

POST BOOKS

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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Charlotte Gray



Charlotte Gray's new book, *Canada: A Portrait in Letters 1800 - 2000*, is a collection of more than

200 letters which reveal Canadian history in the making. Gray exchanged e-mails with Post Books from her home in Ottawa.

Q. How did you collect the letters?

A. I wrote to every historian I could think of for suggestions; I published several articles describing the project and asking for submissions; I pestered friends and acquaintances for letters they had stored in their basements; I had a wonderful researcher, Deborah Van Seters, who trolled through the stacks of the University of Toronto library looking for volumes of published correspondence. By the end of the research phase, I had over 3,500 letters from which to choose.

Q. Why are letters such an important part of our history?

A. Because they tell us what it was really like — to see cholera take the lives of your wife and five children in 1832, or to fall in love in 1889, or to fight in the trenches in 1916, or to watch your daughter become a drug addict in 1987. Personal letters are like snapshots, catching a unique private moment. They make history three dimensional by giving us voices from the past. I've included famous voices, such as Louis Riel, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Winston Churchill and Dr. Norman Bethune, but most of the letters are from ordinary people writing from the heart.

Q. What do these letters say about us?

A. At one level, they reveal the timelessness of human emotions — wives longing for husbands to return from political campaigns or war; young men adoring the adventure of crossing the continent or prospecting in the north. But I'm also struck by how writers rose to challenges. One young woman writes exuberantly about setting up home in Fort Edmonton in 1879, when there were only 157 non-native people living there and two of the other four non-native women wouldn't talk to her. Another woman, a peacekeeper, writes in 1999 to her sister about what she would pack if she was a refugee like so many of the people she is seeing in Bosnia. The one aspect of Canadian society that has changed dramatically is the level of overt racism. Some of the throwaway comments from the 19th-century letters about non-European immigrants and First Nations people are awful.

Q. Which is your favourite letter in the collection?

A. I particularly love a rather rude letter from a young Nova Scotian fisherman in 1890. And I wince each time I reread a 1942 letter from a scared and angry Japanese-Canadian woman in Vancouver, describing how the provincial government was deporting members of her community from the coast and confiscating their property.

Q. What's your next project?

A. I am finishing a book called *This Museum Called Canada*, which is about all the best and most interesting artefacts from our past. Then I start another biography, *Mr. and Mrs. Bell: The Story of Mabel Hubbard and Alexander Graham Bell*.

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