

Good for you and tasty too

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Two of first three in Extraordinary Canadians series delightful to digest

Nellie McClung
By Charlotte Gray
Penguin Canada, \$26

Emily Carr
By Lewis DeSoto
Penguin Canada, \$26

Lord Beaverbrook
By David Adams Richards
Penguin Canada, \$26

BY PAUL GESSELL



Biographies of Lord Beaverbrook and Nellie McClung get high marks, but the portrayal of Emily Carr seems uninspired.

It was difficult to avoid thinking of All-Bran when contemplating the impending arrival of 18 short biographies commissioned by Penguin on "Extraordinary Canadians": The books would undoubtedly be good for you but hardly a tasty treat, even with some of the country's best authors penning the little tomes.

The project simply sounded too earnest and educational, the kind of thing only the CBC or some government agency would tackle in an effort

to be resolutely and smugly Canadian. The series will take three years to complete.

It is being edited by John Ralston Saul, the author-philosopher husband of former governor general Adrienne Clarkson and the man described by

Penguin as Canada's "leading public intellectual." Saul's involvement seemed to give the books a sort of royal seal of approval, another reason to be wary of the project unless you are a high school librarian.

Well, the first three offerings are be-

ing launched today at the Ottawa International Writers Festival at Library and Archives Canada. And, guess what? This All-Bran is rather tasty at times.

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Being less than half the size of usual biographies, these *Reader's Digest*-style books can't tell all. But they can be entertaining, literary and informative.

Top marks must go to David Adams Richards for the sheer poetry of his biography of Lord Beaverbrook, the rural New Brunswick lad who grew up to be a British media baron, a powerful Second World War-era politician and an art patron.

Richards and Max Aitken (Beaverbrook's birth name) both hail from the Miramichi community of Newcastle but never officially met, although Richards, while a child, spotted the much older lord parading around town.

Fans of Richards have met ruthless and ambitious people like Aitken repeatedly in his novels, including *The Friends of Meager Fortune*, *River of the Brokenhearted* and *Mercy Among the Children*. Indeed, *Beaverbrook* reads just like one of Richards's novels about a country boy grabbing at fame and fortune and then finding the prizes come with infamy and misery.

Although a gem, there are two complaints about this condensed biography of Beaverbrook. Richards concentrated on Beaverbrook's professional life and skipped over many of the juicy bits in his messy family life. As well, Richards is prone to hyperbole.

Consider this quote from the Beaverbrook introduction: "He was by far the most influential and important Canadian of the 20th century and, arguably, could be credited with almost single-handedly saving western civilization." Yeah, but did he cure cancer?

Nellie McClung did her bit for western civilization, too, early last century. The biography of the prairie feminist was written by Ottawa author Charlotte Gray, who provides a warts-and-all look at the firebrand who helped get women the vote, participated in the famous court case that declared women to be "persons" and championed the rights of immigrant women.

Gray provides a warts-and-all look at fiery Nellie McClung

Originally a cow-milking Manitoba farm girl, McClung became a best-

selling author in the early 20th century, a spellbinding orator and an elected Liberal politician in Alberta. She also was a leader in the temperance movement — ironically, her four sons developed alcohol problems — and championed eugenics, the sterilization of the mentally handicapped. Gray also hints at dark family issues relatives tried to hush up by burning all of McClung's diaries.

This lack of primary documentation makes it difficult for any author to get right into McClung's head. But Gray's persistent research means we have a detailed portrait of the times and the issues, and a very lively read. We magically find ourselves transported to smoke-filled political meetings debating women's "need," or lack thereof, to vote. We gasp at the scenes of miserable working conditions of immigrant seamstresses. And we see repeatedly how McClung's political pragmatism made her a success and role model.

The third biography in Penguin's first crop is Lewis DeSoto's take on visual artist Emily Carr. DeSoto, a writer and artist, should have been an inspired choice. But he seems uninspired, if not befuddled, by Carr's life. He chases her but doesn't catch her.

DeSoto only comes alive at the end of the book when he discusses some of Carr's most famous masterpieces. *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky, 1935* is described as "rapture, the very embodiment and expression of ecstatic liberation." Right on.

Anyone seeking to understand Carr would be better served by reading the many earlier published biographies and appreciations written about the artist. The only advantage of DeSoto's book is that, at 180 tiny pages, it is shorter than traditional biographies and thus more suitable for a high-school student trying to do some fast research for an essay.

So, Penguin scored high in two out of three in the first round. That's not a bad beginning and certainly encouraging enough to make me want to read forthcoming ones, including *Big Bear* by Rudy Wiebe, *Norman Bethune* by Adrienne Clarkson and *Mordecai Richler* by M.G. Vassanji. And for those unable to sit still with even a short biography, there will be documentaries on all the Extraordinary Canadians beginning this fall on OMNI Television and the Biography Channel.