

# Continuing the Search for Times Past

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*Harness in the Parlour*, Audrey Armstrong. Illustrated by J. Merle Smith. Musson Book Company, 1974. 90 pp. \$5.95 paper.

*Pioneer Girl*, Maryanne Caswell. Edited by Grace Lane. Illustrated by Douglas Johnson. McGraw-Hill, 1968 reprint. Unpaged: approximately 100 pp. \$5.95 hardcover.

Feeding the imagination should be a primary aim for all children's writers, but this is especially true for writers who are concerned with retelling or evoking the flavour of times past. Not all countries, however, have a colourful beginning to their history and, until recently, many Canadians tended to regard Canada's early days as providing less than the required ingredients for a stimulating menu. But, as time passes, research yields stores of well-preserved fruits—there for the sampling, if only they can be carefully selected, well blended, and attractively presented.

*Harness in the Parlour*: that sounds an intriguing title. Moreover, since the book promises to "recall" the pattern of life in pioneering Canada, we are lured to begin reading.

The author's aim, explicitly stated, is to appeal to children, to young people wishing to return to a simpler way of life, to adults who have nostalgic memories (good and bad) of post-war and Depression days, and to the elder "senior citizens" of this country; a tall order! Has Mrs. Armstrong produced the right recipe to appeal to all these appetites then? Unfortunately, no. For, in attempting to reach such a widely diverse audience, she has sacrificed the opportunity to appeal to any of their tastes in particular.

The Preface, Introduction, and Conclusion offer, and reflect on, evocation of those distant days. However, the book itself does not deliver the goods, except in the most general of terms. We soon realize, for instance, that the "grandfather" of the first paragraph, on the first page, is no more than the shadowy outline of all grandfathers.

The book's most interesting sections are those containing definite facts—the "receipts" of pioneering dishes. Reading such fascinating titles as "Grandma Armstrong's Irish Potato Cakes", "Mama Andrews' Pumpkin Pie", we become eager to try the old recipes, but our appetites are also whetted to find out more about the women whose names identify these recipes. "Great Aunt Sally's" name heads a method of pickling butternuts. But Great Aunt Sally herself never appears in person. We cannot help feeling "What'a shame!"

Mrs. Armstrong certainly recognizes the correct ingredients for a tasty book and has assembled them in an appropriate order (beginning with the homestead and progressing, gradually, to the outside world via

stables, yard, fields, and communities.) But, her method of mixing the ingredients within each section has failed to capture the particular taste, the *true* flavour, of the original "receipt" of pioneering life.

Vanishing aspects of fact and folklore dangle, tantalizingly, before the reader. We learn of such fascinating snippets as the pioneers' custom of using ox-blood to paint their loghouses, or mixing whisky or buttermilk with ochre for the same purpose; we also learn that privies came in three sizes: "one-holer, two-holer, and three-holer"; that if dogs ate grass, rain would surely follow. But Mrs. Armstrong has presented her material in prosaic style, prefacing these facts with such vague words as "sometimes", "usually", "often", "perhaps". Young children seldom want to know how things *might* have been; they want to know *exactly* how things were.

And, since one of the main concerns of any child is food (this preoccupation does not change from generation to generation!), it is a pity that no actual menus are given—they do exist in pioneering literature. Instead, we are told that a "real 'groaning board'" of "fruits and vegetables" was prepared for harvesting and "raising" bees. Yet we get no details. How deliciously mouth-watering, in comparison, are the specific accounts of picnics in books like Anne Langton's *A Gentlewoman in Upper Canada* (Clarke-Irwin, 1950), with their roast fowls, wild ducks, chicken, hams, cranberry tart, boiled rice puddings, cranberry jelly, bun loaves, bread, melons and more!

