

## Book Reviews

*Fifty Years on Theatre Row*, by Ivan Ackery. North Vancouver: Hancock House, 1980. Pp. 253, *photos*.

Nostalgia: that's the essence of this entertaining book by the manager of several theatres in Vancouver between 1928 and 1969. His earlier experiences as an usher account for the half century of the title. For anyone who has memories of Vancouver from 1914 onward this is a very evocative book; for a potential reader lacking a Vancouver background the book is likely still to be of interest as an idiosyncratic history of the general development of the movie industry in the city and of the Orpheum Theatre in particular.

As well, irrepressible Ivan tells of his childhood in Bristol, England, youthful adventures in Vancouver in 1914, experiences in England and France as a soldier, being a lively man-about-Vancouver during the 1920s, and his brief management of the Capitol Theatre in Victoria. Ackery participated in the grimness of the Battle of Passchendaele, Belgium, in 1917, when 400,000 allied troops died in order to push the enemy back five miles. From his year or so in Victoria, only one episode stands out: the proud making in and around Victoria of the first all-Canadian talking picture, *Crimson Paradise*. It was partly financed by Kathleen Dunsmuir, who acted in it. The world premiere was on December 14, 1933, in Victoria, "the only place where it *was* a success." Ackery describes it concisely as "a real turkey" and says that no copy exists today. A pity.

Otherwise, Ackery's autobiography is largely a catalogue of famous and forgotten movies and his assiduous promotion of them, along with names of Hollywood stars and entertaining anecdotes about them. The author refers to warm friendships with Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Bing Crosby, Anna Neagle, Pearl Bailey, Louis Armstrong, Stan Kenton, and many others. During the Ackery years the Orpheum put on a few stage shows, but mostly in connection with movie promotion; hence one will

find only passing reference to actors and actresses from the legitimate theatre.

The names of the movies Mr. Ackery successfully promoted (he won several awards for his skill in this area) will be part of the nostalgia for some readers of this book: *Gone With the Wind* (a run of three months), *Canadian Pacific*, *War and Peace*, *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, etc. (The last was surely premiered in Vancouver before 1944.)

Even if one has only a limited interest in movies and their stars, this book has at least one alternative pleasure: the skill with which this relaxed and articulate writer captures the atmosphere of Vancouver over six decades — the crystal sets, speak-easies and rum-running, the grim years of the depression, the tone of fear and suspicion during World War II (especially after Pearl Harbor), the boom years of the 1950s. He refers, for example, to empty mansions in Shaughnessy during the 1930s and to housing shortages during the war years. Lack of space here forbids recounting any of the many humorous anecdotes, but this sentence catches the 1930s in Canada: "There were places where, if you wanted a drink on Sunday afternoon, they'd serve it in silver tea services and pour it out into china cups."

One of Ackery's statistics tells succinctly the later story of the Orpheum: in Canada in 1948 movie attendance was over 219 million; by 1977 it was just over 76 million. Intermittently Ackery proudly focuses on the beautiful Orpheum building (built 1927, 2,871 seats, staff of 65; usherettes earned \$15.00 a week), and he briefly refers to his contribution to the recent "Save the Orpheum" campaign.

The book under review cannot stand scrutiny as serious social history, or as a comprehensive history of either the movies or theatre in Vancouver, but it makes very pleasant reading. It will make many readers say: "So that's what Vancouver was like then."

*University of Victoria*

ROBERT G. LAWRENCE

*Stephanie*, by Joan Austen-Leigh. Victoria: A Room of One's Own Press, 1979. Pp. 284.

If Joan Austen-Leigh has written a disappointing book, the fault does not lie in the theme, the classic one of what happens in an immigrant family when to the generational struggle is added youth's repudiation of

the parents' social values. The family in *Stephanie* is that of Edward Carruthers-Croft, some day to become Sir Edward Carruthers-Croft, Bart., a not too successful lawyer in Victoria in the mid-1930s. Carruthers-Croft, "this sad shy complicated man," has more than his faltering practice to depress him. His wife, the beautiful Celia, characterized by one of her friends as "a selfish shallow woman," is a bitch who epitomizes everything that is false, hypocritical, snobbish and unfeeling about the "Island English" of a generation ago. Such at least is the view of the narrator, her elder daughter Stephanie, who on the verge of her teens secretly writes romances in the woodshed.

