

Book Reviews

Canadian Confederation at the Crossroads. The search for a federal-provincial balance. Edited by Michael Walker. Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1978. Pp. xx, 361.

The surface qualities of this paperback are inviting. The title is “trendy” and immediate. The cover is striking: the Peace Tower and Parliament in black against a shining red background. The jacket blurb conveys a sense of present crisis, and impending doom to be warded off: “From the factory floor to Parliament, from living rooms to boardrooms, the country’s future is a topic never far from the headlines. . . . Canada has arrived at an important and a critical crossroads.” The reader is promised — “a thoughtful and thought-provoking contribution on the most vital issues facing policy-makers and the public alike today. . . . required reading for all Canadians concerned with the future of their country.”

What follows is something less than that. There are nine essays, from different authors, on a number of only loosely related subjects: Equalisation payments; Uniformity of Law; the CBC; Law enforcement; Housing and Urban Development Policy; and so on. There is no common conceptual framework; no central, unifying, core essay that seeks to synthesize the main, empirically based conclusions of the individual authors and relate them, in a disciplined way, to the postulated crisis of Confederation. In what is, really, a series of disparate studies, the integrative factor is supplied by a series of “recommendations” for recasting of the constitutional system and so, presumably, for “saving Confederation.” These recommendations range from the low-level and narrowly technical and sometimes trivial to the high-level and general and sometimes trite or platitudinous. As example of the first category: “The Provinces should create a special agency to provide their governments with carefully researched and documented positions in their dealings with the federal government on matters of law enforcement.” As example of the second category: “The objectives of national unity and regional or provincial

autonomy are not opposites of which one must predominate. Rather, these objectives are *dualities* which must coexist and must be reckoned with as equally legitimate aspirations in any new constitution." Sometimes the wild card turns up, as in the recommendation that "the CBC should be privatised over a period of years." It is an interesting and no doubt (to some) stimulating suggestion, but its relevance to solving the postulated crisis of Confederation is not sufficiently established.

This collection of essays assembles a group of bright, talented and for the most part younger specialist scholars or administrators or businessmen. Strangely enough, for a volume so resolutely dedicated to the pursuit of a new constitution, there is not one specialist in constitutional law and government among them. They are mainly economists, and perhaps that is the reason why the recommendations oriented towards a new Confederation seem to fall so flat. Is the sum of their individual conclusions, in fact, that there isn't so very much wrong with the federal system today that the usual pragmatic adjustments and compromises, that we have grown accustomed to, over the years, will not correct? There is, in fact, nothing in this collection of essays that should startle or dismay any confirmed federalist, and that could not be taken care of by incremental constitutional change, within the existing constitutional rules of the game, if that were, in fact, our political consensus today. It is not necessary to agree or to disagree with the individual authors' conclusions in suggesting that the present volume might have made a far more stimulating and thought-provoking contribution to the current Confederation debate if — more nearly reflecting its quite sober and prosaic contents — it had been entitled "Canadian Confederation not at the Crossroads. Pragmatic adjustments, as usual."

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Victoria: A Primer for Regional History in Architecture, by Martin Segger and Douglas Franklin, Watkins Glen, N.Y.: The American Life Foundation and Study Institute, 1979. Pp. 377. \$15.00 (cloth). \$10.00 (paper).

Rattenbury, by Terry Reksten. Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1978. Pp. 204. \$12.95.

Victoria, the gracious capital of British Columbia, has long been admired for its fine homes and public buildings as well as for its proverbial mild

climate and beautiful gardens. Despite this admiration, the visitor has been hard pressed to find any helpful information on the city's fine buildings. Two new volumes will do much to fill this gap.

Only a recent pamphlet (*Walking Tour: Old Town Victoria*, Victoria [1974]) and a municipal report (City of Victoria Heritage Advisory Committee, *Heritage Conservation Report*, Victoria, 1975) have offered any really useful data. Upon learning that the force behind both was Martin Segger, the chairman of the Heritage Advisory Committee, Director of the Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery at the University of Victoria, and winner of a Heritage Canada Travel Award in 1975, one can be thankful that Segger's long-awaited book on Victoria's buildings has appeared. Segger has combined with photographer Douglas Franklin to produce a volume that will long stand as a reference guide to the architecture of Victoria.

The author describes his book as "an armchair guide to Victoria's architectural history and some of its significant buildings." Four tours of the city's architecture make up the heart of the book. Altogether ninety buildings are described in detail. The selection is intelligent and comprehensive, and presents a fine picture of Victoria building.

Each tour begins with an overview of the route, followed by a lengthy description and one or more photographs of each building. The descriptions are knowledgeable and interesting, full of information on the client, architect and construction, as well as offering a full analysis of each building's architectural style or type.

