

The Shapes of History in British Columbia Writing

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Discussions of the distinctive nature of British Columbia as a literary region, which have been stimulated by the strong recent interest in regional aspects of Canadian writing, nearly always begin with landscape and geography, and historical factors are less often considered. This is natural enough, since B.C. is clearly more notable for its geographical breadth than for historical depth. The history of the area is less visible than its spectacular landscape, and the impact of the history on the literature is harder to define, partly because it is so much more complex.

Yet it is immediately apparent when one considers how the boundaries are formed that history is as important as landscape and geography in determining the character of the region. While geography gives the region eastern and western boundaries that could scarcely be more clearly marked — the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean — and establishes B.C. and the Prairie west not merely as different but as clearly defined opposites in their natural features and climate, the northern and southern boundaries follow no such natural divisions but are arbitrary and invisible. These boundaries are so far from being self-evident or inevitable that the history of the region has been marked by a long series of boundary disputes. The area first emerged to international prominence as the result of a boundary dispute between Britain and Spain, which produced the Nootka crisis of 1789-90; and the successive disputes about the Oregon boundary, the San Juan Islands, and the Alaska boundary continued through the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth.

Artificial and arbitrary though the boundaries established by historical factors rather than geographical features are, a strong sense early developed in B.C. that those which separated it from the American northwest marked a division between two different social orders. This emerges clearly from the diary of Charles Wilson, an officer of the Royal Engineers, who served as secretary of the British Boundary Commission, which in 1858-62 in collaboration with its American counterpart surveyed and marked the arbitrary line that defies all geographical features along the forty-ninth

parallel between the Pacific and the Rockies — an exploit now best remembered for the classic early photographs in which it was recorded.¹ Wilson was an intelligent and literate man, with an appreciation both of the beauty of the country and of the character of the native Indians. He was not unfair to the Americans with whom he came into contact, and his relations with them were always good, but there gradually emerges from his diary a sense of the symbolic nature of the boundary, as one between the rule of law, on the one hand, and violence and lawlessness, on the other: he records visits to an American town where there was a murder or attempted murder on the average once a month but no one was ever brought to justice, and to another, the gold-boom town of Walla Walla, where there was a violent death nearly every day.²

There is no doubt that the colonial authorities responsible for British Columbia and Vancouver Island did their best to ensure that the boundary should have the kind of significance that Wilson saw in it. This is demonstrated in Indian policy and in the handling of the great crisis caused by the Fraser gold rush. At the time of the gold rush in 1858, the secretary of the influential Aborigines Protection Society in England wrote to the Colonial Secretary, Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, expressing concern about the great influx of Californian miners into B.C., and urged him to ensure that the “reckless inhumanity” of the gold-diggers to the Indians in California should not be repeated in B.C., and later in the same year Bulwer Lytton’s successor, the Duke of Newcastle, gave Parliament assurance that the “cruelties and horrors” against aborigines in earlier British colonies and in the American west should not be duplicated there.³

Thus colonial policy was, to some degree at least, framed in deliberate contrast to that of the American west, with the determination that B.C.’s history should be different from that of the American west. The remarkable success with which this policy was carried out, and law was maintained, during the almost incredibly difficult conditions of the gold rush

¹ These photographs were given a prominent place in an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1984. See the exhibition catalogue: Mark Haworth-Booth, *The Golden Age of British Photography, 1839-1900* (London: Aperture Books, 1984), 114-17. Cf. Andrew Birrell, “Survey Photography in British Columbia, 1858-1900,” *BC Studies* 52 (Winter 1981-2): 39-60.

² *Mapping the Frontier, Charles Wilson’s Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel, 1858-62, while Secretary of the British Boundary Commission*, ed. G. F. Stanley (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), 97, 170-74.

³ See F. W. Chesson’s letter to Bulwer Lytton, *The Aborigines’ Friend and Colonial Intelligencer*, Feb.-Sept., 1858, 414. Newcastle’s speech is quoted from *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates* by Barry M. Gough in *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians, 1846-90* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 237-38.

by the Governor, James Douglas, and the Chief Justice, Matthew Baillie Begbie, is one of the best known and most celebrated aspects of B.C. history, the regional equivalent of the legendary role of the North-West Mounted Police on the Prairies later in the century. At the height of the great invasion of miners from the most lawless part of the American west, Begbie was able to report a two-year period with only two serious crimes, and a year without any murder or attempted murder.⁴

The success of the authorities in establishing a different, less violent society is frequently attested by travellers comparing this area with adjacent parts of the American west. A long series of travellers, from the Rev. John Sheepshanks in the mid-nineteenth century to Rudyard Kipling at the end of the century, expressed great shock at the hatred and murderous attitudes toward Indians they found among Americans when they crossed the border.⁵ Some of these observers might no doubt be discounted as displaying British prejudices, but American sources confirm their accuracy. H. H. Bancroft, the great historian of the American west, who was certainly no friend of the British, was astonished by the contrast with his own country revealed by the absence of Indian violence in B.C., under the regimes of the Hudson's Bay Company and the colonial authorities:

Never from beginning to end was there a single outbreak or massacre of any importance save along the seaboard, and these were seldom directed against the resident fur-traders. Why was this, when the United States border was everywhere deluged in blood?

Bancroft considered that the territory of the Hudson's Bay Company was the only one in the two Americas where the Indians were treated with kindness, and was greatly impressed with Begbie's achievement in maintaining the rule of law at the time of the gold rush:

. . . never in the pacification and settlement of any section of America have there been so few disturbances, so few crimes against life or property. And when we consider the clashing elements that came together as Begbie reached

⁴ See Barry M. Gough, "Keeping British Columbia British: The Law-and-Order Question on a Gold Mining Frontier," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 38 (1975): 278; and David R. Williams, "... *The Man for a New Country*": *Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie* (Sidney, B.C.: Gray's, 1977), 98. These figures do not include crimes committed by Indians, but Begbie developed a very favourable view of the native Indians.

