

GLIMPSES OF THE PAST

Bill MacNeil Presents:
"VOICE OF THE PIONEER"
by Bill MacNeil,
foreward by Kenneth Bagnell. Toronto:

Doubleday Canada Ltd. 1988,
photographs, 255 pages, cloth,
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Review by C. Mark Davis

Most devoted followers of CBC Radio will be familiar with the unique ideas and fine characters of Bill MacNeil. A forty year career veteran of this service and the host of several nationally popular radio programs, MacNeil has become a common denominator in the lives and hearts of many listeners. Others may also know him through some of his four books. Indeed a couple of them are the preceeding Volumes I (1978) and II (1984) to this third volume of *Voice of the Pioneer*. Through a variety of mediums MacNeil's quiet style has delighted and entertained Canadians for decades.

Volume III of *Voice of the Pioneer* stays with the uncomplicated format and human-element technique perfected in the earlier volumes. The central theme is Canadian pioneers and MacNeil focuses on those individuals who were some of the first to beat a track through formidable barriers so that others could follow. The fields of early endeavours range widely from the broadcasting, aviation, teaching, fishing and homesteading to drama, comedy, hockey and politics. There are fifty-one entries altogether, including a piece by MacNeil himself. A three to five page essay is given to each person and/or topic and most people have related their own stories and thoughts, allowing for a colourful and fresh mixture of narratives. In each piece, as K. Bagnell notes in the foreword, MacNeil tries to reveal "the extraordinary in the ordinary".

It is evident that MacNeil had some kind of Canadian balance in mind while he was knitting the book together. Of the fifty-one pieces, for example, twenty-seven relate events from Ontario, ten from the West, ten from Atlantic Canada, three from the North and one from Quebec. As well forty men, ten women and one couple are represented. However, although there are a few interesting tales supplied by immigrants, all episodes involve English-speaking Canadians, largely ignoring the pioneering efforts of other language and ethnic groups. MacNeil does a better job counterbalancing great men with ordinary folks. Some of these voices, for example, belong to famous Canadians such as Hugh MacLennan, Johnny Wayne, Frank Shuster,

Paul Martin and Frank "King" Clancy. Others are well known in their own fields, including CBC radio personality Cy Strange, or Canadian diplomat, George Ignatieff or Nova Scotian Baptist medical missionary to India, Dr. Ben Gullison. Some of the warmest stories, though, come from those regular Canadians who built ships, farmed or fished for a living. There are also different kinds of stories. There are tales of tragedy such as the 1942 burning of the Cruiseship NORONIC at Toronto harbour, tales of unexpected adventures such as Officer Bill Carter's role in the fall of the Mad Trapper, Albert Johnson; tales of bitterness including MacNeil's memories of growing up in a company town and several well-told yarns about everyday, rugged perseverance. Generally MacNeil appreciates those who, like himself, had the "will to survive".

This work will appear to that wide popular audience for which it was obviously intended. Yet those with more specific interests may also find treasures here of lasting value. Ena Edwards and Henry Lambert, for example, present a fine eye-witness account of the 1942 Newfoundland sea disaster involving two American naval vessels. As well, Father R. Fumoleau examines aspects of his thirty-five year mission with the Dene. Refreshing is Jamaican Harry Gairey's account of racism in Toronto. Moreover, most of the contributors are senior citizens and it is interesting to note that the Canadian event which had the most tremendous impact on their lives was not World War I, World War II or Korea but the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Perhaps the one major service MacNeil is rendering is that he is actually collecting oral history, ordinary and otherwise, before it is lost forever. More work along these lines must be done and, indeed, done quickly, while the keepers of the stories are still able to participate.

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