

THE CRAFT OF HISTORY

WHETHER HISTORICAL WRITING should be subject to the stimulus of chronological festivities is a point one must leave to the philosophers of that craft. The fact is that the series of provincial and federal anniversaries which began in 1958 with the first of British Columbia's many centennials, and came to a climax in 1967, has been productive of a great many volumes which have increased notably our available sources of local and national history and biography. For collectors of Canadiana it has been a bonanza decade and more; one doubts if so many books in the field appeared in the 91 years between 1867 and 1958 as have appeared in the 13 years since the latter date, whether as reprints or as original volumes.

Once started, the process continues. We are in the predicament of a sorcerer overwhelmed by a tide he has unthinkingly called up, for the spate of Canadiana seems inexhaustible since the fashion for centennials swept from province to province, and the astonishing fact is that — despite the great flotsam of rubbish that inevitably floats on the surface of such tides — the number of creditable new books in the field continues year by year to be high.

Let me begin, however, by isolating among recent publications some of the types of volume (one hesitates to use the word *book*, and *non-book* has become a dreary cliché) that are inspired by historical fashion but carry scanty profit to anyone but the publisher and author, and doubtless — if the truth be known — little to them. There is the collection of dull photographs of fur-clad men on sleds whose only merit is a slight antiquity, and which are reproduced, often with inept historical comments, to flatter local vanities; typical is *Gold Rush* by James

Blower (Ryerson/McGraw-Hill, \$9.95), described as "A pictorial look at the part Edmonton played in the gold era of the 1890's". There is the provocative article puffed into the size of a book, like William T. Little's *The Tom Thomson Mystery* (Ryerson/McGraw-Hill, \$6.95), which tells of the discovery of a skeleton that may (or may not) have been that of the famous painter. There is the revival of a book that has lost its context, like *The Scalpel and the Sword* (McClelland & Stewart), an impressionistic biography of Norman Bethune written two decades ago by Ted Allan and Sydney Gordon in a journalistic manner long obsolete; one would have thought the commissioning of a scholarly life of Bethune at this time more in place. There is the dense academic study of a limited area, in a style deadened by years of subjection to the thesis-masters; Richard Allen's title *The Social Passion* (University of Toronto Press, \$9.50) might be that of a vitally interesting book, but this treatise on "Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-28" in fact leads one into a dead wood of banal writing in which the path of genuine interest is there but hard to follow. And there is the documentary that fails a tantalizing title, like James H. Gray's *Red Lights on the Prairies* (Macmillan, \$6.95), a book which one reviewer who had obviously never read it described as "prurient". Alas, no! James H. Gray earned deserved respect for his books which rendered direct experience, like *The Winter Years* and *The Boy from Winnipeg*; they are an authentic part of the social history of the Canadian prairies, and indispensable as such. But his present study of prostitution in the pioneer towns is second-hand stuff, and he lacks the imaginative touch of the true historian who can give life to scenes through which he has not lived. The subject itself is fascinating, but it still awaits its Mayhew.

Yet despite these varying failures, there is enough in the publication record of recent seasons to assure one that Canadian historians are still producing a fair number of works whose utilitarian or imaginative qualities make them welcome. To the first class belongs the series of paperback Canadian Lives initiated by the Oxford University Press at \$3.50 each. Six titles have appeared so far, and these establish that the series is intended to have a more popular appeal than the parallel enterprise initiated by the University of Toronto Press in connection with the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. The present selection suggests that the Oxford books are planned to fall into two categories. 1. The brief biographies of major figures which act as introductions to wider reading: e.g. Donald Swainson's study of Sir John A. Macdonald and Barbara Robertson's of Wilfrid Laurier. 2. The adequate and satisfying accounts of lesser but important figures of whom a 35,000 word account is likely to be sufficient for all but the most demanding

scholar: e.g. David Flint's study of John Strachan and Dorothy Blakey Smith's of James Douglas. Prepared evidently with an eye to students, these biographies are simple but unpatronizing, and can be read with pleasure and a modicum of enlightenment by anyone with an amateur interest in history. One hopes that the selection of future titles will be expanded in the direction of including as many as possible of those secondary figures whose lives and achievements contain both an idiosyncratic interest, and an importance in terms of historical background, which biographers have rarely explored.

