

Book Reviews

Life and Death of a Union: The Canadian Seamen's Union, 1936-1944,
by John Stanton. Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1978.
Pp. 182.

There is no more dramatic tale in the annals of the Canadian labour movement than the history of the Canadian Seamen's Union. Founded in the depths of the depression by two unemployed sailors, the union spread rapidly among Canada's exploited seamen. And what exploitation! For less than a dollar a day these hapless men were required to put in twelve-to eighteen-hour shifts and work under the most trying of conditions subject to the whims of invariably cruel officers. There was no job security and sailors were required to pay their own transportation costs from port to port to their next jobs. Through the heroic efforts of a handful of seamen, most of whom were members or supporters of the Communist Party, the Canadian Seamen's Union soon became the spokesman for thousands of Canadian sailors. By the end of the war it was the largest and most powerful marine union in the country, so strong in fact that in 1946 for twenty-eight days the CSU closed the Great Lakes to Canadian merchant ships. From the Gulf of St. Lawrence to Thunder Bay no Canadian ship moved until the ship owners agreed to the terms laid down by the union.

At the beginning of 1947 the CSU seemed impregnable — strong enough to take on and defeat an alliance of ruthless ship owners and hostile national and provincial governments. Yet in just over a year the CSU had all but disappeared, its bargaining rights removed, its leadership decapitated, its membership demoralized, its power gone, the union destroyed.

It is hard to imagine a more striking melodrama than the rise and fall of the CSU. Both heroes and villains are readily identifiable and larger than life — brutal, greedy ship owners, scheming politicians, corrupt and cunning union bosses, valiant union organizers, defiant though guileless sailors. It is a story fraught with perfidy and violence, venality and mur-

der, a story full of beatings, kidnappings, fraud, and sweetheart deals, a story in which the Canadian government becomes a witting accomplice to a gang of union goons imported from the United States, and allows them — indeed encourages them — to run wild on Canada's waterfront. Indeed nothing more becomes the CSU than the manner of its death. It did not die from natural causes; it was murdered — though some argue that it was the self-inflicted wounds which ultimately proved fatal.

That anyone can write a dull, dismal book out of such material boggles the mind, but John Stanton has accomplished just that. And what a shame, for as a veteran west-coast radical and as a long-time lawyer for the CSU and other left-wing unions and causes, John Stanton seemed the perfect choice for this book. After all, he was involved in much of the CSU's history, he knew all the protagonists, and seemed to be aware of many of the important documents. Stanton's problem was that he obviously couldn't decide whether he was writing about the union, or his own memoirs, or a history of the trade union movement in Canada. Thus there are seemingly endless pages of unnecessary details on Mackenzie King's relationship with the Rockefellers and on insignificant cases Stanton handled on behalf of seamen. There is really nothing new in this book that has not already been said by others. Anyone will learn very little from this book — though obviously the bias is different.

And Stanton does have definite biases. He has little use for the Communist Party, referring to it throughout the book as the "old Communist Party." He does this, he tells us, to avoid confusing the party of Buck, Salsberg, et al, with the "new Communist Party" being formed at this very minute somewhere in Canada. For the demise of the CSU he blames "employer intransigence, government complicity, judicial bias and American thuggery." To this he might have added Communist party miscalculation, faulty union strategy and the hostility of organized labour in Canada.

Stanton was badly served by his editors. The book abounds with historical and typographical errors. For example, he mistakes Jim Laxer for his father Bob, and tells us that the All-Canadian Congress of Labour was founded in 1929, which is precisely two years after its real creation. Though these errors are disconcerting they do not make this a bad book. What makes it bad is not only what is in the book, but also what Stanton has left out. He provides few character sketches. Many of his readers — and naturally students of the Canadian labour movement — would have appreciated knowing something about Harry Davis or Dewar Ferguson or a dozen others who were active in the CSU and who Stanton must

have known. As well, he says very little about the SIU and Hal Banks, who ultimately provided the coup-de-grâce to the CSU. There is absolutely no mention of the hiring hall, which played a key role in the rise and fall of the CSU. The list is endless.

One gets the impresison that this book was the result of a series of stream-of-consciousness sessions with a tape recorder. Granted, Stanton has built into the narrative some court transcripts, some clippings and even some documents from the Public Archives of Canada, but these often detract from the story he is trying to tell. Stanton obviously has a story to tell — and a fascinating one at that. Unfortunately he did not tell it in this book. His attempt to join such successful British Columbia radical amateur historians as Jack Scott, Harry Rankin and even the Vancouver Longshoremen has ended in failure. There is a book in John Stanton. Sadly, this is not it.

