

# A Bilingual Run at History

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*The King's Loon*, Mary Alice Downie. Illus. by Ron Berg. Kids Can Press, 1979. 96 pp. \$2.95 ISBN 0-919964-24-9. Bilingual Text.

*The King's Loon* by Mary Alice Downie represents an admirable attempt on the part of publisher and author to interest readers at the grade four-to-six level in a book of Canadian historical fiction. The three interwoven strands of this brief story consist of the fictional adventures of a 17th century Quebec orphan, the capture and subsequent release of the loon of the title, and an account of Governor Frontenac's diplomatic negotiations with the Iroquois and his establishment of a fort at Katarakouis, now Kingston, Ontario.

Although the orphan, André, is a fictional hero, he becomes involved in real historical events that possess great potential for dramatic treatment. However, *The King's Loon* has such a disproportionate amount of space devoted to its period setting that there is little sense of action in the tale and none at all of suspense.

In actuality, Count Frontenac's parley with the Iroquois at Katarakouis led to his building of a fort which eventually formed part of a chain of settlements that pierced the heart of the continent from Newfoundland to Louisiana. The historical details in this book are meticulously accurate as far as they go, but no hint is conveyed of the sweep and power of the aggressive, migratory movement which led to the establishment of European hegemony on the North American continent.

Even though the view-point is that of a young boy, some idea of the scope and significance of the events should have been communicated in the narrative itself instead of being appended in an afterword. The plot would have been more exciting if specifics had been given of the distances and dangers undertaken by the Count and his voyageurs. Instead, the author fills out the details of the river-journey by describing the motion sickness and insect-bites that plague André during the voyage.

Details like these are easy to relate to, but are on too small a scale to give the reader any idea of the physical effort and risk that were involved in an undertaking of this kind. There is little sense of wilderness conquest here, an unfortunate impression, since the

seventeenth century was a period when natural and human opposition in North America were factors to be constantly reckoned with. Intervals of peace and war alternated in the relationships between Indian and Europeans; the purposes of an adventure story would have been better served if the author could have enlarged the time-frame of the tale slightly and thus avoided giving the impression that a permanent peace was established by Frontenac in 1673. The dramatic implications of the efforts of a few men engaged in settling a huge and hostile territory have not been disclosed here, even if allowance is made for the admittedly small scope of the book.

The main thread of the fictional part of the story deals with André, orphan-at-large, who runs away from home in order to find adventure and escape his nagging stepmother. The theme of the misunderstood child appeals to most young people; this theme is forcefully depicted in the first page of the book where Tante Louet is discovered in the act of throwing a pail of fishy garbage over the unfortunate André's head. What red-blooded boy would not leave home under these circumstances? However, the liveliness of the opening is quickly dissipated while the reader is given a protracted description of life in 17th century New France. The pace of the story is irretrievably lost by the time André smuggles himself aboard one of the Count's canoes and embarks on the hazardous existence of a stowaway.

The three-week hideout in the boats is dealt with in an eight-page rendition of the mundane gossip of the voyageurs and the boredom and discomfort of the hero. When André is finally discovered by the Count, his presence is casually accepted and he is put to work at menial household chores for the rest of the uneventful journey.

The parley with the Iroquois, which could have provided a high point of tension, turns out to be a placid meeting in which speeches are made, pipes smoked and gifts given. It is a sociologically interesting meeting but not the stuff of high adventure. The negotiations proceed without hitch, as does the subsequent construction of Fort Frontenac. André plays with the Indian boys, much as he has played with his friends at home and there is nothing to suggest that things might have been (and often were) very different. The fort is completed, the Iroquois remain peaceable, and the expedition paddles back to Quebec City. André returns to his Tante Louet, escorted by two of the Governor's officers, who present her with a silver tureen to replace the wooden bowl that André had broken prior to running away from home. This episode could have been developed in a more swash-buckling manner, but it is disposed of in one page and the story ends abruptly, leaving the reader with a sense of anti-climax. Apparently André's life will continue as before, unaffected by his contact with the

world of adventure.

