

Travelling Toward Christmas With Canadian Authors

BARBARA J. GRAHAM

Canadian Christmas Books; a Handsel from Our Victorian Past, Caroline Carver. Tundra Books/Collins, 1975. 95 pp. \$4.95 paper.

Christmas in Canada . . ., Mary Barber & Flora McPherson. Dent, 1972. 134 pp. \$2.95 paper.

The Christmas Tree House, Ian Wallace. Kids Can Press, 1976. Unpaged. \$2.95 paper.

How Mrs. Claus Saves Christmas!, Bill Templeton. Illus. by Wes Chapman. Unpaged. \$4.95 hardcover.

Johann's Gift to Christmas, Jack Richards. Illus. by Len Norris. J.J. Douglas, 1972. Unpaged. \$5.95 hardcover.

The Mayor's Christmas Party, Charles Wilkins. Illus. by Jorica. Queenston House, 1978. 12 pp. \$2.95 paper, \$5.00 hardcover.

The Night the City Sang, Peter Desbarats. Illus. by Frank Newfeld. McClelland and Stewart, 1977. \$5.95 hardcover.

A Northern Nativity; Christmas Dreams of a Prairie Boy, William Kurelek. Tundra Books, 1976. Unpaged. \$9.95 hardcover.

Seasonal literature, although the body of work may be small, provides a special way of looking at a nation and its peoples. Canadian children have had very little of their own Christmas fare to balance the plethora of materials to which they are exposed from beyond their borders. The Christmas Annuals are helping and gradually a few titles are appearing which are both special to young Canadians and at the same time have a universal appeal.

Christmas in Canada, first published in 1959, is an anthology of Christmas articles, poetry, and short stories written by Canadian authors. The earliest contribution is a description of Jacques Cartier's first Christmas in Canada in 1535. What follows is both a chronological and geographical distribution of materials which allow the reader to roam imaginatively from the Arctic to Moosejaw, to Toronto, to Montreal, to the seacoasts through urban and rural communities, from past to present times. There are contributions from ethnic groups – i.e., the description of the immigrant family celebrating Christmas Eve at Union Station in Toronto is memorable – but one wishes for more such vignettes. The anthologists have chosen wisely for the most part, and the result is a compact,

thoroughly readable collection of Canadian Christmases which has proven appealing to older children and adults. Through the years, many of the selections have been used by children for assignments, by adults planning Christmas programmes, and by families enjoying themselves around the Christmas tree.

Focusing on a narrower aspect of Christmas past, Caroline Carver's *Handsel from our Victorian Past* provides a tantalizing browse for older children and adults. Acknowledging that Christmas celebrations came of age during the Victorian period, Carver has delved into newspapers and periodicals of the period to illustrate just that fact. The result is an oversized paperback in periodical format chock full of fascinating memorabilia. The reader is able to observe the gradual transformation from the negligible interest in Christmas in the periodicals of 1837 to the full-blown celebrations in the early 1900's. The child's role in Christmas celebrations begins to dominate; Santa Claus appears; Christmas gifts become important; The Christmas Card becomes popular; and, most important of all, the family Christmas comes to the fore, influenced by Victoria's own love and emphasis on family solidarity. The newspaper and periodical illustrations which are abundantly reproduced show the importance of Canadian scenes as a background to Christmas cards and writing. Snow makes its appearance, as do all sorts of outdoor Canadian sports. Sentimental illustrations of little children abound. Even the South African war finds its place in Christmas illustration.

After Carver's general introduction, which provides basic historical information for the uninitiated, the arrangement of the book is thematic, and what a variety of themes: Christmas in various parts of the nation, politics and Christmas, food, lovemaking, toys, soldiers to name a few. The arrangement of the material itself is attractive – different sizes of print, captions of the day from English and French newspapers, insets of relevant comment from periodicals, and always the illustrations. The column format provides brief readable units. The variety of material is sure to please – poetry, short articles, excerpts from literary works, such as Mrs. Traill's *Canadian Settler's Guide*, even contemporary advertisements for special gifts such as dolls at 12½ cents each.

