

Reflections on the Surface of the Pond: A Review Article

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Benjamin Baltzly: Photographs and journal of an expedition through British Columbia, 1871, edited by Andrew J. Birrell. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978. Pp. 159; *illus.*; *map*.

Rubber Boots for Dancing and other Memories of Pioneer Life in the Bulkley Valley, by Nan Bourgon and edited by Marjorie Rosberg. Box 387, Smithers, B.C.: Tona and Janet Hetherington, 1979. Pp. 138; *illus.*

Writing on early B.C. is rather like watching water skimmers. The object of scrutiny is both near at hand and elusive, individuals appear and are lost in general movement, and activity is more obvious than pattern or purpose. For the author, the sources of these difficulties are not far to seek. He or she writes out of a heterogeneous, transplanted society with neither an indigenous tradition nor a focussed sense of identity, yet with an enveloping momentum that discourages perspective. Individual studies are difficult to situate within an interpretative literature that is still woefully thin and, apart from Martin Robin's somewhat heavy-handed Marxism, cannot rely on an explicit theory of British Columbia to provide a deductive point of attachment. Consequently, as literature on early B.C. proliferates we are treated to more than our share of unassimilated fragments and slick packaging — fare that is all too clearly a symptom of the problem of understanding whence and how modern British Columbia has come to be.

Yet here and there amid this production are books of more interest than their authors or editors have quite realized. Two such have recently crossed my path. One is a collection of photographs and a journal by Benjamin Baltzly, a photographer with a survey party to the North Thompson in 1871, that have been edited by the Head of Acquisitions of the National Photography Collection in the Public Archives of Canada, and attractively published in Toronto by the Coach House Press. The other is an amateur labour-of-love. *Rubber Boots for Dancing* is the

reminiscences of Nan Bourgon, a pioneer in the Bulkley Valley, that have been edited after her death by a friend and published in Smithers by a daughter.

Benjamin Baltzly was an American from Ohio who, in 1871, worked in the William Notman studio in Montreal. He came to British Columbia as the photographer of an expedition led by Alfred Selwyn, Director of the Geological Survey of Canada, that intended to study the geology of the proposed railway route from Kamloops to the Yellowhead Pass via the North Thompson River. The party arrived in Victoria from San Francisco, went on to Yale by steamer, walked the wagon road to Lytton, and from Kamloops set out in a packhorse train of eight men and fifteen horses for the Yellowhead Pass. They never quite got there. The season was too advanced (they left Kamloops on August 19th) and the going too tough. Eventually the horses were abandoned and the party struggled back to Kamloops in mid-November, lucky to be alive. Until he was forced to abandon most of it in the increasingly desperate effort to get back to Kamloops, Baltzly had with him the several hundred pounds of photographic equipment required by the wet collodion process. His journal was published the next summer in the Montreal *Gazette*. Together, the photographs and journal are a remarkable geographical record of a traject across British Columbia and into the wilderness during those suspended years between the gold rushes and the CPR.

After the bustle of San Francisco, Victoria disappointed Baltzly. He photographed a quiet settlement that included Indian houses on one side of the bay, a ragged forest on the skyline, a good deal of substantial mid-Victorian architecture, comfortable homes amid their gardens, and a certain elegance. The survey party posed in suits and hats in front of a formal neo-classical entrance, but its route led into the wilderness. Along the Cariboo wagon road civilization receded to become the road itself, a collection of shacks at Lytton, a teamsters' camp at Bonaparte, a few buildings at the Savona ferry, a grist mill at Tranquille, several buildings and a beached steamer at Kamloops, and a few Interior Salish Indians in a summer encampment. Not many miles north of Kamloops such flimsy traces of man ended. Baltzly became a photographer of wilderness and, on occasion, of the survey party within it.

