The History of Everyday Things / *Jonathan F. Vance*

Alexander Mackenzie: From Canada by Land. Ainslie Manson. Groundwood, 2003. 118 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-483-4.

The Amazing Adventures of Captain Bob Bartlett. Susan Chalker Browne. Tuckamore, 2002. 32 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 1-894294-53-X.

Breaking Free: The Story of William Kurelek. May Ebbitt Cutler. Illus. William Kurelek. Tundra, 2002. 32 pp. $22.99. ISBN 0-88776-617-X.

The Man Who Ran Faster Than Anyone: The Story of Tom Longboat. Jack Batten. Tundra, 2002. 104 pp. $16.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-507-6.

Hana's Suitcase: A True Story. Karen Levine. Second Story, 2002. 111 pp. $12.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-55-X.

William Lyon Mackenzie King: Dreams and Shadows. Lian Goodall. XYZ, 2003. 181 pp. $15.95 paper. ISBN 1-894852-02-8.

The Toronto Story. Claire Mackay. Illus. Johnny Wales. Annick, 2002. 166 pp. $34.95. ISBN 1-55037-763-9.

Let's Call It Canada: Amazing Stories of Canadian Place Names. Susan Hughes. A Wow Canada! Book. Maple Tree, 2003. 96 pp. $16.95 paper. ISBN 1-894379-50-0.

Canada Invents. Susan Hughes. A Wow Canada! Book. Owl, 2002. 96 pp. $19.95 paper. ISBN 1-894379-24-1.

Only in Canada!: From the Colossal to the Kooky. Vivienne Bowers. A Wow Canada! Book. Maple Tree, 2002. 112 pp. $14.95 paper. ISBN 1-894379-38-1.

Life in an Anishinabe Camp. Niki Walker. Crabtree, 2003. 32 pp. ISBN 0-7787-0373-8.

Native Nations of the Western Great Lakes. Kathryn Smithyman and Bobbie Kalman. Crabtree, 2003. 32 pp. ISBN 0-7787-0372-X.

Ultra Hush-Hush: Espionage and Special Missions. Stephen Shapiro and Tina Forrester. Illus. David Craig. Annick, 2003. 96 pp. $29.95. ISBN 1-55037-779-5.

Believing in Books: The Story of Lillian Smith. Sydell Waxman. Napoleon, 2002. 88 pp. $18.95. ISBN 0-929141-77-6.

For centuries, the solemn task of the historian was to elevate the reader. The chronicle of great events and great men (and the subjects were mostly men, for women were rarely thought to have achieved anything that made them worthy of note) offered a path to moral and spiritual improvement, a series of object lessons that could help the reader achieve a higher state of being. With this in mind, historians and biographers were careful to maintain the distance between subject and reader. There was no suggestion that the subjects should be humanized at all to make them more accessible to the reader or that the events should be described in such a way that the reader could better relate to them. On the contrary, history's didactic power lay in the fact that it was distinct from normal experience; this enabled it to convey the lofty ideals and paradigms for the discerning reader to emulate.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, historians began to experiment with a new approach. It went by a number of names — "history from below" in Britain, "micro-history" in Italy, "*Alltagsgeschichte*" (literally, the history of everyday things) in Germany — but whatever it was called, the focus was the same: its practitioners eschewed the story of great people and great events and instead tried to reconstruct how normal people lived, worked, and died. They began to focus on what earlier historians would have dismissed as minutiae: working class culture, marriage rates, childbirth rituals, poverty and vagrancy, parades and protests, material culture, diet, criminality. Within this school, it became fashionable to profess an interest in the "lived experience" of individuals (a colleague of mine wondered what other kind of experience it is possible to have) rather than the exploits of statesmen and generals who had dominated the historical record for centuries.

This revolution in historical writing occasioned little surprise among writers of history for children. They had long accepted that their work, just like history books written for adults, should be used to teach lessons in civic duty and personal conduct. Conveying those lessons, however, demanded a certain level of interest in young readers. The tool for achieving that was the description of everyday things. Children were fascinated to discover how people actually lived in the past: the entertainments they enjoyed, the clothes they wore, the food they ate, the houses they lived in. It is not going too far to say that *Alltagsgeschichte* came to children's writing before it came to the historical profession generally.

