

A GOOD STORY AND GOOD HISTORY

The secret of Willow Castle, Lyn Cook. Camden House Publishing, 1966, 1984. 235 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-920656-30-7.

In *The secret of Willow Castle*, Lyn Cook draws on specific historical detail for a fictionalized account of eleven-year-old Henrietta Macpherson, impetuous daughter of Allan Macpherson, a prosperous shopkeeper, grist-mill owner, and crown land agent in early nineteenth-century Upper Canada. Cook's novel focuses on the way Henrietta befriends orphaned Sarah, who introduces her to the special imaginative world of Willow Castle.

In *The secret of Willow Castle* the novel's momentum never flags, despite the fullness of its story. As well as the action surrounding Willow Castle, there is the ongoing feud between Henrietta's conservative father and the reform-minded Luke Carscallion, and the several appearances of Henrietta's favorite cousin, John Alex, who already shows the promise that will make him Canada's first prime minister. Giving the novel a touch of mystery is strange "old Mother Martha," whose herbs save Henrietta's life. Also important is Henrietta's relationship with the servant, Becky. Not only is Becky Henrietta's confidant, but her introduction of the mysterious Mistress Cullen leads to the happy ending in which Sarah's mother is discovered to be still alive.

A further positive feature of the novel is that historical realism is maintained without interfering with action and plot. Allan Macpherson and John A. MacDonald are historical personalities, and the novel repeatedly touches upon political developments in Upper Canada. "Old Joe", a minor character, gives the emancipation of slaves particular life for both Henrietta and the reader. Finally Cook provides a sense of the period in descriptions of an agricultural fair, Allan Macpherson's general store, and an early nineteenth-century schooner.

Some might feel that Cook rather blatantly imitates L.M. Montgomery in creating the imaginative wonderland of Willow Castle. Like *Anne of Green Gables*, *Willow Castle* is about the passing of what is special in childhood. While the friendship of Henrietta and Sarah is saved, Henrietta recognizes that, with the secrecy of the friendship gone, what was "will never be the same again." Others might object to the presentation of the Macpherson family. Allan Macpherson is an honest and just man, as well as a caring husband and father, but he is also the dominating patriarch whose commands must be obeyed. By comparison, his wife seems little more than a servant, and remains a largely undeveloped character.

Although about an eleven-year-old, the novel's vocabulary and length suggest a reader older by a couple of years. The book's illustrations add little, and here Cook might have left things to her readers' imaginations.

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