

# CANADIAN HISTORICAL FICTION FOR CHILDREN

## *A Survey*

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**I**T IS A WRY COMMENTARY on the state of Canadian historical fiction for children that a consideration begins with the most basic question: Is it historical fiction at all? Historical fiction is surely nothing less than the imaginative recreation of the past. The good historical novel involves the reader in a bygone era, dramatically and emotionally. Such a recreation of the past must depend on a nice balance between the contending pulls of imagination and authenticity. Accuracy is important, for, like all "adjectival novels", historical fiction depends in large part for its appeal on the facts which it embodies. Put vegetation on the moon and science fiction becomes only fiction. The historical novel need not represent quite *wie es eigentlich gewesen sei*, but plausibility is essential.

Even more necessary is the writer's evocative skill. No conscientious accumulation of data itself can create the conviction which a successful historical novel demands. Only invention can bring the reader to an identification with the past, living it rather than studying it.

The artistic problems inherent in the historical novel are compounded in the works intended for children. Events must be more closely winnowed and sifted; character more clearly delineated, but without condescension or oversimplification. The child must be moved rather quickly into the consciousness of another time and his imagination immediately stirred to it. Because the child has greater need for self-identification with a hero than has an adult, the past must

become the present and the present the past to such a degree of intimacy that entry from one to the other passes almost unnoticed. All this takes more rather than less talent.

It is against these standards of historical fiction — the standards exemplified by Hope Muntz and Rosemary Sutcliff in England, Zoe Oldenbourg in France, Esther Forbes in the United States — that Canadian achievement must be measured. Only a misplaced patriotism can take comfort from the comparison.

For Canadian historical fiction for children has, by and large, been a failure. Its virtues have been manifest in the reporting of history; its failings have been literary. Canadian writers may take full credit for the conscientious and accurate assemblage of dates, names and events. But their plots are manipulated and the characters they invent are papier-maché. They recount the past, but they seldom recreate it. They seem to have decided to parcel out so much history and so much narrative, and they have commonly weighted the parcel in favour of history. How they love to teach it — not only dates and places, but how to prepare pemmican, how to make candles, how to tan a deer hide, how to construct a Red River cart, all interesting in themselves but misplaced in the pages of a novel.

Olive Knox's *The Young Surveyor* is typical of this pedagogical approach. It is based on the Jarvis survey for the Canadian Pacific Railway in British Columbia in 1875-85. A seventeen-year-old boy accompanies Jarvis and learns surveying from him. The reader perforce learns it too, since the first two chapters consist of little more than questions and answers on the subject. *The Young Surveyor* represents most of the faults to which its genre is liable. Dismiss it then as an individual mistake? Alas, no. For sales appeal is not synonymous with intrinsic merit. Diluted history of the *Young Surveyor* type has its market, and thus its own *raison-d'être*. Such markets are best exploited by standardized products. Understandably then, the most recent trend in Canadian historical fiction is for books to be commissioned by publishers and written to a formula. Formula books are designed to constitute part of a series — such as the “Buckskin Books” and the “Frontier Books”. Not that the series link is in itself necessarily damaging. Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, Edith Nesbit's *The Bastable Children*, the Narnia books of C. S. Lewis, the Eagle of the Ninth group by Rosemary Sutcliff — all these “author-series” books show that their originators had so much to say that their joy and activity spilled over into another book.

The Canadian “publisher-series” books, however, read as if specific data had been fed into a computer. Each book is by a different author, but the similarity of their instructions is clearly reflected in the result. The formula seems to call

for the following ingredients: history must be deadly accurate; history must take precedence over fiction; don't narrate — just report event after event after event; don't worry about style or characterization; limit the vocabulary to the number specified by educationists as normative for the age group.

The Buckskin Books, the publisher would have us believe, are "exciting stories for younger readers, tales of action and adventure set against the background of rousing events in Canadian history. They are books full of lively incident that provide children with a wide and wonderful variety of good reading." Against these claims may be placed the following analysis. Each book consists of no more than 122 pages and no less than 113. The vocabulary is stringently limited: except for the proper names, the words are those derived from the textbooks produced for the age group. In each book (ten have been published since 1961), the story line is a thin thread of Canadian pseudo-history with fiction lying uneasily amid the fact. They have been prepared for children eight to ten years of age, presumably on the assumption that fairy tales and fantasy are no longer proper fare.

