

ABOUT BIOGRAPHIES

ONE MARK OF CANADIAN LITERATURE has always been the interest of writers in autobiography. Mrs. Brooke, in *A History of Emily Montague*, though she was writing about fictional people, was not writing of a fictional world. She was giving, quite strenuously, her own emotional and intellectual response to the Canadian scene. Other writers followed her, some in journals revealing the country and their own personalities. Still others made their own personal stories into novels, or what can loosely be termed novels. There are Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill, giving their version of Canada based on personal experience. There is also Ethel Wilson, giving impressions of Vancouver in *The Innocent Traveller*.

The autobiographical element fluctuates with the biographical; stories are often more than stories, they are frequently based on legends or myths of people who had actually existed in full human form. Canadian writers, interested in their country and its landscape, move frequently into the lives of real people, or often base their fictional world on people who have actually existed. Not that this is a Canadian syndrome, by any means, but it does show that Canadian literature frequently goes to more of reality in its literature than do other literatures. Norman Bethune can be seen in MacLennan's characterization of Jerome Martell in *The Watch That Ends the Night*, and often MacLennan and other novelists have dealt with people not as well known. The interest in a kind of personal biography continues to hold sway in much Canadian fiction. But to tell the tale of a person's life, fictional or real, is always the novelist's function. It appears, however, that Canadian writers more often than not are using characters from the real world.

They do not all do it. But because of a rather misplaced Canadian consciousness, perhaps, it appears that Canadian writers seem to direct themselves toward the biographical.

Major Canadian writers, unlike American writers, work in an area where the world of a literary creation is not distinct from the real Canadian world. Canadian writers have not sought to create a universe of freedom within the field of literature itself. They do not triumph over that conditioning in society, the custom and environmental determinism that limit the action and vision of the major characters. There is not a memorable character to come out of Canadian fiction yet because the writers do not try to expand the self-meaning of those characters they describe. They continue to leave them in a world that the reader always recognizes. Some day their vision will lift them beyond completely; at the moment only a few authors point beyond, and reveal a capacity for the vision and dependence on the imagined world and its primacy over the real that will lift Canadian literature to greater international status.

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An interest in biography is reflected in the great number of books of pure biography, and autobiography, that came out in Canada in 1967. It was perhaps an auspicious year, and many biographies appeared. Some should not have appeared, but there were many that were needed, and things Canadian will be richer because of them. Three books stand out in this year of biography. Dale C. Thomson's book, *Louis St. Laurent*, has many fine qualities, though Thomson is a bit too close to his subject both in time and personal relationship for the good of the book, and as a consequence the volume lacks the perspective it demands. Michael Macklem's *God Have Mercy* is a particularly well-written book on Fisher; Macklem has exhausted all the material on Fisher, and has presented what is frequently pure Tudor political-religious history. And the other book is Father Neil McKenty's book, *Mitch Hepburn*. It is a successful political profile, lively and well written, and it is very much a life — though not as much at times as one would perhaps always want — of Mitch Hepburn. The tone is not defensive, and it examines Hepburn's policies and foibles with fair detachment. It is an admirable contribution to a Canadian history field in which there has been all too little written: biographies of provincial premiers who have given the nation's history some shape. The book is a delight to read. For that reason it has been awarded the 1967 University of British Columbia Medal for Popular Biography. *Canadian Literature* extends its congratulations to Father McKenty.