Baltzly was a devout man steeped in a form of natural theology and in a Victorian sense of the picturesque and sublime. He found the hand of God in the beauties of nature, and particularly admired scenes of rugged, composed beauty in which clouds scudded across looming mountains and trees framed reflecting water. By agreement with Selwyn, his negatives

would become the property of the Notman Studio, and Baltzly presumably assumed that such views would also appeal to the public. In short, he was an agent of Victorian sensibility, and to a degree of Victorian business, in the British Columbia wilderness. The fit was far from perfect. Along the North Thompson he found the scenes to satisfy his sense of the sublime, but also clouds of mosquitoes, raw days of rain (and, by late October, snow), the endless tangle of bush that defeated the horses and, as time passed and movement slowed, the growing challenge of escaping from what could easily have been a wilderness tomb. He took pictures that appealed to Victorian sensibility, including for the first time in British Columbia several in alpine meadows, but he also began to record common, unpicturesque elements of the environment around him: burnt-over forests, tangled trees, uprooted trees. Here, as the hard days in the bush went by, was a photographic “new seeing” that was beginning to detach the British Columbian landscape from a transplanted image of beauty. Baltzly’s “Fallen Timber on the North Thompson River” must be one of the great landscape photographs from nineteenth-century Canada. When he turned his camera on the survey party, he recorded a ragged group of men whose existence in the wilderness was ephemeral and increasingly precarious.

In less than four months, Baltzly had created a unique photographic record of British Columbia. He had crossed a colony becoming a province of Canada, had found a trace of settlement, and had plunged into the wilderness. The expedition of which he was a part and his photographs revealed only too clearly that this Cordilleran wilderness was harsh, and that it could reshape alien spirits in subtle ways. Some forty years later in another British Columbia valley, Nan Bourgon (née Capewell) settled in a pioneer shack on a stump farm with a French Canadian husband.

Nan Capewell was the second of seven children in a strict Wesleyan family living in a row house on a short street near the Midland Railway Station in Derby, England. Her grandfather was a gardener, her father a “skilled workman,” and her grandmother a seamstress who taught Nan to sew. As a young woman she worked in a dress-making shop until, presumably excellent at her trade, she was offered a position to make school outfits for two titled young ladies. She moved into a mansion in Sherwood Forest, and entered the hierarchy of a servant’s world, presided over by a butler, where places at table in the housekeeper’s room were fixed according to rank. She learned that servants were not to laugh, and were to stand with blank faces in the presence of a member of the family. For the first time in her life, she saw wild flowers, ferns, deer, and majestic oaks;

she sewed for Milady, gracious and remote. Nan remained in the employ of this family for several years, living in their town house in London in winter, and at the Sherwod Forest estate in summer. During this time a sister emigrated to Canada, and in 1911 Nan, then thirty years of age, decided to join her. "Milady . . . was very nice, presented me with a prayer book, and told me that she would be very glad to give me references."

She came to Vancouver, worked for a time as a dressmaker, then as a waitress, and was overtaken by the depression of 1913. Her sister and family moved to Seattle, and she to Prince Rupert and a job in the new Grank Trunk Pacific Hotel. The pay was poor but her fare had been advanced. She worked there for three months, then fetched an amorous manager across the head with a broom, quit with two dollars in her pocket, heard of a job in a hotel in the Bulkley Valley, got as far as Smithers on the second train to leave Prince Rupert, and went on by buggy to McNeil's Hotel in Telkwa. For fifteen months she worked there as a waitress and cleaning girl. A French Canadian who was opening a farm a few miles away wanted to marry her, and with much misgiving and no real enthusiasm she eventually agreed. This was no love match. He needed a capable farm wife, and she, alone, poor, no longer young, and known (and respected) in Telkwa as Joe Bourgon's girl, slipped into the arrangement that others assumed. She found herself in a filthy shack, trying to cope with rancid bacon, dirty flour, mouldy potatoes, a packet of baking soda, and a husband who assumed that any worthwhile woman would manage. The long, accidental route from working class Derby through the servants' quarters of titled England to a frontier farm in the Bulkley Valley had come to an end.

