

Canadiana, Coffee Table Books and Tourist Teasers

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Newfoundland and Labrador, John deVisser with an introduction by David Blackwood, Oxford, 1979. Unpaginated. \$12.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-19-540336-3.

The Yellowhead Route, John deVisser, Bill Simpkins, Robert Taylor with an introduction by Hugh Dempsey. Oxford, 1980. Unpaginated. \$14.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-19-540300-2.

The Old Kingston Road, Paul von Baich with an introduction by Jennifer McKendry. Oxford, 1980. Unpaginated. \$14.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-19-540304-5.

To the Wild Country, John and Janet Foster. Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1975. 155 pp. \$19.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-442-29947-8.

The Seaway, in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Seaway and the 150th anniversary of the first Welland Canal, Robert Legget. Clarke Irwin, 1979. 192 pp. \$15.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-7720-1270-9.

One of the rewards of Canadian nationalism in the last decade is the large collection of new books and materials which were produced to portray the Canadian landscape. When well practiced, the art of photography has the capacity to widen the reader's horizons, whet the appetite, point out the vagaries of life, make desolation beautiful and feed the soul. Even when it does not satisfy all these requirements, a picture still can provide a focus while the mind takes that infinite leap into the imagination.

In an increasingly visual society we are bombarded with electronic and photographic images, yet educators and parents do not conscientiously train children how to interpret these images. Once the child has learned to read words, we no longer emphasize the picture. Most adults are not aware of the impact of colours and textures on emotions and buying patterns. The adage "Don't judge a book by its cover" has never been truer and never more ignored than today.

The following five books, of which three are almost entirely

photographs, combine the best and some of the worst attributes of photographic Canadiana. There are touches of brilliance in four of them and certainly the three from Oxford and *To the Wild Country* are worth having in any library or personal collection regardless of their shortcomings.

Of the three coffee table books from Oxford, the best is *Newfoundland and Labrador*, in which deVisser has downplayed the savagery of the land and the North Atlantic storms but shown many of the diverse moods of the province. The printed text, only two pages, is separate from the photos so that nothing distracts the reader's eye. Unfortunately the pictures have no accompanying captions and while the publisher has printed a removable insert, this is a distraction. As well, there is no map and one must search hard in an atlas to find the locations of some of the photographs.

There is only one thing that bothers me about the text of the book. All the pictures of people are labelled by town or activity (e.g. Sunday in Newfoundland, Woody Point etc.) except for one which is labelled 'Young Newfoundlander' (#53). Yet #65, which also shows young children, is labelled by geographic location. Neither photo has any distinguishing characteristics other than the children themselves. Why then is the white, blondhaired child a Newfoundlander while the dark-haired Inuit is not?

As for the colour photographs, all one can do is rhapsodize about the choices. Some are brilliant in textural contrast and emotional impact while others are merely excellent examples of what can be good in photographers' art.

The Yellowhead Route is a fine meld of pictures showing western Canada at its best, specifically from Prince Rupert to Winnipeg along the Explorers' trail now part of the Trans Canada Highway. The text assumes slight knowledge of western Canadian history, hits only selected highlights like the Newfoundland text, and is greatly enhanced by a clear map showing not only the route but the locations of the photographs. One minor error mars the word text: "The early pioneers travelled it (the highway) from west to east." It should be "east to west."

The photographs, again entirely in colour, are striking, although those of the mountain flowers lack the clarity of those in *Canadian Wildflowers*.¹ They feature all aspects of the landscape and human activities, but they show a disproportionate number of British Columbia and Alberta settings (53 of the 88) and they present no winter scenes. From this book it would appear that the only snow found on the Yellowhead Route is on mountain tops.

There is a high quality of colour photography in *The Old Kingston Road* as well. This book covers the territory from Cobourg to Morrisburg, Ontario, in much the same manner as the previous two. The introduction is more florid in style and both it and the photographs appear to lack cohesion and purpose. Again a map would have been useful especially since the photographs have neither geographic nor thematic sequence.

For anyone who wondered why John and Janet Foster were award winners, you have only to read *To the Wild Country* to understand. This is not strictly a picture book for they have combined printed words with black and white photography, then followed each chapter with stunning colour photographs of each wilderness area. The book highlights six major Canadian wildlife regions including the Kluane and Pacific Rim National Parks, Algonquin Park and Baffin Island. The printed text is very readable, almost lyrical, with twitches of humour interspersed throughout. Certainly their joy of discovery and their commitment comes shining through.

In order to properly appreciate *The Seaway*, the reader would have to be a fanatic sailor, a marine historian or a high school student doing a theme on the history of the Seaway. The text is filled with details about the history of the seaway, including everything from the number of Welland Canals (4) to the width of the original canals of 1781 at Coteau du Lac (6 to 7 feet). Unfortunately, the style is often awkward and convoluted and it is very easy to lose the author's train of thought.

It is an amply illustrated book, with at least two pictures per page and they warrant better treatment. The black and white illustrations include paintings dating back to 1760 and photographs from the late 1800s. How much more effective they might have been if the entire book had been re-edited.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, you should have a good time with the Oxford trio and *To the Wild Country*. Send them to any of your acquaintances who have not visited the regions. They are great tourist teasers and should do something worthwhile for the tourist industry.

NOTES

¹*Canadian Wildflowers*, Mary Ferguson and Richard Saunders (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976).

Billie Anne Robinson is a geographer by training and a teacher-librarian by choice.