

Book Reviews

Gathering What the Great Nature Provided: Food Traditions of the Gitksan, by The People of 'Ksan. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980.

In 1971 the people of 'Ksan, an Indian museum and craft village located on the Skeena River, began an oral history aimed at recording their heritage for their young people and the world at large. It is their intention to create a series of books dealing with various aspects of Gitksan culture history. This book is the second in the series. Like the first, which dealt with legends, it represents the collective input of over ninety Gitksan (people of the 'Ksan River) who call themselves the "Book Builders of 'Ksan."

One of the remarkable things about the effort of the "Book Builders" is that they wrote the book by consensus rather than assigning ultimate responsibility to a single editor. First, they recorded the information about Gitksan food traditions from knowledgeable elders. A group of three to eight members then discussed the material, weighing its accuracy and pertinence. Further information was sought when necessary. Acceptable versions were then incorporated into a cohesive whole by the consensus group and then given to at least two informed people to read. These two people made corrections where necessary.

In presenting the material to the reader, the "Book Builders" used the past tense whenever talking about a custom that has been discontinued and the present tense whenever the discussion deals with a practice that is still followed. Also, whenever there appeared to be irreconcilable differences in the opinions of the elders about certain older practices, the alternative views are presented. The end result is a very informative book that provides viewpoints about past and present practices in an unencumbered way. Indeed, *Gathering What the Great Nature Provided* is a pleasure to read. Furthermore, the numerous black-and-white photographs and line drawings provide rich illustrations of the textual material.

Of importance to those who are interested in native history, the book offers the sorts of information about details of material culture and

ecological adaptations that are usually lacking in historical accounts of native people. The opening chapter of the book deals with cooking methods in general as well as food preservation and storage methods. The next chapter deals with foods that were eaten in the past. It is subdivided into sections according to the type of food. This discussion is followed by a chapter entitled "Some Hints for Cooks." As the title suggests, this chapter contains recipes provided by the elders for cooking some of the traditional dishes. Included are recipes for soups, bread, fish, fish eggs, meat and desserts. They are "unedited," and measurements are by the "potful," "handful" and "little bits." Therefore, as the "Book Builders" warn, they are to be used only by the experienced and adventuresome cook.

The closing chapter discusses eating etiquette and the meaning that food had for the Gitksan. Of interest to ethnohistorians, the "Book Builders" point out that food was a central part of gift exchanges. Whenever feasts were held, food served as a "gift-payment" for the guest having been witness to the business transacted at the feast. More food was presented to the guests than they could possibly eat. They were expected to carry the surplus home to distribute among their relatives. Sometimes this surplus, termed the "so'o," was given out by high-ranking chiefs as an advance payment for future hospitality. In this instance, the chief dispensing the "so'o" expected to be billeted by the recipients whenever he visited their villages. Other types of food gifts are also discussed.

The discussion of food legends indicates that food was ceremonially burned to gain favour with the spirit world. In prehistoric times, the quantities of food destroyed in this manner appear to have been rather small. However, in historic times considerable amounts of food were destroyed by those who attempted to "cure" Gitksan possessed by the dreaded Man Eaters' or Dog Eaters' power (these were two of four so-called secret societies). The "Book Builders" raise the interesting question of whether or not this practice developed during the historical period. They suggest that since the Man Eaters and Dog Eaters societies evolved at about the same time that the fur traders appeared, the new-found wealth generated by the fur trade may have served to lessen the value of food to the point that the Gitksan began to waste it.

Gathering What the Great Nature Provided is a model oral history as well as a sensitive and informative addition to native history. Moreover, as the dust jacket claims, it is a singularly beautiful book.

Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle. The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember*. Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1982.

Boss Whistle is about the coal mining families and communities of Vancouver Island. While the story is written by Lynne Bowen, it is built from material generated by the local people from their own memories. Both the story and the efforts expended in its production are worthy of our attention.

Armed with 130 hours of taped interviews with 100 informants and the technical assistance of a team of local experts, Bowen and the Coal Tyee Society, which headed up the project, have produced a stirring and richly detailed account of the nature of the workplace and the workday for coal miners, everyday life in the various Island coal-mining communities, industrial struggles, and the tragic industrial accidents and deaths.

