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long term.

For the southern historian, the study of northern Canada is sometimes akin to probing beyond the frontier. The increasing number of local histories written by northerners should inspire further and more serious inquiry into social interaction and regional development. For the northerner, local histories have become not just a means of preserving the past, but a rather subtle yet effective way of educating the "outsiders". The North as a factor in the Canadian identity has long been acclaimed; the North in Canadian historiography is only beginning to show its potential.

BRUCE W. HODGINS AND SHELAGH D. GRANT

Canadian Popular History in the 1980s

CANADIAN HISTORY HAS FINALLY come of age. In the past few months more books about the nation's past have made the bestseller lists and been offered as book club selections than at any other time within the admittedly short memory of mortal humankind. Significantly, few of the blockbusting bestsellers have been authored by academic historians, who continue to ply their craft in the pages of journals with miniscule circulations and through the university presses and specialized publishers where subsidies make possible tiny press runs no commercial publisher could tolerate. The division between the historians of the academy and those outside it is neither new nor different. What distinguishes the present crop of non-academic historians from their predecessors is that they show distinct signs of emerging as "professional" historians who can make a decent — and in some cases even spectacular — living out of historical research and writing. This generation of non-academic historians is not one of genteel amateurs, therefore, but of skilled and experienced writers, coming out of the tradition of magazine journalism which has particularly flourished at *Maclean's*. Indeed, four of the five authors under review here share a common association as some-time editors of Canada's equivalent of *Time* or *Newsweek*.

If the relationship between the academic and non-academic historian in Canada has long been an uneasy one, the sheer success of the present generation of non-academics adds new dimensions to the longstanding hostilities. As one of the authors under consideration here observes, Canadians have an abiding suspicion of success, partly because in this country of limited resources it is generally believed that success must come at someone else's expense. The tendency of some academics airily to dismiss bestselling historians as panderers to the lowest common denominator of public taste has always come from the dubious security of not being required to take public taste into account. Most

academic historians ply their trade from the comfortable position of kept intellectuals, guaranteed lifetime job security regardless of productivity and enjoying annual salaries which most freelance writers only dream about achieving. Academics ought not to kid themselves. Canada's university-based historians are spared the need to communicate with those that ultimately foot the bills by a patronage system which has cleverly been taken out of the hands of the patrons and placed solely in the control of the patronized. The extension of this principle, now shared only with other professional groups such as doctors and lawyers, into other fields of endeavour, has implications well beyond the scope of the present discussion. Suffice it to say that the bestselling historians, by writing for the popular market, do not really compete with their academic colleagues, but have moved into territory largely abandoned by the academy for a variety of reasons.

Operating on the assumption that not all members of the academy are necessarily eager to avoid contact with the nation's general readership, or with royalty payments, it perhaps makes some sense to eschew the temptation simply to expose the weaknesses of the successful in favour of some effort to appreciate the basis of their enterprise, both stylistically and conceptually. Why do these authors sell books when academic scholars do not? What strategies would an academic historian need to adopt to emulate these bestselling writers? To what extent would these strategies vitiate the integrity of historical scholarship? Is anything of substantive intellectual interest going on in the recent outpouring of historical bestsellers? Such questions suggest the nature of the essay that follows. It takes for granted that more than publishers' hype and promotional campaigns distinguish bestseller history from academic history — although a popular historian may need a strong stomach to tolerate some of the hype — while it refuses to accept that books acceptable to popular taste automatically lack intellectual integrity or historical craftsmanship.

The evidence of these books under review is that their authors share a fairly clear notion of how popular history must be written. To some extent, of course, the consensus may be artificial, since so many of these authors also share a common background at *Maclean's*, and the presence of that journal's style is readily apparent. Yet within the general agreement, there remains room for individuality, and in many respects no two of these works are similar. This crop of popular historians are certainly in emphatic agreement about what the audience does not want, however.

Historiography, in the sense of any discussion of the development of interpretation over time, the influences upon changing interpretations, the conflict of interpretations, or indeed the notion of alternative interpretation, is virtually non-existent in these books. It is perhaps well worth contrasting this avoidance of interpretation and its history with the approach taken by one of the most acclaimed recent academic efforts to quest for a larger audience: Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press,

1985). Friesen's book has been justly honoured by his peers, but what is perhaps most striking about it in the present context is the extent to which he builds upon the conflicting interpretations of the past, offering a chart to the reader through the minefields of prairie historiography and interpretation.

