

CORRESPONDENCE

Letter
perfect

**Canada:
A Portrait in Letters, 1800-2000**
By Charlotte Gray
Doubleday Canada, 536 pages, \$45

REVIEWED BY
JOHN ROBERT COLOMBO

I have yet to meet Charlotte Gray, who is a professor in the department of history at Carleton University in Ottawa as well as the author of this handsome and valuable book. (It has such heft that I want to describe it as a "tome.") I have yet to read her biography of Mrs. King (about Isabel Mackenzie King, the mother of former prime minister Mackenzie King) or her study *Sisters in the Wilderness* (about pioneer authors Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Trail).

But about a year ago I did read with interest and appreciation her biography *Flint & Feather* (about the poet E. Pauline Johnson). Indeed, I am grateful that in its pages she drew attention to "possibly the worst piece of poetry that Pauline ever wrote" by reprinting the following lines of verse that begin oh-so memorably: "Little Vancouver was born in the west, / The healthiest baby on Canada's breast."

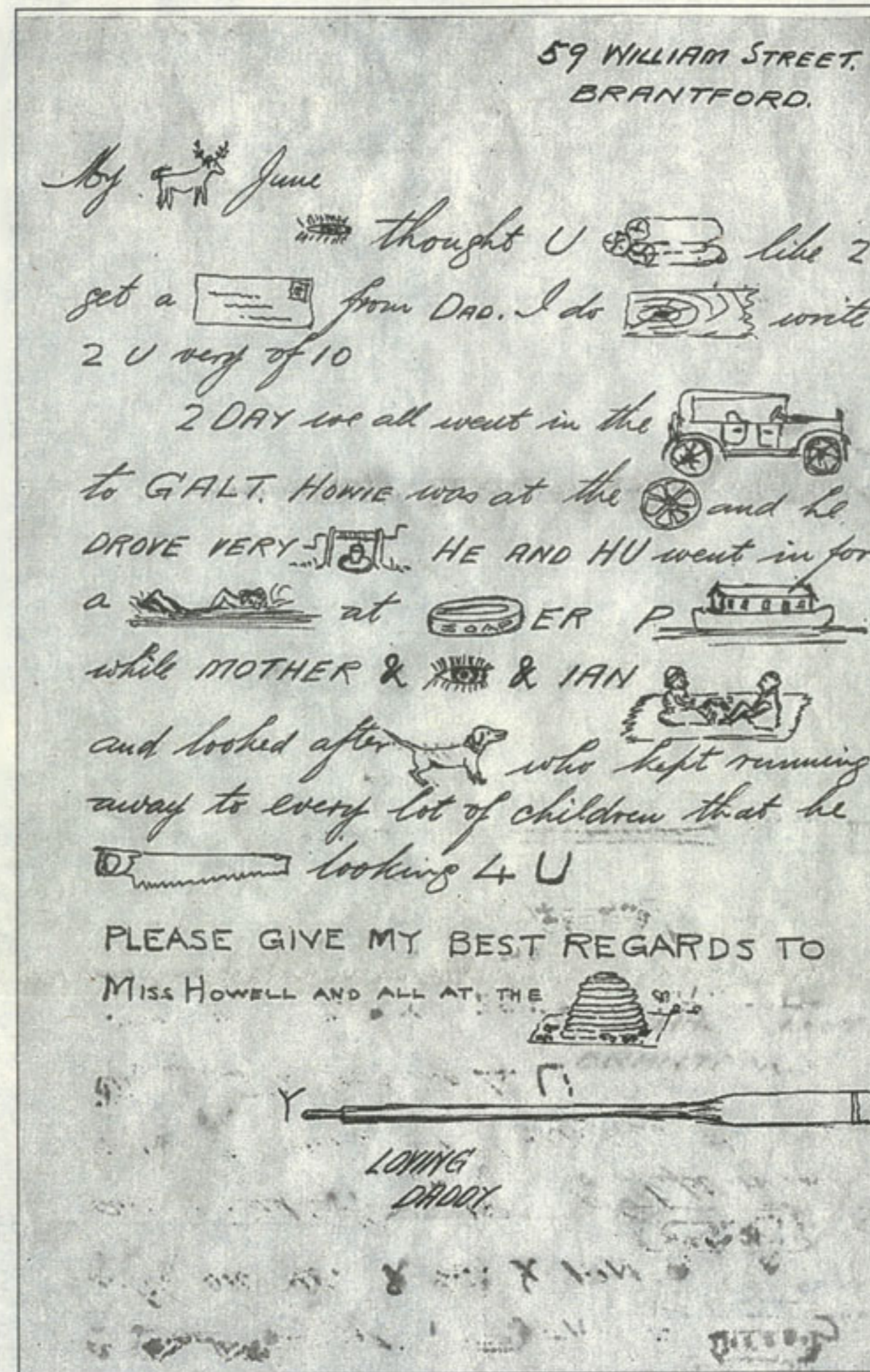
Charlotte Gray obviously has a sense of humour. *Canada: A Portrait in Letters*, her latest work, is a lovely book to have and to hold, a tribute to the arts and crafts of the designer, the publisher and the printer. It is an anthology or chrestomathy of 217 personal letters, and all of them were handwritten, typewritten, word-processed or e-mailed (the last one!) by Canadians from all walks of life. Some of the correspondents are well-known (like Robertson Davies), others are known (like Irshad Manji), and some are unknown (like Lea Panquin, a primary school pupil in Coleman, Alta., who writes about conditions on the home front during the Great War). Each letter was composed to meet a specific need. Each now serves another need: to

