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Micheline Persaud est Bibliothécaire-conseil à la Fédération des bibliothèques de l'est de l'Ontario où elle est responsable des services pour les enfants. Elle est aussi membre du Conseil éditorial de In Review et du Comité pour le choix du livre canadien pour la jeunesse de la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada.

Historical Biography in Nova Scotia

ROBERT NICHOLAS BÉRARD

Joseph Howe, H.R. Percy. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1976. 62 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-88902-220-8.

Joe Howe: The Man Who Was Nova Scotia, Kay Hill. McClelland and Stewart, 1980. 221 pp. \$9.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-4096-2.

Clansmen of Nova Scotia, Gordon M. Haliburton. Petheric Press, 1979. 104 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-919380-31-X pa.

Some Sons of Erin in Nova Scotia, Terrence M. Punch. Petheric Press, 1980. 127 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-919380-35-2 pa.

Nova Scotia has perhaps produced more than its share of heroic figures, or so it seems to those of us who live in and have studied the history of the province. Yet the economics of publishing and the relatively small population of the Maritimes have dictated that men and women of provincial or regional importance are not introduced to other Canadians or even to their own countrymen, save in the pages of publications of local historical societies. To foster in our children an appreciation of the past and a respect for its people, and to link our society with those of our ancestors, historical biography is an effective and attractive literary form. It is, however, very easy to do poorly and very difficult to do well.

Two volumes here deal with the most widely known political figure from the Maritimes, Joseph Howe, the "Tribune of Nova Scotia". His struggles against repressive libel laws, unrepresentative and irresponsible colonial government, and the undemocratic and insensitive process of the confederation of British North America

demonstrated Howe's passion for justice and reform. H.R. Percy's short story of Howe in the continuing Fitzhenry and Whiteside series "The Canadians" and Kay Hill's longer biography, *Joe Howe: The Man Who Was Nova Scotia*, both celebrate the eloquence, patriotism, and tenacity of this gifted man.

But there were other aspects to Howe's character. Leaving aside his well known reputation as a womanizer, consideration must be given by any biographer to charges that Howe was guilty of religious bigotry, questionable political activity within the borders of a neighbouring country, and political disloyalty to his anti-confederate colleagues. The hero's darker side is carefully sidestepped in both volumes. Percy takes up Howe's illegal attempt secretly to recruit volunteers for the Crimea in the United States and his public attacks on Nova Scotia's Irish Catholics after violence erupted between Catholic and Protestant workmen building the Nova Scotia Railway, but he does so only to act as Howe's uncritical apologist. William Condon, a Catholic journalist who discovered and exposed Howe's undercover American recruitment activities, is charged by Percy with "treachery" and "racial and religious mud-slinging". Hill simply avoids these and other contentious issues, but both books contribute more to myth-making than history of biography.

Hill is easily the better story-teller, although her tendency to mix stilted and transparently fictitious dialogue with excerpts from Howe's speeches and letters diminishes the book's impact. She has, however, been attentive to the reading abilities of intermediate and early secondary school students and has prepared an engaging, if somewhat contrived, narrative. Hill's book is somewhat dowdy; its long lines unbroken by illustrations mark it as part of an earlier tradition in young people's literature. Percy's *Joseph Howe*, on the other hand, makes use of all the latest graphic techniques, including photographs on every page and thought-provoking questions in the book's extremely wide margins. But despite its visual appeal, Percy's book is not appropriate for younger readers, a fault it shares with many of the other volumes in "The Canadians" series. John Howe, for example, is introduced as a Sandemanian in religion, but no effort is made to explain this obscure term. And in one of Percy's frequent rhetorical flourishes, Joseph Howe is said to have "embraced the harridan of politics". The reader who is able to follow Percy's language without difficulty will find his story-book narrative simplistic and unsatisfying.

Gordon Haliburton's *Clansmen of Nova Scotia* and Terrence Punch's *Some Sons of Erin in Nova Scotia* constitute the first two

volumes of a projected "People of Nova Scotia" series published by Petheric Press of Halifax. Each is comprised of a series of thumbnail sketches of major and minor figures in the province's history, linked solely by either their Scottish or Irish ancestry. No women appear in either volume, and both concentrate heavily on churchmen and politicians, with an occasional nod to the educational profession.

Haliburton's sketches, most of which were written originally for a local newspaper series during the last International Gathering of the Clans in Nova Scotia, all begin with a short, anecdotal history of the Scottish clans with which the subject is associated and conclude with an equally brief and anecdotal biographical entry. Punch's book follows a similar format, although his biographies tend to be fuller, more extensively researched, and more crisply written, and most are illustrated with portraits of their subject.

Students from the intermediate grades onward should have little trouble with either book, and they will meet some interesting characters, many of whom escape notice in general textbooks. Punch draws appealing pictures of Lawrence O'Connor Doyle, Howe's ally in the fight for responsible government in Nova Scotia, Charles Fenerty, the inventor of wood pulp, and Inspector Francis J. Fitzgerald, a tragic hero of the Royal North West Mounted Police. He also includes an article on William Condon, Joseph Howe's nemesis, which treats their dispute with a balance lacking in the biographies by Hill and Percy. Neither book provides much more information than could be found in most biographical dictionaries, and each seems less a contribution to historical biography than a vehicle by which some Nova Scotians might celebrate their ethnic heritage.

Of the four books, only Hill's represents a contribution, however flawed, to young people's literature as such. But in a region which will necessarily be overlooked or undervalued in general surveys of Canadian history, it is difficult not to recommend to teachers and librarians that even weaker efforts, such as the Maritime biographies in "The Canadian" series, be made available to our young people. Perhaps, in time, regional historical biography of depth and balance will supplement these early efforts.

Robert Nicholas Bérard is an historian attached to the Department of Education at Dalhousie University in Halifax, and he is the author of several articles in the areas of history, historiography, and education.