

EDITORIAL

The two articles in the Focus section of this issue deal with absence and the academic imagination. They are the work of two young scholars, both members of the Editorial Board of this journal, who were themselves absent from the scientific expedition reported in the last issue and use their own absence to reflect more widely on presences and absences in our literature and on the difference between thinking about British Columbia from here and from away.

Adele Perry, a historian at the University of Manitoba, reflects on the absences — the gaps — in our histories. Historians usually have relied on the written archives, but much has gone unrecorded, while most of the written record, such as it is, is biased towards particular categories of people and events. She would open up British Columbian historiography to other sources, and to voices seldom heard — those of women, the poor, ethnic minorities, Aboriginal people. Despite all the interest in and study of Aboriginal issues over the last twenty years, she considers that the province's Aboriginal history is known only in patches. She is right, but the diagnosis is easier than the remedy. With a few exceptions, the written sources are not by Aboriginal people. Oral histories that extend back more than three or four generations present daunting interpretative challenges. Post-contact archaeology has been rare. In recent years, these weaknesses in the record, as much as cultural bias, have constrained inclusiveness. Although Perry is well aware of the difficulties, her plea is for more work at the borders, among the marginalized voices, and her premise (which her own writing has considerably demonstrated) is that such work will yield more than is usually assumed.

Daniel Clayton, a geographer at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, writes about the different faces of imperialism when viewed from the center and from the margins. He is situated close to the heart of imperial Britain, in a British academic environment, and in the international postcolonial literature. A few years ago he was immersed in the BC archives, and in the local complexities of early modern British Columbia. These different locations, he says, inflect scholarship differently and create scholarly circuits that are hardly in touch with each other.

Steeped as he is in the postcolonial literature, Clayton is uneasy about some of its tendencies: its frequent repetition, following too

crudely from Edward Said, of the civilization-savagery binary; its focus on the thought of the imperial center; its relative ignorance of the complexities of margins; and even its theory that becomes, virtually, another international imperial tactic superimposed on the distant and the local. On the other hand, he considers that writing on British Columbia is frequently too internalized, too province-centered, and as such too detached from comparative opportunities and from the international literature. He would draw the international literature closer to the margins and the literature of the margins closer to the center, but he is surrounded by intellectual habits and institutional constraints that make it virtually impossible to do so.

Clayton has identified a real and serious problem. The best of the post colonial literature is brilliant and provocative. It poses new questions, sharpens old ones, and is indispensable reading for those concerned with colonialism and its effects — as in this settler colony we must be. But, like any literature, it has biases and limitations. It has neither theorized physical power (the power of the gun) effectively, nor self-interest (of capital in profit, of settlers in land and family-centered security). It has dealt with race and culture, but less with gender and even more sparingly with class. It has rarely dealt with the complexity of voices, both of colonizers and colonized, that surround particular colonial circumstances. As Clayton points out, it has tended to ignore settler colonies. If one works primarily from the postcolonial literature, not much of British Columbia emerges. If one is interested in understanding (with a view to mitigating) the effects of colonialism here, there is no escaping the local details of the case.

Clayton is expected to write in international journals for a post-colonial readership. Such is a means of academic success and of silencing British Columbia. It is not very different here. The young are pressed to write in the national and international journals, and the more elderly cherish the international reputations that are made there. To get into them, scholars adopt an international voice more tuned to abstraction than to particularities. British Columbia recedes, and with it many pressing social problems about which scholarship can usefully speak. The trick, of course, is to work within both the international literature and, as it were, the local archive, but this is not easily done. The pressures of academic life favour the former, whereas often only individual curiosity and sense of the responsibilities of civic scholarship sustain the latter.