

## Review

*Janis Thiessen*

**Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill.** *Like Our Mountains: A History of Armenians in Canada.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.

Winner of a 2006 Clio Prize from the Canadian Historical Association, Kaprielian-Churchill's history of Armenian Canadians combines the strengths of popular and scholarly history. The book was originally to have been part of the Generations series, but was thirty years in the making. A revision and expansion of Kaprielian-Churchill's doctoral thesis on Armenians in Ontario, this detailed survey history ends in 1988, shortly before Armenia declared independence in 1991.

*Like Our Mountains* makes extensive use of primary sources – particularly interviews. The author's collection of interviews personally conducted over the course of three decades is supplemented by oral history projects performed by students attending Armenian schools in Toronto. She is clearly aware of the role of the interviewer in the shaping of interview content, observing that

[a]t times... the interview moved beyond uncovering facts and evolved into a discussion/debate between the informant and the historian. Thus, the interview itself became a historical text – a vivid reflection and manifestation of the informant's and the investigator's historical experience and vision (xxxiv).

In addition to interviews, the personal items – letters, photos, diaries – of individual Armenian-Canadians are used. Many of these latter, since production of the book, have been deposited in archives. Poems written by Armenians and Armenian-Canadians, sprinkled throughout the narrative, provide literary insight into the experience of emigrants and immigrants.

Historians who share the ethnic background and/or religious commitments of the group(s) they are studying are often open to charges of bias. Of course, what is too often forgotten is that most (if not all) historians choose their areas of study because of some sort of personal interest in the subject matter. In ethnic history, the connection is simply more apparent. Kaprielian-Churchill treats her source material with an even hand, however, and carefully avoids hagiography. She openly avows that one of her purposes in writing this history is to assist in the (re)creation of an Armenian-Canadian identity, noting that the book is for

the young woman who recreated her identity as an adult, learning to speak and read Armenian on her own, since her parents had rejected their Armenian identity in an attempt to be Canadian. It is for the young woman whose father was disowned [sic] by his parents for marrying a non-Armenian. It is for the young man who is ashamed of his background because his grandmother, overwhelmed by her terrible experiences during the Genocide, was eventually driven to a mental institution. This work is for all those who grew up in an atmosphere of woe and lamentation and who too seldom rejoiced in the victory and successes of their people (xxxv).

Kaprielian-Churchill examines the three waves of Armenian immigration to Canada: before the First World War, the period from 1914 to 1950, and the post-1950 migration. In each period, she examines the interactions of ethnic identity, religious belief and practice, gender, and class. The role of the Anglican church in settlement, and the many political- and class-based divisions within the Armenian church, are explored. The first wave was composed primarily of male immigrants, and the author discusses the creation of community through boarding houses. The use of ethnic and familial networks to find employment and establish businesses is a common theme in ethnic history, and is treated in detail here. She gives attention as well to the process of migration – the financial costs, the role of travel agents, the modes of transportation, and the role of the Canadian immigration department (which restricted Armenian immigration until the third wave, due to the classification of Armenians as Asians).

Two chapters are devoted to the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Turkish government during the First World War. An estimated one and a half million people were killed, and Kaprielian-Churchill spends considerable time and attention discussing the impact of this history on the psyche of survivors and their descendants. Understanding the effects of the genocide, she argues, is central to understanding the identity of Armenian-Canadians. She concludes that the recognition of the genocide by the Canadian government in 2004 “highlighted the integration of [Armenian Canadians] into Canadian society at the same time that it reinforced group solidarity.” (477)

*Like Our Mountains* is a well-written book that manages to be both passionate and balanced. The author demonstrates considerable skill in integrating copious first-person accounts. Illustrated with numerous photographs, this book deserves the attention (and admiration) of ethnic and oral historians alike.