

Tales from Down East

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A Proper Acadian, Mary Alice Downie and George Rawlyke. Illus. by Ron Berg. Kids Can Press, 1980. 64 pp. \$2.95 paper. ISBN 0-919964-29-X English edition, ISBN 0-919964-33-8 French edition.

The Young Privateersmen, Dexter Hubbard. Lancelot Press, 1980. 45 pp. \$2.00 paper. ISBN 0-88999-129-4.

First Spring on the Grand Banks, Bill Freeman. James Lorimer & Co., 1978. 171 pp. \$11.95 hardcover, \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-88862-221-X hardcover, ISBN 0-88862-220-1 paper.

Atlantic Canada offers a wealth of historical material for fictional consideration. The expulsion of the Acadians provides the historical background for *A Proper Acadian*. Timothy Parsons is a citizen of Boston, but he has been shipped off to Acadia to live with his mother's relatives. He soon becomes infatuated with the land and the culture and, when the expulsion becomes imminent, Timothy must choose between life in Boston with his father and his new-found home among his Acadian relatives, and choose he does. The plot struggles along through the events of Timothy's voyage to Acadia and his acceptance there. However, the authors present the actual crisis of that gloomy autumn in 1755 in very moving prose: "Children wandered through the streets alone, crying and unheeded. The cattle, unmilked, lowed their distress. Dogs, abandoned beside unlit fireplaces, howled dismally. It was a bitter night in Acadia." Scenes of mental abuse and exploitation are portrayed with a feeling of concern. These scenes are enhanced by marvellous illustrations.

The characters are, at times, rather contrived and effective characterization is often lacking. American Timothy and his Acadian cousin, Martin, are so much alike that one would think they had been raised in the same culture.

Individual Acadians do not stand out to any significant extent, but, as a group their spirit and oneness have been adequately portrayed and the authors have certainly captured the atmosphere of one small group's stand against all odds and an inflexible conquerer. The bitter consequences of physical division somehow strengthen and unify the group rather than divide and, consequently, prepare these people for any manner of hardship in future generations.

We move along to the year 1801 and *The Young Privateersmen*. Young Timothy Mathews and Dave Scott stow away on the recently built privateer, the *Beaver*, for a half-hour trail run. Unbeknown to them they are on their way to the Spanish Main. Eleven days out of port the *Beaver* captures a Spanish ship. However, some of the *Beaver's* crew suffer the same indignity the next day, at the hands of cruel pirates. The rest of this short novel relates Dave's and Timothy's experiences as captives of the Spanish and describes how they eventually are freed.

The historical event is well represented and one gets an excellent picture of the art of privateering and of the men who chose this way of life. Privateering offered adventure and intrigue. It was equivalent to frontier exploration in the west because it provided adventure and escape for the men of Atlantic Canada who otherwise suffered through a boring and routine existence at home. The novel's expressive plot rises above the unremarkable characterization. Individuals do not stand out, and any character traits that surface tend to apply to the crew as a group. Tim and Dave and the rest of the crew are symbols of strength overcoming weakness, but strength is relative and as soon as the skeleton crew meet a stronger force, namely the pirates, they succumb to the humiliation of defeat.

This novel appropriately explains the differences between pirates and privateers. Privateering was a cut above piracy. The privateers followed a set of unwritten rules while pirates roamed, looted, and murdered at will.

Pirates were villains, usually from a country hostile to the homeland. Privateers were honest citizens from local towns and villages who only wished to supplement their low incomes and to give a little excitement to a mundane life. One assumes that this will not be Tim and Dave's last time on a privateer. The *Beaver* provides their initiation to sea travel, and a young boy's desire to go to sea was not uncommon, as witness the captain of the *Beaver*: "You bested me by three or four years – I was fifteen when I stowed away on a fishing schooner."

