

Mark Bourrie, *Big Men Fear Me: The Fast Life and Quick Death of Canada's Most Powerful Media Mogul*, Biblioasis, 2022. 414 pages, ISBN 9781771964944, \$24.95.

Mark Bourrie, a Canadian journalist, historian and author, who won the RBC Charles Taylor Prize in 2022 for *Bush Runner : The Adventures of Pierre-Esprit Radisson*, has written an engaging biography of George McCullagh, the long-time, but today largely forgotten, owner and publisher of the *Globe and Mail*.

It is a quintessential “rags to riches” tale in which McCullagh became a multi-millionaire, a leading voice in newspaper publishing and a force in both Ontario and Canadian politics. George grew up in a working class neighbourhood in London, Ontario. Although a good student, he quickly concluded there were more promising avenues to success beyond education. He left school in his early teens to join the Toronto *Globe*, selling subscriptions in southwestern Ontario. He moved on from the *Globe* in 1930 to join an investment firm specializing in Ontario-based mining companies. Coincidentally, he became involved in the provincial political scene, when he took on the Ontario Liberals’ new populist leader, Mitch Hepburn, as a client.

During the mid -1930’s, McCullagh became aware of the possibility of acquiring the *Globe* which was then being threatened by a union-organizing campaign, which its owners were disinclined to fight. But to finance the purchase, McCullough would need financial backing, which he found in one of his investment business clients, Bill Wright. Wright had made a fortune as co-owner of the fabulously valuable Wright-Hargreaves Mine in Kirkland Lake and the two men had a shared interest in horse-racing.

McCullagh was also interested in acquiring another Toronto daily newspaper, *The Mail and Empire*, with the intention of merging the two papers. Wright agreed to join McCullagh in that endeavour, as well. Wright put up most of the money to purchase both papers, plus additional cash for a new building to house their joint operations which came to be regarded as one of the foremost newspaper headquarters in the world. While *the Mail and Empire* was the more prestigious and profitable paper, both were suffering in the midst of the Depression and *The Mail and Empire’s* owners no longer had the energy or resources to compete with a rejuvenated *Globe* publication.

Wright was the principal owner of these businesses, but had no interest in their management, preferring to focus on long-term expansion for the merged business, as Canada’s most dynamic newspaper. McCullagh was then still only 31 years old and already prestigious enough to be profiled in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Major US-based labour unions were seeking certification within the US auto industry and their Canadian counterparts were not far behind. The *Globe* was quick to oppose these efforts, fearing that if General Motors were certified in Canada, other internationally powerful unions, such as the CIO and the United Mine Workers, might follow. Ultimately, the upstart unions carried the day. This experience helped shape McCullough’s fiercely anti-labour views and shifted his political orientation in a conservative direction. It also convinced him that partisan politics were preventing the evolution of more effective government.

McCullagh was inclined to support unitary, and even autocratic (albeit, non-fascist) government as a means of reform. He established a political movement called “The League of Leaders” which proved an unmitigated and now-forgotten failure. Nevertheless, the concept of unitary government was not without its supporters around the world, particularly during wartime.

In his sometime role as a political activist, McCullagh would purchase blocks of radio airtime from CBC and other broadcasters in order to make appeals in support of causes he was espousing. Early suggestions were aimed at reconstructing federal and provincial governments. One such notorious plan, which The *Toronto Star* characterized as intended to “put Ontario on the road to a one party corporate-controlled regime”, prompted then Federal Conservative leader, Arthur Meighen, to head it off.

As McCullagh acquired more wealth, influence, and connections, he took up a more elegant lifestyle. He bought a large estate on Bayview Avenue in Thornhill and raced horses in the most prestigious stakes races in the province. In 1939, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth looked on as his horse, Archworth, obligingly won The King’s Plate.

During the Second World War, McCullagh criticized the management of Canada’s war effort, including the lack of preparedness for combat operations (such as at Hong Kong and Dieppe), conscription, and wartime censorship. Early in the war McCullagh enlisted in the Air Force, only later having to withdraw due to personal health problems.

For all the controversies over “hot button” issues of the day, McCullagh remained on generally good terms with many of the country’s most influential and important people of its time, including Prime Minister Mackenzie King, Ontario Premier Mitchell Hepburn, Joseph Atkinson of the *Toronto Star*, John Bassett, George Drew, Conn Smythe and Lord Beaverbrook, among many others.

In 1948, McCullagh completed his own personal trifecta of Toronto newspaper ownership when he purchased *The Telegram* from the estate of John Ross Robertson and The Hospital for Sick Children. This time, however, the financial resources of Bill Wright were not needed to complete the deal.

McCullagh suffered from significant health issues, especially bi-polar mental disorder which periodically prevented him from pursuing any kind of normal activities. From his 20s to a few months prior to his death, he was treated by a prominent New York psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Foster Kennedy. McCullagh became very reliant upon Dr. Kennedy and some speculated that Dr. Kennedy’s death, some months prior to McCullagh’s, may have been a contributing factor in McCullagh’s own death. Although the official cause of his death was heart attack, the more widely-held view was that George’s death was the result of suicide. After his death, the *Globe* was sold to the Webster Family in Montreal and, thereafter, to the publishing conglomerate, F P Publications. It is now owned by the Thomson Family’s investment holding company, Woodbridge. In 1952 *The Telegram* was purchased by the Bassett family and subsequently liquidated.

The author’s conclusion that George McCullagh is today’s “forgotten man” seems unassailable. The enduring stigma attached to suicide may be one explanation. Another may be the destruction of his personal papers by his widow. Moreover, the causes he espoused were not always widely embraced by the public and a number of them, such as the League of Leaders, his strongly anti-union stance and his embrace of the concept of autocratic government, were seen as undemocratic and as upholding the

interests of the wealthy and the ruling class. If all of that seems a little unjust, then that is, perhaps, just the way it is, and George McCullagh might himself agree with such an assessment.

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