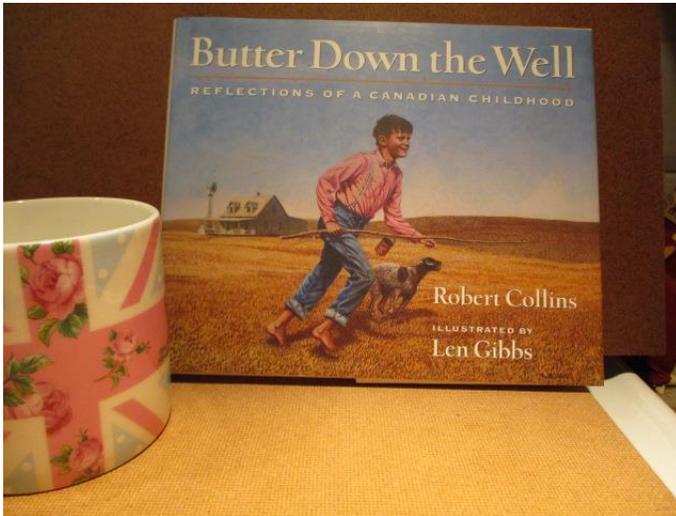


# Butter down the Well

By Rod Fraser

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The author of *Butter down the Well*, Robert Collins, was a client during my working years — at a time when he was in his seventies. He had retired a few years before I met him, but still worked each day, writing books and earning an income for his efforts.

In fact, it was very much a hobby. He didn't need the income. Bob was a frugal sort and had prepared for his retirement by carefully saving over his working years.

In total, Bob wrote fourteen books. But the one that generated the largest royalties was *Butter down the Well*. It sold over 50,000 copies. In Canada, that

makes it a very successful book. It was also the first in a trilogy of books that purported to tell Bob's life story. How typical of Bob's entrepreneurial instincts to spin out one memoir into three books.

I recall at one of our lunches, Bob told me how much his mother enjoyed this book. It gave her a certain cachet among her friends. Her good feelings about the book are not surprising. Floy played a leading role in this lovely story.

Bob's brother, Larry, had a different opinion. He felt Bob embellished and distorted their family story. He wasn't a fan of the memoir. Of course, it is worth stating that very often, siblings experience childhood differently. It didn't surprise me that Larry held a contrary view.



The story of this interesting family all started one Sunday afternoon in May 1918, when Jack Collins washed up, donned his brown suit and drove to the neighbors to meet the new school teacher. As they used to say at the time — Jack was "going girling".

The object of his attention was Floy Leona Hatzell, a young woman from North Dakota, hired by the community to teach at the local School. She was reported to be a "good looking", which next "to being a good worker", was the highest compliment a woman could hope for at that time.

Floy had "glossy chestnut hair, large dark eyes, high cheekbones and sensitive lips". Jack was smitten at first sight. Floy was also favorably impressed. Jack was well-mannered, intelligent and a sharp dresser. He loved to read, appreciated music and was a grand companion most days. It wasn't long before it was clear: "Miss Hartzell was spoken for."

There were two problems with marrying Jack Collins. The first was Jack's health. He was partially disabled from the war and sent home in September of 1915. He was "discharged with a 75 percent disability pension, heart and kidney damage, a spot on his lung and chronic rheumatism." He was told "no liquor, no smoking, no indoor work .... You must work outdoors."

Fortunately, Jack owned a 320 acre farm in Saskatchewan near the village of Shamrock. And he intended to farm it. And this brought into focus the second problem. The only house on the property was a one room bachelor shack. When Floy saw it, she told Jack, "I can't live in — that thing .... I want a proper house."

Jack handled the first problem by asking Floy to postpone their marriage for two years. "By then", he explained, "I'll be strong enough to work full time on the farm."

With respect to the second problem, Jack mort-

gaged his property and used the money to buy the house Floy wanted — ordered from Timothy Eaton's mail-order catalogue. "Up went the house. It took [Jack] twenty-three years to pay off the mortgage."

By the autumn of 1920, when the house was ready, Jack and Floy had been married for a few months and they settled comfortably into their new home and life.



A few years later, their two boys, Bob and Larry, were born. *Butter down the Well* is largely the story of their childhood, growing up on the prairies during the depression.

