

A SENSE OF PLACE:

The Local in British Columbia History

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OVER the past century or so, as the production of “serious” history has moved into the hands of university-trained and -based writers, academic and local historians have looked at each other across a widening chasm, when they have regarded each other at all. Generally, neither side has had an overly positive image of the other. To academic, or “professional,” historians, local history was done by “little old ladies in sneakers” who produced works of uncritical antiquarianism lacking in conceptual framework or any sense of the larger historical and geographical context. At best, academics saw local history as the source of historical material (pioneer reminiscences, oral history, etc.) that could be used in more scholarly work. To local, or “amateur,” historians, academic history was dry and inaccessible, displaying little interest in the uniqueness of a local place and even less appeal to the general reader.

Certainly, these stereotypes have not always held true, and work has been done on both sides to try to bridge this divide, with varying degrees of success. Aside from a handful of recent publications, though, there has been little concerted thought put

into how these two historical solitudes could enrich each other.¹ This review attempts such a consideration. Undertaken by an academic historian, it reviews a shelf-full of local and localized histories – some sixteen works that provide an occasion to assess the current state of the local in BC history and to reflect upon its contribution to our understanding of the province’s past.

The first batch of books is firmly in the genre of local history – they take a specific geographic location (a town, lake, valley) and tell the story or stories of its past. Immediately notable is the large contribution Harbour Publishing and its founder, Howard White, continue to make to local history in the province. Harbour’s current offerings include: Doreen Armitage’s *Around the Sound: a History of Howe*

¹ See Carol Kammen, ed., *The Pursuit of Local History: Readings on Theory and Practice* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1996); David Kyvig and M. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1996); Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What It Means* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1995); and Linda Hale and Jean Barman, *British Columbia Local History: A Bibliography* (Victoria: BC Heritage Trust, 1991).

Sound-Whistler; Tom Henry's *Small City in a Big Valley: The Story of Duncan*; Jeannette Taylor's *River City: A History of Campbell River and the Discovery Islands*; Jean Webber's *A Rich and Fruitful Land: The History of the Valleys of the Okanagan, Similkameen and the Shuswap*; and Howard White's *The Sunshine Coast: From Gibsons to Powell River*. It is notable that these histories are confined almost exclusively to the Coast, giving scant attention to the Interior. This is also the case with two works from other publishers, Lynne Bowen's *Those Lake People: Stories of Cowichan Lake*, and Jan Peterson's *Journeys: Down the Alberni Canal to Barkley Sound*.

The centrality of their particular locale is, of course, the defining feature of these works. At times, the geographic location or feature becomes a historical actor or force itself: the dramatic geological birth of Howe Sound's mountains in Armitage; the mixture of grassland, hills, and lakes in Webber; or Peterson's elongated Alberni Canal and the broken islands of Barkley Sound. In others, the locale is largely a passive backdrop for the people who live there, like the succession of settlers inhabiting Bowen's Cowichan Lake. For Bowen, "the lake's richest resource" is its people, not its landscape (175). These histories also seek to identify and highlight the uniqueness of their particular locality. As Shelton Stromquist, both a university professor and a local historian, writes: "The elaboration of that sense of a distinctive and unique place continues to be a defining objective of the local historian."² Some authors find this uniqueness in the land itself, others in the locale's people; most find it in the interplay between the two.

² Kammen, *Pursuit*, 181.

Despite their focus on uniqueness, there are significant themes, or motifs, that these local histories share. The first is the determination to "start at the beginning," with the province's Native peoples. Armitage and Webber both have sections entitled "The First People," while Henry and Taylor's histories show a keen understanding of the complex societies that first inhabited the region and of their responses to the European newcomers. Henry expresses this fresh perspective: "William Duncan's ancestors were still roaming the Scottish Highlands in bare feet and animal skins when another pioneer first glimpsed the Cowichan Valley" (11).

The primary focus of most of these works, though, is still upon European immigrants and their settling of the land. Peterson's main interest is "the people who journeyed to the west coast of Canada" – "early pioneers" such as William Eddy Banfield and Edward Cox and, later, Scottish crofters and loggers (325, 25). Aboriginal peoples have a presence, but only through the filter of their "troubled relationships" with Europeans, which, in Peterson's history, were characterized by violent clashes. Bowen's history of Cowichan Lake is even more focused upon newcomers (English aristocrats, Scandinavian loggers, Asian workers) and ignores the lake's Native peoples almost completely. Thus, the main characters we see range from hardy homesteaders and their wives, trying to scratch out an existence in a forested wilderness, to rugged loggers and fishers.

