

Insight into the human side  
of a controversial premier



**WILLIAM ABERHART**

*. . . left few contemporaries neutral*

*Andrew Snaddon, editor of The Journal, reviews the new book, Aberhart of Alberta, by L. P. V. Johnson and Ola J. MacNutt. The book is published by the Institute of Applied Art at \$6.75 clothbound, and \$3.75 paperback. A former reporter covering the Alberta legislature, Mr. Snaddon continues to study the province's political history.*

In 1935 the bitterest election campaign Alberta has ever seen seared like hell-fire as William Aberhart trumpeted the evangelical call of economic salvation to depression-frustrated Albertans.

A fundamentalist preacher with the Bible in one hand, he had reached out of the other for the economic "Social Credit" gospel of an English theorist Major C. H. Douglas. Mr. Aberhart, a high school principal in Calgary, had mastered the new art of radio oratory in his Bible broadcasts and in the early thirties the mix of economics and religion was potent. That the combination was sincere is not, in my mind, in dispute.

### Devotion

One author is L. P. V. Johnson, a geneticist and well-known local writer who came from a Southern Alberta family caught up in the early Social Credit movement. The other is Ola MacNutt, Mr. Aberhart's youngest daughter. He devotion to her father comes through strongly. Yet, somewhat to my surprise, it does not destroy the book, merely enhances the human factors of a controversial public man who emerges much more clearly as a human than he ever does in the all-too-often heatedly expressed extremes of saint or devil. William Aberhart left few of his contemporaries neutral. This obviously is not the definitive work on him, but it is readable, informative and makes a case.

From a farm life in Ontario, William Aberhart, born 1878, grew up a religious man, something of a church leader even at an early age. He worked for his bachelor of arts from Queen's by correspondence. In mod-

ern day Alberta this may seem unimpressive to some, it was a considerable achievement in its time.

He came to Calgary in 1910 to teach school. He was married and had two daughters. While certain passages of the book tend to deify him, Mr. Aberhart was indeed a good teacher. As principal of Crescent Heights in Calgary he won recognition as one of the best.

### First broadcast

The early years in Calgary were devoted mainly to his teaching, raising his family and an increasingly successful fundamentalist ministry in a small Calgary Baptist church. November, 1925, as is recorded, was an important date, for he made his first Back To The Bible radio broadcast. From a church with a membership of 200, he became a household voice to a "congregation" of Alberta, much of it far more isolated than it is today.

As the book notes, the Aberhart ability to organize, so widely demonstrated a decade later, was evident as he put his air-borne appeals across. He expanded into Sunday school instruction and the Prophetic Bible Institute classes which Ernest Manning attended and became the leader's disciple.

The depression came and we are told how Mr. Aberhart came into touch with the work of Major Douglas. The Douglas movement in England, although it airily spurned political action, was involved with some action groups with authoritarian tendencies. The idea that "experts" would in their own way bring about plenty in the midst of poverty is one of its basics. The authors outline the Douglas theories quite concisely.

By the mid-thirties the voters of Alberta were parched and as ready for a drink of anything cool and apparently relieving as shipwreck survivors adrift without water for days in tropical sun.

The book if anything does not give Mr. Aberhart enough credit as a preacher. He could reduce complications to simplicities. He was never over his audience's heads and he could always make them laugh and

identify with him and his cause. Potential preachers and politicians would do well to study Mr. Aberhart and his follower Mr. Manning as examples of communication.

"Aberhart of Alberta" chronicles the growth of Social Credit doctrines and the amazing organizing (it was not yet a political party) genius of the Calgary schoolmaster. The United Farmers of Alberta government was rotting, eaten by inner scandal and shrivelling from the lack of revenue in the depression years.

The UFA had chances to adopt Social Credit as this book details. The leadership failed to do so even though it was becoming politically clear that grassroots membership was swinging over. The authors, being convinced Social Crediters, have a weakness here in the implication that the UFA leaders were either rogues or fools or both.

### **Both sincere**

The fact is that most of them could not see Social Credit as any kind of economic sense, certainly not as an entity. They were not prepared to endorse what they did not accept. They feared a control by "experts". Over the years I have talked to many of them as I have with true-believer Social Crediters and I believe the former to be as sincere and honest a group as the latter. Douglas, who did make one appearance before the Alberta legislature, failed to convince its members of his plan. It is worth observing that it was rejected everywhere although it was freely available. It is intriguing to note that the followers who would accept the Douglas "experts" would not listen to other experts with, surely, at least equal background.

As no one else would take up the cause, the Social Credit soldiers onward marched. The organization of the meetings, designed by William Aberhart, was truly clever, using showmanship to get a message across.

