MARINE LIFE

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Raincoast Chronicles 18: Stories and History of the British Columbia Coast
Howard White, editor
Madeira Park: Harbour, 1998. 88 pp. Illus., maps. $14.95 paper

Westcoasters: Boats that Built British Columbia
Tom Henry
Madeira Park: Harbour, 1998. 192 pp. Illus. $34.95 cloth

Light on the Water: Early Photography of Coastal British Columbia
Keith McLaren
Vancouver/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/
University of Washington Press, 1998
160 pp. Illus. $45 cloth

Heart of the Raincoast: A Life Story
Alexandra Morton and Billy Proctor
Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 1998.
208 pp. Illus., maps. $15.95 paper

Great journeys in BC are more likely to begin with a vigorous yank on an outboard engine than with the proverbial single step.
Tom Henry

BRITISH COLUMBIA is a region composed of many regions: mountainous topography creates micro-regions, and isolated cultures exaggerate their separateness. Attending in various ways to ideas of islanded cultures, W.H. New, Cole Harris, and George Bowering have reminded us not to take the west coast (or Vancouver!) to define BC culture. Yet by sheer weight of population, a Victoria-Vancouver-Pender Harbour imaginary triangle often comes to be identified with all of British Columbia. The rest of western Canada, when it heads west, describes its destination not as a city or a province, but as an edge: they're going to "the Coast."

For more than twenty-five years Howard White has been teaching us to understand this region, which often stands for the whole province, as "Raincoast." It's a compound whose staying power rests in its economical confusion of sea and land. For Raincoast, melding is the primary regional trope: the land turns liquid, and the sea becomes tangible and solid. T-

shirts and bumper-stickers use the variant "Wet Coast" – an apparent verbal slip made ruefully ironic boosterism. Emily Carr recognized the site of slippery transformation as "this 'nothing's place,'" "belonging neither to sea nor to land." Visitor George Faludy finds it "hard to imagine a more *limpid* wilderness than this." (*Notes from the Rainforest* 1988, 4). And Brenda Peterson develops the waterland trope to book length in *Living by Water* (1991). In Linda Svendsen's *Marine Life* (1992), both landscapes and interiors, whatever the technical terms used by geographers or architects, pass through Adele Nordstrom's out-by-the-Pacific perspective, to be renamed in "muted aquamarine" (17).

In Number 18 of *Raincoast Chronicles* (now with a new design and typeface), White imagines this compilation of "stories and history of the British Columbia Coast" as highlighting the pervasive but often unnoticed influence of the sea. Two mini-biographies – the form might be called "collected anecdotes" – recount the fishing life (since 1937) of Hank McBride and the boat-dependent settlement of German immigrant Claus Botel (and family of ten) in 1913 at Top Knot (northwest coast of Vancouver Island). Two stories focus on lighthouses, those guides to keep the seagoing away from land until they make landfall. As usual, White features the world of work. Three articles emphasize the unique boat-building achievements of British Columbia's economy: Vickie Jensen and Arthur McLaren on the greatly accelerated ship building during the Second World War; David R. Conn on the development of the self-loading, self-dumping log barge; and Tom Henry on the building of a commercially viable non-military submarine.

Henry's intriguing article is reprinted in his compilation of fourteen boat stories in *Westcoasters: Boats that Built British Columbia*. In his chapter on the *Malahat*, Henry also tells some of the story of the first self-propelled log barge. In eulogizing (but with an unsentimental edge) fourteen skookum vessels from 1791 to 1989, Henry has created a pelagic history of British Columbia. His attention to movement, directed by geographical erratics of tide and current and wind – and by his own love for the verbs that give such roll and twitch to his prose – charts coastline and character and community. As alert for a love story (the passionate couple discovered in a lifeboat on the *Lady Alexandra* and bolted under the covers by a tenacious crew) as for revealing odours – "mainstay stenches of sweat, moldy clothing and rotten teeth" – on Captain Vancouver's *Discovery*), Henry deftly links one vessel, its shifting societies and influences, to another in a drifting, rolling history of transporta-tion and of its shaping of a land-water region.