York University

IRVING ABELLA

W. L. Morton, ed., *God's Galloping Girl: The Peace River Diaries of Monica Storrs, 1929-1931*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1979. Pp. xlix, 307.

Monica Storrs, an English gentlewoman, came to the remote Peace River district of British Columbia as an Anglican Church worker in 1929, at a time when North America's last agricultural frontier was being rapidly settled. Although she initially committed herself to remain for only a year, she grew to love Peace River and its people, among whom she continued to live and work until 1950. *God's Galloping Girl* is Monica's own account of her first two years in Canada, written in the form of weekly diaries which were sent to England to be circulated among her friends and supporters. Monica maintained her regular diary report until World War II, but the typewritten copy preserved in the Archives of British Columbia is too extensive to be reproduced in its entirety in this volume. Therefore the editors decided to publish the complete text of the first two years rather than an abbreviated version of the whole period. As a result, readers do not learn of the maturation of Monica's work in the depression conditions of the 1930s, when she attempted to bring material assistance as well as spiritual encouragement to the penniless settlers and opened her home to students from outlying farms who wished to attend

the new high school. However, they are compensated by a full, rich description of the early, formative period, which is essential for understanding both the evolution of Anglican work in the North Peace and Monica's response to Canadian conditions. Monica's lively commentary is supplemented by the careful editing of W. L. Morton and Vera Fast, who identify and provide short explanatory notes for most of the person-ages mentioned, whether they be visiting dignitaries or local settlers. Their general introduction also helps to set the book in the broader context of frontier settlement and Church of England activity, while R. D. Symons, a friend of Monica and husband of one of her co-workers, contributes personal details which illuminate Monica's life and personality.

Monica Storrs was one of a growing number of British churchwomen who answered the call to promote Christianity in the less accessible regions of western Canada. Even in the more settled areas of the prairies, the Anglican Church was not self-sufficient and appealed to England for support. Lay preachers and clergymen were recruited from Britain and Church of England societies sent financial aid as well. Women played an indispensable though still supporting role in enabling the church to respond to the needs of the western Canadian mission field. Women were not accepted as priests in the Anglican Church, although the controversial issue of the ordination of women was seriously debated in the 1920s. However, women participated enthusiastically in the expanding lay movement within the Church, especially in conducting Christian education work among women and children. Hence it was Eva Hassell, a pioneer Sunday School Caravan worker, who encouraged Monica Storrs to go to Fort St. John, where the itinerant caravaners had prepared the way for a permanent mission worker. Although she did not specifically define her responsibilities, Monica worked primarily with women and children. She devoted much of her time to organizing and directing Sunday schools, Scouts and Guides, and as a District Visitor she was most concerned with the women and children in isolated homes. Indeed, one of the strengths of the book is the insight which Monica gives into the lives of the women so often overlooked in accounts of frontier development. She travelled on foot and by pack horse into regions which could not yet be reached by car and visited the one- or two-room dwellings of isolated families. During her first year in the region she also initiated and conducted church services in the centres of Fort St. John, Baldonnel and Taylor's Flats, but she was unwilling to remain unless a resident clergyman was appointed for the following year.

God's Galloping Girl provides valuable documentary evidence on the growth of Anglican influence in the vast Peace River territory. Monica's strong Christian faith and commitment to the Anglican Church underlay all her reports, but her views on certain issues affecting the character and work of the church were less explicit. She showed that Anglican activity in the Peace district was made possible by assistance from both England and the Montreal-based Fellowship of the West, but did not comment on how the relative strength of the two sources of support might affect the character of the church. The question of denominational boundaries and rivalry also remains unresolved in the book. Monica believed that her mission should be primarily to "our own" — that is, British settlers belonging to the Church of England — but found that she was dealing with people of varying faiths because scattered settlement conditions caused denominational divisions to fade. Nevertheless, Monica continued to share with other representatives of institutional churches a desire to see her own church as strong as possible. While she welcomed the building of a Roman Catholic hospital and co-operated with United Church students to prevent overlapping of activities, she also feared that the Anglican Church might lose ground to the more energetic United and Roman Catholic Churches. Similarly, Monica described her visits to settlers of various origins but made few comments on cultural distinctions and none on the responsibility of the Anglican Church towards American or European newcomers.

