

WRITING WOMEN INTO BRITISH COLUMBIA HISTORY

A Review Essay

BY ADELE PERRY

Henry and Self: The Private Life of Sarah Crease, 1826-1922

Kathryn Bridge

Victoria: Sono Nis, 1996. 216 pp. Illus., map. \$21.95 paper.

By Snowshoe, Buckboard, and Steamer: Women of the Frontier

Kathryn Bridge

Victoria: Sono Nis, 1998. 231 pp. Illus., map. \$19.95 paper.

Mainstays: Women Who Shaped BC

Cathy Converse

Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 1998. 212 pp. Illus. \$15.95 paper.

Women occupy a significant place in the recent explosion of popular histories of British Columbia. Female figures are gradually being written into a landscape once dominated by a cast of stock male personae – daring explorers, wise or “savage” but invariably male Aboriginals, scrappy pioneers, and hardy backwoodsmen. Recent histories fundamentally challenge this masculine historiography by providing detailed portraits of British Columbia’s women in lively and readable prose. In doing so, however, these works risk merely substituting the usual male figures with female figures, offering no more variable a cast of historical characters.

Efforts to write women into popular BC history did not suddenly begin in the last decade. Nineteenth-century

historians like Hubert Howe Bancroft credited women with a certain historical influence, especially associating First Nations women with fur-trade debauchery and White women with the gladdening reach of civilization.¹ Nellie de Bertrand Lugrin’s *Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island* probably represents the first explicitly feminist attempt to explore female agency. Published by the Canadian Women’s Press Club of Victoria in 1924, Lugrin’s work reflects a potent mixture of colonial discourse and first-wave feminism. The mixed heritage of women like Amelia Connolly Douglas and Suzette Legace Work is con-

¹ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of British Columbia, 1792-1887*, Vol. 32, in *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1887), 249-50.

spicuously elided and, to the extent that they exist at all, other First Nations women are evoked largely as foils for White benevolence.² White women, on the other hand, are accorded considerable historical prowess as nation-builders. Pioneer women's home-building and child-rearing, argues Lugin, was indeed "responsible for the birth of a nation."³

The figure of the hardy yet civilized female pioneer provided by Lugin has been a persistent one, as has that of the woman province builder. These figures dominate works by Elizabeth Forbes and, more recently, Marnie Anderson.⁴ They also characterize three recent monographs exploring women's role in BC history: Kathryn Bridge's *Henry and Self: The Private Life of Sarah Crease, 1826-1922* and *By Snowshoe, Buckboard, and Steamer: Women of the Frontier*, and Cathy Converse's *Mainstays: Women Who Shaped BC*.

Bridge and Converse both offer interesting books that utilize scholarly expertise to speak to a wider audience. Bridge also brings important information and primary sources to light, offering the reader a glimpse into components of British Columbia's past that have been barely touched on in the existing literature. *Henry and Self* is as detailed a biography of mother, artist, and wife of Attorney-General Crease as the sources allow, and the

inclusion of "Sarah's 1880 Journal" makes an important primary source readily accessible. Bridge's *By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer* builds on this biography by providing portraits of four nineteenth-century White women: Margaret Eliza Florence Askin Agassiz, Eleanor Caroline Fellows, Helen Kate Woods, and Violet Emily Sillitoe. Combining description and analysis with long passages taken from the subjects' autobiographical writing, Bridge again provides a useful mixture of source material and historical analysis.

Like Bridge, Converse utilizes a biographical approach. She profiles twenty British Columbians whose lives span the mid-nineteenth century up to the present. These women are grouped into six chapters based on their interests and contributions to education, community building, art and literature, public health, politics and law, and science. Converse describes these women in sharp and decisive prose, but her research is thin. A survey of *Mainstays'* endnotes and bibliography indicates a heavy reliance on published secondary literature augmented by selected primary material.

Both Converse and Bridge position their work as a necessary corrective to British Columbia's overwhelmingly masculine historical record. Bridge writes that she is "intrigued by the almost undocumented, hidden, female strength of colonialism" and wants "to discover, and sometimes uncover, the life stories and personalities of nineteenth-century women" (*Snowshoe*, 11). Converse's motivations are not dissimilar. She seeks to address the "dearth of understanding about the importance of women's contribution to the province's history" (x). In seeking to restore women to history,

² Nellie de Bertrand Lugin, *The Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island* (Victoria: Canadian Women's Press Club of Victoria, 1924), 9-24, 60-64.

