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The Great Adventure. 100 Years at The Arts & Letters Club By Margaret McBurney

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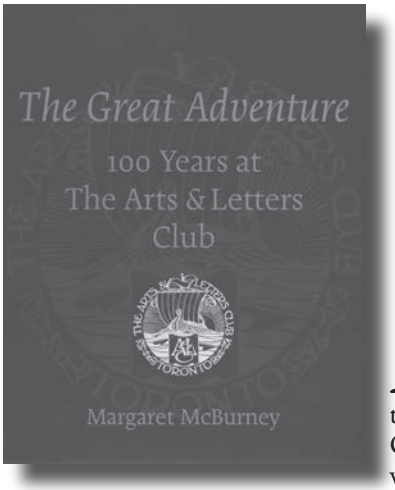

The Great Adventure. 100 Years at The Arts & Letters Club

By Margaret McBurney. Toronto: The Arts and Letters Club, 2007. xv + 191 pages. $50.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-9694588-2-1 (www.artsandlettersclub.ca)

Anyone who never attended Bobby Orr Collegiate won't scramble to read its yearbook. An outsider reading this account of the activities at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club will solemnly sigh that "you-had-to-be-there" and turn to other tasks. The social historian may find material here for a footnote or two, especially in view of the author's commendable candor in memorializing more than one instance of misogyny, stuffiness, adolescent boys'-clubbishness, and indifference to wider issues in the Club's history. This frankness gives the book its greatest strength.

A reviewer has to display a reciprocal frankness. The endless lists of names, the accounts of riotous laughter over jokes that have long since lost their point, the too-frequent citations of doggerel verses best forgotten, and the unfailing emphasis on the arrivals and departures of the famous (including Adolph Hitler's nephew) eventually grows, like the Flopsy Bunnies' over consumption of lettuce, soporific.

The Arts and Letters Club began in 1908 as a gathering place for men (only) in search of kindred, arts-loving counterparts in a commercial city where art was an activity best pursued conventionally, unseriously and anywhere but here, though always in a gentlemanly manner, of course. Because some of those men formed the Group of Seven, because some others (like Ernest MacMillan, Healey Willan and John Coulter) contributed mightily to Canada's sparse cultural life then, it would be easy to dismiss the absence of such giants as evidence of a great falling-off in the present day.

Not so. As McBurney portrays it—and as I have intermittently experienced it—the Club has evolved into a social hub for those in search of genial conversation and like-minded participation in common pursuits, many of them artistic: architecture, letters, music, painting and photography. Amateurs rather than professionals set the tone there, though both belong to the club. Retired people have more time for sociability than the general population, and the membership's demographics reflect this fact.

Cultural changes have bestowed celebrity status on leading artists. They now mingle with elites rather than with middle managers. Finding opportunities for socializing is no longer a problem for an artist. Shedding past friends on the way upward is now the more taxing demand. Yet the club—and it is no coincidence that this follows upon the admission of women to its membership—continues to offer what McBurney, quoting Adam Gopnick, describes as a place for "convivial people who are in need of other people as a mirror in which to see their better selves." This fact undercuts any grounds for nostalgic reminiscence, and explains the club's present-day flourishing.

Anyone wishing to analyze rather than describe the evolution of social clubs in Toronto will find excellent raw material here, and congratulate the author on her industry and perseverance.

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