"Life Was Simpler Years Ago," or Books for Proud Canadians of All Ages

—Maria Nikolajeva

Allan Johnstone School Students. *Standing Guard: Through the Eyes of the Sentinels*. Markham, ON: Scholastic, 2003. 30 pp. $5.99 pb. ISBN 0-439-96961-1.

Bannatyne-Cugnet, Jo. *Heartland: A Prairie Sampler*. Illus. Yvette Moore. Toronto: Tundra, 2002. 40 pp. $12.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-722-2.

Barton, Anthony. *Horsy-hops. A Newfoundland Bestiary*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2003. N. pag. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55081-209-2.

Bonder, Dianna. *Eleven Lazy Llamas*. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2004. N. pag. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55285-609-7.

Faulkner, Megan. *A Day at the Sugar Bush. Making Maple Syrup*. Photo. Wally Randall. Markham, ON: Scholastic, 2004. 30 pp. $6.99 pb. ISBN 0-7791-1411-6.

Hémon, Louis. *Maria Chapdelaine*. Illus. Rajka Kupesic. Abr. ed. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. 40 pp. $22.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-697-8.

O Canada: Our National Anthem. Markham, ON: Scholastic, 2003. 32 pp. $7.99 pb. ISBN 0-7791-1408-6.

Pendziwol, Jean E. *Dawn Watch*. Illus. Nicolas Debon. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004. N. pag. $15.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-512-1.

Spalding, Andrea. *Bottled Sunshine*. Illus. Ruth Orhi. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. N. pag. $19.95 hc. ISBN 1-55041-703-7.

Stellings, Caroline. *Skippers at Cape Spear*. St. John's: Breakwater, 2001. 32 pp. #9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55081-174-6.

Trottier, Maxine. *Our Canadian Flag*. Illus. Brian Deines. Markham, ON: North Wind, 2004. 32 pp. $19.99 hc. ISBN 0-439-97402-X.

Wallace, Ian. *Mavis and Merna*. Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005. N. pag. $16.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-647-0.

I have previously had the occasion to contemplate Canadian nationhood (Nikolajeva). What struck me then and what strikes me now, as I am browsing through a pile of recent Canadian picture books, is the strong sense of national identity, the striving to bring forward and convey to the young readers—very young readers in some cases—the most essential characteristics of things Canadian: spirit, history, geography, prairie grain, and maple sugar. I am aware that the stack in front of me is not a representative sample, since the books I am assigned to review have been consciously selected for their focus on Canadian-ness. Yet I am in no way surprised by this obsession with nationhood, as identity seems to be a leitmotif in Canadian culture. Even a very brief library search in Canadian studies results in titles such as *Reflections on the Canadian Identity* and *A Passion for Identity*, and a specific request for Canadian picture books in the Swedish Children's Book Institute scholarly database brings forward Joyce Bainbridge's and Brenda Wolodkos's article "Canadian Picture Books: Shaping and Reflecting National Identity." From the titles themselves, the focus on identity becomes evident.

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Being an outsider and comparing the common denominator of these books with Sweden, where I live and work, I cannot but notice the conspicuous presence of the theme of nationhood that is inconceivable in my country. I have recently participated in a radio program discussing the year's production of children's books in Sweden, and every spring I have the opportunity to get an overview of the past year in a comprehensive exhibition arranged by the Swedish Children's Books Institute. I am trying to remember one single book in which Sweden's national anthem, the Swedish flag, or the celebration of the national day is presented. The only work that comes to my mind is the first Swedish school primer published in 1868. This seems more or less the last time the word "Fatherland" was accepted in Sweden.

I may be exaggerating just a bit, but books such as *Our Canadian Flag* or *O Canada: Our National Anthem* could never appear in Sweden. Swedes are not openly proud of being Swedish (unless they are recent immigrants, and not all of those either), and they do not talk about it, presumably simply taking

for granted that their country is the best in the world. If children learn the national anthem in school, there is not much difference from learning a Christmas carol or a nursery rhyme to welcome spring. As to the flag, it is much too often abused by extreme nationalists to make acceptable subject matter for a children's book.

