

## Book Reviews

*Working Lives: Vancouver, 1886-1986*, by Elaine Bernard, Logan Hovis, Robert McDonald, Louise May, Jeremy Mouat, Keith Ralston, Allen Seager, Andrea Smith and Veronica Strong-Boag. Vancouver: New Star books, 1985.

As noted in the preface to this beautifully illustrated and produced celebration of one hundred years of labouring life in Vancouver, fifty years ago such a project was almost unthinkable. William Bennett, a communist labour journalist and no relation to the reigning family of post-war British Columbia, commented on the city's Golden Anniversary with recognition that "little mention has been made of . . . the working-class, without whom there would have been no Vancouver, no celebration, no jubilee." To make sure that history did not repeat itself, the Working Lives Collective was formed, gathered each month for more than two years, assigned archivist Louise May the task of choosing photographs, divided up responsibility for writing substantive introductions to the themes of the volume, and sought other authors to pen the brief one-page accounts that accompany the many illustrations which make up the texts of each section. The result is a mine of information, the wealth surfacing in prose and picture. Like all mining ventures, there are some unproductive seams and not a little dross. But with a workforce of over fifty toiling to cover a chronological sweep of one hundred years, attentive to the episodic features of class conflict and organization as well as the enduring continuities of family, cultural, and job lives, the final text is a testimony to the hard work, resiliency and determination of both the Collective and the class they chose to depict.

Let me comment on the words first, for it is obvious that the Collective structured its illustrative choices around particular premises rooted in much recent academic writing on the history of workers in Canada. The three thematic sections of the volume, for instance, as well as their ordering — Working, Living, Organizing — reflect an insistence that labour's

past is more than simply unionization, encompassing lives both caught in and sustained by work processes and life cycles where the active creativity of workers runs smack into the determined limitations and necessities of a society ordered around the inequalities of class. Thus the “Working” and “Living” sections convey nicely the possibilities as well as the stark imposed realities of working lives in Vancouver’s one-hundred year history: loggers looked for work in saloons that were informal hiring halls, raising their glasses in recognition that they would soon be travelling north to engage in back-breaking forest jobs that left little time or energy for the leisurely drink; working-class families developed forms of self-reliance and solidarities that carried them through the cyclical hard times that struck every household and the domestic crises — unwanted pregnancies, gruesome abortions, the death or desertion of the breadwinner — that disrupted so many; within a working class mobilized along ethnic lines by capital, which designated specific work sectors the preserve of Japanese, Chinese, French-Canadian, native Indian, East Indian or white, impressive alliances could emerge on the shop floor at the same time as segmentation survived and the market triumphed in practices such as the Japanese picture bride system. In this connectedness of work and life, self-activity and structured limitation, we see some of the content setting the stage for organization and resistance.

In orchestrating the volume in this way, the Collective was obviously guided by a scholarly conception of what working lives are all about. That agreed upon, they then intended to use illustrations and texts to popularize this notion of labouring experience. Such effort is admirable. Unfortunately, the lengthy introductions, first to the book itself, and then to each theme within it, while containing much of individual merit, do not quite achieve this, in part because these introductions are rather uneven and lack co-ordination.

Allen Seager is at his populist best in the volume’s general introduction, leading the reader through the pre-Depression history of Vancouver labour with flair and ease, quoting champions of “the producing classes,” pillorying “colonialism’s bureaucratic drones” and a business class that proved to be, with the collapse of 1929, “the god that failed,” mixing metaphors with the best of the west coast demagogues. It is not until well into this tale that the history of Vancouver’s working class recedes from view and Seager hoists himself upon the social-democratic soap box to flail away at all of those politically to the right of the CCF-NDP, whose abandonment of, among other things, “military Keynesianism” he decries

as but one of many of “unplanned capitalism’s” slaps in the face of the people.

There is nothing wrong with this kind of introductory commentary, but one wonders about the turns not taken: about some attempt to address the meaning of the image of working-class life that so often appears in the stylized posing of an experience captured through a photographer’s lens; about the inevitable passivity of a class frozen at work, at play, or on parade; about who took the pictures and why; about the relationships of work and life or struggle and accommodation, and how they are “revealed” in a particular artistic medium.

While the thematic introductions by Robert McDonald (*Working*), Veronica Strong-Boag (*Living*) and Keith Ralston (*Organizing*) are useful, they repeat some of the content of Seager’s larger introduction as well as skirting the relationships between image and actuality that demand consideration in a book such as this. McDonald and Strong-Boag are, to be sure, less flamboyant than Seager, and their commentaries are structured around their respective concerns with the organization of work and the formal and informal ways in which the welfare of the working class has been “protected.” The irony is that McDonald, the historian of Vancouver’s powerful capitalist interests, and Strong-Boag, the feminist historian of the welfare state and its various institutions, can end their accounts with such divergent conclusions. For McDonald the lessons of looking at a century of work are stark indeed: “The essential powerlessness of Vancouver’s working people continues” (33). Strong-Boag, however, sees the lessons of a century of living as holding forth far more in the way of potential: “Vancouver’s working people have a long history of solidarity. Their courage, ingenuity and co-operation holds promise for the future” (97). Small wonder that the book was built on recognition of both necessity *and* desire.

