

tion cap sur le Sud.

A son arrivée, il découvre une contrée surprenante où tout est vert. Son enthousiasme nous étonne un peu quand il s'écrie: "Un arbre! C'est un arbre!" A peine installé, Léon se lamente: "J'ai chaud!" Pauvre Léon, il court, saute, grimpe aux arbres, fait mille cabrioles. Pas surprenant que, sous un soleil de plomb, il s'affale! Heureusement qu'Alexis, le raton laveur a la bonne idée de jouer au coiffeur en coupant court tous ses poils. Voilà notre héros soulagé, et ce au grand plaisir des oiseaux qui s'empressent de cueillir cette moisson inusitée pour douillettement tapisser leur nid...tout blanc devenu!

Dans "J'ai faim", Léon le gourmand, pris d'une incontrôlable fringale, engouffre noix, glands, graines, fruits, baies, miel. Ce qui devait arriver arriva...une indigestion! "La prochaine fois que ton ventre fera du bruit [...] écoute-le seulement un petit peu..." Voilà comment Léon, l'ours blanc descendu du Grand Nord, a appris à se débrouiller en faisant la connaissance des animaux et des plantes qui vivent dans son nouvel habitat.

Ces aventures restent proches de l'univers des enfants et de leurs émotions quotidiennes. Qui n'a jamais entendu, de la part de ses rejetons ou de ceux des autres, ces lamentations "J'ai faim!", "J'ai chaud!". Pour réaliser ces albums de la série Léon, les auteures se sont sans doute inspirées de cette belle réalité! Les textes de Cécile Gagnon sont illustrés avec beaucoup de chaleur et de fantaisie par Darcia Labrosse. D'un album à l'autre cette illustratrice nous livre son dessin minutieux aux nuances délicates. L'illustration donne du "ressort" aux histoires qui, quoique bien amorcées, tombent à plat. Les petits, à qui j'ai raconté "J'ai faim", me réclamaient la fin de l'histoire...Peut-être voulaient-ils un autre dénouement? Peut-être attendaient-ils une fin surprenante? C'est une histoire à raconter en y ajoutant le dynamisme, l'enthousiasme, et la chaleur d'un conteur.

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## SINGING OUR HISTORY – WITH DIFFICULTY

**Singing our history; Canada's story in song**, Edith Fowke and Alan Mills. Doubleday Canada, 1984. 250 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 0-385-19499-4.

This collection is designed "to present the songs that most clearly reflect

some aspect of our national development." A revision and enlargement of *Canada's story in song* (1960), it attempts to "provide an informal social history." That is a tall order for a 250-page book. Although *Singing our history* is touted as containing material "from pre-European times...to the present day," the collection in fact stops at the Depression. Quibbles of this sort are niggling. Much more substantial and upsetting is the claim to a judicious historical coverage and to a lyrical illustration of our development. I found many of these 90 songs virtually unsingable, full of enough leaps, oddities and compressions to tax the skills of an operatic soprano. These musical problems, which have to do not with abstractness or experimentation but with overburdened and often unlyrical narratives, are symptomatic of the bigger issue of the credibility of teaching history through song.

Fowke's informative introductions to each of the 16 sections are crucial to an understanding of these detail-filled songs. Sometimes, as in the preamble to "The golden vanity," an old English sea ballad of a cabin boy cruelly treated by his captain, Fowke sets up the reader's expectation for a singable ballad; unfortunately the song itself turns out to be a good story buried in an unfocussed and inaccessible musical setting. Similarly, while it is fascinating to read that "Farewell to Mackenzie," dated "Markham, April 10, 1832," commemorates Mackenzie's sailing to England to present the Reformers' case to the Colonial Office, the tune which "Diogenes" actually composed is not easy to grasp. Other titles which suffer from non-lyricism as well as tendentiousness are "A Fenian song," "Riel's retreat" and "The Toronto volunteers." By contrast, the compositions which catch our attention and even prompt us to sing along succeed primarily as tunes and as blendings of text and music. While it does help to know something about M.A. Gérin-Lajoie, or Colonel Peacock's opposition to the Fenians, or the maple leaf that clung to Alexander Muir's sleeve, or the commissioning of Calixa Lavallée by the *Société de Saint Jean Baptiste*, or the Dakota period in Louis Riel's story, this background in itself does not explain the hummable success of such popular, tender and poignant tunes as "*Un canadien errant*," "An anti-Fenian song," "The maple leaf forever," "O Canada," "Riel's letter" and "Riel's farewell." A sprinkling of humour — not uproarious, of course, but wry, sardonic, or whimsical — enlivens some of the best songs too; I especially liked "The crocodile," in which a shipwrecked sailor's exploration of Alaska is described as a Jonah-like sojourn in the belly of a 1900-mile-long crocodile.

But instances of genuine lyricism and humour are rare in *Singing our history*, an uneven collection of time-tested favourites and curious period pieces.

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