

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Island Timber: A Social History  
of the Comox Logging Company, Vancouver Island*

Richard Somerset Mackie

Victoria: Sono Nis, 2000. 309 pp. Illus., maps. \$39.95 paper

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IN THE MUSIC WORLD, crossover hits are not uncommon. Think of recent successful releases by Shania Twain, Diana Krall, or Celine Dion. In book publishing they are rather more unusual. David Suzuki is, indubitably, a public figure, but the immensely popular books that bear his name are hardly essential reading in genetics, his original field. Important though they are, the writings of Alan Cairns, Will Kymlicka (and many other Canadian academics) are little known among the public at large. While “professional” historians sniff at the “popularizer” Pierre Berton and all his works – and vice versa – Canadian publishing struggles to survive, its “serious non-fiction” list kept afloat by the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, and its trade books subject to massive returns by “big-box bookstores” intent on moving titles through their shelves. There are, of course, many, many reasons for all of this – ranging from business bottom lines and fiscal caution, through style and taste and design and marketing considerations, to the size and interests of the book-buying public – and they cannot be sorted through here.

Against this backdrop, however, Richard Mackie’s *Island Timber* warrants attention. It is a work of local history, firmly focused on a small part of east-central Vancouver Island. Yet it throws a good deal of light on British Columbia’s coastal forest industry – an enormously important facet of the provincial past that still awaits its mature historian. It is not an academic book, yet it has more academic substance than many works that claim an academic pedigree. And it was, for some weeks after its publication, the best-selling non-fiction book in the province (on the strength of this success, a second edition is now in preparation). This is not enough to proclaim: “Richard Mackie Rocks!” However, to stretch a point, perhaps he might be thought of as a sort of Ashley McIsaac manqué – someone who has successfully brought the classical sensibilities of the trained historian (and, I would add, the historical geographer) to a popular audience.

*Island Timber* is basically a history of the Comox Logging and Railway Company through the first forty years of the twentieth century. It tells the story of the conversion of “a logger’s

Eden" – 200 square miles of prime Douglas fir forest – into more than three billion board feet of lumber (enough to build well over half a million houses). This is done simply and straightforwardly. The book follows the wood, from the flat gravelly soils between Comox and Campbell River (first opened by settlers in the 1860s) to the massive mills twelve miles up the Fraser River, where between 500 and 900 men converted magnificent 250-year-old trees into dimension lumber, doors, window frames, and plywood destined for markets within Canada and across the world. It is hardly surprising, then, that work – the various jobs in which Comox Logging's 450 employees earned their daily bread (from cruising and surveying, falling and bucking, rigging, yarding, skidding, hauling, booming, towing, and grading to saw filing and cooking) – holds a central place in this account.

Indeed, one of the major contributions of this book lies in its clear and detailed depiction of how the forest industry worked. Who knew that Comox Valley men engaged in "aerial logging" with "flying machines" before the First World War? If you are intrigued, Mackie will help you understand that they were using high lead methods and Lidgerwood skidders to bring out the cut. He shows as well as anyone who has written on the industry how skylines are rigged, how donkeys and logging railways changed the assault on the forest, and how log booms were built. Even more impressive are the maps and diagrams that show the principle and practice of skidder logging, the manner in which logs were yarded from a cold deck pile and loaded onto flatcars, how fallers and buckers worked their ways through a skidder setting, and

how logging railways shaped the geography of forest exploitation. Here Mackie has used his training as a historian, and his engagement with geographers, to shape a thoroughly useful, tightly integrated account of the heyday of logging on the coast of British Columbia, revealing not only how the forest was turned into lumber but also how places such as the Comox Valley became resource hinterlands of southern mills (in Chemainus and Vancouver) and integral parts of such celebrated stories as that of Prairie settlement.

Yet *Island Timber* is more than this. Mackie's text is distinguished by a strong emphasis on people and their communities. He interviewed 150 men and women in the course of his research, all of whom "enthusiastically" shared with him their memories (to say nothing of books, maps, and photographs) of the area, and this shows. The Comox Valley is Jack Hodgins country – his father farmed and logged in the soldier settlement of Merville – and this book introduces almost as many unlikely and colourful characters as appear in the pages of *Spit Delaney's Island*. Sometimes I found myself impatient with the crowd. Like many local histories, this one revels in idiosyncrasy and anecdote. Mackie undoubtedly read more tales and heard more reminiscences than he includes in his book, but one wonders, eventually, about the work done by some stories (such as the one on page 112 about "a fatal accident ... averted during the great snowfall") and the larger significance of many "facts" (such as the claim, on page 97, that an Irish section boss "grew the biggest carrots you ever saw"). For all that, Mackie does a commendable job of weaving bits and pieces together to provide a richly textured account of

the experiences and aspirations of those men and women whose role in the conversion of one of the most impressive forests on the Coast was in some sense incidental to their larger aims of making homes, raising families, and building communities. Here reproduction is revealingly framed alongside production to reveal the complex human dimensions of a resource industry too often treated simply as an economic activity. For all its particularity, the intensely human story of logging in the Comox Valley is far from unique, and in Mackie's hands it speaks both to the histories of other resource communities across the country as well as to the humanistic impulse that links the lives of others to our own.

If these are the basic elements of *Island Timber's* success, it must also be acknowledged that no crossover artist

scores a hit without agents and publicists, and here much credit is due Sono Nis Press. This small Victoria publishing house has produced a most handsome book. It has the look and feel of a coffee-table volume, with high-quality, glossy paper, an attractive layout, and photographs (literally hundreds of them) magnificently reproduced and spread throughout the text. Many of these pictures – from candid snapshots of families at the beach, to posed studies of proud engineers beside their locomotive, to action shots of woodwork – are published here for the first time. They are undoubtedly part of the book's attraction and worth the price of the volume on their own. At \$39.95 for both text and illustrations, *Island Timber* – like island timber before it – is a rare bargain.

### *A Sto:lo-Coast Salish Historical Atlas*

Keith Thor Carlson, editor

Vancouver/Seattle/Chilliwack: Douglas and McIntyre/  
University of Washington Press/Stolo Heritage Trust,  
2001. 208 pp. Maps., illus. \$60 cloth

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**L**AST MONTH, at the annual BC Book Awards Ceremony, *A Sto:lo-Coast Salish Historical Atlas* received the Roderick Haig-Brown Regional Book Prize. The culmination of a large research project launched in 1999 under the auspices of the Sto:lo Nation, the atlas well deserved this honour. Keith Carlson was the driving force behind the

project. As the primary editor and principal author, he coordinated the efforts of a large crew of contributors – six editorial board members, fourteen authors, five clerical/administrative assistants, seven research assistants, two cartographers, one graphic designer, two place names advisors, two copy editors, and a production coordinator.