Keith Ralston’s introduction to the “Organizing” section could have resolved this apparent impasse with a sensitive discussion of how workers have moved to overcome powerlessness through organizational campaigns that linked the structured exploitation of the workplace, the oppression of life in a class society and the recurring historical capacity of the working class to survive and regroup on the basis of a refusal to surrender all of life to the employer. Yet Ralston’s account of one hundred years of organizing is rather wooden, a texty tour of the political and economic institutions of the working class that actually tells us little about organizing, organizers and their victories and defeats. Regardless of whether he is concerned with the Knights of Labor or the Independent Canadian

Transit Union, Ralston offers us up very conventional wisdoms with little in the way of interpretive support. About the most conventional of organizational breakthroughs — the International Woodworkers of America successes of the 1940s — Ralston is surprisingly silent, mentioning the IWA only in passing in conjunction with credit unions, newspapers and the use of radio in the 1930s.

Seager, McDonald, Strong-Boag and Ralston are all academics. Words are their business. Not so with many of the contributors who produced the short texts that appear beside each photograph or figure. Here we read accounts of the smaller events and experiences situated within the larger themes already introduced: of work in *specific* sectors, such as mills, breweries, sugar refineries, garment factories, shipyards, banks, hospitals, homes and schools; of courting, marrying, drinking and sporting; of socialists, union women, the One Big Union, the unemployed struggles, public sector workers and, of course, Solidarity. These passages were written by students and trade unionists, as well as by other academics. They are fascinating glimpses into the larger history this book is all about, and some are as elegant and as enlightening as many a scholarly article. In one brief page unionist/student Mike James introduces us to the essential contours of work in the maritime sector. Gillian Wade outlines the history of working-class housing admirably, while Louise May provides a brief account of the making of Strathcona, an immigrant working-class neighbourhood threatened in the 1950s with being “re-developed” out of existence. The list could be extended almost indefinitely.

But what of the *pictures*? Are they just an adornment to the text, or do they really speak loudly, and at length, on the matters they are obviously meant to address? In a way we just do not know, for as I have indicated above, there is no attempt to decipher the meaning of the images captured in the past and recreated here. Nevertheless, something can be said, or at least some questions posed. The starting point is with the suggestion that photographic images of working lives are situated within specific contexts, where class is embedded in and hence reflected through particular ideological and social constructions.

The static quality of the *single* photograph raises this interpretive issue most forcefully, and in a book such as this, so concerned with the broad sweep of labour’s history, necessarily reduces the history to a set of snapshots. Thus, to take only the photographs in the “Organizing” section is to confront the obvious: why, of the twenty-four pictures, cartoons and facsimiles illuminating this theme, are so few — eight by the most liberal

count — action oriented? Accompanying the short text on the 1923 long-shoremen's strike, for instance, is a photograph of police combing the neighbourhood around Ballantyne Pier after 1,000 strikers marched during a 1935 conflict. My main concern is not that the text and photograph do not correspond in terms of event and chronology, although this is a small matter that might have been dealt with easily. Rather, the image of class emerging out of the illustration is one of conflict retreating in the face of state power, an image of dispersal that I suspect stands in contrast to the image of defiant resistance and struggle against considerable odds that might emerge from a *sequence* of photographs that showed the marchers gathering, moving forward, confronting the police, and escaping repressive assault with flight to their own community. No book such as this could afford the space to do this kind of thing for all of its subject matter and it is possible that such a series of photographs does not exist; but neither can books like *Working Lives* fail to address the problem.

Illustrative histories of this sort, moreover, should gesture toward the ways in which particular forces generate images that are conceived to effect a conscious ideological purpose. Many of Hine's classic industrial photographs, for instance, can be read as glorification of America's technological achievements, an overt attempt to sanitize working lives in the interests of presenting the march of industry in the most favourable, indeed mythical, light. Cape Breton's Leslie Sheddon also produced these kinds of photographic representations of working lives for the Dominion Coal and Steel Corporation. To look at some of the photographs in this collection — of women working at Burrard Yarrows during World War II, of a telephone operator (1915), of linemen in North Vancouver (1960), of painters at Vancouver's docks, of building tradesmen perched on the partially constructed Granville-Pender post office (1890) — is to think that something of this sort must have been going on in the origins of these depictions of working in Vancouver. Nor is this ideological content simply a matter of external manipulation of the actualities of class. In the stylized respectability of working-class marches, parades and Labour Day gatherings, advanced elements within the workers' movement sought to capture and preserve an image of class at odds with the grimy experience of labour. So, too, one suspects, did the families that "sat" for some of the contented patriarchal poses that preserved the idyllic within domestic life only to obfuscate and mystify the tensions, resentments and confinements of the home. What is striking in this pictorial depiction of one hundred years of working, living and organizing is the lack of dirt, squalour, anger and alienation that we know was associated with many

workers' daily lives. To be sure, this does appear, in photographs of arrests, kitchen work and cannery labour, but it is nowhere explicit and unambiguous. The medium passes on to us, implicitly and subtly, an undeniable message. We need some words to let us know why and how this is happening.

