



A Celtic Temperament: Robertson Davies as Diarist

Robertson Davies

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Versatile and prolific, Robertson Davies was an actor, journalist and newspaper publisher, playwright, essayist, founding master of Massey College at the University of Toronto, and one of Canada's greatest novelists. He was also an obsessive, complex, and self-revealing diarist. His diaries, which he began as a teenager, grew to over 3 million words and are an astonishing literary legacy. This first published selection of his diaries spans 1959 to 1963, years in which Davies, in mid-life, experienced both daunting failure and unexpected success.

Born in Thamesville, Ontario, in 1913, he was educated at local schools, then Upper Canada College, Queen's University and Oxford University. He worked in England at the famous Old Vic theatre as an actor and literary advisor before returning to Canada where he became the editor and publisher of the *Peterborough Examiner*, established himself as a prominent Canadian playwright, and published his first three novels now known as the *Salterton Trilogy*. By 1959, at the age of forty-five, Robertson Davies was already one of Canada's leading literary figures. Even so the diaries show that he was frustrated by the limitations of his literary success, often exasperated with the distractions of his daily life and buffeted by his mental and emotional state. They also show that he enjoyed life, was deeply interested in the society he lived in, and in the people he encountered. More often than not he found comedy in the world around him and delighted in recording it. He kept not only a daily journal, but also more focused diaries such as his accounts of the Toronto and New York production of his play *Love and Libel*, when he worked closely with the great British director Tyrone Guthrie, and of the founding of Massey College, the brainchild of Vincent Massey. The descriptions of backstage and academic politics are invariably entertaining, but in his diaries Davies also reveals himself as intensely self-critical, frequently insecure, and with a highly changeable nature that he described as his "celtic temperament." We also see him as a partner in an intensely happy and creative marriage, and as a man with an astonishing capacity for hard work. By the end of 1963 his life had taken a new direction. As master of Massey College, he finds himself a public figure, but he is increasingly preoccupied with a new novel he wants to write which he is calling *Fifth Business*.

The publication of *A Celtic Temperament* establishes Robertson Davies as one of the great diarists. In their range, variety, intimacy, and honesty his diaries present an extraordinarily rich portrait of the man and his times.

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