This is not the proper place to discuss the reasons for the Canadian focus on nationhood and the Swedish absence thereof, and anyway, I have already speculated on the topic in the above-mentioned publication. I'll say simply that, as a relatively recent immigrant to Sweden, I prefer the Canadian attitude. It is, for an outsider, quite fascinating to see how it is expressed in children's books.

O Canada is a beautiful book intended "for proud Canadians of all ages," as the back-cover text informs us. Each clause, placed on a separate double spread, is illustrated by gorgeous photos showing the nature, the landmarks, the sports achievements, and the ethnic diversity of those who live there. No explanations, just the words that children, parents, and grandparents have heard together many times, and that they are invited to contemplate. What feelings do the words "With glowing hearts" evoke and what do the accompanying images have to do with them and with each other? What does "The True North strong and free!" imply: is it merely high fir-trees against the greenish night sky, wrestling polar bears, and a skateboarder caught in an audacious ride? What else can one add to exemplify "far and wide" besides the prairies, the ferocious ocean waves, the endless forests, and the towering mountains? Who are the "we" that "stand on guard for thee": the hockey goalkeeper, the fishing boats in harbour, the serene beaver, the white-cheeked goose, the two native girls in traditional dress, or the seashore cliffs? I have truly enjoyed the book and would love to have something similar to read together with my grandchildren to set them thinking about Sweden's "sun, sky and green open spaces," featured in the Swedish national anthem. I have, however, tried in vain to find the name or the person of persons who have compiled this little pearl of a book. There is information at the back about the composer and the authors of the French and English lyrics; there is even the music score. The photo credits are duly acknowledged. But otherwise the book must have produced itself!

In contrast, *Our Canadian Flag* names both the author and the illustrator on the cover. The text is twofold: a poetic narrative at the top of the page, and boxed, dry facts at the bottom. I guess this highly educational concept is fruitful in some situations, and after all one can skip the boxed text. There is naturally nothing wrong with the facts; however, the authors seem to be trying to do two things at the same time by two different means. The illustrations

are pretty, but more decorative than enhancing the verbal story. The story itself is a reiteration of the many occasions the flag is used, and again some of the landmarks are the famous buildings, hockey, ocean-going ships, and the far North. War glory is an important aspect shown through military uniforms, parades, and Remembrance day. For Sweden, a country that has not been at war for almost two hundred years, the connection between war and the national flag lies far away in history. Hockey victories, on the other hands, are recognizable.

I have tried to approach the books I have received from *CCL/LCJ* without preconceived opinions. I have no deeper knowledge of Canadian picture books; therefore I cannot put the ones I have examined in a proper context. I have simply treated them as a more or less random sample, with one single point of departure: looking for their Canadianness. In the two above-mentioned books, nationhood and the proud acknowledgment of national identity are predefined. How should one then deal with books celebrating nature? In *Heartland: A Prairie Sampler*, brought out, according to press release, in conjunction with the centenary of Alberta and Saskatchewan, the author and illustrator have tried to point out the most apparent aspects of the Canadian prairie. Having seen the prairies of South Dakota and of Manitoba, I cannot say that the landscape made an unforgettable impression on me. It really needs a deep love of your homeland to bring forward its bright sides. The author explains the subtitle as the prairie being like a sampler quilt, "a random selection of block patterns held together with a common theme." This is the concept of the book itself, "bits of this and that," the land, the climate, the people, industry and agriculture, wildlife, play, traditions, and food, including recipes for Saskatoon pie and Campfire bannock. I can imagine that, in a country as large as Canada, many children would not have seen the prairies, and the book can become part of geography and history education. For a child living on the prairie or having roots there, the book is a confirmation of one's identity: not just Canadian, but local. The illustrations are exquisite, but once again, decorative, that is, repetitive of the text, which is perhaps unavoidable in this type of book. Sure, they show the places mentioned by words, yet the text could almost work on its own. Whole-page

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pictures alternate with smaller framed panels as well as unframed images on the facing side of the double spread. This creates a nice visual rhythm, but the text dominates, and there are few details in the pictures that attract special attention. I would guess that the book appeals to adults more than to children, but it surely makes a perfect read-aloud book for school as well as home.