Mother is presented to us as bad, bad, bad. Dreaming of being invited to dinner at Government House, she deprives her overworked husband of his Banff holidays in order to mount an extravagant garden party to which she inveigles the Lieutenant-Governor and the press. Wanting her children to grow up with English accents, she proposes to send Stephanie to Cheltenham Ladies' College. She will not permit Stephanie to call Robertson, the gardener, "Mr. Robertson." She winces to hear somebody described as "well-heeled." In the flower shop she loudly laments: "If only there were a really *good* florist in this town." She insists that Stephanie's new bicycle be a Raleigh, not a CCM. She glares at a poor old Chinese pedlar. She doesn't like dogs in the house. Entirely without shame, she observes "... how much I dislike Canada. The sooner we can go back home to live, the better." Mother is clobbered enthusiastically throughout the novel. Only at the end does our author, who seems to identify very strongly with Stephanie, administer the *coup de grâce* and have Mother die of pneumonia brought on by her own vanity (going out on a cold night she insists on wearing her swansdown boa instead of the coat urged on her by her husband).

Not all the Brits in this novel are bad. There are the good Brits, those who are earnestly working away at becoming real Canadians. Thus there is Cousin Winifred, who has become plain Miss Croft and has won her reward, becoming secretary to a deputy minister. At the opposite pole from Mrs. Edward Carruthers-Croft is the Canadianized Scottish woman, Mrs. MacPherson, mother of Stephanie's friend Maggie. Mrs. MacPherson is a compendium of all the virtues. She talks of her "hubby," eats in the kitchen, does not use a butter knife, and says "eether." Whereas the wretched Mrs. Carruthers-Croft buys *petits fours* at Pierre's, Mrs. MacPherson does her own baking, and she "wouldn't go back to Scotland for all the tea in China." As for Maggie, she bravely asserts: "If Canada is

good enough to work in, it ought to be good enough to live in," a piece of precarious logic which nobody challenges.

*BC Studies* is not normally a journal of literary criticism, so we need spend little time on the strengths and weaknesses of *Stephanie* as a novel. Joan Austen-Leigh does have certain virtues as a writer. She employs a decent literate style, and she can create the occasional evocative piece of description: Stephanie's clandestine ride on the streetcar, the departure of the night boat for Vancouver, first arrival at the Westcliffe School for Girls (surely Strathcona Lodge on Shawnigan Lake). On the other hand structure is rather weak, characterization is superficial, and the dialogue at times becomes stogy and unconvincing. One cannot really believe that even a singularly unhumorous retired general, coming upon Maggie, aged about 12, dressed in Major Carruthers-Croft's Great War uniform, would declare, "How dare you impersonate a British officer . . . you're committing a criminal offence and I warn you I am telephoning the police!" As for Stephanie's escape from a fate worse than death on the night boat to Vancouver, that is creaking melodrama. The more sophisticated devices of literature are signally absent. At one point, however, we are told that the present baronet, Sir Richard Carruthers-Croft back in England, is a middle-aged idiot with the mind of a six-year-old child — presumably this is symbolism. There seems to be little point in tracing the literary ancestors of Stephanie, not the least of whom is Anne of Green Gables.

Presumably the editors have chosen *Stephanie* for review in these pages because its author has set out to recreate the Victoria of half a century ago. Sometimes a novel does so evoke the scenes and the spirit of an earlier time that it becomes a most valuable adjunct for the historian. How well has Austen-Leigh recreated the Victoria of the 1930s? Not particularly well. There are careful references to the Carruthers-Crofts' McLaughlin-Buick being angle-parked on Fort Street, to the *Empress of Russia* being moored at the Outer Wharf, to the Standard Old Broadcast on the radio, etc., but these things are pretty external. They do not take us into the spirit and values of the time as does the fact, which I find noted in my diary, that all the radio stations in Vancouver went off the air when word was received of the death of George V. Somehow Joan Austen-Leigh does not take us back to earlier years the way Ethel Wilson did in *The Innocent Traveller*.

About three-quarters of the way through her novel, our author permits Stephanie some insight into her father as he really is: "Suddenly I saw him as a man, not very happy, with an ambitious wife, a rebellious

daughter, a man who was obliged to make his living in a country to which he could never fully adjust." If only the author had commenced her novel with that awareness and had maintained it, she might have given us something we could have treated more seriously. There is a fine novel to be written about the Victoria English, their absurd snobbery, their genuine attachment to values which we are unwise to scorn, and their often complex relationships with their young. But this is not that book.