The ocean not only afforded a means of travel and adventure but it also supplied work and food. *First Spring on the Grand Banks* tells of the life of the Newfoundland fisheries. This novel is a sequel to *The Last Voyage of the Scotian* and is Bill Freeman's third novel relating the adventures of Meg and John Bains. Meg and John, Captain Canso and his wife Peggy board the schooner *Newfoundland* and head for Tower Rock, Newfoundland. The four leave under clandestine conditions since Canso's right to sail his deceased father's ship is in

question. Mr. Hunter, a Nova Scotia merchant, claims ownership of the schooner. Herein lies the dilemma of many an east coast fisherman – that is, how to obtain credit from the merchant without becoming yet another possession of that scheming money-lender. This novel recounts the merchant's exploitation of the poor but hard-working fishermen in a highly readable fashion. Mr. Hunter uses credit as a means of control over Captain Canso. The plot moves along to an exciting climax and only falters during long descriptions of fishing techniques. However, these descriptions are important to the development of the plot rather than being isolated attempts to teach the reader how to fish or set a trap.

What makes this novel more than just another sea-faring adventure story is the strong representation of character. The doubtful, worrisome John Bains has been placed in a legally questionable position, and does not like the situation, but is hesitant to speak up. Captain Donovan is a splendid old salt, long since semi-retired, but obviously enjoying the feeling of being needed. Donovan demands that individuals possess honesty and integrity and when he later learns that he went to the Grand Banks not knowing all the circumstances surrounding Captain Canso's schooner he becomes insulted and acts accordingly. The courage and dependability of these hardworking Newfoundland fishermen particularly stands out in this novel. Their strength, both physical and psychological, has made them survive in the past and will guarantee survival in the future. Even the women, who at the outset refuse to fish, show remarkable traits of strength and endurance in the midst of personal loss and hardship. The words of Tower Rock: "It's been terrible hard on all of us. Two months back my youngest boy almost died from hunger, or maybe it was the loss of his father, I don't know which. But you're right, I have to learn to put it all behind me. I'll do what I can."

Like the other two books by Bill Freeman, *First Spring on the Grand Banks* ventures to teach Canadian history of the 1870's. His previous two books have a teacher's guide available. The books do not contain original illustrations, but, instead, offer photographs and sketches of the period. One must approach this combination of fact and fiction with interest and with caution. It is to be hoped that the goal of any historical fiction would be an appreciation of literature rather than a history lesson. History provides time and place, but what counts is how this piece of fiction measures up in a literary sense. Fortunately, Bill Freeman has woven an exciting tale in and around the history.

Attempts to reconstruct the past in fiction are not easy. There is always the disadvantage of looking backward over incidents that have occurred since the event being discussed; there is the danger of romanticizing the event and the characters; and lastly, many writers give their characters little personality, relying on history making the person rather than on the person making history. *A Proper Acadian* reports the event admirably, but falls short of credible character representation. *The Young Privateersmen* spins an exciting tale and will be read by many a young person because it is short, but it is primarily an adventure story and should be judged as such. *First Spring on the Grand Banks* teaches history within the framework of worthy plot and characterization, but some young readers may give up rather than endure long passages describing the technology of the nineteenth century fishing industry.

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Northern Adventures For the Middle Years

DONNA O'CONNOR

A Dog Called Houdini, C. Everard Palmer. Illus. by Maurice Wilson. Scholastic-TAB Publications, 1980. 104 pp. \$1.50 paper. ISBN 0-590-71066-4.

A Puli Named Sandor, Sharon Siamon. Illus. by Jock MacRae. Gage Publishing, 1981. 159 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-7715-6272-1.

Adventure stories and those about animals are popular with readers in the middle grades. Combine the two with convincing characters, and you have the makings for a high interest book. The two titles listed above fulfill these criteria. Each transports the reader to a northern setting, involves him/her in an exciting, uncertain situation, and overcomes problems to the reader's satisfaction. One gives us insight into life in a small northern town, the other into the nature of the wilderness bush. The deep bond that grows between animals and humans is depicted in both books.