

SEEING BRITISH COLUMBIA:

A Review Essay

BY TERRY GLAVIN

Bush Telegraph: Discovering the Pacific Province.

Stephen Hume

Madeira Park: Harbour, 1999. 283 pp. \$28.95 cloth.

Secret Coastline: Journeys and Discoveries along BC's Shores.

Andrew Scott

North Vancouver: Whitecap, 2000. 239 pp. Illus., maps. \$18.95 paper.

*Tungsten John: Being an Account of Some Inconclusive
but Nonetheless Informative Attempts to Reach the
South Nahanni River by Foot and Bicycle.*

John Harris with Vivien Lougheed

Vancouver: New Star, 2000. 262 pp. Illus. \$19 paper.

THERE ARE SEVERAL currents that combine to form the popular literature about British Columbia's history, culture, and landscape. These three books emerge from three important tributaries to the general course of non-academic writing about British Columbia. *Tungsten John* comes from the well stocked shelf of accounts of the discovery and exploitation of a single region by White people. Strictly speaking, *Tungsten John* is about the Nahanni River country, which actually lies just north of the BC-Yukon border, but British Columbia's libraries are full of books just like it about BC locales.

Secret Coastline is a kind of outdoor writing that treats local culture as a necessary part of the scenery. It is a sort of picture book without pictures (although it does offer a few obligatory colour photographs of typical Coastal

scenes), and there are lots of those books around, too. *Bush Telegraph* is in the tradition of conventional journalism and attempts to capture something of the spirit of the province. The book relies mainly on the personal essay and literary journalism to explore aspects of British Columbia's cultural geography. It joins an ever-growing shelf of books of this type, but there still aren't enough books like it.

Of the three, *Bush Telegraph* provides the reader with the greatest sense of the economic complexities and historical forces that have rooted people in various places in British Columbia's landscape. And that's not just because its sweep is broader than that of *Tungsten John* or *Secret Coastline*. It's because Hume spends time with the people he meets and takes the trouble to investigate the landmarks he encounters, explaining what he makes of

their meaning in space and time.

It is unfortunate that Scott doesn't take that extra trouble. *Secret Coastlines* does provide a few portraits of real people with real concerns that reflect the circumstances of the contemporary Coast. But as often as not, the Coast that appears in its pages remains little better defined than the view from a cruise ship. It is a holiday makers' diary, which is perfectly respectable, particularly since Scott is a journeyman travel writer, and he takes pains to put himself in out-of-the-way places. But he doesn't linger anywhere long enough, and the reader is unavoidably left wanting more.

In the isolated Nisga'a village of Gingolx, for instance, Scott comes across an odd-looking monument, of traditional Aboriginal design, bearing this inscription: *Here lies the last but not the least because he is the last of all His line the Lak Deyaukl Tribe. Abel Ward. Died Ap. 25, 1911, Age 61. Solomon Ward.* A moment later, Scott meets an old man who introduces himself as Rufous Watts and proclaims himself to be the oldest Nisga'a in the entire Nass Valley (having been born in 1906). Watts points out that the monument marks the place where Abel Ward is buried. But we learn no more about what the monument commemorates, either from Scott or from the loquacious Watts, because Scott immediately moves on to a brief tour of Nass Bay, where he makes cursory inspections of a cemetery and the sites of several long-gone canneries. Then, Scott chats with Gingolx band manager Alvin Nelson about the revival of Nisga'a dance traditions and the community's hopes to build a new economy based on tourism and sport fishing. Then, it's good-bye Gingolx.