The new life was exceedingly hard. This was pioneer farming at the climatic limit and far from reliable markets. The farm became essentially a subsistent operation that produced some surplus of hay and dairy products. Such income as there was went to build up the farm; almost nothing was left for clothing or furniture. Nan and her husband did not get along very well and for a time, at the birth of their first child, she left him. The child was born in Seattle, but when money came from Joe for the ticket home and she faced the prospect of working while looking after a baby, she returned. There was not much choice. She and Joe argued about almost everything — whether a garden should have flowers or vegetables — but stayed together and raised a family. New settlers came: soldier settlers, many of them English, after World War I; Empire settlers, also English, at the end of the 1920s; Eastern Canadians; and a sprinkling of

people from other parts of the world. All faced the same problem, trying to earn a living off land in market conditions that would not support them. In relation to the newcomers, the Bourgons were relatively well off, but no one had much money. Many left. There was a good deal of mutual aid, a local barter economy underlay monetary exchanges, and the institutions of community appeared: churches, eventually a school and a Nursing Home, a community hall, a Farmers' Institute. Joe Bourgon was president of the Institute for over twenty years, a good farmer and respected neighbour; Nan was one of the guiding spirits behind the community hall, an emergency midwife, and a social focus. In their different ways, both were pillars of an emerging, shifting society. Joe Bourgon spoke English with only a few traces of French; the Bourgon children were Roman Catholic and English-speaking.

In all this, of course, is grist for reflection. At issue is the extent of social transplantation as people moved from one setting to another, and the tentative ingredients of theory in these two books are these: a new environment, a picture of the homeland society, and a picture of another society in British Columbia. If we hardly have a statistically acceptable sample, we do have some very suggestive evidence.

Bulkley Valley society differed from that which Nan had known in England in two fundamental respects: (1) The formal social hierarchy was very much weaker, and (2) The range of ethnic backgrounds was considerably greater. In the upper class England she had left, people were identified by their social position within a complex social order in which work carried precise social meaning. From the scullery girl to the footman to the butler to Milord and Milady, people knew their positions and acted accordingly. In working class Derby the local society was far more homogeneous, a consequence of industrialization, but the working class defined itself in relation to the external power, authority and life style of the middle class and the factory owners. In the Bulkley Valley most of this hierarchy was absent. McNeil, who ran the Telkwa Hotel and a large firm, employed a few people; families like the Bourgons became known and respected. Some settlers were liked, others were not; the weak social hierarchy reflected personal qualities more than name, inheritance, occupation or economic power. Between Sherwood Forest and the Bulkley Valley, the reference that Milady might have written lost its intelligibility.

Nan grew up in a society of English people, most of them from the Midlands. Had she stayed in England there would have been little opportunity to marry a man who spoke another language and was raised in another country. But a settlement like that in the Bulkley Valley drew

together people of different regional backgrounds, and resulted in marriages like the Bourgons'. Part of the tension between the two of them was cultural. As children they had been exposed to different, often incompatible ways, as had husband and wife in tens of thousands of other households spread across three hundred years of the expanding North American frontier. In such households different ethnic backgrounds converged, a selection was made of remembered traits, and the children reflected a somewhat blended fragment of the cultural inheritance of the parents. Given the predominant ethnic composition of the surrounding settlers, the drift in the Bourgons' case was strongly in Nan's direction. Her children would grow up English-speaking and, broadly, would share the culture of most of the children of the area.

In short, settlements like that in the Bulkley Valley had the capacity to pare away vital elements of their Old World heritage. Basically, they tended to undermine the Old World hierarchy of social standing and deference, and to efface the regional cultural variety that was the inheritance of the first generation.

The failure to sustain the immigrants' cultural variety reflects the fact that culture is a collective inheritance, that individuals isolated from the cultural mass are culturally vulnerable, and that migration and resettlement created many instances of such isolation. Households and rural neighbourhoods became crucibles of assimilation in which sparsely represented cultures were rapidly eliminated. Sharply contrasting explanations could be offered for the collapse of social hierarchy. In strict Turnerian terms it would reflect the capacity of free land in a new environment to shape a new society. For Louis Hartz, it would reflect the migration of a fragment of the European social whole. Class differences, Hartz might infer, were weakly represented in the Bulkley Valley because only the poor had gone there.