To raise questions like these is, no doubt, to stretch this work past what it was meant to do, to quibble too cantankerously. But this is much too good a book to let these matters slip by without comment. It is, of course, a celebration of one hundred years of working in Vancouver, and as that it is a great success. The Working Lives Collective should be justifiably proud. Certainly it has answered Bill Bennett's 1936 call for a tribute to working people, although Old Bill might have wondered whatever happened to the Communist Party, which receives only the most indirect treatment here. Why, he might ponder, do feminist unions in the 1970s merit explicit coverage, when the Communist Party, so much a part of Vancouver's labour history since the 1930s, receives no comparable space? Another Bill Bennett, however, surely won't see this as a problem. Indeed, what will the former provincial Premier have to say about this book? I expect he'll like the pictures.

*Queen's University*

BRYAN D. PALMER

*Hamilton Mack Laing: Hunter-Naturalist*, by Richard Mackie. Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985. Pp. 282, illus. \$19.95.

The ambivalence towards nature that is revealed in the desire to at once both celebrate it and control it is perhaps particularly Canadian. The nature story is in many ways a Canadian genre, just as hunting is a major national pastime. Hamilton Mack Laing was an exponent of both, and, according to Richard Mackie, this "Hunter-Naturalist" saw no contradiction between writing stories that celebrated the natural world and also going out with his gun to kill vast numbers of birds and animals. Indeed, Mackie argues that Laing's apparently contradictory attitudes were a natural product of the Canadian frontier.

Mack Laing felt cheated by being born in Ontario in 1883, but he grew up in rural Manitoba as the west was opening up to settlement. After leaving school he became a teacher, serving in a number of small communities through the first decade of this century. It was during this period that he wrote his first stories. Laing was very much influenced by

the nature writer Ernest Thompson Seton, and he followed in Seton's footsteps by leaving Manitoba for art school in New York in 1911. In the 1920s Laing was a naturalist and museum collector on expeditions to different parts of western Canada before settling down to spend the rest of his years on Comox Bay. The Comox coast was rich in bird life, and birds were Laing's primary area of expertise as well as his abiding passion. Throughout his life Laing collected thousands of birds and animals for museums and private collections, he wrote hundreds of nature stories that were published in a variety of newspapers and magazines, and he was the author of several books, most of which were never published. Yet he was a naturalist for whom the hunting instinct remained fundamental. He never lost the Manitoba farm boy's view that nature must be controlled by man: that predatory birds and animals ought not to be protected, but rather the natural order should be balanced by man in the role of game warden. For nature "left to its own devices would invariably result in a reign of terror by crows, hawks, eagles, owls and wolves" (22).

Richard Mackie has done us the service of introducing a man who spent much of his life in British Columbia, who was an avid collector and a prolific writer, and yet is now probably not known to many. As a biographer Mackie is better at description than he is at explanation. This is so notwithstanding the fact that several chapters are arranged topically rather than chronologically, an approach that also results in a certain amount of repetition. The author often stands aside at crucial points to allow Laing to speak for himself with long quotes from the naturalist's own writings. Laing is thereby given too much control. We do not get far below the surface of his personality, and in this respect Mackie's book is very different from E. Bennett Metcalfe's recent life of another British Columbia nature writer, Roderick Haig-Brown.<sup>1</sup> Even the basic dichotomy between the naturalist and the hunter is described, but not probed in any depth. Mackie does point out that Laing's ideas about hunting as a means of controlling nature's "savagery" were outdated by the 1930s with the development of the conservation movement in Canada, but one wonders if such notions were ever widely held among nature enthusiasts. Certainly there were contemporary critics of the shooting naturalists. And Mackie's assertion that Laing's justification for killing predators because they were "bad" animals was firmly grounded in Seton's nature stories is based on a very different interpretation of Seton's writing than that

<sup>1</sup> E. Bennett Metcalfe, *A Man of Some Importance: The Life of Roderick Langmere Haig-Brown* (Seattle and Vancouver: James W. Wood, 1985).

offered by John Wadland.<sup>2</sup> To the end of this book Laing remains an interesting character but does not become a rounded personality, as some aspects of his activities are passed over much too quickly.

One such activity arose from Laing's interest as a young man in a species of wildlife that tends to be ignored by other naturalists. Nowadays the hog is, if not endangered, then certainly threatened, unless, of course, it can be preserved by the boys from Porsche. But Laing knew the beast well before it became a cult item. In 1915 he rode his Harley-Davidson, which he named "Barking Betsy," from New York to San Francisco. The account that he wrote of the journey, entitled "Transcontinentalizing or Joy of the Road," was one of his many "books" that was never published. The Harley-Davidson Motor Company felt that it was too long to run in its monthly magazine, *Enthusiast*. In its letter of rejection the Milwaukee Company did note, however, that the demand for power had become so urgent of late that the engineering department had finally perfected a 74 cubic inch model "that would make old Betsy look like a mere weakling."<sup>3</sup> And so it did. But even in 1915 the Harley had its mystique and, while the male students were sceptical, a number of the young ladies from his art school in New York wanted to accompany Laing on his journey. Betsy's rigid frame, murderous swept-back bars and suicide shift must have made "transcontinentalizing" a touch uncomfortable at times. Yet, even then, the classic V-twin engine was reliable enough to take him from coast to coast and, booting across the great American desert, Laing surely knew the meaning of the words "live to ride" long before they gained currency in the biker fraternity.

