

Historical Writings for Children

Alexander Graham Bell: An Inventive Life. Elizabeth MacLeod. Kids Can, 1999. 32 pp. \$16.95, \$6.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 1-55074-456-9, 1-55074-458-5. *C-Growl, the Daring Little Airplane*. Nat McHaffie. Vanwell, 1999. Unpag. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55125-015-2. *The Hydrofoil Mystery*. Eric Walters. Viking, 1999. 211 pp. \$22.99 cloth. ISBN 0-670-88186-4. *The Man Who Made Parks: The Story of Frederick Law Olmsted*. Frieda Wishinsky. Illus. Song Nan Zhang. Tundra, 1999. 32 pp. \$17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-435-5. *Not Guilty*. George Sullivan. Scholastic Canada, 1997, 1999. 152 pp. \$5.99 paper. ISBN 0-59051-428-8.

The above titles are all examples of works of history that try to engage the reader in another time and place. How successful each work is depends on many factors, including the relevance of the material to the reader's realm of experience. Four of these titles use the biographical form; one title is a work of historical fiction. Aside from the accuracy of the research, the initial choice of subject and the presentation are critical. Finding the link between the past and the present to make the literature appealing to a given audience is difficult. This task can be daunting when children are the audience because of their limited range of experience. However, if an author can tap into their natural curiosity and imagination, the past can become relevant to their present.

The subjects chosen by these authors are varied. The life of Alexander Graham Bell provides the basis for two books (*Alexander Graham Bell: An Inventive Life*, *The Hydrofoil Mystery*); famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted inspires another (*The Man Who Made Parks*); an aeroplane, the de Havilland Chipmunk, is the centrepiece of a fourth (*C-Growl*). The fifth book (*Not Guilty*) is a collective work of cases involving people who suffered "because the justice system went awry." Only two of the subjects, Bell and aeroplanes, have been explored in children's literature. The other subjects are less familiar but no less appropriate. While biographies generally aim to present details of a character's life and accomplishments, those written for children often attempt to extract life lessons. These authors are no different; their material is developed in such a way that the overall message of each book is that much can be accomplished in the face of obstacles.

The common theme of perseverance through adversity is most acute in Sullivan's *Not Guilty* which details the cases of six individuals who were wrongly accused of serious crimes. Two of the cases are drawn from the late-nineteenth century, while the other occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Canadians Donald Marshall and Susan Nelles are among those covered. In all cases the accused are portrayed as people of good character whose innocence was sacrificed to the forces of racism, public pressure, hasty judgment, and sloppy investigative work. With the aid of supporters, much hard work, faith and determination, each individual is vindicated. Retribution came relatively soon for some; for others, it came posthumously or only after years of incarceration.

The books featuring Bell and Olmsted detail how these men met the challenge of technical and social constraints. Bell turned his observation of life around him into opportunities to discover and create. He is quoted as defining an inventor as "a man who looks around the world and is not contented with things as they are ... [he] wants to improve whatever he sees, he wants to benefit the world" (MacLeod