Standing Guard: Through the Eyes of the Sentinels, another historical prairie narrative, is written and illustrated by a group of schoolchildren, probably as a school project. The watercolours are superb to be done by amateurs, and since each painting shows a different kind of wooden grain elevator, their disparity of style does not really matter. The introductory text explains the background, and the story itself is written from the point of view of the elevators, reflecting their heyday and demise. This unusual perspective, reminiscent of Virginia Lee Burton's famous picture book *The Little House* (1942), balances the inevitable didacticism of the story, or rather, a few plunges into the remote and recent past. There is a tangible nostalgia in the text, such as the recurrent "Life was simpler years ago," which hardly comes from the children in the project, but more likely from their teachers or schoolbooks. I am not sure that this adult nostalgia is an appropriate way of assessing the past in a children's book, but it surely allows some expression of national pride: "We were a symbol of country life and encouragement." This is somewhat similar to windmills in Holland, nowadays just as useless. It is a poignant book, and a few sensitive children might mourn the wooden elevators who "worked and never thought of what the future might hold. Now all but a few of us will be taken down to make way for much bigger, stronger, sturdier. . . ." Metaphorically, the story is perhaps about parents and grandparents growing old and becoming redundant; or simply about many artifacts that get out of use or are replaced by more modern appliances.

It is not entirely unexpected that nationhood in children's books is so frequently expressed through history, but it is disconcerting that the past is presented as simpler, better, and emotionally richer. In *Maria Chapdelaine*, based on the Canadian classic by Louis Hémon from 1916, the illustrations are exceptional pieces of art, inspired by Breughel, Henri Rousseau, and Frida Kahlo, if one can imagine a combination like that, and also with a strong East-European flavour, which is not surprising, given the artist's background. The paintings are traditionally framed, and although they certainly add to the sense of the past in terms of settings and clothes, the text could easily be read on its own. It is hardly a book for children, and although the romantic story is quite like a fairy tale, there are too many details of everyday labour and sorrows to make an exciting plot. A gift book?

Generally, I have always been skeptical of nostalgic children's books that satisfy the adults' secret longing for the days of their childhoods (Nodelman, "Progressive Utopia" 153–54). It is very hard for the authors of such books to create and maintain the child perspective. Instead, the detached narrative voice, even—or maybe especially—when the first person is used, as in *Dawn Watch*, sets up a distance between the events and the reader. It has also been pointed out that first-person narration is problematic in picture books, since pictures cannot, with rare exceptions, convey the personal point of view, and thus the two aspects of the narrative, the verbal and the visual, contradict each other (Nodelman, "The Eye"; Nikolajeva and Scott 124–25). In *Dawn Watch*, it is especially manifest in the wide panoramic seascapes, with the tiny boat viewed in an omnipresent perspective from high above. The anonymous "I" of the text is confusing enough, and, autobiographic as they claim to be, the dramatic events on a stormy night evoke associations with a male rather than female narrative. In fact my first impression was that the "I" referred to the male figure on the recto (right-hand page) of the first spread. The protagonist/narrator's gender is revealed only through her headdress, which is the easiest way; otherwise there is nothing in the story that demands a female character. It is, however, quite remarkable that a girl sails with her father on a quite dangerous crossing over Lake Superior. The matter-of-fact story, full of correct sailing jargon, stands in contrast to the ominous, dark-coloured pictures that emphasize the adventurous side of the story, but hardly the emotional side, in which the father-daughter relationship could have played a more distinct role. Then the female protagonist would have been better motivated. The quasi-naïve child perspective breaks through in the verbal narrative when the author tries to be authentic and didactic at the same time; for instance, as the narrator says: "I knew that the first thing we had to do when our watch began was plot our position and mark it in the log book." To me, it sounds unnatural, an adult retrospective narrator overvoicing the young narrator, especially as compared to later, more emotionally loaded mental discourse: "Sound the alarm! All hands on deck! Man the battle stations! Douse the lights!" To add to the didacticism, the author lets the adult character supply facts: "'The North Star has been guiding boats for thousands of years,' Dad said." One would not imagine that an experienced sailor, like the "I" who is entrusted with the most arduous watch, "while the rest of the crew slept, until it was their turn," needs this piece of trivial information. Rather, the author tries to enlighten ignorant landlubbers.