If we take two typical books in this series we find that they have themes familiar in North American children's literature. In *The Great Canoe*, by Adelaide Leitch, a little Indian boy attaches himself to a famous explorer; in *Father Gabriel's Cloak*, by Beulah Garland Swayze, a white girl is captured by Indians. These are young heroes with whom the reader can identify himself, the settings of the novels are authentic, and in *The Great Canoe*, there are convincing descriptions of Indian tribal beliefs, customs and rituals. Less successful are the style and characterization. In *The Great Canoe* there are frequent lapses into comic book vocalisms: "Ai-ee! Pffah! YI-i-ee!", while the method of bringing Champlain down to a young child's level is to write, "Champlain's face fell. 'Don't you think I was rather clever in the woods?', he asked disappointedly."

The degree of over-simplification is seen in such paragraphs as this from *Father Gabriel's Cloak*: "She was a quiet girl, small for her age and dark. Madame Lemieux had been worried about her that summer. She had had a fever, so they had cut her dark hair close to her head. But by early September she was much better." The best books in this series are those with little or no attempt to establish a definite period in history, such as Catherine Anthony Clark's *The Man with Yellow Eyes* and Benham's *The Heroine of Long Point*. But the overall impression of the series remains that they are designed for an uncritical market, with little else to recommend them than their "Canadian content". No one denies the need for Canadian historical fiction, particularly in the schools, but the question

is whether Canadian history, Canadian literature or Canadian children are well served by such baldly commercial products.

One has to admit that there are few better books in their own class with which to compare the Buckskin Books. Historical fiction for the eight to ten age group is certainly difficult to write. Yet there are enough good examples to carry the point, such as *The Emperor and the Drummer Boy* by Ruth Robbins, *The Matchlock Gun* by Walter Edmonds, and *The Courage of Sarah Noble* by Alice Dalgleish. Each of these takes a single incident and tells it simply, but dramatically; each of them is thrilling enough to carry the unusual words with the simple ones.

The Frontier Books exemplify the deficiencies of the "formula story" at the older age level. Described by the publisher as historical novels, they are completely based in history and no fictional characters of any consequence appear in them. Typical of this series is *John Rowand, Fur-Trader*, by Iris Allan. It is the story of an actual fur-trader who left his home in Montreal as a boy of fourteen to spend his days with the Northwest Company. We follow his rather uneventful life until he dies at the age of sixty-two. The outstanding happening is the amalgamation of the Northwest Company with the Hudson's Bay Company (an event which most adults will recall, without excitement, as thoroughly enough covered in textbooks). In similar vein is *Horseman in Scarlet*, by John W. Chalmers, recounting the career of the famous Sam Steele of the Northwest Mounted Police. The book is a mere refurbishing of facts:

"Why is it called the Dawson Road, Sergeant Major?" Sam asked. Coyne was unable to answer that question, but Ensign Stewart Mulvey could. "Dawson is the name of an engineer who laid it out a few years ago", he explained. "It really isn't a road; it's more of a trail where a road could be built. It roughly follows the old trade route of the Nor'westers. It starts at Prince Arthur's Landing, near Fort William, and follows the Kaministikwia River west and north past the Kakabeka Falls to the Junction of the Shebandowan."

"Then west to the Matawin and Oskandagee Creek", Big Neil continued. "From there past the end of Kashabowie Lake and along the Windigoostigwan Lake and some other waters to the Maligne River."

One feels sorry that Sam asked the question.

Their evident dullness aside, the plethora of factual information in the Frontier Books raises doubts as to whether they are even seriously intended as fiction. Perhaps it is fairer to see them simply as an attempt to make history more palat-

able, just as the rules of arithmetic may be more easily learned when set to some rhyme. The Frontier Books seem to say, in effect, that a child would not be interested in reading a purely factual account of say, La Salle's life, but might be induced to swallow the intellectual pill of history or biography when it is sweetened by a slight coating of fiction.

THIS ATTITUDE is, of course, not confined to Canadian writers. Much biography appearing today for both children and adults is overcast with fiction. The best ones, even for children, use the fictional element cautiously, such as Geoffrey Trease's *Sir Walter Raleigh*, where conversation is kept to a minimum and where there is some historical evidence for such conversation. But when reading *Sir Walter Raleigh* there is no doubt that one is reading biography. History, biography, historical fiction should be used to reinforce one another, not to cause confusion between fact and fiction. With the advent of the Frontier Books, Canadian authors appear to be missing the advantages of fiction while depreciating history.