Recalled is the Man from Mars who was landed in Alberta to be baffled by the absurdities of the depression. Good old Professor Orthodox

Anonymous was another star attraction good for laughs at meetings — and it also served to laugh down "experts" who happened to have different views. Perhaps because a newspaperman meets nothing but "experts" he tends to downgrade them.

Albertans, understandably, were not in a negative mood—at least not the majority of them. Those were years in a Promised Land where men had come, worked the hard land, burned and frozen with great physical effort, honesty, self-deprivation and hope, only to have to go on relief to take the humiliating hand-outs a poor community would share. Men with a lifetime wrapped up in a small store, saw it go under them as customers had nothing to pay. No wonder they cried "why?"

The book makes the case that William Aberhart was sincere in his efforts. That he was badly let down by Major Douglas also seems quite clear. For William Aberhart, a reluctant politician, saw his movement sweep the province in 1935 and shortly thereafter took a seat himself.

The correspondence between himself and Douglas for the next two years is fascinating. The major apparently had some difficulty "hearing the call" and stayed firmly in Figtree Court in London. His advice as outlined given by cable and letter appeared rather impractical in an Alberta where action was needed, NOW.

### **Strengths**

Premier Aberhart, much reviled in these times in his own ranks, faced attacks from within as well as an onslaught from without. Here again we get an insight into a man whose strengths have often been overlooked by his critics. Some cabinet members resigned; "press on" Socred insurgents split the party.

The book gives a good brief account of the hectic first years in office and the federal government disallowance of much attempted legislation.

In 1943 William Aberhart died in Vancouver. Ernest C. Manning took over, and after a few years of inter-



mittent effort, really abandoned attempts at introducing Social Credit. The federal disallowances made it rather futile and economic terms had greatly changed so that the remedies of the thirties lost their pertinence. In orthodox terms Social Credit has given good government — and so did William Aberhart in his time.

They were bitter times. The book clearly establishes that Mr. Aberhart was treated unfairly, often viciously. It fails to take into account that the charges that opponents were either the "50 big shots" or their "deluded henchmen," "unchristian" or "bankers' toadies," willing to sell out their fellow men for profit, were hardly models of democratic give and take. While there need be no discredit in a religious man going into politics, Social Credit supporters are notably

sure that God is on their side only and therefore they are right.

William Aberhart never brought Social Credit to Alberta although he tried. He earned a place in our history. In a day when guaranteed annual incomes are spoken of by all parties, which long ago gave support to family allowances, perhaps the Aberhart dividends don't sound so foolish. Certainly "Bible Bill" had the sense and courage to recognize he had to float "orthodox" loans to get moving in office in 1935. He left a creditable record in fields such as education, welfare and conservation.

One need not believe Mr. Aberhart was absolutely right to realize that he was far from all wrong too, and to learn something of his human side. The authors give us that and a fair insight into the party in those years.

# A Daughter's Fond Look

ABERHART OF ALBERTA, by L. P. V. Johnson and  
Ola MacNutt (Institute of Applied Art, Ltd.,  
Edmonton, 252 pages, \$6.75) Reviewed by Par-  
ker Kent.

Of all Albertans up to now, none was as remarkable or reached such heights of fame and notability as William Aberhart, Alberta's seventh premier. It will be a long time before his like in terms of public power and influence appears upon the scene again.

This is not the same as saying that Mr. Aberhart was a great historic figure. Great men leave a lasting imprint and it is doubtful if the teacher-preacher of the Twenties who became politician and premier in the Thirties and Forties managed to do that. But he was a towering figure in his time. It mattered not whether you loved him or hated him; you were impressed by him.

I think that any Albertan who has any interest at all in his province ought to buy this delightful book, read it, and keep it on the shelf for his progeny and theirs to read. This is a really close-up view of Mr. Aberhart, coming from a genuinely inside source, his youngest daughter, Mrs. Ola J. MacNutt. Mrs. MacNutt collaborated with Dr. L. P. V. Johnson, Stavely-born agricultural scientist who has been professor of genetics at the University of Alberta since 1948. Dr. Johnson presumably performed the writing task, with Mrs. MacNutt providing much of the more interesting information.