I like the pictures, but more as individual seascapes than as the parallel narrative to the verbal story. Yet the pictures undoubtedly convey the protagonist's

sense of awe and loneliness in the middle of the stormy lake, and the sequence of six double spreads generates a sense of a long span of time, while the father has most probably just been away from the deck for a couple of minutes. The scared child's imagination, as she sees a green-eyed monster instead of the green starboard light of an approaching ship, is a very convincing detail that allows gratifying visual solutions. On the whole it is an enjoyable book, but the only Canadian element in the story is the mention of Lake Superior and Thunder Bay. Perhaps the sea adventure does represent a certain part of Canadianness for Canadians, but for an outsider who, like myself, lives in a similar geography and climate, with a great diversity of landscape, it is not obviously a national experience.

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Another sea story employs a historical background as well as animal characters, the latter most likely a tribute to the common, but unconfirmed assumption that children prefer animals to human characters. However, the use of animals in *Skippers at Cape Spear* undermines the historical facts presented in short, side texts on every spread, turning them into nonsensical capers, which is also emphasized by the light-hearted (and often halting) verse. The authenticity of the visual depiction of buildings and vessels is overbalanced by the comic figures of anthropomorphic, clothed mice, cats, and dogs (whom I would have believed to be wolves, if I hadn't been informed otherwise in the afterword). The factual texts are confusing, since they present facts of considerably later dates than the main story, which is supposed to take place during the Viking period: the first Europeans in Newfoundland, the building of a lighthouse in St. John in 1897, and so on. The illustrations add to the confusion as Viking ships alternate with crafts of much later date. Of course, one might view this composition as two parallel stories, but since both verbal texts are placed on the same page, it is puzzling. If I were reading this book to a child, I would be uncertain in which order to read and whether to read the factual bits at all. The versified narrative is linear and it has a plot (albeit not especially exciting), while the factual texts are disparate, and some of the accompanying small pictures feature human characters. The Canadian

spirit is accentuated by the landmarks, such as lighthouses and towers, as well as some maps. I perceive this book as one of many ephemeras, books that have little chance of leaving tangible traces behind.

Making maple-syrup is apparently an essential part of Canadianness, even though I have also seen descriptions of it in American children's books set in Vermont. In *A Day at the Sugar Bush*, this national activity is presented in photographs in which the collective protagonist is a group of schoolchildren. Obviously, the event is seasonal: "It's the first week of spring. . . . It's time to visit the sugar bush!" It is, then, a bit strange that the sugar and syrup production is described as if seen for the first time ever, but this is dictated by the educational purpose of the book. The vague narrative alternates between the past and the present, and the clothing of the workers rather suggests a period theme park.

Bottled Sunshine is, by contrast, quite a different kind of book, even if it also involves making use of natural resources. Sammy goes picking blackberries with his grandmother, who promises to bottle some sunshine for him to take home when summer holidays are over. In the middle of the winter, when grandmother has died, Sammy opens the jar of blackberry jam, and it brings back the memories of summer, the bees, the prickles, the sunshine, and grandmother's wrinkled face. The story is not very sophisticated and is in parts overtly didactic (for instance, explaining why wax is used to seal jam jars), while the illustrations are plain and unimaginative, not to say boring. Adding hardly anything to the text, they show nature that could have been almost anywhere, and the only detail that could be stretched into representing Canada is a dreamcatcher over Sam's bed.

