

Ontario History



Early Voices: Portraits of Canada by Women Writers, 1639-1914 Edited by Mary Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson, with Elizabeth Jane Errington

Brian Osborne

Volume 103, Number 1, Spring 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065485ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065485ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Osborne, B. (2011). Review of [*Early Voices: Portraits of Canada by Women Writers, 1639-1914* Edited by Mary Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson, with Elizabeth Jane Errington]. *Ontario History*, 103(1), 109–111.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065485ar>

upon a few key points, such as their vague reference to a 1909 strike being the bloodiest in Canadian history. Still, omissions of this nature are minimal.

North of Superior is a wonderful introduction to the history of northwestern Ontario and its importance within the province and nation. It is at once scholarly

and popular, presenting an excellent inclusive introduction to a rich history. I hope that this volume will inspire further study and publications on a long-neglected corner of our province.

Karl Hele
Concordia University

Early Voices: Portraits of Canada by Women Writers, 1639-1914

Edited by Mary Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson, with Elizabeth Jane Errington. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010. 316 pages. \$28.99 softcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-769-9 <www.dundurn.com>

Was it Queen Victoria who said, “You can’t trust actors: you don’t know where they’ve been!”? Certainly, this could have been true of travel writers who constituted a major genre before the emergence of popular novels. From Herodotus and Julius Caesar through to Samuel Champlain and David Thompson, the reading public consumed these evocative accounts of people and places. But these were predominantly male voices and male imagery. To be sure, there *have* been women travel writers and commentators in early Canada. In Ontario Elizabeth Simcoe, Anna Jameson, Anne Langton, Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill all have enriched our insights into backwoods life and the maturing of a colonial society. Nevertheless, as Jane Errington observes in her fine introduction to *Early Voices*, this writing has regaled us principally with accounts of “strong men and silent women.” (p. 21)

In *Early Voices*, Marty Alice Downie and Barbara Robertson have attempted to redress this bias. They present us with 29 women who have recorded their experiences and observations of Canadian communities – five of them in Ontario – in what Errington calls a “wonderfully

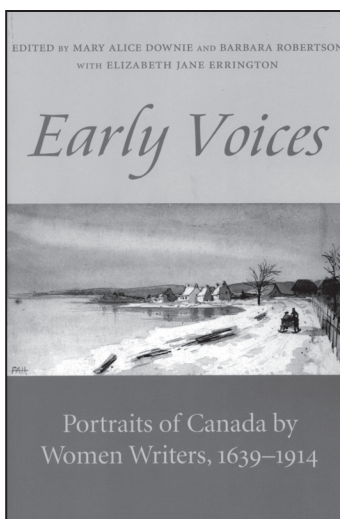
eclectic collection.” (p. 21) This eclecticism is one of the strengths of this work. Some of the writers were merely visitor-voyeurs; others were committed settlers. All experienced the travails of a trans-Atlantic crossing, the discomforts of contemporary travel, and the limitations of a nascent social infrastructure. Their perspectives are as diverse as the subjects. While it may be charged that the elite gaze of Baroness von Riedesel, Lady Aberdeen, and Lady Dufferin might have been through their lorgnettes or their crystal champagne glasses, even the more adventurous ladies ensured that their needs were attended to when on a voyageur experience. Anna Jameson (1794-1860) “had near me my cloak, umbrella, and parasol, my note-books and sketch-books, and a little compact basket always by my side, containing eau de Cologne, and all those necessary luxuries which might be wanted in a moment.” (p. 114). What a way to rough it in the bush!

In their search for a more plebian experience the editors turned to Ella Sykes (1863-1939), a middle-class daughter of the English manse, a member of a family not unfamiliar with the corridors of power, and eventually a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. An experienced traveler,

her stay on a Prairie dairy farm required her to make beds, sweep rooms, fetch water and wood, feed and water fowls, peel potatoes, lay table, fry steaks, and wait on men at table. She had become a working woman, if not a working-class woman.

Early Voices is replete with intellectually provocative commentary on women's experience of life in Canada. Emily Carr, Emily Murphy, and Nellie McClung were no strangers to the battles against injustice, prejudice, and intolerance. As a child growing up in Montreal Sui Sin Far (1865-1914; a.k.a. Edith M. Eaton) saw herself "so keenly alive to every shade of sorrow and suffering that it is almost a pain to live." ... "The question of nationality perplexes my little brain" as she probed the dilemma of living with an English father and Chinese mother. "Why is my mother's race despised?" (p. 106). Precocious in her wisdom, she declares, "Only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clear and hear distinctly." (p. 109)

Landscape and wilderness, and particularly climate, dominate many accounts. Even though the "figures on the thermometer are very alarming," Julia Ewing (1841-1885) waxed poetic on her "walk over a glittering plain – of pure, dry, exquisite snow – under a sun as hot & a sky as pure, deep, & unclouded a blue as if you were in Italy." (p. 51) For others, like Letitia Hargrave (1813-1854), Canada's climate consisted of "nine months of winter varied by three of rain and mosquitoes." (p. 291) Perhaps Lady Aberdeen (1857-1939) appreciated the need for winter distractions.



