
This book takes on the daunting task of reconstructing the historical Canadian experience through the eyes of ordinary citizens. “Canada’s history has often been told from the vantage point of those who possess the resources that we recognize as power—wealth, military authority, political influence,” says the author in a passage excerpted on the back cover, “but this book looks at it from the perspective of those who feel that they are responding to events rather than initiating changes.” As a means of capturing this perspective, Friesen takes the personal stories of representative individuals from key periods in history—a Dene family extending over four generations; the wife of a trapper in early twentieth-century Labrador; a German woman who immigrated to the west coast in the late 1920s; a part-aboriginal school teacher; a dyslexic factory worker, and an elite Québécoise of the present day—and examines the way that these persons interact with, and illuminate, the broader social and political trends of the day.

Friesen describes his approach as rooted in the “new methods of social and cultural history” (p. 7). Eschewing the economic preoccupations of conventional historians, he finds his raw material in culture, in popular political discourse, and in the experience of everyday life. “The answers … require that one move away from the economic approach and into an analysis based on cultural force and political action” (p. 185), he says repeatedly throughout the book. The exegesis is tied together thematically by a recurrent concern with the evolution of communication, and with the changes that take place in communal conceptions of time and place. This multi-levelled framing of the project promises an exceptionally rich reading experience—and to a large extent Friesen delivers. The flaws in the book relate largely—or so one suspects—to the fact that the author has not only tackled a category of endeavour for which he has little recent precedent (the field of national synthesis, as one commentator notes in a back-cover blurb, has been largely dormant for the last quarter-century), but that in doing so, he has traversed into methods and areas of knowledge with which he is relatively unfamiliar. I am one of a hopefully increasing number who applaud the return of a more national perspective to social studies. Without diminishing the value of what Friesen has accomplished in this book, therefore, I feel that it may be useful to others who might be moved to try their hand at this kind of project to note at least briefly where he has fallen short.

The first criticism that I would make of Friesen’s work is the fact that the stories he takes for his jumping off point seem both arbitrary and unrepresentative. Despite his paeans to the “ordinary people,” his sample seems unreasonably skewed to the lower segments of the social spectrum. The skew is exacerbated by Friesen’s fixation on what one could only describe as a “noble savage” motif. Aboriginality, with its implications of harmony with nature and superior sense of place, is not only idealized in the analysis, but attributed with a far greater relevance to the Canadian experience than seems justified by the facts.

Second, Friesen does not really seem to know what to do with these materials. There is a substantial recent literature both in sociology and in literary studies on the use of personal narratives as a tool for social analysis, but there is no sign that Friesen is familiar with any of this. There is also no sign (and this may explain the arbitrariness of his selection) that he is familiar in any broad way with life writing as a phenomenon in itself. This lack of context may explain some of the aesthetic flaws in the book, particularly the author’s failure to bring his subjects truly alive for the reader or to forge convincing links between the different levels of his narrative. It is probably not coincidental that Friesen seems more confident and his writing more authoritative when he lapses into more conventional academic discourse. His token attempts to make connections only play up the contrast. “These were the sentiments that Phyllis Knight encountered in Vancouver during the 1930s and 1940s,”
he says breezily (p. 160) after an extended disquisition on the unique face of Canadian socialism from which the subject herself is palpably absent.

The third problem, closely linked to the second, is the fact that, in the end, Friesen does not really deliver what he promises. This is not history as it is seen through the eyes of the ordinary people. It is the ordinary people as they are seen via the vantage point of history. It is notable that Friesen does not really derive many insights from his subjects’ stories. Rather, he uses the historical narrative to impose meaning on them. Part of this may be put down to the methodological inexperience mentioned in the last paragraph. In greater part, however, one has to attribute it to the fact that, whatever his attraction to the new methods, Friesen’s most natural stance vis-à-vis his subject matter is conventional academic detachment. One is struck by his reliance on documents and third-person reports, his tendency to order and classify (the four stages of time/space orientation, the four paradigms of Canadian history), and his recurrent, almost obsessive, sounding of conventional authority (“How have Canadian scholars explained the differences between the family experiences embodied by the Goudies and the Knights?” [p. 122]). These constructions do not just intellectualize Friesen’s subject material; in many cases they seem to prevent him from engaging directly with it. One of the more peculiar examples of this is the way he builds his explication in Part I not around the realities of the aboriginal lifestyle but around Harold Innis’ comments about it. “In the concluding pages to his landmark history, *The Fur Trade in Canada,*” the book begins, “Harold Adams Innis offered a sweeping statement: ‘We have not yet realized that the Indian and his culture were fundamental to the growth of Canadian Institutions’” (p. 11). The entire succeeding chapter is, in a sense, an attempt to probe the hidden meaning of these words. “Perhaps Innis was thinking …” (p. 20). “Could Innis actually have believed …?” (p. 19). “Did Innis have in mind …?” (p. 21). Hammered with this obsession with intellectual provenance, one gets the unmistakable impression that Friesen has a very difficult time getting out of the ivory tower.

Having said this, I must admit that the view from the tower is not really all that regrettable. Friesen’s strong point as a writer is his ability to tap a wide range of data and arguments, and to fit them under a single, intellectually coherent umbrella. Although it is probably not what the author himself would like to hear, I cannot help feeling that his book would have been more effective if he had stayed on familiar ground rather than trying to jump on the bandwagon of the new. The historical contextualization that he gives to the individual stories, for instance, would have been more powerful without the pretense that he was privileging the individual viewpoint. The empirical material, similarly, would have carried more weight if he did not feel obliged to downplay its importance. Take the aforementioned discussion of socialism in the 1930s, for instance. While it is true that the developments described in this section are enlivened by our glimpse of the experiences that gave rise to it, it is equally true that it is trivialized by being relegated to the level of background. The instance is not an isolated one. “These are the ideas that these people would have been exposed to,” the author says (in effect) over and over, to justify his digressions into macro-phenomena, or: “These are the social effects that issued from this common experience.” Tellingly, at the same time as we get all these disclaimers, the book as a whole seems to be suggesting that the experience of individuals is most interesting to the extent that it is common.

This brings me, finally, to what I personally found most impressive in *Citizens and Nation.* While diffused somewhat by being packaged as a worm’s eye view of the world, the unfashionably encompassing vision that underlies Friesen’s circumlocutions is to my mind an extremely compelling one. He gets it right, I think, when he says that the key to understanding our history is not economy but culture. He gets it right when he says that there is a unique Canadian experience which is constructed and preserved through the discourses of everyday life. He also gets it right when he says that the recovery and elucidation of this
experience is one of the most important and underaccomplished tasks facing the Canadian historian. Misfires aside, in fact, I can forgive Friesen any number of technical flaws for his resistance to the homogenizing narrative of globalization and his unabashed assertion of Canadian resilience. “Canada’s political circumstances will continuously change but the country has endured for well over a century and may last a good while longer …. And there can be no doubt that I am wearing my heart on my sleeve when I defend the country of Canada, argue for a sense of continuity in this place from past to present, and insist that the experience of ordinary households has its own processes of adaptation and resistance” (pp. 219-220).

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