After so many years of rummaging and research, one is astonishingly reminded every year or so that some important document from the more or less distant Canadian past has been lying undiscovered and unpublished for a century or more. The Champlain Society has a record of enterprise in this direction which it is unnecessary to stress, and now, as its forty-sixth publication, it has issued the *Journal* of Major John Norton, that chief of the Five Nations whose hybrid origin is so obscure and whose activities have been so ignored or doubted by our historians that he does not yet find a place even in existing biographical dictionaries. The narrative, describing his journeys among the Cherokees and telling the history of the Five Nations which adopted him, is hardly likely ever to be regarded as an example of masterly writing, though it comes with a lengthy introduction by so distinguished an authority on literature in Canada as Carl F. Klinck, but as a document to be weighed against other historical material it is undoubtedly of the first importance.

In quite a different category, so far as literary merits are concerned, was one of the predecessors of John Norton's *Journal*, *The Narrative of David Thompson* which appeared as the Champlain Society's twelfth title in 1915, edited by J. R. Tyrrell. But Thompson's accounts of his great travels, which included the exploration and mapping of a vast area of western Canada and the north-western United States, have been unavailable up to the present in an edition which the general public could buy. Now this lack has been met. What Victor G. Hopwood gives us in his new version (*David Thompson: Travels in Western North America 1784-1812*, Macmillan, \$10.95) is not merely a condensation of the incomplete manuscript reproduced by Tyrrell, which Hopwood trims to eliminate repetitions and irrelevancies; it also includes hitherto unpublished portions of Thompson's journals which the editor found in manuscript form in various Canadian libraries.

The result is a more complete picture of Thompson's experiences and achievements than we have had before, carpentered together with impeccable scholarship and editorial skill. Some years ago, in the pages of *Canadian Literature*, Dr.

Hopwood put a persuasive plea for Thompson's literary as distinct from his historical importance, and now, reading in full his version of the Thompson narrative, the present writer — an aficionado of travel writings — is glad to agree; this is an unusually pleasing book to read for its perceptive observation of men and animals and for its natural style, as well as being a basic document of Canadian history. Thompson, as Hopwood claims, was a prose writer to be classed with such classic nineteenth century masters of the scientific travel narrative as Charles Darwin and H. W. Bates. Undoubtedly, among recent publications in Canadian history, the *Travels* deserves to be regarded as the best; one looks forward with strengthened interest to Dr. Hopwood's biography of Thompson, which will be published shortly.

Quite different in character, but still admirable in its own terms as an example of the skills of modern reportage turned to historical uses, is Pierre Berton's *The Last Spike*, the second volume of his account of the Canadian Pacific Railway; covering the years from 1881-1885, it takes us out of the doldrums of national life that followed the Pacific Scandal and narrates what is perhaps our only epic story as a nation, the actual building of the line.

Berton is a journalist, and inclined to the high colour and accelerated prose to which his trade has accustomed him; he is also prone to the monumental cliché (but so, the experts tell us, was Homer himself, with all his rosy-fingered dawns). As readers of Berton's *Klondike* may expect, he sometimes gives a hectic feeling to events that must have seemed pretty banal in their day, but his book is informative as well as entertaining, and full of odd facts and eccentric erudition. It is also much concerned with the very profound ways in which the construction of the railway affected the lives of thousands of ordinary people in the 1880's; Berton's account of how the labourers actually lived and worked, and of the methods of construction, is unrivalled in any other book on the period. *The Last Spike* is excellent popular history, and one suspects the professionals will use it as a basic work on the Railway for a long time ahead, whether or not they recognize its merits publicly.