Henry ends (implying that his closing story narrates an untypical and crucial beginning) with the making of the Haida dugout *Lootaas*, a project conceived and directed by Bill Reid. Again Henry tells the story backwards: he begins with the arrival of *Lootaas*, following the canoe up the Seine to Paris, where it was to be displayed as part of a homage to Claude Lévi-Strauss at the Musée de l'Homme. But the story ends, and climaxes, with the process of steaming the dugout at Skidegate. (The vessel was created for use and display at Expo 86.) The boatbuilders put water in the hollowed cedar with hot rocks and left it to brew so that the hull widened from 132 centimetres – first by 15, then by another 10, and, with dozens pulling

on the gunwales, eventually by another 25 centimetres. A log became a boat: through the agency of water, the mass of wood became a genius of water. As Henry reminds us, Bill Reid speculated that the flowing lines of Haida art themselves express the movement of water and the shapes of creatures that are able to move in and through it.

Watercraft and the crafting of watercraft in British Columbia are celebrated in Keith McLaren's *Light on the Water: Early Photography of Coastal British Columbia*. This book does not have the narrative interest, or the risky synaesthesia, of Henry's prose; but it does archive more comprehensively some impressive documents of marine life and visible light. The reproductions are very fine, enabling an appreciation of detail that is encouraged and enhanced by the attentive and affectionate notes that accompany each large-format reproduction.

In many senses reading British Columbia, or its raincoast synecdoche, requires learning to read the water. It's a crucial skill celebrated in *Heart of the Raincoast: A Life Story*. This curious and compelling hybrid of a book sometimes tells Billy Proctor's own story, the autobiography of a fisher and hand-logger turned environmental activist. Sometimes it features his mother Jae's tidy anecdotal verse. Often it yields to the charm and mystery of a collection of family snapshots. It depends on Alexandra Morton's more comprehensive telling of Billy Proctor's story; and always, intriguingly, it drifts towards the not-quite-told and yet significantly revisionist story of women alone on the water.

The location is the archipelago at the northern end of Johnstone Strait. The area is known, we learn, as the Mainland. So what looks, on a map, like a maze of waterways is named puckishly as continental solidity: the primary narrative of the place, ironically, is a story of exit – not of progress but of a steady centuries-long pattern of disappearing and diminishing human population. The people live on water or on land so close to the sea as to be haunted by water. At times of festival, neighbours can only gather at the Proctors: no other family has enough "grounds" to allow more than a few people to assemble. The community is made of floathouses and floathouse children; of land houses moving on to floats and back on to shore; of boat decks always wet, even in the hottest sun; of meticulous calculations to ensure that a felled tree will slide of its own weight into water. The heart of the raincoast is a world where the coast is hidden in rain and the stability of land is constantly unmade by the motility of water.

Watery movement seems to dictate the "form" of this book. It randomly follows one line into another current, up an inlet, and swirls in a backwater. Morton opts for an additive assembling of anecdotes and observations: no overt pursuit of meaning, or consequence, or significance. She, and her collaborators, write with quiet respect for the hidden currents of personality and with humility in the face of the unpredicted surprises of living on the water. Only (and always) with the salmon does the life story find *in disappearance* a life story. Proctor is at his best on the discourse of avoidance (134), which is the essence of fishing salmon. Memory and conversation about fishing is the art of *not* knowing where the fish are under water. In *The Heart of the Raincoast*, the most compelling narrative, in so far as there is a narrative,

concerns the growth not of an artist, but of an environmentalist. Billy only starts *writing* when he is in despair and anger at the disappearance of the salmon that have given life to the "mainland" and, surely, to the Mainland. In this paradox, once again, the raincoast story becomes the story of the mysterious ocean-going creature, the precious salmon who climbs high into and on to the land to end and begin.