

History is king

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY

There is a delicious irony in the fact that our new Prime Minister's favourite phrase is "making history." That's what he called his big speech at the November Liberal convention, and that's the mantra spattered over his Web site. The irony is that, as usual, our politicians are following, not leading. "Making history" is what Canadian non-fiction writers have been doing at an accelerating pace for a couple of years now. History books were winners in 2003. After years of neglect, history is the non-fiction genre that publishers are now embracing.

Since the 1970s, both non-fiction in general and history in particular have been in a slump, elbowed to the margins by the glamourization of fiction. (All those prizes! All that glitter! All those sexy black-clad Toronto novelists!) General non-fiction is still fighting for survival, but well-written narrative history is on the come-back trail.

Margaret MacMillan's *Paris, 1919* (Random House), the chart-topper at the start of the year, owes its success to the fact it is about the hurly-burly, behind-the-scenes activity at the Paris peace conference, rather than clause-by-clause debate. MacMillan is that unusual phenomenon, a scholarly academic who tells a good story. She convincingly describes how people who were variously ambitious, opinionated, scheming, ruthless or flirtatious (and, in the case of Lloyd George, all of the above), rather than the impersonal forces of history, shaped negotiations.

Similarly, books about Canadian history that have crowded bookshelves this fall allow us to see the development of our nation through individual lives. Explorers abound, in *The Man Who Mapped the Arctic: The Intrepid Life of George Back, Franklin's Lieutenant* by Peter Steele (Raincoast), *Epic Wanderer: David Thompson and the Mapping of the Canadian West* by D'Arcy Jenish (Doubleday) and (my favourite) *Ancient Mariner: The Amazing Adventures of Samuel Hearne* by Ken McGoogan (HarperCollins). Dead white males are no longer allowed to dominate the North. We also have Jennifer Duncan's *Frontier Spirit: The Brave Women of the Klondike* (Doubleday) and Jennifer Niven's *Ada Blackjack: A True Story of Survival in the Arctic* (Hyperion).

But the growth-of-a-nation stuff, beloved of 1950s history teachers,

is about more than conquering landscape. In *The Perilous Trade: Publishing Canada's Writers* (McClelland & Stewart), Roy MacSkimming gives us a cultural history of Canada, and the struggle to establish a literary tradition. In his memoir *Birth of a Bookworm* (Talon), Michel Tremblay describes the development, in Quebec, of a different kind of literary culture. The early years of our artistic heritage is traced in David Silcox's *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson* (Firefly). And the bare-knuckle, hard-scrabble lives of workers on whom the Canadian economy continues to rely is grippingly described in Melissa Fay Greene's *Last Man Out* (Harvest Books), which tells the story of the Springhill Mine disaster of 1958. In my own *Canada, A Portrait in Letters 1800-2000* (Doubleday), I allow the voices of Canadians from the last two centuries to speak directly to readers today.

What does this reawakened interest in our shared past tell us? First, that history offers a lot of great stories. Non-fiction writers are not the only people exploiting them. This

Martin talks about how previous generations of Canadians made history by grasping the opportunities before them. He mentions Confederation in the 1860s, and the post-Second World War era during which the social safety net was woven. His rallying cry is "Together, we can make history." With typical Canadian caution, many of us will embrace this message only when we are convinced that we have done it before, so we can do it again.

In the glory days of Canadian non-fiction, before it was swamped by the 1990s fiction tsunami, there were three staples of the market: politics, business and sport. Glancing through this year's catalogues, it is remarkable how little there is of the latter two categories (although I'm sure there are contracts out for a few razor-sharp bios of Lord Black). Hockey, the national sport, has nearly faded from the bookshelf (with the notable exception of Bruce Dowbiggin's *Money Players: How Hockey's Greatest Stars Beat the NHL at its Own Game* (Macfarlane Walter & Ross). The business category has largely

well-written, none of these books topped the charts as anything by Peter Newman, Christina McCall, Ron Graham or Richard Gwyn did 20 years ago. We want to know where we have come from, and what shaped us as a nation — but we don't want it from the Men-in-Suits angle.

This fall, one book did emerge from the non-fiction pack as the Big Book of the season. On my own book tour across Canada, wide-eyed book-sellers would confide, "When he came, we had to turn 200 people away!" or "customers kept him signing for over an hour!" The star was General Roméo Dallaire, author of *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Random House), his account of his months in 1994 running the United Nations observer mission in Rwanda. Canadians have embraced this agonized memoir of a moral and fallible soldier struggling to do his best in impossible circumstances. For a nation eager to define its own identity, he provides a compelling reflection.

Is history hot elsewhere? The British have always revelled in their history, devouring books about kings, queens and conquerors, but today their best-seller lists are top heavy with biographies of Beck, Spice and other *Hello Magazine* celebrities. The United States, in contrast, is obsessed with Bush-bashing. Authors like Al Franken (*Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them*), Molly Ivins (*Bushvack*) and Michael Moore (*Dude, Where's My Country?*) have mounted a no-holds-barred assault on the President and the Republican right. A century ago, Edith Wharton described the United States as "a land which has undertaken to get on without a past," and these authors continue the tradition.

Canadians enjoy having our prejudices about the United States confirmed by authors like Moore. But, this year, we seem eager to explore our own past, in order to give us strength and ideas for the future. The title of one of the most interesting non-fiction books of the year, by Ted Chamberlin, is *Is This is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* (Knopf). As we move deeper into the 21st century, it seems to be a question Canadians are asking ourselves.

■ Charlotte Gray, author of *Canada, A Portrait in Letters 1800-2000*, was recently appointed chairman of the advisory committee for the new Canada History Centre.

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year's fiction lists include novels set in our collective past, and often built around real historical characters, by (among others) Ann-Marie MacDonald, Frances Itani, Fred Stenson and Douglas Glover.

There is a second, more significant underlying cause for the "history is hot" phenomenon. In another book that looks backwards, *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World* (McClelland & Stewart), Andrew Cohen suggests we cannot figure out where we are going unless we understand where we have been and who took us there. The late 20th-century image of the global village suggests a gradual dissolution of national borders. Many Canadians (and not just activists at the Quebec City summit of 2001) feel this dissolution is devoutly to be resisted. At a time when we see the country, and the world, changing rapidly, we are hungry to know what makes us different as a nation. We want to find between two covers, in engaging prose, affirmation of our unique identity, rooted in our past.

The new Prime Minister himself has latched on to this theme: Paul

dwindled down to How To books, which put a damper on the Gifts for Dad list (book-sellers used to see every dad as an aspiring tycoon, looking for role models).

Politics remains a perennial subject for Canadian non-fiction writers, and this year has been no exception. The new Prime Minister's psyche is examined in Susan Delacourt's *Juggernaut: Paul Martin's Campaign for Chrétien's Crown* (McClelland & Stewart) and John Gray's *Paul Martin* (Key Porter), and Lawrence Martin published *Iron Man: The Defiant Reign of Jean Chrétien* (Viking), the second volume of his biography of Jean Chrétien. The most popular political biography of the year was Geoffrey Stevens' *The Player: The Life and Times of Dalton Camp* (Key Porter), which proves once again that a biographer can dig deepest into motivation and character when the subject is safely dead, and therefore cannot sue. But Canadian interest in federal politics has been dwindling for at least 20 years: Ottawa does not have the same fascination as it did in the days of Pierre Trudeau. Although