

## VOICES FROM THE PAST

“AS TO GHOSTS OR SPIRITS,” wrote Mrs. Traill in *The Backwoods of Canada*, “they appear totally banished from Canada. This is too matter-of-fact country for such supernaturals to visit. Here there are no historical associations, no legendary tales of those that came before us. Fancy would starve for lack of marvellous food to keep her alive in the backwoods.” From our own vantage point in time, such a dearth no longer confronts us. The work of anthropological investigators like Marius Barbeau has familiarized us with the stories and traditions of our native peoples; and folklorists like Helen Creighton, Edith Fowke and Germain Lemieux have recorded an impressive variety of songs, tales and superstitions handed down by generations of French and English Canadians. We have our heroes and villains, our myths and monsters; and every region of Canada can boast its legendary, literary or historical associations. Sadly, to most of us the cultural and political history of our country still remains a blur, and we are more familiar with the legendary exploits of other nations’ heroes than with those of our own. This is less true, perhaps, in Quebec, where the homogeneity of a society long closed in on itself has facilitated the survival and encouragement of cultural traditions. English Canada, by contrast, too often seems impervious to its past, eager to establish an unmistakably modern identity.

So books like Pierre Berton’s *The Wild Frontier* (McClelland & Stewart), unsatisfactory as they must seem to a professional historian, have a value beyond their obvious popular appeal: they put us in touch with our past, and bring before us the men and women who, through their ambition, or greed, or love of adventure, opened up this country and laid the foundation of our society. Berton focusses on individuals whose lives were filled with action: men like Wilfred Grenfell, “the perfect schoolboy hero”; Sam Steele, the Mountie who commanded the force’s

cavalry during the 1885 uprising; Almighty Voice, the Cree Indian whose defiance of white man's law led to the last outbreak of open warfare on the Canadian frontier. There is of course a danger in dwelling too fondly on such exciting moments in our past, the danger that we may romanticize and thus falsify our ancestors' achievements. To Berton's credit, he avoids this pitfall; he takes note of the Hollywood glamour that has invested our notions of the frontier, and rejects it. "We tend to overlook the pain of exploration," he observes in his preface; "The country was opened up at dreadful cost. Most frontier chronicles are also chronicles of human misery."

A very different picture of Canada's past emerges from Beverly Fink Cline's compilation *Louisa Clark's Annual 1843* (Porcépic), the third in a series of slim volumes in which excerpts from journals like the *Literary Garland* are blended with writings by a fictional "Lady Writer Residing in the Town of Goderich Canada West." Short pieces on slavery or the poor sit side by side with songs, recipes, and engravings of romantic landscapes. This kind of pot-pourri was not unusual in Victorian publications, and its resuscitation here does have a certain charm. At the same time, however, the effect is to make our ancestors seem quaint, sentimental, or merely silly. We cannot make the past come alive simply by imitating it: ultimately, that can only produce a sense of its remoteness.

A more direct means of contact with the past is provided by the camera. The development of photography antedated Confederation by some thirty years, and consequently we possess excellent photographic records of various aspects of nineteenth-century life in Canada, notably in the field of portraiture. George Woodcock's *Faces From History: Canadian Profiles & Portraits* (Hurtig) is a splendid collection of a hundred and twenty portraits, each accompanied by a concise and lucid commentary summarizing the life and achievement of the subject. Woodcock has gathered the politicians and the businessmen, the rebels and the writers, who shaped our country and gave us a cultural heritage worthy of respect, not condescension. John A. Macdonald and Louis Riel; William van Horne and Alexander Graham Bell; Emile Nelligan and Emily Gowan Murphy: here they sit, mutely reminding us that we have a rich and complex past — that Canada is no longer a "young" country. The poses are often stiff and awkward, a reflection of the difficulties facing early photographers; nevertheless, the portraits still tell us much about the personalities of the sitters, and give a valuable human dimension to dry historical fact.