⁵ See Sheepshanks' diaries for 1859 and subsequent years, in D. Wallace Duthie, *A Bishop in the Rough* (New York: Dutton, 1909), 36, 132, and Kipling's *From Sea to Sea, And Other Sketches: Letters of Travel* (London: Macmillan, 1900), II, 61, 63.

the country, the nature and antecedents of the wild, rough and cunning men, it is wonderful.⁶

Bancroft's sense that British Columbia's history developed along very different lines from that of the American west has been confirmed by many later historians.⁷

Today we must be too conscious of the most deeply tragic dimension of B.C. history, the dispossession of the native Indians from their land, their decimation by disease and alcohol, and the destruction of their culture, to be complacent or boastful of the differences from the history of the American west. British Columbia is part of a universal North American tragedy. It has no exemption. Yet the differences from the American west are genuine, and they are reflected in the literature.

If we ask what the consequences are for literature of the fact that the history of B.C. has been so different from that of the American west, the answer is easiest to provide in negative terms: we can quickly point to elements in western American literature that are lacking in that of B.C. This was noted as early as 1899 by William Ridley, the Anglican missionary bishop at the Bennett and Atlin gold fields. He remarked: "... Canadian mining camps would never provide Bret Harte with the material his stories are built up with. Law and order are maintained by the common resolve of the men."⁸

Among writers conscious of this difference was the friend and biographer of George Gissing, Morley Roberts, who lived for a time as a young English immigrant in B.C. Roberts' novel, *The Prey of the Strongest* (1906), based on his experiences in B.C. in the 1880s, has a melodramatic plot but provides a vivid and authentic picture of the life of sawmill workers: it does for saw milling what Martin Grainger and Hubert Evans were later to do for coastal logging and fishing. In his introduction, addressed to a friend who knew the region, Roberts felt it necessary to apologize for the melodramatic elements of his narrative: "It is possible that you will say that there is too much violence in this story, seeing that it is laid in British

⁶ *History of British Columbia, 1792-1887, Works*, XXXII (San Francisco: History Company, 1887), 45, 431. Bancroft attributes the relatively peaceable nature of the western Canadian frontier to commercial motives and policies of the Hudson's Bay Company.

⁷ Charles Lillard, who came to B.C. from the American north-west, has recently expressed his astonishment that in B.C. there were no Indian wars or even skirmishes, apart from the minor Chilcotin outbreak in 1864, in contrast to eight major Indian wars, as well as a great many "police actions" in the adjoining American territory. See his *Seven Shillings a Year, The History of Vancouver Island* (Ganges, B.C.: Horsdal & Schubart, 1986), 141.

⁸ Ridley's *Snapshots from the North Pacific*, second edition (1904), reprinted in Charles Lillard, ed., *Warriors of the North Pacific* (Victoria: Sono Nis, 1984), 258.

Columbia and not South of the Forty Ninth Parallel." In the novel itself he draws contrasts with the American west, stating that few six-shooters are to be seen in B.C., and that in B.C. killing is murder, though this excites scorn, derision, and even amazement from American citizens from Spokane Falls and Seattle.⁹

Perhaps the most striking consequence of the way in which the literature is conditioned by the historical differences signified by the border is the absence of the American western in B.C. fiction. The environment of much of B.C. made the man with the axe rather than the man in the saddle the dominant figure of the frontier, but even in areas like the Cariboo and Chilcotin, where there existed an authentic cowboy and ranching culture, the American-style western was scarcely possible. It is in keeping with the local conditions and traditions that Sheila Watson has declared that in writing *The Double Hook* she was determined to produce a novel "about the West, which wasn't a Western."¹⁰ How indeed could one write an American western in a region where the best cowboys were often Indians, where lynchings were unknown, and where anyone wearing a six-shooter was likely to be laughed out of the country, a region which had attracted settlers seeking not to escape any lawless past of their own but to escape the lawlessness of the American west.¹¹

The incongruity of the American western with this region appears in occasional attempts to impose its patterns on the B.C. setting made by immigrant writers who have imported their attitudes from the American west. One such American writer, Richmond Hobson, in *Grass Beyond the Mountains*, an entertaining and deservedly popular narrative about establishing a ranch in a remote part of the Chilcotin in the 1930s, describes the Ulgatcho Indians, whose territory he had invaded, as having "cruel-looking faces" and as thinking nothing of murder; among them, he tells us, was "an evil, nightmarish-looking pair"; one had "dark treacherous eyes"; and their area was "possibly hostile Indian country."¹² With time

⁹ (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1906), viii, 23, 233.

¹⁰ See Watson's "What I'm Going to Do," *Open Letter*, third series, no. 1 (Winter, 1974-5), 182.

¹¹ The only lynching apparently known to have occurred in B.C. was committed by Americans a few hundred yards north of the border in 1884. See Williams, *Begbie*, 89. Even during the conditions of the Cariboo gold rush, the *British Colonist* stated: "The bowie knife and revolver are as rare as in old and well-settled communities," as quoted in an anonymous *Handbook to Vancouver Island and British Columbia* (London: F. Algar, 1862), 6. For an example of a settler who moved to B.C. because of his dislike of the "vigilante" regime in Washington Territory, see the life of Robert Wood of "Spallumcheen" in J. B. Kerr, *Biographical Dictionary of Well-known British Columbians* (Vancouver: Kerr & Begg, 1890), 324.

¹² (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 134, 148, 168-69. First published 1951.

and experience these imported American stereotypes were weakened as Hobson gradually learned that he had come to a surprisingly peaceful frontier.

Another narrative, popular enough to reach American best-seller lists, which shares the same biases is David Conover's *One Man's Island*, the story of the Californian author's adventures in acquiring and settling on one of the smaller B.C. Gulf Islands in the 1940s. His encounters with local Indians are described in terms such as these: "The way he walked sent a chill through me. . . . For an instant our tongues were tied. We faced a full-blooded Indian." Not satisfied that his wife carried a rifle for protection against Indians, he bought her a handgun for her birthday, and tells us how she fired it at Indians gathering oysters (where they had been gathering shellfish for generations and had every legal right to do so): "Her face was hard, and she held the gun with authority."¹³ This is an astonishing attempt to convert an idyllically peaceful area of B.C. into part of the wild American west.

One would not be likely to find anything so crude in the work of more sophisticated writers, but one might ask, for example, to what extent the striking differences between the fictional worlds of Jack Hodgins and Raymond Carver, who lived and wrote for some years a relatively short distance apart on opposite sides of the Straits of Juan de Fuca, represent in more subtle ways the reality of a boundary between two areas with different histories and traditions, as well as expressing more purely individual characteristics. In contrast to Carver's characters, who rarely seem far from violence, open or repressed, most of Hodgins' characters, though they certainly have no immunity from tragedy and evil, lead lives relatively free of violence. In *The Invention of the World* Hodgins satirizes one of his characters, Wade Powers, for building a pseudo-fort as a tourist trap on a Vancouver Island where the wild west never really existed, and in *The Honorary Patron* he shows how the characters' sense of the non-violent nature of Vancouver Island history and society intensifies their surprise and incredulity when a local person is found to be implicated in international terrorism.