And what a childhood. Poor and deprived as they were, they were only poor in the sense they didn't have money. They read books, sang songs, talked about the issues of the day and enjoyed each other, as only a close family can. Bob told it like this:

*My mother's "quiet strength buoyed up [my father] on his black days."*

*"[But] when his spirits were high, he swept us all with him on a tidal wave of good cheer.... My brother and I learned so much: how to cope, how never to give up, how to salvage fun from the simplest things."*

*"Without her we might not have survived; without*

*him we might have missed the enchantment of life. They loved and supported and complemented one another. They were 'spoken for' through all their years together."*



It's difficult to know what to include in this review and what to discard. There are so many charming anecdotes in *Butter down the Well*. Well, I'll just write about the things that interest me and leave you to discover the rest when you read Bob's book. Perhaps I will start with some details about his schooling.

*"Standon [School] stood on its own stark, grassy yard, its white paint peeling and not one tree to relieve the barren landscape. Its lone classroom held twenty-five desks for grades one to ten."*

Bob acknowledged one of his major failings was he liked school. His mother taught him to read in his years before age six, so he was well prepared and eager to learn. Both he and Larry did well at Standon.

But they were wise enough to keep their fond feelings to themselves. It didn't do to announce to the bigger guys, you were happy to be at school. It could lead to a 'pounding' or worse humiliations.

As Bob tells it, "we learned as much as any pupils any time. Jean Dempson instilled in me more English

literature and grammar than any high school or university thereafter.”

“[At home] we told stories together, read aloud to one another and read privately together, all four [of us] burrowed in our favorite living room chairs with books.” The family did not own a radio during the worst of the depression, but Jack Collins finally bought a mantel ‘Philco’ for thirty-four dollars in 1939, paying it off at the rate of two dollars a month.

It’s hard to imagine a family living in rural isolation, without a television, radio or internet to break the tedium. But that was the norm for many rural families in the hard days of the depression.

Bob explains the radio like this, “Thanks to Hitler, we were now in step with the golden age of radio.” With the war against Germany being fought in Europe, the news was just too important for Jack Collins and his family to be left in the dark.

The radio was purchased and placed on a table in the living room. The family listened to “Lux Radio Theatre ... [and] The Guiding Light” in the evenings. Floy “fitted her mending and sewing around the Metropolitan Opera from New York” on Saturday afternoons.



Coming from such a literate family, I wasn’t

surprised to learn Bob and Larry both earned their living as journalists in their adult years. Bob got an early start. At age ten, he won a one-dollar first prize for submitting a story "*Christmas at the Browns*", printed in the *Torchbearer's Magazine*, a Regina *Leader-Post* publication for young people.

The *Torchbearers Magazine* was a wonderful idea. Young people turned pen to paper and wrote essays, poems and short stories for publication. This "blessed magazine" printed "our stuff for all the West to read, rating it "C" to "A" in an effort to raise the standard." Some "*Torchies*", like Bob and Larry, "were set on a course for life."



One item that interested me during my reading of *Butter down the well*, was that the Standon School finished with grade ten. I knew this was common in many schools of that era, but since Bob and Larry continued on in school. I wondered how this was possible.

I mentioned this curiosity one day while having lunch with Bob. He wasn't impressed. I recall him saying, "I explained it in the book. You obviously missed it."

I could see the editor in Bob, explaining to his idiot reporter that he (or me in this instance) had missed an important detail. I went home, and sure

enough read the following,

*"I graduated from grade ten — the end of the line in our country school. I began commuting by bicycle and saddle horse to Shamrock High School. World weary and wise, I brought back tales of high life in the metropolis."*

I thought of telling Bob at our next lunch that it was just a tiny paragraph. Anyone could have missed it. But I decided to 'suck it up'. Editor Bob Collins had spoken: I should read things more carefully and come prepared for our lunches. I intended to do just that.



The latter part of the book discusses the early years of the war and the end of the depression, when the poor harvests of the 1930s were no more. Bob writes,

*"The crop of 1942 was our best ever. I slaved over the stooks. They were caught in unseasonable snow and stood out all winter, but I had built them well."*

*"In the spring, the threshing machine belatedly poured a torrent of wheat and oats into our granaries. My father paid off the mortgage and other debts that had lingered for twenty-three years."*

In the summer of 1942, with the new prosperity brought about by the war years, Jack Collins "began managing the Shamrock lumberyard, in search of a steadier income and an easier life." It was then that Bob took on the management of the farm.

By this time, he was close to enlistment age and wrote away for "the RCAF brochure". When it was clear Bob would be 'joining up', the family arranged to rent the farm and Bob traveled to Moose Jaw to enlist in the air force. Once accepted, the recruiter told him,

*"Go home for the harvest. You'll be needed there... Right after that, report to Brandon Manning pool."*

On Bob's final morning on the farm, he rose early and packed his gear in his "father's worn club bag." His father drove him to the train station. Bob writes,

*"When I looked back, my mother was standing on the flat stone beside the back door. It was only the second time in my life I had seen her cry."*

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