

A New Discoverer?

The Sinclair Saga. Mark Finnan. Formac, 1999. 154 pp. \$19.95 paper. ISBN 0-88780-466-7.

Sleuthing is an old tradition that the twentieth century erected into major art through crime mysteries that leap-frogged from print to stage to television. The historical variant has gained widespread acceptance with British novelist A.S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel, *Possession*. *The Sinclair Saga*, by Nova Scotia history buff and author Mark Finnan, contains all the elements that go into making a good historical detective story: an intelligent inquirer speaking directly in the first person voice about his intellectual quest; images of popular marauders; seafaring adventure; aboriginal/European contact; crusading medieval Knights Templar; legends of the Holy Grail and an a mysterious god-like figured named Glooscap in eastern North America Mi'kmaq folklore; ancient manuscripts whose words are open to interpretation as well as conjecture; a psychic adept at identifying archaeological sites; pictorials carved on rocks; and intractable human remains that have yet to fully reveal their secrets.

Finnan explores the possibility that between the Viking settlement at l'Anse-aux-Meadows in Newfoundland and Columbus's landfall in the West Indies a contingent headed by Prince Henry Sinclair, earl of Orkney (Scotland) and vassal of the Norwegian monarch, visited the North American coast in 1398-9. His quest begins with local legend and curious stones near New Ross in central Nova Scotia. After a long romp on both sides of the Atlantic that involves a host of reputable and questionable characters, the author returns to the mystery of New Ross and the commemoration of the Prince Henry Sinclair memorial at Guysborough, NS. Representing the best in the sleuthing tradition, Finnan enlivens his account with reference to the people he encounters and their stories, evidence, and judgments.

Even though Vikings are introduced early in the account, the author's discursive strategy may prove a deterrent to mature adolescents wanting to embark on this trail. Nor are the author's assessments of evidence and inferences totally reliable. For instance, he notes that an early modern manuscript relevant to his case praises Prince Henry Sinclair for his goodness, while Mi'kmaq legend does the same for the legendary Glooscap. Perhaps the two were one in the same, but such generalities are too vague to draw conclusions. The psychic (who prefers to be called intuitive) also appears to be a charlatan but is thrown in to make a good tale more enticing.

Although the book is uneven, it rightly resists the temptation of resolving its case definitively. Young people interested in the intricate weave of history and legend may find the tale engaging, particularly those in Scotland, Atlantic Canada, and New England where the principal action transpires.

A Cabinet of Historical Curiosities

The Just a Minute Omnibus: Glimpses of Our Great Canadian Heritage. Marsha Boulton. McArthur, 2000. 579 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55278-151-8.

Will Reginald Fessenden ever become a household name? A noted inventor who

worked with Thomas Edison but was denied a faculty position at McGill University, Fessenden became the first individual to broadcast the human voice in 1900. Marsha Boulton, past recipient of the Stephen Leacock Award, rightly acclaim this father of radio as "one of the least-lauded geniuses that Canada has ever produced."

Encountering Reginald Fessenden is but one of the numerous small rewards in this large and diverse book of Canadian vignettes. It contains 150 entries, mostly about people but occasionally about aspects such as the great auk of eastern Canada that went the way of the dodo. This is a book to be dipped into, to be sampled rather than read. There is no overall rationale for inclusion apart from an interest in the unusual and the colourful, as well as fascination with women, aboriginal peoples, technology, and achievement. Margaret Newton, the first woman to receive the Tyrell Medal of the Royal Society for research on rust control in cereals, is included, but Isabella Preston, who gained an international reputation for breeding flowers, is not.

The people and subjects cover a vast range, but they are sensibly grouped in sections dealing with immigration and inspiration; heroes, heroines, and the odd scoundrel; origins, originals, and upstarts; women's history; sports; adventure and discovery; innovation, invention and science; art and artists; transportation; and communication. Such catholicity is only possible as a result of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Canadian scholarship's foremost legacy from the twentieth century to its successor. That project has only reached the years after 1900, but Marsha Boulton also displays considerable ingenuity in dredging up individuals as Louis Slotin of Winnipeg, who died of radiation exposure during A-bomb assembly at Los Alamos in 1946. Other curiosities include the invention of Pablum that revolutionized baby nutrition and Toronto's Great Stork Derby of 1926-36 that proved pregnant in consequence for governmental regulation of birth control information once the Great Depression hit.

These thumbnail sketches are written for an adult audience, but their brief nature (three to seven pages) makes them appropriate for adolescents interested in Canadian non-fiction. Although generally correct factually, the volume suffers from the usual weaknesses and inadequacies of its genre, including occasional pedestrian writing. Sometimes the author misses the point. The entry on Kateri Tekakwitha, the seventeenth-century Lily of the Mohawks, fails to explain the fascinating processes through which the Roman Catholic Church has historically elevated people to sainthood. Sketches of individuals such as Labrador and Newfoundland missionary Wilfred Grenfell do not convey the deep well-spring of loneliness and isolation that characterized his psyche.

Reginald Fessenden will not displace Guglielmo Marconi in the popular imagination, but in this book readers can sample a Canadian past that they did not previously know.

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