

# Canadian Colonial Vignettes

TERENCE SCULLY

*Tom Penny*, Tony German. Illus. by Diana McElroy. Peter Martin Associates, 1977. 184 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88778-172. \$9.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-88778-171-3.

*Tom Penny*, Tony German. Traduit de l'anglais par Claude Aubry. Editions Fides, 1981. 253 pp. Paper. ISBN 2-7621-1038-6.

*Honor Bound*, Mary Alice and John Downie. Illus. by Joan Huffman, Oxford University Press (Canadian Branch), 1971. 192 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-19-540331-2.

*The Boy with an A in his Hand*, James Reaney. Illus. by Leo Rampen. Porcupine's Quill, 1980. 102 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-88984-031-8.

*United Empire Loyalists*. Series editor, Mary Archibald. Dundurn Press, 1978. 4 pp. each, paper. Set of 9, \$8. ISBN 0-919670-29-6.

Adventure tales, these, set in the agitated world of the Canadian colonial period between the American Revolution and the Mackenzie rebellion. Of the novels, *Tom Penny* is the simplest as a piece of literature, being little more than an episodic series of calamities that befall the young English hero as he discovers his new homeland. What plot there is lacks a sense of direction: the boy, Tom, wanders passively from danger to danger – a shipwreck, a runaway raft caught in rapids, lumbermen's gang raids, wolves, cold weather and a remarkably persistent villain – and Tony German strives to add tension to tension by calling down a series of near-miracles to rescue the youngster from each of these threats. There seems to be no good reason why the villain should be killed off at page 170: the hero has won no quest at that point, has solved no problem except that, miraculously, he no longer has menacing Dirk Black dogging his icy footsteps. He himself has survived much more than his share of violence, both physical and emotional (his parents both die during the narrative – his father being mugged in a dark alley and expiring in the boy's arms). German's style is entirely appropriate for this junior pot-boiler, moving with excitement where necessary and, despite precise technical terminology, always with clarity.

En français *Tom Penny* gagne pour quelque raison en vraisemblance. Ce sera peut-être un effet d'une simplification

stylistique imposée par le traducteur sur son original: le glossaire, par exemple, dont German avait doté son oeuvre manque dans la version française, aussi bien que beaucoup des termes quelque peu obscurs sur lesquels il comptait en grande mesure assure son réalisme. La maison d'édition québécoise a décidé de ne pas incorporer des illustrations (et heureusement pas celles, maladroitement enfantines, de l'édition originale), et a donné à la couverture brochée un dessin qui est à la fois plus fin et plus attrayant que l'oeuvre mérite. En tant que traduction la version française est certainement suffisante, mais on y constate de petites lacunes curieuses (aux pages 33, 73, 103 et 165 par exemple); on s'étonne peut-être qu'une allusion toute passagère à la victoire du Nelson sur Buonaparte soit tellement offensante au lecteur français qu'elle exige l'excision. Et malheureusement, une des bribes de couleur locale chez German, l'accent irlandais du bûcheron Rory, disparaît dans la traduction où tous les accents se voient réduits à une espèce de choyal flasque à tous propos. Quand le cuisinier de bord dit, "Tom, slip down, for'ard, will you, with a bite o' the fish-and-brewis for yon passanger," nous lisons, "Viens ici, Tom, tu veux bien? Voilà une bouchée de fricassée au poisson pour notre passager." C'est un français correct, soigné même, mais incolore; or la valeur principale de German réside dans la façon dont il évoque la vie incroyablement battue de son héros.

If German does not write down to young readers, the Downies do not hesitate to incorporate a degree of cleverness which may well be slightly above them. A prime example of this is discovered in the book's title which by itself evokes the double nature of the plot: *Honor Bound* is a search by a United Empire Loyalist family for their dignity, and an effort to reunite this family by locating the hero's lost sister who, naturally, is called Honor. This second sense of the title is by far the less developed: the shadow of sister Honor exists only as a vague, recurrent spasm of worry, verging on the irritating because never substantial enough really to engage the reader's concern. The abstract type of honour is real enough though, and has been given a good variety of aspects by the authors: patriotic loyalty, personal integrity, racial and cultural consciousness. The reader is provided with yet another key to the plot in the form of a prophesy uttered by an Indian who had obviously been raised on *MacBeth*. The Downies' lack of originality is certainly not serious here; they do deserve credit for constructing a plot which has shape, and for not relying for excitement merely upon a more or less disconnected series of calamities. Their narrative has a rousing beginning, a convincing progression from episode to episode (including a treasure hunt and a capture of the not-so-terrible villain), and above all a satisfyingly distinct conclusion where "Honor" has been reached. To these credits can be added two further honorable achievements - engaging style

