

FOUR VOICES FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA

A Review Essay

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Selkirks

Leone Caetani. Translated by Danilo Aguzzi Barbagli
Fasano Italy: Schena Editore, 1999. 146 pp. 20 lira paper

Chasing Their Dreams:

Chinese Settlement in the Northwest Region of British Columbia

Lily Chow

Prince George: Caitlin Press, 2000. 158 pp. Illus., maps. \$18.95 paper

Port Coquitlam: Where Rails Meet Rivers

Chuck Davis

Madiera Park: Harbour, 2000. 204 pp. Illus. \$39.95 cloth

North River:

The Story of BC's North Thompson Valley and Yellowhead Highway

Muriel Poulton Dunford

Merritt: Sonotek, 2000. 384 pp. Illus., maps. \$19.95 paper

Gold and Grand Dreams: Cariboo East in the Early Years

Marie Elliott

Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 2000. 200 pp. Illus., maps. \$17.95 paper

Upstarts and Outcasts: Victoria's Not-So-Proper Past

Valerie Green

Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 2000. 192 pp. Illus., maps. \$18.95 paper

Steveston

Daphne Marlatt and Robert Minden

Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2001. 107 pp. Illus. \$16.95 paper

A Measure of Value

Chris Yorath

Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 2000. 176 pp. \$17.95 paper

LOCAL HISTORIES of settler communities have too frequently taken a filio-pietistic and simplistic approach to the plucky pioneers, lauding their indomitable spirit in the face of the near-insuperable odds of a harsh climate, unremitting toil, and unfriendly natives – Aboriginal or otherwise. These one-dimensional histories have adopted only the colonizers' gaze, frequently neglecting to examine the political, social, economic, and environmental realities of the place of settlement. Furthermore, the complete migration experience is often ignored, with only the events in the receiving community being catalogued; however, if we are to have a more comprehensive understanding of the pioneer experience, then events in the sending community must also be explored. It is refreshing, therefore, to find that many of these books have examined their communities – “warts and all” – and addressed, at varying depths, the issues of prejudice, marginalization, brutality, and the pain of separation from home that were the experience of so many immigrants. Further, many of the works have attempted to come to grips with the myth of an empty wilderness “untamed,” “untouched,” and just waiting for the civilizing influence of Europeans. It is refreshing, too, to find that many authors are working to a finer tolerance, allowing the voices of individuals to be heard rather than treating the settlers and sojourners as an undifferentiated mass of miners or farmers, of Chinese or Scots.

Three of the books examine areas of British Columbia: the Northwest; the North Thompson Valley and Yellowhead Highway; and Cariboo East. Lily Chow's *Chasing Their*

Dreams traces the lives of the Chinese in the communities of Hazelton, Essington, Cassiar District and Yukon, Prince Rupert, Terrace, Smithers, and Kitimat – a well organized treatment of spatially and temporally scattered information. Chow does an excellent job of situating her subject; the introduction informs the reader about the conditions in China that impelled emigration – a dimension of the migration experience that is too frequently ignored – and then explores official efforts to exclude the Chinese from British Columbia and Canada. Each chapter begins with a brief history of the town or area, again situating the reader in what might otherwise be unfamiliar territory, and then tells the stories of the Chinese who settled or sojourned, frequently using testimony from descendants of the original settlers. Chow has searched for, and found, both the disquieting and the uplifting episodes in the lives of her subjects and has produced a fully rounded examination of the Chinese migrants in the Northwest region of British Columbia. A minor cavil would be that the relationships between the Aboriginals and the Chinese are hinted at but not fully explored. For instance, she notes that many Chinese married Aboriginal women, but she also notes that Chinese parents wanted their children to marry within the Chinese community – tantalizing facts that leave the reader looking for an examination of the intercourse between these two marginalized cultures.

