

Book Review: The Horsburgh Affair: Disciple or Deviate?, by Ronald C. Smeaton

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Citation Information

Bellmore, Brian. "Book Review: The Horsburgh Affair: Disciple or Deviate?, by Ronald C. Smeaton." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 4.1 (1966) : 151-153.
<http://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj/vol4/iss1/12>

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THE HORSBURGH AFFAIR: DISCIPLE OR DEVIATE? BY RONALD C. SMEATON. TORONTO: BAXTER PUBLISHING Co. 1966. pp. 153. (\$1.95).

On June 29, 1964 Russel Horsburgh, an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada, was escorted by police from the rectory of his pastoral charge at Chatham's Park Street Church to a courthouse where he was charged on eight counts with contributing to juvenile delinquency and where he would later face a trial which was to make daily front page news not only across the country, but across the seas in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom. It was similar newspaper articles describing the senseless killing of an entire family in Kansas which prompted Truman Capote to make an exhaustive investigation of all possible aspects of the story, and resulted in his current best seller, *In Cold Blood*. Capote calls it a non-fiction novel. The extraordinary success of the book indicates the public desire for a deeper and more thorough analysis of such events than the newspaper reporter, confronted with a deadline, is able to give. Reverend Ronald Smeaton in this little book offers the reader a detailed and intriguing picture of the characters and events—so dramatic that it might have been a *tableau* cut from the pages of Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*—which were so prominently reported in the press, radio and T.V. throughout the summer and fall of 1964.

The author contends that Horsburgh was the victim of a conspiracy among the conservative members of his congregation to remove him—a conspiracy which got out of hand. The ancient dramatic conflict between the spectacular revolutionary and the staid reactionary element of society is personified in the unorthodox Reverend Horsburgh and the reluctant old guard of his church. This small, yet powerful, minority objected to his weekly dance for teenagers on the church premises, his acceptance of Negroes as full church members and his Sunday evening lecture-sermon series in

⁹ A. W. R. Carrothers, *op. cit.*, *supra*, footnote 4, at p. 179.

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which a rabbi, a priest and a poet, among others, addressed the congregation. Such a spirit of ecumenism was not shared by the old guard of Park Street United.

Ironically, Horsburgh was convicted not on the evidence of this group, but on the testimony of the juvenile delinquents he tried to rehabilitate and whose presence on the Church premises outraged the old guard. Smeaton charges that it was the mother of one of these teenage tarts, assisted by the prosecuting attorney, who acted as a catalyst in uniting these two diverse groups against the minister. The author is at his best when he describes the social undercurrents in the pastorate which he calls "an ecclesiastical Peyton Place". Special attention is given to the chief teenage Crown witnesses. Their previous delinquency, their penchant for lying and their promiscuous behaviour, which the girls proudly announced by wearing the pins of membership in the non-virgin clique, are all revealed in detail. These were the people for whom Horsburgh had established a local branch of Youth Anonymous (an organization akin to Alcoholics Anonymous working in the area of juvenile delinquency and crime) and who now betrayed him.

In researching the book Smeaton read all six volumes of transcript from the trial and interviewed over one hundred and fifty individuals. He alleges that there was "an atmosphere of insidious vindictiveness" throughout the entire judicial proceedings which began with a one-sided police investigation and ended with a highly questionable assessment of the evidence of the teenage Crown witnesses.

Among the complaints:

1. "the circumscribed and selective police investigation" confined only to church cranks and teenagers who became Crown witnesses. Church counsellors, church janitors, secretaries and others closely connected with the minister were ignored. Two people who later became defence witnesses found that the police interrogation was abruptly terminated when they began to take the minister's part.

2. the deliberate implications made throughout the trial by the Crown Attorney in his examination of witnesses that the accused was homosexual. Smeaton argues that this had no possible relevance to the heterosexual charges laid and were made to defame the man.

3. the credence given by the judge to the testimony of the "sneaks and liars of Youth Anonymous", which, the author convincingly points out, was riddled with contradictions. One letter from a primary Crown witness is reproduced in full:

. . . I was told in July, when I begged-off that if I were to back out now there would be chances that charges of obstructing justice could be laid against me. It goes without saying I sang. But I only sang half truths.

This boy says he testified in court against "the best friend I had" because he was vindictive at the time over a supposed slight. Some of the complaints indicate a lack of understanding of rules

of evidence and procedure, while others are well taken and no doubt will be considered by the Supreme Court of Canada in Horsburgh's final appeal.

The Horsburgh Affair: Disciple or Deviate? gives the reader a deeper and more thorough analysis of the individuals and events superficially reported in the spectacular newspaper stories of two summers ago. It is an impassioned, if somewhat verbose defence of the man and his concept of the ministry. Whether he is "a conscientious shepherd tripped up by his own crook", or a pathetic opportunist who used the cloth of the ministry and a house of worship to facilitate the satisfaction of his perverted desires is a question left to the individual reader. Such a book is valuable in detailing the less lascivious and spectacular elements of the case which most newspapers did not cover. It is recommended not only to those cynics who shake their heads and immediately think the worst when a public figure is accused—be it in a court of law, the House of Commons or at a cocktail party, but also to those who are aware of the character of juvenile delinquents such as those whom Horsburgh tried to help. When their characteristic loose morals, devious thinking and unscrupulous conduct is weighed against the thirty-one character witnesses called by the defence and the revealing new facts contained in this book, a doubt may arise in the reader's mind as to the guilt of the minister.

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