The Luck of the Horseman
by Bill Gallaher

Reviewed by Bob Armstrong

It’s a truism of Canadian cultural criticism that we haven’t been very good in this country at turning our historical figures into the kinds of larger-than-life cultural icons our southern neighbours have in such abundance. Likewise, we have tended to produce stories of our past that are grounded in social and political context, rather than soaked in action and adventure.

This middle volume of a trilogy of historical novels by British Columbia’s Bill Gallaher is packed with frontier adventure, moving at a brisk pace from the foothills of Southern Alberta, to the Yukon gold rush, to the South African veldt. And while Gallaher does provide context, reflection, and nuance, the overall effect is of a slightly old-fashioned, rip-snorting yarn, rather than a modern Canadian “meditation on history and memory,” as our historical novels are so often described.

Gallaher uses the fictional life of his narrator, Jack Strong, as an entry point for a number of dramatic events in the history of the Canadian West. In the first volume of the series, The Frog Lake Massacre, young Jack Strong was caught up in the eponymous conflict and later joined NWMP Inspector Sam Steele in the hunt for Cree chief Big Bear.

Steele, a larger-than-life figure from Canadian history whose career spanned the Fenian Raids to the First World War, shows up regularly in Gallaher’s trilogy, as Jack Strong continually crosses his path.

This volume commences with Strong, now in his thirties, reconnecting with Steele in the search for a wanted Blood Indian murderer named Black Feather (based closely on the real-life story of a fugitive named Charcoal).

In a rapid series of adventures, Strong then contracts with Pat Burns, the cattleman who founded Burns Meats and co-founded the Calgary Stampede, to drive a herd over the mountains of Alaska and the Yukon to Dawson City during the 1898 gold rush. Upon returning home, he signs up with the newly formed Lord Strathcona’s Horse, commanded by Steele, to fight with the British in the Boer War in South Africa.

Gallaher is like Saskatchewan’s Guy Vanderhaeghe or Alberta’s Fred Stenson in his interweaving of real historical figures throughout his fiction. The Luck of the Horseman, in fact, covers similar ground to Stenson’s most recent novel, The Great Karoo, which opened with Charcoal’s execution before following a group of Alberta cowboys to the Boer War.

Though his use of Western Canadian history invites this comparison, Gallaher is less explicitly a literary author. He uses a single, reliable, first-person narrator, who is consistently sympathetic and whose motives are never in doubt.

There is, as a result, a slightly old-fashioned feel to the book.

At the same time, Gallaher’s sensibilities – and those of Strong – are contemporary. He doesn’t flinch from describing actions by British and Canadian forces that would today be considered war crimes, including reprisals against civilian populations and execution of captured Boer snipers, and the scenes involving the hunt for the fugitive Black Feather are handled with sensitivity and understanding.
In addition to telling the stories of Jack’s historical adventure, Gallaher creates an emotional arc for his character in a series of flashbacks that tell us about his family life.

These chapters provide a basis for his wandering and his yearning as we read about how tragedy has haunted him, beginning with his childhood with an abusive, alcoholic American Civil War veteran for a father.

“Tragedy stands just off-stage in everyone’s lives,” Jack says, at the beginning of his story. “For the lucky ones, it never makes an entrance; for me, it burst on and stole the show” (1).

The just-published final volume promises to take Jack Strong’s story further into the twentieth century, through the First World War and the On to Ottawa Trek of the Great Depression, events that will give Gallaher the chance to incorporate both tragedy and heroism.

Readers with an interest in Canadian history, a taste for adventure, and a love of books set in the great outdoors will find Gallaher’s series a delightful way to encounter the epic elements of our past.

Bob Armstrong is a Winnipeg writer with a weakness for Westerns.

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