Rather than examining the work of writers in a narrowly reductive manner for national and regional biases, however, it may be better to move to a broader and more positive approach, and consider a number of the ways in which B.C. history has been explicitly or implicitly embodied in the literature of the region. This analysis thus far has drawn attention to ways in which the literature reflects the fact that B.C. history

¹³ (New York: Crown, 1967), 95-97, 138, 174.

follows a western Canadian rather than American pattern, one marked by a British concern for the rule of law and by the modification of individualism and the frontier ethic by a concern for community; but on closer examination it is of course the differences in regional history and experience from other parts of the Canadian west that are often most interesting. These include not only the presence of a native Indian coastal culture and art unique in North America, but also the fact that this is the only area of Canada that was ever part of Spanish America, with an outpost at Nootka, ruled from Mexico City and Madrid. The west coast became one of the "gunboat frontiers" of the British Empire, where imperial power was represented by the Royal Navy,¹⁴ and had more in common with other maritime frontiers of Empire like New Zealand than with the Prairies. During the colonial period, maritime links with California, Hawaii, the Orient, and even Australia were often closer than ties with Canada. Sir Alexander Mackenzie's famous inscription on the rock near Bella Coola in 1793, "From Canada by land," long remained the boast of a singular achievement. So separate had B.C.'s historical development been that at the time of the Confederation debates, John Helmcken, the speaker of the colonial legislature, considered in 1868 that it would make as much sense for the colony to unite with Australia as with Canada, and declared in 1870: "Canada is for all practical purposes further removed from us today than England; we know less about her."¹⁵

Much of the region's early documentary literature and many works of primary history written by participants in and witnesses of events in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century gain distinctiveness from having been produced by historical circumstances as different as the geographical features from those of other parts of the Canadian west. This is illustrated most obviously by the fact that the written records begin with the journals of the great navigators, Cook and Vancouver, and their Spanish counterparts. Although the early literature includes the narratives of overland explorers and servants of the great land-based fur trading companies, such as Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson, the largest branch is provided by the log books, journals and reports written by maritime explorers and aboard the hundreds of ships engaged in the maritime fur trade in the late eighteenth and early nine-

¹⁴ See Barry M. Gough's series of books on this topic, especially *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians, 1846-90* (1984).

¹⁵ Helmcken is quoted by Derek Pethick, *Summer of Promise: Victoria 1864-1914* (Victoria: Sono Nis, 1980), 41, 54.

teenth century.¹⁶ Thus the early literature of B.C., in English and other European languages, differs from that of the Prairie west in the simple but crucial fact that most of it was written by sailors, and most of the writers made their approach not overland but from the Pacific.

A second great outpouring of literature about B.C., which has no close counterpart in the Prairies or other regions of Canada (at least until the Klondike rush of 1898), occurs just after the middle of the nineteenth century as a result of the Fraser and Cariboo gold rushes between 1858 and 1862. For a short while B.C. attracted world attention to a degree it never had before and perhaps never has since. For the first time professional writers were attracted to B.C. as a subject. Two books on the region and its gold fields were published by W. C. Hazlitt, grandson of the great essayist, and one was published by R. M. Ballantyne, author of *Coral Island*, although neither of these writers had any first-hand knowledge of B.C.¹⁷ Charles Dickens, displaying his usual keen journalistic sense, included an article on B.C. in the journal he owned and edited, *All the Year Round*, which was based on reports sent back to England by George Hills, the first Anglican Bishop of Columbia.¹⁸ So great was the publicity prompted by the gold rushes that Anthony Trollope could refer casually to "Frazer's River" in a novel, *The Bertrams*, written in 1858 and published the following year; and so extensive was the literature that Samuel Butler, the future author of *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*, could write to his father in a letter of 4 August 1858: "I have been and am reading the latest work on New Columbia which seems to me to offer the best chances."¹⁹

By this time there was a great variety in the types of documentary litera-

¹⁶ See F. W. Howay, *A List of the Trading Vessels in the Maritime Fur Trade 1785-1825*, *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, XXIV-XXVIII (1930-34); reprinted, ed. R. A. Pierce (Kingston, Ont.: Limestone, 1973). About 250 vessels are in this list; since records are fragmentary, the total number was certainly much greater.

¹⁷ Hazlitt, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London, 1858), and *The Great Gold Fields of the Cariboo, with an Authentic Description, Brought Down to the Latest Period of British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London, 1862); and Ballantyne, *Handbook to the New Gold Fields* (Edinburgh, 1858).

¹⁸ "Episcopacy in the Rough," *All the Year Round*, 4 (23 Feb. 1861), 470-74. A number of articles on B.C. subjects by Robert Brown were subsequently published in *All the Year Round* between 1865 and 1871. See John Hayman, ed., *Robert Brown and the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989), Appendix I, 199-200.

¹⁹ See Trollope's *The Bertrams*, ch. XLVII (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1986), 581; and *The Family Letters of Samuel Butler, 1841-1886*, ed. A. Silver (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962), 90. Since Butler decided upon emigration to New Zealand, British Columbia missed the chance of becoming the setting of *Erewhon*.

ture, embodying in diverse ways the distinctive nature and history of the region: letters, diaries, autobiographies and other narratives of explorers, fur traders, gold miners, settlers, missionaries, naval officers, and sportsmen, among others.²⁰ While the early documentary accounts vary widely in literary quality, they are often fascinating as providing the first European impressions, descriptions, and experiences of the region, its native inhabitants, and its landscape and other features. Frequently prompted by utilitarian motives, such as the requirement to keep ships' log books, they reveal also the impulse to describe the new and unique in setting and experience, and, while they inevitably display the European and imperialist biases of their time, they initiate the great historical subjects in the region's literature: the exploration of B.C., the contact between Europeans and native Indians, immigrant experience, and the relation, full of ambiguities and ironies, between "wilderness" and "civilization."

