

ON DIVERSITY

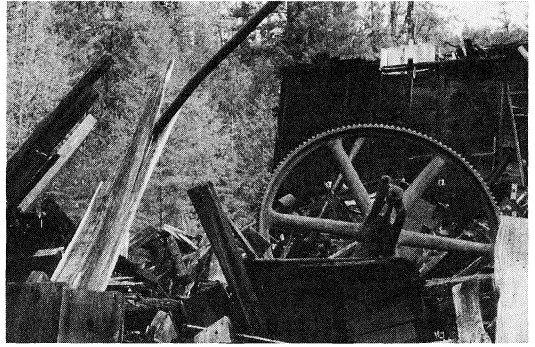
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WE TRAVELLED THROUGH different settlements and human landscapes superimposed on different physical environments, and frequently commented on this diversity. British Columbia, we said, is a place of contrasts. But as no place can be quite like any other, geographical diversity is a human condition, and the claim that British Columbia is diverse has, in itself, no particular meaning. Nor perhaps does the opposite, the claim that we live in an increasingly homogeneous and globalized environment in which cultural diversity is diminishing and places increasingly resemble each other. If we are to consider diversity in British Columbia, we probably should be a little more specific. What sort of diversity is out there? What causes and sustains it? What are its prospects? A five-day field trip cannot answer such questions but can provoke some musing, and I offer a few reflections based on three of our encounters.

THE REMAINS OF THE NOBLE FIVE MILL AT CODY

The large mill for concentrating silver-lead ore located some five kilometres above Sandon in the narrow valley of Carpenter Creek has collapsed and burned, but some of its machinery remains. So does the cleared swath straight up the mountainside behind the mill where an overhead tramway brought buckets of ore from high mountainside mines. A spur line of a railway once reached this mill, making it the point of connection for two systems of industrial transportation as well as a focus of capital and labour, one of the many sites where industrial capitalism reached into British Columbia to extract resources. It was to mining what a cannery was to fishing

or a sawmill was to logging – all examples of industrial capitalism employing different technologies and skills to extract and process different resources. At Cody, men were miners or mill workers; elsewhere they were loggers, fishers, or cowboys. Different work created different occupational identities, dif-



Ruins of the Alamo mill, near Sandon. Like the mill at Cody, this one was located in the valley bottom with the mines high in the mountains above.

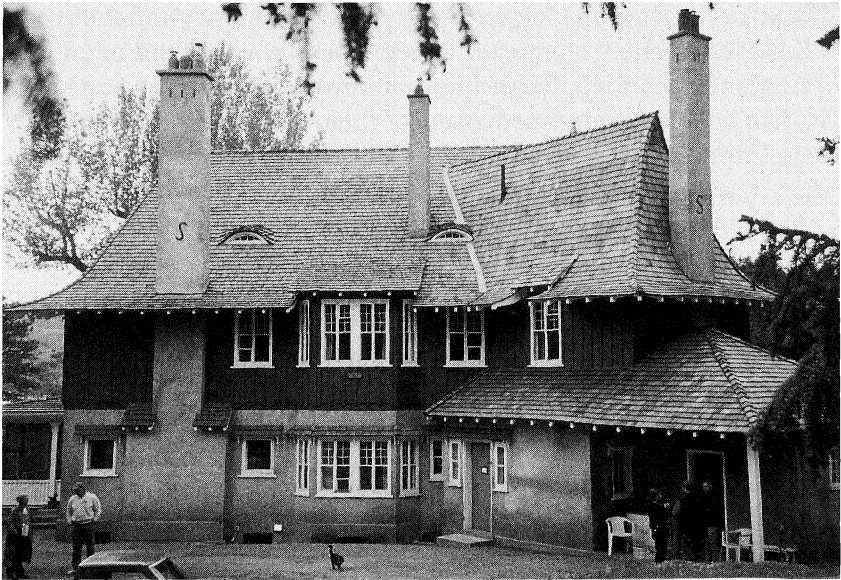
ferent types and locations of buildings created different human landscapes, and different system of transportation and of service provision created different patterns of regional activity. A mining region did not feel like one dominated by fishing or ranching, partly because each of these activities had sought out different physical settings, but also because they arranged and constructed themselves differently on the land, and because people did different work. Some of these work sites were differentiated from each other by ethnicity. No oriental worker got anywhere near Cody; the union would not have allowed it.