Similarly, methodology does not play a critical role in any of these popular works, although in at least one case (Peter Newman's *Company of Adventurers*) a journalistic methodology never made explicit would appear to lie at the basis of the research approach, and in several other instances journalistic techniques have also been applied, although more or less acknowledged. The best-selling historians are not interested either in explaining how they work or in developing innovative techniques for manipulating or analyzing their material. All five books fall roughly into the academic rubrics of social and/or economic history, where a good deal of methodological stirring has been recently occurring, but the reader of these works is not likely to become aware of the point.

Finally, related to methodology and its prominence in academic social and economic history, there is little explicit recognition in these books of the larger forces, trends, or issues behind the events and lives herein chronicled and described. Instead, these authors focus on the concrete, mainly people, individual actors in the drama of history, in what many academics would view as an anecdotal approach. The personification of Canadian history has a long and honourable tradition within the academy, as exemplified by the biographical "Life and Times" approach of much of our historiography, and it is still present, chiefly in the pages of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, an enterprise with which none of these authors seem either involved or acquainted. The popular authors feel obliged neither to fit their individual actors into larger frameworks nor to put lives and careers into perspective.

In short, there is in this popular history no explication of conceptualization, no visible *problématique* beyond the investigative reporter's commitment to present the "story". The absence of apparent conceptualization is to some extent delusive and misleading, of course, and one of the most credible complaints of the academics about this sort of popular history (and the journalism which gave it birth) is the air of omniscient self-confidence and virtuous integrity which it exudes, as if journalists-cum-historians have some kind of monopoly upon truth and some clearer vision of what truth is all about. These authors no less than academic historians have their assumptions, biases, and indeed, methodologies, although since consideration or discussion of these matters are regarded as "academic", no self-respecting reviewer in the world of journalism would venture to address them.

Stylistically, these examples of popular history are interesting in terms both of writing style and of overall approach. All five of these books are written in the currently fashionable journalistic style. The writing is terse, punchy, Hemingwayesque. It uses lots of colourful, exciting, descriptive, vivid, and picturesque adjectives. It often bunches these adjectives together. It is fond of parallel con-

structions. It avoids complex sentences and parenthetical expressions (though there are exceptions).

Paragraphing is short. Academic weasel words like probably, undoubtedly, perhaps, or arguably, are seldom employed. These books, after all, offer their readers fact, not conjecture. *The style does feature lots of italics and nouns are often verbalized.* Some authors are more colloquial than others.

Behind the writing style lurk some interesting organizational principles and approaches. While the creation of seamless webs of narrative development remains common among American and British popular historians, such as Barbara Tuchman and Christopher Hibbert, such a literary approach, based upon the novel, is not often apparent in current Canadian popular history. The novelistic technique is more likely to be employed in Canada by academic historians seeking to reach the popular audience than by those who are succeeding in so doing. It would appear that the flowing and well-coloured narrative is not regarded as the way to reach the popular history market in this country. Instead the approach is episodic, modelled less on traditional fiction than on present-day television, with its rapid cutting, montage, and change of both topic and perspective. As we are all aware, such techniques can be employed to tell a story, and on television and in the movies we have come to accept them almost as a given. But the episodic and disconnected style still jars a bit on the printed page, particularly among academic readers accustomed to seamlessness. And the question remains whether the model is Sergei Eisenstein or Sesame Street, the latter having no commitment to continuity whatsoever.

Given the failure of these authors to be explicit about their craft, either within the pages of their books or in the media — and the refusal of their peer-group critics to address such questions — one can only conjecture on the extent to which the episodic construction of these works is a deliberate attempt to invoke new techniques, or a conscious awareness of the shorter attention span of the modern reader. Certainly British critics are persuaded that the overwhelming emphasis of American television upon disconnected episodic segments which obviate the concentration necessary to follow a narrative — or an argument — has had enormous impact on the reading habits of the general public. It may well be that the episodic approach results basically either from the common journalistic background of the authors or from the study of the success of Pierre Berton, who has long employed such techniques in his historical writing. To some extent, the inherent continuity of the building of the CPR or the fighting of the War of 1812 may have disguised the extent to which Berton has relied upon the disconnected episode and vignette to construct his histories. Given a less coherent topic, or perhaps a less skilled author, the episodic approach tends to stand out more obviously.