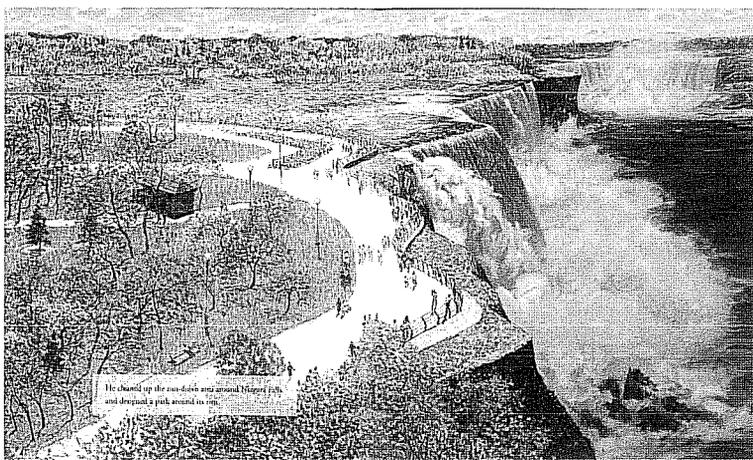


Illustration from *The Man Who Made Parks*

28). His work and creations provided scientific advancement in many fields including those of communications, transportation and education. The MacLeod book outlines the depth and breadth of his diverse activities while the Walters book provides a fictional account of the setbacks and the progress that accompanied the development of one of his projects, the hydrofoil. While taking some dramatic license with timelines and personalities, the story does capture the enthusiasm and the thrill Bell must have felt with each new accomplishment. His humanity is also portrayed in his contact with the fictional character, Billy, who must deal with his own set of problems. The summer of 1917 proves to be a period of personal growth and self-discovery for the fifteen-year-old whose eyes have been opened to his father's failings and who is himself in danger of following in the path of some friends with dubious reputations and morals. Against his will, he is sent away and separated from his family and friends for a summer of work at the Bell home in Nova Scotia. In the Bell character, Billy finds a mentor, a guiding force and an opportunity for some excitement.

Olmsted's achievements were not as far ranging as Bell's, nor were they born of adversity. Olmsted came from a seemingly privileged life of financial comfort with educational and travel opportunities and well-connected friends. However, before gaining respect, he had to overcome some failed career choices and people's assumptions about his ability to withstand hard labour or take on major projects. Only then was he able to bring his ideas on park design and development to fruition. In the process he spawned the profession of landscape architect and left some lasting creations throughout North America.

C-Growl is a composite of all Chipmunk aeroplanes that existed and, simply put, it is the story of the underdog in the fashion of *The Little Engine that Could* and *Little Toot*. Built in 1946, the Chipmunk won world-wide acclaim as a training and aerobatics vehicle. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s this plane was used to teach pilots (and a prince), win air races, fly doctors into the Australian outback, and

herd sheep. These adventures, as manifested in an aeroplane named C-Growl, come to an end when a landing accident grounded the plane. In need of repairs, “years passed and C-Growl just got older and dustier. Fabric dried out, paint flaked off.” Since “airplanes don’t dream — but pilots do,” the story tells of pilot Glen’s seven-year effort to rebuild the aeroplane. “Finally they’re flying. Up high, wonderful and breezy. C-Growl is an airplane again,” just in time to mark the 50th anniversary of its making.

In addition to the common thematic approach, the three titles by Wishinsky, McHaffie, and MacLeod are similar in their presentation techniques. While not strictly picture books nor aimed at preschoolers, they borrow from that genre, with a happy interplay between text and illustration. The book on Olmsted alternates pages of full text with facing pages of detailed illustrations by Song Nan Zhang that portray Olmsted and evoke the look of his time. The artwork is used as a vehicle to bridge the past and present; in the latter part of the book, a double-page scene of Central Park in the nineteenth century gives way to lush views, in present day, of some of Olmsted’s other lasting contributions (the Capitol in Washington, Mount Royal, Niagara Falls, Yosemite). For the most part, text and illustrations are synchronized; the final double-page spreads have simple identifying sentences that do not detract from the art. One curious oversight appears to be the failure to provide a view of the park that the author calls Olmsted’s “boldest design.”

McHaffie’s book (which the author both wrote and illustrated) also alternates text with beautiful renderings of the aeroplane and its adventures. The inclusion of sidebars that illustrate aspects of air flight such as landing patterns, radio call signs, and instrumentation are a nice added feature. The endpapers are also full of facts and figures.