Still, *Harness in the Parlour* does provide a service. As a resource book it is certainly of value, for it would not be either practical or economical for the young, or the elderly, to research original materials thoroughly. Yet it is difficult to imagine a child picking up this book to browse through it out of curiosity, or reading it through in one absorbed sitting. And surely, older folk would appreciate the inclusion of original findings gleaned from Mrs. Armstrong's years at Black Creek Pioneer Village or from the lips of former homesteaders whom she interviewed. Unfortunately, not a single direct quotation is given (although a few common expressions: "Good in September, goes on to December"; Early wed, early dead" are interspersed in the text.) Consequently, the book loses its potential for immediacy—an attribute which would have arrested the reader's attention in an engaging, personal way.

The book is aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Its title is captivating. The cover illustration shows up the paradox; the pioneering world *was* a mixture of harnesses and elegant pictures, rough hewn log cabins and fancy papered parlours. The ornamental *had* to mingle with the practical. Mrs. Armstrong has given us the practical aspects in abundance. Perhaps a little more of the ornamental in her writing would have given us a more complete "portrait" of the times that she was wishing to convey.

Sepia illustrations, by J. Merle Smith, do add a creative, sympathetic dimension to the book. And the typesetting is clear, attractive, and easy to read; both are important considerations in a book designed to be read by both the young and the old.

What a shame then that the proof of Mrs. Armstrong's "pudding" is in the eating. For, while it has plenty of the right ingredients, it tastes much

like any other pudding. It could have had a highly original flavour with a little more spice, leavening, and seasoning.

*Pioneer Girl* is as exciting (for the ten to fifteen-year-old age group) as *Harness in the Parlour* is disappointing.

Can a hard-working, energetic family find the recipe for true happiness in the promised land of the North West Territories? That is the theme of this collection of letters written by a sensitive, observant girl to the grandmother she has left behind in Ontario.

From the first page, the reader (young or old) is caught up in a first-hand, real-life adventure. The writer, Maryanne, is a delightfully normal fourteen-year-old; the "Grandma" on *this* first page is a *real* flesh and blood one.

Along with Maryanne and her family (the Caswells consist of parents, two brothers, and three sisters), we entrain for the distant west (the ultimate destination is Clark's Crossing, Saskatchewan) in the spring of 1887, knowing that to say farewell to relatives in the East is, in all probability, to say goodbye to them forever. Maryanne's infectious enthusiasm, however, soon carries us on and, like her, we look forward to life in that "enchanted, fairylike country" for which she is headed. Her buoyant, youthful optimism dispels any misgivings we might otherwise have.

Yet, by only the third day of the month long journey, loneliness begins to set in, for there are now "no houses nor people other than track men." But, undaunted, the Caswells still experience exciting thrills on their epic trek as they progress slowly westward. Leaving the train at Moose Jaw, they embark on what is to become a three week wagon trail to Clark's Crossing, two hundred "lonely uninhabited miles" away. But, what do they care for weariness and boredom, loneliness and misfortune, since "each step brought the promised land nearer to [their] weary, lagging feet?"

Reaching Saskatoon a few days later, however, they face the shock of new emigrants whose expectations outmatch reality. For that great metropolis boasts only "about 14" houses. Confidently, the Caswells ask: "But where is the city?" only to be told "On a map in the surveyor's office"!

And this only the first of many such disappointments! In the course of the letters (covering eight months) the Caswells not only endure the rigours of their journey, "hard times and lack of food," but also feel in all its bleakness, the loneliness of "this ageless, vastest, limitless space" that is the western prairie. They also lose Andrew, son and brother, who dies following an accident. Thus, the tale of the Caswells becomes one of frustration, forbearance and sadness; it is the tale of a family who has striven to achieve something against overwhelming odds.

Present day ten to fifteen-year-olds might well enjoy comparing their lot to Maryanne's. Their typical day has little resemblance to hers. This will make Maryanne's story all the more interesting for the curious teenager whose most strenuous task is to carry out the garbage or push a vacuum cleaner. Maryanne, in contrast, spent New Year's day, 1888, helping with such chores as

. . .shovelling snow, bucking, cutting or sawing wood, mending ox-harness, setting and sharpening the bucksaw, driving cattle to the river watering-hole, cutting and cleaning it out, hauling water out of the well, feeding the stock, cleaning the stable and chicken house. . .