Simon Fraser University

ROBIN FISHER

<sup>2</sup> John Henry Wadland, *Ernest Thompson Seton: Man in Nature and the Progressive Era 1880-1915* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 447-51.

<sup>3</sup> Harley-Davidson Motor Co. to Hamilton M. Laing, 30 March 1922, H. M. Laing Papers, Add Ms 1900, Box 16, Provincial Archives of British Columbia.

*The Chinese Connection, Getting Plugged In To Pacific Rim Real Estate, Trade and Capital Markets*, by Michael Goldberg. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985.

The objective of Goldberg's book is to analyze the behaviour of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs. Goldberg hopes that this will contribute to the understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour in general and to the

development of strategies to improve access to the fast-growing Pacific Rim markets.

The volume begins with a short discussion of trends in the Pacific Rim countries. This is followed by a general discussion of the nature of Chinese society and overseas entrepreneurs. Chinese businesses, according to Goldberg, are characterized by small-scale, centralized decision making, family control, flexibility, financial acumen and reliance on trust. Overseas Chinese have traditionally filled the role of entrepreneurs — a function shunned by indigenous populations. Their economic success resulted in indigenous populations discriminating against them. Consequently, overseas Chinese feel insecure in the host countries.

Following the general discussion, Goldberg summarizes the results of over eighty interviews with Chinese real estate investors in Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Investment flows, decision-making criteria and methods of investing are discussed. Interview results reveal a diversity of characteristics. Hong Kong entrepreneurs are influenced by the lease renewal question. They are interested in secure investments in regions where families reside. Singapore investors are less security conscious and rely more on real estate brokers than family. Bangkok entrepreneurs are also interested in diversification. Overall, the results indicate the significance of personal connections and reluctance to deal with strangers.

The book concludes with a discussion of the policy implication of changes in the world economy. The shift to information-based activities, the role of “capital circuits” and the importance of cities are emphasized. Goldberg identifies means of encouraging immigration of Chinese entrepreneurs such as access to education and improved transportation. He emphasizes that Canada should concentrate on areas of comparative advantages such as exporting expertise in resource development.

Some of Goldberg’s observations and policy proposals, such as exporting resource development expertise, are interesting. There are, however, a number of important issues which are not addressed. Goldberg assumes, for example, that increased foreign investment in real estate is good for the Canadian economy even though many analysts emphasize that this type of investment is unproductive and does not compensate for the weakness in industrial entrepreneurship relative to mercantile entrepreneurship which plagues the Canadian economy. Goldberg at least owes it to his readers to discuss this controversial issue.

The book also suffers from lack of continuity. The reader gets the feeling that Goldberg added chapters to turn an interesting research

paper into a book. The chapter on the Pacific Rim economy contains information which is irrelevant to the study, such as the number of telephones per capita. The chapter on the overseas Chinese comprises largely quotes and data from several other studies. Why bother printing it? The final chapters on changes in the world economy and policy suggestions for the Canadian economy bear little relation to the actual core of Goldberg's study. Nonetheless, Goldberg's book addresses an important issue for British Columbia. It contains some useful insights on the nature of Chinese entrepreneurs and economic development. It also contains an impressive bibliography which any researcher on Pacific Rim issues will find invaluable.

*Simon Fraser University*

THOMAS GUNTON

*School Wars — The Assault on B.C. Education*, by Crawford Kilian.  
Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985.

Crawford Kilian's *School Wars* is, as he describes it, "a personal book about a public institution in crisis" and a book that presents one account of the events that have led to the recent turmoil in British Columbia education. Kilian, a teacher at Capilano College and education columnist for the *Vancouver Province*, served as a North Vancouver school trustee from 1980 to 1982 and is, in his own words, not "a friend to the Social Credit Government or sympathetic to its priorities."

Believing obviously that the pen is mightier than the sword — and, indeed, he wields it sometimes with the subtlety of a blunt instrument — Kilian has set out in this 241-page volume to catalogue the evils that have befallen public education since the introduction of the government's restraint legislation in 1982 and to indict government leaders for their "incompetence and malice." As he puts it: "In three years, the Socreds have thrown a major social institution into chaos. Careers have been ruined, money has been wasted on a titanic scale, and the whole atmosphere of British Columbia social life has been poisoned."

Government attempts to control educational spending in the 1980s and to reduce dramatically the number of public sector workers are historically grounded, Kilian explains, and may be traced to the reactionary attitudes found in certain elements of the business community in the 1930s as well as to ever-present currents of anti-intellectualism within the provincial character itself. In addition, recent government attacks on the schools,

colleges and universities have been made possible by changes in demographics and by the declining "political power of people who consider education important." Since the downturn of the provincial economy in the early 1980s, Kilian points out, the struggle for philosophical and political control of the schools has been won by atavistic conservative forces who espouse an educational creed "which not only recognizes but even celebrates the law of the jungle." The influence of the "ecumenicals," as he terms those who seek educational opportunities for "every child regardless of background or abilities," has given way to that of the efficiency-conscious "schismatics" who see the schools as factories or as agencies for social and economic selection.

