

as participants in the “health” industry, whether as workers or patient. I could write a really thought-provoking theoretical piece arguing that smoking on the sidewalk resists oppression inherent within both the institutional policies and the value-laden efforts at “health promotion” that these policies collude with.

Then again, I wonder what reasons the smokers would give. Maybe they would just say they wanted a smoke. They’re under stress, I’m sure, all of them. Someone they love is upstairs dying. They just worked a double shift,

or got yelled at by their supervisor. Lots of reasons not to quit today.

I look at my watch. It’s time for me to go back to work, with real people that I have to interact with and can’t just observe. But I sit for one moment longer, watching as a woman in a grey coat, about my age, lights up one last cigarette. And I think, all the real action takes place at “the boundary,” doesn’t it? There are the smokers, crossing the line to where smoking is no longer prohibited. And here I am watching from the other side of the boundary keeps me

apart from them, the glass that locks the outside out. Even when I’m not pretending to be a researcher, I still put a comfortable distance between them out there in the cold, and myself in my warm hospital. The divide that separates me, a physician and a nonsmoker, from the people who do that sort of thing; go for a smoke in the snow.

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## BOOKS

# The life of Saint Tommy

**Tommy Douglas**

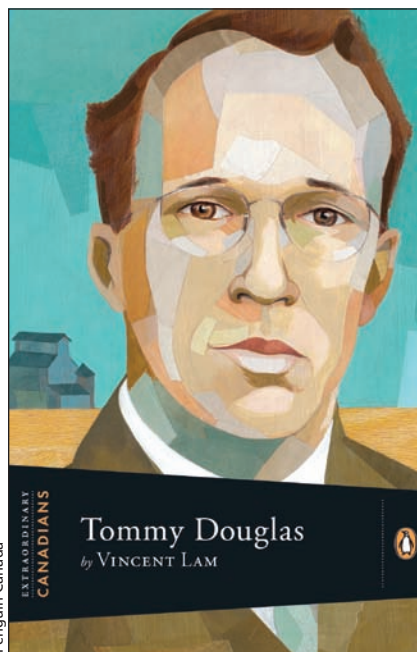
Vincent Lam

Penguin Canada, *Extraordinary Canadians* series; 2011

The typical biographer either sharpens his subject’s horns or polishes his halo. (A third option — mundane agnosticism — is rarely attempted.) Toronto emergency physician Vincent Lam reveals his choice early in *Tommy Douglas*: Lam’s boyhood aspiration to become a physician, he explains in the first chapter, came from a desire to “... serve people irrespective of their wealth ... [and] get paid without handing any patient a bill ...”

The health care system that allows Canadian doctors to practice with such altruism is Tommy Douglas’s most famous legacy, and the battle for the making of this system is Lam’s passion in this book. Lam’s novel, *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures* won the 2006 Giller Prize. In this biography, he turns the eye of a fiction writer to the conflict between Douglas, the “poor immigrant boy whose parents had no money to pay for the specialized treatment he needed [for osteomyelitis],” and the Saskatchewan doctors who go on strike despite “a clear public mandate to proceed on medicare.” This tale is told with zeal, fittingly for a David-and-Goliath story.

Unfortunately, this briskly told tale occupies only one chapter and the



remainder of Douglas’s life seems to be much less inspiring for Lam, resulting in a fairly plodding whitewash job. Douglas’s tireless energy, his practical piety and his commitment to principle are demonstrated again and again. His shortcomings, on those rare occasions when they are mentioned at all, are turned to advantage: Douglas’s “atrocious” French language skills, for example, permit him to be “motivated not by politics or affinity with a particular group but by a deep respect for civil rights” when he opposes the invocation of the War Measures Act during the October Crisis of 1970.

Lam is so unflinchingly reverential that his book can be taken as nothing other than hagiography. Douglas even gets in some miracles. (How else to explain that federally funded health care was enacted on a national scale, not by the socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, but by Diefenbaker’s Tories?) Not that this devotion need be a bad thing. Douglas is surely the patron of Canadian health care, so where is the harm in treating him as such?

What’s disappointing, then, is not that Lam tries to canonize Douglas, but that he is not, on the whole, more spirited about it. After initially crediting Douglas for his life-changing decision to become a physician, Lam-the-believer is replaced as narrator by a bland follower whose ideas are put forward as drab Sunday school rote: “To most Canadians, it has become a core part of our national ethos that health care should be equally available to all regardless of ability to pay.” Where is the contemplation, the revelation? What might have been a personal and meaningful book about one man’s faith in the ideas that Douglas represents is instead stale dogma.

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