and characterization. The authors' style is both relatively simple and light, embodying in dialogue and narrative a continual wry humour which appears as irony, punning and general playfulness. The characters whom the son of the family meets are drawn with strong and natural lines; they too are frequently endowed with traits of light humour – for instance, the pint-sized picaro Alf Brown whose tin drum suggests echoes of another, more earnest literary midget. The book offers its readers a good excuse for a cheerful and entertaining look at Ontario settlers' homespun experiences.

Reaney's *The Boy with the A in his Hand* is more firmly set in history than either of the two other books by virtue of its locale being concretely the town of York (Toronto) in 1826, and because its characters move in certain precise spheres of existence within that town. The villains are a little stock-cast, the political grandees of early York whose presumptions of absolute authority enmesh the young hero and his innocent friends in little campaigns for principles of social justice. Whether this is history or not is of course another matter; to drop the names Strachan, Macalister and Mackenzie into the plot does endow it, though, with the framework for an aura of reality, to which a fine evocation of muddy streets and elegant parlours adds good colour. The central image remains Mackenzie's print shop with its huge press and its complex drawers of moveable type. It is the scene to which Reaney has given the most attention, as his hero becomes an apprentice to the arch-Reformer (Reaney might have had that last word printed with an A). The print shop serves as well symbolically to represent the theme of the book, the energetic, uncompromising resistance to injustice. Readers should be happy to see this book (copyright in 1965) reprinted: it has already served a generation well with its spirited fantasy, and could very effectively be read aloud to a third generation of very junior listeners.

In the series "United Empire Loyalists" nine biographies have appeared to date about people who, by remaining loyal to Britain at the end of the Eighteenth Century, were forced to flee their homes in the former Thirteen Colonies and search for new lives in the Maritime Provinces and Upper Canada. The subjects in these monographs tend to be rather obscure individuals, soldiers, clergy, political figures, tradesmen, farmers, men and women, negro and white, but the historical events through which they lived and the societies they knew are well evoked in a natural fashion. The series seems aimed at Canadian History classrooms; its regular format – four pages of biography, footnotes, comments by the Loyalist, comments about the Loyalist, and references – makes the series quite practical as supplementary educational material. Although slightly flawed by an unevenness in style from author to author, and by signs of lax

proofreading, the series usefully fills a gap between general history textbooks and the historical fiction we examined earlier.

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## Entrepreneurs, Politicians and a Slice of Nineteenth Century Life

DEBRA L. NASH-CHAMBERS

*The Firebrand*, William Kilbourn. Clarke, Irwin, 1956, reprinted 1977. 259 pp. \$3.95 paper. ISBN 0-7720-1176-6.

*The Tiger of Canada West*, W.H. Graham. Clarke, Irwin, 1962, reprinted 1965. 317 pp. \$3.25 paper. ISBN 0-7720-0215-0.

*Northwest to the Sea*, Marjorie Wilkins Campbell. Clarke, Irwin, 1975. 230 pp. \$12.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-7720-1027-8.

The early decades of the nineteenth century were turbulent times in Canadian history. Fierce economic competition and the high risk of entrepreneurial investment challenged even the mightiest of the British North American colonies' commercial leaders. The records of the local councils and of the legislative assemblies of Upper and Lower Canada testify to tempestuous political battles. Poor quality colonial administration and the heightening indifference of both the British government and colonial élites to the wishes of colonists fanned the fire of a new reform spirit. The troubled times tested the mettle of any businessman or politician who hoped to shape the destiny of the Canadian colonies. The struggles endured by three such men have been chronicled in separate, meticulously researched historical biographies. William Kilbourn, W.H. Graham and Marjorie Wilkins Campbell have developed thought-provoking assessments of the prevailing social milieu of William Lyon Mackenzie, Dr. William "Tiger" Dunlop and William McGillivray. Although all three biographies can be labelled "popular histories", each author's engaging narrative shows painstaking, serious academic research. Individually or collectively, these works are an entertaining resource aid for the teaching or study of Canadian social history.