illuminate a public trend or a private aspect of life in Canada.

Where did Charlotte Gray find these letters? Many come from volumes of selected correspondence (like those of Margaret Laurence and Marshall McLuhan). Others are reprinted from offbeat collections such as Jack Kapica's *Shocked and Appalled* (letters written to *The Globe and Mail*). As well, a fair number are taken from private archives (like Dr. J. B. Collip of penicillin fame writing to accept the chair of biochemistry at the University of Alberta).

Many of the letters in this gallimaufry are new to me, so I expect most of them will be new to most readers of this lively collection. The letters are arranged chronologically in four 50-year periods from 1800 to 2000. They attest to the compiler's wide familiarity with the books of the past and the present and her deep appreciation of the unpolished gems that rest in private collections and public archives. The letters are not "edited for length" (as editors of editorial pages in newspapers are wont to express it), but the contents are excerpted, and each letter is a page or two in length. There is a section of sources and a comprehensive index.

How collectively these letters amount to a "portrait" of Canada is a little uncertain. Instead of a formal portrait, what they do present is a mosaic of peoples, a patchwork quilt of experiences, an anthology of attitudes, or a collage of concepts and colours. Gray certainly knows what she is doing because she possesses two fine and necessary qualities. As a historian, she is able to see the big picture with clarity and objectivity. As a biographer, she has the subjectivity needed to enter into the heart and soul of each of her letter-writers. She is able to focus on the near-at-hand, the telling detail and yet not lose sight of the faraway horizon. (Charles Mair describing life in Rupert's Land in 1868 is a good instance of a fine historical passage. Lucy Maud Mont-



June Copeland, a seven-year-old Grimsby, Ont., girl, received the letter above from her father in the first half of the last century.

gomery's letter about arranging the publication of *Anne of Green Gables* — all about "the contact... a fear-somely legal looking document" — makes her live again.) Since the editor collects letters, she may well enjoy receiving a letter from me. Here is my epistle.

Dear Ms. Gray: I like the way you begin your new book. "Letters have a magic all their own. When my mail arrives each morning, the mere sight of a particular envelope addressed to me can induce a rush of expectation or foreboding." This morning, when I checked my e-mail, I groaned at the spam I was receiving. Since your work predates the introduction of e-mail, you were presumably spared the spam. Yet you had to turn the pages of countless books of Canadiana, mainly out of print, most deservedly so, so you had to face what amounts to the spam of 19th and 20th century!

You continue, "I can almost hear the writer speak to me, across time and distance. I am drawn into a conversation with an unseen and often unknown protagonist." I am not sure about the word "protagonist"; perhaps "correspondent" would be more appropriate. You

suggest that reading and reprinting private letters is like "eavesdropping on history," but it is also over-seeing people and learning about psychology, society and heritage rather than history per se. Perhaps you instinctively felt this by making the decision to avoid filling the 536 pages of this anthology with letters from the heroic nation-builders of the past. There is one letter apiece from Sir John A. Macdonald, Louis Riel, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Mackenzie King. It must have been a struggle to so limit them! References appear to Pierre Trudeau and Brian Mulroney, but no letters. Did they ever write personal letters?

It was a great idea to encapsulate the evolution, society, culture and spirit of Canada through epistolary means. Other editors have tried to do so with compilations of essays, speeches, statues, narratives, reportage, fiction, poetry and photographs. (Well-chosen illustrations appear throughout the text, by the way.) Correspondence meets your needs to a T, but I occasionally wonder if the needs are a tad too narrow. Historians such as Donald Creighton always maintain that writing history is as much an art as it is a science, and while that may be



Included in this lively collection is a whimsical letter former prime minister Mackenzie King wrote in 1925, responding to a South African girl.