It would be unfortunate, however, if the popular success of *The Last Spike* were to obscure the good qualities of another excellent recent example of popular history written at a high level. This is Joseph Schull's *Rebellion* (Macmillan, \$9.95), an account of the French uprising in Lower Canada in 1837. The rebellion of 1837 has assumed a new topicality owing to its acceptance by the FLQ and their supporters as the archetypal separatist movement, and *Rebellion* provides a fluent and perceptive account which explores both the political and social

causes of the incident and the lasting wounds that were left by the methods of repression which reinforced in French Canadian minds the belief that they were regarded as a subordinate people.

Slightly on the other and duller side of the border from Berton and Schull, the journalists writing history, are the historians writing for amateurs who have put together *Colonists and Canadians* (Macmillan, \$8.95), an account edited by J. M. S. Careless of the various colonies of British North America between the conquest of New France and Confederation. It is the work of eleven writers, each taking a decade, and, while it brings out some interesting and previously neglected aspects of local history during the colonial period, it suffers from the inevitable disjointedness and — worse — the inevitable variation in quality of writing that results from the now fashionable habit of publishing books written by committees rather than by individuals.

The difference between such a book and a firmly-crafted history written by a single individual becomes evident when one compares *Colonists and Canadians*, with its shifting focus and abrupt transitions, with Barry M. Gough's *The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast, 1810-1914* (University of British Columbia Press, \$12.50), a well-documented and lucid account of the most effective manifestation of the British presence on the west coast of Canada during the nineteenth century; it presents with much charm of style a subject which — astonishingly — has never been adequately studied before. An interesting aspect of the book is the persuasive argument that the United States would indeed have grabbed what is now British Columbia if the Royal Navy had not appeared off the disputed coast in the right strength and at the appropriate time.

At the opposite end of the scale to Dr. Gough's self-contained study of a single phase of European penetration into North America is another nautical volume, Samuel Eliot Morison's *The European Discovery of North America: The Northern Voyages* (Oxford, \$15.00). Admiral Morison, of course, is no Canadian, though he has visited us often and with perceptive eye; but in this volume he deals mainly with the explorers who came to the lands that eventually formed Canada, and, if he brings little new in the way of facts, he does discuss the existing knowledge about the Norsemen, the Cabots, Cartier and the Elizabethan searchers for the Northwest, with a shrewd if erratic judgment; he supports his chapters of narrative with copious and useful notes. As a general introduction and a compendium of sources, *The European Discovery of North America* is a useful and readable book, once one gets accustomed to the Admiral's rather self-consciously

Old Saltish breeziness; nevertheless, it is far too idiosyncratic a book to be taken as more than a partial view of the facts available.

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Finally, there are the picture books, massive and colourful, perhaps more numerous this season than ever before, and perhaps more handsome. The best of them demonstrate the tendency of the historical amateur in the 1970's to demand concrete and visual evidence. No longer is he willing to take the professional's word; he likes to see for himself, to weigh and savour, the material on which history is based, so that he can have the feel and look of the past as a physical reality as well as a written record.

The most magnificent of the current historical picture books, *The Discovery of North America* (McClelland & Stewart, \$25.00), covers much the same ground as Admiral Morison's book. It also is written by non-Canadians about an area of history that is largely Canadian; the narrative — best described as workmanlike — has been provided by an American scholar, W. P. Cumming, and two British historians, D. B. Quinn and the late R. A. Skelton. It is by no means as lively as the Morison account, but in its caution is perhaps more reliable. The level tone may even be intentional, for it provided a reliable line of continuity on which to hang the most splendid collection I have yet encountered of reproductions, many of them in colour, of the maps, charts and contemporary drawings and engravings that have preserved the knowledge and view of the world held by men in the expanding dawn of the modern age. The narrative begins with St. Brendan and ends with the Pilgrim Fathers, and all the important extant maps of that age are included, in full and clear colour. Yet the best of all the illustrations are the drawings of John White, who accompanied Martin Frobisher to Baffin Island and later played a crucial part in the settlement of Virginia. White was an artist of stature — barely recognized — and his drawings of Canadian Eskimos (the first ever made) and of fishes and other creatures, bring to one with an extraordinary freshness that sense of a new and pristine world which the Elizabethans took home with them from the Americas. The quality of the colour printing in this book is quite outstanding; every graphic artist as well as every amateur of history should study — should even possess it.