And yet the new historical approaches were not entirely without impact, and children's authors came to realize that a much broader range of subject matter was open to them. This is particularly true where biographies are concerned. Politicians, artists, explorers, and adventurers had always had their biographers, but it soon became clear that an aboriginal runner, a Holocaust victim, or a children's librarian (who until fairly recently would not have been regarded as fitting subjects) could be just as useful in teaching about the resilience of the human spirit and the ability of the individual to triumph over adversity. If the subject matter was

innovative, the approach was not; it was rather a case of old wine in new bottles.

The continuities in historical writing for children come out most clearly in these biographies. *Alexander Mackenzie: From Canada by Land* and *The Amazing Adventures of Captain Bob Bartlett* are classic tales in a Victorian mould. Both men were restless souls, driven by a love of the sea and a thirst for adventure. Mackenzie's wanderlust was behind his meteoric rise through the ranks of the fur trade business and drove him in 1793 to become the first European to cross North America by land. Bartlett rejected the minister's career that his mother hoped for to become one of the greatest sea captains of his day. His most famous adventure began in August 1913, when the Canadian Arctic research ship *Karluk* became trapped in ice. It floated aimlessly for five months before sinking in January 1914, forcing the survivors to walk 100 miles across the ice floes to land. Then, Bartlett and an Innu guide began a 700-mile trek to Siberia to find a rescue vessel, which finally reached the castaways in September 1914; the exploit was later called "the finest example of leadership in the maritime history of Canada" (28). Manson and Browne have crafted fast-paced and exciting tales, each with the requisite brushes with death, narrow escapes from peril, and displays of physical prowess. What is most striking, though, is that one can easily imagine these books as serials in a typical Boys' Annual of the 1880s or the 1920s.

The biographies of William Kurelek and Tom Longboat are of a slightly different order. They did not battle the elements or struggle to open new frontiers like the typical nineteenth-century hero. Their challenges were different: domestic abuse, mental illness, alcoholism, prejudice. It was not the manly strength and vigour (*à la* Mackenzie and Bartlett) which allowed Kurelek and Longboat to find a degree of triumph over adversity; it was a kind of quiet determination and inner strength which is not Victorian but modernist and perhaps even postmodernist.

In *Breaking Free*, May Ebbitt Cutler gives us the classic portrait of a tortured artist. Born into grinding poverty in rural Alberta, William Kurelek was raised by an abusive father whom he both worshipped and detested. He turned to painting to cope with depression and fears that he was going blind, and his work reflects the deep divisions within him. It runs the gamut from bright and airy canvases that capture the simple joys that punctuated his unhappy childhood, to sombre and introspective pieces, often with religious overtones. Cutler, who was the publisher of Kurelek's own children's books as well as his biographer, does a fine job of capturing this deeply conflicted soul. She does not shy away from the tragedy (indeed, the young readers at whom this picture book is directed may well find the story a little too dark) but reminds us that Kurelek brought more joy to his readers than he enjoyed in his own life and that he was able to find a kind of peace with his father at the end of his life.

Jack Batten's *The Man Who Ran Faster Than Anyone* draws the same kind of lessons for older readers. Tom Longboat, who was born and raised on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, rose to prominence at a time when marathon running was one of the most popular spectator sports in the world. In a few short years before the First World War, he won dozens of major races and became the toast of North America and Europe. As an Aboriginal, however, he was fated to suffer prejudice and discrimination, often at the hands of the very people who profited most from his skill. In the end, Longboat had little to show for his achievements after he retired and spent his last years as a manual labourer. Although the riches and fame of his running deserted him, Longboat never lost his dignity and

graciousness. Batten's Longboat, like Cutler's Kurelek, is a very modern hero: a man of rare gifts who had his own inner demons to fight and who was ultimately prevented from fully enjoying the fruits of his success.

If Tom Longboat is a non-traditional subject for a biography, *Hana's Suitcase*, Karen Levine's powerful account of the Holocaust in history, is a life story that simply could not have been written in any other context than the post-1945 world. It is really two stories that Levine weaves together effortlessly: one tells of Fumiko Ishioka, a young Japanese teacher, and her efforts to create a Holocaust education centre in Tokyo; the other concerns a young Czech Jew and her experiences in the Second World War. The suitcase provides the link. It arrived at the Tokyo centre in response to Fumiko's plea for artifacts to use as teaching tools and motivated her search to find its original owner. Ultimately, the suitcase brings Fumiko and Hana together, in the person of Hana's brother George.