While on one level episodic writing may be little more than a recognition of the concentration capacities of the audience, on other levels it may represent both an artistic response to new forms with which to represent reality and a way

of dealing with the seemingly intractable narrative problems inherent in *annales*-style history. The trouble with social, economic and cultural history — indeed, with most of the "new" history which attempts to get beyond the political framework which has long dominated Canadian historical writing — is that unless as episodes or as abstractions with long time-frames, such history cannot usually be given a coherence except by reference back to the chronology of politics. What the popular historians may be offering, therefore, is an instinctive way out of the problems which academic historians all face. Contrary to much conventional academic wisdom, the book-buying public obviously does not place much of a premium on traditional narrative or story-telling. It doesn't like to be troubled with historiography or methodology, but it will accept its history in an episodic form which may well be a more adequate representation of the complexities of the past than the unifying conceptualizations imposed by the academics.

Pierre Berton is the doyen of Canadian popular historians, and his success has doubtless persuaded others to take the plunge. Berton developed his style and approach gradually, and it first came to full fruition in *The National Dream: The Great Railway 1871-1881*, published in 1970. That work, one of Berton's early efforts at large-scale popular history, produced both a writing and packaging formula from which he has not deviated in his subsequent books. The publisher's design package has not altered since 1970: the same bold and readable typeface, the same chapter layouts, the same artist's representations of key figures of the text in the same sepia tones for the endpapers. Within the covers of the book, the author's contribution has also remained unchanged. Each chapter is subdivided into between four and seven episodes (separately identified in tables of contents in the railway book and the latest effort, not so clearly delineated although present in the War of 1812 study). There are no footnote superscripts in the text, although the documentation is identified by page and line number in the Notes. Berton's paragraphs tend to be short and epigrammatic, creating both a distinctive visual impression of lots of white space on the page and a reading impression of movement rather than continuity. The latest book, *The Promised Land: Settling the West 1896-1914* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1984), also has brief vignettes written in the present tense and set off from the text in italics, most of which share the motif of the CPR station platform in Winnipeg where many of the settlers chronicled in the book disembarked to begin their new lives.

The research techniques employed by Berton also remain unchanged. His research assistant combs the relevant archives for relatively self-contained documentary episodes which are interesting and revealing. Since few of these episodes in their final form will exceed ten pages in length and most are less, the researcher is really able to concentrate on short articles rather than on a book, and there is little need for archival work on backward or forward linkages, the kind of effort which consumes so much of the academic researcher's time. The

conceptual continuity is provided by Berton, who arranges the episodes into chapters based on reading in the secondary literature. Thus, while Berton's histories are unusual in their obvious grounding in primary research, that research tends to be extractive rather than exhaustive. Themes not well developed in the secondary literature are seldom considered, although Berton does take some delight in the mining of obscure sources, as in his chortling over the conclusion "any investigative reporter poring over the sworn evidence taken before two parliamentary committees must come to" (p. 229) and the slap at unnamed historians who have failed to reach the right conclusions (p. 233).

Within its limits, *The Promised Land* is a very solid and well-crafted book. Berton has identified an appealing subject, and covered most of the major points and themes of the secondary literature in a relatively fresh way, particularly for readers not familiar with the extensive academic research upon which it is based (dutifully listed in a bibliography). One ought not to expect Berton to break any new ground conceptually or methodologically, and he doesn't. The book certainly does not reflect at all the recent resurgence within the academy of the history of agriculture, particularly for this period of prairie development. Berton gives virtually no consideration to the agricultural base upon which his settlement occurred, either in terms of the experiences of farming or the production which it involved. Curiously for a book on the prairie west (and by west Berton means the prairies), there is no index entry for "wheat". *The Promised Land* is really a book about immigration rather than about settlement. Even on the popular level, Berton has scarcely exhausted his subject.