There are, however, some real drawbacks to this fascinating book which relies so heavily on illustration. The reproductions are far from clear, the black and white line drawings often blur together creating large sections of total black. The few coloured illustrations are better, but the relevancy of the Canadian Militia in Dress Uniform, 1898, is open to question.

Without adult guidance, children may not sustain their interest in this book. The print is often small; the illustrations can be frustrating; the historical and political references may discourage rather than inspire. Older children will find the book useful for Christmas assignments. Teachers will be able to formulate all sorts of short answer projects for that long, final week before the Christmas holidays. In addition, the paperback binding is a

real problem. If several handle the book, rebinding will be necessary. My copy has fallen apart after one perusal. Nevertheless, this potpourri of information provides a unique contribution to our Canadian Christmas heritage, as well as giving us an amusing look at our social and political heritage.

William Kurelek's *A Northern Nativity* is unique in a different way. Following the successful formula of his earlier pictorial autobiographies of growing up on the prairies of the thirties, Kurelek remembers a special group of nativity dreams he experienced at the age of twelve. Using the perceptions of a young boy limited in experience beyond that of the classroom, Kurelek takes the reader through twenty dream sequences across the Canada of the thirties. Asking the question, "What if the nativity happened here?" the boy William pictures the Holy Family among cowboys of the west, rod riders, lumberjacks, and in such places as country missions, fishing boats, garages, and an abandoned grain elevator.

Kurelek's concept is an interesting one, and one which could be appealing to young people. Many would amuse themselves with Kurelek's colourful, primitive paintings, but the message which Kurelek presents might prove difficult for many younger readers. "In the Mountains" words come to William to help him explain the beauty he sees: "Only a Creator who is beauty itself can create beauty – only those made in His image can appreciate that beauty". And later, in the twentieth dream, as the Holy Family flees, the message may be perplexing for some. But, the challenge is there, and the magnificent illustrations assist in providing answers. Teachers of art and writing could have some challenging lessons using those paintings; children could write and/or illustrate their own "What if" dreams. The universal meaning of Christmas has a uniquely Canadian interpretation as the result of the spiritual integrity and the creative talents of this well-recognized Canadian artist.

In *The Night the City Sang* Newfeld's black and white and gold illustrations provide just the right background for Peter Desbarat's three rollicking Christmas poems set in Montreal. Older children will love to read them aloud; younger ones will enjoy the vivid sights and sounds. The rhyme is fun, the movement quick and the wordplay delightful. Even the contrivances are acceptable in the magic of three special Christmas Eves when Halibut York, the little Eskimo girl gets her wish, when the city buildings actually sing and when Lucretia, an attractive little devil, finds out what Christmas is all about.

Ian Wallace's *Christmas Tree House* is a simple charming story reminiscent of his earlier effort, *The Sandwich*. Nick, who lives in Cabbagetown with his parents and grandparents, is different from other eight-year-olds because on Saturdays he goes out looking for adventure rather than playing with friends or going to horror movies. One day close to Christmas, while looking at the animals at Riverdale zoo, he meets Gloria, a

sponky nine-year-old, and has a pleasant scare when Don Valley Rose, a peculiar old lady, who is the subject of many a spooky story, comes into view. Gloria and Nick discover a tree house and decide to have their own Christmas party the day before Christmas. Don Valley Rose interrupts their plans and provides a surprise for two children who learn not to judge by appearances. Young readers will enjoy this quiet adventure of two inner city children. Nick's Macedonian background adds an ethnic interest and the many Toronto references will be enjoyable for those who know the city, but will not detract for those who do not. Wallace's black and white illustrations with their two page spreads are evocative and well-related to the text. The portrait of Don Valley Rose with her soft understanding eyes is particularly effective. The wish-fulfillment aspects of the story will be satisfying to the younger reader while the danger is just to tantalize but not scare.