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documentary writing in which this region is so rich has a double value, both as primary historical literature in its own right and as source material for the later creative writer as well as the later historian. While much of the early writing is more notable for its content than for its style or formal qualities, it often has at least the merits of simplicity and directness, and at best it rises to a high level of excellence. For example, here is a report of one of Cook's encounters with the native Indians at Nootka by John Ledyard, the Connecticut Yankee who sailed with the great navigator:

When a party was sent to procure some grass for our cattle they [the Indians] would not suffer them to take a blade of it without payment, nor had we a mast or yard without an acknowledgement. They intimated to us that the country all round further than we could see was theirs. Water and wood they charged us nothing for. Capt. Cook would not credit this fact when he first heard it and went in person to be assured of it, and persisting in a more preremptory tone in his demands, one of the Indians took him by the arm and thrust him from him, pointing the way for him to go about his business. Cook was struck with astonishment, and turning to his people with a smile mixed with admiration exclaimed, "This is an American indeed!" and instantly offered this brave man what he thought proper to take; after which the

²⁰ See Margaret Ormsby's "Note on Sources" in her *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958): "British Columbians have always been literate, and they have always been inspired by a sense of their province's destiny" (p. 526). Despite the good work of historians and editors, much of the most interesting primary literature remains unpublished in archives, relatively inaccessible to the ordinary reader. Some of the B.C. sections even of the exceptionally important journal of Archibald Menzies, the botanist who sailed with Captain Vancouver, remain unpublished; and there has been no extensive publication of the correspondence, either private or official, of the dominant figure of the colonial era, Sir James Douglas.

Indian took him and his men to his dwelling and offered them such as he had to eat.²¹

This is one of the passages that has drawn the attention of the poet Lionel Kearns in *Convergences* (1984).²² He asks in effect how any later writer could possibly improve on such a narrative. For the poet, novelist, or dramatist, literature of this kind is more than raw material; it provides a challenge for the creative writer to match it in interest and power in his own medium.

How much has the history of B.C., which is so amply recorded in the documentary literature, entered into the consciousness of the region's poets, dramatists, and novelists? One's first impression might be that history has entered less into creative literature here than in some other Canadian regions, since there appears to be no historical figure who has so seized the imagination of writers as Louis Riel has for those of the Prairies. An explanation for this might be found partly in the fact that a high proportion of B.C. writers have immigrated to the region from other places: for many of them the past is quite literally another country. Some writers such as bill bissett have even stated that they came to B.C. in order to escape history and all the monuments that commemorate it.²³ Some natives of the region such as George Bowering have declared that they were taught little of the history, and grew up without knowing much about it.²⁴

Yet, as Bowering goes on to point out, writers who have not formally been taught the history of the region may be stimulated by the sense of personal exploration and discovery when they embark upon their own investigation of it. This is shown in the interest he and other writers have taken in the personalities and exploits of Cook, Vancouver, Mackenzie, and other explorers. The modern writers engaged in literary exploration of the region have often seemed fascinated by these earlier explorers and their records. The poets from Earle Birney to Bowering and Lionel Kearns, and the writers of fiction from Ethel Wilson to Audrey Thomas, have turned in their own writings to the narratives of the first European explorers.²⁵

²¹ *John Ledyard's Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage*, ed. J. K. Munford (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1963), 72. First published 1783.

²² (Toronto: Coach House, 1984), unpaginated.

²³ See Maidie Hilmo, "Interview with bill bissett," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 32 (Summer 1986): 140.

²⁴ Bowering's statement in an interview, in Reginald Berry, "George Bowering: The Fact of Place on the Canadian West Coast," *Westerly* 30 (December, 1985): 78.

²⁵ See for example George Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980) on Captain Vancouver, and Kearns' *Convergences* (1984) on Cook. There are significant allusions to the eighteenth-century maritime explorers in Wilson's *Love and Salt Water* (1956), in Thomas' *Intertidal Life* (1984), and in Marilyn Bowering's *To All Appearances a Lady* (1989).

The writers have, it is true, tended to avoid certain types of conventional historical subject. They have given us few historical poems, plays, or novels about the Fraser gold rush or about Sir James Douglas or Amor de Cosmos. They have not been much attracted toward political figures, neither great establishers and upholders of law nor great rebels and outlaws: they have not shown much interest in developing mythologies corresponding either with that of the North-West Mounted Police or with that of Riel on the Prairies. They have, however, explored many other aspects of the history of the region, while simultaneously exploring the relations between history and myth, between fact and imagination.

The poets and novelists have demonstrated that historical materials have the most diverse uses for the creative writer: recent examples range from Bowering's playful postmodern parody of literary and historical conventions in his novel of Captain Vancouver, *Burning Water* (1980), to Daphne Marlatt's much more solemnly political and didactic rendering of women's history in the place that came to be called Vancouver, *Ana Historic* (1988). If the writers have not been much interested in such figures as Douglas and Begbie, they have been fascinated by a figure of a very different kind, the painter Emily Carr.²⁶ Much about the character of this region and its writers may be implied by the fact that no other historical figure occupies so prominent a place in the imaginative literature as the painter who was the first to come fully to terms with the local landscape and the native Indian culture, and who showed the possibility of a great art integrated with the west coast setting.

Examination of the way in which B.C. history has been embodied in poetry should begin with Earle Birney, undoubtedly the greatest poet of the region, though he is far from being confined to any single region. His work expresses a definite vision of west coast history, marked by a view of local patterns and developments within a series of large perspectives. Sometimes, as in "November Walk near False Creek Mouth" and "The Mammoth Corridors," the perspective is a vast geological and evolutionary time-scale; sometimes it may derive partly from a Marxist view of history. Birney is capable of combining the perspective of the Marxist with that of the mediaevalist, and of giving us in *The Damnation of Vancouver* comments on the area's history both by William Langland and by a Salish headman. These large perspectives do not result in any crudely reductive or oversimplified view, for they are combined with detailed and precisely

²⁶ See Eva-Marie Kröller, "Literary Versions of Emily Carr," *Canadian Literature* 109 (Summer 1986): 87-98. Cf. W. H. New on Carr as cultural symbol in "A Piece of the Continent, A Part of the Main: Some Comments on B.C. Literature," *BC Studies* 67 (Autumn 1985): 10-14.

observed contemporary social history; the sombre, sometimes apocalyptic vision of poems like "What's so Big about Green?," on the destructive exploitation of the land, is balanced by a strong sense of human joy, love, and comedy in many other poems. This special combination of perspectives and approaches to the history of the region is a unique and still relatively little explored aspect of Birney's work.