Of all of these biographies, *Hana's Suitcase* is the least traditional. Its didacticism is very subtle, for there seems to be no comforting conclusion to suggest that either the human body or the human spirit can triumph over adversity. On the contrary, it revolves around a bright little girl who, despite all her promise, was doomed. Still, there is an optimism around the book which mitigates the tragedy, for the inanimate object, the suitcase, holds within it the power to teach, to heal, and to provide comfort. Levine's book is a fine example of the best kind of modern biography, one that relies on common items and average people to put a human face on a much bigger story.

That's not to say that every figure can benefit from this kind of approach. Mackenzie King, for example, has resisted all of Lian Goodall's efforts to transform him into a sympathetic, appealing figure, although her inability to humanize King is certainly no fault of her own. Many of Willie's closest confidantes, even those who were most impressed by his political acumen, found him unpleasant to be around and possessing of little in the way of a personality; those traits which were evident — his fussiness, his paranoia, his obsessions — were generally negative. King was a resolutely political animal, a man who had little in his life (beyond spiritualism, and even that was often used for political purposes) that did not revolve around politics. He devoted his life to public service, to the exclusion of virtually everything else.

To humanize such a single-minded character is a challenge, and Goodall tries mightily. Instead of attempting to cover King's long and full life in its entirety, her biography is a series of snapshots of days, an excellent technique that allows her to describe all of the important events in King's life and career. In doing so, she relies heavily on King's own diaries, surely the most remarkable single document in the Canadian historical record and now available on-line. But the character that emerges does not quite ring true. King was not the multi-faceted, sensitive soul that Goodall renders, but a ruthlessly pragmatic political manager whose first thought (and probably his second and third as well) was for the partisan implications of anything. He simply cannot be made warm and fuzzy, as this book attempts to do.

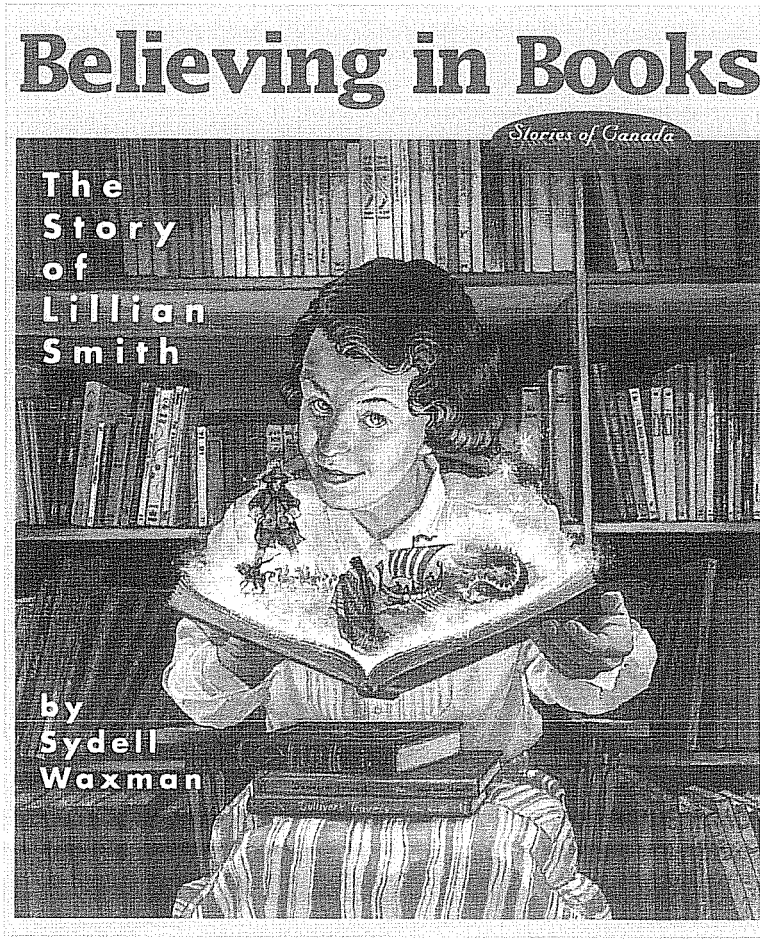
In their efforts to ensure that their subjects are accessible to young readers, the best of these books never forget to play up the contrast between the past and the present. Having seen politicians regularly raked over the coals for the most minor character lapses, they will be amazed that the career of Canada's longest-serving prime minister was unaffected by his obsession with spiritualism or by his countless other personal oddities. Accustomed to state-of-the-art, space-age athletic shoes,

they will be astonished that people like Tom Longboat regularly ran marathon distances in shoes that were essentially army boots. And it's difficult to imagine which fact about Alexander Mackenzie will be most unbelievable to a teenager: that in the fur trade he helped build, it could take over three years to complete a normal business transaction that today would take a matter of hours; or that he was fifty years old when he married a 13-year-old girl, who bore him three children before he died six years later.

