

Beyond the Shickshock Mountains: A Canadian Talon Saga

Malcolm Mills

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With political tension, dangerous pirates, and ventures into unknown lands, Malcolm Mills's *Beyond the Shickshock Mountains* is a vivid historical fiction following three men in the Talon family as they fight against injustice and search for lasting freedom. Though the book occurs during the Seven Years War between France and Britain and focuses mainly on the lands that would become Canada, it captures the spirit and resolve that defined most pioneers as they traveled westward all across North America.

Told in three parts, the book features the stories of Jean George Talon, Shannagan Talon, and Trevallion Talon, three fictionalized descendants of the first Intendant of New France. Each must overcome political oppression in order to fight for the free life that is inherently his right, battling against corrupt powers and violent pirates to pursue what is just. Jean George leaves his longtime home and guides many people from his village to a new land. Shannagan runs away from a life of indefinite servitude into an unknown world for the chance to be free, and when Trevallion is captured while attempting to visit home, he makes a daring escape, regains what is stolen from him and his family, and returns to the life he has built for himself.

The quickly moving plots are filled with action and encourage readers to make meaningful connections to history by seeing figures similar to the Talon family as exciting pioneers. Trevallion's story includes some of the experiences of the Beothuk tribe, lending perspective on the changing positions and trials of indigenous people during North America's westward expansion. Although there is an interesting foreword, a small map or timeline would have been helpful for those unfamiliar with the history and geographic area covered.

Each Talon's trials generally represent the larger struggle of all pioneers in that age, and common themes of freedom, honor, and justice are examined throughout. The writing comes across as a bit dramatic at times; but the tone is usually appropriate to the significant actions of the book. And while it sometimes seems like the characters have an inordinate amount of luck on their side as plans unfold, they certainly suffer losses and consequences.

Mills captures the worldview and values of the time, as well as the political tensions between the French and British, and an opportunity for discussion on stereotypes, values, general history, colonization, and even gender roles is offered up.

In these triumphant stories, celebrating the honorable man who fights for good, a part of history becomes very much alive and the fictionalized dramas make for an engaging read.

ALICIA SONDHI (May / June 2011)

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