Certainly she first thought hockey to be "a most fascinating" game which the players "get wildly excited about" and then listed the casualties – broken noses, destroyed teeth, and concussions – while admiring the "perfection of skating." (p. 151) She subsequently concluded, however, that it was too rough a sport, and rejected it.

First Nations provoked a wide range of commentary. Marie Morin (1649-1730) cowered before the dreaded

Iroquois, "trembling, fearing we were at our dying day." (p. 89). For Anna Jameson a century later the perspective was changing; a Native encampment "was most picturesque, particularly when the camp fires were lighted and the night came on." (p. 116) When Laura Salverson (1890-1970) got lost in the winter in Manitoba during the 1870s, "the strength flowing out of me like water from a cracked crock," she was found by an "Indian" who took her to his tepee where she was massaged, fed, dressed in new clothes, and set on the trail for her home: "a miracle of God's mercy, working through the simple heart of a savage." (p. 181). No wonder that, increasingly, many shared Lydia Campbell's (1818-1905) assessment of her neighbours in Labrador: "Poor despised Indians, the traders selling them rum and the foolish people buying up all they could, and getting lost, falling overboard, losing bodies and souls ... but that has all changed now." (p. 310) If only it had.

The richness of *Early Voices* is signaled by the conjunction of "voices" and "portraits" in the title. It sets the tone and objective of this study, developing evocative word pictures accompanied by an excellent

selection of sketches, paintings, and photographs. Together they present a rich insight into land, society, culture, and the emerging senses of various places over some three

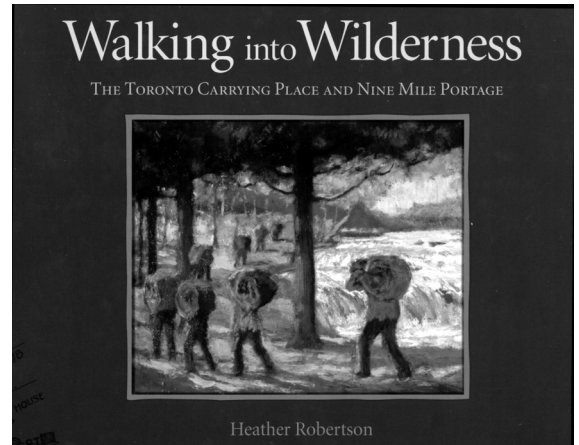
centuries of Canada's development.

Brian Osborne
Queen's University, Kingston

Walking into Wilderness: The Toronto Carrying Place and Nine Mile Portage

By Heather Robertson. Winnipeg: Heartland Associates, Inc., 2010. 224 pages. \$29.95 softcover. ISBN 978-1-8961505-9-8 <www.hrlandbooks.com>

This is an invitation, not to walk into wilderness (that was done for us by many forerunners) but to savour various kinds of information that provide a context for the historic, near-mythic corridor of the title. The information spans a huge range from the primeval formation of the continents to the living memories of the destruction of parts of west Toronto by Hurricane Hazel in 1954. The invitation, in fact, is manifested in the Introduction when Robertson leads the reader to some significant places along the corridor: Baby Point near the Humber mouth, the high point of the Oak Ridges Moraine, Holland Marsh approaching Lake Simcoe, Fort Willow, and the Nottawasaga River at the north end. The large distances between these places are an indication that, despite a great deal of research, speculation and field investigation over many decades, there are still gaps in what can be confidently accepted as the actual route of the Carrying Place. The lower part of the Humber River watershed is heavily urbanized. The maps of the portage route are in large part a best approximation, at least until reaching the West Holland River on the way north through Lake Simcoe, Nine Mile Portage to restored Fort Willow, and the Nottawasaga River. The more general



maps require the reader to fill in detail, although the redrawing of Pilkington's map of Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe's circuit north in 1793, returning south on Yonge Street, is attractive and useful.

This is an entertaining account that, chapter by chapter, becomes more focused on the dramatic social interactions that impinge on the origins and reinforcement of the significantly-named Carrying Place and Nine Mile portage. It must have been an excessively onerous section of the trip to and from the upper Great Lakes, although this is not a preoccupation of the book. Rather, Robertson uses a broad canvas to sketch a series of captivating historical events and personalities, and human group interactions, from archeological evidence of prehistoric human occupancy of the region, to the elusive adventures of the young trailblazer Etienne Brulé, followed by the grandiose and often abortive plans of de la Salle in the second half of the seventeenth century, and the death-defying exploits of the trader Alexander Henry, nearly con-