The theme of "making a living in a rugged environment" is a persistent one, and it is linked to another common motif – the exploitation of natural resources. Not surprisingly, given the coastal bias of these works,

logging and fishing are the industries that dominate the economic history of these locales. Cowichan Lake, Duncan, Campbell River, Port Alberni, and other towns go through comparable cycles of resource-based economic development, only recently coming to the realization that there are environmental limits upon even British Columbia's natural abundance.

In the end, what is most crucial for these local historians is the formation of community on a local basis. Indeed, each shows a romantic affinity to the ideal of face-to-face relationships, at times bemoaning the loss of small-town virtues amidst a growing economy and population. Sharing this concern for the "process of community building" (*Collected Memories*, 4) are a number of historical guides that, though not fully historical narratives themselves, do contribute to our knowledge of the local in the province's history. These include John Adams's *Historic Guide to Ross Bay Cemetery*; the Discovery Project's *Collected Memories: A Guide to the Community Markers of South-East Vancouver*; and Gwen Szychter's two volumes, *Beyond Ladner's Landing: Two Heritage Walks South of the Original Village* and *Ladner's Landing of Yesteryear: Two Heritage Walks in the Historic Village*. Aside perhaps from Adams's work, these guides are targeted less at tourists than at the local community; that is, they seek to provide residents with a sense of their community's identity and of their own link to that community.

Along with a concern for community in the local histories reviewed here, there is a focus upon the stories of ordinary people, "told in their own words" (Armitage, 12). There is something inherently democratic about this type of local history, something that is at the core of its appeal – the claim

that history is not just the story of great men and wars, but also of ordinary people making a living. But as Henry recognizes, this is largely accidental, a matter of "being in the right place at the right time" (191). The very process of "pioneering" – establishing a novel culture, people, and way of life in a new location – makes the ordinary historically significant, although it does so in a way that retains a certain ethnocentric romanticism.

Do these recent works of local history move beyond the earlier, celebratory products of this genre that has been so maligned by academic historians? The answer is yes and no. On the yes side, the single narrative dominated by mainstream European settlers and economic progress is no longer unquestioned. To an extent unseen in the past, these current local histories recognize the perspective and contributions of those formerly on the margins of the story, whether Native peoples, Asian immigrants, or women. Indeed, we see in these local histories hints of the same developments academic history has gone through in recent decades: a focus on social history and on previously voiceless groups, a heightened critical edge, efforts to link the local to the larger context, and the multiplicity of perspectives in history. These traits are strongest in Webber, Taylor, and Henry. The latter has the most acute critical edge and sense of history's multiplicity, writing that "Duncan was not one town but many" (10). Local history succeeds, writes Carol Kammen, when it recognizes "the plurality of the past" and is "alert to all the voices and experiences that make up the fabric of a single community."³

³ Kammen, *On Doing*, 177, 179.

Despite improvements in some quarters, however, old habits are hard to break. There is still a reluctance in these works to provide a sustained, critical analysis. For instance, some writers provide little mention of the environmental costs of the settling of their local landscapes: Peterson leaves any talk of this to the last three pages of her 328-page book, while Bowen does not even do that (although she reprints photographs that show the devastation wrought by clear-cutting on Cowichan Lake's shores). I have already mentioned the persistence of a focus on European settlement and the matching neglect of Native peoples. Most definitely, again with the exception of Henry, there is little sense of the ongoing dynamic between these two cultures or of the uneven power relations between different ethnic groups and economic classes. Finally, most of these works are still hampered by an overdependence upon the anecdotal and biographical. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that local histories use a particular geographical feature as their organizing principle rather than an overarching thesis or historical question that might provide a more coherent narrative.

