

Eight Biographies of Canadian Women

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Wilderness Women: Canada's Forgotten History, Jean Johnston. Illustrated by Patricia Wilson Johnston. Peter Martin Associates Limited, 1973. Repr. 1976. 242 pp. \$4.94 paper.

In *Wilderness Women*, Jean Johnson develops the theme that women, largely ignored in history texts, were an important force to be reckoned with in the settlement of Canada. Equalling men in boldness and endurance, they contributed stability and permanence. The eight women whose biographies make up this volume all exhibited the strength of the pioneer spirit although they came from a wide variety of backgrounds and their exploits took many unsung forms.

First published in 1973 and reissued in paperback in 1976, the book's style and format is aimed at an adolescent audience and could be useful as supplementary reading for high school history classes. Each biography is carefully and extensively documented with bibliographies and explanatory footnotes and more general reference sources are listed at the end. A black and white sketch depicting a moment of drama in the subject's life accompanies each story. Unaccountably, there are no maps, an unfortunate oversight in view of the woolly sense of geography enjoyed by most young people.

The lives of the eight women span the centuries. The Viking Gudrid, whose story is based on old Icelandic sagas and recent archaeological discoveries, lays claim to being the first white woman to bear a child on North American soil. Marguerite de Roberval's story is the most romantic and astonishing. Abandoned with her lover on a small island off Newfoundland in 1541, she became the first wilderness survival expert, staying alive for three years before rescue. The most familiar name is that of Jeanne Mance whose extraordinary managerial ability and persuasive power ensured the establishment of a mission colony in Montreal. Molly Brant, a Mohawk who married Sir William Johnson, is credited with playing a major diplomatic role in keeping the Six Nations loyal to Britain during the American Revolution. Another diplomat, Amelia Douglas not only made a successful transition from the humdrum existence of fort life to the glamour and responsibility of being First Lady of British Columbia; as the daughter of a Cree mother, she bridged two cultures. Marie-Anne Lagimodière's life was more humble, but her experiences were more exciting as she followed her voyageur husband to *les pays d'en haut* and became embroiled in the problems of the Selkirk settlement. Charlotte Bompas, a representative of the Victorian missionary spirit in the far north, was a woman of astounding spirit and endurance, and she is given here a particularly sympathetic treatment. Finally, there is Martha Black, a very modern spirit. Abandoned by

her husband en route to the Klondike, she pressed on, founded a successful mill, won the title of 'Mother of the Yukon' and the honour of becoming the second woman to sit in the Canadian House of Commons.

These are stirring tales and by and large the author is able to catch the flavour of the time and the spirit of the central character. Certainly the book presents a new perspective on women and their role in the development of Canada. Most found themselves in the traditional help-meet situation, but it was Charlotte who for months on end ran the mission while her bishop husband travelled through his far-flung diocese; it was Molly and Amelia who gave the advice that averted trouble with the Indians; it was Marguerite, not her lover, who survived that last lonely year.

The biographies can be enjoyed even by those with minimal historical knowledge, for the author is adept at sketching in the necessary background. The reader gains sufficient understanding of the trade versus settlement rivalry to comprehend the problems encountered at Red River. He gains useful insights into early attitudes toward mixed marriages and an appreciation of the culture and sensibility of the Indians, especially the Iroquois. There are good descriptive passages detailing the hardships and pleasures of river travel, the awful deprivations of northern communities and the aching loneliness of isolated cabins, and the tedium of fort life.

The most successful biographies are those in which the author focuses on or highlights exciting episodes. Little is known of Marguerite de Roberval apart from her adventure in the New World; thus Ms. Johnson is compelled to dramatize the three year sojourn in the wilderness, and although questions as to how she survived are unanswered, the feat remains fixed in the reader's mind. Martha Black's first year in the Yukon is treated in detail and serves as a focal point in understanding her character. Three sharply sketched scenarios involving Marie-Anne Lagimodière not only reveal the hardships of prairie life but serve to flesh out her personality. In the same way, the energetic and kind-hearted Charlotte Bompas is made memorable in one scene in which she improvised to make Christmas decorations that astonished and delighted the mission Indians. In contrast, the long arduous career of Jeanne Mance fails to grip the reader. Although her achievements were probably the most significant, one tends to lose sight of them in the detailed accounts of her various journeys between the New World and France. Ms. Johnson notes in her summation that little is known of the human side of Mance, but that cannot be condoned as an excuse for the failure to bring her to life.

Unfortunately, most of the stories tend at times to bog down in a welter of details too often unrelated to the main thread of the character's life. Considering the enormous research involved, it is perhaps not surprising that the author does not always have her materials under control, but it is distressing to gain the impression of flipping through research notes. Too many explicit references to source material tend to interrupt the flow of the story. In de Roberval's tale, the author is punctilious in defining which of the two 16th century journals is the authority for a specific detail, information more properly belonging in footnotes. She is always at pains to confess the absence of explicit source material. Thus one encounters the phrasing

"The family legend does not tell us. . .but. . . ." Apart from their questionable literary merits, these approaches lend an apologetic tone and cast doubt on the interpretations that follow. The author uses many direct quotations from journals and letters without incorporating them into the text in an intelligent and enlightening manner. They often merely repeat what has already been dealt with or illustrate matters incidental to the central events. After several paragraphs describing Molly Brant's movements from Niagara to Montreal and back to her people, a letter from Governor Halidan is quoted which sums up this information but adds nothing new. The tragedies that darkened Martha Black's old age are expanded at such length by excerpts from letters that the biography becomes unbalanced. Occasionally Ms. Johnston has been unable to resist including interesting but totally irrelevant details such as the presence of an ancestor of Pierre Elliott Trudeau on the ship that carried Jeanne Mance back to New France.

Each biography begins with a very brief assessment of the subject's importance and often a transparent and forced attempt to link her life to that of the previous subject. Each ends with a summation of the woman's character and the historical role she played. These passages often have an aura of special pleading and are marked by the condescending tone so often apparent in writing for young people. When the author is relating incidents, her style is lively; when she fills in background, it is straightforward; when she describes conditions, it is frequently evocative. However, when she attempts to generalize and persuade, the language becomes self-conscious. We are told that "It is easy to picture Gudrid in her old age" and that "It is pleasant to think of Marguerite with her little pupils." There are pat concluding devices: "There is little to add to Anne-Marie's story" or "So the curtain goes down on Amelia." There are unacceptable projections: how Jeanne Mance would view her achievements or what Charlotte Bompas would do were she alive today. And whenever sources are thin, the rhetorical question becomes a signal for speculation. "Why did Molly Brant command this attention? What was the secret of her magnetism?" Although it is the prerogative of the biographer to interpret his subject, this particular approach seems unnecessarily awkward.

In view of the work involved in preparing this book and the very genuine interest of much of the subject matter, it is a pity that it is so stylistically flawed. One cannot help but feel the publisher must bear some of the blame. A good editor working closely with the author would surely have spotted the awkward passages and irritating mannerisms and would have insisted that they be removed or smoothed out. Unfortunately, few Canadian books for young people are afforded the close scrutiny and endless revision that produces a first class product.

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