Admittedly, Canadian writers have a harder task in dealing with history as material for fiction than do their counterparts in Great Britain, France or the United States. Where are Canada's revolutions, civil wars, medieval pageantries or "ages of kings"? Perhaps Canada, "the land of compromise", has had a history too underplayed to provide the conflicts that form the basis for a good rousing tale. It would be quite a feat to write an interesting children's story based on Baldwin and Lafontaine's theory of responsible government.

Yet, however valid these excuses, the range of historical topics represented in Canadian children's literature still seems extraordinarily narrow and the treatment of them unnecessarily bland. The choice of themes, for example, is almost invariably obvious: either the subjects that the textbooks label as "important" or those which have their colour already built-in: life with the Indians, the fur trade, the Rebellion of 1837, the Caribou Gold Rush, appear over and over again. Against this heavy preponderance can be set only a few exceptions which show the fresh resources that can be discovered by the exercise of ingenuity and originality: John Hayes' tales of the Selkirk Settlers and of the Fishing Admirals of Newfoundland; Thomas Raddall's account based on the attempted revolt in Nova Scotia in 1776; Marion Greene's effective use of the turbulent Ottawa of the 1820's as setting for her *Canal Boy*.

The rest is almost silence, and of events after the Riel Rebellion there is nothing at all. Many episodes in our history, both great and small, have as yet been ignored. Where are the books based on such themes as the flood of immigration or the Fenian raids?

Even more puzzling is the authors' self-imposed limitation of pitch. There is no reason to believe that Canadian children are uniquely appreciative of the virtues of restraint, but those who write for them prefer gentility to gusto. Even so competent a novelist as John Hayes almost never exploits the conflict inherent in his well-chosen subjects. His *Land Divided*, for example, is about the Acadians, tragic victims in a war that settled the fate of empires. But no need is felt for emotion or taking sides. Give the young hero a father who is an English army officer and a mother who is Acadian. Have Michael's Acadian cousin Pierre even help in the search for Michael's father when the latter is captured by the French. In turn, of course, Michael's father will kindly and courteously help his Acadian relatives live well in the foreign town to which they are banished. So well, in fact, that the impression is left that they will be far better off there any way. Michael's mother is no dramatic problem, either; she takes the oath of loyalty to King George. Why in the world did Longfellow become so emotional about *Evangeline*?

Even in Hayes' *Treason at York*, blandness and impartiality set the prevailing tone. The issues would seem to force a choice — after all, Canada was *invaded* in the War of 1812 — but Hayes somehow enables hero and reader to escape involvement. A neighbour's brother lives across the border, so the hero bears no sense of enmity to the American adversary. In many ways the book is a plea against fighting with our neighbour. This is admirable morality but does not satisfy the claims of either entertainment or historical truth. Hayes assuages feelings when it would have been more valid and dramatically effective to strengthen them.

Only in his book on the Rebellion of 1837, *Rebels Ride at Night*, does Hayes finally come round to committing a hero; the protagonist definitely takes sides with Mackenzie, though characteristically enough more for personal than for political reasons. This clearness of identification makes *Rebels Ride at Night* perhaps the most satisfactory of Hayes' books and certainly far better than the other two books on the same subject, Emily Weaver's *The Only Girl* and Lyn Cook's *Rebel on the Trail*. In these two novels, the Rebellion is seen from the periphery by young heroines. While the families in both books are alarmed by the mild attachment of an elder son to Mackenzie's cause, the Rebellion itself is

treated as a pointless scheme of a foolish few. The authors imply that a little more patience and equanimity would have desirably obviated the whole incident.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it comes as no surprise that Canadian historical fiction gingerly sidesteps the greatest issue in Canadian history — the conflict between French and English. The five books for children dealing with the events culminating in the battle of the Plains of Abraham and beginning with G. A. Henty's *With Wolfe in Canada* are all by British or American authors. It seems as though for Canadians the emotional implications of this theme can hardly be toned down, and that therefore it is thought a subject best avoided altogether. At the same time, the scarcity of material on the age of exploration and the French-Indian wars seems beyond explanation. Only three Canadian authors (Fred Swayze in *Tonty of the Iron Hand*, Adeleine Leitch in *The Great Canoe*, and Beulah Garland Swayze in *Father Gabriel's Cloak*) have dealt with this period. Even the story of our great heroine, Madeleine de Verchères, beloved in the textbooks, has been left to our American compatriots in such books as *Madeleine Takes Command* by Ethel C. Brill and *Outpost of Peril* by Alida Malkus.

