

finds out that Selena and her family are black. The racial aspect is part of the story, but makes little difference to the plot: Gabrielle and Selena just happen to be one white child and one black. (It's like Ezra Jack Keats' Peter just happening to be black.) The author's description of the two girls at the beginning of the book does not explain that Selena is black, just that she has "large brown eyes. If you took a bowl made of dark wood and filled it with rainwater, that was the color of Selena's eyes." The descriptions are quite sensitive and almost poetic.

Unlike *Alphonse* where there is pain, separation, fear (although happiness, as well), *Gabrielle and Selena* is a happy book all the way through. It is a delightful, humorous story to be read and enjoyed by eight or nine year olds.

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## Early Canadian Folklore

GILLIAN THOMAS

*Canadian Wonder Tales*, Cyrus Macmillan. Clarke Irwin, 1918-1922 rev. 1974. 2 vols. in 1. \$14.75 cloth.

Cyrus MacMillan collected the tales which appear in this edition just before World War 1 and acted as the meticulous folklorist of his day in that he undoubtedly took great pains to hear the stories at first hand and to produce written versions which followed the originals as closely as possible. However, to our modern judgement, he was a biased recorder. Although many of the tales belong to various Indian traditions, he gathered many of them, not from the Indians themselves, but from European settlers. Part of MacMillan's aim as a folklorist was to show that Canadian folklore "matched" that of Europe in both senses of the word. His thesis title at Harvard, "The ballads and folk tales of Canada and their relation to those of Europe" points to this intent. He seems to have perceived the European tradition as paramount and to have regarded the Indian tales as of greater or lesser interest according to how closely they compared with European forms and motifs. As a result of this bias the tales which make up the second half of the book (originally published as a separate volume) are dubbed "Canadian Fairy Tales" although the "fairy tale" is a specifically European form of comparatively recent development. In the same way, MacMillan clearly saw no conflict in lumping together stories with French sources and the more ancient Indian stories despite the differences in their origins.

Even though they are, in Sheila Egoff's words, "clothed in the lighter form of fairy tale" the stories in *Canadian Wonder Tales* manage to retain much of their original power. The tales are full of perilous confrontations with the world of animals and spirits and each encounter is a knife edge of doubt. "Are you going to kill me or help me?" asks the wounded Blackfoot hunter who has to shelter in a bear's cave. It is a world in which the strangest animal may prove to be a generous helper and the most familiar one an evil spirit in disguise. Success can only come from wariness and an understanding of the predatory chain. For example in one of the more comic stories, "The Boy who was called Thickhead", the hero, who is considered a fool by his people, goes hunting and catches only a worm. But with his worm, he catches a duck, and with the duck, a fox, and with the fox, a wolf, from whose skin he makes a drum with which he wins the chief's daughter as his wife. Another source of power which plays a role in these stories is the ability to make use of intuitive knowledge, to listen to and to act upon the messages received in dreams. In "The Boy who was saved by Thoughts", the hero brags that his strength saved him from the Great Eagle, but the wise woman who knows that he was saved by the advice which was given him in a dream rebukes him:

Oh, vain boy, do not think so highly of yourself. Your strength is nothing; your shrewdness is nothing. It was not these things which saved you, but it was the strength of our thoughts. These alone endure and succeed when all else fails . . . Our thoughts alone can help us in the end, for they alone are eternal.

Some of the Indian stories in *Canadian Wonder Tales*, like those of other folklore traditions, portray a time when the animal world was structured differently from its present form, a world in which the rabbit and the fox are fellow hunters, in which the bear has a long tail and in which the seagull has charge of the daylight. In this mythical past time, perhaps the most fascinating composite character is the Rabbit. He acts as Glooskap's forest guide and often assists human beings in overcoming difficulties but is also the epitome of the trickster hero, escalating from mischief to mischief and eventually hiding, terrified of retribution for his misdeeds. This subtle and contradictory character, part hero, part coward and part nuisance, is one of the most entertaining figures in the collection.

Finally it should be said that *Canadian Wonder Tales* is a beautifully designed and illustrated book. Elizabeth Cleaver's woodcuts which hint at but do not copy native art forms act as an entirely appropriate accompaniment to the tales. The fact that this remarkable collection has been reprinted and the evident care devoted to its production may be signs that Canadian publishers are now ready to handle indigenous Canadian folklore in a manner which accords with the imaginative power contained in the stories themselves.

*Gillian Thomas, now teaching English at St. Mary's University, Halifax, has an article earlier in this issue.*