In the annals of North American coal-mining history the Vancouver Island coal-mining operations loom large — large levels of production (when Number One mine in Nanaimo, which was the oldest operating in British Columbia, closed in 1938, 18,000,000 tons of coal had been dug beneath Nanaimo harbour); large strikes (the Big Strike of 1912 to 1914, for example); and large explosions (between the opening of Number One mine in Nanaimo in 1884 to the year 1912, 373 lives were lost in Vancouver Island coal mines as a result of gas explosions, 64 of them in a single mine accident near Cumberland in 1901). All of this history and much more is related in a sensible blend of oral testimony and a narrative based on archival and secondary sources. Of special note, Bowen pays a great deal of attention to the racial question. The coal-mining work force in this region was a racially mixed, socially stratified one that included Chinese (a Chinatown in one community contained 3,000 people at the turn of the century), Japanese and blacks. The stories of discrimination suffered by the three groups are handled in a candid and unsentimental manner. The author and her informants convey a strong sense of all aspects of working in the mines and living in the various mining communities.

It is a moving, intimate and impressionistic story of people and places that obviously mean a great deal to Vancouver Islanders. Important also is the fact that *Boss Whistle* fits into a new and developing historiography in North America of writing local history from sources generated by local people themselves.

Cattle Ranch: The Story of the Douglas Lake Cattle Company, by Nina Woolliams. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre. Paperback, \$7.95.

Somewhere near the end of *Cattle Ranch*, the history of Canada's largest primary-level meat-producing operation, the Douglas Lake Cattle Company, Nina Woolliams talks of the flood of writers and film-makers who began to converge on the Douglas Ranch in the Nicola during the 1970s.

The articles, films and publicity media all stressed the romantic aspect of cowboying, as did the one book written about the ranch in the '50s, and their creators almost ignored the equally important undertaking of farming.

The implication of this remark is that in some way her own book offers a more realistic view of the largest of all Canadian ranches than the mine of material on the Douglas Ranch which at the time was appearing in weekend magazines and pseudo-documentary films catering to the escapist instinct of urban Canadians so belatedly discovering the frontier and the pioneer life as the time-travelling destinations of brief self-deluding vacations of memory.

And in a way Mrs. Woolliams is right. *Cattle Ranch*, first published as a hardcover book in 1979 and now appearing in a paperback edition, is a hardnosed kind of book that deals frankly with the ranching life and that shows — perhaps more starkly than its author quite realizes — how the ruthlessly organized exploitation of land and animals and men enters into the ultimate success of an undertaking like the Douglas Lake Cattle Company.

It must be obvious already that I have not in the last resort been greatly edified by the reading of *Cattle Ranch*. Before I describe my more negative reactions, let me discuss the book's undoubted merits. It is written with honesty, with a feeling for serviceable prose, and with a sense of historical structure. As a narrative of what happened to the cattle industry in central British Columbia since the demand for large quantities of beef first emerged at the time of the Cariboo Gold Rush it is highly informative. Mrs. Woolliams has researched well not only the events that led to such a monstrous accumulation of ranch lands as the Douglas Lake spread represents, but also the backgrounds of the people involved; one of the strengths of her book is the series of vivid portraits of ranch owners and cowhands she presents to us.

There is also a sharp realistic edge to her description of the ranching life. She makes no attempt to minimize its hardships, to gloss over the

unpleasant tasks that no Hollywood film ever shows. Her cowboys are often violent men, human beings in some way grotesque and exaggerated, as in fact men of the frontier often have been, but she does not confuse romantic image with true worth, and she is especially good at portraying the dull, methodical man on whose presence every venture of this kind depends for its ultimate success. At the other edge of the picture, without in any way romanticizing them — her own period as wife to a manager of the Douglas Lake Ranch seems effectively to have removed that temptation — she shows clearly the kind of satisfaction life in a vast space of almost uninhabited grassland and pinewood like the hills behind Nicola Lake can offer. She makes quite evident, for those who did not know it before, why so many men were impelled to return to the ranching life and why so many stayed in it until death was almost on top of them.

That is one side of the story — the one that makes us admire certain ways of life for the opportunity they give men to dramatize rather than merely to endure a life of effort and danger. But just as the *Iliad* fills us with a pride at human courage, yet leaves in the end a great sadness, a sense of the pity of it all, so there is a bitter taste to a book like *Cattle Ranch*, perhaps all the more so because the author seems hardly aware of it.