Muriel Poulton Dunford's *North River* is a sweeping saga, in both territory and time, that investigates the Thompson River from Kamloops to Jasper and from before contact to the 1950s. Dunford's exploration is a

masterly work of thorough and extensive research, presented in an exceedingly readable style and leavened with trenchant asides (e.g., the Overlanders learned to like pemmican “when they were hungry enough” [51]). This is an inclusive history. Nothing in the Thompson Valley seems to have escaped the author’s gaze: the continuing contribution of members of the Shuswap Nation to events in the valley, pioneer enterprise and ineptitude, the role of pioneer women (107), the treatment of the Chinese on the railway, harrowing accounts of the inhumane conditions suffered by Aboriginal children in residential schools, and even the story of the “little leather boots for the donkeys” (190). The great merit of this work is that it is so alive, so filled with the voices of the people of the North Thompson and Yellowhead Highway District. Richard Mackie’s back-cover testimonial, asserting that “*North River* is destined to become a classic of British Columbia local history,” seems to be wholly justified.

Marie Elliott’s *Gold and Grand Dreams* traces the story of Cariboo East in the early years, from 1859 to the end of the century. Beginning with a year-by-year approach to her subject, Elliott catalogues the chronological events of the gold rush to Quesnel Forks and describes the lives of the miners, packers, entrepreneurs, and government officials who were the actors in this search for yet another El Dorado. Her research is extensive, although at times, particularly in the early chapters, one wishes for fewer facts and more personal anecdotes to give this work a more human gloss. In later chapters, when the frenzy has diminished and mines are closing, Elliott’s style becomes more reflective

and, ultimately, more satisfying. A chapter is devoted to hydraulic mining and its devastating environmental damage. She mentions, for example, the collapse of a hill that, had the water at the Golden River Quesnelle Dam not been turned off, would have destroyed “the south end of the bridge, the Govt. house and quite a slice off the front of the town.” The slide was found to be “500 feet in length and up to 100 feet deep” (150). A chapter is devoted to the Chinese miners, who also appear throughout the text; Aboriginal peoples, however, seem to have been dealt with less extensively.

Four of this clutch of “voices” deal with specific places – D’Arcy Island in Haro Strait, Steveston, Port Coquitlam, and Victoria. Chris Yorath’s *A Measure of Value* is a compelling, powerful, and, at times, distressing account of twenty-three men – “mostly Chinese” – who were “stockpiled to die” (13) in the lazaretto on D’Arcy Island between 1891 and 1906 – the period during which the City of Victoria created and was responsible for the leper colony. Yorath’s research is comprehensive and meticulous: he outlines the nature of leprosy and the social, political, and medical attitudes towards the disease, and then he recounts the fifteen-year history of the lazaretto (gleaned from archival and newspaper sources), concluding with the results of his successful search for the location of the buildings. The voices, and many of the names, are lost, if indeed they were ever recorded. So, in an “attempt to give [the men] humanity” (14), Yorath uses archival material to create a fictional account of “one man’s journey from China to Victoria.” The story of Lim Sam is woven throughout the text and succeeds in giving a human presence

to what is, of necessity, mainly a catalogue of data. Yorath succeeds in his intention to “take the middle road between apologism and anger” (15), and he gives us a satisfying, if at times disturbing, account of events in the history of the City of Victoria – events that, until now, have been not just neglected but entirely forgotten.

Steveston – poems by Daphne Marlatt and photographs by Robert Minden – is in its third edition (the first was published in 1974), and it seems a pity that such a rich interior should be encased in paper. The black-and-white photographs are by turns haunting, depressing, and amusing. They are exquisite and evocative – but evocative of the community as it was over twenty-five years ago (the photographs are dated 1973 and 1974). What do they tell us about Steveston now? The poetry, from the first poem’s line “the bodies of men & fish corpse piled on top of each other” (11), weaves a thread of sadness and loss throughout the book. Without a textual analysis of the lives of the mainly Japanese cannery workers, the reader is left to conclude that theirs was a dire existence. The book’s merit lies in its superb photography and eloquent poetry, but the purpose of this revised edition is not clear. Is the reader to infer that Steveston has not changed in almost thirty years? Although notes about this edition appear on the back cover, it would have been more useful to locate them (along with a rationale) in an introduction.