From Birney we might proceed to other poets who have shown special interest in B.C. history. These include at least one excellent contemporary poet who seems fascinated by every aspect of the history of the region, Florence McNeil. However, as there is space here to examine only a few examples, we may turn to a genre that has produced several exceptionally substantial and distinguished works, the novel. Three novels deserve special consideration: Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1938), Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller* (1949), and Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* (1977). Though none of these is a conventional historical novel, all have important historical dimensions.

The earliest of these three novels to be conceived and begun was Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller*. Although it was not published until 1949, recent research has shown that the author began writing it as early as 1930, and that it was the first substantial work on which she embarked.²⁷ While in the past it might have been assumed that the local factors which prompted her to become a writer were landscape and nature, since these are very prominent in her work, it now appears that her sense of historical change and of the uniqueness of local historical experience may well have provided the primary impetus.

Ethel Wilson had a special interest in the operation of time, a strong sense of the transient, and she knew that while the landscape remains, the historical moment soon passes from memory. She wrote *The Innocent Traveller*, as she stated in a talk about her work, to provide for the benefit of future generations "the record which might otherwise be lost" of the history both of a family and a place.²⁸ She sought, before it was too late, to give a picture of Vancouver's early social history, based on her own experiences and memories and those of other members of her family, especially an elderly aunt. She deals with the immigrant experience of a middle-class English family, which arrived in the raw little frontier settlement of Vancouver in the 1880s, and recreates the special quality of life in the early years of this place, suddenly sprung up on the edge of the

²⁷ See David Stouck's introduction to his edition of Ethel Wilson's *Stories, Essays, and Letters* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), xii, xiv-xvi.

²⁸ "Somewhere Near the Truth," in *Stories, Essays, and Letters*, ed. D. Stouck, 87.

wilderness, and in the subsequent period of the transition from frontier town to large city.

The central character of this loosely structured episodic novel, Aunt Topaz, is represented as one who lives on the surface, without much depth of inner life. This very limitation makes her an ideal vehicle for social history. She has other limitations, including those of class, but she successfully embodies a personal experience of fifty years of Vancouver's early history. Wilson states of Aunt Topaz's family: "The history of families like the Hastings family is to some extent the history of Vancouver, but it will not be written for a long time."²⁹ She does not claim for herself the comprehensiveness or detachment of the professional historian, but provides a lightly handled personal version of history, which gains its authenticity and vitality from the fact that it is based not on archival research but on her own experience and the experience of those of an older generation who were close to her. In a letter she describes the novel as "derived from intimate, personal experiences," "almost autobiographical."³⁰

Wilson's novel represents an approach to history that could scarcely be more different from O'Hagan's. *The Innocent Traveller* is a historical novel conceived as the antithesis of a historical epic. It is comic in spirit, and the essence of the central character is that nothing much really happens to her; she accomplishes no great deeds, in a sense does nothing at all with her life. *Tay John*, on the other hand, has heroic qualities and large epic dimensions. While Wilson has aptly been termed a wary or cautious mythologist, O'Hagan brings a grand mythic approach to his treatment of history.³¹

In contrast to *The Innocent Traveller*, *Tay John* presents us not with the social history of a western city but rather with a great mythic vision of the essence of western history. O'Hagan belongs both to Alberta and B.C., and *Tay John* can be seen as the archetypal novel of the far western region that extends from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific, the novel that embodies most fully the theme of the relation between wilderness and civilization, which is at the centre of the region's historical experience and

²⁹ *The Innocent Traveller* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1949), 158.

³⁰ Letter of 18 Feb. 1946 to Ellen Elliott, in *Stories, Essays, and Letters*, ed. D. Stouck, 126-27. In a letter of 25 July 1953 to Desmond Pacey she expresses an unfavourable view of the conventional historical novel: "A novel that is historical is already stacked against, for me" (p. 187).

³¹ Although these discussions are not concerned with the handling of history, see Brent Thompson, "Ethel Wilson, Wary Mythologist," *Canadian Literature* 102 (Autumn 1984): 20-32; and Michael Ondaatje, "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," *Canadian Literature* 61 (Summer 1974), 24-31, which drew attention to the mythic power of this long-neglected writer.

looms large in the documentary writing. The principal character, Tay John, is half-Indian and half-white. He is a figure divided between two worlds, who is shown as finally learning to reject the white man's materialism and false spiritual values. The novel conveys powerfully both the meaning of wilderness, represented by the pristine Rocky Mountain setting, and the losses entailed in its ending.

Tay John presents the ironic as well as the epic aspects of a new land which yet has been long inhabited and a civilization which may be the reverse of what it professes. It shows the imposition of the white man's world on the wilderness in a variety of figures and actions: the activities of a fur trader, McLeod; the building of the railway; the American entrepreneur Dobbie's construction of a resort, to make money and a name for himself; it shows the ironic failures of European religion in the new setting, as represented in two opposing forms of repressive fanaticism. It shows the west as the place of tomorrow, the place of illusions. It shows the significance of putting names on the landscape, including the irony of the uniquely magnificent place pretending to be something it is not, the Switzerland of America, and of a Rocky Mountain resort calling itself Lucerne. It is a powerful, vivid, often critical rendering of the dominant patterns, forces and conflicts of western Canadian history, and it introduces many themes and images which will be taken up again by later writers including Hodgins.

Jack Hodgins' skills in representing contemporary life in the Vancouver Island setting are so great that one does not think of him primarily as a historical writer, but his fine sense of place rests on an awareness of history as well as of landscape. He avoids conventional historical fiction, and indeed is inclined to satirize it, as his references to the performance of a historical play about Dunbar, a figure evidently based on Robert Dunsuir, in his recent novel, *The Honorary Patron* (1987), where he explores the relations between history, myth, and art. His fiction has been set mainly in the present or the recent past, and his island characters sometimes express the sense of living in a place without a history, where nothing important has ever happened; but as he defines and analyses the present, he frequently glances or moves backward to show how the identities both of individual characters and of the society to which they belong are shaped by the past; and he is, at the time I write, about to publish a novel set in the 1880s.³²

³² An extract titled "Loved Forever" from this novel-in-progress, set in Victoria, San Francisco and Australia in 1881-82, was published in *Books in Canada* 17, 6 (Aug.-Sept. 1988): 13-15. [Since the present article was written this novel has been published, with the title *Innocent Cities* (1990).]