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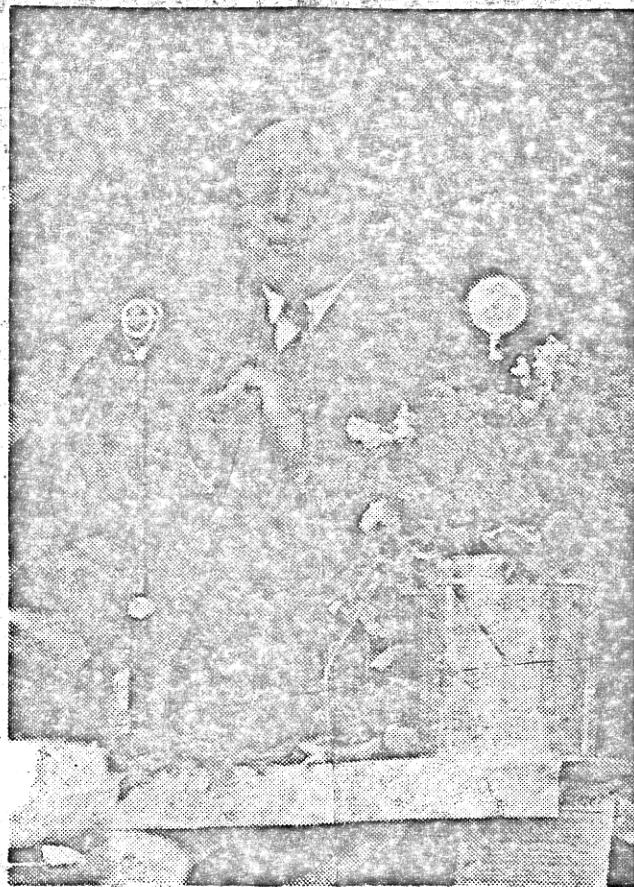
IT NATURALLY has to be noted that the book is neither a biography in depth nor a literary creation. The style is more that of an academic writing a thesis than someone who handles words with graceful simplicity. Take this opening paragraph: "There is a farm near Kippen in Hibbert Township, Perth County, Ontario, a few miles west of Egmondville, that will upon inquiry be identified as the birthplace and early home of William Aberhart the younger."

"Identified, indeed, by almost any villager or district farmer, who will mention with some pride, making more or less vague references to Alberta and Social Credit, and to the plaque at Seaforth District High School."

Furthermore, it must be taken for granted that the book is more than a little biased in favor of its subject. But who would have it otherwise? There are plenty of other places to look for more objective stuff about this fascinating man.

The picture which emerges is that of an individual of rustic, God-fearing, puritanically simple upbringing, whose father was a German immigrant and whose mother was of English extraction.

He was born on the Ontario farm, the fourth of



WILLIAM ABERHART  
... "a man to be feared"

eight children, on Dec. 30, 1878, and died in Vancouver at the age of sixty-four, on May, 23, 1943.

He became a rural school teacher in 1899, moving to a school in Brantford in 1901. He married Jessie Flatt of Galt the following year. In 1905, at the age of twenty-seven, the hard-working young man had become a school principal. He also had become a dynamic, evangelist-type Bible teacher. He worked overtime to take correspondence courses from Queen's University and finally won his B.A. degree extramurally in 1911. The year before that he had moved to Calgary to become principal of Alexandra school.

In 1912 he became principal of King Edward

# At Aberhart

school. For some time, the school board had been planning to build a new high school on Crescent Heights but the war held up construction of a building. The new Crescent Heights school was organized on an interim basis in 1915 anyway, and Mr. Aberhart got the coveted job of principal. Until 1928, classes operated in Balmoral school. Finally, in 1929, the large new high school opened and Mr. Aberhart served as its principal until making politics a full-time vocation in 1935.

Key points of William Aberhart's career as teacher, prophetic evangelist and Alberta premier are generally well known. How he branched out from church memberships into taking an independent path of leadership, how his Sunday broadcasts of mass services conducted in the Palace Theatre soon gained him a radio audience of immense proportions and how, eventually, enough offerings poured in to make possible construction of the Prophetic Bible Institute further west along 8th Ave., these things are all here in great and interesting detail.

In a book of this kind one is able to obtain a lot of the little off-camera tid-bits of information so revealing of character.

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*ON THE ROSTRUM*, Mr. Aberhart looked like a fierce, avenging prophet of God, a man to be feared, to be respected, but hardly to be loved. His voice was hard. It was used on occasion at full oratorical pitch. The message was simple — pathetically simple, said the educated people of the day. But it carried weight with masses of simple Alberta folk, mostly rural in the late Twenties and early Thirties. And, of course, when the Great Depression came and the bottom dropped out of man's world, what more natural than that everyone should turn to this prophet to whom God had confided not only the secrets of the Last Trump but a new economic gospel which would solve materialistic problems of the here and now as well.

Busy as he always was, William Aberhart was always the attentive and loving family man. He was strict with his children, but fair. He played games with them, raised his voice in song with them around the family piano which he taught himself to play.

"Once one of his daughters had a severe case of mumps. Coming from school, he would go at once upstairs to the bedroom and take her in his arms and walk the floor with her. To this day, his daughters remember how they used to look forward to his loving care."

The book sets forth in new terms the rise to political power, the terrible vicissitudes of high office, the drama of times which many of us remember with nostalgia and which all others should add to their store of knowledge.

A must for everyone.