This change in public sentiment, Kilian contends, was recognized by a government eager to seize opportunities for political advantage and, with the help of "a few morally catatonic bureaucrats," government leaders capitalized on the new public mood by declaring war on education through the restraint program. "The Bennett Government," according to Kilian, "consciously chose not only to make education a low priority, but to make it, along with other fields, a scapegoat for the province's economic woes — to portray it as a problem rather than a solution, because an unhappy and frightened populace was looking for someone to blame."

What followed the restraint legislation of 1982, in Kilian's view, was three years of "chaos and uncertainty," marked by abortive attempts at curriculum reform, teacher layoffs, a teachers' strike, the removal of local school board autonomy, the dismissal of rebellious trustees, program and faculty cutbacks at colleges and universities and a general decline in the morale of the educational community. The net result of all of this, he argues, has been a crisis not only in education but in the broader realm of public social policy.

Although it is not difficult to sympathize with some aspects of Kilian's concern about the state of provincial education — or to accept his ideas about education's importance to individuals and the nation — his volume is flawed in several ways, not the least of which is its one-sidedness and its treatment of complex issues in sometimes superficial ways. Without question, the government has cut the rate of growth of educational spending, and this has had serious consequences for those who work and study in provincial institutions. However, in presenting only the anti-government viewpoint, and in attributing the reasons for the restraint program largely to the government's anti-intellectual bias, if not mean-spiritedness, Kilian does little to illuminate the nature of the economic and political

forces that caused government leaders to take such a radical step. In this respect, Kilian might easily have explored the enormous growth that occurred in all parts of public education during the 1960s and 1970s (the number of employees within the Ministry of Education itself doubled during this period), the burden such growth placed on business and residential taxpayers, or the need for elected policy makers to attenuate or otherwise address the public's almost insatiable desire for higher levels of educational service — levels that the public may not, in fact, be able to afford. Moreover, he might have discussed how the restraint program sought to arrest mounting public pressure on government to curtail social speeding or have investigated the kinds of choices open to decision makers at a time when provincial revenues were sharply declining and costs for health and education were skyrocketing. In this way, we might have gleaned at least a clearer understanding of the grounds on which the school wars have been fought. Instead, all the reader has is a fairly unrevealing portrait of the "good guys and bad guys."

Leaving aside the forces spurring the government to act or the general demoralization brought about by a provincial economy in a state of contraction, Kilian could similarly have investigated the economic and political motives driving the other combatants. He does not examine in any comprehensive way the motives of the government's opponents — the Solidarity coalition, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, the dissident school boards, or other labour or professional groups — or what such groups stood to win or lose in their confrontation with government over its education policies. By not inquiring into the self-interest of these groups, Kilian neglects the *realpolitik* of the labour-management struggle in the province, or the way in which education served as a lightning rod around which to attract general anti-government sentiments from a variety of constituencies. Nor, it should be noted, has he probed very deeply into the strategy of the New Democrats or their own less than unblemished record in funding higher education. Yet, he concludes: "On Churchillian grounds, the NDP would deserve support no matter what its stand might be, since the urgent need of the mid-1980s' schools is to remove Social Credit from power. When any stick will do to beat a dog, the NDP is perfectly serviceable."

Ultimately, what the reader is left with in this volume is a reconstruction of events which reads like a twentieth-century morality play. Within this drama, Kilian characterizes educators and their supporters as self-sacrificing and righteous forces of light locked in a life or death struggle with the dark forces of politics and government officialdom. Admittedly,

the author of *School Wars* has not claimed to be even-handed in his treatment of events or their meaning — and in this regard he may have excused himself from his transgressions against the canons of historical scholarship. Clearly, the intent of this work is less historical than polemical; it is less concerned with augmenting our understanding of the recent past than with sounding a call-to-arms for those opposed to government policies in education.

*University of British Columbia*

THOMAS FLEMING

*Vancouver Short Stories*, edited by Carole Gerson. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985. \$9.50.

*Vancouver Fiction*, edited by David Watmough. Polestar Press. N.p.

The historical occasion for the appearance of these two collections — Vancouver's centennial — offers a locally restricted, literary context within which to frame one of the historic and thorny questions for Canadian Studies: how do we define the relations between place (or setting), tradition (literary, or more broadly, cultural) and nationality (geographical or racial), given the exigencies of what Frye has called our "fore-shortened history"? Is "Vancouver fiction" written *about* Vancouver — its atmospherics, its settings, its cultures; written *in* Vancouver — in Point Grey, Kitsilano, Kerrisdale, on Commercial Avenue (in Dollarton?); or written *by* Vancouverites — by whatever dubious criteria we might identify these latter-day natives? (Of Carole Gerson's twenty writers, four — William McConnell, Joy Kogawa, Wayson Choy and Frances Duncan — are Vancouver-born; of the thirteen writers in David Watmough's collection, Keath Fraser is the sole Vancouver native.)