Among his previously published works, the historical dimension has an especially prominent place in *The Invention of the World*. The amateur historian Strabo Becker has an important part in the narrative, and characters discuss the question whether Vancouver Island has a history that can be compared with that of apparently older places. Movement in the narrative back and forth between early and later twentieth century shows that the island does indeed have its own history and mythology. This novel, centring in the malign figure of Donal Keneally, is much concerned with such historical topics as immigrant experience and the development of an island society with its special characteristics.

Hodgins' treatment of western history, like O'Hagan's, has strongly mythic aspects. The figure of Keneally is to some extent modelled on or inspired by Brother XII, a leader of a cult in the 1920s, who had real historical existence; but Hodgins' methods are not those of Strabo Becker, who is intent on discovering the historical facts. He may have begun *The Invention of the World* with the idea of writing a relatively conventional kind of historical novel about Brother XII, but he came to realize that his vision of truth could better be presented through a freer kind of fiction, and the historical figure of Brother XII was replaced by the mythic figure of Keneally.³³ While exploring the boundaries between history and myth, he has created his own myth to express truths about island life and history, to embody and examine critically such themes with special regional significance as the search for the ideal place or quest for Eden, and the tendency of islanders each to make his own island.

Mythic approaches to history of the kind we have in O'Hagan and Hodgins may of course represent visions that are so purely personal, individual, and even eccentric as to have little validity in terms of the historical experience of the region as conceived by others: they may represent patterns imposed on history rather than found in it. These two writers, however, have powers of perception of historical patterns and a sense for authentic detail which give their work a validity that is far more than personal. Their fiction often provides the same pleasure of recognition for those familiar with the history of the region as it does for those familiar with the landscape.

A few illustrations may be given to show the accuracy of Hodgins' historical perceptions, since this aspect of his work is not always so fully appreciated as his other imaginative powers. For example, his perception in *The Invention of the World* and his other fiction that the quest for the ideal place, Eden or Utopia, has a special prominence in the history of

³³ See W. J. Keith, "Jack Hodgins and the Sources of Invention," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 34 (Spring 1987): 81-91.

Vancouver Island, and that this search has often been exploited by figures ranging from cult leaders to real estate agents and developers, has an accuracy that is confirmed by historical sources reaching back long before the time of Brother XII, almost to the beginning of European exploration and trading activity on the coast. It is amusingly confirmed by a document that can probably be regarded as the region's first real estate advertisement. In 1791 Captain John Kendrick of Boston "purchased" some land from Maquinna and other chiefs near Nootka, and in 1793 he issued a circular in four languages in London, offering for sale "a tract of delightful country" to "such as may be inclined to associate for settling a commonwealth on their own code of laws, on a spot of the globe nowhere surpassed in delightful and healthy climate and fertile soil."³⁴

Eventually this image of the region became so well established that D. H. Lawrence, who spent much of his life in a restless quest for a new heaven and a new earth, included B.C. in his list of ideal places and considered going there. He wrote in a letter of 9 October 1921 from Sicily: "My plan is, ultimately, to get a little farm somewhere by myself, in Mexico, New Mexico, Rocky Mountains, or British Columbia."³⁵ Although Lawrence did not actually come to B.C., Malcolm Lowry of course did, and the idea of B.C. as a potential Eden remained very much alive in the 1960s and 1970s. In *The Eden Express* (1975), Mark Vonnegut, son of the well-known novelist, has described how he and a group of upper middle-class American members of the Swarthmore class of 1969 came to B.C. — which they were surprised to find a mountainous area — to establish their ideal commune in the vicinity of Powell River. The quest for Eden or Utopia is clearly an important regional theme; yet before Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* no one had realized or explored so fully and imaginatively its significance for the region's history and experience.³⁶

Connected in some ways with the idea of the quest for Eden is the view Hodgins develops of his area as being, though naturally for its natives the

³⁴ Quoted by John T. Walbran, *British Columbia Coast Names* (1909; reprinted, Vancouver, for the Vancouver Public Library, 1971), 280-81.

³⁵ Letter to Earl Brewster, in *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, IV, ed. W. Roberts, J. T. Boulton, and E. Mansfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 95.

³⁶ I have provided a more detailed analysis of the handling of the quest for Eden in Hodgins, with some reference to Lowry and others, in "West of the Great Divide: A View of the Literature of British Columbia," *Canadian Literature* 94 (Autumn 1982): 96-112. Among more recent variations on the theme is George Faludy's *Notes from the Rainforest* (1988). In contrast to the nostalgia for the native land so often expressed by political exiles, the Hungarian poet gives the sense that his period on Vancouver Island was not so much an expulsion from as into Eden.

centre of the world, in the eyes of others an ultimate frontier, a land at the end of the world. In this, too, he shows good historical understanding. The books and pamphlets prompted by the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s made the point that B.C. was virtually the most distant place in the world by the sea routes from England. J. D. Pemberton wrote in his *Facts and Figures Relating to Vancouver Island and British Columbia* (1860) that the passage of over 17,000 miles or almost five months is "the longest passage that can be taken from England to any known part rounding either cape, unless it be in the vicinity of Sitka or Petrapaulouski."³⁷ So well understood was this fact that Vancouver Island was used by Anthony Trollope to stand for the place at the uttermost ends of the earth: in his novel, *The Small House at Allington*, published in *The Cornhill Magazine* between 1862 and 1864, the central character, John Eames, seeking to escape hopeless entanglements and disappointments in love, asks himself: "Had he not better go to Australia or Vancouver's Island, or — ?"³⁸ Morley Roberts in his *The Western Avernus* (1887) tells us that he was drawn from England to B.C. as "almost the farthest place from anywhere in the world."³⁹ Less adventurous immigrants sometimes took a gloomier view of the remoteness. In his *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life* (1868), Gilbert Sproat records the lament of a woman speaking with a Gaelic voice near Alberni in 1860: "you are bringing me to the back of the world."⁴⁰ This brings us very close to the complaint of an Irish immigrant to the island in *The Invention of the World*: "For isn't it true we're all on a ship that will be sailing off the end of the earth?"⁴¹ Hodgins' characters speak with authentic historical voices.