University of British Columbia

G. P. V. AKRIGG

*Sacred Places: British Columbia's Early Churches*, by Barry Downs.  
Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980. Pp. 175, *illus.*

It is frequently assumed that once a society begins to have a proper concern for the past, it has finally reached a very real degree of maturity: it is willing to limit its youthful exuberance and with this curtailment of attitude reject the concept, at least in part, that the only good is the new. The assumption that follows is that progress is not just the novel, but that there are other aspects as well. In the not too distant past, wherever planners congregated they expounded the thesis which could be summarized as "out with the old, in with the new." The contemporary replaced what was regarded as antediluvian. But in recent years there has been a very radical change of outlook. What was thought to be uninspired Victorianism, for example, is now presumed to have a heritage character. Buildings which only a few years ago would have been bulldozed to the ground are now cherished. Indeed, it may well be that there is too much concern to preserve and not enough to be creative; that there is a kind of malaise of spirit in nostalgia which does not bode too well for a country. Not everything is worth preserving merely because it is old, enthusiastic conservationists to the contrary.

Older societies, particularly those with an abundance of so-called historic buildings, are constantly faced with the challenge of finding a way to use them in a contemporary society. In a few instances skilful conversion does give them a new life, but all too frequently such is not possible; nothing is more dreary and desolate than buildings kept for their historic character that are now merely shells. The structure survives, but it has no relationship to the community except as a curiosity.

Fortunately, church buildings rarely fall into this category, for they continue to serve the function for which they were originally built. Moreover, in their architectural style they reflect past taste effectively; and with the exception of those in abandoned communities most are reasonably accessible. In British Columbia the number of surviving churches erected since the early days of settlement is quite astonishing. Under ordinary circumstances, wooden buildings have a relatively short life unless society takes particular care to conserve them, for structural decay is inevitable unless buildings are kept in good repair. Therefore it is gratifying to see that community concern has ensured the survival of a number of church buildings of the last century.

It is these surviving structures that are the principal subject of this agreeable book by Barry Downs. His enthusiasm and his concern for the national heritage go far to refute the idea that an architect, which is his profession, can chiefly be the ally of the developer rather than the conservationist. Mr. Downs has struck a nice balance in his book between photographs and text. The latter is neither too scholarly, thereby appealing only to the professional, nor too general, thereby risking rejection by the cognoscenti. The author uses technical language with care and supplies a brief and useful glossary to explain architectural terms which may not be very familiar to most readers.

After a brief introduction on the pre-settlement period, the book focuses chiefly on the last quarter of the nineteenth century because this was the period of church-building. Inevitably the Anglican and Roman Catholic communions are the principal participants, for their clergy were particularly active with both the settlers and the native peoples. However, other denominations are not neglected insofar as they contributed to the subject.

Most of the early churches were small; the Anglicans used as their model rural parish churches in England while the Roman Catholics had Quebec as a source of inspiration as to design and order. For the Roman Catholics the wooden church was no novelty, but for many Anglicans this was a new experience. Generally speaking, all were variations of the Gothic, which both clergy and laity had come to assume represented the best of Christian architecture and religious sensibility.

The churches have survived because their parishioners have been concerned to keep them in good order. To be sure, some are in real disrepair because the community they once served is no more; those churches that have vanished are not totally forgotten, because efforts are being made to preserve at least their original sites.

It is difficult to particularize and give any church pride of place, but Holy Cross at Skookumchuck is truly outstanding. It illustrates in a splendid manner the best of the work of the early craftsman in both symbolism and design. St. Andrew's at Lake Bennett is a mute witness of the gold rush. Except for their wooden construction, St. Peter's Quami-chan or St. Mary the Virgin at Metchosin might be part of English rural life today. Clearly history is not the documentary evidence alone, but artifacts as well. The origins of western Canada and its historic roots can be seen in these varied buildings.

The author has selected his illustrations with care from a variety of sources. Some are extremely artistic, others more mundane, but all serve to add to the value of the text. Mr. Downs has produced a pleasant addition to the increasing literature on British Columbia. The aims of the author are modest, and his text is readable and informative, with nicely selected quotations from historical sources. *Sacred Places* is not the last word on the subject of historic churches in the province, and other more professional work will ultimately appear, but for the moment Mr. Downs' book is a useful and popular introduction to this facet of history in art.