The letters create a "portrait" of Canada. Above, Mackenzie King's mother, Isabel, at a writing table.

so, when it comes to the literary arts, their works seldom reflect them at all. I missed a number of important writers' letters. Where are letters from Earle Birney and Irving Layton? Specifically, where is Octave Crémazie in 1867 bewailing the culture of Quebec? Archibald Lampman in 1895 stating, "I am a minor poet of a superior order and that is all"? Northrop Frye in 1948 admitting to a former teacher that he felt "how nice it would be if I could read them" (referring to William Blake's prophetic books)?

I could go on and mention the cattiest letter of political gossip that I have ever read: Hector-Louis Langevin's thumbnail put-downs of the Fathers of Confederation at their conference in London in 1866: "Mr. Tupper, of Nova Scotia, is capable, but too insensitive; he makes many bitter enemies for himself; he is ambitious and a gambler," etc. It offers "portraits" in the form of a letter. Back to the book at hand. Your work has so many highlights that it is a shame to dwell on some correspondence that could or should have been included. You write, "A letter is rarely written with

a view to posterity: instead, it captures the unique moment at which it is composed."

This is certainly true of most of these letters, including those that were written in indelible ink by the late Eugene Forsey, the maverick senator, who for decades sent screeds of letters on subjects of public interest to newspaper editors. Forsey has two lively missives in your collection. Remember the proposal for a "triple-E" Senate in 1987? Forsey writes, "It is just flailing the air, whistling in the wind, blowing soap bubbles."

Who writes such rhetoric these days? Remember what was once known as Dominion Day? Way back in 1954, Forsey noted the gradual disappearance of the name of the national holiday: "The Department of External Affairs explains that its use of the term 'Canada Day' for 'Dominion Day' is for external consumption only, for 'convenience,' because the poor foreigners wouldn't know what 'Dominion Day' meant: 'it means very little abroad.' I suppose the French, when they are talking to foreigners, call the 14th of July 'France Day,' and the Americans call the 4th of July 'United States day?' I hope the Department of External Affairs will be careful in future, if it has occasion to speak of June 24th, not to call it 'St. Jean Baptiste Day' but 'Quebec Day.' 'St. Jean Baptiste' might mean very little abroad."

Such gems! I am delighted to own this review copy of Canada: *A Portrait in Letters*. But I now have a problem, and the problem is where to keep my single copy — upstairs for bedtime reading, or downstairs for reference in my home office. But if I visit my local bookstore I can buy a second copy. That will solve my problem. I wish all problems were so easily solved!

Sincerely, J. R. C.

John Robert Colombo is the author of three books this fall, including *The Penguin Book of MORE Canadian Jokes*.

Poor cousins

In February 1934, the Great Depression brought Newfoundland to its knees: the self-governing British colony was declared bankrupt and a commission of government was appointed in London. Among the first commission members to arrive in St. John's was Sir John Hope Simpson, who took charge of Newfoundland's fishing, forestry, mining and agriculture. Meanwhile, his wife, Lady Hope Simpson, recorded in letters to her children her own dismay at the colony's poverty.

Newfoundland Hotel
26 February 1934

Darling! it is so lovely today. The children are sliding & tobogganing about & shouting & skating along the streets & the sledge bells ring so merrily, and there is fresh-fallen snow over everything & the sun shining on all.

But it is terrible to know of the awful poverty behind this joyous scene. It is unbelievable. The dole is so small that it is only just sufficient to keep life; it is given in kind (food) once a month; & of course a hungry family finishes its ration long before the end of the month. And it does not allow for clothes or rent or anything else. There are poor creatures living in the town in shacks without doors & without heating in this bitter cold. That is why Lady Anderson [wife of the governor] & other people are at work & working their fingers to the bone. And it is not just here. All over the island, the poor people are in desperate case. Women stay in bed till 1 o'clock because there is nothing to get up for. In other places, the people never go to bed because they have no blankets, so stay huddled together round whatever fire they have. One trouble here is that there are so many tiny communities scattered along the coast — fisher folk whose ancestors settled just here or there because there was enough fishing for perhaps one or two families. And many of the villages, & towns even, are so inaccessible in the winter — they can only be reached by sea & in the winter it is almost impossible to get to them. There has been terrible misgovernment — worse, terrible immorality in the government. The people have been exploited — the natural resources have been wasted & gambled away. Wealthy men hold huge tracts of land — hundreds of thousands of square miles & pay 2 [shillings] an acre & do nothing to develop it — just hold it in the hope that sometime it will be wanted & they can demand huge prices for it.

The politicians have demoralized the people. They say, "Appoint me & I'll give you this & that." So that the people have grown accustomed to having everything done for them.

And yet — they are a fine people really, & if they get a decent government and a chance to recover, they will do well.

Lunch-time, & Daddy will be in directly.

Excerpt from *Canada: A Portrait in Letters, 1800-2000*