

Percy "boy" staunton: the greater life



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Though some may appraise the worth of a life on the basis of intrinsic values, the qualitative nature of such values themselves makes it difficult to make an objective comparison. The value of a life, then, is best defined through the yardstick of the quantifiable: measures like material wealth, overall accomplishments and the contributions that an individual makes to society at large. Percy “ Boy” Staunton best fulfills this description in the world of Fifth Business. As a business savvy tycoon and later as the Minister of Food during the Second World War, Percy’s contributions and hand in guiding the Canadian economy far outweigh the value of Dunstan’s own contributions to the academic sphere. He was also instrumental in the life of Dunstan Ramsay himself, to whom he provided the “ financial advice and... modest financial security” (Cameron 92) necessary to finance Dunstan’s expeditions across the globe. Even in his personal life, the combination of Dunstan’s social ineptitude and Percy’s natural extroversion gave Percy a social edge, thereby exposing him to a world of things Dunstan never had the opportunity to experience. Though Dunstan accumulated a wealth of experience in Deptford and in his treks across the globe, it is easy to see how Percy “ Boy” Staunton lived a life of greater value by all quantifiable measures. According to American academic Leo Calvin Rosten, “ The purpose of life is to be useful...it is, above all, to matter and to count, to stand for something, to have made some difference that you lived at all.” In Fifth Business, Percy Boy Staunton embodied this definition in ways Dunstan never did, and made significant contributions to the welfare of average Canadians “ though not many people knew it” (Davies 141). As the president and managing director of Alpha Corporation, and later as the Ministry of Food under the Coalition Cabinet, Percy was single-handedly responsible for

keeping the country fed during its times of greatest need. During the Great Depression, for instance, Percy “ held the price of bread steady” (Davies 142) and “ concentrated on necessities...in times like these, people need cheap, nourishing food.” (Davies 142). He later applied a similar principle as the Minister of Food in the Second World War, and “ put the full resources of his Alpha Corporation...to the job of feeding Canada (and) feeding its armed services” (Davies 182). By contrast, Dunstan dedicated his entire life to hagiography (the study of saints), which, though commendable, is of little if any value to the general public. The triviality of Dunstan’s contributions is highlighted by his colleagues’ indifference to “ his acceptance from *Analecta*; (who) looked uncomprehendingly, like cows at a passing train, and went on talking about Brebner’s extraordinary hole-in-one the day before” (Davies 158). Though Percy’s alimentary achievements may not have had the same level of intellectual insight Dunstan’s notes on *Wilgefortis-Kummernis* so required, Percy’s shrewd and innovative practices in the food industry were certainly of greater value to the general populace than Dunstan’s ever were. Even if a reader were to place greater importance on Dunstan’s accomplishments, one could argue that “ Dunstan’s outer journey is made largely through the effect on him of his relation to Percy Boyd Staunton” (Cameron 92). As his confidant and sole financial advisor, Dunstan depended on Percy’s investment advice for his continued financial stability, which he drew upon to satiate his academic hunger and travels around the world. Under Percy’s guidance, Dunstan “ laid the foundation for the modest but pleasant fortune I have now...without his guidance I would have been powerless” (Davies 105) and was made “ pretty well-off for a man in your position” (Davies 254). Dunstan’s interest in medieval religious art and

hagiology blossomed from his plentiful monetary reserves – courtesy of Percy – which he used to pursue saints in “ scores of churches through the Low Countries, France, Austria and Italy” (Davies 115). From that point onwards, a snowball effect (pun intended) ensued: Dunstan began writing books based on the research gathered during his journeys and successfully published three books over the course of his literary and teaching career. Dunstan later travelled to Mexico on the Chairman of the Board’s (Percy’s) goodwill, where Eisengrim’s aide Liesl commissioned him to write Eisengrim’s autobiography with the style and “ candour that is brilliantly disingenuous, treating marvels with the seriousness of fact” (Davies 202) that had come to characterize his other literary works. The success of the autobiography allowed Dunstan “ to transfer Mrs. Dempster from the public wards of that hateful city asylum to a much better hospital near a small town” (Davies 220). It is important to note that all of the above are the direct result of Percy’s financial advice, who acted as the fiscal catalyst of Dunstan’s accomplishments and without whom such accomplishments would have been impossible to achieve. Some may argue, however, that Percy lived a life of lesser value and served only to facilitate Dunstan’s jaunts across the globe. This could not be farther from the truth. A natural extrovert and keen on living the high life, Percy flourished in his personal life experiences well before becoming a member of Canada’s elite, while Dunstan wallowed in mediocrity and lived a life of lonely solitude. It was clear, for instance, that Percy was the more accomplished of the two in love. Percy married Leola after the First World War, before Dunstan had the opportunity to profess his love for her; naturally, Dunstan “ resented anybody else having her...and God forbid that I should pretend that there is

not a generous measure of spite in my nature” (Davies 94). While Dunstan remained a schoolteacher through his career, Percy’s forthcoming personality allowed him the opportunity to become both the president of Alpha Corporation and the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. When the Prince of Wales visited Canada, Percy was “one of His Highness’ aides-de-camp” (Davies 118). Dunstan was not. Percy had two children. Dunstan had none. Regardless of the outcome of his life and the effect his personality may have had on others, the fact remains that Percy experienced more and saw more than Dunstan did during his lifetime to a physical degree. That in itself is enough to qualify Percy’s life as the one of greater value. Though the definition of value may depend on whom you ask, Percy Boy Staunton lived the life of greater value in its truest and most literal sense. The fruits of his labour as the Minister of Food and the president of Alpha Corporation were passed down to thousands, if not millions of Canadians. The seed of his financial advice to Dunstan Ramsay blossomed into glorious academic achievements, while his life, though chaotic, was certainly more colourful than the mundane life of Dunstan Ramsay. Percy Boy Staunton may not have been the straightest of all arrows, but he was certainly the most valuable one in the quiver. That, above all, is what matters most. Works Cited Cameron, Elspeth. Robertson Davies: an Appreciation. Peterborough, Ont., Canada: Broadview, 1991. Print. Monk, Patricia. Mud and Magic Shows: Robertson Davies’s Fifth Business. Toronto: ECW, 1992. Print. Ross, Val. Robertson Davies: a Portrait in Mosaic. Toronto: Emblem, 2009. Print. Davies, Robertson. Fifth Business. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.+