This interest in everyday matters that were once considered entirely inconsequential is characteristic of the *Alltagsgeschichte* trend in historical writing. Academic historians are now realizing what children's authors have known for decades: that such details give history its appeal. For the scholar, they are now deemed essential to reconstruct the texture of earlier times; from the reader's point of view, there is no better way to grab the attention than to intersperse a narrative with quirky and amusing bits of historical trivia.

The Toronto Story is particularly effective in this regard. An updated version of a book that originally appeared in 1990, this edition has more illustrations and is in a smaller format, which makes it easier to handle. Here is a book that is written with real verve; author Claire Mackay has a wry sense of humour and a positive gift for a fine phrase. Her description of rebel leader William Lyon Mackenzie — "eyes of blue lightning, a jaw like a tombstone, a nose like an axe, and a tongue like a flame thrower" (38) — is as good as anything that has ever been written about him. The book is also filled with utterly pointless but fascinating bits of information to add texture to the solid historical detail. Who could not be won over by the revelation that early pioneers manufactured soap from urine or by the account of the Millar Stork Derby, when an eccentric lawyer bequeathed a fortune to the Toronto mother who bore the most children before Halloween 1936 (the pot was eventually split between four women, each of whom had nine children in the decade after Millar's death)? Through it all, Mackay makes every effort to draw parallels between the events and personalities of the past and what is familiar to today's readers. The celebrity boatman Ned Hanlon, one of the most famous sportsmen of the late nineteenth century, thus becomes the Gretzky of rowing. We also learn about the kids of De Grassi — not the ones in the famous television series, but the children of the De Grassi family who gave their name to a street in downtown Toronto. And each chapter begins with an aerial view of the same city block, a wonderful device that allows readers to see the physical changes that the city has experienced and compare it to the city as it exists in 2003. It remains to be seen whether the book will be of any interest to readers outside of Toronto; given the disdain with which the city is held in much of Canada, one suspects not. This is a pity, because it's an excellent format and a fascinating read.

The Wow Canada! books take Mackay's fondness for the bizarre to an even higher level. Better for browsing than reading, they are crammed full of fascinating facts and figures. The origins of place names provide endless scope for enlightenment and entertainment; as Susan Hughes suggests, we can learn a good deal about Canada's history from the stories behind the names of settlements. Inventions, too, provide a useful way to understand historical processes. The reader wishing to learn more about Canada's past could do worse than consult the section on Charles Saunders, the inventor of Red Fife wheat, who was named the most influential Canadian in history in a recent list compiled by leading historians. As informative as they are, however, the real charm of these books is that they don't take them-



Cover illustration of ***Believing in Books: The Story of Lillian Smith****, by Sydell Waxman*

selves too seriously. The subtitle of Vivien Bowers's *Only in Canada*, a rollicking tour through the obscurities of Canadian history led by a moose and a Canada goose, sums up the Wow Canada! series as well as anything: *From the Colossal to the Kooky*.

But *Alltagsgeschichte* doesn't always work, for much depends upon the presentation. *Life in an Anishinabe Camp* and *Native Nations of the Western Great Lakes* are filled with solid information about how these Aboriginal communities lived (not unlike the kind of detail that Mackay and the Wow Canada! books present), but both are terribly earnest and suffer from an unfortunate want of light-heartedness. The result is historical writing in the traditional mould — filled with all the right material, but dry, humourless, and (perish the thought!) severely "educational." These are volumes that kids will consult for projects rather than read for pleasure.