Peter C. Newman is a relative newcomer to popular history, and the first volume of his account of the Hudson's Bay Company, *Company of Adventurers* (Toronto, Penguin Books, 1985) is the Canadian writing fraternity's success story of the year. According to latest reports, the book has sold 135,000 copies internationally — in hard cover — and will spin-off into a TV series and goodness knows what else. Newman's book will doubtless reopen the ongoing controversy between popular and academic historians, since the initially enthusiastic reviews in the international press are not likely to be replicated by those scholars familiar with the company and its archives. Like Berton's book, *Company of Adventurers* is episodic, although some of the episodes tend to be longer and less relevant while the underlying themes are less apparent; what John Rae's 19th century operations are doing in a book which otherwise stops in the late 18th century is not made clear, for example. Newman also writes in short paragraphs, and his pages have a look similar to Berton's. Here the similarities cease. For Newman does not come across as in control of the extensive secondary literature to the same extent as Berton, and his archival research seems to consist of occasional dips into the manuscripts. Given the nine pages of "Resource People", mainly scholars, listed in the appendix, one cannot avoid the suspicion that Newman's methodology was that of the investigative journalist rather than the historian, and that this book is heavily reliant upon

interviews with the"Resource People". Newman makes much of his "eight filing cabinets of facts" (p. x), and one hopes they will make their way to some public repository, so that others can see exactly how Newman went about collecting them. Certainly his footnotes do not suggest any systematic combing of the extensive company archives.

What is most curious about Newman's book, particularly given his background as a student of Canadian business enterprise, is the absence of any sustained consideration of the Hudson's Bay Company as a business venture. After discussing the founding of the company in a chapter which focuses on Prince Rupert, whom the author acknowledges subscribed to only a small fraction of its capital and was probably not the crucial figure in its early history, the company's London operations virtually disappear for the remainder of the book, surfacing only occasionally and very briefly. The changing organization, structure, and philosophy of the company, as well as the crucial matter of marketing the furs and supplying the trade goods, receive little attention. The impression the reader comes away with is that the company's North American activities had a life of their own, only in the loosest possible sense affected by business policy or economic considerations. The notion of such independent action and development is certainly sustainable, but Newman does not have a thesis, and clearly has not mastered the business details of the company's operations on either side of the Atlantic. This book is not a history of the Hudson's Bay Company, but merely uses the company as a general umbrella under which to discuss a variety of themes and individuals.

Authors ought not to be held accountable for the hype of their publishers and media associates. At the same time, Newman's project created expectations he has not fulfilled, and much of the negative reaction one senses within the academic community is probably a product of regret at missed opportunities. The resultant book is not so much a disaster as a disappointment. On the positive side, thousands of readers have discovered the history of the Canadian West, and some may pursue a new-found interest by reading other works. On the negative side, *Company of Adventurers* suggests that Newman will not produce the anticipated full modern account of the Hudson's Bay Company which usefully exploits and explains its incredibly rich archival heritage. One awaits with trepidation the second volume, which must carry the story through nearly two centuries of complex dealings, particularly given the almost total absence of secondary literature and experts to interview for the post-1870 period. A satisfactory history of one of Canada's most influential economic operations would appear to be still needed.

Unlike Berton's *The Promised Land*, heavily dependent upon original research, and Newman's *Company of Adventurers*, which purports to have been, Walter Stewart's *True Blue: The Loyalist Legend* (Toronto, William Collins, 1985) comes closer to being a self-acknowledged potboiler. Stewart has relied exclusively on the existing secondary literature, with a somewhat offensive air of

more originality and revisionism than is indeed the case. Once again, the chapters are cut up into episodes and vignettes, with clever subheadings, and paragraphs are short. Stewart's style is extremely breezy and colloquial. Some readers I have spoken with found the style patronizing, although in fairness to Stewart, my senior-level university students thought it refreshing. Stewart's analysis is no better than the secondary literature on which he relies, and in many cases, such as his account of Loyalism on the Island of St. John (Prince Edward Island), he has reproduced a hodge-podge of misinformation which a bit of work in the archives might easily have avoided. While any specialist can have a field day with Stewart's details, the overall picture he presents of the Loyalists is a reasonably accurate reflection of the present state of scholarship, particularly on the Canadian side. If he has trouble in dealing with the Loyalist legacy after the initial period of resettlement, so does the academic literature on which he has relied. But there are better syntheses on the Loyalists available, including Wallace Brown and Hereward Senior's *Victorious in Defeat* (1984) and Stewart's book does not have the merit of filling a need.

Harry Bruce's *Frank Sobey: The Man and the Empire* (Toronto, Macmillan, 1985) is a quite different sort of book than the three previously considered, although Bruce comes out of the same journalistic stable. He employs the same short paragraphing and much cutting between the past and the present, particularly in the opening chapters dealing with his subject's background and early life. But this work is a biography of a contemporary figure rather than a history. The book, while obviously extensively researched, is almost totally undocumented. Since neither Sobey nor his world figure prominently in an extremely limited secondary literature, there is really no way of confirming Bruce's findings or holding him accountable for them. The absence of publicly-accessible papers is a real problem. Nevertheless, the book does reflect an interesting trend in contemporary Canadian writing: the lionization of successful business entrepreneurs.