As the subtitle reveals, the book has its pedagogical bent as well. *Victoria: A Primer for Regional History in Architecture* strives to show how one can read history — and a distinctly regional history at that — in the architecture of a city, as well as simply learning the history of architecture. Segger brings out his thesis in four introductory essays. He explains:

Victoria's residents wanted to ritualize their climatic paradise into a pattern of consumable daily life. They did so through architecture — the one man-made product which best adjusted the environment of daily life to their ideal. Thus it is important to trace not only the styles of domestic, commercial and institutional buildings, but also to rediscover their significance in the popular imagination.

This search for the *significance* of buildings in the imagination leads Segger to suggest why Samuel Maclure's house for George Richardson is so ordered ("the middle class merchants were neither deceived by the romantic fantasies of Ruskinian medievalism . . . nor attracted by the doctrinaire faddism of the American Arts and Crafts movement"), why

the maverick Reverend Edward Cridge and his architect John Teague (who emerges as one of the heroes of the book) produced a board-and-batten Carpenter Gothic church (it “suited the near fundamentalist beliefs of the dissenting congregation . . . [and] carried with it implications of indigenous rustic piety”), and why the quaint Morris tobacco shop on Government Street sports a Georgian façade (it “emulates the atmosphere of one of those high Victorian masculine institutions, a gentleman’s club”).

Biographies of leading architects, a bibliography, a glossary, and an index increase the usefulness of the book. It admittedly has its weaknesses as well. The tours will probably prove hard to follow because of the uninformative maps by Stuart Stark and the dichotomy between overview and description. The design is disappointing and the competent photographs are grey and coarsely screened. (The Bay, on page 70, is reproduced backwards.) The author is sometimes careless with minor facts, and the book contains noticeable editorial lapses (e.g., the names of the tours appear in the contents but not with the tours themselves). Lapses aside, every architecture buff who visits Victoria will want to have a copy.

The other book under review is a very different affair. It deals mainly with people, not buildings. Consider the plot: a flamboyant Yorkshire-trained architect migrates to British Columbia, resolves to design every great public building in the province, charms his clients and angers his rivals, deals in steamboats in the Klondike and land in the Bulkley Valley, falls in love at the age of fifty-six with a pretty flapper half his age, abandons his wife, returns to England in scandal, and is murdered at the hand of his new wife’s teen-aged lover. For the dénouement, the distraught widow takes her own life by stabbing herself in the heart. This is the story of Francis Mawson Rattenbury, and it is heady tragedy. So much so that the finale formed the subject of *Cause Célèbre*, a play by Terence Rattigan that ran in London’s West End in 1977. Rattenbury’s full story is now told in a fine biography by Victoria’s Terry Reksten.

Reksten may be better known as a dynamic leader on the preservation scene in Victoria than as a writer, but she has met the literary challenge admirably. *Rattenbury* is well researched, well organized, well written, and well printed. The lively narrative is peppered with enough carefully documented personal touches to reveal the architect’s arrogant, aggressive and manipulative personality. It is hard to like “Ratz” — indeed, Reksten herself seems almost to have been done in by him — but she is never so one-sided as to lose sight of the positive strengths and talents that drove him on.

This book is about the architect rather than his architecture. With admirable candour, Reksten explains her approach:

I have avoided a detailed critical analysis of Rattenbury's buildings for two reasons. As someone with a general, rather than a specialized, interest I find the vocabulary of architectural criticism confounding and the subject both technical and complex.

The author, it seems, has shirked a responsibility. Buildings are described only cursorily, and there is not even a list of the architect's works. This can only be regretted.

The author's second reason for avoiding architectural analysis is that "Rattenbury simply wasn't a particularly original architect. He broke no new ground." (A bad metaphor or a good pun?) True, perhaps, that his buildings were not "daringly creative," but they cannot be dismissed as insignificant. He had a perfect sense of timing. Ratz was among the first to adopt and exploit the important Château Style, and used other modes with equal facility where appropriate. His buildings got bad press mainly because of the bitterness with which jealous rivals described them. As recently as 1972, the then octogenarian Vancouver architect G. L. T. Sharp complained to this reviewer that the design for the B.C. parliament buildings had been stolen from T. E. Colcutt's Imperial Institute in London (a building which Reksten notes that Ratz admired). Bad reputations are hard to kill.

Rattenbury's greatest genius was, as Reksten states, "his ability to envision monumental buildings in spectacular settings, buildings which would have an immediate and unforgettable visual impact." Ratz was a bold and visionary planner of the calibre of Daniel H. Burnham. His staged development of Victoria's Inner Harbour, with its parliament buildings, Empress Hotel, and the later Crystal Garden and CPR Steamship Terminal (the latter two in collaboration with P. L. James; the last is omitted from the text), is nothing short of spectacular. And this complex might have paled had Ratz been able to carry out his grandiose plans for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway's terminal facilities at Prince Rupert (a project killed when his client went down with the *Titanic*).

Rattenbury may not contain the deserved detailed treatment of architecture — although Reksten does pass on more about the buildings than she admits to — but it remains good reading and a good biography. In this, as in *Victoria*, the city's architecture has been done a fine service.*

Ottawa

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