Carole Gerson's "Introduction" addresses these and related questions succinctly and intelligently, pointing out that the book "is not a collection of Vancouver authors, but of Vancouver short stories, chosen because they highlight facets of the city's social history and literary development." But choosing stories which highlight facets of Vancouver's social history created a problem and begs a question: Gerson found that "for the first seventy-five years of Vancouver's existence there is too little material, and for the last twenty-five there is too much." Presumably, this scarcity influenced Gerson's inclusion of the first selection, Frances Owen's lurid "The Prophetess" (1907). The story may indeed be "an intriguing account of

the great Vancouver fire of 1866," but it also manifests an intense and cloying admixture of the sublime, the gothic, the romantic and the outright purple — of most interest, perhaps, to an archaeologist of style or an anthropologist of idiom:

The sun was just setting; a crimson glow suffused the sky; the twilight blushed; the silver gems of the snow-capped peaks became golden with the sunset flush; the rushing streams seemed to allay their headlong course to be caressed by the lingering sunbeams, which left a purple hue upon the dancing waters, turning them into streams of gold; . . .

We stood gazing at the glory of the sunset, lost for the moment in the grandeur and nobility of the eternal, fascinated by the various shades of color, and the succession of changes from silver through all the mutations of gold and crimson to a deep purple hue as if the blood of battling spirits had stained the sky.

Perhaps the problem with this selection reflects a difficulty with the book's conception: stories which reflect social history may not be otherwise distinguished. The question begged, that of the relation of fiction to history, is addressed in Owen's story at the level of its lowest common denominator.

But *Vancouver Short Stories* generally strikes a careful and instructive balance between the demands of its twinned objectives. The stories, arranged chronologically by date of first publication — Owen's is the first, and the final story, Cynthia Flood's "The Animals in Their Elements" is first published in this collection — provide both a rewardingly variegated excursion through local social history as it is refracted through fiction and a panoramic view of developments in literary style and tradition. Reading or re-reading Malcolm Lowry's "Gin and Goldenrod" (c. 1950) or Ethel Wilson's "A Drink With Adolphus" (1960) on any occasion is exciting and engaging; to rediscover Lowry and at the same time to discover William McConnell's beautiful, unjustly ignored "Love in the Park" (published in *Klanak Islands*, the 1959 collection of stories McConnell edited) more than compensates for Owen's histrionics or for the occasional flatness of Bertrand W. Sinclair's "The Golden Fleece" (published from the Sinclair Papers at UBC), a too-predictable depiction of a middle-class shipping agent's longing for adventure running liquor down to Mexico through the Pacific's winter storms. Pauline Johnson is represented with two of her 1911 *Vancouver Legends*, Martin Allerdale Grainger with the opening chapter of his *Woodsmen of the West* (1908); Emily Carr's "Sophie," Dorothy Livesay's "A Cup Of Coffee" and Jean Burton's "Phyllus" provide, respectively, three quite separate

perspectives on native life and manners, hard times in the thirties, and the fatal fit between smart, stylish Vancouver's fashions and mores in the twenties.

With Audrey Thomas' "Aquarius" (1971), we cross definitively into the contemporary; the transition is particularly telling because the previous story is Ethel Wilson's delightful but searing sendup of the foppish, portentous, pretentious Leaper, a Victorian out of time and place at Adolphus' improbable party. From the seventies to the present, Vancouver is presented and represented by Alice Munro ("Forgiveness in Families"), Gabriel Szohner ("The First Woman") and George Bowering's "Spans"; the sombre excerpt from Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* counterpoints stories from two newcomers, Sky Lee's "Broken Teeth" and Wayson Choy's "The Jade Peony." Frances Duncan's autobiographical piece, "Was That Malcolm Lowry?" reads instructively after "Gin and Goldenrod," and Australian Kevin Roberts' "A Nice Cold Beer" nicely captures Aussie dialect and conduct in collision with the Vancouver drug and biker scene.

Two last cavils: why include Munro when "Forgiveness in Families" does not strongly evoke Vancouver and when Munro's writing is so often and justly celebrated for evoking the ethos of a very different region; and why *not* include a story of Jane Rule's, when Rule's writing is so often and justly celebrated for its pungent and detailed evocation of Vancouver's social and psychological atmosphere? Minor reservations aside, *Vancouver Short Stories* is painstakingly and helpfully edited, with clear, thorough biographical and bibliographical information on writers, stories, and dates and places of publication. Gerson has provided Vancouverites and the disinterested reader alike with a judiciously selected, educational and entertaining reading occasion, a revealingly diverse commemoration in fiction of the history of a young one hundred years.