After musing over Baltzly and Bourgon, what of the following? For some immigrants early in this century British Columbia did hold out cheap agricultural land and a last, if terribly minimal, agricultural opportunity. Here was an alternative to life in an industrial city, an alternative coloured by the agrarian illusion of self-reliance, deeply rooted in North-western European individualism, and sufficiently attractive to draw people into an unlikely wilderness. Poor immigrants tried to farm where agriculture, as Baltzly surmised, was barely possible. At best such farms and farm areas provided setting and subsistence for families, but hardly a means for the accumulation of wealth. A new environment had opened up a toe-hold for the family, not a route to prosperity and power. In such

circumstances, neither the older landed nor the newer industrial hierarchy of status and power could be reproduced. Society would be relatively egalitarian, the land providing a limited opportunity — for those who could work hard physically perhaps a little more than in Europe — but no support for a European hierarchy of status and deference. A society created in such circumstances would have less social range, a weaker sense of the social whole, and a stronger sense of the individual than its Old World progenitors.

Such a sketch is more Turnerian than Hartzian for it implies that the terms of access to land (resources) had a powerful effect on New World social structure. In the Bulkley Valley these terms were extreme, but it seems to me that across the span of European settlement in North America they were far from unique. Perhaps the sharp social drift away from Europe that was taking place in the Bulkley Valley early in the twentieth century was broadly similar to that taking place on long lots along the lower St. Lawrence early in the seventeenth century, on rocky farmsteads in the interior of New England early in the eighteenth century, and in the colonization schemes along the Shield fringe of Ontario late in the nineteenth century. In each place settlers had access to land that provided a subsistent living for families but hardly to a commercial opportunity, and in each case a relatively egalitarian society was the result. In many other North American settings, of course, the terms of access to land were quite different. Initial land costs were higher, capital investments were greater, land quality and markets were better. Often, too, the terms of access to land were measured by the size of a wage packet. What, then, of the relevance of a fascinating vignette from the Bulkley Valley for the larger understanding of British Columbia?

Contrary to expectations when the Grand Trunk Pacific was being built through the Bulkley Valley, agriculture would not dominate the British Columbia economy. No amount of promotion could overcome the reality of the land Baltzly had photographed. Where agriculture did begin, the results were diverse. Between the gold rushes and the coming of the CPR the Lower Fraser Valley offered a slim agricultural opportunity — bounded by massive forests and meagre markets — that fostered a relatively egalitarian society. Later, as the forest was cleared and commercial opportunities improved, rural society became more differentiated. The remittance men and the other Englishmen of means who settled in the Okanagan, on the Gulf Islands and in parts of the Kootenays were able to transplant gentry ways that may have been threatened at home — until their money ran out and their vicarious buffer against the realities

of a new land was removed. Some of the small towns and villages of British Columbia provided inexpensive places to live, a limited amount of work and few opportunities for aggressive entrepreneurship, while exerting strong assimilative pressures on cultural minorities. The social results were not unlike those in the Bulkley Valley. In short, admitting that the agricultural settlement of the Bulkley Valley is an extreme example, I suspect it does represent a widespread direction of social change in British Columbia. Of course, farms like the Bourgons' are irrelevant models for the industrial camps that were the pioneer settlements in many parts of the province. Here the family was often absent, the labour force often transitory, class relations sharply defined, and a collective vision dominated union rhetoric and the minds of some of the men. Again, very different terms of access to land seem to me to account for very different social results. Perhaps the key to understanding British Columbia is to recognize that the land threw up, often in close juxtaposition, quite different opportunities. I suspect that most of them can be reduced to two principal models — one emphasizing the family and de-emphasizing conflict, the other emphasizing both class and conflict — and that we will understand the evolution of British Columbia a good deal better as we explore these contrasting elements of its reality.

In the meantime, we are fortunate to have books like *Benjamin Baltzly* and *Rubber Boots for Dancing*. In publishing Baltzly's photographs and journal, Andrew Birrell has provided a vivid datum plane for the study of modern British Columbia. Baltzly photographed the stage, and even his short experience on it suggested its transforming power. Marjory Rosberg has performed an invaluable service in compiling and editing the Bourgon papers. Her book deserves to be read far outside the Bulkley Valley, for it is in knowing lives like Nan Bourgon's that the unusual and rather baffling experience of being a British Columbian begins to come into focus.