MacLeod’s work integrates design and text to the greatest extent. Termed a photo-biography, the book presents information on Bell in a series of two-page chapters covering not only his experiments and inventions but also personal details about family and home and his work in education. While there is a main narrative, information is also presented in the captions or speech bubbles that accompany the historical photographs, drawings, and artifacts laid out in collage fashion on separate pages or used to frame the text page. Except for the inclusion of a picture of a cell phone and one of a rose that makes reference to Helen Keller’s sense of smell, the captions truly augment the text and are informative rather than mere filler. Except for cover art and the occasional photo reproduction, the Walters and Sullivan books appropriately rely on their narratives to tell their stories.

All these works tell fascinating stories and deserve to find an audience. With the crime and trial recreations of *Not Guilty* and the elements of suspense and espionage in *The Hydrofoil Mystery* these titles are the easiest to sell; geared to older children and teens, they are best adapted, in format and appeal, to their target audience. *Alexander Graham Bell: An Inventive Life* will be a useful addition to the literature on this famed man. While not a biography of great depth, it will appeal to the reluctant or casual reader as an initial introduction. Younger children will be drawn to the look of *C-Growl* but will soon find the text beyond their reading ability. For this group, the book is made for shared reading with an adult. Older children might be put off by its appearance yet they would find the information

and history interesting. It is hardest to envision an audience for *The Man Who Made Parks*. An unconventional subject for children's literature, the details and influences of Olmsted's life do not seem compelling or relevant. The use of the storytelling technique and the many beautiful illustrations cannot overcome this basic shortcoming and the work will remain a specialized piece for a limited audience.

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From Sea to Sea: Explorations Deep and Shallow

Kotik — The Baby Seal. Angele Delaunois. Photography, Fred Breummer. Trans. Mary Shelton. Orca, 1995. 48 pp. \$9.95. ISBN 1-55143-050-9. *Nanook and Naoya the Polar Bear Cubs*. Angele Delaunois. Photography Fred Breummer. Trans. Mary Shelton. Orca, 1995. 48 pp. \$9.95. ISBN 1-55143-048-7. *See, Make and Do at the Seashore*. Pamela Hickman. Illus. Twila Robar-DeCoste. Formac, 1996. 64 pp. \$12.95. ISBN 0-88780-356-3. *Oceans — Looking at Beaches and Coral Reefs, Tides and Currents, Sea Mammals and Fish, Seaweeds and other Ocean Wonders*. Adrienne Mason. Illus. Elizabeth Gatt. Photography David Denning. Kids Can, 1995. 80 pp. \$16.95. ISBN 1-55074-147-0. *Welcome to the World of Whales*. Diane Swanson. Photography First Light. Whitecap Books, 1996. 28 pp. \$6.95. ISBN 1-55110-490-3. *The Ocean's Garden*. Daniel Porter. Illus. Daniel Porter. ESP Press, 1997. 28 pp. \$9.75. ISBN 0-9681156-1-6.

Few things stir our wonder and curiosity like the ocean. These six books seek to illuminate different facets of the ocean, its shorelines and its denizens. All attempt, with varying degrees of success, to convey the vast wealth of life it sustains, and the complexity of its ecosystems.

Nanook and Naoya the Polar Bear Cubs and *Kotik — the Baby Seal*, both by Angele Delaunois, are stories of survival in the Arctic. The stunning photography by Fred Breummer alone makes these books worth purchasing. With an artist's eye, Breummer juxtaposes the vastness of the Arctic landscape with heartbreakingly intimate moments in the lives of these animals. In one picture, a mother polar bear sits upright in an almost human posture, eyes half-closed, serenely nursing her two cubs. In another, a newborn seal, balanced precariously on the edge of an ice floe, rubs noses with his mother, bobbing up from the water before him. All on their own, Breummer's photographs tell an eloquent story.

There is a lot of text, making these books more appropriate for children in Grade Five and up. Younger children, however, will love the pictures and would no doubt enjoy an abbreviated reading of the stories.

Some words are italicized, indicating that they appear in the brief glossary at the end of the book. Such use of italics within the text is distracting and interrupts the flow of the story. As well, the choice of italicized words seems, at times, to be