David Watmough's *Vancouver Fiction*, although it rewards readers with brilliant individual flashes, is generally less satisfying a collection. If the book is intended as a "centennial celebration," as Watmough suggests in his "Introduction," then its scope should have been expanded in several directions. Gerson's collection articulates one new resonance among Vancouver's many ethnic sensibilities more clearly than Watmough's with her inclusion of stories by Wayson Choy and Sky Lee; as well, Gerson's historical perspective is more balanced, with eleven of her selections originally published before 1960. Watmough's selection includes only three out of thirteen pieces originally published before 1960; after these (an excerpt from Hubert Evans' *The New Front Line*, Ethel

Wilson's "Down at English Bay" and Lowry's "The Bravest Boat"), we are permanently, and rather monolithically, ensconced in the contemporary scene. In inviting submissions from twelve writers (Watmough's "Vancouver Summer Pudding" is the thirteenth piece), Watmough appears, consciously or not, to have leaned towards less traditional and more experimental writers — which makes for a sparkling sameness, and might have the unintentional effect of distracting readers from the merits of some fine fiction by Bowering ("Ebbie & Hattie"), Keith Maillard (an excerpt from his forthcoming novel "Motet"), D. M. Fraser ("Recessional") and Keith Fraser ("There are More Dark Women in the World Than Light"). Nor would Watmough, I suspect, wish *Vancouver Fiction* to suggest, as at points it might seem to, that "Vancouver fiction" is *by definition* experimental, innovative, avant-garde. Finally, because almost a third of the selections are excerpts from novels (Evans', Betty Lambert's *Crossings*, and Beverly Simon's *Da Vinci's Light*), these stand uneasily on their own, so that reading *Vancouver Fiction* becomes a more fragmented experience than it might have been if more of the selections were stories.

Watmough does include Jane Rule, although "Blessed Are The Dead" is a weaker story than Rule's "Dulce," which is also set in Vancouver, is also recent, and might have appealed to a wider range of readers than the fairly restricted story of a UBC academic's education in the universal claim of mortality on mortals; but since Watmough invited submissions, it is unfair to fault his judgement on this count. Robert Harlow's "Heroes" is a warm and sympathetic portrayal of the costs of a character's "heroic" attempt to be ideally human; less successful than Harlow's delicate but sharply etched and edged portrait is Beverly Simon's careful, minutely detailed but also laboured recreation of Laura's mindscape in the excerpt from Simon's projected novel. Watmough's "Vancouver Summer Pudding," with its incisive analysis of the foundations of a couple's troubled, troubling marriage, projected onto their intoxication with each other as they march in Vancouver's massive 1984 anti-nuclear demonstration, closes the collection with a suggestively ambiguous reflection on the functions of popular causes as social glue for fragmenting relationships.

Although Watmough includes (different) stories by four writers who also appear in *Vancouver Short Stories*, *Vancouver Fiction* has a different, more restricted orientation, and will appeal, I would guess, to a more restricted audience. Watmough's book provides attractive photographs of the thirteen writers, but the bibliographical information is less

complete than Gerson's, and the editing is not as thoroughgoing. There are too many distracting typographical errors in the stories, and someone — Watmough or Watmough's editors — should have dealt with the following construction in the "Introduction": "Indeed, while the use of natural phenomena as a determining [*sic*] factor in conduct and even thought patterns are perceivable in several of these fictions, it is nowhere more the case than in Maillard's pages."

That *Vancouver Fiction* is more restricted in its range does not negate the collection's worth. It bears out, as does *Vancouver Short Stories*, the various powers of fiction to create identity by imagining a place. Vancouver's topography haunts these fictions through language that conveys the figurative information necessary to conjure an imagined, imaginative locale. If Frye is correct in suggesting that Canada's cultural life is most troubled, finally, by some riddling question such as "Where is Here?", then these collections resonate with Vancouver's many-voiced reply.

*Mount Royal College*

NEIL BESNER

'*My Dear Legs . . .*': *Letters to a Young Social Democrat*, by Alex Macdonald. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985. Pp. 187.

My father, then Chief Justice of British Columbia, used to be riled to read in the Elections Act that the only persons who could not sit in the Legislature were "Judges, Indians and Lunatics". Since then an Indian has been seated, no judges of course, and quite a few lunatics, whom I readily recognize. So will the reader who perseveres.

*My Dear Legs . . .* mirrors the character of its author. It is by turns amusing, obscure, passionate, radical, reformist and, one must say, in truth, ever so slightly haughty. So is Alex.

Alex Macdonald attempts to hide his serious purposes with an appealing after dinner kind of wit to be taken like mints so as not to offend. When gently discussing the sins of his colleagues in the legal profession he observes that "it reminds me of Voltaire who wrote that he had only been ruined twice — once when he lost a lawsuit and once when he won one." Sensitive to the ambitions of the young and the impatience of his seatmate Bob Williams, he notes that his "friends credit me with every Christian virtue but resignation." There is undoubtedly a purpose to his declaration that "this collection is dedicated to my wife Dorothy, whom I married at an early urge."

Perhaps his most urgent purpose is to propose public policies — and Macdonald proposes a veritable potpourri of policy. He favours rent controls, a not surprising preference since as Attorney-General he was the minister responsible for introducing them during the NDP sojourn in government. It is more startling to learn that he believes that resource companies and other large commercial enterprises should be publicly owned and that a fair incomes policy should be pursued which would eradicate large differences in take-home pay — doctors and waitresses will lie down together like the lion and the lamb after the tax department is through with them. These are not central themes in NDP election campaigns, and Macdonald hints at a feeling of annoyance at democratic socialists who have not felt able to keep the old faith. Macdonald himself is not a man to turn his back on the policy propositions of his youth, though he does indicate an acquaintance with a more contemporary left wing gospel by advocating that large public enterprises should be broken down into small self-sufficient entities which will promote a more democratic culture in Canada.