And more! To unwind after the exertions of the day, there is "reading out loud in the firelight." And what is Maryanne's counterpart to watching television? Sitting by the fireside "seeing pictures in the flames."

But, our modern fourteen-year-old will also find, perhaps surprisingly, some things in common with the pioneer girl: Maryanne's awkward shyness at her first dance; her eager participation at a fair, delight at Christmas festivities (there was no money for presents, so "gift-giving" was simply a matter of "exchanging" old treasures). And Maryanne was faced with all the usual dilemmas of growing up and early adolescence: quarrelling with siblings; being admonished by father for lack of grown-up awareness; experiencing an overwhelming sense of vulnerability when her mother is lost, temporarily, out on the prairie; sympathetic despair at the sight of her father's anguish; empathic concern for the little ones whose hearts, like her own, simply "ached" at the thought of losing their mother. Then, when mother returns to safety, the typical quick reversal to youthful cheerfulness, in the privacy of a letter: "It was all pretty exciting, Grandma." All these reactions mark Maryanne as a sensitive girl on the brink of womanhood.

Indeed, Maryanne's youthful resilience sustains her, her family, and her readers throughout this book. The prairies fail to live up to her dreams of fairylike enchantment; their solitary nature overwhelms her, yet Maryanne can still appreciate their intrinsic beauty. From her panoramic vision of the prairie sky at sunset:

. . .we refreshed our beauty sense with the beautiful scene. Far below, the shining waters were overcast, deepening to crimson with the gorgeous colouring of the sunset—light clouds flecked with the king's yellow, changing to mauve and royal purple.

to the strikingly simple, yet effective, closing line of one of her letters: "There's beauty here, Grandma," Maryanne shows a keen perception and powerful capacity to evoke a scene, convey an atmosphere.

We cannot but thrill to *Pioneer Girl's* tale of early settlement in the West. Here is no stereotyped story of prim little girls raised in drawing room security. In this harsh world, all turn their hands to whatever needs attention. So a girl of fourteen helps with woodsawing and oxen-driving, as well as with baking and laundry. In a land, and at a time, when survival was of the essence, all contributed to the common good, according to their strength and talents—the young and the old, male and female. As Maryanne wrote: "Everybody works at something all the while." We should be grateful that she found time to "work" at her letter-writing too!

So the Caswells did not find true happiness in that far off land. But they did find self-respect and satisfaction in a job well done.

In her letters from the Canadian backwoods of the 1830s, Anne Langton (*The Story of Our Family*, 1881) admitted that she was writing so that others might have "some sort of notion of what this world of ours is really like." Maryanne's letters of the 1880s fulfil the same purpose for the world of Western Canada. We are the beneficiaries of her legacy.

Grace Lane's editing of these letters is a welcome addition to pioneering literature, providing the seldom-glimpsed views of a young girl. This is an effective and appealing way of arousing present day teenagers' interest in the origins of their country's history.

The book is well set out, with a clear, uncluttered, appearance which is enhanced by simple, yet bold, illustrations by Douglas Johnson. What a pity though that there is no page numbering. What a disadvantage to anyone who attempts to put the book to classroom use, or to review it!

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## Music at Home and in School

JOAN WELLER

*Second Song Book*, Lucile Panabaker. Illustrated by Pat Dacey. Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1975. 60 pp. \$6.50 hardcover.

*To Listen, To Like, To Learn*, Barbara Cass-Beggs. Photographs by Ian Wilson. Line drawings by Susan Fothergill. Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1974. 170 pp. \$12.00 library binding, \$6.95 paper.

Today parents and educators realize that music is an important part of every child's education. Indeed, recognition of music as an integral part of the child's "self" has come to us through the research and studies of leading child psychologists. Observers not trained as educators or psychologists recognize the child's innate love of music and his desire to express this through song and movement. A mother sings a lullaby to soothe her new baby; a toddler claps happily to rhythms; youngsters toss balls and skip to songs and rhythms they themselves create as a natural response to play.

Great advances have been made in bringing children and music together through teaching methods—both privately and in schools. The media, both radio and television, offer some imaginative and constructive