

Book Reviews

Canada: A People's History, Volumes 1 and 2. DON GILLMOR, ACHILLE MICHAUD, and PIERRE TURGEON. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, Ltd. Volume 1, 2000. 320 p. ISBN 0-7710-3340-0; Volume 2, 2001, 352 p. ISBN 0-7710-3341-9.

This review is only of the use of visual documentation in these publications. The freshness and excellence of the television series rested on its use of contemporary manuscripts and published material which gave the spoken words a high degree of authenticity within the historical narrative of each episode. The directors also made extensive use of the extraordinary visual documents which are available in various archives and museums in Canada and elsewhere.

The two volumes under review are beautifully designed and printed on high quality paper with wide margins and generous use of space so that the text and illustrations do not crowd each other. The illustrations are in colour or black and white, depending on the original. The choice of illustrations is exciting, with many new images that have not been published before. They range from oil paintings, watercolours, and prints with a few photographs in Volume 1 to almost all photographs in Volume 2 as photography overtakes art in documenting current events. The authors have not restricted themselves only to Canadian illustrations, and groundbreaking images, such as Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Guernica* take their place within the Canadian historical narrative. The images are beautifully reproduced in a variety of formats, from full pages to small boxes in the margins. Occasionally they are too small such as the map reproduced in Volume 1, page fourteen where you need a magnifying glass to see the details.

Because such excellent use was made of contemporary textual material in the television series, and because so many new images were gathered, I had expectations that the latter would be used in the comprehensive and in-depth manner accorded to text. Visual documentation needs to be put into context so

that the reader can understand its source and determine the relevance and authenticity of the image.

My criticism of the use of images lies in their captioning and lack of explanation. It would have been difficult to contextualize the visual documentation in the television series itself, because there was no place within the rhetoric of each episode to give explanations. However, there is space for such explanations in a publication, and given the excellent pictorial research in discovering new images with which to enrich these volumes, it is unfortunate that the opportunity to also put them in context was missed. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, one of those being the extensive discussion of *The Death of Wolfe* by Benjamin West, the captions make no mention of artist, or photographer, or a date, and offer no explanation as to why and how the image originated. This is more significant in the first volume which ends with Confederation and covers a period with which we are less familiar and whose visual culture is different from ours with its proliferation of pictorial images.

No differentiation is made between a watercolour or drawing done “on the spot” and an engraving of the same image by an artist who would not have seen the original view. Readers are not alerted to the fact that they are looking at historical reconstructions of seventeenth-century French Canada by the twentieth-century artist Henri Beau. A discussion of seventeenth-century events is illustrated with a nineteenth-century painting, and an imaginary portrait of Jacques Cartier done in 1840 by Théophile Hamel is juxtaposed with a portrait done from life of Francois I. Not corroborating the authenticity of the images reduces their authority.

It is unfortunate also, although not the fault of the authors, that while the television series was being produced, they did not have access to the new research I have conducted of a portrait of Marie-Élisabeth Bégon. (Volume 1, p. 101). This portrait is a copy of an original held in France and the research points out the problems of copied portraits; the artist makes a copy of the portrait but does not copy the inscriptions on the back of the work. In this case the inscription on the original in France, which includes a date, proves that this portrait is not of the Canadian Madame Bégon. Similarly, a new and more authentic portrait of Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil was acquired by the National Archives in 1999 to replace the copy by Henri Beau cited in Volume 1, page 111.

These volumes are so splendid that it feels petty to make the above criticisms. However, because the television series made such excellent use of original textual documentation, the expectations were set high that they would do justice to the visual documents. It is a big opportunity that was missed.

Eva Major-Marothy
Portrait Gallery of Canada