University of Victoria

S. W. JACKMAN

*The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*, by Hugh Johnston. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979. Pp. 162, *illus.*

A whole book about an unfortunate incident that took place back in 1914? Some might think that we know enough about this skeleton in the closet of British Columbia's past. The luckless attempt by enterprising Sikhs to get around Canada's racist immigration laws through the charter of a Glasgow-built Japanese ship has been frequently discussed in print, then and since. Peter Ward's *White Canada Forever* (Montreal, 1978) devotes a whole chapter to "The Komagata Maru Incident" in the broader perspective of the efforts once made to exclude all non-white immigrants from our shores. But in the light of recent headlines such as: "Racism: B.C.'s Latest Victims are the East Indians" (front page, *Vancouver Sun*, 12 March 1981), it is good to have this thorough and objective account of the origins of a problem that is still — alas! — too much with us.

Professor Hugh Johnston of Simon Fraser University has done a beautiful job, piecing together materials from Canadian, British and Indian archives and from personal interviews, and organizing them into a lucid, very readable account of this shameful event in our past. The problem of racism arose not just because British Columbians (white ones, that is) *were* racist in the early years of this century, but because they were themselves divided in crucial ways over whether or not, and in what capacity, to make use of Indian labour, and because they — and Canada — were still “British” enough to feel obliged to disguise their racial hostility to certain fellow British subjects. The result was a confused situation and inconsistent policies, which made possible the opportunity taken by Gurdit Singh and his companions in chartering the *Komagata Maru*. Nearly all of these men, although born in the Punjab region of India and Sikhs by religion, were already working in various bits of the British Empire outside India — and had experienced inequality in opportunity and treatment that belied imperial propaganda and theory.

The opportunity that beckoned these men to Canada was the usual one of employment — primarily in sawmills, but also on Okanagan farms and on railway contracts, mostly for the bottom unskilled wages rates going, \$1.50 to \$2.00 per day. Their situation was very analogous to the “guest workers” in Germany and Sweden today — employers wanted their labour but society in general did not care for their presence. Most of them wanted only to pursue the normal Punjabi peasant family-centred economic strategy, as described so clearly in studies like Tom Kessinger’s *Vilyatpur* (Berkeley, 1974): when a family was lucky enough to have more male workers than could be employed locally, younger and often unmarried men travelled in search of work elsewhere, or joined the British Indian army. They worked hard, lived frugally, and contributed their savings to the family finances; most would also intend to return to their ancestral village some day, although not all did. Such motivation was not always understood by white Canadians with their more individualistic values.

Gurdit Singh and his shipmates saw a loophole in the formal requirements of Canadian immigration law, so cleverly shaped by Laurier’s government to keep the likes of them out without appearing to discriminate on racial grounds. But Vancouver and British Columbia insisted that their government rigidly enforce the informal requirement — that immigrants be white. It is instructive for us now to be reminded how widespread this unworthy conviction was. Both the *Sun* and the *Province*, of course, led the way. But they reflected the wide opposition to Indian



immigration: from the politicians, the Trades and Labour Council, the Ministerial Association, the Women's National Council.

One of Hugh Johnston's most original contributions is to tell us what happened after the *Komagata Maru* left here. The treatment given to the Punjabis by their "own" government, the British Rāj in India, is even sadder than their reception in Canada. Treated as if they were dangerous criminals, fired on by panicky police officers when they disembarked, some were killed and others imprisoned. The lesson which many of the voyagers had already discussed, that "good" government is no substitute for self-government, was driven home. Gurdit Singh himself, then 56 years old, abandoned his life as a businessman to throw himself into nationalist politics. He became a minor celebrity, met Mahatma Gandhi, and lived to see India become independent. The incident that changed his life was soon swallowed up by greater crimes and became, in India as in Canada, only a footnote to the history of our times. For the British, surely the chief sinners in this squalid little tale, it is not even that. Such an attitude helps explain why Britain today makes such heavy weather of its coloured immigrant workforce from the Commonwealth countries, although surely she is more honest than her continental neighbours who deny their desperately needed "guest worker" labour force the rights of immigrants.

Johnston does not present us with any conclusion, and perhaps we do not need one. His well-told story speaks for itself. And the problem is not concluded, but still unfolds in the everyday contacts between Indians and other Canadians in our communities, workplaces, schools, shops, and playing-fields. We can try to write our own conclusions in the attitudes we bring to such contacts.

