

Book Review Encyclopedia aimed at youngsters

By BOB SPENCE

Long before "nationalist" became a synonym for Quebec separatist, Mel Hurtig was known as a nationalist - a Canadian nationalist.

The Alberta book publisher, who has been in the forefront of various pro-Canada advocacy groups, has taken the biggest financial gamble of his publishing career with an ambitious project that is so Canadian you could use a maple leaf as a page-marker.

The Junior Encyclopedia of Canada, the first encyclopedia written specifically for young Canadians, is a treasure trove of information written in plain language.

Hurtig Publishers' \$12.5-million project, the largest publishing project in Canadian history, has culminated in a five-volume set of beautifully illustrated books packed with everything from Canadian history to space travel to the arts.

With more than 4,500 entries and 3,000 illustrations, including 500 specifically commissioned for this edition, it puts every other junior encyclopedia to shame when it comes to providing pertinent information about Canada.

CANADIAN EYES

In general articles in American or British junior encyclopedias, Canadian achievements are often ignored. The Junior Encyclopedia of Canada looks at the world from a Canadian perspective.

Aimed at eight to 15 year olds, it is both an educational tool and a statement of what Canada was and is.

Numerous sidebars enliven the text, with anecdotes or examples. A sidebar on the entry of banking, for example, explains what happens when you write a cheque.

Care was obviously taken on not only what information to include, but how to present it.

Hurtig received grants totalling more than \$1.5 million, but his publishing company put up nearly \$11 million, including \$8 million from bank loans. He is delighted with the initial response to the encyclopedia.

In a telephone interview, Hurtig explained that the original concept - starting the junior version by rewriting major portions of Hurtig's Canadian Encyclopedia - was quickly discarded. "We wanted to make sure that children could understand. We had 130 experts in education and communications prepare the material.

"We studied the curriculum in all the provinces and tried to make sure the entries were related to the curriculum."

And, items about such topics as pop music and children's authors and literature were added.

Hurtig is bypassing direct sales by bookstores, because of problems he encountered in 1988 with the second edition of The Canadian Encyclopedia. It was being sold through bookstores for \$175 a set, but Coles, which received a huge discount because of its large-volume purchase, started selling the sets at \$99 each. Small stores couldn't match the price and a number of people who had paid \$175 for a set demanded a refund from the publisher.

Now, Hurtig is making sure there is just one price - until Christmas, that is. The five-volume set is \$159.95 before Christmas, then the price climbs to \$189.95. Many bookstores and other stores have display copies, brochures and order forms, and you can order a set at these stores. The encyclopedias, however, will be shipped to customers by the publisher (with the stores receiving a commission).

Bob Spence is the editor of Thomson News Service.
- Thomson News Service.

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