

"I will come back . . . I will be true to the North."

The Yukon remembers Service: during summer months, a young man is employed to play the part of Robert Service in Dawson City, to appear at his cabin each afternoon at four, read poetry to anyone who drops by, and to offer a hospitable cup of tea. Carl Klinck's biography makes one long to make the pilgrimage to that rendez-vous.

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A CANADIAN HEROINE: THE FACTS AND THE FICTION

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Journey Fantastic: With the Overlanders to the Cariboo, Vicky Metcalf.
McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd. 1970. 159 pp. \$6.95 hardcover.

Journey Fantastic, published in 1970, should have been a valuable contribution to Canadian literature. It should have helped to fill a large gap in knowledge: topics dealing with the history of this country and with its early heroes and heroines had been largely neglected, as had children's literature in general. It should have also satisfied those who wished to educate the public concerning the deeds of courageous women of Canada's past.

Ms. Metcalf has researched her topic well, consulting diaries, reading accounts of pioneer life and of the time, speaking with descendants of Catherine Schubert and other participants in the *Overlander* voyage. The book is carefully factual, including names of people and places, details about daily life, and even a map.

The journey of Catherine Schubert is certainly a story worth telling. In 1862, with her husband and three children, and pregnant with her fourth child, Catherine travelled across the Rocky Mountains from Winnipeg to Kamloops, becoming the first white woman to enter British Columbia. On the journey, the travellers encountered much discomfort and some danger — Indians, almost-impassable bush areas, wolves, mosquitoes, turbulent rivers, near-starvation. Yet Catherine neither complained nor expected special treatment as the only woman in the company, and arrived in Kamloops barely in time for the birth of her baby.

Because the facts themselves are so interesting, one wishes to read the book to its finish. Yet the book fails as literature, and therefore does not fulfil its promise of providing pleasure and learning to many young people. It fails to make history come alive.

The problems of this book make one aware of the difficulties in writing historical fiction. One can stick closely to fact, but fictionalize through adding the inner thoughts of the main characters and through providing dialogue; or one can interpret history loosely, selecting freely from the facts, embellishing the more interesting events and ignoring non-essential detail. In either case, one must select and imagine to some extent, in order to make the events real and vivid to the reader.

Ms. Metcalf is erratic in her handling of the information, and is inconsistent in her approach to writing this type of book. She gives data from diary entries, even about people subsidiary to her main plot; yet she also makes an attempt to show Catherine Schubert's emotions and point of view. This effort is unsuccessful, however, due to lack of convincing dialogue and a failure to get inside the character. The book sometimes reads as a weak novel or biography, and at other times as an incomplete documentary.

The author has not drawn Catherine fully enough for us to admire her courage or understand her reason for undertaking the dangerous journey. When her husband decides to join the search for gold, Catherine fears staying behind to run the store and raise the children alone. She insists on going with him, rather childishly it seems, despite the hazards to her children and to her pregnancy. Throughout the journey, Metcalf often *tells* us that Catherine is worried about the children, but never *shows* us this convincingly, and, in fact, we sometimes forget that the children are there. Catherine was indeed brave, but the language and description are so stiff and cliché-ridden that we never find her believable.

Catherine's husband, Augustus, rarely enters the story. When he does, he is either selfishly domineering or weakly ineffectual. For some reason Catherine wishes to be with him, but we see no emotion between them. The other voyagers seem even less real, some of them mentioned only because their diaries have been preserved.

Metcalf, in her failure to select and shape the facts properly, includes much non-essential, uninteresting information, simply because it was available. On the other hand, she describes exciting or touching events too briefly, without the called-for drama and colour. For example, the following passage concerns the kindness of neighbours on learning that Catherine intends to accompany her husband on the overland journey:

Catherine was deeply touched by their generosity and also by the love and gratitude they expressed for her numerous kindnesses to

them. The women reminded her of the many nights she had sat up with them in times of illness and sorrow. They told her that in the four years she had been with them, they had found in her a generous and loving friend who had been ready at all times to help them. Some cried unashamedly at the thought of her leaving, but all agreed that going with Augustus was the only sensible thing to do. (p. 16)

This scene, if dramatized, with dialogue provided, would be touching and meaningful. As it stands, it is not even memorable.

The prose suffers from clichéd expressions, over-use of adverbs (Catherine does things abruptly, excitedly, suddenly, and wearily, to name a few). Stiffness, and lack of vitality. The dialogue seems false and unreal: “‘Gus, Gus, the baby is coming!’ she called shrilly” (p. 151). It is unfortunate that a book concerning such an interesting adventure has not been better written.

The book does acquaint us with a real Canadian heroine, and it provides us with factual information about a memorable journey. But if children are to read about this adventure with the interest and enjoyment it deserves, history must be brought to life with colorful language and descriptions, and with characters who are real and vital.

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