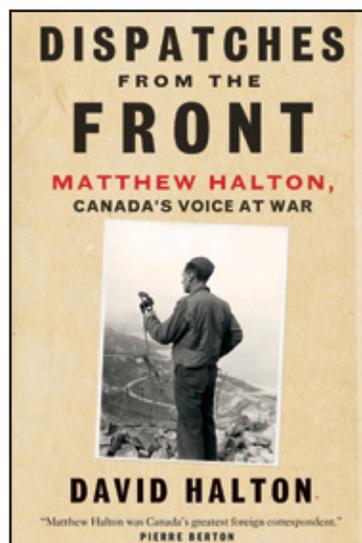


# Spring Reading



## Like Father Like Son: Voices of Canada

David Halton

*Dispatches from the Front: Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War.* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2015

Review by Anthony Wilson-Smith

Two points are noteworthy about David Halton in connection with *Dispatches from the Front*, his biography of his father, the great journalist Matthew Halton. First, David was only 16 when his father died. Second, David's own career track—first as print journalist and then as distinguished CBC correspondent—closely mirrored that of his father. Add those together, and it would be reasonable to fear a result of either adoring hagiography, or—just as tiresome—a cri de coeur ultimately more about the writer than his subject.

But just as Matthew Halton was a remarkable journalist, so was—and is—David. The result is an extraordinary book that compellingly limns Matt's extravagant, adventurous, achievement-filled, and far-from-perfect life.

While doing so, David also creates a vivid portrait of one of the most dramatic periods of the last century—the run-up to the Second World War and the conflict itself.

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Born in Pincher Creek, Alberta—a community for which he maintained lifelong affection—Matthew Halton possessed a rare combination of journalistic skills: a gifted writer who was also a diligent reporter. At a time when daily newspapers were the sole credible source of news, he became the *Toronto Star's* London-based correspondent while still in his 20s. From there, he wrote stories syndicated across Great Britain and the United States as well as Canada, while his reputation grew accordingly. He interviewed everyone from King George VI to Franklin Roosevelt, Hermann Goering, Mahatma Gandhi and the indomitable Marlene Dietrich. Most impressively, in 1933, he wrote a 10-part series from Germany in which he forecast the coming dangers posed by Adolf Hitler's rise. Germany, he wrote, “has heard the call of the wild. Pan-Germanism, six centuries old, is on the march again, but in new and demonic form.” In seeing that, he was years ahead of contemporaries—including many Western political leaders initially in thrall to Hitler.

Matthew wielded influence of almost unimaginable proportions, and was not shy to push his views. A keen anglophile, he was a socialist who railed against Britain's stifling class structure—but enjoyed friendships with members of the aristocracy. When war arrived in 1939, he resolved to get up to the front lines whenever possible, and repeatedly put

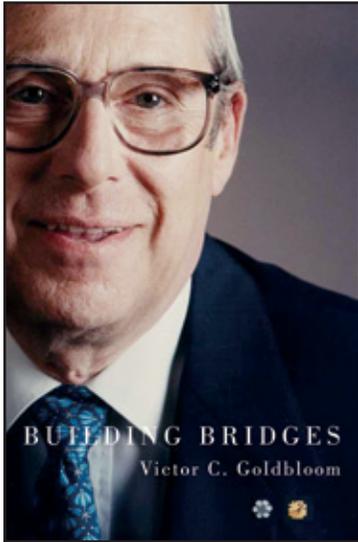
his life at risk. Partway through the war, he was lured from the *Star* by the CBC. His on-air reports, often mingled with live background sounds of gun and mortar-fire, conveyed the terrifying yet exhilarating feel of life on the battlefield in a manner that resonated hugely with listeners. As he recounted in one broadcast: “Here was the spot where we saw the gunners die on their guns...here was the advanced dressing station where we were machine-gunned. Here's where our new boys were caught in the minefield.” He was a Canadian Ed Murrow.

All this is recounted by David—born in 1940—in artful but matter-of-fact prose backed by exhaustive research. He brings his clear-eyed approach to other parts of his father that would have been painful for a son to research. Those include Matt's heavy drinking and philandering and frequent absences from the family despite his genuinely close, affectionate marriage to Jean, Matt's wife—and David's mother. There are frequent references to Matt's excessive drinking, and others chiding him about it. Matt seems to have regarded his lengthy wartime separations from Jean as license to sleep with other women. He implicitly acknowledged that in letters to her. Jean, in turn, was sanguine. “More than three decades later,” David writes, “my mother told me that she accepted that her husband had ‘the occasional one night stand’ during the war.”