In short, one of the bases of geographical diversity in British Columbia lay within industrial capitalism itself. This system, common to all the resource industries of British Columbia, was flexible and inventive and, drawn by different, widely scattered resources, expressed itself in a great variety of spatial configurations. At the same time, these different, specialized activities were functionally interrelated components of the same market economy; participated in approximately the same general circulation of goods, information, and ideas; and reflected many of the institutions and tensions inherent in industrial capitalism. They exhibited a measure of work-related difference within the same matrix. They were not, for example, anything like the relatively isolated regional cultures, with their pervasive variety of languages, dialects, and folkways, that characterized any pre-modern peasantry. Nor were they very permanent. The spatial logic of industrial capitalism was never fixed. Technologies of resource extraction and transportation changed, and particular resources were exhausted. The Noble Five mill at Cody operated for only a few years. No one has lived or worked there for the better part of a century.

LAKE HOUSE, COLDSTREAM VALLEY

There is perhaps no better example of the monied, educated Englishness of the Coldstream Valley. Lake House is a large turn-of-the-century arts and craft house surrounded by landscaped grounds that once included an orchard, a lawn tennis court, a circular driveway, and a boathouse. Inside is furniture, some of which apparently belonged to Burne-Jones, an English designer/artist and associate of William Morris; a teapot that apparently belonged to Jane Austen; paintings attributed to European masters; a great deal of sterling, and an atmosphere of beams, verandahs, and tasteful Edwardian comfort. The house is a transplanted, early twentieth-century patch of gentry England, its contents assembled over the years from similar Coldstream houses.

It was built for an English family that had the money to reproduce a good deal of their own domestic, upper-middle-class ways. But they were not in England, and their house was not so much the England they had left behind as a symbol of it. In this they did what most immigrants have done. They turned what were taken-for-granted ways of life into symbols, into memory, with the difference in their case that a monied family in a British colony had opportunity to symbolize more than most. More typically, the symbols appeared around the edges of lives lived within the common material trappings of western North America: in dishes served, forms of worship, weddings, or national



Lake House on Kalamalka Lake.

days. People had converged in British Columbia from many points of the compass, and such symbols were powerful psychological props in strange circumstances, points of connection with places and people left behind. Lake House is a vivid and unusually comprehensive example.

Here, then, is another axis of difference. In an overwhelmingly immigrant society, different people brought different ways to different places. They did so, however, within sharp constraints, many of them posed by what, for them, were the novel economic and technological circumstances in which they found themselves. It was usually cheaper, for example, to build a house with locally available materials and techniques of construction than to reproduce house types from home. Only the well-to-do somewhat escaped this pressure. There were not Italian, or German, or Irish ways of logging. To log was, usually, to work for a company and to adopt methods and technologies that, in the circumstances, were the most efficient and competitive means at hand. Different languages were spoken in the bunkhouses at Cody, but these men were miners doing allotted tasks with the same tools in much the same way. Moreover there, as commonly elsewhere, people of different backgrounds were mixed, English was the *lingua franca*, and assimilative pressures were strong. Only here and there were there enough people of a particular ethnicity to shape the character of a place, as in Chinatowns, products of prejudice, or as, almost, in the English Coldstream, a product of money and influence.

But even in the Coldstream Valley, where symbols and memories of England abounded, Englishness hollowed out with the years. The English population declined, many of them killed in one of the world wars. Other people moved in; the Coldstream Valley was no longer what it was. England, too, had changed, and even in England a Coldstream stratum of Edwardian life became increasingly anachronistic. Eventually, to live in Lake House was to live in a symbol full of memories but without any contemporary referent. The house survives as a detached and fascinating fragment, an echo of another time, but hardly as a measure of the generational vitality of ethnic differentiation in British Columbia.