Port Coquitlam: Where Rails Meet Rivers, on the other hand, leaves the reader in no doubt: it is a concise, comprehensive, and chronological account of events in that city from the arrival of the settlers to the present day, although, readers from outside

this. Chuck Davis has produced a sumptuous book – at least one plate, some in colour, on every page – and given space to incidents and individuals who shaped the city’s past (although the city’s pioneering Europeans do predominate). The author has made some attempt to acknowledge that the land was not empty when the first settlers arrived, and he gives a two-page spread to the archaeological dig at the mouth of the Pitt River in the late 1970s (26-7). Regrettably, however, among the hundreds of pictures, there are only two of Aboriginal people, both stereotypical: Chief Martin Joe standing, wearing a blanket, and gazing into the distance (30); and Chief Coquitlam in full regalia, performing a good luck dance in 1961 (135). Non-European settlers are mentioned, including the arrival of two Japanese families in 1929 (about which the author’s only comment is that “Canada was not particularly welcoming to these immigrants” [95-6]). However, Port Coquitlam’s reception of these families is not explored. Although this is a “feel-good” book, the author has, with a few exceptions, stayed within the paradigm of earlier local histories in telling the stories of the pioneers who built the town and fought the good fight against fire and flood.

The last work concentrating on one specific place is Valerie Green’s *Upstarts and Outcasts: Victoria’s Not-So-Proper Past*. Although she has ostensibly written about the socially unacceptable “lower orders” (10), Green seems to have included everyone with this category, whether she/he be an upstart, an outcast, or neither (e.g., Daniel Fowler Adams, “an enterprising and resourceful early Victorian tradesman” [150]). This work has no

sustained focus and little analysis. Not only is the reader frequently unsure what point is being made but at times he/she is unclear as to whose voice is being heard. In one instance, for example, we are uncertain whether the voice is that of Fanny the actress or Green the author (80-1).

One work in this selection, Leone Caetani's *Selkirks*, stands alone in offering the voice of an Italian aristocrat who reflects on what he found during an 1891 hunting trip to British Columbia. *Selkirks* is the journal of that trip, and, while at first its inclusion in this essay seems unwarranted, closer scrutiny of the author's presentation of the tourist's gaze suggests that it serves as a reminder of, and perhaps even a corrective to, attitudes of the period. An observation such as "near the fire an old and slovenly Indian was cooking the last remains of the carcass, stirring what was boiling in the pot with a wooden ladle, which from time to time he took out and voluptuously licked from top to bottom, thereby exposing a large dark-red tongue that would have done honour to a quadruped" (63) jolts the reader, reminding her/him that all classes who travelled to, and through, British Columbia shared negative stereotypes

about Aboriginal people. This is a short read – the excellent English translation and the original Italian text are on alternate pages – and a valuable voice.

British Columbia is well served by most of the books on this list. Although local histories are always guaranteed a readership in the locality in question, most of this group deserve more than a captive, hometown audience. For that reason, if for no other, authors of local histories should do whatever they can to situate their territory (e.g., by providing good, well placed maps). *Port Coquitlam* has already been mentioned; Chow and Dunford each present excellent maps, but they are collected at the front of the volume rather than being interspersed throughout the text; and *Gold and Grand Dreams* uses archival maps, which are not easily read. As Jean Barman recently noted (*BC Studies* 131: 9-14.), "the parts that comprise British Columbia want their own viewing. By seeing the parts, we come to a much better understanding of the whole." These voices from British Columbia allow the reader to view some of these parts of the province, and some of these voices provide a measure of exploration and understanding that is invisible to the tourist gaze.