

Perspectives on Canadian History

WILLIAM GODDARD

Famous Canadian Stories, (2nd ed.) George E. Tait, McClelland and Stewart, 1973, 312 pp. \$3.95 paper.

The Sinking of the I'm Alone, *How the Depression Hit the West*,
The Exodus of the Japanese, Janice Patton. McClelland and Stewart,
1972. 47 pp., 48 pp., 47 pp. \$1.49 each, paper.

It has been said that we live in an ironic age filled with cynicism, pessimism, and defeatism. How will our children survive? Well, you need not fear this infection if your children read Mr. Tait's romantic history of Canada. The predominant feelings that emerge are first an inebriated elation and secondly a gnawing sense of guilt for ever having thought that Canada was anything but a great nation. In three hundred short pages Mr. Tait has organized a whole history of Canada around the stories of explorers, pioneers, soldiers, settlers, missionaries, inventors, and politicians. In his chronologically-oriented scheme, we are exposed to stories concerning the search for the famed Northwest Passage, New France, the Maritimes, Ontario and so forth. There is even a fascinating chapter entitled "Canadian Place Names" which examines the origins of the names for such well-known towns as Winnipeg, Regina, and Toronto.

As editor of this "new and revised edition", which has been around for three or four years in hard cover, Mr. Tait has chosen materials useful to his purpose from a variety of sources. Unfortunately, he does not list these sources, so all comments praiseworthy or otherwise, are directed towards him.

Let us state clearly from the beginning that Mr. Tait's work, in giving us this panoramic view of Canadian history from 1534 to 1953, presents an exciting vision for children. Certainly the generally rounded and complete treatment of the key achievements of his personalities should be well received. Young people from ages eleven to fifteen, especially boys, should enjoy these dramatic, action-packed tales. They are written in a simple, direct style which is most readable. Grade seven and eight students would find this historically accurate book useful for their history programs. The illustrations, by Vernon Mould, are not especially attractive to children, and the addition of some coloured pictures in future editions would help. There are potentially good geography exercises that could be developed through the creative imagination of a teacher.

Mr. Tait undoubtedly believes that British origins are the primary source of strength for our Canadian heritage. He neither dislikes nor ignores the French Canadian heritage; he simply feels that it is secondary. Of the approximately seventy stories told, about eighteen reveal the French Canadian heritage, while at least forty emphasize the British contribution. From Confederation on, only two French Canadians appear - Father Lacombe and Sir Wilfred Laurier. Men like Bourassa,

Mercier, Bishop Laval, Duplessis, St. Laurent, and Vanier are ignored. Women, likewise, are given short shift. Only Madeleine de Verchères, Longfellow's Evangeline, and Laura Secord make the roll of "who's who". Somehow, Mr. Tait has fallen short, and this is not the only area that needs reconsideration. There has been no real attempt to evaluate the tremendous contribution made to Canada by her other immigrants, be they Ukrainian, Polish, German, Italian, etc., the place of the native people in the development of our country has also been seriously under-rated.

He seems to believe, too, that our young people need something "simplistic but accurate to begin with" when they study history. Mr. Tait's narratives are that, but is this enough? To suggest only, or even largely, the successes of life or history, and to avoid the disruptive elements--the fears, the weaknesses, even the betrayals of human nature--is this really fair to young people? Surely in a four page story on Sir John A. MacDonald, man and politician, the writer can include more honest criticism than a few sentences of suggestion, quickly dismissed at the end. This sort of white-washing tends to permeate the book and it becomes dull after the first one hundred pages. Children are not corrupted by a few minor revelations.

There is one other area of criticism. The book is twenty-two years out-of-date. The final impression, comforting though it may be for Imperial Anglo-Saxons, needs updating. Perhaps some of the gaps pointed out could be overcome by adding a section to bring it up to the early 1970's.

In writing this history Mr. Tait has undertaken a valuable task. In an age of growing nationalism, he has endeavoured to make us proud of the legacy that certain men and women have made to Canadian history. This is a worthwhile goal. As the French would say, "Voilà, l'idéal".

Janice Patton, in her three new booklets, takes a more up-to-date approach to our history than Mr. Tait has attempted. A casual and cynical academic might say, on first glance, that the classic comic book had come into a new era, that the action-packed adventure stories that have made up so much of our modern television viewing are somehow encapsulated here. However, this view, as it stands, would be unfair. Mrs. Patton has researched three relatively obscure topics in modern Canadian history--Canada's participation in Prohibition, the effect of the depression on the Canadian West, and the treatment of the Japanese in Canada during the Second World War. She has done it in a popular fashion, emphasizing dramatic incidents illustrated with high impact photographs, and enclosed in a glossy package. But this is not all. She has a keen understanding of both the need for and the impact of the visual on twentieth century people. One does not soon forget pictures like the fleet of American coast guard vessels setting out to stop the forbidden trade, the plague of locusts covering depression-ridden fields, nor the bitter, angry disillusioned faces in a crowd of Japanese Canadians who chose to leave Canada for good in 1946. These photographs re-emphasize the old cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words; especially when they are so well chosen. Furthermore, by her selection of incidents, she has attempted to make our history come alive for young people. And, it might be added, why shouldn't our

history books be packaged attractively? Welcome to the 1970's.

Each of the three books has as part of its format a number of primary source photographs spaced well throughout. Each uses two eye witness reporters to comment on the historical events. Mrs. Patton fills in the gaps with her own historical commentary. The blending of these three elements is the real challenge, the real test of skills. The least successful of the three appears to be *The Sinking of the I'm Alone*. The narrative lacks a certain continuity and even flow. Perhaps the author attempts to cover too much. Perhaps more background material should have been introduced. Adolescents who use these books would be advised to look first at the photographs, then at the captions, and finally read the narrative. Younger children using them for historical research would need much assistance with the first book, but less with the other two: *How the Depression Hit the West*, and *The Exodus of the Japanese*. All three, though, should be well received. Several copies of these books would be useful as introductory or supplementary resources for history or for Canadian Studies programs in both senior elementary and high school. They would be especially useful in small group work. Except for the obvious indignities rightfully felt, by experienced eyewitnesses, in *The Exodus of the Japanese*, all three books present limited, but balanced, historical perspectives. They are not, and do not pretend to be definitive. They are an enjoyable and worthwhile introduction to three--as yet--little discussed periods in Canadian history.

Since the publishers have not used the activities format, they must be aiming at an audience more sophisticated than just the classroom. As an adult, I too found them interesting and instructive.

In the case of this series of books Mrs. Patton realized that the literacy of our young people is not solely print oriented. It includes the visual media. What she has done, and done well, is to capitalize on this knowledge, and thus arouse their interest in Canadian history. As long as we do not stop here, this is a good start. It is up to other historians to accept graciously this worthwhile contribution and write other exciting and readable histories.

William Goddard is Chairman of the English Department at St. Charles College, Sudbury, and teaches English and History.