The overall impression that Canadian writers withdraw from the emotional impact of historical fact is strengthened when one examines the two really outstanding historical novels for children. Both of these — Roderick Haig-Brown's *The Whale People* and Edith Sharp's *Nkwala* — might indeed more properly be described as anthropological novels. They deal, not with recorded events or with personages from history, but with a social setting no more specifically defined in time and place than British Columbia "before the white man came". This is not to say that the narratives are not based on solid historical research. The historicity is evident, but it is never obtrusive; fact underlies every fictional event but never dictates its pattern.

*Nkwala* and *The Whale People* also offer some useful lessons in design. Both employ a short time span — *Nkwala* a few months and *The Whale People* about two years. By contrast, most other children's historical novels, with an "other-directed" structure imposed by history book or publisher, attempt to cover too long a period. Fred Swayze's *Tonty of the Iron Hand*, for example, chronicles twenty-six years of Tonty's experiences; Olive Knox's *Black Falcon* twenty years of a white boy's life with the Indians. And most others not much less. This insensitivity to the need for dramatic unity is also manifested in the pervasive tendency to complicate plots and proliferate details. The typical novelist is likely to march his hero from fort to fort, from battle to battle in such confusing itinerary

that parts of the book must often be re-read in order to determine what is actually taking place.

Simplicity goes with artistic integrity. *Nkwala* and *The Whale People* are again the obvious examples. John Craig's *The Long Return* is another. This is the story of a white boy captured by Ojibway Indians. He lives with them for several years and becomes fond of them. When he makes his escape, he does so almost with reluctance. The plot is exciting but it is also simple. And there is not a date in the book; Craig takes ample opportunity to concentrate on character and style and the development of credibility. So too with John Hayes' *Dangerous Cove*. The Fishing Admirals on their yearly trip to the fishing banks of Newfoundland put into force their charter to drive the settlers away from the coast. The two heroes help to oppose and ultimately to defeat them. A simple and credible plot, the sharp focus produced by a short time span, and a fast-paced narration combine to achieve a successful integration of history and invention.

**I**N THE FINAL ANALYSIS, John Hayes and *The Dangerous Cove* may indeed serve to represent the typical virtues of good Canadian historical fiction for children. *The Whale People* and *Nkwala* are far better but they stand well apart from the rest; probably superior writing is always *sui generis*. For the group as a whole, the claims must be much more modest, but nonetheless hardly negligible. Canadian children will learn some history from these novels. They will find considerable variety in the settings; in their overall range from Newfoundland to British Columbia these books well portray how "the east-west dream does mock the north-south fact". They give some sense of the vastness of Canada and its varied scenes. They succeed often enough in giving the lie to the premise that Canadian history need be dull. There can really be no despair for historical fiction in Canada when it can produce as subtle and sly a view of history as is offered in James McNamee's *My Uncle Joe*, (1962). The protagonist only remembers Riel as a dinner guest in his father's home; the Rebellion is never actually encountered. Yet both the man and his movement are fully realized. A wealth of meaning is conveyed in brief compass (63 pages), and a door is opened on the privacy of history.

Canadian history is not easy to dramatize. If it does not conform to the usual pattern of bloodshed and victory, dynamic personality and odd characters, its



interpreters in fiction have perhaps the burden of developing new forms. But even so, adventure may appear in many guises and a story is every bit as exciting whether it has a battle between knights in armour or a skirmish in the Arctic forest, a boy adrift on the Sargasso Sea or wrecked on the shore of Lake Superior. Good historical fiction will impart at least the distinctive flavour of Canada's historical development and conceivably a more universal meaning is also within reach. The major revelation of historical fiction for children may well be the unfolding of man's steady search for order. Perhaps Canada, above all countries, has this to offer to its children and to children everywhere.

