

Neither Fish Nor Fowl: Fictionalized History for Children

MICKIE McCLEAR

Brand 9999 by Terry Leeder. Illus. by Deborah Drew-Brook. Dundurn Press, 1979. 63 pages. Paper \$2.95. ISBN 0-919670-43-1.

Canadians in a Far Country by Terry Leeder. Illus. by Deborah Drew-Brook. Dundurn Press, 1979. 63 pages. Paper \$2.95. ISBN 0-919670-44-X.

In The Republic of Childhood, Sheila Egoff poses a key question regarding what we tend to call historical fiction: are these books really historical fiction? According to Egoff, historical fiction is "nothing less than the imaginative re-creation of the past. It involves the reader in a bygone era, dramatically and emotionally. The reader . . . must be made to identify with the past, to live it in his mind rather than to study it."

What happens when her question and definition are applied to *Brand 9999* and *Canadians in a Far Country*, two books in the Frontiers and Pioneers series, written by Terry Leeder? That the two are fiction is immediately obvious. The books make ample use of invented conversations, attribute emotions and thoughts to the historical personages, and generally embellish incidents rather than give historical background and information. However, they do not bring the past to life nor do they involve the young reader emotionally. What they do is give a scant look at a particular time in history and attempt to make it understandable by fictionalizing it. The result is neither history nor historical fiction but fictionalized history.

Brand 9999 tells the story of two men with the same ambition: to build cattle ranches in Alberta. The idea of juxtaposing the struggle of John Ware, a former slave, and John Craig, a white man with the financial backing of English noblemen, is an intriguing one. Unfortunately, Leeder is hamstrung by the series format (64 pages, four illustrations) and by his own inability to bring characters and situations to life.

In the opening pages, John Ware realizes that his horse, which he has had since its youth and which has just brought him all the way from Texas, is dying. "He had to shoot it, and he felt horrible. When

he buried Hound Dog, he felt like he had lost his only friend, the only friend he could count on. Then, slinging his saddle bags over a shoulder, and hefting his saddle onto his back, he gripped his bed roll and rifle in one hand, and started walking." A more emotionless parting between a man and his friend would be hard to find.

Later, John Craig and some of his men are stranded without food in a blizzard. Their five day ordeal is covered in under two pages and reaches the following climax:

They caught some fish in a fast flowing mountain stream. Hill went almost blind with snow glare, and finally both Craig's and Hill's horses could go no further. They unloaded the pack horses, saddled them, and left all their supplies with the played out animals.

When they reached the ranchhouse, they stumbled in, numb with hunger, cold and exhaustion. The men who had been left behind shouted a welcome, and heated up a strong brew of hot tea, with hot cakes, bacon, and great heaps of roast beef. They ate and drank for two hours, then collapsed into bed.

There is very little action in the story and the limited characterization cannot bring to the reader any emotional tension or real concern for the success of the two men.

Canadians in a Far Country also employs a good technique in telling its story, and is, happily, somewhat more successful in creating interest. The progression of the Boer War is shown through the involvement of three Canadians: a doctor, present at the beginning of the turmoil; a soldier who served in some of the worst fighting; and a teacher brought in at the war's end to teach refugee children. The reason for the marginal success of this book is the middle sequence which is chock full of war action.

The Frontiers and Pioneers series presently consists of ten books covering various locales and time periods in Canadian history. It is aimed at readers ten to fourteen years old, and the publisher expects to add more titles which presumably will adhere to the same format.

Author Leeder earned a Master's degree in Canadian history at the University of Western Ontario, and taught high school before turning to his present position of historical book editor. There is little doubt that he knows his material, but the limitations of his writing keep at least the two books reviewed here from being of much interest as recreational reading. Because of the topics which are covered, the books could be helpful as support material for the classroom, but

again, the presentation might only reinforce the idea that history is not all that interesting.

History can be fascinating. Publishers and authors must continue to explore ways of bringing it to life. Kids Can Press has achieved some success with *A Proper Acadian* (by Mary Alice Downie, 1980) and *The Tin-Lined Trunk* (by Mary Hamilton, 1980). Let us hope that Dundurn Press will be more successful in its future attempts. Until that time, Frontiers and Pioneers series offers an attractive, accurate, but not a stimulating introduction to some little known aspects of our history.

Mickie McClear is the Head of Children's Services for the Midwestern Regional Library System in Kitchener, Ontario.

One of the Family

KATHLEEN GRANT JAEGER

The Tin-Lined Trunk, Mary Hamilton. Illus. by Ron Berg. Kids Can Press, 1980. 64 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-28-1 (English edition). ISBN 0-919964-32-X (French edition).

Gaskill's Cove: A Novel of Early Nova Scotia, Robert B. Powell. Book design by Mary Eliza Franklin. Petheric Press, 1975. 173 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-919380-19-3.

The second title to appear in Kids Can Press's *Kids Canada* series, *The Tin-Lined Trunk* draws its background from the British Child Emigration Scheme that sent homeless children to work as indentured servants in the British Colonies between 1865 and 1925. Over 80,000 such children settled in Canada, and Mary Hamilton devises a typical pair, Polly Dipple and her older brother Jack, a pair of London street waifs sent to Ontario under the auspices of Dr. Barnardo's Homes. Her story tells of the eighteen months between the children's "rescue" and their being accepted by the Canadian Mr. and Mrs. Sommers as no longer "Home children," but "more like family, you know" as Mr. Sommers puts it on the novella's last page.