*University of British Columbia*

FRTZ LEHMANN

*In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.*, ed. by Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess. Victoria: Camosun College, 1980.

This fine book about early British Columbia women is part of an interesting tradition. None of the seventeen contributors to *In Her Own Right* were engaged in paid work as historians at the time that their book was published. They are exploring their own past and writing their own histories as students, as political activists, or, in one case, as an oil company executive. They have published their own book through the

auspices of Camosun Community College in Victoria; Val Mieras, a Camosun College student listed with the authors among the contributors to the volume, took responsibility for typesetting, layout and printing. Their book begins with a well-crafted essay by Gillian Marie arguing that women ought to be written into British Columbia's history and then offering practical advice to the first-time researcher undertaking historical investigations which include her own past. The rest of *In Her Own Right* is a heterogeneous assemblage of biographical sketches, reprinted documents, theoretical discussion, and research essays by seasoned and less experienced writers. The people who produced this book plainly share with the members of the British History Workshops the belief that present-day political experiences can impel, and ought to be informed by, research about the past. Their book is very much like the volume *Women at Work: Ontario 1850-1930*, produced in 1974 by a group of Toronto feminists, and published by the collective Canadian Women's Education Press.

At times these distinctive origins, distanced from the historical profession and influenced by present-day concerns, weaken *In Her Own Right*. Jackie Lay has difficulty integrating her evidence about the women and girls of the brideship *Tynemouth* into her narrative, and her commentary on the limitations of her sources is clumsy. Nora Lupton's "Notes on the British Columbia Protestant Orphan Home" deal briefly with the 1870s and the 1960s and leave the reader wondering what happened in between. Alexandra Zacharias describes the atypical role of the British Columbia Women's Institutes as an instrument of state policy, without reflecting upon either the implications of so strong a government tie or the influence of provincially appointed urban socialites on the executive of an organization intended to serve farm women. Similarly the essays of Diane Crossley on women's reforms after the extension of the suffrage and Michael Cramer on the campaign for the vote do not rise sufficiently above the detail of the events to set them in context or make sense of their consequences. The biographical accounts are often in the notable women genre, charting the domination of enduring character over transient circumstance. While the skills required to uncover the past ought not to be either mysterious or inaccessible, and the best history is written in something close to the language of common speech, it takes time to learn how to recreate the fullness of former times from the stray bits left behind, and the inexperience of many contributors to *In Her Own Right* shows.

This book succeeds best in the discussion of radical and marginal women, perhaps because it is here that the distinction between the priorities of the present and the presumptions of the past is most great. The contributors who inquired into the club women and maternal feminists of Victorian British Columbia were exploring a fragment of the past firmly integrated into the dominant culture by the middle of the twentieth century. The investigators who found themselves uncovering equal-rights feminists, pantheists and unionized waitresses, laundresses and shop clerks were forced to confront a past which had been lost in the intervening years and to jettison their many expectations contradicted by the evidence. Such bemusement is fuel to good work. Marie Campbell incisively questions the role of class and male domination in the union movement, pointing out the costs to working women of union men's deference to middle class female reformers. Roberta Pazdro, in presenting a picture of Agnes Deans Cameron which will be a useful western counterpart to Deborah Gorham's portrait of Florence Macdonald Denison, does not hedge about ideological and personal differences which divided British Columbia women and left Cameron, a school principal who disagreed with the National Council of Women's focus upon domestic science, turning in crisis to socialists rather than feminists for support. Deborah Nilsen's analysis of the origins of Vancouver prostitutes and the nature of police regulatory activity shows how middle class fears, and the labour market of a port city, provoked the selective enforcement of vice laws.

There are conspicuous gaps in this book, as its editors acknowledge. There is no treatment of rural women, save through the eyes of ill-informed urban observers. There is no discussion of Doukhobor women, of the Scandinavians, the Russian Mennonite immigrants of the interwar years or the Dutch Reformed families who arrived after the Second World War, nor of any immigrant group save the British. Racial discrimination is dealt with briefly as counterpoise to sexual discrimination in Campbell's essay on unions, but the peculiar British Columbia interplay among class, race and gender clearly requires further elaboration. Nonetheless *In Her Own Right* is a useful contribution, and the feminists of Camosun College are to be commended for their energy and determination in bringing it into print.