



DETAIL FROM THE COVER OF A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS BY CHARLOTTE GRAY/BETTMAN/CORBIS/MAGMA

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

CHARLOTTE GRAY finds the history of Canada is in its mail

REVIEWED BY ROBERT WIERSEMA

As a rule, a collection of historical Canadian correspondence has as much appeal to the general reader as, well, a collection of historical Canadian correspondence. Most shy from such a book as they might a dental drill — “I know it’s good for me, but I can’t bear the pain ...”

In *Canada: A Portrait in Letters 1800-2000*, Ottawa historian Charlotte Gray achieves the near-impossible, creating an enthralling, thought-provoking and frequently moving volume from more than 200 letters and 200 years.

Gray, one of Canada’s most significant popular historians (her award-winning *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake* has just been released in paperback) takes an editorial role here. In addition to selecting the letters, Gray introduces the book, each section and each letter (for context), though largely the 217 letters stand on their own.

The correspondence was culled from more than 5,000 offerings, drawn from published collections, the unpublished re-

search of other historians and, most significantly perhaps, from the public.

The collection is divided into four sections, each covering 50 years. The “coherent, if untidy” narrative traces a through-line of national emergence and development.

A Surge of Settlers: 1800-1850, provides a keen and vividly human insight into the early immigrant experience. Later historical developments inform the reading of letters such as that from John Bland in

1807, arguing strongly for conciliation with the “Red Indians” (the Beothuck) in Newfoundland, or John Franklin’s grim account of his Coppermine Expedition, 23 years prior to his disastrous 1845 attempt to find the Northwest Passage. Just as significant are the routine chronicles of daily life from fur traders and landowners, from grande dames and a homesick 14-year-old boy.

The book offers many similar delights from figures both well known and everyday. Lucy Maud Montgomery’s ecstatic announcement to a friend not only that she “went to work and wrote a book,” but that the L.C. Page Co. of Boston were “offering to publish” *Anne of Green Gables*, is tempered by Montgomery’s self-effacing “the publishers seem to think it will succeed.” A young Winston Churchill, on a speaking tour of Canada, weighs in on Queen Victoria’s death in a letter to his mother from Winnipeg. The roots of the Northwest Rebellion are hinted at in an 1869 letter-to-the-editor from Louis Riel.

The final section of the book, *Hurting Towards the Millennium: 1950-2000*, is the weakest since, for the time being, it wants for historical resonance. There is a greater reliance on familiar names (Glenn Gould, Eugene Forsey, Marshall McLuhan, George Woodcock, Mordecai Richler and others) and less insight into everyday life. It’s a niggling criticism (after all, how much insight do we require into a period we have lived through?) that will likely be addressed as the passage of time creates critical distance.

Canada: A Portrait in Letters should find a permanent home in most Canadian home libraries. Supplemented by frequent maps, facsimiles of original letters and detailed source-notes, it is a treasure trove not of history but of *our history*, a reflection of our past both collective and utterly personal. It is also a celebration of the written word, of the now almost forgotten joy of correspondence, the frisson of letter in a voice long unheard.

Roberta Wiersema is a Victoria writer and bookseller.

THE BOOK

Canada:
A Portrait
in Letters

BY CHARLOTTE
GRAY

Doubleday,
536 pages; \$45

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