The Writing of Biography

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The Green Tiger, James FitzGibbon: a Hero of the War of 1812, Enid L. Mallory. McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 142 pp. $7.95 cloth.

The writer of biography for younger readers faces many challenges. Like all biographers, he must be accurate and objective while at the same time giving personal insights and presenting his own point of view or interpretation of the subject. But, in addition, he must write with an awareness of the fact that his audience is not adult. He must first of all be aware of the restrictions society places on him for, as Margery Fisher has noted, "The Establishment exercises a powerful, invisible influence on the field of junior biography."[1] Often this has meant that certain people and certain aspects of other people's lives could not be discussed. More important, it meant that biographies were often expected to be cultural tracts in which the heroic subjects were embodiments of accepted social values. The success story is a typical example of this type of writing. As Marilyn Jurich has wittily remarked: "Generally, if one is to be an honest-to-goodness hero—either in this country or elsewhere -- he must have known some kind of economic deprivation. Riches are not justified if the rags have not been flaunted beforehand."[2]

A more significant problem facing the biographer is the relative lack of experience of his readership. The lives of great men are often inner and as such are beyond the understanding of most children; moreover, their outer lives are generally involved with historical, political, and economic forces which are also not understood by children. As well, the subjects of these biographies are adults and it may well be that the child's understanding of the nature of adulthood differs from that of the adult.

Within these limitations, the biographer's general response has been to emphasize the story element of biography, to choose subjects or those elements of subjects' lives which are physically dramatic and exciting and hence comprehensible and interesting to children. Often biography is fictionalized with scenes and dialogues that operate within the range of probability rather than of verifiable fact.

Enid Mallory's *The Green Tiger, James FitzGibbon: a Hero of the War of 1812* has the potential to be a good juvenile biography. The dust jacket proclaims that a "colourful hero of early Canada comes to life in this book, which captures the sweeping grandeur and the local comedy, the excitement and the suffering of the War of 1812." Like many juvenile biographies, this is a success story, the tale of how the son of a poor Irish cotter achieved the status of a hero during the War of 1812 and the William Lyon MacKenzie

trouble of 1837. The subject's main achievements were on the battle field, giving the biographer ample scope for the dramatic, and the subject seems not to have been an incredibly complex or deep thinking individual and so is within the range of understanding of younger readers.

Born in Ireland in 1781, FitzGibbon as a boy was, according to the author, "more than a dreamer ... (He was) quick as a cat and just as determined." In his teens he showed an aptitude for soldiering, joined the Talbert Fencibles and, four years later, was stationed under Isaac Brock at Quebec. FitzGibbon came into his own in 1812 when, at age 31, he became involved in the War with the United States. For two years, he travelled throughout the Niagara Frontier, where his military cunning and daring earned him a considerable reputation. An admirer of the fighting techniques of the Indians, he developed guerilla tactics well suited for the wooded terrain. With his handpicked group of Green Tigers, so named for the markings on their red uniforms, he constantly harassed American troops and was an important factor in the British victory in the Battle of Beaver Dam. During his later years, living in Toronto on the fringes of the Family Compact, FitzGibbon again used his military knowledge to suppress quickly William Lyon MacKenzie's uprising.

James FitzGibbon's character was not complex. A main drive in his life was his desire for promotion and recognition, both of which he received, although not, apparently, in quantities to his liking. Yet when one considers his humble origins, the fact that he achieved the status he did, in a time when background and influence were often more important than merit, is a tribute to his abilities. He had a military mind and the ability to lead men. Mallory reports that when he was only in his teens FitzGibbon helped in the drilling of English soldiers. Throughout his soldiering life, he had the respect of his men who not only acknowledged this military ability, but who also loved his character, a mixture of intelligence, daring, audacity, courage, and humor.

With such a subject, acting in so interesting an historical and geographical setting, Enid Mallory might well have created an excellent biography. Unfortunately, the book falls far short of its potential.

First, it lacks focus. Three subjects are treated: the life and character of James FitzGibbon, the historian's difficulty in factually documenting many periods of his life, and the War of 1812. The last subject has provided the material for many excellent books, the second could be transformed into a solid scholarly article, and the first could, as we've said, have been made into a very interesting biography. But when they're mixed together in a short book, they form an uneven mish-mash. The discussions of documentation are disconcerting and could have been relegated either to footnotes or an appendix. And the War was carried out for too long over too large an area to be well discussed in the space available to the author. At one point, the war was strung out over a six hundred mile line stretching from Detroit to Montreal, a situation which kept the beleaguered British officers, as one might say, hopping. It has also kept the author hopping, as she seems to be compelled to jump from event to event, place to place, and soldier to soldier,

trying to give capsule comments for too many aspects. At one point, I counted the names of five people and five places in one paragraph and ended up feeling rather confused.