In contrast, the visual dulness of *Canada's Five Centuries*, by W. Kaye Lamb (McGraw Hill, \$22.50), produces a rather pedestrianly utilitarian first impression. Here, I suggest, the text is more attractive than the illustrations. Admittedly, Dr. Lamb is not likely to tell the professional historian much that is unfamiliar,

but he does recast the material for the general reader in an interesting mosaic pattern which dodges the monotony of complete chronological continuity and relates the historical facts to appropriate groups of illustrations, many gleaned from the Public Archives of Canada over which the author so long presided. In themselves, these illustrations are instructive and often novel, but they are reproduced either in a greyish black-and-white, or in black on a peculiarly distasteful beige-brown background, with a few in pallid four-colour, and some revoltingly crude colour photographs at the end. A great deal of good material has in fact been spoilt by poor design, poor printing and unwisely selected paper. All the sadder is the fact that this is the only one of the five illustrated books under review to be printed in Canada. *The Discovery of North America* and the three other texts I shall mention were all produced abroad, three in Italy, one in Germany, and all are far better examples of the printing craft than *Canada's Five Centuries*.

The remaining books relate to specialised phases of history. In *The National Gallery of Canada* (Oxford University Press, \$27.50), Jean Sutherland Boggs gives a modestly-written, much-needed and well-illustrated account of the Gallery's development which reveals how much richer its collections in fact are than the limitations of the present building allow us to appreciate. Obviously we cannot compete with the great collections of London, New York, Paris and Italy, but we can still thank a line of dedicated directors for a selection of good works from all ages and schools that stands high among national galleries of the second rank. Now, with the copious illustrations in Dr. Boggs's volume, we can gain a far more comprehensive idea of the National Gallery than any single visit to its restricted exhibitions will give.

Would that Scott Symons had been as matter-of-fact in his style as Dr. Boggs! In *Heritage* (McClelland & Stewart, \$22.50), he rhapsodizes in a prose of curious whimsicality on the associations aroused by a series of splendid colour photographs by John de Visser of some of the best examples of early Canadian furniture. (Nothing that comes from the sunset side of Sault Ste. Marie is shown, which suggests that both author and photographer regard the west as barbarian darkness.) The illustrations are so magnificently self-sufficient, so completely and poetically evocative in their own visual dimensions, that the voice of the rhapsodist becomes in the end an annoyingly distracting twitter. One would prefer informative labels, set in some grave Georgian type, for with such photographs, and such objects, one can easily do one's own daydreaming.

On the other hand, in *Seasons of the Eskimo* (McClelland & Stewart, \$16.95),

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the voice and the eye seem in perfect harmony. Fred Bruemmer has spent much time in the Arctic, living among the last of the Eskimos who have so far escaped the welfare prison of the modern North and still contrive to live the old hunting life. That is, as his sub-title declares, "a vanishing way of life", and there is a truly elegiac quality to Bruemmer's account. In fine, sensitive prose, he records the traditional Eskimo life from season to season, and in what are probably the best photographs ever taken of the native life of the North he portrays the remote Eskimos of today, veritable men between two worlds, living out the last years of their traditional culture in all its phases. It is history, since what it records will soon be vanished, but it is also a moving human statement of the greatness of the Eskimos' experiment in living, of the nobility of their primeval anarchism, and, not least, of the extraordinary empathetic understanding with which Bruemmer has lived his way into their collective sensibility. *Seasons of the Eskimo* is a far more subtle and adequate contribution to our understanding of the Inuit than any anthropological record I have yet read. It is likely to be a long-valued document of the traditional North.

G.W.

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