As an old and experienced courtroom advocate he forcefully argues the case for a number of other programs with a flavour of the radical passion of his younger days. He argues for a new medical billing scheme where physicians would be paid by the number of patients registered with them with the fees varied by the age of the patient. Clement Atlee would be pleased. He argues for a youth corps to get unemployed kids off the streets into a setting where they can learn skills and be toughened up by “former Sergeant-Majors who know how to bark orders.” F.D.R. will beam in heaven. He decries state lotteries, as befits a Christian socialist. He would mobilize the \$36 billion he states is tucked away in financial institutions in B.C. through state-guaranteed wage-earner funds directed at providing capital for public and private enterprise. He would end tort liability in automobile accidents and substitute a thoroughgoing no fault insurance scheme. He would reinstitute death duties, confiscate all the gains of real estate flippers (is this a prophecy of a new inflationary spiral in the province?), heavily subsidize television programming, tax with a vengeance the tobacco companies (even the cigar makers!) and encourage worker participation in the management of industry. The ideas, often as old and venerable as the author, occasionally new fangled, always passionately argued, keep tumbling from the pages of the book, entertaining and provoking.

Macdonald seems particularly anxious to provide the complacent in his own party. He criticizes the B.C. Teachers' Federation for failing to

“assume its share of responsibility in work and income sharing.” Not a stated party policy. He criticizes Michael Harcourt, a bit unfairly given the rather limited powers of mayors, for not securing the public ownership of land adjacent to the new rapid transit stations in Vancouver. He is dismayed by the NDP embrace of quotas to the point where half of the federal executive must be women. He is distressed by what he sees as an over-reliance on campaigning devices for identifying rather than persuading voters, noting that the NDP originated the three canvass door-knocking campaign at voter identification in the late 1960s. Actually the CCF in Ontario conducted such a campaign in a 1942 by-election, partly borrowing Liberal techniques in order to defeat Arthur Meighen. One should not, of course, expect Macdonald to be completely immune from the mythologies of B.C. socialists. Finally, he is appalled at the easy acceptance on the left of the “rights culture.” He was certainly against the imposition of the Charter of Rights (with Blakeney rather than Broadbent) because he sees so many of the rights as ill-defined and because he is not at all certain about the wisdom of the judges who will be called upon to provide definitions — a very proper sentiment in a man whose father was chief justice of the province and who boasts two brothers on the bench. Macdonald recognizes that the Charter may make things rather more difficult for reformers and scathingly notes that “our MLAs in a fit of lunacy supported a formal Sacred resolution to insert property rights into the Charter.”

Of course Alex Macdonald is able to delight in taking potshots at his colleagues because he is not really a modern social democrat — he is instead a nineteenth-century Radical from a good Whig family. As a radical he romanticizes the workers, particularly those in service. He writes feelingly about his waitress at the Union Club who, he surmises, will never “land a . . . husband . . . never make a killing on the stock exchange; never have a home of her own.” There is actually no reason to believe this of a “chipper and peppy” young woman who owns a car and holds down another job as a waitress, no reason other than an aristocratic sense of *noblesse oblige*. It is a prejudice, just as is the Macdonald disdain of businessmen (and women) — those, as it would have been pronounced in the last century, who are in trade. Mind you, it is a prejudice shared by many in the NDP and a reason why the party in British Columbia is likely to continue finding it difficult to appeal to small businessmen and others in the middle classes not employed in the public sector or not intellectually secure in their professions. It is no accident that Macdonald, in choosing a former caucus researcher to

patronize by sending letters of advice, the heuristic device of the book, should choose Hugh Legg, the son of a B.C. Supreme Court judge who married Linda Coady, the grand-daughter of another Supreme Court judge and the daughter of a very prominent physician. Nor is it any accident that Macdonald's favourite Biblical tale, taken, of course, from the King James Version, is that of the Householder who decides to pay all who worked in his fields on a hot day, whether for all day or just for a few minutes, the same needed penny. The Whig aristocracy is alive and well, living in a house overlooking English Bay yet holding the NDP pocket borough of Vancouver East.

This, no doubt, sounds critical. It is not, or at least not very critical save to suggest that Alex Macdonald, like us all, is not very conscious of his own assumptions. The book itself is wonderful. The courtly reminiscing about Woodsworth and Coldwell and other party icons is delightful. Macdonald's story about his role in obtaining the appointment of the first Chinese notary public (with a little judicial help from Linda Coady's grandfather) is inspiring and usefully reminds us of the shameful treatment given to the Chinese and the Japanese in British Columbia and of the courage of those like himself who could not abide racism. His story of providing a seat at the San Francisco founding of the United Nations for none other than John Diefenbaker is a nice bit of Canadian memorabilia. His account of his father's investigation of oil and gas prices for the Pattullo government is, in itself, worth the price of the book. So, for that matter, is the picture of Alex in his kilt opening Robson Square a half hour before the official deed.

Alex Macdonald threatens to write another book. This one is a partial autobiography disguised as amusing and didactic letters from the Earl of Sandwich to his son. I hope that the next one, even if written about a less personal subject, shows the same wit and sense of style. Alex Macdonald is the last person who ought to succumb to academic overcaution.