Monica's detailed weekly diaries inevitably include some repetition but their cumulative effect is to convey a vivid sense of the fabric of her life as a church worker and of the way in which the aims of the church were fulfilled in practice. The work with Scouts and Guides provides a good illustration. The Church of England sponsored Scouting and Guiding in order to inculcate Christian values, loyalty, and patriotism in participating youth. The division of sexes within the movement was important because both boys and girls were to be taught attitudes and skills appropriate to their future role in life — the boys as physically fit, responsible citizens and the girls as homemakers and mothers. In the 1920s the titles of the columns dealing with the work in the Anglican periodical, *The Canadian Churchman*, were indicative of this division, Boy Scout Notes appearing under the caption "Beside the Camp Fire" and Girl Guide Notes under the caption "Beside the Home Fires." Because she was writing for the benefit of supporters who already understood the underlying aims of her work, Monica did not explain the reasons for trying to start Scout and Guide troops in the little schools of Peace River. However, she did recount with humour, pride and some frustration her successes and failures in

organizing the most northern Scouts and Guides in British Columbia. The enrolment at some schools was only enough for a reasonably sized group if boys and girls were taken together. Arranging meeting times and places also posed problems, although these were not insuperable if the school-teacher and parents co-operated. Far more difficult was the challenge of conveying the true meaning of Scouts and Guides to children growing up in the practical, materialistic atmosphere of a frontier community. From Monica's point of view, both boys and girls enjoyed the team games but were inclined to regard the Law and Promise too lightly. She wondered how to direct the Fort St. John Scouts because "they already know all there is to know about outdoor life, and don't seem to have the wits or imagination to care about any other side of Scouting. At present they are keen because they seem to think I am going to lead them out to track and shoot bears and wolves in a new way!" (p. 18) The Taylor's Flats Scouts created even more problems because they faded away twice, first because of the belief in the community that Scouting was the first step to conscription and death at the front, and the second time because the schoolteacher read them an inspiring story about a Scout who rescued a baby from a burning house and it seemed that after all Scouting might be worse than war. (pp. 83, 97) Compared to the Scouts, the Guides were more easily managed, but they too brought a "stolid matter-of-factness" to the activities and a practical skepticism of Monica's ideals of home-making imported from England. Differences of opinion even rose over the art of bed-making. As Monica reported, one of the issues was "How often you should strip. The general opinion was, that to do it every day, (as sometimes in England), is morbid if not hysterical. Here we arrived at a compromise of *at least* twice a week." (p. 73)

Coming to Canada at the age of forty-one, Monica Storrs brought with her not only her gramophone and her folding harmonium as visible signs of home culture, but also her deep spiritual faith and her sense of British propriety, both products of her upbringing as the daughter of the Dean of Rochester. Her life in northern British Columbia was much easier than that of the majority of women in the district. She arrived with sufficient funds to pay her own expenses and the knowledge that she had the freedom to leave. A boarding place was arranged in advance for her in the comfortable home of May Birley, a graduate nurse with an English background who became a firm friend. When Monica, in company with an English companion, decided to build a house the second year, her funds enabled her to construct a commodious church home — later called the Abbey — in a location with an attractive view yet close to the main

communication road. She was always surrounded by friends and never experienced the loneliness, isolation and privation which was the fate of so many of the women in the Peace River district. Nevertheless, Monica had to make a considerable personal transition from a life of comfort and refinement in England to pioneer conditions on a northern Canadian frontier. She showed determination — which at times the locals might consider foolishness — in making her rounds in spite of the winter cold and the treacherous road conditions. Her spirit was not daunted by a horse which threw her three times, by an ancient car which frequently broke down, by a food diet which could be monotonous, or by a limited water supply. Indeed, she seemed to adapt very readily to the physical conditions of the district and to take advantage of its opportunities, even designing the church hall at Baldonnel. On the other hand, while she had a warm affection for the people, she continued to be surprised by their direct behaviour and the “blissful equality between all parties,” as well as by indications of a lack of spiritual culture. Monica did not disclose her personal emotions in the diaries, which were written intentionally for public distribution. However, R. D. Symons reveals in his introduction that Monica felt rejected and very unhappy during her first weeks at Fort St. John. It was only gradually that she began to understand the people, and, although never entirely losing her middle-class British standard of values, to believe that “quite as wonderful as inheriting the walls and traditions of centuries is to acquire a bit of nameless, untouched bush and start everything from the very bottom” (p. 222).

God's Galloping Girl is a welcome addition to women's history, religious history, and the history of British Columbia settlement. It is a book which can be enjoyed both by those reading for pleasure and by those seeking information.

Carleton University

MARILYN BARBER