Some of the reviewers of *The Barclay Family Theatre* (1981) seem to have considered that the theme of invasions that Hodgins develops in this work was chosen more arbitrarily than the themes of his earlier books, but he was surely right to recognize that invasions are the key to much of the character and history of the region. From the arrival of Cook in 1778, the invasions have never ceased: anyone who doubts this should consult the coastal Indians. The first result of Cook's voyage was the great influx of maritime fur traders seeking sea otter pelts that brought several hundred ships to the coast in the next few decades. During the Fraser gold rush of

³⁷ (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1860), 84. Pemberton stated that the shorter route using the Panama railway was enormously expensive.

³⁸ Ch. XIV (World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 145.

³⁹ (Westminster: Constable, 1896; first published 1887), 43.

⁴⁰ (London: Smith, Elder, 1868), 14.

⁴¹ (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), 111.

1858 the inhabitants of the little village of Victoria awakened one morning to find thousands of Californian gold prospectors had arrived overnight. A contemporary observer, Alfred Waddington, commented: "Never perhaps was there so large an immigration in so short a space of time into so small a space."⁴²

Much of British Columbia's nineteenth-century history was dominated by fear of invasion and annexation as a result of American "manifest destiny," but in the world of Hodgins' fiction the invaders are not necessarily harmful or threatening. They may on the contrary be figures of exceptional perception and benevolence. From the literary viewpoint the most important of the invaders have of course been the writers who have come from other places, since they and the influences associated with them have played a large part in the literary history of the region. As well as artists, Hodgins shows that his island at the edge of the continent has both attracted and given birth to many other characters of strong individuality and sometimes characters of decided eccentricity.

The prominence Hodgins gives to strikingly individual characters is a special mark of his personal vision and creative power, but it also rests on an accurate understanding of the history and character of his region, which emerges at an early date in documentary accounts. An early immigrant to Vancouver Island, Annie Deans, a carpenter's wife, wrote back not long after her arrival, in a letter of 10 September 1854, to her relations in Scotland, with words that might well serve as an epigraph for some of Hodgins' island writings: "I do assure you there is a rum set of folk on this island."⁴³ The pioneer historian of Hodgins' native area, Eric Duncan, in his *Fifty-seven Years in the Comox Valley*, gives a remarkable picture of the diversity and individuality of the early settlers and of the visitors they sometimes received. His chapter on a wandering Irishman who arrived at Comox in 1897 is titled "A Strange Case" and begins: "What I am about to tell is so unbelievable that I do not wonder if people should discredit it, but those who were my neighbours at that time know that it is true."⁴⁴ Hodgins' perception is confirmed even by such an unexpected source as P. G. Wodehouse, for one of the latter's comic eccentrics, Lord Uffenham, is known to have been based on a resident of Victoria and Galiano, with

⁴² Waddington's *The Fraser Mines Vindicated* (Vancouver: Robert Reid, 1949), 28. First published, Victoria, 1858.

⁴³ Provincial Archives of British Columbia, MS E/B/D343.

⁴⁴ (Courtenay, B.C.: Comox Argus Publishing, 1934), 44-48; reprinted in Duncan's *From Shetland to Vancouver Island* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, third edition, 1939), where the quoted sentence ends "that it is all true" (p. 184).

whom he became acquainted in a German internment camp during the second World War.⁴⁵

One could multiply examples almost indefinitely, though this would be needless pedantry, to show Hodgins has good claims to being the most historically perceptive as well as the most imaginative of recent B.C. writers of fiction. To examine his work in this way may come close to subjecting it to the limited criteria of Strabo Becker, who is intent on establishing the historical facts, but it demonstrates that Hodgins' myth-making is an expression of island reality, rather than a flight from it.⁴⁶ It is a paradox that Hodgins and O'Hagan, the novelists with the greatest mythic powers, are unsurpassed in their grasp of the historical realities of the region, even while they possess the modern and postmodern awareness of the degree to which all narrative and perhaps all constructs of history and reality are fictional.

Examination of the work of Wilson, O'Hagan, and Hodgins suggests that the absence of novels about Douglas, Begbie, and de Cosmos is not necessarily to be regretted. It may indeed reflect good artistic sense on the part of the writers, since few types of literature have a lower survival rate than conventional historical novels. At their best, the novelists have been successful in finding ways of expressing their vision of the region's history in works that are more powerful imaginatively than conventional historical fiction, and which avoid the notorious pitfalls of that genre, such as the documentary kind of "researched" historical novel that lacks the freedom necessary for the truth of fiction. They have often been most successful in rendering the region's history, as in rendering its landscape, through oblique means, while appearing to do other things. They have turned to history not to compensate for any failure in creative power but to find challenges to their powers of perception of the ways in which their region has been shaped by its history, and to their powers of imagination and invention in the shapes they give the history in their writing.

There are now indications, too, that if the historical sense has in the past been less prominent in the creative literature of British Columbia than of some other regions this may well be changing, as is indeed the almost inevitable mark of a maturing culture and a maturing literature. Not only has Hodgins turned in a new novel set in the 1880s to more

⁴⁵ See the discussion of Max Enke as a model for Wodehouse's character, in N. T. P. Murphy, *In Search of Blandings* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), 116-21.

⁴⁶ I refrain from more detailed analysis of Hodgins here because I have already provided discussions of his work in "Jack Hodgins's Island: A Big Enough Country," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 55 (Fall 1985): 21-44, as well as in articles in *Canadian Literature* 94 (Autumn 1982) and 102 (Autumn 1984).

explicitly historical fiction than he has previously written, but George Bowering has displayed an increasing fascination with the history of his region, most recently with the publication of *Caprice* (1987), and the poet Marilyn Bowering has also emerged as a very interesting historical novelist with *To All Appearances a Lady* (1989).

To All Appearances a Lady is the narrative of a voyage around Vancouver Island in a small boat to old whaling stations, which is also a voyage in search of his origins for the half-Chinese pilot-narrator Robert Louis Lam. Built on the recognition that history is as important as geography in defining the region, this novel is remarkable for the fusion of imaginative power with historical sense and the awareness of landscape and seascape. Robert Lam sails with a ghost from the past and an archive of old documents, and the complex narrative involves movement backward, to Hong Kong in the 1850s and to Victoria and the D'Arcy Island leper colony in the 1890s. This is as much a forward looking as a backward reaching novel in its concern with feminist and ecological issues and with a subject certainly destined to loom much larger in the region's writing in the future than it has in the past: the long history of the Chinese in B.C. and the special historical links with Hong Kong.

