

AT ONCE TOO STAID AND MELODRAMATIC: BERTON'S CANADIAN HISTORY

The capture of Detroit. Pierre Berton. McClelland & Stewart, 1991. 119 pp., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-7710-1425-2; **The death of Isaac Brock.** Pierre Berton. McClelland & Stewart, 1991. 89 pp., \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-7710-1426-0.

These two books are the first in a series of "Adventures in Canadian History" to be written for McClelland & Stewart by Pierre Berton. A third volume devoted to the War of 1812, *The revenge of the tribes*, has also been published, as well as three additional titles, dealing with the opening of the West and the North. The publishers have, no doubt, made a prudent investment in this series. There is a dearth of well-written Canadian history aimed at young people, particularly at the twelve-to-fourteen year age group for which this series has been prepared. The clear type and the low price of these books will make them particularly attractive for purchase by schools and libraries. Finally, who better to interpret the history of Canada, particularly the story of the War of 1812, to young people than Canada's most prolific and popular pop historian, Pierre Berton? A decade ago, Berton won substantial critical acclaim from academic historians as well as the general public for *The invasion of Canada* (1980) and *Flames across the border* (1981), his treatment of the War of 1812 for an adult readership. He knows his subject, and he is, perhaps, Canada's most widely-read author.

Unfortunately, the likely commercial success of these volumes and their value as classroom resources must be set against the disappointment that will be felt by many teachers of history that such a talented writer has done so little with his material. Despite Berton's best efforts to bring into high relief the drama and irony of the North American aspect of the Napoleonic Wars, the books are staid and flat, too heavily laden with the minutiae of textbook history to be compelling historical fiction and too breathless and melodramatic to be a key source for historical analysis.

Both books open with a common introduction to "the peculiar war," which Berton characterizes as a "civil war" fought in large measure by people who did not want to fight each other. The author summarizes his view that this indecisive conflict, whose follies and excesses he repeatedly notices, yielded little benefit to either the Americans or the Indian nations which found themselves drawn into battle but was a decisive event in Canadian history, one which "marked the first faint stirrings of a Canadian nation." It is significant that Berton says very little about the War of 1812 in Québec and nothing about the Atlantic region. It lends support to the idea that, in the perspective of many of our intelligentsia, the "Canadian nation" bears a striking resemblance to Upper Canada.

Berton has taken pains to ensure that he has got his facts straight, even to the point of drawing his dialogue from contemporary sources, and this constitutes one of the strengths of the books. He has also tried to avoid the partisan

chauvinism that marks many older histories of the War of 1812. He has sought and found heroes and villains, the silly and the sagacious, on both sides in the conflict, although he leaves little doubt about his favourites; and each individual figure, from the brave, gallant Isaac Brock to the equally-noble Shawnee chief Tecumseh to the “pompous, self-important” American general Alexander Smyth is presented as less complex than we might expect. Berton also pursues his long-standing concern—see his *Why we act like Canadians* (1982)—with distinguishing the Canadian from the American national character through contrasts in historical experience. Thus, in *The capture of Detroit*, he contrasts the relatively peaceful and law-abiding “pioneer” community of Upper Canada with the intemperate and violent “frontier” society to the south: “No Daniel Boones stalked the Canadian forests, ready to knock off an Injun with a Kentucky rifle or do battle over an imagined slight” (65). It will be a matter of little consequence if Americans find the comparison inaccurate or overdrawn, but the publishers may well expect serious criticism from aboriginal groups who will no doubt take issue with Berton’s references to drinking and scalping.

A major drawback, for many readers, will be the narrow military, even strategic focus of much of the books. To be fair, Berton does try to describe the nature of Upper Canadian society and community life, but more often he lapses into overlong descriptions of armaments and battle plans which may not engage the interest of more than a minority of adolescent boys. It is too difficult to find the links between these events and the lives of contemporary Canadian teenagers to make these books a popular choice on drug-store shelves. At the same time, Berton raises some provocative questions about war and heroism. Although some may find the language a bit strong, Berton’s descriptions of the horrors of the conflict—“Blood and brains spattered the walls and the gowns of some women who had sought refuge nearby” (*The capture of Detroit* 107)—underscore his determination to avoid excess glorification of war. He also invites a reappraisal of the American general William Hull, sentenced to death by a military court for cowardice in his surrender of Detroit, an act which averted an almost certain slaughter of American soldiers and civilians.

Berton’s narrative is, in general, forceful, although the text is littered with annoying metrically-correct parentheticals—thus, John Norton, military leader of a Mohawk band, is referred to in *The death of Isaac Brock* as “a strapping six-foot (two m) Scot” (75)—and miles and kilometers appear randomly throughout. The author displays his recognized skill at deploying characters and events for maximum surprise and impact, and he never condescends to younger readers. In fact, while reading, one can almost hear Berton’s pleasant and familiar voice narrating a CBC documentary on the events described. Unfortunately, the comparison that comes immediately to mind is with the acclaimed American Public Broadcasting System’s award-winning documentary series, *The civil war*. It was the genius of that production to relate a massive military conflict in an age more different from our own than most people immediately recognize to

the concerns of ordinary people. That series set a standard for popular history that Pierre Berton perhaps could, but has not in these volumes, attained.

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LOVE IN WARTIME

Looking at the Moon. Kit Pearson. Viking, 1991. 212 pp., \$17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-84097-1.

Kit Pearson's *Looking at the moon*, volume two of her trilogy about the evacuation of 8,000 English children to Canada during World War II, aims not to dramatize the greatest children's adventure of all time, but to explore her heroine's coming-of-age. In the "Afterword" to *The sky is falling*, the trilogy's first volume, Pearson notes: "Many of the children who came to Canada enjoyed the adventure and found warm, welcoming homes. I tried to imagine a child who didn't." That child is Norah Stoakes, and in *The sky is falling*, Norah's sullen anger and resentment (first directed at her parents for sending her abroad and then at Florence Ogilvie, the aloof Toronto woman who takes in Norah and her brother, Gavin) upstage history.

History fares even worse in *Looking at the moon*: Pearson sets her novel at Florence's lakeside summer home, where wealth and privilege keep a "depressing," "boring" war at a safe distance. Now thirteen years old, Norah falls in love. Norah's passage into womanhood is complicated by the fact that she loves Florence's nineteen-year-old nephew, Andrew, a member by birth of a family clan in which Norah enjoys merely temporary membership.

The significance of Norah's painful discovery that Andrew responds to her love only with kindly amusement is spelled out in Norah's talks with two unmarried women: Florence's daughter, Mary, and Florence's sister-in-law, Catherine. Mary tells Norah that single life is not only bearable but also pleasant, given the risks of leaving family to chance happiness in marriage. Catherine tells Norah that it is "much better to be independent, not saddled with someone for the rest of your life."

Although Pearson thus advances the feminist view that men are not essential to women's happiness, her trilogy implicitly conveys a contrary message. For twenty-five years, Florence Ogilvie's mourning for a son killed in the Great War has contaminated her life and the lives of other women: Mary, who spurned a marriage proposal so she could nurse her mother's broken heart, and Norah, whose anger in *The sky is falling* comes from her awareness that she was accepted into Florence's home only because Florence seized upon Gavin as a