More cohesive and critical visions of the local in British Columbia's past and present are presented in two works that are not as directly located within the genre of local history; rather, Terry Glavin's *This Ragged Place: Travels across the Landscape* and Richard Bocking's *Mighty River: A Portrait of the Fraser* are reflections upon the meaning – and meeting – of time and place in the province. Both works make effective use of the theme of “travelling through time and place” as an organizational and analytical tool. As Bocking writes: “This is a journey through centuries as well as kilometres, through

astonishing landscapes and a rich tapestry of life” (11). Each author juxtaposes vivid descriptions of the landscape with narratives of historical events and contemporary people – Aboriginals, small-scale loggers, environmentalists – rooted in the communities through which both history and their narrative eye pass. While Glavin's essays make periodical use of this motif, it is an organizing principle in Bocking's narrative. Bocking begins at the headwaters of British Columbia's dominant river, and, as he travels to its mouth, the Overlanders, Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, railroad builders, and gold prospectors travel with him.

Along with a more cohesive vision of the province's past, Glavin and Bocking also provide more concerted criticism and analysis of historical developments in the province than do the other authors mentioned here. Theirs is very much a dissenting perspective: they highlight the province's Interior over the Coast, where British Columbia's wealth and population has flowed over the decades, and the people and places they describe are often those left by the wayside in the province's mad pursuit of “progress.” These works do not stop at offering effective vignettes of such people and places; they also reveal a keen awareness of the larger, even global, forces at work. They show that the forces of industrial development and cultural homogeneity are essentially placeless: decisions are made in far distant cities, with little concern for their impact upon local communities and landscapes. These works implicitly present a critique of British Columbia's previously unquestioning reliance upon a resource-based export economy. While earlier it may have been possible to bridge the contradiction between local community and development –

because of the relative abundance of the province's resources – it is no longer possible to do so, as the limits of growth and overdevelopment have become painfully evident.

It is not surprising, then, that both Glavin and Bocking have a strong environmentalist message. This ethos is even more explicit in two other local works, Ian McAllister's *The Great Bear Rainforest: Canada's Forgotten Coast* and Ian Gill's *Haida Gwaii: Journeys through the Queen Charlotte Islands*. Gill also adopts the historical traveller theme – his “is a book of journeys, passages through time and place” (2). *Haida Gwaii*, though, has far more landscape than history, as does McAllister's work. The goal of each is to make people aware of their locale's “pristine” nature and, thus, to stir up opposition to any development. To do so, however, each adopts a largely Manichean morality in which the snake of development must be kept out of an Eden-like landscape. A visual example of this appears in McAllister – a photograph of a natural (i.e., naked) Eve sitting discreetly in a pristine rainforest garden, a waterfall cascading to her feet (71).

Along with a critical environmentalist message, Bocking and Glavin present a dissenting perspective regarding the province's First Nations. Native peoples have a prominent and ongoing presence in these works, particularly in Glavin's. In contrast to most of the local histories mentioned above, in Bocking and Glavin Natives are not confined to an introductory chapter or two; rather, they are part of a present in which the fundamental issues and processes of BC history are still being worked out. In his collection of essays Glavin effectively dissects what he labels the anti-Native “hysteria” that has characterized the

reaction of the majority of people in British Columbia to the Nisga'a Treaty, Native fishing on the Fraser River, and the Gustafsen Lake standoff. Glavin evokes a note of tragedy, melancholy – and, not accidentally, a strong sense of place – with regard to British Columbia's past and present when he concludes with a poem by Howard White: “how far/Indian is from White how far/learning is from knowing how/far we are from this ragged place/we've taken from them” (202).

These same lines could belong to a final work, the autobiography of pioneer son Hilary Place. *Dog Creek: A Place in the Cariboo* was perhaps the most pleasant surprise among the books reviewed here, for Place successfully transcends the usual failings of pioneer biographies. His is a sensitive and intelligent voice: he is alive to the dynamics of newcomers settling on the land of others, and he makes way for the ongoing presence and even voices of the Cariboo's Native peoples. He also avoids the temptation to romanticize the past and can be critical even of his own family. Place's is the kind of voice that historians can look to for inspiration concerning the interplay between peoples, the land, and forging a living in British Columbia's sometimes unforgiving Interior.