It is the maritime and Pacific dimensions of B.C. history that most interest Marilyn Bowering, but George Bowering's *Caprice* provides the best concluding point for the present discussion, because it brings us back to the subjects with which we began: the significance of the invisible boundary and of the absence of the western. Considered as a writer of historical fiction, George Bowering has emerged as a stronger and more interesting figure with *Caprice* than when *Burning Water* stood alone, and with it a grand design has become apparent.⁴⁷ *Caprice*, set in the 1890s, is intended as the second part of a trilogy begun with *Burning Water*, set in the 1790s, apparently to be completed some time in the future with a novel set in the 1990s. While *Burning Water*, an insistently fictive handling or re-invention of voyage literature, was an examination of the first of the European literary genres of the region, the one that because of its maritime nature and Pacific orientation separates B.C. from the remainder of the Canadian west, *Caprice* is an examination of the leading American genre of the west, the western of fiction and film. By locating his version

⁴⁷ While Bowering constantly reminds us of the fictive nature of *Caprice*, he avoids here the problems that arise in *Burning Water* from the blatantly fictive treatment of such historical figures as Captain Vancouver. *Caprice* is both lighter and wittier and more closely and seriously engaged with regional history than *Burning Water*, and in it Bowering achieves a better balance between the self-reflexive and metafictional and the more conventionally realistic elements.

of the genre in the interior of B.C., Bowering is able to show striking variations that arise from the transfer across the boundary: he demonstrates both the differences in historical experience between the Canadian and American wests and the literary consequences of those differences. Since the dry cactus land of his setting is identical with the typical landscape of the western set south of the border, it is made clear that the variations result from historical rather than geographical factors.

Caprice might be seen as carrying a stage further the programme Sheila Watson announced with *The Double Hook* of writing a novel "about the West, which wasn't a Western." Bowering takes the conventions of the western and turns them completely around at every point, beginning with a reversal of sexual roles. In place of the cowboy as hero, *Caprice* is a beautiful young woman, a poet, who was educated in a Quebec convent and has lived in Paris, and in seeking revenge for the slaying of her brother she brandishes not a six-shooter but a bull whip. The equivalent of the school-marm figure who provides the romantic love interest is Roy Smith, who teaches at the Indian residential school. All the stereotypes of the western are represented: stock characters, situations, episodes, but at every point there is a witty and surprising reversal of the conventions.⁴⁸

In this parody of the western, Bowering shows the same postmodern concern as in *Burning Water* with exploring and questioning the boundaries between fiction and "reality,"⁴⁹ but he shows a special interest also in exploring the historical significance of the invisible boundary between the American and Canadian west, the "medicine line" that is referred to insistently in the novel. The leading villain, the killer of *Caprice*'s brother, is a Tennessee gunman, Frank Spencer, who has strayed or fled across the border into B.C. There he finds himself no longer in a wild west but in a relatively tame west: "Kamloops was not Tombstone," "Kamloops was not Dodge" or Laramie.⁵⁰

In *Caprice* the differences signified by the border appear in attitudes

⁴⁸ See Bowering's own comments on *Caprice* in Peter Quartermain and Laurie Ricou, "Extra Basis: An Interview with George Bowering," *West Coast Review* 23.1 (Spring 1988): 52-73; and see also Stan Dragland, "Wise and Musical Instruction: George Bowering's *Caprice*," in the same issue, 74-87.

⁴⁹ A good discussion of the postmodern context of Bowering's work, established partly by such historiographical theorists as Hayden White, is provided by Linda Hutcheon in "Historiographic Metafiction," ch. IV of her *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988), although *Caprice*, which seems to me much more successful than *Burning Water*, appeared too late for inclusion there. See also Bowering's "A Great Northward Darkness: The Attack on History in Recent Canadian Fiction," in *Imaginary Hand: Essays by George Bowering* (1988), 1-21.

⁵⁰ (Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books, 1988), 14-17.

toward guns, police, and Indians. The point is frequently made that in this part of the west six-shooters or Colts are little in evidence and considered unacceptable in most contexts. We see that for the heroine to acquire a handgun, as Caprice at one time does, is to risk giving victory to the villain — or allowing the villain to take charge of the narrative. Spencer complains that people up here don't think of outlaws but of cops as heroes. The roles played by Constable Burr and the Provincial Police show the police in a favourable light: they may be slow but they help save the heroine and they get their man. Roy Smith believes in teaching Indians rather than shooting them; and two Indians who are given a special role in the novel as analysts and commentators show that they have much to teach others: they often appear as the most perceptive figures, and represent a high level of sophistication, shrewdness, and humour.

Bowering's approach is not crudely chauvinistic or complacent. His wit and humour help save him from that danger, and for the sake of balance he provides a Canadian as well as an American villain.⁵¹ But he demonstrates that in an area of British Columbia that has the perfect landscape for the American western, history has made the western impossible: if a transfer is attempted the genre becomes transformed by the different historical circumstances. It has to be set on its head or reversed. In *Caprice* the "medicine line" assumes a significance not dissimilar to that Charles Wilson saw in the boundary when he was engaged in surveying it between 1858 and 1862, and the novel as a whole is a working out of its literary implications.⁵²

⁵¹ It might be argued, however, that through the character of Roy Smith Bowering gives a more favourable view of Canadian policies and practices in the education of native Indians than the historical evidence warrants, since recognition has grown strongly in recent years that this is not a subject in which Canadians can take pride.

⁵² In sections such as the one on the shrinking of the west (pp. 108-10), *Caprice* draws to our attention another boundary which has specially interested B.C. writers, that between two historical eras: the period from 1880 to the turn of the century. In this as in other things the pattern is established by O'Hagan's *Tay John*, which opens in 1880 (and to which Bowering pays tribute in *Caprice*, pp. 138-39, etc). In Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* the Irish immigrants arrive on Vancouver Island in 1899, and his latest novel is set in the 1880s. The earlier part of Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller* is set in the same period, and much of Marilyn Bowering's *To All Appearances a Lady* is set in the 1890s. This period has attracted the writers, rather than the more obviously striking events and characters of the earlier fur trading, gold rush and colonial eras, partly no doubt because the 1880s and 1890s mark, if not the end, the beginning of the end of the frontier or pioneer era, with the coming of the railway and the cities, and the nature of the old far west is best defined in its passing.