

Explaining the Extraordinary

When **JOHN RALSTON SAUL**, BA'69, DLitt'97, agreed to edit Penguin Canada's Extraordinary Canadians, a new series of biographies about particularly significant Canucks, he had something bigger in mind than simply telling a few life stories. "I wanted to explore the creation of modern Canada."

According to Saul, the 20 people showcased in the books—among them, women's rights activist Nellie McClung, media studies pioneer Marshall McLuhan and prime ministers Lester B. Pearson and Wilfrid Laurier, BCL1864, LLD1898—all played key roles in fashioning the country we know today.

In his introduction to the books, he writes, "Each one of these people has changed you. They changed how each of us sees what surrounds us, how minorities are treated, how we think of immigrants, how we look after each other, how we imagine ourselves through what are now our stories."

The books are modest in length—generally 200 pages or less. Saul has little enthusiasm for "great big suitcase-sized biographies. They tend to give you an awful lot of information without being terribly revealing."

The aim of Extraordinary Canadians is not so much to pore over the minutiae of their subjects' lives, as it is to give readers a sense of their major accomplishments, their motivations and how they

each had a lasting impact on a young, evolving country.

One of Saul's chief tasks as series editor was to select the books' authors. For the most part, he steered clear of writers best known for biographies (one notable exception is *Nellie McClung* writer Charlotte Gray), choosing instead some of Canada's best-known fiction writers, including Nino Ricci (*Pierre Elliott Trudeau*), David Adams Richards (*Lord Beaverbrook*), M.G. Vassanji (*Mordecai Richler*) and Jane Urquhart (*L.M. Montgomery*).

"I've always had problems with the notion that non-fiction is factual while fiction is something that's just made up," says Saul, a prize-winning writer himself for both fiction and non-fiction. "There is a reason why great novels live for hundreds of years. A talented novelist explores the truth in a way that most [non-fiction writers] can't."

One of the writers Saul approached was Margaret MacMillan, the author of *Paris 1919* and *Nixon in China*, both of them best-selling accounts of major turning points in world history. Given her track record, Saul thought MacMillan would be ideal for a biography he had in mind about a major statesman. Instead, she surprised him by asking to write about Stephen Leacock, the McGill economist and political scientist who earned worldwide fame for his satirical works.



LUCY CAVENDER

"I was attracted to Leacock as a subject because I have always enjoyed his humorous writings, some of which I think are absolute classics," MacMillan explains.

"What surprised me [about Leacock] was how well-known he had been and how he was a public intellectual." Leacock's admirers included Charlie Chaplin and F. Scott Fitzgerald and his new works were eagerly anticipated by readers in the U.S. and the U.K. "He was a major figure in Canadian public debates," MacMillan adds, "over how to deal with the gaps between the rich and the poor, for instance, and Canada's place in the British Empire and the world."

Saul himself penned one of the books in the series—an upcoming joint biography of 19th-century political reformers Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin.

"They were practically children when they came into power," says Saul, and they only wielded that power for a handful of years. "What they accomplished in that brief period is stunning. The laws they passed provided the underpinnings for the country we now live in—our system of municipal democracy, our civil service, our railroads, our public universities, our post office."

Extraordinary Canadians indeed.

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