From *Alice* to Ottawa: History and Historical Fiction

RONALD REICHERTZ

How Canada Got Its Capital, Nadja Corkum. Illustrated by Emma Hesse. McClelland and Stewart, 1975. 59 pp. $4.95 paper.

Shantymen of Cache Lake, Bill Freeman. Illustrated. James Lorimer & Co., 1975. 166 pp. $4.95 paper, $8.95 cloth.

The writing of history for children has progressed considerably since the history lesson in *Alice in Wonderland.* The mouse's history of William the Conqueror was a no-nonsense progression of facts that created its share of tear-pools. More than a century of experiment, from Goodrich's "Peter Parley" to Rosemary Sutcliff, has given children history and historical fiction that Alice never dreamt of. Goodrich invented an attractive narrator and insisted that all important people, places and events must be prominently illustrated. Rosemary Sutcliff's dictum that "history is people" has quickened the writing of historical fiction for children even more forcefully by insisting that research must be fully assimilated into story.

The basis of history and historical fiction is research. Both *How Canada Got Its Capital,* and *Shantymen of Cache Lake* are more than competently researched. Their strengths and weaknesses lie squarely in what happens to the research. The first book is illustrated history for younger children. As history, it is shaped by selection and emphasis. Nadja Corkum's historical sense is wide but she is most successful when she deals with early history. The title is, in fact, something of a misnomer. It might have been more appropriately titled "the early history of how the place later called Ottawa got to be what it was when Queen Victoria chose it after four earlier capitals had proved impractical, together with some side light shed on her choice and ending with a sprint through subsequent history." A very lively description of the lumbering industry actually gets twice as much space as the story of the way that Canada got its capital. Corkum chooses to solidify a quick and vital myth of the past at the cost of presenting contemporary Ottawa as a museum if not a mausoleum.

In *Shantymen of Cache Lake* Bill Freeman does a masterful job of evoking life in the lumbering industry in the 1870's. At his best he transmutes the everyday elements of logging into dynamic descriptions. But his narrative line and characterization are poor by comparison. A melodramatic and polemical plot peopled by caricatures rather than by characters is finally little more than a convenience to string together well-crafted essays.

Generally, then, Corkum and Freeman are like the little girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead: when they are good they are very, very good, and when they are bad they are . . .not horrid, but they fail to live up to their potential. And they fail to do all that history-writers can and should do for young readers.

Accomplishment in the first part of *How Canada Got Its Capital* is considerable. Corkum and Emma Hesse develop an overall layout that continually juxtaposes the present with the past. The text does this simplistically by asking the young readers to participate imaginatively in the rigours of life in the past. On a larger scale it is done by Hesse's excellent blending of fluid movement and tableau. Hesse obviously realizes that the people and events that dominate over half of the book are normally presented as wax figures standing in front of painted backdrops. She mirrors Corkum's text by animating a static Champlain, the voyageurs, Wright, By, and unnamed extras. Both writer and illustrator use techniques from cartoon history and television documentary.

Corkum's attention to a vital past peopled by familiar great names suggests an historical pattern. Explorer gives way to explorer/user, who in turn gives way to pioneer builder, who welcomes the securer. These are vital mythic figures whose accomplishments, from our vantage points, are seen as the product of quest interacting with spontaneous hurly burly. The human intention of mercantile and military necessity is tripped up by human quirk and foible. Champlain, aquiver with the possibility of a Northwest Passage, is all too humanly led astray by the quixotic fables of Nicolas de Vigneau. Champlain's sense of failure in this venture is set against what he unintentionally accomplished. The voyageurs follow in search of trapping grounds but repay history handsomely by accidental discovery and a gift for naming that still animates our maps. Pioneering spirit pulls Philemon Wright and his family out of the snug comfort of Massachusetts into the raw promise of sparsely populated Quebec. Hesse's series of illustrations work tellingly here. Wright and family are first pictured comfortably engaged in separate activities in a spacious living room. Next, the Wright children toy with winter; but once under way, they are more the toys of winter. Finally the family is seen huddled as a unit around a camp fire. Pioneering alters family interaction; it expands the sense of relation to nature. A similar pattern, with less happy results, is presented in the story of Colonel By, the securer. Against great odds, By successfully oversees the building of the Rideau Canal. Ironically, uninformed bureaucrats back home accuse By of overspending. Although exonerated, By cannot remove the stigma and spends his last years in isolation.

Corkum and Hesse, then, revel in the frontier myth, a myth of churning vitality at the heart of the lumbering industry. In fairness, Corkum does suggest that a great deal of the ferment rose from the economic exploitation which in turn had been aggravated by economic depression. But the romance of the lumbering drive and its attendant release of frustration get far more attention. Animosity between ethnic groups scrambling for jobs results in acts that Corkum describes as "tricks". Burning houses, interfering with burial practices and spoiling wells are hardly "tricks:" they are brutal acts of frustrated men. But

this raw life disappears instantaneously when Queen Victoria chooses Ottawa as capital.