How Mrs. Claus Saves Christmas follows the traditional pattern of many Santa Claus stories. Reminiscent of the Walt Disney style, the large vividly coloured illustrations full of action and humour will be appealing to the young child. When Santa Claus falls asleep, exhausted from his Christmas journey, one of his elves discovers a doll which Santa Claus has failed to deliver to Donna-Lee. Mrs. Claus and her faithful McMoose set out to save Christmas for Donna-Lee. The journey is filled with misadventures including McMoose's hiccups, a jet plane, skyscrapers and a Christmas thief. With the exception of McMoose, there are no Canadian references in this entertaining but stereotyped story for younger readers.

Peter and Popcorn are not even ten-year-olds when they attempt a journey of "fifty freezing miles" to attend *The Mayor's Christmas Party*. Much like a fairy story, full of fantasy and moral fibre, the story revolves around trickery and triumph in adversity. Told with simplicity, and containing a few Canadian references, the tale will delight young children because of the vividness of the telling and the daring of Peter and Popcorn who almost survive on their own, but are eventually rescued by the jolly mayor.

Johann, the little mouse who lived in the Austrian Tyrol one hundred and fifty years ago is a very special fellow. He listens, and develops a great love of music which in turn changes his whole life. After meeting old Viktor, the church mouse at a band concert, Johann visits his church frequently and

decides against his parents wishes to become a church mouse because of the beautiful music played by Herr Gruber on the organ and the lovely wooden angel. Johann becomes so hungry that he eats the organ bellows just before Christmas. This charming interpretation of the creation of "Silent Night" should please the young reader. The illustrations, mostly sepia in tone, are delightfully full of character. Jack Richards' story is not specifically a Canadian Christmas story, but it is a memorable little Christmas fantasy.

After examining the selection of Christmas fare represented above, the reader is left the same sense of dissatisfaction one experiences after a mediocre Christmas pantomime. It is amusing while it lasts, but it is soon forgotten. *Christmas in Canada* remains the most satisfying of all because of its variety of material and the quality of writing provided for the older reader. One looks to the future for new material of high quality for the younger reader.

Barbara Graham, a teacher-librarian for many years, is presently the school library consultant for the London Board of Education. She has taught children's and young adult's literature for the Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, as well as for the Ministry of Education.



Livres et Méthodes Pour Les Classes de Français

D.M. PARAMSKAS

Arnold le Hamster, 124 pp., *Pirouette*, 125 pp., *Fil de fer*, 122 pp., Yves Larin et al., Collection Communication. Série: Bandes dessinées (Niveau élémentaire). Editions Hurtubise (Montréal) 1972-1975. Textes accompagnés de *Guides méthodologiques*, 124 pp., 125 pp., 79 pp.

A la découverte du journal, *La Vie en plein air*, *La Motoneige*, *Jeux sur glace*, *Pour rire*, *Sports de défense*, *Les Animaux*, *A pied*, *en voiture*, *en avoin*, *En vedette*, *A la mode de chez nous*, *En vacances*, Jean Campeau et Michel Ménard, Collection: Documents pour l'enseignement du français (Secondaire, premier cycle, étudiants faibles). Editions Hurtubise (Montréal), 1975, 45 pp. chacun, accompagnés de *Guides méthodologiques*, 29 pp. chacun.

Sur la scène de l'actualité, *l'Ecole*, *l'Univers des sports*, *Le Corps humain*, *Les Transports*, Diane Deneault. Collection: Dossiers pour la classe de français. Editions Hurtubise (Montréal). 1973. 27-32 pp. Une collection comprenant: fascicules thématiques, cahiers de travaux pratiques pour l'étudiant, guides méthodologiques, tableaux-synthèse pour le professeur, banque de dispositifs pour la classe.

Le Récit, *La Bande dessinée*, *La Conversation*, *La Biographie*, *La Présentation*, *Le Message*, *La Nouvelle*, *l'Information*, *La Présentation II*, *l'Interrogation*, *La Lettre*, *l'Enquête*, *Le Reportage*, Réal Larochelle. Collection pour l'enseignement du français au secondaire, en situations d'apprentissage. Editions Hurtubise (Montréal). 1973. 24-31 pp.