

***Voice of the Pioneer*, By Bill McNeil, Introduction by Harry Boyle, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978, pp. 257, photographs. \$14.95)**

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programs at Canadian universities that, if extant, would conceivably serve to help foster a more markedly indigenous presence in the field of Canadian folklore studies.<sup>1</sup> In this connection, it is good to note the continuation of *Culture and Tradition* as a collaborative periodical publication headed by folklore students from both Laval and Memorial Universities. This kind of activity suggests that perhaps a truly Canadian "school" of folkloristics is in the embryonic stage of formulation. We should all hope that this is indeed so.

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<sup>1</sup>T. H. B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, Vols. 1/2 (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975), pp. 83-85.

### **Voice of the Pioneer**

By Bill McNeil

Introduction by Harry Boyle

(Toronto: Macmillan, 1978, pp. 257,  
photographs. \$14.95)

Since Barry Broadfoot's *Ten Lost Years*, there have been a number of popular oral histories published in Canada. The style of these books runs from journalistic to academic, from anecdotal to documentary, but they all fill an obvious gap in the chronicling of Canadian history. The personal account, reminiscence, and historical legend add a non-élite perspective and a certain vitality to history, often lacking in orthodox historical documentation. Oral history not only contributes to our knowledge of past events, but makes these events more understandable and appreciable to the book-buying public.

*Voice of the Pioneer* is one such popular

oral history. Its format is close to that of the Broadfoot books and its publication was undoubtedly inspired by Broadfoot's success. The book is composed of seventy-five short oral accounts gleaned from interviews conducted by McNeil for his CBC Radio programme, "Voice of the Pioneer." His informants range from well-known Canadian personalities, such as Joey Smallwood, John Diefenbaker, "Cyclone" Taylor, and Charles Best, to unheralded old-timers who have, in some sense, been pioneers.

McNeil uses the term "pioneer" very loosely, as he himself admits. Anyone who has managed to live past the allotted three score and ten years and who is able to recall and recount stories from his youth is a "pioneer." Thus, the book includes not only those who truly did pioneer in some way, such as Group of Seven painter, A.Y. Jackson or prairie homesteader, Mrs. Carl Tellanius, but also those who simply had a good story to tell.

Not all of the accounts are life histories. The tales these pioneers tell include eye-witness accounts of historical events, such as the Halifax explosion and the 1892 St. John's fire; reminiscences concerning famous persons, such as Alexander Graham Bell and Norman Bethune; as well as descriptions of Canadian life at the turn of the century.

Unfortunately, this great variety in types of informants and types of stories is the book's greatest weakness. Instead of giving the reader a sense of what it meant to live in turn-of-the-century Canada or what it was like to be a pioneer, the book only succeeds in presenting a rather disorganized and confusing hodgepodge of autobiographical scraps. There is no direction, no overall plan, which ties together all these stories. McNeil's poorly defined sense of "pioneer" is largely to blame for this fault.

This lack of direction becomes quite frustrating. The reader is given only a sample of what it was like to be a pioneer on the prairies or to pioneer in early Canadian medicine. The reader gains only a fleeting

glimpse of fighting in World War I or working in the lumber camps. Indeed, the main difference between this book and those of Broadfoot is this lack of direction. Behind every snippet in McNeil's book is a larger story; every reminiscence has been isolated from its total life history and thereby suffers from lack of context. The danger is that publishers will now consider that the life stories of these people have been told, when in fact only a sample has been given. All of McNeil's informants deserve a chapter to themselves, if not an entire book.

If McNeil has strayed from the Broadfoot format in terms of direction or common theme, he has managed to repeat many of the errors inherent in Broadfoot's popular oral history style. Information on the informants is much too brief and inconsistent from one informant to the next. McNeil gives the age of less than half of his informants and almost never mentions when or where he did his interviews. There are no references to other printed sources, even when such information almost cries out to be given. For example, McNeil includes a short piece of Elizabeth Goudie (whose name he misspells) without mentioning her autobiography, *Woman of Labrador*, and he interviewed James Gray about prostitution on the Prairies without reference to Gray's book, *Red Lights on the Prairies*. As in the Broadfoot books, there is no index, no explanatory footnotes, and no attempt to integrate photographs within the text.

Despite the wide range of informants, there are some serious deficiencies in McNeil's survey of Canadian pioneers. There is almost no representation from francophone Canada, nor do the native peoples have more than one, lone representative in this book. Indeed, the book concentrates overwhelmingly on white, Anglo-Saxon pioneers, with only token representation from other ethnic groups.

This book will probably sell well. Given the current popular interest in oral, historical accounts, almost any book of this sort will be successful. There are, however,

many other oral histories, both popular and academic, which serve the public much better, and which are of more interest to the folklorist and oral historian. The following is a list of a few of the more useful recent oral histories and life histories published in Canada:

Broadfoot, Barry. *The Pioneer Years, 1895-1914: Memories of Settlers Who Opened the West*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Six War Years, 1939-1945: Memories of Canadian at Home and Abroad*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1974.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Ten Lost Years, 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1973.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Years of Sorrow, Years of Shame: The Story of the Japanese Canadians in World War II*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1977.

Butler, Victor. *The Little Nord Easter: Reminiscences of a Placentia Bayman*. Community Studies Series, No. 1. Ed Wilfred W. Wareham. St. John's: MUNFLA, Memorial University, 1975.

Dégh, Linda. *People in the Tobacco Belt: Four Lives*. Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Mercury Series, No. 13. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975.

Goudie, Elizabeth. *Woman of Labrador*. Ed David W. Zimmerly. Toronto: Peter Martin, 1973.

Gray, James Henry. *Red Lights on the Prairies*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1971.

Montero, Gloria. *The Immigrants*. Toronto: Lorimer, 1977.

Piniuta, Harry. *Land of Pain Land of Promise: First Person Accounts by Ukrainian Pioneers 1891-1914*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978.