

## BIOGRAPHICAL FIRST FRUITS

AS THE FIRST FRUITS of what is probably the most massive literary task ever attempted in Canada, Volume I of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* has at last appeared under the imprint of the University of Toronto Press. Under the General Editorship of George W. Brown, with Marcel Trudeau as his Associate, the years of preparation since 1959 have already assembled a uniquely monumental archive of Canadian biographical information, and the section of the Dictionary which now appears is an earnest that the final work, when its eighteen or twenty volumes have brought it up to date somewhere in the 1970's, will be a fitting monument to the late James Nicholson, whose original visionary bequest made it possible to start work on this project so important to Canadian historical and literary scholars.

Inevitably, the editors of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* have learnt from the experience and the errors of their predecessors who produced the *Dictionary of National Biography* in Britain and the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and also that pioneer in our own country which actually bore the title of *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* when it appeared in 1926 and which, by an act of unusual courtesy and co-operation among publishers, now appears as *The Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, and still serves an excellent purpose as a concise basic reference book.

The first volume of the new *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*<sup>1</sup> appears under auspices which emphasize the national character of the project. It is published by the presses of the Universities of Toronto and Laval; the original Nicholson

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume I, 1000 A.D. - 1700 A.D.* University of Toronto Press. \$15.00.

bequest has been supplemented by grants from the Canada Council; and the contributors are drawn from seven Canadian provinces, as well as from the United States, Britain, France and Italy.

Wisely, the editors have avoided the problem of out-dating involved in a general alphabetical arrangement by giving a period frame to each volume. The present initial volume thus includes the biographies of six hundred people who played a significant part in Canadian history during the centuries from 1000 to 1700 A.D. The beginning date is important, since it represents a kind of final admission on the part of Canadian scholars in general of the claims of the Norsemen; the names of Bjarni Herjolfsson and Leif Erickson appear as an acknowledgment — perhaps convenient in these days of bicultural controversy — that it was neither Cabot nor Cartier who first penetrated from the European world to the land that later became known as Canada. A further feature which will please those who like to remember that Canadian history is not all French and English is the fact that 65 of the biographies, more than 10%, are of Indians who played an important part in the early days of Canadian history.

The entries are usually sufficient, and often substantial, varying from brief 300-word notes for a few very minor figures, to biographical essays like that on Champlain, which runs to well over 10,000 words. The contributors do not merely inform; they also take a critical stance towards their subjects and, in many cases, give useful evaluations of past accounts or of available evidence on controversial points. In addition to the actual entries, which cover every aspect of Canadian life during these vital centuries of exploration and tentative settlement, Volume I of the biography contains a whole series of useful adjuncts, including background essays on the Indians of Canada, on voyages to the North, on early settlement in the Atlantic region and New France, as well as a very useful list of the Indian tribes at the time of first contact with Europeans, and an adequate general bibliography.

In other words, Volume I of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* must be saluted as a thorough, imaginative and wholly satisfying beginning to a great scholarly task whose unfolding we shall watch with interest, admiration and gratitude.