Ultra Hush-Hush: Espionage and Special Missions is plagued by a rather different flaw. It is well written in a breezy kind of way but suffers from being overdesigned. It is easy to get lost in the welter of text boxes, side bars, and page references, some of which seem to have little relevance to the matter under discussion. There is no apparent logic to the order in which the material is presented. It is not chronological, nor is it apparently thematic — for the most part, it appears to be entirely random, so there is no narrative flow. The book also has a vaguely unsettling tone that stems from its subject matter. Many books on spying tend to be characterized by a James Bond-ish fascination with gadgetry, ruses, and disguises, and this one is no different. It is a prime example of what one writer called "gee whiz history." In describing the spying missions in action-movie tones, it tends to lose sight of the broader context in which this espionage occurred. It's easy to get carried along by the duplicity, double-crossing, and danger of the book, and think, gee, wouldn't it have been neat to be a spy in the Second World War!

From secret agents to a children's librarian in Toronto may seem like an awkward segue, but in the final reckoning, it is worthwhile considering how many of these books would have seen the light of day without the efforts of Lillian Smith. As Sydell Waxman points out, some librarians of the late 1800s believed that children read too much; they felt that youngsters had no place in a library, actively discouraged the purchase of children's books for their collections, and even banned children under the age of 14 from their premises. It was Lillian Smith who broke this tradition by becoming the first children's librarian in the British Empire in 1912. In a book that, like *Ultra Hush-Hush*, suffers from an excess of subtitles, marginalia, text insertions, and subtitles that make the narrative a little hard to follow at times, Waxman provides an impeccably researched account of Smith's influence on generations of Toronto children, and on the legions of children's librarians who followed in her footsteps. Indeed, her legacy is probably felt in every issue of *Canadian Children's Literature* for, as Waxman observes, "in Canada today, the children's book industry has Miss Smith's indelible mark" (79).

Early in her tenure at Boys and Girls House, the Toronto library that she helped to found, Lillian Smith began compiling a list of the timeless classics of children's literature, what she called Yardstick Books: *Tom Sawyer*, *Treasure Island*, *David Copperfield*, *The Wind in the Willows*, and other favourites. She believed that a good book was one that had the power to entertain and delight while engaging the imagination, and for this reason tended to promote fiction over non-fiction. In doing so, she went against the preference of her mentor, pioneering American children's librarian Anne Carroll Moore, who favoured non-fiction because of its ability to

educate and inform. This is, of course, a false dichotomy, for the year's best Canadian history books for children prove that it is possible to do both. As for the others, the wise reviewer should commit to memory Smith's rule of thumb on choosing books for her library: "to tolerate the mediocre and the commonplace is to misunderstand the purpose of book selection" (53).

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Imagining *Home* in Children's Picture Books by Canadian Aboriginal Authors / *Paul De Pasquale*

Dragonfly Kites / pímíhákanísa. Tomson Highway. Illus. Brian Deines. Text in English and Cree. HarperCollins, 2002. 32 pp. $19.99 cloth. ISBN 0-00-225527-8.

Flour Sack Flora. Deborah L. Delaronde. Illus. Gary Chartrand. Pemmican, 2001. 48 pp. $9.95 paper. ISBN 1-894717-05-8.

Lessons from Mother Earth. Elaine McLeod. Illus. Colleen Wood. Groundwood, 2002. 22 pp. $15.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-312-9.

The Slapshot Star. Gloria Miller. Illus. Gloria Miller. Pemmican, 2001. 40 pp. $9.95 cloth. ISBN 1-894717-07-4.

Willy the Curious Frog from Pruden's Bog. Grant S. Anderson. Illus. Sheldon Dawson. Pemmican, 2002. 44 pp. $12.95 paper. ISBN 1-894717-15-5.

What the image of home is or represents in the contemporary Canadian Aboriginal context and what the forces are that threaten home have been of concern to Aboriginal authors at least since Maria Campbell's groundbreaking *Half-Breed* (1973). In this account of a Métis community in Saskatchewan, or the "road allowance people" as Campbell calls them, home is difficult to return to because the independence and pride of the Métis had been eroded by forces that had alienated them from their lands and culture. The challenge depicted in Campbell's text of "returning home," of revitalizing past traditions and languages and reconnecting with the land and peoples, parallels a similar challenge shared by many Aboriginal peoples across Canada today. As recent Aboriginal scholars have argued, returning home, in the metaphorical or literal sense, is fundamental to the sustenance of Aboriginal cultures and languages as well as to the resurgence of Aboriginal self-determination. In several recent children's picture books by First Nations and Métis authors, images of home provide both a focal point and an important gloss on discussions about Aboriginal rights, nationhood, and identity currently in the Canadian political and literary arenas.

Home is not a specific dwelling or location in Tomson Highway's *Dragonfly*