³ Lugin, *Pioneer Women*, 2.

⁴ Elizabeth Forbes, *Wild Roses at Their Feet: Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: British Columbia Centennial '71 Committee, 1971); Marnie Anderson, *Women of the West Coast: Then and Now* (Sidney, BC: Sand Dollar, 1993).

these authors suggest that the “contribution,” or “recovery,” style of women’s history that is usually associated with the 1970s and 1980s has proved more resilient than is generally acknowledged.

Bridge and Converse share more than their biographical approach and commitment to recovering the female story of British Columbia’s past. They focus largely on White women. This is a bias that Bridge acknowledges and interrogates, arguing in *Henry and Self* that “Sarah was a product of her times” who provides historians with an example of how “a woman of her class and race viewed the world” (*Henry*, 9). Bridge also analyzes her subjects’ relations with and views of First Nations and Chinese people, interrogating how women like Eleanor Caroline Fellows interacted with the diverse society she found in British Columbia (*Snowshoe*, 75–94).

Converse is less interested in acknowledging her subjects’ race and racism but is more inclusive in her sweep. *Mainstays* includes biographies of First Nations women like Gloria Cranmer Webster, Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), Rose Charlie, and African-Canadian politician and activist Rosemary Brown. Yet no East or South Asian women are profiled, and Converse’s comment that “it remains to the children of those women to gather their stories so that they can be told” (xi) seems to replicate the problem rather than to address it. Lesbian history is also conspicuously absent in this version of British Columbia’s past, even though women like author Jane Rule would seem to neatly fit Converse’s criterion; that is, women who “have helped to shape the province of British Columbia” (xi).

Bridge and Converse also share a tendency to resort to two central ways of explaining female experience in

British Columbia. Like their predecessors, these authors tend to cast women in the mould of one of two prototypes: the hardy pioneer or the province builders. Bridge, perhaps because of her nineteenth-century focus, favours images of competent but struggling frontier womanhood. Crease is said to have shouldered the difficulties of colonial housekeeping and to have “accepted all the challenges that came her way” (*Henry*, 85), while Violet Sillitoe’s work as a wife and helpmate to her missionary husband is argued to demonstrate that “she was a woman of much strength of character and resourcefulness” (*Snowshoe*, 218).

While Bridge explains women’s history in terms of personal strength amongst difficult colonial conditions, Converse is interested in explicating women’s roles as province builders. In each of her chapters, she seeks to uncover individual women’s contributions to yet another component of BC life. Agnes Deans Cameron, Evelyn Farris, and Margaret Ormsby are credited with breaking down barriers in education, while public health care is said to be “indebted to women like Sister Frances Redmond, Alice Ravenhill and Dr. Ethlyn Trapp” (29, 116). These women, argues Converse, “helped forge the direction of British Columbia and in many cases were the architects of the knowledge and policies that have become the defining characteristics of the province” (xi).

BC history was never the mightily masculine frontier it has too often been depicted as. Bridge and Converse each help to chip away at that image and create a more gender-balanced view of the past. They build on the fine tradition of popular yet critical scholarship begun with two earlier collections of BC women’s history – *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on*

Women's History in B.C. (1980) and *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (1984).⁵ Historians of British Columbia need to pay attention to these works and heed their calls for a portrait of the past that acknowledges men and women alike. Yet we also need to be wary of merely substituting a set of stock female characters for the male ones under challenge. At their best, both Bridge and Converse suggest that women were more than hardy pioneers or province builders:

⁵ Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, eds., *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980); Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984).

they were members of races, of classes, of families, and of communities; they had sexual identities and political positions. Historians need to go beyond inscribing women into existing narratives of BC history and, instead, to critically analyze how gender worked to structure and shape society.⁶ It is only then that we will be able not only to acknowledge women's existence, but to use that acknowledgment to begin a fundamental and much needed reconsideration of British Columbia's past.

⁶ On this, see Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *Canadian Historical Review* 76, 3 (September 1995): 354-76.