

“Canada’s Heritage in Pictures” Birth of a Series

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Macdonald of Kingston: First Prime Minister, Donald Swainson. Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1979. 176 pp. \$10.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-17-600739-3.

Mackenzie King: Man of Mission, William Teatero. Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1979. 192 pp. \$10.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-17-600740-7.

This series, “designed especially for the reader whose knowledge of Canada’s past is incomplete, and as an encouragement to further reading” may, like other attempts to portray history, come under attack. In fact, it has been the fate of most historians to suffer at one time or another the lampoons of a cynical reading audience. On occasion the fruits of their labours are denounced as “distillations of rumours” (Carlyle), “post-mortem examinations” (Dunne), and “unrolled scrolls of prophecy” (Garfield). Outspoken critics even challenge the historians’ self-proclaimed authority, calling presumptuous their attempt to explain that which they have never witnessed. Their credibility then must rest on their ability to validate their respective approaches. Since, according to the old adage, it is only pictures that never lie, the editors of this series, in displaying the photograph as documented evidence, have provided proof and lessened reader dependence on the historical account, and they entice the reader into assuming the historian’s role of seeking out other versions for comparison. Theoretically this approach not only should quiet the critics, but also should help increase readership.

Educational research has also promoted this approach. Recent studies of learning indicate that still photos accompanied by a verbal description have an influence similar to that of motion pictures. Other findings support earlier claims that children and young people prefer photographs to more commonly used line drawings. As a result of this, photographs are being used increasingly to supply information that poorer readers might miss, and even when comprehension skills have matured, pictures perform more specialized functions for better readers: the message, reinforced so that it will be processed into one’s long-range memory, subsequently can be recalled in greater detail.

Since this series is intended for the person lacking the interest or background for a more in-depth treatment, factual reconstruction is

suggestive rather than comprehensive. Because the reader is not restricted to textual analysis, he has more chance to respond imaginatively. The books have been written in the belief that there is more to the history of a man and his times than the reiteration of his feats and failures. Accordingly, the prime minister's personality is seen not only to dictate his campaign, but also to be primarily responsible for how he carries out his post-electoral decisions; and though the role of circumstance is never underrated, it is featured as reflecting the leader's options in a given situation.

Regardless of whether or not such an interpretation of history is scholastically acceptable, in view of the series' objectives it does provide an engaging approach. For those not wishing a long treatise on the finer points of a political career (which often seems to imply that had the writer been there, we would be the wiser for it today), they are spared the detailed accounting. Each book tells its simple story with few generalizations, and states its material clearly, definitively, and without comment. At the top of each page a caption runs in bold print, at the bottom a concise explanatory paragraph. Thanks to a careful layout seen especially in the balancing of the size of photo with the size of paragraph, the effect is clear, uncluttered and complete.

If one were an historian, the pleasure of reading one of these books would be akin to that felt when leafing through a family album. But students, understood to be lesser enthusiasts, may peruse with shorter interest span. Therefore it is fortunate that the books can be consumed in smaller segments. By choosing photos that are originitive as well as illustrative, the authors have made this possible. That the pictures can stand independent of the text allows for a greater range of interpretations and for greater adaptability to the student's level of learning. The versatility of the subject matter and the format occasionally made me want to supply accompanying cartoon balloons, and consequently I predict that the series success will rest not so much on its ability to promote further investigation as on its potential to instigate a creative response.

These books contain a wealth of information in picture which would be hard to convey in words for the reluctant reader. As a reference source the books are likely to be chosen by a student attracted to the relative lack of print, but they will be superseded by something more expansive. Employed as an instructional aid, however, the potential is limitless. A shot of Mackenzie King lounging on a rock looking disgruntled and headed by the words "King did not enjoy being idle and was anxious to get back into politics" is not only indicative of Teatero's humour, but brings to mind a manner of possible asides on King's part; likewise Swainson's inclusion of so many political cartoons provides an opportunity to analyse on a symbolic level the complaints of Macdonald's contemporaries.

Because one otherwise would have to visit an archive to see these photos, their inclusion in these books is a decided convenience. Access from within the book is facilitated by an index highlighting their more important features. But while pictorial representation does not automatically demand a specialized degree of perception – and instead is expected to promote its development – the accompanying notes necessarily do. Preparing them obliges the writers to decide beforehand upon a level of reading competence and comprehension. In neither of these volumes does the text offer an explanation to the type of question a child might ask, such as “Why did King name all his dogs Pat? and why two of them at the same time?” Despite Swainson’s considerable finesse in precise writing and Teatero’s wry wit, there is some imbalance between what the authors have supposed to be of interest to their projected audience and the general level of difficulty of the bibliography that they append. Typically the book has not been designed for the young inquiring mind.

In his introduction Swainson remarks: “Today some say Canada is at a crossroads. It is. But such has always been the case. By reading about . . . we should be able to learn something about what Canada was then – and is now.” Both volumes of this useful series are concerned with the recurring nature of issues. However, the parallels are not pursued in the course of the narrative: instead the authors deftly choose the turn of phrase that raises parallels in the reader’s mind. For children in particular this shows that the study of history can help them link what they see today with what they will see tomorrow.

In the final analysis these books may be considered a worthwhile investment for readers and educators committed not merely to reading promotion and knowledge acquisition, but to the development of thoughtful and creative reflection.

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