Look at *Cattle Ranch* in the other way — the way an inhabitant of Erewhon or some other detached utopia (or for that matter an ecologically minded libertarian like the present reviewer) might be expected to observe it. We find (a) a story of the engrossment of a vast area of the most beautiful land in British Columbia (“163,000 deeded acres controlling more than 350,000 acres of Crown grazing”), over a century and more, into the hands of a series of syndicates of rich men and finally into the hands of a single owner with other vast interests, C. N. Woodward, and (b) a story of the exploitation over the years of hundreds of thousands of living beings (which we call by the unemotive name “cattle”), not exactly with cruelty, since none of the people involved shows any sign of sadism, but entirely cold-bloodedly so as to provide most meat on the hoof to be sold at the best prices.

Other disquieting aspects of the story are the destruction of wild life — bears, cougars, coyotes — which turning land over to a single species inevitably involves, and the turning of the Indians, to whom the land originally belonged, into a kind of helot class, glad to get jobs as cowboys. There are also the ironic, unintended compensations. For, like the private golf courses which are another feature of an inegalitarian society, large

ranches like Douglas Lake and the Gang Ranch do in fact help to keep vast areas of the countryside, for the time being at least, out of the hands of the speculative developers, who are even more negative in their deeds than the men who merely set out to accumulate vast areas of grazing land and turn a fair profit on the deal.

I do not of course attribute any of the reflections in which I have been indulging to Mrs. Woolliams. She clearly sees the record of the Douglas Ranch as an admirable one, and given her husband's role as one of the managers it is hard to imagine her thinking otherwise. When she does criticize former owners — as she does William Studdert and Frank Ross — it is mainly because they starved the ranch of funds in order to make the greatest personal profit. She never at any point suggests that there was anything less than beneficial to humanity in the long task of land-grabbing that ended in a single man controlling about 800 square miles of British Columbian land.

Whatever one's view on the social morality of what she is describing, it must be said of Mrs. Woolliams as an industrious amateur historian that she has written her book with a respect for fact and a clear style which makes it possible for both those who admire and those who deplore the achievement she narrates to have a very lucid idea of what they are discussing. As a piece of localized agrarian history *Cattle Ranch* is interesting to the end. It will doubtless give comfort to those who believe in unlimited free enterprise in the use of the land, just as it will give plenty of ammunition to those who believe — even if they have no use for state control — in some more communally oriented form of land use. Good history tends to serve all sides in an argument.

Vancouver

GEORGE WOODCOCK

The Rainbow Chasers, by Ervin Austin MacDonald. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1982. Pp. 272.

Ervin Austin MacDonald's biography/autobiography of his father, his family, and himself, *The Rainbow Chasers*, is a memoir of the frontier, of "westerling"; both Frederick Jackson Turner and Wilfrid Eggleston in action. The father, Archie from Bytown, never could settle down, at least not until almost too old to go much further; by that time, 1907, he had arrived at Lac des Roches "at the end of the road from the 70 Mile House and at the beginning of the old trail to Little Fort on the North

Thompson River." At 29, in 1868, he had left the Ottawa Valley and had become a prospector chasing the elusive one-big-strike to California, to Nevada and to Montana. Before the end of his odyssey he had met Indians and had fled from them; had broken legs while driving cattle to railhead at Revelstoke; and at 57 had become a widower with five small children. Soon afterward he was homesteading in Alberta, living through a brutal winter and a prairie fire and other catastrophes sent to test such heroes. But then, just recovered from a bout of pleurisy — "It's living indoors that does it to me, boys!" — he saw in a dream "the nicest layout for a ranch that you could ever hope to find. It was on a beautiful lake, with open fields sloping down to the shore." And they were off again. Sure enough, they found it. There on the lake they lived happily, not for ever but at least until 1929 when Archie died, the sons sold the property and, with their wives, moved out.

Most of the book is about life on that ranch by that lake so far off the beaten track. It is the stuff of western romances, factual or fictional: the deer and the moose; blizzards, frozen lakes, forest fires; fishing and hunting; and fiercely individualistic people. Visitors with news. Indians who stop only an hour or so, only long enough for one of the women to have a baby. From wily Old Cashmere, a somewhat less than Noble Savage, Ervin learned to make snowshoes and set traps. From Ike Simmons he learned why spruce is ideal for stretchers for drying a marten, mink or muskrat catch. Ike also taught him how to make skis: which tree to choose and why, how to cut the planks, and then how to heat them in a five-gallon can before shaping them. Like many such books, this one too is a "how-to-survive-in-the-wilderness" book, one filled with such gems as how and how not to make portable smudges in the mosquito-plagued world; how to bake bread and bannock; and, in fact, how to build an oven in which to do the baking. Mr. MacDonald is also describing the growth of a frontier community, from trails to corduroy roads, from shacks to cabins to houses to new houses, from a few families to those attracted by the earlier ones. In such a way a farm becomes a settlement with a store and then a school, and entertainment becomes a dance or a sleighing party rather than a freight haul pitting horse against horse, driver against driver.