Clearly, if one is to write a biography of a hero of the War of 1812, the War must be depicted to provide a backdrop for the character. But a good introductory chapter, or the use of a few paragraphs to place specific aspects of the hero's life in the larger context are all that are needed. It is not necessary to forget about the hero for pages at a time. For example the meeting between General Brock and Tecumseah was one of the great moments of the War as well as of Canadian history generally; but surely when FitzGibbon was at least three hundred miles away when it occurred, the event doesn't require three pages of narrative.

One suspects that the extensive historical materials are padding necessitated by the fact that not much documentary material about FitzGibbon was available. Except for some of FitzGibbon's letters and some contemporary references to him, the chief sources seem to be *A Veteran of 1812*, the recollections of his granddaughter, Mary Agnes FitzGibbon, and Mrs. Anna Jameson's *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles.*

The book's lack of focus can be seen by examining the opening chapter. In just over five pages we are told of the first thirty years of FitzGibbon's life. The opening paragraphs take the point of view of James' Irish mother who worries on the night before her seventeen year old son leaves with the English army. The last two pages discuss Isaac Brock and FitzGibbon's admiration for him. "Whenever the Colonel faced trouble, Fitz was there," we are told. Unfortunately, he was not with his hero when the latter died at Queenston. The important aspect of their relationship was that "Out of the young, impulsive boy from Ireland, Colonel Brock was making an outstanding soldier who would dare anything for his commander and for the British cause." The chapter closes with mention of the approach of the War of 1812. "By the Spring of 1812, you could taste war all along the frontier. To James FitzGibbon it was a tangy taste; it was the long-awaited opportunity for advancement."

For all its brevity, this is a confusing chapter. Three possible approaches to the study of FitzGibbon are suggested. There is the worry of a proud, devoted mother; yet the mother is never again mentioned. There is the admiration of the young soldier for a superior, a theme filled with great potential for development, but one which is only sporadically and even then superficially treated. Finally, there is the driving ambition of FitzGibbon, the poor Irishman, to achieve success against difficult odds. Indeed this theme is mentioned through the book, but not to the extent that it could have been.

In the next three chapters, FitzGibbon all but disappears. What we have is a somewhat excessively detailed account of the beginnings of the War of 1812, with only occasional references being made to FitzGibbon.

One wishes that Mallory had more consistently availed herself of the devices of the fictionalizing biographer, inventing dramatic scenes which would have enabled her to explore character more fully. In discussing the campaigns of 1813, she gives us a long quotation in which General John Vincent discusses an order for the retreat of troops. Then follows this one sentence: "FitzGibbon could not believe they were giving up the Niagara Peninsula." But we are interested in FitzGibbon not Vincent and would have liked to have known more of his reaction. At times Mallory does allow herself to dramatize, as in her accounts of FitzGibbon's later years in Toronto, but often she either summarizes or engages in the historian's examination of evidence. The result is a very shallow portrait of this hero of the War of 1812.

Not that the book is without virtue. Enid Mallory has done her homework well and she is often very good in describing short battles taking place in a limited geographical area. One example is the presentation of the role played by FitzGibbon in the defeat of the Americans near Stony Creek in June 1813. But even this description is weakened by her page length discussion of her source, FitzGibbon's granddaughter's memoir.

Possibly the best chapter in the book is that which describes the heroics of Laura Secord and FitzGibbon in the defeat of a large American force at Beaver Dam in June 1813. Using all available facts and her sound knowledge of the area's terrain, Mallory debunks much of the Secord legend in order to show the real courage of the woman. She travelled twenty miles, much of it through a humid and mosquito-infested area which was thick with natives and hostile American troups, in order to warn the British. FitzGibbon was equally brave: greatly outnumbered by the Americans, he used his daring and quick thinking to bluff and defeat the Americans. Here Mallory also fictionalizes well, using dramatic scenes to advantage.

But even her best passages are often weakened by bad writing. Here are a few examples. "Daylight comes early to Stony Creek in June." Doesn't daylight come early in June everywhere in Canada? "People in the streets walked taller." "(Brock) now knew the name of the game he was playing." It wasn't a game, it was war. And there are many other examples.

In *The Republic of Childhood,* Sheila Egoff has spoken of the great wealth of material which the writer for children can find if he or she looks at Canada's past. Such a wealth exists in the story of James FitzGibbon, but as it is told in *The Green Tiger,* it is too often concealed by confusion of purpose, proliferation of unnecessary background facts and, regrettably, by too much dull writing.

[1]Margery Fisher, "Life Course or Screaming Farce," *Children's Literature in Education,* 22 (Autumn 1976), 111.

[2]Marilyn Jurich, "What's Left Out of Biography for Children," *Children's Literature,* 1 (1972), 148.

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