In the last dozen years we have been well served by publications documenting our past in pictures, most memorably by the McGill University Press edition of *Portrait of a Period*, a fine selection by J. Russell Harper and Stanley Triggs from the Notman archives. More recently, local historians have dug into municipal or provincial archives, to produce collections like *Vancouver's First Century: A City Album 1860-1960* (J. J. Douglas), or *Old New Brunswick: A Victorian Portrait*,

edited for Oxford University Press by Richard Vroom and Arthur Doyle. The importance of such records is unquestionable; but there is still an element of unreality about many of these "views" of early Canada. The neat New Brunswick townscapes, the spotless shop fronts and tidy streets photographed by George Thomas Taylor and Isaac Erb are as carefully posed and arranged as any studio portrait. The camera may not lie, but it doesn't necessarily tell the whole truth either. In this respect the work of the photographer is comparable to that of the landscape artist; both see with an interpretative eye, and the image they convey reflects something of their personal vision. A good example of nineteenth-century landscape art is provided by the work of Joseph Légaré, the first native Canadian landscape-painter, whose pictures are collected in a handsome *catalogue raisonné* prepared for the National Gallery of Canada by John R. Porter. One of the most striking pictures, in subject if not in execution, is Légaré's depiction of the meeting in 1826 between a group of Hurons and the English actor Edmund Kean, on the banks of the Saint Lawrence: an encounter which, in composition and choice of detail, is charged with extra significance by the artist to emphasize the contrast between two utterly different civilizations. Such curious incidents abound in our annals, and deserve to be better known.

Literary scholarship has not lagged behind in the recovery of our past, though it is still difficult to obtain good texts of works published before the twentieth century. An important contribution is the series of reprints issued by the University of Toronto Press, under the general editorship of Douglas Lochhead. Latest to be published in this series is Barrie Davies' edition of *At the Mermaid Inn: Wilfred Campbell, Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott in The Globe, 1892-3*, an invaluable collection of articles that impresses one by the breadth of the writers' concerns and the maturity of their intellectual outlook. Campbell, Lampman and Scott wrote on topics very much alive today: the rights of women, the spirit of nationalism, the existence of a Canadian literature; and as the editor notes in his introduction, "'At the Mermaid Inn' makes it clear that there is a continuum of sensibility and a history of ideas which ought to enable us, in future, to be more specific and confident about the implications of the word Canadian when we speak of Canadian literature."

The work of modern anthologists has been especially useful in establishing a sense of a Canadian literary tradition in both prose and poetry: collections by Ralph Gustafson, A. J. M. Smith, Carl Klinck and Reginald Watters have been instrumental in giving impetus and direction to the study of our literature. Their work has been ably carried on by Mary Jane Edwards' four-volume anthology *The Evolution of Canadian Literature in English* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston), and most recently by the two volumes of *Literature in Canada*, edited for Gage by Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman. These anthologies, designed for college and university use, reach a much wider audience than critical histories such as the

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*Literary History of Canada*, and are at least as influential in forming public taste. Inevitably, anthologists can only hint at the wealth of material from which they have made their selections, and the general reader may be forgiven for thinking that fewer than a dozen Canadian poets were at work in the nineteenth century. In fact, as Gordon Roper pointed out some years ago in *Read Canadian*, more than five hundred writers braved the adverse conditions of publishing in Canada to produce between them over eight hundred volumes of verse. Most of these have gone down the dusty road to oblivion, deservedly perhaps; but they are evidence of a more vigorous intellectual life than one might have suspected. In a new anthology from Quebec, *Anthologie de la poésie québécoise du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (1790-1890)* (Hurtubise HMH) John Hare presents selections from the poetry of more than forty writers, few of whom are likely to be known outside their native province, yet whose works constitute a tradition vital to the successful development of better-known poets. In his preface, Hare asks, "aurait-on connu l'oeuvre géniale d'un Nelligan, sans la centaine de poètes qui l'ont précédé?" The writer, like other artists, is nourished by the achievements of his predecessors, which form a living and continuous tradition drawn on and modified by successive generations. Nothing is to be gained by uncritical admiration of our ancestors, by exaggerated praise for minor or insignificant writers; but we should be ready to respect their contribution, and acknowledge their place in the literary landscape that once seemed so desolate to Mrs. Traill.

H. J. R.

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