

let the survivors of the title speak for themselves. When she writes that a child was first afraid, then later reassured by kindly caregivers, her statements have the ring of truth and first-hand experience, which, indeed, this book is based upon. Kitz's earlier book, *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery* (1989), covered the event and its ramifications in the definitive terms, and the author there was at pains to clarify and illustrate wherever possible. *Survivors* is an offshoot of her original research, and is as elegantly told and illustrated as its forerunner: in *Survivors* we follow the day in the lives of several children who lived to tell about their experiences. The book has, therefore, a focus and a symmetry that is very pleasing—the reader follows the adventures (and there are some told here that are not for the squeamish) of these children who, as adults in the book's final chapter, come together for an impromptu reunion in 1985, when they are present for the dedication of the memorial bells on Fort Needham. Ms. Kitz has judiciously chosen and underscored details that are almost certain to appeal to the voracious curiosity of the young. One of the rare moments of comic relief in the book is the mention of a strange white substance splattered over the kitchen walls of one of the ruined homes, whose chatelaine comments that she had been making bread when the explosion occurred and that the dough had risen—but not quite as she had anticipated. Combined with telling photographs (one, of a survivor's nightshirt that never could be washed clean of its explosion fallout of grime, for instance) her document amply covers the explosion by putting human faces on it and, one can readily imagine, giving young readers a "way into" an event of almost incomprehensible horror. The mere fact that these children survived and went on to lead full lives, in spite, in some cases, of crippling injuries, makes *Survivors* an ultimately heartening and life-affirming testament for readers of all ages.

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OF SHOES, AND SHIPS, AND SEALING WAX

Fire Ship. Marianne Brandis. The Porcupine's Quill, 1992. 119 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88984-140-3. **Terror at Snake Hill.** Earl Plato. Vanwell Publishing, 1991. vii & 159 pp., \$12.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-920277-67-5, ISBN 0-920277-69-1. **Flight.** Connie Brummel Crook. Stoddart, 1991. 292 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-7737-5457-1. **Honor Bound.** Mary Alice and John Downie. Illus. Wesley W. Bates. Quarry Press, 1991. 216 pp., \$16.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55082-026-5, ISBN 1-55082-027-3.

Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—
of cabbages—and kings—

(Lewis Carroll)

For the last two decades, Canadian writers of historical fiction for young readers have been more focussed on shoes, ships, sealing wax and cabbages than on kings.

The emphasis has been to foreground the lives of ordinary people in an historical context rather than to recount tales of the rich and famous, or infamous. That trend continues in the four books under review here which provide an exploration of the lives of some of those who laid the foundations for modern day Canada.

Marianne Brandis' fourth novel for young people features a taut, fast-paced account of one week in the life of thirteen-year-old Dan Dobson. But what a week it is. The Americans invade, conquer and sack York (Toronto) in the late winter of 1813. The invasion creates excitement for Dan but soon the excitement turns to disillusion and horror as Dan learns that war is not something splendid but rather "something incomprehensible and mad." Acting as catalysts in Dan's journey from innocence to experience are the burning of the great ship, Sir Isaac Brock, Dan's working as surgeon's helper in the carnage of the blockhouse, and his dealing with the neighbours' hostility to the whole Dobson family, recently arrived immigrants from New England.

Brandis provides evidence of her usual meticulous research in re-creating the lives of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary historical events. There is plenty of substantiating detail about houses, food, clothing, uniforms, the battle itself, and daily activities. A simplified map of the York waterfront complements the narrative of events. But the solid historical research has exacted its price. The characters are less well drawn than in the earlier "Emily" trilogy, some of the historical detail is not well blended, and there are some stylistic quirks, such as one stood "astride over the plank", and the anachronism of "sawbones." There is also some outright banality: "... he realized he would have to rejoin the rest of the world."

Whatever the minor reservations, *Fire Ship* is a worthy addition to the growing number of books for young readers about the War of 1812. Especially subtly done is Brandis' linking of the cries of the recurring loon to the course of the action, the association of the great ship and natural phenomena, and the suggestion of the war in microcosm in the tribulations of Dan's youngest brother, George, at the hands of the Fitzgeralds.

Less successful, despite the evidence of thorough historical research, is Earl Plato's *Terror at Snake Hill*, an action-filled account of the Fenian invasion of the Niagara Peninsula and the Battle of Ridgeway in early June 1866. Too much action in the form of too many skirmishes, battles, and spy missions creates a confused and confusing narrative which even the accompanying area map cannot sort out. The characters rarely rise above stereotypes, and an uncertainty of tone, ranging from the heroic to the burlesque, undercuts the book's central message that war is hell. More focussing of character and action, and some solid editorial work would have helped this book to achieve its objective in raising the consciousness of young Canadian readers about this rarely noticed event in their country's history.

Intended to commemorate the United Empire Loyalists, Connie Brummel Crook's *Flight* is really two narratives in one; the parallel stories of young George Waltermeyer, who reluctantly remains with his family during the revolution, and his father Hans, a legendary Loyalist spy (and founder of Belleville)

are undoubtedly meant to complement each other. However, the dual protagonists only compound the narrative's unwieldiness, given that several subplots—a venerable boatman, etc.—add to its prolixity. *Flight* needs editing. Brummel Crook seems reluctant to sacrifice material for the sake of brevity; ironically, her admiration for her subject becomes in some ways her greatest shortcoming.

Characters like the saintly mother, Polly, are unconvincing, and attempts to humanize famous figures don't come off: "Sir Guy Carleton looked at [his] appointment sheet ... Then he sneezed" (260). Brummel Crook does not fully exploit her strengths, one being description. She succumbs instead to "over-historicizing" (providing more dates than needed) and to quoting scripture; both tendencies augment the novel's didactic, sentimental thrust.

Originally published by Oxford in 1971, *Honor Bound*'s story of a Loyalist family and their 1780s journey from Philadelphia to Canada remains fresh and engaging. Wesley W. Bates' woodcuts enhance an already-strong text. The novel's rather sombre cover is misleading; the Downies have a distinct flare for humour and playfulness with language (the double-entendre of "Honor" exemplifies one such clever twist). Evident throughout *Honor Bound* is an appreciation for the period's language: "a firkin of butter" (35) ... "rigadoons and paspies, Spanish fandangoes" (36) ... "what a fribble I was..." (89)! Indian legend, Celtic lore and texts like *Gulliver's Travels* and *Goody Two-Shoes* are deftly applied motifs. In less capable hands, stock characters like the urchin and the Rousseauesque nature-boy might have become clichéd, but the Downies usually manage to avoid predictability.

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AN ELEPHANT IN NEW BRUNSWICK

Mogul and Me. Peter Cumming. Illus. P. John Burden. Ragweed Press, 1989. 164 pages. ISBN 0-920304-82-6.

Set in 1836, *Mogul and Me*, a novel by award-winning children's author Peter Cumming, imaginatively recreates a historical tragedy in which a steamship bound for Maine from Saint John, New Brunswick caught fire and sank. Thirty-two passengers died by fire or drowning after many crew members abandoned ship in one of the only two lifeboats, the other boats having been removed to make room for the travelling circus and its chief attraction, Mogul the elephant.

The story is broken into roughly two halves. A narrator recounts first his youth in rural New Brunswick and the realization of every boy's dream when he is asked to care for Mogul on the voyage because he has "a way with animals."