

Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.

Yet, a glimmer of light still brightens our horizon. The source of this beacon originates in the publishing house of Fitzhenry & Whiteside with their series, *The Canadians*. This is good history for the young reader. Each book consists of a well-researched biography of a deserving Canadian, both those well-known and those whose achievements have gone unnoticed.

The illustrated balance between their personal lives and their professional lives informs the reader that these people used their imaginations, skills and determination to reach great milestones. No false mythology exists here, just Canadians at their best.

These editions are a great credit to the publisher and the authors, who offer history designed for young readers, based on the assumption that students can successfully tackle works constructed with an *adult* style. Each comprehensive biography includes a table of contents, index, photographs and diagrams, reference and illustration credits, as well as a list of further readings. The text is clear, concise and challenging without being overwhelming, nor (significantly) underwhelming.

As each author of *The Canadians* provides his own unique perspective on the biographies, the potential for disagreement between works covering similar topics provides an excellent basis for classroom discussion and debate: another hallmark of good history! The variety of potential subjects in this series could provide infinite avenues into Canadian history and might promise that each student explorer could find his or her interest in the past.

These books also provide an insight into some of the problems facing contemporary Canadians, as well as explaining how people in our near and distant past faced similar hardships and concerns. This important optimistic link (all too often neglected) helps anchor the student firmly as each youngster prepares to face an uncertain future.

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HEROES LARGE AND SMALL

William Hall. Bridglal Pachai. Four East Publications, 1995 (Famous Canadians). 40 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-920427-35-9. **Alfred Fitzpatrick.** James H. Morrison. Four East Publications, 1995 (Famous Canadians). 55 pp. \$6.95 paper. ISBN 0-920427-45-6. **Paul Bunyan on the West Coast.** Tom Henry. Illus. Kim La Fave. Harbour Publishing, 1995. 56 pp. \$12.95 paper. ISBN 1-55017-109-7.

The two latest slim volumes of Penguin's *Famous Canadians* illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of an ongoing series that seeks to bring to light lesser-known Canadians, those who, while not necessarily forming a part of the regular school curriculum, deserve wider recognition for their contribution to Canadian

culture. In the life of Alfred Fitzpatrick (1862-1936), the author has an ideal subject: Fitzpatrick's ideas for educating those on the margins of Canadian society — loggers, railwaymen, seasonal labourers — were radical for his day and certainly relevant today. James H. Morrison is able to exploit his material creatively through techniques of dramatization and the extensive use of dialogue. But Bridglal Pachai's account of war hero William Hall (1829-1904) is often plodding, lacking in specific incidents and in human interest.

Part of the problem is that few precise records exist of Hall's life, and that little evidence is sometimes contradictory. Still, Pachai is partly at fault, as he spends too much time debating matters only of importance to historians; matters like Hall's correct full name and his exact date of birth are tiresomely rehashed (though not resolved). The early pages are weighed down by names and numbers, as in this deadly sentence: "[I]n April 1939, the Director of Navy Accounts of the British Admiralty in London informed the Nova Scotia Provincial Secretary of the Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League that William Hall had given the British Admiralty his date of birth as 28 April, 1821" (11).

Pachai is certainly qualified to write on Hall, the first Nova Scotian and person of African descent to be awarded the Victoria Cross: he wrote the biographical entry for Hall in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and has also written for adults on the plight of Black Nova Scotians. At the end of this sparse volume, we may well agree with the author that "[t]he name of William Hall deserves to be better known" (5), but it is the name, and not the person, that we have come to know. Pachai seems to miss a chance to inject "humanity" into the narrative by reproducing the folk poem, "The Saga of Willy," on the inside of the back cover, where its most obvious and effective placement would be within the text itself. Furthermore, there is no bibliographical information accounting for the poem's date of composition or author; readers who ponder the circumstances of the poem's origin are left wondering.

What Pachai fails to do, partly on account of the absence of resource material, Morrison admirably accomplishes. Morrison's skilful embellishing of an incident provides colour and interest, as well as gives a sense of representativeness to what is being depicted. For example, he begins his second chapter by dramatizing a chance meeting between Alfred Fitzpatrick and a long-lost brother in a California redwood forest. The meeting is an historical fact, but Morrison here combines a telling eye for descriptive detail with realistic dialogue to create a scene that catches the reader's attention as well as imparts information. The ability to render an historic scene in its authentic immediacy serves Morrison well, who builds his narrative around such scenes, establishing a rhythm of engagement with the reader from beginning to end.

Unfortunately, Morrison's book is rather carelessly edited. Punctuation errors are the most obvious (as this comma error: "Fitzpatrick also felt that the capitalists might have good intentions but, would not do anything for the new

workers unless new laws were passed” 33-4), but there are also dangling modifiers and problems with inconsistent hyphenation.

Books in the *Famous Canadians* series have an appealing format with many photographs and a manageable bibliography. If the material is presented in an interesting way, the books should succeed in their stated aim of acknowledging the role of “our local heroes and heroines,” thereby increasing “awareness of our Canadian heritage” (General Preface).

Paul Bunyan is obviously a hero of a different kind, a ubiquitous distillation of history and legend (the historical elements survive in Bunyan’s “realistic” vocation and in the way his exploits are grounded in space and time). In Tom Henry’s exuberant retelling, coupled with the stark, dramatic illustrations of Kim La Fave, Bunyan is successfully transplanted to Canada’s West Coast as the cloudless version of the Old Frontier. He fits well there, being the unwitting creator of such landmarks as Puget Sound and the Sooke Potholes, not to mention El Nino.

Henry is sensitive to and respectful of early twentieth-century writers who developed the Bunyan myths, particularly in his portrayal of Paul, who — part child, part adult — transcends the physical world (as children would), becoming the child’s projection of ultimate power — a power that is nonetheless sanctioned by admirable inner traits, such as a sense of fairness and justice. Henry juxtaposes a simple, direct style with an imaginative flair for hyperbole, as in his description of Bunyan’s pet, Babe the Blue Ox, who “tipped the scales at more than the combined weight of all the fish that got away”

Henry’s most obvious contribution to the manifold folklore is in the way he adapts the legends to reflect the Canadian perspective, often gently mocking Canada’s institutions in the process. Although intended for children aged eight and up, *Paul Bunyan on the West Coast* would likely be better appreciated by older children. (Non-westerners, children and adults, may miss a few of the “in” jokes, but can certainly enjoy this work).

Ultimately, what is most appealing about Henry’s book is the storyteller’s ability to communicate the joy and wonder of his art in a way that empowers his readers.

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SKETCHY PRIME MINISTERS

The Prime Ministers of Canada. Gordon Donaldson. Toronto: Doubleday, 1994. x + 380 pp. \$18.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-25454-7.

The Prime Ministers of Canada, by Gordon Donaldson, discusses the lives and political careers of the twenty persons who have served in our highest political post. The objective of the book is “to sketch the story of Canada through the personalities of its elected leaders” (vi). The book has strengths, but it is also badly flawed.