Though informative, the book is not a great one. It lacks life and form. The prologue holds some promise that Ervin MacDonald can tell a story, and the first chapter about logging on the Ottawa is a fast-paced, factual version of the beginning of Ralph Connor's *The Man From Glen-garry*. But there the promise is broken: the action stops, and stops short.

When following the MacDonalds from Edmonton to Tête Jaune and down the Fraser, readers are surely exhausted, not emotionally, not from tensions created by the telling of the tale, but physically from reading it, from tripping over the details. Discrimination — selection and rejection — is the essence of art, but little is evident here. No doubt Mr. MacDonald can tell a real knee-slapper of a story, but he does not write one: he ignores such technicalities as conflict, climax and resolution. What is more, unlike Odysseus Archie MacDonald as a character is too good to be true, and like most too-good-to-be-true characters he is often boring. If only he would swear, or sin, just occasionally! When writing about himself MacDonald creates a more immediate interest, but still fails to give form and shape to his hundreds of good stories.

The Rainbow Chasers is, therefore, flat — plate-flat. One wonders what Eric Collier or Rich Hobson or Bill Hillen would have done with such material.

Simon Fraser University

GORDON R. ELLIOTT

The Columbia is Coming! by Doris Andersen. Sidney, B.C. Gray's Publishing Ltd. Pp. 205, \$9.95.

In the wake of the Klondike Gold Rush, hundreds of immigrants and settlers came to the British Columbia coast to exploit the stands of virgin timber or to harvest the boundless shoals of fish. Logging camps, canneries and isolated settlements sprang up, particularly on the islands and inlets of the Gulf of Georgia. Social services for these loggers and fishermen were non-existent, due to the isolation and distances involved. This gap was filled by the churches — in the north by the Methodists, and in the south by the Church of England in Canada. The latter's Columbia Coast Mission, whose story is sympathetically told by Doris Andersen, was largely the work of two men, John Antle and Alan Greene, who carried out an itinerant ministry to soul and body, in a variety of tiny ships, up and down the coast for sixty years.

Antle was a seafaring Newfoundlander, who combined nautical skills with a vital concern for the welfare of the scattered inhabitants of this vast coastline. He quickly realized that medical aid was the most urgent requirement, and recruited a series of doctors to accompany him on his missions of mercy. Authoritarian and paternalistic, he nevertheless built up the Columbia Coast Mission into an indispensable part of the British

Columbia scene. "Heal the sick and say unto them, the Kingdom of God is come upon you" became the motto of his life's work. His successor, Alan Greene, who spent a total of forty-eight years with the Mission, was more gregarious and humour-full. Tributes to their timely aid and welcome alleviation of loneliness are scattered throughout the book.

Doris Andersen's approach is necessarily anecdotal. But she does not hide the fact that the Mission was always in trouble. The natural dangers of storms and uncharted seas took a constant toll of the ships; there were never enough funds; the difficulties of reconciling the demands of chaplain, doctor and sea-captain were incessant; crew members came and went with alarming frequency; rival denominations campaigned over the same territory; the appeal of Anglicanism was rarely heeded. By the 1960s, the provision of medical and educational services had vastly improved. The introduction of aircraft made the upkeep of small boats prohibitive. Nevertheless, in the pioneering days of early British Columbia, the Columbia Coast Mission served the remote and often forgotten settlements with devotion and dedication. Doris Andersen's lively portrayal of its supporters, especially Antle and Green, is a deserved tribute.

It is much to be hoped that the projected parallel history, in a similar popular style, of the United Church's maritime ministry in the more northerly waters of British Columbia will soon be brought to conclusion. It is even more to be hoped that some of the recipients of these services could be persuaded to record and reflect on this pioneering effort in the early days of the province's development.

University of British Columbia

JOHN S. CONWAY

Frontier Theatre: A History of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainment in the Canadian Far West and Alaska, by Chad Evans. Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1983. Pp. 366; \$16.95.