Victoria's choice of Ottawa is the culmination of all that has gone before. Quite accidentally the city's history, good mingled with bad, has made it the place for a capital. The selection ended vexatious Canadian problems.

The last quarter of the book is a downhill race from 1858 to the present. It pauses briefly over the history of the Parliament building, barely noting the ironic gaps in building plans (no plan for a heating system!). The end of confederation, the Parliament fires, etc., whirl past. And the book ends with a rather static map that brings together some of the historical high points presented earlier and some hints on "things to do in Ottawa." Almost as an afterthought Corkum suggests a visit to a sitting of Parliament. She might have pointed out that Parliament, pictured aglow and etched against a night sky, is not simply a product of history but is a part of a continuing process.

Historical fiction such as *Shantymen of Cache Lake* is a kind of children's book that demands complete assimilation of research. There is no question that Bill Freeman knows his period, especially the stuff of lumbering. The description of the topography between Ottawa and Cache Lake and of the hazards of crossing it in mid-winter is excellent. The great expertise demanded of the teamster and the physical stamina required of men and horses are presented with exactness. In a sixteen-page description Freeman not only describes the ten day trip but also evokes the feeling of isolation. The descriptions of the caboose and of the loggers' grueling work and exuberant play are equally good. Mini-essays on the preparation of food, on felling, scoring and hewing timber, on preparations for the great drive, and the drive itself are precise and vivid.

And the story of how John and Meg Bains (fourteen and thirteen-year-olds, respectively) take on the responsibility of supporting their family after Angus Bains' mysterious death at Cache Lake is convincing. But the early description of the disparity in life style between a logger's family and the opulence of the camp's owner, Mr. Percy, sets a tone that rapidly dominates the novel. By the time John and Meg get to Cache Lake against the odds of brutal weather and the irrational insistence of MacInnes, the company bookkeeper, with whom they travel through a blizzard, sides have been drawn with overwhelming clarity. Percy, the effete and flabby owner, controls his men through Hardy, a deranged Paul Bunyan of a foreman, and through the crafty spying of MacInnes whose ledgers contain entries on disloyalty along with assets. This diabolical triumvirate of a money-man and his two flunkies is set against the simple goodness of the workers--Cameron, the basically noble but ambivalent natural leader; Jacques, the clear-sighted French Canadian; and Tim, the excitable young Irishman eager to right wrongs immediately. When the good workers meet John and Meg, they welcome them warmly as their dead leader's children. They broadly hint that Angus Bains died for his vision of union. After all, an expert logger, alone with Hardy when it happened, does not get felled by a tree. But young John, who fast becomes the pivot of the narration, is a slow convert, even after

he witnesses severe mistreatment. If Freeman's story is to work, this juncture is crucial. But Freeman captures neither John's fear of authority nor the respect the boy has been educated to have for the basic decency of true authority. Unlike Meg, who sees clearly at once, John is so frightened and confused that he almost becomes MacInnes' dupe. John continues to doubt even in the face of Hardy's gross error in the building of a log chute to be used in the drive. John is convinced only when Tim is killed by the collapse of Hardy's expedient design. Tim's death releases John to fulfill his unwitting role as revenger. In a climactic scene where Percy bows to the pressures of solidarity, Hardy resists with an enraged malevolence. Hardy is so irrational that Cameron catches him off guard and gains his confession to Angus Bains' murder. Cameron is thrashed by Hardy, but fate and the work-hardened legs of John dispatch him over a cliff.

Freeman lets his morality-play narrative pass into melodrama without giving either goodness or evil its due. Characters are flattened under the great rolling logs of absolutes. The following comparison of Percy and his workers is characteristic:

> He was the picture of the prosperous Ottawa lumber merchant: soft and weak with saggy jowls and protruding stomach. What an incredible contrast, Meg thought, between this city merchant and the hard, lean, windburned shantymen who worked for him. (136)

It is clear that unions were absolutely necessary to win fundamental rights for loggers. Freeman's epilogue, which points out that unions weren't truly formed until after the industry destroyed itself by overkill, is ironic. But singleness of mind in support of a just cause does not license oversimplification. Freeman wins a redundant polemic battle at the cost of his story. Had he been able to join research to an intense vision of grievance and embody both in people, *Shantymen of Cache Lake* might have been an excellent historical novel instead of a merely good one.

Together, Freeman's *Shantymen of Cache Lake* and Corkum's *How Canada Got Its Capital* illustrate both the values and the dangers of history writing for children. Information about the Canadian past--whether in a great city like Ottawa or in the remote lumber camp of Cache Lake--can be presented in an exciting way, without falling into the traps of melodrama or of romantic shallowness. Such information can be wholesome fare, and can vie successfully with what "Peter Parley" called the unfortunate appeal of gore in folk tales and the shameless use of nonsense.

Ronald Reichertz teaches Children's Literature at McGill University.