Animal stories are always a gratifying matter for picture books and invite humour and nonsense. *Horsy-hops*, with the subtitle "A Newfoundland Bestiary," is a collection of very funny verses accompanied by bizarre pictures, in the spirit of Dr Seuss, but quite original. Footnotes explain—for the rest of Canadians, I assume—the meaning of some seemingly nonsensical words, for instance, that Boo Man's hat is a Newfoundland toadstool, or that angle-dog, depicted as a fierce red-orange canine, is in fact a fishing worm. This absurd play with words and images is highly enjoyable and presents some superstitions, as well as games and silly advice about how to deal with the monsters described. Considerably less inspiring is *Eleven Lazy Llamas* that ostensibly is meant as funny, but is almost embarrassing, as the author tries to save the weak plot and the horrid, My-Little-Pony-like pictures by the comic-strip-like onomatopoeias such as "schnlork," "chweep," and "plonk." Again, one of books that should perhaps not have been published and will not be remembered. And—am I mistaken in believing that the llama is not

a native Canadian animal?

Finally, a book that is Canadian in origin, but does not present, and perhaps does not intend to present, anything specifically Canadian. *Mavis and Merna* is a remarkable story that needs reading between the lines. Superficially, it is one of those endless stories about a child befriending a slightly weird neighbour. Upon closer examination, however, we see, to begin with, that Mavis's parents neglect and humiliate her in a most appalling manner, and that Merna, the shopkeeper's widow, provides everything for Mavis that her parents do not: care, quality time together, conversation, attention, picnics, and not least, creative imagination, as she mows her lawn in zigzags. Perhaps Merna is merely Mavis's imaginary substitute mother? Mavis is the focalizing character, and the narrative voice feels genuine and immediate, until it suddenly informs us that "three decades passed," and it turns out that the story has in fact been told in retrospect. The pictures hardly support this perspective, at least not in people's clothes or details of setting. The previous events, however, become detached from the protagonist's adult "present," in which she is married and supports herself by lobster fishing. The child's innocent perspective, that allowed her to love the junk store and ignore her parents' spiteful remarks, is lost, and the parents appear in an ironic light, in the memory of a self-confident, grown-up woman. Mavis's adult point of view is underscored by the further comment on the parents: "Mavis's parents went to Florida for the winter so her father wouldn't have to shovel snow."

Further, contradicting my earlier statement about this book not being specifically Canadian, as I am trying to get still deeper into the meaning of the book, I start seeing Mavis, her old friend, Merna's dead husband and their shop as representatives of the good old Canada, of traditions, of pre-industrial lobster fishing, and of warm, neighbourly relationships. Much of it goes to the grave with Mr Gully, but, characteristically, two strong-willed women take over. Mavis's parents betray their Canadian home and go to Florida, but their daughter remains true. Wishful thinking? A Canadian dream? The illustrations add a lot to the sense of place, if not time, while in the multitude of details in the shop, the reader will find much delight. The dedication page vignette shows a key that anticipates the reopening of the shop: a nice detail for a keen observer. Maybe I read too much into this book, but this follows from my premise for this article.

By way of conclusion: from the sample of books I have been assigned to examine it seems that Canadian picture books—presumably addressing very young readers—often evoke a sense of the past, when the nation was emerging, or else refer to the elements of the present that have deep national roots, such as making maple syrup. Further, the books emphasize

landscape features, almost bringing them into the foreground and eclipsing the plot and characters—indeed, in some books there are neither plots nor characters at all. My feelings toward the books are ambivalent. I enjoy and respect the fostering of love for the native country and its official and unofficial symbols. Yet some of the books are so overtly nostalgic that I wonder whether today's children have any delight in them. Maybe they do. On the contrary, adults reading to a child may be reminded of something their grandparents read or told them. Thus, the books can be read on several levels—which is exactly how the best children's books work.

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