By war's end, in 1945, Matt had reached the height of his fame. As David writes: “For Matt, the post-war years marked a slow descent from the summit of his career.” He settled into life in London with his family. Despite his professed love for Canada, he had spent little time there since leaving in 1932. Eventually, his drinking and chain-smoking took a toll. On a tour of Canada in 1956, his mother and Jean became concerned about his gaunt frame, lack of energy and unusual forgetfulness. Back in England, a check-up revealed a tumour. Shortly after an operation he hoped would restore him to health, he had a stroke and died five days later, only 52. A doctor who examined him believed he had ‘early onset dementia’ and that had he lived, “he would never be the great and famous person that he was.” Death, then, came early but as a blessing.

Over the years, his notoriety faded—until this reminder of greatness from his son. Like his father, David couples deft writing with a willingness to do his homework, even when it involves painful revelations about the brilliant but flawed father he so clearly loved. Matthew, based on his own often searingly honest work, would have likely approved. Like father, then, like son. In the best of ways, they deserve each other. There can be no better tribute to Matthew Halton than this superb book. **P**

*Contributing Writer Anthony Wilson-Smith, former editor of Maclean's, is President and CEO of Historica Canada.*



## A Gentleman in Politics

Victor Goldbloom

*Building Bridges.* Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015.

Review by Antonia Maioni

History often tends to overlook the quiet builders, those whose contributions solved many pressing problems in crucial transition periods, and whose life-long commitment to public service made a difference to future generations. In Québec, Victor Goldbloom was one of those quiet builders, and a real gentleman in politics. His aptly titled book, *Building Bridges*, reminds us of the significant and lasting impact he and those like him can have in our societies

The Goldblooms are, in fact, a well-known Montreal family: you can find the name of pediatrician Alton Goldbloom (father of Victor) inscribed in the medical faculty's Strathcona Hall at McGill University; and for many years the name of publisher Michael Goldbloom (son of Victor) displayed under the masthead of the *Montreal Gazette* and the *Toronto Star*. But within this illustrious family, it is Victor Goldbloom himself who has had the most remarkable impact on political life in Québec—and Canada.

In this memoir, written as both a chronological narrative and a series of vignettes and speeches, Dr. Goldbloom reminds us of why this is so. A man whose career spanned the last half of the 20th century, he was destined to follow in his father's footsteps as a pediatrician. His stories of his training and practice are an absolute delight—not only for the informative forays into medical history, but even more because they illustrate the often forgotten art of empathy in the medical profession. Dr. Goldbloom's bedside manner shines through as he *cares* for children and identifies what researchers today would call the “social determinants of health” in simply observing and understanding the family situation of his young and vulnerable patients.

For Dr. Goldbloom, however, fate intervened to provide an alternative career path. As the Quiet Revolution transformed Québec society, health care became a key element of its policy agenda. As part of the profession's leadership (a role that already involved a considerable amount of bridge-building between linguistic groups and medical specialties), he became engaged in the political process and was persuaded to run for office. Today's Trudeau-watchers may be interested to know that he was first tapped to run in the riding of Mount Royal (traditionally considered a seat for a member of the Jewish community) for the Liberal Party of Canada, but lost that nomination battle to Pierre Trudeau in 1965. Goldbloom's honest account is not at all bitter; nevertheless, it does not paint a particularly pretty picture of partisan politics nor the machinations for which the federal Liberals are well known.

Instead, “Docteur” Goldbloom became a member of the Québec Liberal team, winning the riding of D'Arcy McGee as an opposition backbencher in 1966 and eventually as a member of Robert Bourassa's provincial government in 1970. Here again, Goldbloom provides an unvarnished account of his years in office, including the dramatic events of

the October Crisis, the controversy surrounding language laws, and insights into many Québec political figures. Goldbloom also unpacks some of the decisions that were strategically risky for his political prospects, but dictated by his ingrained sense to “do the right thing”, a concept that seems to elude many modern-day successors.

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While in office, Dr. Goldbloom did a great deal of bridge-building in the metaphorical sense—as a representative of the English-speaking language minority, as the first Québec cabinet member of the Jewish faith—but he was also a builder in a very practical sense, too. He carried the first portfolio related to the environment in 1970, at a time when much too little attention was paid to these issues, thus carving the path for future interventions. And, as minister of municipal affairs, Goldbloom literally took in hand one of the most challenging projects in Québec's history—the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympic Games—whose preparations were on the cusp of disaster.

After his tenure in political office, Dr. Goldbloom was persuaded to move on to the national scene, turning bridge building into an art form through his leadership of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, and then as the Commissioner of Official Languages. Goldbloom makes no bones about the realities of anti-Semitism and linguistic silos in the Montreal of his youth, yet he offers a balanced approach in tracing societal changes as he led these organizations. We sense the dedication and gravitas with which Dr. Goldbloom approached these responsibilities, but also the liveliness that really makes Canada come alive in his accounts. Overall, we see evidence of steady, honest, respectful but firm guidance, and the way in which Dr. Goldbloom transferred his professional capacities (the physician's power of careful observation and prescription) and personal qualities (the moral compass and sense of humanity) into addressing the challenges of religious and linguistic relations.