

THE ONCE AND FUTURE PAST

AT THE END OF HIS HISTORY of New Zealand, Keith Sinclair quotes from a 1925 *New Zealand Herald* comment on the election of Gordon Coates as Prime Minister, to the effect that “All is yet molten, mercurial. There are more departures to make than precedents to follow. To have a history may be an old land’s glory and safeguard: to make history is a new land’s perilous employment.” It is an interesting phrase, full of calvinist optimism and coloured by a romantic sense of a national future and an imperial past. Fifty-three years later, the perils of the employment may be even clearer than they were in 1925: for Canada at least, whatever the case might be in New Zealand. Perhaps not so curiously, one of the perils seems to be the temptation to assume that the events of the nation’s first century have established rigidly for all time the limits and structure of the nation’s character. Growth and change are not, of course, intrinsically admirable; nor is structure intrinsically vicious. But the fear of change — and any demand for the rigid maintenance of order (whether the order is right or wrong, admirable or not) which is itself born of the fear of change — is as debilitating as unbridled license. The way things were may provide solace from the way things are, but seldom a solution. We ought not to relive the past in the present, but to reinterpret it. And knowing that the past exerts its fascinations, we have sometimes to remind ourselves sharply of our responsibility for the past that is yet to come.

Several books published recently in Canada coincidentally reveal varying attitudes to the past. They range from *The Shopping Guide of the West* (J. J. Douglas, \$9.95), which reprints two of Woodward’s mailorder catalogues, for 1912 and 1929, with an enthusiastic and entertaining introduction by Robert D. Watt, to Conrad Swan’s *Canada: Symbols of Sovereignty* (University of Toronto Press, \$29.95), a handsomely illustrated, solemn and scholarly guide to Canada’s symbolic identifications of “authority and jurisdiction.” In between are a variety

of histories, anthologies, memoirs, and perspectives which partake in differing degrees of scholarship and nostalgia. Some of these are local histories, like F. R. Berchem's *The Yonge Street Story 1793-1860* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson, \$12.95) and the Urban Reader editors' pictorial volume *Vancouver's First Century: A City Album 1860-1960* (J. J. Douglas, \$19.95). The titles themselves describe the different approaches. Berchem uses Yonge Street to tell a narrative; the Vancouver book relies for its effect on an engrossing accumulation of advertisements and photographs. The pace of the narrative varies — in large part with the cast of characters (Berczy, Mackenzie, Col. Moodie and others) — and so does the quality of the prints. But the contrast between the two tells of more than just the distinction between verbal and visual books. The accident of the year 1860 being the end of one book and the beginning of the other draws attention to the different kind of world that existed when Toronto and Vancouver grew from their separate wildernesses. Whereas the camera focussed on Vancouver from its earliest days, Berchem had to make use, rather unsuccessfully, of line drawings to give visual stimulus to his contemporary narrative. In yet another book, *The Drawings of James Cockburn* by Christina Cameron and Jean Trudel (Gage), we find Cockburn's arresting, though somewhat static, watercolour paintings reproduced, mostly in black and white, as "A Visit through Quebec's Past." Paradoxically, the camera can be taken now into the Ontario and Quebec countryside to photograph structures from the early days, whereas Vancouver's forest past has long since disappeared. Cockburn and Trudel's interest seems to be in revisiting and identifying particular scenes; Berchem's interest is less in structure than in people, whose actions and attitudes created the life of his street; and where Berchem strives for a sense of character in the past, the *Vancouver* editors, much more tangibly, simply *show* us people in their landscape.

Books like Allan Anderson's *Remembering the Farm* (Macmillan, \$12.95) and Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews' *Mennonite Memories* (Centennial, \$15.00) combine elements of local and ethnic history in an endeavour to isolate both roots and attitudes of mind. The former is a tape-recorder-book, whose virtue lies in the way it catches Canadian voices; the latter, a compilation by several hands, is much more formally written and is more than anything else a testament of a persisting faith.

One can read roots and attitudes into both books. *Mennonite Memories* is intuned, its concern for privacy and propriety possibly the characteristic stance of the ethnic community it describes, and *Remembering the Farm* amply reveals "Rural Philosophy" and "Rural Anecdote." But such generalizations about either Mennonite or agricultural communities would be presumptuous, and both books as a result seem curiously artificial. The past they portray seems a contrived past, so that even the hardships they announce are made to appear like goals to which a contemporary age should strive.

Robert Watt, writing the introduction to the Woodward's catalogues, suggests that they will offer readers "a nostalgic trip down memory lane . . . [which] will be fun and hopefully . . . lead to some real understanding of the way we were." The important component there seems to me to be not "real understanding" but "fun." Enjoying memories is often bound up with embroidering memories; nostalgia allows us to alter the past and remember it selectively, which is a comforting process. But it is also perilous, for if we ever forget that selectivity does govern our memories, and accept our casual recollections, or advertiser's deliberate illusions, as whole truth, then we begin to rewrite history in unacceptable ways.

In *My Childhood and Yours* (Macmillan, \$9.95), a series of engaging anecdotal "happy memories of growing up," Robert Thomas Allen provides narratives about childhood magic and childhood joy. But he also recognizes the degrees of illusion which he is both drawing upon and creating. His story of a boy who could pray better than play, but who was nonetheless elected captain of a hockey-team because he took the heat off the other boys in Sunday school is a case in point. The man writing about the boys knows why the boy is put in goal: because if he couldn't skate, there, at least, he could hang on to the goal post until the game was over.

It wasn't the right ending for someone who had been a cowboy, a jungle explorer, a human fly, and The Greatest Champion of Everything the World Had Ever Seen, but somehow, without actually thinking about it, I knew that it was the most common ending, and that it happens far more often to most people than the things that happened to the heroes of my boyhood.

This comment provides the ending for the anecdote, but not for the book. The book ends by asserting the continuity of people's ability to live with a dream. If the dream dies, the society dies with it, which is why we should be so conscious of our sources and our ideals. To ignore the past is dangerous; to see the past as the only possibility is foolhardy; to accept either course alone is the greatest peril of a nation that thinks it is making history.

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