In contrast, *Bush Telegraph* lingers in such places. Hume's encounter with the bronze statue of a fisherman in

oilskins, in Prince Rupert harbour, leads him to Foster Husoy, who served as the statue's model. Hume then presents Husoy's life story as a kind of metaphor for the precarious lives led by resource-industry workers in the communities of British Columbia's north coast. From a length of twisted steel taken from a rusting hulk at the edge of a mud flat north of Qualicum, Hume follows the wrecked ship's history through musty records at the national archives in Ottawa to the ship's service as a submarine chaser in the North Atlantic during the darkest days of the Second World War. From the sun-bleached remains of an old water flume above the ghost town of Walhachin in the sage hills of the Thompson country, Hume reconstructs a moment in British Columbia's history that was bright with preposterous optimism, among Walhachin's fancy-dress balls and polo matches, in the days before the First World War. One in ten British Columbians ended up in uniform, and half of them died in the trenches, and from that horror Hume sees Canada's identity being forged, along with rural-urban tensions, east-west antipathies, and deep class antagonism.

In *Bush Telegraph* (which consists of essays refashioned from Hume's *Vancouver Sun* column, along with some new work) Hume takes the reader on an extended voyage through the landscape – through its geology, biology, and its human history. The Aboriginal experience of the countryside serves as a persistent and defining feature, like outcroppings of bedrock, rather than merely a necessary reference point for the early days of White settlement.

In comparison, Scott's *Secret Coast* leaves one feeling a bit like a tourist, hurried along by a tour guide. It is an odd sensation, and it is particularly

disconcerting in light of the fact that British Columbia's Coastal communities are increasingly turning to tourism as a hoped-for replacement for the logging, fishing, and mining industries that have left so many Coastal villages every bit as empty and forlorn as Newfoundland's outports. Scott visits many such communities the way growing numbers of tourists do, by ferry and by kayak, but one is left wondering what tourism holds for the Coast's future. The provincial government has wisely resumed regular summertime ferry service to many isolated Coastal communities, such as Ocean Falls and Bella Bella. At Klemtu, the *Queen of Chilliwack* arrives regularly now, but tourists won't find many places to spend money there; instead, dozens of village residents board the ferry during its four-hour stopover to dine in the ship's restaurant and spend money in the gift shop. Village children spend the time stuffing loonies into the ferry's video games. This is all a perfectly understandable response by an isolated Coastal village to the arrival of a ferry, but what does it all mean?

Tungsten John, although it comes from a regional-history tradition, ends up serving as a kind of happy medium between Scott's outdoor-adventure book and Hume's attention to larger questions. It is an account of the author's several attempts, with outdoor writer Vivien Lougheed, to reach the South Nahanni River. It is accompanied by an elaborate hiker's guide, which consists of Lougheed's route notes – a kilometre-by-kilometre description of the steepness of the hills, the places where bushwhacking is moderately difficult, where the best camping spots are, and so on. At the same time, Harris presents a thoroughly researched regional history, along with

an analysis of the popular literature of the area.

The Nahanni country first came to the attention of the outside world in the 1920s, when English schoolboys thrilled to lurid tales about a tropical valley of headhunters situated in the northern Rocky Mountains in the Nahanni country. The area's mystique evolved over the years with sensational reports of prospectors venturing into the Nahanni only to end up as headless corpses. Several unexplained deaths and inconclusive RCMP investigations only added to the aura of general spookiness about the Nahanni countryside, and Harris spends much more time tracking down the facts of those stories than he does in marvelling at the grandeur of the mountains. This is a welcome departure from the norm in both regional history and nature writing.

It is also to Harris's credit that he shows little interest in trails maintained by parks officials and exults, instead, in bulldozer roads. He prefers abandoned trappers' shacks to sleeping under the starry skies, and he shows far less interest in the majestic movements of grizzly bears than he does in rooting through piles of industrial garbage, which litter the Nahanni country as a result of late twentieth-century mining operations. Harris does not lament humanity's encroachment upon the pristine wilderness. He laments the increasing inaccessibility of the countryside as old mining roads wash out and bridges collapse, making the back country that much more difficult to reach. In a genre that has become tediously rigid in its narrative templates, *Tungsten John* offers a thoroughly refreshing perspective; besides, in places it's as funny as American humorist Bill Bryson's enormously popular *A Walk in the Woods*.