

VANCOUVER IN PRINT

A Review Essay

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Burrard Inlet: A History

Doreen Armitage

Madeira Park: Harbour, 2001. 324 pp. Illus., maps. \$32.95 cloth.

Vancouver: Then and Now

Chuck Davis and John McQuarrie

Ottawa: Magic Light, 2001. 232 pp. Illus. \$45 cloth.

The Cherniavsky Trio

Felix Cherniavsky

Vancouver: Printed Privately, 2001. 175 pp. Illus.

Pacific Press:

The Unauthorized Story of Vancouver's Newspaper Monopoly

Marc Edge

Vancouver: New Star, 2001. 450 pp. \$39.00 cloth.

Namely Vancouver:

A Hidden History of Vancouver Place Names

Tom Snyders with Jennifer O'Rourke

Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001. 301 pp. Illus., map. \$19.95 paper.

Station Normal: The Power of the Stave River

Meg Stanley and Hugh Wilson

Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2001. 120 pp.

Illus. maps. \$19.95 paper.

BRITISH COLUMBIANS like to read stories about the province's past. A recent study of publishing across Canada showed that British Columbia leads the way in per capita consumption of books, a substantial portion of which are local or regional histories. In *The Burden of*

History (1999), Elizabeth Furniss observed that the shelves of the two major bookstores in Williams Lake were filled with popular histories of British Columbia. A visit to museum gift shops and bookstores around the province, including those in Vancouver, will also reveal an extensive selection

of local and popular histories. The six Vancouver titles reviewed here, all published in 2001, illustrate both the robust character of publishing within the fields of “local” and “popular” history in British Columbia and the range of books that fall within the category of historical writing labelled “popular.”

Vancouver Then and Now, Burrard Inlet, and *Namely Vancouver* illustrate characteristics that typify popular histories: they seek to entertain as much as to inform, they avoid controversial issues, and they portray the past through images and stories that are known in the literature, but are perhaps unfamiliar to most readers. The coffee-table book *Vancouver Then and Now* adopts a familiar approach to the presentation of historical photographs by comparing past and present images of urban streetscapes, buildings, and panoramic views of the city. Although the historical images have, for the most part, been published before, the large number of high-quality reproductions and the excellent contemporary photographs by Ottawa photographer John McQuarrie make *Vancouver Then and Now* a very attractive and useful addition to the historical literature on Vancouver. Chuck Davis and John McQuarrie could have presented a grittier and less romantic impression of the city than they did, but such an emphasis would not have been in keeping with the progressive assumptions of the before-and-after approach. One wonders as well about the emergence of Greater Vancouver’s newest Chinatown in Richmond, an important change in Greater Vancouver’s social history that is not easily conveyed visually by the then-and-now comparison of specific locations.

Burrard Inlet: A History and *Namely Vancouver* tell stories in words rather than images, though both supplement

the text with substantial numbers of black-and-white photographs. Of the two, *Burrard Inlet* is the more conventional, as Armitage moves around the circumference of the harbour recounting the histories of shipbuilding, longshoring, lumber milling, the Point Atkinson Lighthouse, and other aspects of Inlet life. *Namely Vancouver* is more innovative than *Burrard Inlet*, setting out to tell “the good stories” that the names of 930 streets, parks, bodies of water, mountains, and other locations in the Greater Vancouver area have to tell. For those who like their history in small digestible chunks, Tom Snyders and Jennifer O’Rourke have written a highly readable introduction to the history of Vancouver. I especially liked the sidebar references throughout the text that served – in the fashion of Web page links – to connect a name (such as “Oliver Crescent”) back to other related citations or short essays (in this case, “Politicos and Bigwigs”) scattered throughout the alphabetically organized book.

Other new books expand our knowledge of Vancouver’s past. Felix Cherniavsky’s *The Cherniavsky Trio* is, in its conception and intent, not a typical “popular” history; rather, it is a family story written from within the Cherniavsky family to honour three Ukrainian brother-musicians who played at the Czar’s court in pre-Revolutionary Russia before becoming well known in Europe, North America, and the British Dominions. For the Cherniavskys this book, privately published and expensively produced, is a family story meant to recognize, and to honour, the colourful history of three extraordinary musicians: Leo, Jan, and Mischel Cherniavsky. Mischel and Jan became connected through marriage to the family of B.T. Rogers, millionaire sugar manufacturer,

after the trio's chance 1915 meeting with the twenty-year-old Mary Rogers while returning to Vancouver from Fiji via the Pacific Ocean. Herein lies the larger significance of this unique book for Vancouver historians: the Cherniavsky Trio's story illuminates aspects of the social life of Vancouver's elite, whose provincialism is said to have driven two of the Rogers daughters, Mary and Elspeth, into the arms of the charismatic and internationally recognized musicians.

Station Normal: The Power of the Stave River tells the story of a hydroelectric power plant that operated for most of the last century to the east of, and indeed almost in the shadow of, Vancouver. Until the 1960s the power company (BC Electric in the 1920s, and then BC Hydro) operated a company town at Stave Falls, and it is the possibility that a company-run community could exist for so long so close to the city that makes this study intriguing. Marked by a clear prose style and heavily documented with original photographs, this book is meant for general readers and, in that sense, falls within the category of "popular" history. But *Station Normal* stands apart from the first three titles examined here in that it was initiated by Power Pioneers and BC Hydro for the explicit purpose of paying homage to the community of Stave Falls. To achieve this goal Meg Stanley and Hugh Wilson explore the business, technical, and social aspects of Stave Falls's history, aiming less to be "popular" than to recount the story of a local community. It is as an example of how local histories should be written that *Station Normal* stands out. The authors frame their narrative from questions that emerge from the scholarly literature (e.g., about the paternalistic nature of "typical" com-

pany towns, and, as the community modernized, about the shift from in-plant training to formal apprenticeship programs) while at the same time presenting the story of Stave Falls in a readable narrative. The result is a book that is both accessible and makes an original contribution to the historical literature on Greater Vancouver.

Of the six, the book that emerges most explicitly from an academic setting is Marc Edge's *Pacific Press*. A former Vancouver journalist, Edge laid the foundation for this examination of Vancouver's newspaper monopoly while studying for graduate degrees in labour relations and communications in the 1990s. *Pacific Press* stands apart from the other books in that it is loosely structured around a particular argument. Edge is critical of the lack of real competition among Vancouver's newspapers, the result, he suggests, of the "operating agreement" that Southam Newspapers (owners of the *Vancouver Province*) and Don Cromie (owner of the *Vancouver Sun*) made in 1956 when they decided to set up a joint publishing company called Pacific Press. Tracing the extensive labour troubles that have plagued the newspaper industry in Vancouver since the 1950s, and the failure of other newspapers to present the *Province* and the *Sun* with real competition, Edge concludes that the Pacific Press monopoly failed to generate long-term advantages to either the newspaper owners or the city and eventually forced both papers into the joint control of, first, Southam, then Conrad Black, and now the Aspers. Written in a narrative style reminiscent of books about larger-than-life newspaperpeople, *Pacific Press* reinforces the impression left by the other books noted here that popular historical writing about Vancouver is thriving.