There are innumerable local and regional studies of the theatrical history of the United States and Great Britain, but until relatively recently Canada has not been well served in this area. Such studies are now beginning to appear, and *Frontier Theatre* is a welcome and useful addition to their number. It is the first major study of the early (1850-1900) theatre in British Columbia and Alaska, and it succeeds in laying a sound basis for further research into this period, as well as into the subsequent period of theatrical history that ended with the First World War. The

book is diligently researched and well illustrated; it will be instructive to historians of both theatrical and social history in its period.

The first four chapters trace the theatrical life of Victoria from the earliest amateur productions by naval crews, through the American invasion brought on by the gold rushes, and into the slump that followed. Chapter 5 is devoted to the theatre in the Cariboo in this period. Four chapters then tell the story of developments between the 1870s and the turn of the century, with particular reference to Victoria, Vancouver and other larger centres; this was the period that saw the rise of "the road," the touring system facilitated by the growth of the railroads. Chapters 10 and 11 are local studies of theatre in the Kootenays, Alaska and the Klondike. The last three chapters are something of an appendix, dealing with minstrel shows, opera and the circus in the period under study; they are informative but somewhat superfluous to the main thrust of the book as a piece of regional historical writing.

The strengths of this account are numerous. Evans uses the data of theatrical life to convey the raw character of frontier communities: the second-rate companies performing in makeshift accommodation, or, as in the case of the Keans' visit to Victoria, great performers appearing in incongruous conditions to embarrassingly provincial receptions. Theatrical life also offers a good reflection of the clash between English and American attitudes; the account of the anti-negro riots in Victoria in 1860 that turned on theatrical seating arrangements is particularly well described. It is also good to see the author examining amateur productions and contrasting them in enlightening ways with concurrent trends in professional performances. In a study that takes us into the "box-houses" of the Kootenays and Klondike, theatrical entertainment is extended to include the colourful public aspect of more essential diversions in isolated mining communities.

By its very nature theatrical history involves a wealth of detail, and Evans' book is no exception. But there are times when the reader may yearn for wood among trees. I think it is a pity that the author did not include an introductory survey both of the development of the province in this period and of the emergence of professional theatre in the Pacific Northwest. Both would have helped the reader to put the mass of factual detail in some perspective, while the latter would have helped the book to transcend the parochialism to which studies of this sort are prey. It would also have been useful to have had a map included, particularly one illustrating the development of transportation routes.

If detail is of the essence in theatrical history, so too is criticism. (1) From the point of view of social history, the significance of the notion of the frontier, introduced briefly in the foreword (page 9), deserved lengthier discussion. I cannot see that it has anything more than a descriptive function in this book; it is a way of saying that raw, developing communities had a matching theatrical life, as we might expect. This hardly seems to establish a "frontierist perspective" allegedly neglected by earlier historians. (2) Vancouver seems to be given rather short shrift; the author does not make use of recent work on the city's early theatre (see *BC Studies* 44, Winter 1979-80, pages 3-24). (3) At pages 176-77 the characterization of serpentine dancing does not do justice to its celebrated originator, Loie Fuller, nor to her influence on specialty acts even here on the frontier: see my article, "The Age of La Loie: Dance in Vancouver in the eighteen-nineties," *Vandance* (Vancouver Ballet Society), VII:3 (September 1979), pages 7-9. (4) At pages 137-38 the analysis of the rise of vaudeville against legitimate theatre in terms of increasing working-class immigration ignores wider economic factors in a period of tight central control of theatrical touring: see J. Poggi, *Theatre in America: the impact of economic forces* (Ithaca, 1968). (5) Why is an engraving of Madame Patti reproduced opposite the title page when the diva is nowhere mentioned in the text? As far as I know, her only performance in the province was in Vancouver on 16 January 1904.

In the final analysis, however, *Frontier Theatre* is a book that deserves to be widely read, and I hope that a paperback edition will appear soon. It would be splendid if this book inspired further research into British Columbia's theatrical history, since much remains to be done. Accurate annals of the early theatre in Vancouver and Victoria need to be published. Despite the complexity of theatrical life, generalizations in this area need to be based on as sound a statistical basis as possible. The exemplaristic method on which a study like Evans' relies has inevitable limitations. There is also a case for giving closer attention to the content of plays than the present work permits. Such additional research could refine and expand the account given in this book, but for what Chad Evans has for the moment provided one must be most grateful.