Frank Sobey was a businessman and dynastic founder virtually unknown outside the Maritimes, and probably even within the region few have realized the scope of his operations. At the same time, he was not without counterparts in the region. Like many underdeveloped areas, the Maritimes has produced a crop of highly successful home-grown business dynasties — the Irvings, McCains and Sobeys are only the most prominent. Bruce does not attempt to deal with the general phenomenon, and there is no comparative dimension to a book which sticks relentlessly to its subject. But implicit in his pages is the suggestion that the relative neglect of the Maritimes by outside capitalism opened the door for the few local figures with ambition, drive, vision, and ruthless business practices, particularly in wholesale and retail trade and in the processing of local products. Bruce does not attempt to avoid Sobey's ruthless and singleminded wheelings and dealings; instead, he describes them with obvious relish, particularly when old Frank outmanoeuvers the boys in Central Canada. Bruce emphasizes the

extent to which Sobey exploited regional networks and loyalties (and family) which the outsiders were simply unable to tap. His chapter on Sobey's leadership of Nova Scotia's economic development as head of Industrial Estates Limited — while based almost exclusively on interviews and newspaper accounts and clearly favourable to Sobey — is useful. Even more fascinating is his discussion of the small-town takeover battle over the Roseland Theatre Company Ltd. in the closing years of the war, and Sobey's decision to open the first self-service supermarket in the region in 1947. Given the paucity of published material on Maritime business history for this century, Bruce's *Frank Sobey*, whatever its limitations and imperfections, makes a major contribution to our understanding of the modern region.

Richard Gwyn's *The 49th Paradox: Canada in North America* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985) is much less likely to be remembered as popular history than the previous four works discussed, although it does contain one lengthy section (titled "The Mouse that Roared") dealing with economic and cultural nationalism and Canadian-American relations in the period since 1957 that is essentially historical in its approach. The book is journalistic in its emphasis, however, and makes its contribution to the "Condition of Canada" question rather than to historical matters. It is full of fascinating tidbits of fact and provocative generalizations about the Canadian Character and the Canadian-American Connection, but for the most part it is undistinguished by any organizational framework to provide a consistent argument. Despite its patchiness, Gwyn's book is well worth reading in these days of debate over continental free trade. Over the long haul, however, it will join a score of other similarly topical books on the shelf interesting only to cultural historians as evidence of what was being written about the problems it considers in its time period.

Admitting that he chose his subject on the calculation that Canadian-American relations would be a hot topic of debate when the book was completed, Gwyn also acknowledges that his initial focus on free trade as the crucial issue shifted in the course of research and writing. "What matters instead", he writes, "is that free trade itself, when considered carefully, turns out to be a good deal less than the big deal it is commonly presented as being. Virtual free trade already exists: 'secure access' is a chimera". Gwyn concludes that the attention to free trade "has been grossly disproportionate to the comparative economic value of a real national debate about reform of the education system, say (alone among Western nations, Canada has never had such a debate), or about any overhaul of labour-management relations". Despite such candour, the book remains stuck with its focus on Canadian-American economic and cultural relations as a background to the free trade debate. Gwyn's own shifting conclusions doubtless explain many of the book's problems. The book does demonstrate, however, some of the differences between history written by journalists and journalistic history. Berton, Newman, Stewart, and Bruce all present their history straight up, for its own sake, rather than as background for

the issue of the moment. In this sense, certainly, they have been influenced by the assumptions of the academy.

The success in the marketplace of several of these works indicates that there is an audience, even an international one, for Canadian history. Even more interesting, that audience would appear willing, perhaps even anxious, to read about matters other than politics. The emphasis of all these books on what can only be described as social, cultural and economic history rather than traditional political accounts is certainly striking. These authors also suggest the sorts of approaches and techniques which are necessary to bring the new history being produced by academics to the general readership. Whether academic historians are willing to rise to the challenge is another question entirely. But if they do not, they must be willing to accept that the Bertons and Newmans will continue to dominate the popular market. Highly critical reviews in the academic journals are no substitute for attempts to make a better job of communicating with an audience prepared, within certain limitations, to be appreciative.

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