

Review Articles and Reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

PIERRE BERTON AND HISTORY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Before the Gold Rush. 1993. 83 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-7710-1449-X. **Kings of the Klondike.** 1993. 76 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-7710-1448-1. **The Men in Sheepskin Coats.** 1992. 89 pp. \$5.99 paper. **The Railway Pathfinders.** 1992. 87 pp. \$5.99 paper. **Steel Across the Shield.** 1994. 92 pp. \$5.99. ISBN 0-7710-1422-8. **The Battle of Lake Erie.** 1994. 80 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-7710-1424-4. **Attack on Montreal.** 1995. 75 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-7710-1419-8. **The Death of Tecumseh.** 1994. 68 pp. \$5.99 paper ISBN 0-8810-1423-6. All books: Pierre Berton. Illus. Paul McCusker. McClelland & Stewart (Adventures in Canadian History).

This reviewer was asked to read eight books by Pierre Berton and assess them in terms of their worth to their targeted readership, which is children between the ages of eleven and fourteen. The books, all concerned with Canadian history, were duly read, but assessment is not easy. What precisely should young children know or be taught about Canadian history? Some things they should be taught and some things they should not be taught. It is obvious that children cannot develop a sophisticated understanding or analysis of the historical process. No sensible person would expect a twelve-year-old to read and appreciate works by Arnold Toynbee, Alan Bullock or Pliny. But some things can be imparted. Some notion of history as process should be taught: historical knowledge should be about development and change, not about dates and the names of prime ministers and premiers. Military battles are important, but usually because of the impact of a battle rather than because of the tactics of the flanking movements. Personality is important, not because of amusing aspects of an individual's character, but because of that person's role in development and change. Urban history should be studied in order to illustrate how communities evolve and develop, not because the author wants to provide potted sketches of endless numbers of mayors and aldermen.

And, some things should not be inflicted on young readers. History should not be turned into irrelevancy. Young people should not be given the impression that history is an endless series of anecdotes about persons or battles or railways. Perhaps most important, we should not use history as a tool to propagandize our children. These young people should not be subjected to government-inspired propaganda or current societal shibboleths. It is certainly fair to let children know that the activities of the Nazi government of Adolph Hitler were thoroughly evil. At the same time, we should be much more prudent about softer areas of human

activity. Students can be left to decide for themselves whether rapid urbanization is a good thing or whether or not we should have federal-provincial relations.

It should also be emphasized that historical writing for young people should be good writing. A twelve-year-old should want to read a book of history. Apart from being well-written, these books should be well-designed, and illustrated effectively with good pictures and clear, understandable maps.

Now to turn to the question of Pierre Berton's series of books for young people. In this reviewer's opinion, these volumes are of very mixed quality and utility. The weakest are the two volumes on the Klondike gold rush: *Before the Gold Rush* and *Kings of the Klondike*. Both books are merely collections of anecdotes. One might make a case in favour of anecdotal writing, but these anecdotes are about uninteresting, vulgar arrivistes, almost all of whom spent their gold and went into bankruptcy. The only point of real interest in the Klondike volumes is that the Yukon territory was essentially American, at least before the North-West Mounted Police took control in 1894-1895. Berton comments that there "was another odd thing about Fortymile (a booming gold town). It was inside the Canadian border, but it was really an American town." The residents of Fortymile used US postage stamps when they mailed a letter.

The Men in Sheepskin Coats is concerned with the wave of East European immigrants who flooded into the prairie region during the period of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's federal government (1896-1911). This volume is of some interest, but it has curious flaws. For example, it concludes on a note of propaganda: "Looking back, the governments' new attitude, under [Minister of the Interior] Frank Oliver, towards the Doukhobors seems not only racist but foolhardy. Why shouldn't people work communally? Why do they have to be separated by long distances with a house on each quarter section . . . Canada in those days, was intent on bending all immigrants to its will . . ." It is very dubious history that takes contemporary notions of multiculturalism and applies them retroactively. This is highly anachronistic. The early twentieth century should be assessed within its context, not within the context of people writing in the 1990s.

Two volumes are concerned with our first transcontinental railway: *The Railway Pathfinder* and *Steel Across the Shield*. The *Pathfinders* volume is concerned with the surveyors who sought a route for the railroad from central Canada to the Pacific, although its focus is on route problems in the far west during the years following the 1871 agreement to build the line. There was major disagreement about the route and the surveyors led amazingly adventurous lives. All of this is told through endless anecdotes. In the end, the work of these valiant persons did not mean much, because when the Canadian Pacific Railway Company was created in the 1880s it found its own route and junked most of the work of the initial surveyors. *Steel Across the Shield* addresses the problems of building the railway in the rugged terrain north of Lake Superior. This is a story worth telling, but this volume is not overly successful. It includes too many anecdotes about nitroglycerine and devotes a disproportionate amount of space to the details of moving troops from central Canada to the prairies in 1885. This

troop movement was important because it was these soldiers who crushed the 1885 Riel Rebellion. However, pages of anecdotes are not particularly useful.