By way of conclusion, I proffer two suggestions as an academic historian commenting on what my colleagues and I might learn from the latest offerings on local history. The first is that we need to pay serious attention to the local – both peoples and landscape – in studying British Columbia's past. This might seem an obvious or trite “insight.” But too often we fail to consciously and critically assess how the prejudices of our own analytical constructs denigrate the local by devaluing

the particular. Historical findings are seen to be of value only if they can be applied elsewhere; that is, they are transferable because common historical processes or forces are at work. We have to guard against seeing the local as significant only as it reflects or reveals the larger context or similar developments elsewhere. The risk in losing the unique and particular amidst the universal and global is that we do not get as full a sense of the diversity, ambiguity, and proximity of the past as we might.

Second, and finally, academic historians must take seriously the BC public's patent appetite for history; that is, for accessible, well written, engaging, and human history. The books reviewed here were released as commercial ventures that had to pay their own way. Their number, and the success of publishers like Harbour, attest to an avid interest in the province's

past. Over the past few decades, academics have largely abdicated the field of popularized history, leaving it to journalists and amateur and local historians. Academics rarely venture into the risky waters of public debate to contribute their knowledge, and the public at large even more rarely asks them to do so. Certainly, I am not arguing for abandoning analytical or theoretically driven work. There needs to be respect and recognition from our own peers, and from the departments and administrations of the province's universities and colleges, not only for academic publications, but also for more generalized historical writing. By recognizing our own links to the community and land around us, we might contribute to an understanding of some of the pressing issues of today and provide a fuller sense of place and identity amongst British Columbians.

BOOKS REVIEWED

- Adams, John. *Historic Guide to Ross Bay Cemetery, Victoria, B.C., Canada*. Rev. ed. Victoria: Sono Nis, 1998. 48 pp. Illus., maps. \$9.95 paper.
- Armitage, Doreen. *Around the Sound: A History of Howe Sound-Whistler*. Madeira Park: Harbour, 1997. 240 pp. Illus., maps. \$28.95 cloth.
- Bocking, Richard C. *Mighty River: A Portrait of the Fraser*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1997. 294 pp. Maps. \$35.00 cloth.
- Bowen, Lynne. *Those Lake People: Stories of Campbell Lake*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1995. 217 pp. Illus., maps. \$19.95 paper.
- Discovery Project for South East Vancouver. *Collected Memories: A Guide to the Community Markers of South-East Vancouver*. Vancouver: Discovery Project for South East Vancouver, 1997. Illus., maps. \$10 paper.
- Gill, Ian. *Haida Gwaii: Journeys through the Queen Charlotte Islands*. Vancouver: Raincoast, 1997. 150 pp. Illus., maps. \$24.95 paper.
- Glavin, Terry. *This Ragged Place: Travels across the Landscape*. Vancouver: New Star, 1996. 203 pp. Illus. \$24.00 cloth.
- Henry, Tom. *Small City in a Big Valley: The Story of Duncan*. Madeira Park:

- Harbour, 1999. 182 pp. Illus., maps. \$36.95 cloth.
- McAllister, Ian, Karen McAllister, and Cameron Young. *The Great Bear Rainforest: Canada's Forgotten Coast*. Madeira Park: Harbour, 1997. 143 pp. Illus., maps. \$39.95 cloth.
- Peterson, Jan. *Journeys: Down the Alberni Canal to Barkley Sound*. Lantzville: Oolichan, 1999. 395 pp. Illus., maps. \$21.95 paper.
- Place, Hilary. *Dog Creek: A Place in the Cariboo*. Surrey: Heritage, 1999. 256 pp. Illus., map. \$18.95 paper.
- Szychter, Gwen. *Beyond Ladner's Landing: Two Heritage Walks South of the Original Village*. Delta: The Author, 1997. 72 pp. Illus., maps. \$8.95 paper.
- . *Ladner's Landing of Yesteryear: Two Heritage Walks in the Historic Village*. Delta: The Author, 1996. 68 pp. Illus., maps. \$8.95 paper.
- Taylor, Jeanette. *River City: A History of Campbell River and the Discovery Islands*. Madeira Park: Harbour, 1999. 239 pp. Illus., maps. \$36.95 cloth.
- Webber, Jean, ed. *A Rich and Fruitful Land: The History of the Valleys of the Okanagan, Similkameen and Shuswap*. Madeira Park: Harbour, 1999. 239 pp. Illus., maps. \$46.95 cloth.
- White, Howard. *The Sunshine Coast: From Gibsons to Powell River*. Madeira Park: Harbour, 1996. 127 pp. Illus., maps. \$29.95 cloth.