Shantymen Afloat

JAMES HARRISON

The Last Voyage of the Scotian, Bill Freeman. James Lorimer & Co., 1976. $3.95 paper, $9.95 hardcover. (A teacher's manual is also available at $5.00.)

Bill Freeman's motives for writing his first children's book, *Shantymen of Cache Lake* (reviewed in *CCL* number 7), and this, its sequel, are as admirable as they are obvious. I have included the former twice in a children's literature course, and found it an excellent teaching vehicle.

For one thing, the book conveys a vivid sense of a segment of Canadian history, and incorporates this skillfully within an exciting narrative, supplemented by a fascinating selection of contemporary photographs. This, in a country still striving to establish a sense of national identity, has to be a bonus point. And for another, the author breaks new ground in choosing to write of early lumber camps in the Ottawa valley, rather than of fur traders and pioneer homesteaders. Moreover, by showing the need to establish trades unions to improve working conditions, he is trying to heighten his young readers' social awareness in a way which, to judge from the response of my university students, is both effective and badly needed. On the other hand, they found his well-intentioned attempt to be non-sexist in describing the characters of his young hero and heroine, John and Meg, to be anachronistically unconvincing and merely doctrinaire. And I had to agree with them, even though discussion of the point helped them to realize that the middle-class male was (is?) much more likely than his working-class counterpart to regard his mate as merely a covetable possession or status symbol.

For my purposes, the book's undoubted weaknesses (melodramatic stereotypes for characters, and a certain woodenness of dialogue) were almost as valuable as its strengths. Besides, there was so much to approve of that one could look forward to the author's learning his craft and putting at least some of these things right in his next attempt.

This we now have. *The Last Voyage of the Scotian* takes the same brother and sister, a little older, a little drier behind the ears, and shanghais them aboard an old windjammer carrying timber to the West Indies, sugar cane to Liverpool, and immigrants back to Halifax. Once again a dusty corner of Canadian history is brought to life by a tale of adventure and by contemporary photographs. Once again there is a moral issue and social relevance: the ship is old and leaking badly, and the lives of the crew and of the immigrants are put in jeopardy by a captain who refuses to have the necessary repairs carried out. Once again there is need for concerted but responsible action by those being exploited, to try to improve matters. And

once again brother and sister find themselves taking a lead in such action.

Freeman has made some notable changes, however, and most significantly in the way he presents the enemy against whom all must unite. This is no longer a weakly vindictive boss, or a pathologically vindictive foreman—in either instance a mere cardboard villain with no redeeming qualities—as in *Shantymen.* It is, rather, a man in a dilemma—a ship's captain who has gone heavily into debt to buy his first and aging ship, which he clearly cannot afford to repair, and which he must somehow coax to the end of its voyage to repay his debts. We can therefore sympathize with him even as we condemn his treatment of the crew, or the deceptions he practises to fill his ship with immigrants desperate to reach Canada. In the same way, there is gradually established something of a bond of respect and understanding between the Captain and the children's particular friend, Canso, the most able and initially the most mutinous of the shanghaied crew. Neither Canso nor the reader quite pardons, but we do understand.

At the end of the story, therefore, when the ship is wrecked on the Nova Scotian coast but the passengers and crew are safe ashore, Canso can say to him: "You're a ship's captain, not a business man. You can hire yourself out to another company and be a sailor again." And in thus advising him to leave the dirty work of nineteenth-century capitalism to others and return to practising an honest craft, Canso and the author are suggesting that the real villain of the piece is off-stage, in the form of the system in which everyone is caught up. Time enough, later, to discover that systems too can be better or worse without being black or white; the effect is at least a good deal more subtle than the crude confrontations of *Shantymen.*

Unfortunately, such striving for more rounded, credible characters is not matched by a defter handling of dialogue. I find it hard to believe, for instance, that a fourteen-year-old, in irons in a black, rat-infested hold, would thus answer his sister's assertion that the Captain must have gone mad.

> I don't think so, Meg. It's the law of the sea. He has the right to discipline us any way he sees fit, but he shouldn't go this far. . . . We've got to oppose him, Meg. Anyone who would run a ship the way he's done is not fit for a command. (p. 88)

Still less can I credit his countermanding the Captain's order to flog Canso in words like these:

> No!. . . .A captain's job is to control his ship, not drive his sailors to desert. Flogging is not the way to run a ship. Our welfare is your responsibility. You are not doing your job. (p. 97)

The end result, therefore, is that this more subtly conceived story leaves the reader more aware than ever of the crudeness of its execution, and in particular of the way its characters speak (and sometimes act) on behalf of the author rather than out of what the reader comes to believe

about them as individuals in their own right. Morley Callaghan may infuriate me, in *Luke Baldwin's Vow,* by underlining three or four times the significance of what his characters say and do. But at least I believe in them and in what they say and do in the first place. And Long John Silver, though living in an almost totally amoral and even more totally incredible world of romance, does more to convince me of the complexity and ambiguity of moral judgments (though not, I admit, of the *need* for judgments) than anyone aboard the Scotian.

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Native Tales

CARRIE FREDERICKS

indian legends of canada. Claude Mélançon. Translated from the French by David Ellis. Gage Publishing Company Limited, Toronto, 1974. 163 pp. $4.95 paper.

Claude Mélançon, author of *indian legends of canada,* was a self-educated French-Canadian naturalist born in Montreal in 1895. He died in 1973. He enjoyed a successful career with the Canadian National Railways, where he was French publicity director, and in his spare time studied the natural life of his province, which he had loved since childhood. He published books on native birds, fish and animals and toward the end of his life turned his attention toward the native people. He was a methodical, thorough researcher who built up an impressive library in his areas of interest and whose scholarship was recognized by several honorary degrees, membership in the Royal Society of Canada and decoration by the Order of Canada.