SPAXOMIN VILLAGE

The village is a straggle of houses at the foot of Douglas Lake and is surrounded by hay fields, natural grasslands, and some of the most beautiful scenery in the province. In 1878, when the Indian reserve

commissioner laid out reserves here, he intended them primarily for ranching. Now there are some 200 people at Spaxomin along with approximately 400 cattle and as many horses. No one makes a living from ranching on this reserve, although it might support one or two small, single-family ranches if organized differently. There is not enough timber for much logging or enough reserve land to sustain more than edges of the old fishing, hunting, and gathering economy. The band tries to ignore reserve boundaries and to reach out into its former territories but, in so doing, encounters, among others, the Douglas Lake Cattle Company and very different agendas. There are arguments at every turn. Band administrators posit various economic developments, but the problem they cannot quickly overcome is obvious: there is not enough access to land (resources) to support these people.

Overlooking the village are a new school and gymnasium, both handsome and well equipped, built with funds from Ottawa. On the walls of one classroom are simple pictures with identifying names spelled below in English and Okanagan. Okanagan-speaking elders help in the classroom. But only about thirty children attend this school, not as many as are bused to the regular public school in Merritt. Perhaps the children, the older ones especially, want the excitement of town; perhaps their parents have decided that there is less point in learning a language that has almost no speakers than in acquiring a competitive modern education. It must be a difficult choice. These people have ancestors who have lived in the Upper Nicola Valley for thousands of years. They are of this place far more profoundly than are any of the others who have come to live nearby. For all the assimilative pressures, they know who they are and where they are from. But where they are from can no longer support them, and some are equipping their children to leave.

Spaxomin is not a relic, as is Lake House, but it is a site of struggle. A small people are trying to regain their territory and maintain a distinctive identity, a huge challenge on either count. They are surrounded by others who are easily unsympathetic. Their traditional territory is encumbered with alien property rights, not easily dislodged. They live within the electronic barrage of contemporary communications and the linguistic imperialism of contemporary English. They are trying to be local in a world becoming increasingly global. But ability and commitment are in the air, and computer maps of traditional resource uses are on the walls. These people are not giving up. They are not what they were, and they will not be what

they are, but I suspect that, for generations to come, there will be people at Spaxomin who consider themselves indigenous Upper Nicola. This, however, will be achieved only with continuing struggle, and probably in most outward ways the people at Spaxomin will live like those around them – which, if one considers who they are, and how they lived not many generations ago, is a measure of the pressures that British Columbia exerts on difference.

Of course British Columbia is diverse. Given its myriad components, it could hardly be otherwise. The physical land presents deep contrasts and has attracted different economies to different places. The province has been recently resettled by people coming from the corners of the world, out of deeply different historical and cultural experiences. Such differences cannot disappear overnight. Less in the background than formerly are the people who have always been here, who not long ago spoke more than thirty different languages within eight language families, some as different from each other as English is from Chinese. These are circumstances that would seem calculated to produce as much diversity – if diversity can be measured – as exists anywhere in the world. But what, rather, has always struck me is not that British Columbia is diverse, but that it is not considerably more diverse. One language is replacing dozens. People live within broadly similar material cultures, experience broadly similar entertainments, and shop at similar stores. The architecture, broadly speaking, is western North American. Difference tends to be personal rather than cultural, familial rather than regional, or tied to different employments and locations in a functionally integrated economy. Given the enormous founding variety of its constituent parts, the conclusion that British Columbia's experience with modernity has been accompanied by a huge and largely successful assault on diversity seems inescapable. In this light, I would be cautious about ascriptions of diversity. The concept is relative – assessments depend on the end of the telescope one uses. But we do need to be careful about celebrating our diversity when so many among us have experienced the precise opposite, the challenge of maintaining cultural difference in an enveloping technological and institutional environment that tends to reconfigure people and space in its image.