These two aspects of the story are expository, with little attempt at characterization. However, there seems to be some attempt to create added depth in the loon episode. The title of the book is effective, with its hint of the contrast between the formal regality of the old world and the freedom of life in the new. André catches the loon; he does this effortlessly even though it has been categorically stated that no one has ever before caught a loon alive. The bird is presented to the Count who declares that such a rare creature must be sent to the King of France, and that André must be the courier. This interesting development (with its implications of fame and fortune) quickly peters out when the loon pines in captivity and is freed by its captor when it becomes obvious that the bird will die before ever reaching Quebec.

The loon episode takes up only ten pages of the narrative and actually occupies less than half of the space within these ten. It, like the rest of the story, contains possibilities for symbolic or philosophic development. However, André makes no reflections on the implications of removing a wild creature from its natural environment, even though this is plainly the point of the episode. Instead, recalling the conditions of his "escape" from home and reminiscing about the loon's ingratitude in wanting his own freedom, André only muses that it is easier to bear a grudge than to remember a kindness. In doing this he portrays the only piece of character development in the book. Even so, the parallel drawn between André and the loon is false, since the loon was happy in its natural environment and was forcibly removed from it, whereas André was taken in as a foundling and given a home by an act of kindness. When he leaves his home he does so voluntarily and his experiences in his new environment are happy ones.

Since the loon is the title figure of the story, it might have been more appropriate if André had freed the bird after considering the consequences of tampering with nature. This would have applied to the story as a whole, paralleling André's temporary removal to a man's world and also making reference to the wider intimations of the novel which deal indirectly with the involuntary conversion of a pastoral people and, more obviously, with the taming of a continent.

When Mary Alice Downie is given freer rein, there is ample proof that she can write historical fiction that offers rich rewards to the young reader who looks for a strong, suspenseful plot and well-rounded characterization, as well as historical accuracy. This is apparent from a reading of her book, *Honor Bound*, written in collaboration with her husband, John Downie.

Therefore, taking the author's ability into account, it would seem that the weakness shown in almost all the elements of *The King's Loon* is an indication that too much was attempted in too small a space. Recreating a historical period and combining it with an adventure story that has symbolic undertones is praiseworthy, but it is overambitious to attempt all this within forty-five pages. Overambition is even more evident when the story is printed in back-to-back bilingual form. A unilingual reader will read it in one language only; a bilingual reader will not read it twice. Perhaps its future lies in the classroom where it could usefully be studied as a language text.

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## Didactique des langues et sainteté

*François Paré*

*Les boucaniers d'eau douce*, Henriette Major & Pierre Brassard. Montréal, Fides/TV Ontario, 1981, 163 p. 7.25\$. ISBN 2-7621-0739-3.

*Les boucaniers et le vagabond*, Henriette Major & Pierre Brassard. Montréal, Fides/TV Ontario, 1981, 177 p. 7.25\$. ISBN 2-7621-0740-7.

*Les découvertes des boucaniers*, Henriette Major & Pierre Brassard. Montréal, Fides/TV Ontario, 1981, 135 p. 7.25\$. ISBN 2-7621-0741-5.

*François d'Assise*, Henriette Major & Claude Lafortune. Montréal, Fides, 1981, 80 p. 9.95\$. ISBN 2-7621-1126-9.

Parmi les auteurs dont il est fait mention dans les titres à recenser, Henriette Major se distingue nettement, pour quiconque s'intéresse au domaine de la littérature pour la jeunesse au Canada, par une présence et un travail incessants au cours des vingt dernières années. Avec Paule Daveluy et Monique Corriveau, Major fait partie d'emblée d'une génération d'écrivaines extrêmement prolifiques dans le domaine de la littérature pour la jeunesse.