The best three of the eight volumes under review explain episodes from the War of 1812-1814. In fact, all of these episodes occurred in the fall of 1813. *The Battle of Lake Erie* recounts the only important battle ever to take place on a Canadian lake. The British and American fleets engaged on 10 September 1813 and the Americans won. This gave the Americans strategic control over large parts of western Ontario, even if only temporarily. The strength of this volume is that it explains clearly why the battle was fought, how it was fought, and what the American victory meant. *Attack on Montreal* deals with the attempt by two American generals to occupy Montreal, which, if successful, would give them control of all the territory to the west — that is, all of Ontario. The American generals, Wade Hampton and James Wilkinson were, as Berton points out, “ageing incompetents, hated by their troops and despised by their fellow officers.” They had substantial superiority over the British and Canadian land forces and should have been able to win with ease. The plan was that one general would enter Canada from the south while the other proceeded via the St. Lawrence from the west. This pincer operation would lead to the easy conquest of Montreal. But nothing worked for the Americans and vastly smaller British/Canadian forces defeated them in crucial battles at Châteauguay and Chrysler’s farm. The accounts of both battles are excellent, but the real value of the book is that it provides a first-rate insight into the ability of a big organization like the American army to be commanded by officers who seem to have functioned like idiots. The book also provides an interesting insight into the degree to which the British and Canadians (at least some Canadians) were determined not to become Americans. The battle at Châteauguay was won by a small group of French Canadians led by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles-Michel De Saleberry. They repulsed a much larger force. At Chrysler’s farm, the British defeated a bigger American army. The British were heavily assisted by Canadian scouts/spies.

The best of the eight volumes under review here is *The Death of Tecumseh*. This great Indian chief had very clear objectives. He wanted to create an Indian state in what is now the American mid-west, and he wanted to fight Americans. The British and their Indian allies had occupied Detroit, but were forced to withdraw into Ontario. General Isaac Brock had been killed, so the British forces were led by the largely ineffectual General Henry Procter. Under Procter’s leadership the British troops and their Indian allies fled up the Thames river valley and finally decided to fight near Moraviantown. The Americans won the battle and Tecumseh was killed. The book indicates clearly what native objectives were as well as the importance of the Indian fighters to the British forces. It also makes clear that Tecumseh was a highly effective military and political leader.

As suggested earlier, the eight volumes under review are of mixed quality. They are well enough written, although the illustrations and the maps are far from distinguished. In general, they are too anecdotal and will give the young reader the impression that history is about trivial things. The three volumes on the War of

1812-1814 are easily the strongest and should be recommended to young people. The other five volumes are not impressive and should not be recommended.

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WOMEN IN CANADIAN HISTORY

Her Story: Women from Canada's Past. Susan E. Merritt. Vanwell Publishing, 1993. 172 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55125-000-4. **Her Story II: Women from Canada's Past.** Susan E. Merritt. Vanwell Publishing, 1995. 172 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55125-000-4.

Despite the publication over the last two decades of a burgeoning number of Canadian historical biographies aimed at young adolescents, women are still under-represented in literature that focuses on male explorers, military leaders and politicians. The two volumes of Susan Merritt's *Her Story: Women from Canada's Past* attempt to redress the imbalance through "a celebration of the richness and variety of women's lives."

The books each profile sixteen women who share few common characteristics other than a birth date before 1900 and lives of courage and determination that facilitated their endurance in the face of sorrow, or triumph in the face of adversity. The deliberate inclusion of women from different time periods, ethnic backgrounds, vocations, and provinces illustrates the diversity of women's contributions to Canada's heritage.

In volume I, Merritt's protagonists include a doctor, writer, and social crusader, as well as women who defended forts, delivered slaves to freedom, and conveyed military intelligence. As always, it is possible to quibble with the choice of women studied in a collection such as this. Biographies of six of the women were already accessible to children eleven or twelve and up in E. Blanche Norcross's *Pioneers Every One* (1979). While it is commendable that four native women and two black women are portrayed, it is troublesome that only two French women are deemed worthy of inclusion. Given the importance of the role played by religious women in health care and education in Quebec, either Marie de l'Incarnation or Marguerite Bourgeoys would be a logical choice. Scottish heroine Flora Macdonald's story would be more appropriate if she had achieved something noteworthy during the three years she lived in Nova Scotia.

Although occasionally marred by inconsistent spelling, faulty punctuation, and the claim that it is 22,000 kilometres from Seattle to Alaska, the historically-accurate narrative is written in clear and engaging prose. The author, however, tends to focus on the virtues of her characters at the expense of a more realistic depiction of their personalities. For example, Madeleine de Verchères is described as a "symbol of valour and determination." No mention is made of her