

BOOK REVIEWS

Cougar Annie's Garden

Margaret Horsfield

Nanaimo: Salal Books, 1999. 259 pp. Illus., map. \$40 paper.

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COUGAR ANNIE'S GARDEN speaks to resourcefulness and endurance. Ada Annie Rae-Arthur came to the west coast of Vancouver Island in 1915 determined to get her charming but drink-and-drug-addicted husband Willie away from Vancouver's temptations. Promised financial support by his wealthy sister back home in Scotland, they took up land and built themselves a house at remote Boat Basin in Hesquiat Harbour. In retrospect, they were engaged in an impossible task, as a generation of their counterparts found out in attempting to make a living from recalcitrant land too far away from markets for whatever products they could grow. The couple had, moreover, a family to tend. They came with three children in tow, to which were added eight more born at Boat Basin over the next decade and a half.

Margaret Horsfield weaves Ada Annie's story out of gossamer threads. She acknowledges early on: "Ada Annie Rae-Arthur died with her mysteries intact. Much will never be known about her. Her life was largely undocumented." (4). Repeatedly tramping through Ada Annie's world, Horsfield searched out objects of

memory. "And in Cougar Annie's house and garden, the haunting remains of store and post office, the stacks of old letters, the rusted traps, the collapsing goat sheds ... the still heap of mossy stones covering a grace – all evoke past lives, past hopes, past dreams beyond number" (5). Scraps of letters received and unsent, dedications in moulding books, tattered lists and newspaper clippings are integrated with verbal and visual descriptions of the physical place, along with oral recollections of Ada Annie's later life, to fashion a story with enormous appeal.

Ada Annie Rae-Arthur remained at Boat Basin for two-thirds of a century. She did this at enormous cost to herself and to her children, who were sometimes neglected as she struggled to clear the land and to establish a plant and bulb nursery. She sold raw furs and hunted cougars for bounty, hence her nickname – "Cougar Annie." Parcels of clothing occasionally arrived from British relatives, but very often, one daughter recalled, the family was reduced to "porridge morning, noon, and night" (75). The oldest children were forcibly removed by Children's Aid on the grounds that they were not attending school, and

almost all of them "took off" (110) as soon as they could, daughters in particular ceasing to have contact with their mother. Ada Annie had her successes, as in getting a post office at Boat Basin to complement the makeshift general store she ran for passersby. The genial Willie, who was more decorative than useful, died in 1936. Thereupon Ada Annie advertised in the agricultural press for a successor. "BC Widow with Nursery and orchard wishes partner. Widow preferred. Object Matrimony" (113). There would be three more marriages, none of them satisfactory. Ada Annie retained her fierce independence until 1983, when, at the

age of ninety-five, virtually blind, she was forced to leave Boat Basin. She died two years later.

Cougar Annie's Garden is a very fine book. Horsfield recognizes the importance of context. Interwoven with Ada Annie's story are those of the broader geographical area and of the Aboriginal people, missionaries, loggers, and others who also made their lives around Hesquiat Harbour. The wealth of colour and black-and-white photographs, contemporary and historical, tell their own story, making it quite possible to savour the book without reading a single word.

*At Home Afloat:
Women on the Waters of the Pacific Northwest*

Nancy Pagh

Calgary/Moscow, Idaho: University of Calgary Press/
University of Idaho Press, 2001. 179 pp. Illus., map. \$24.95 paper.

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IN THIS FASCINATING study, Nancy Pagh clearly reveals the sources of her interest in women who have travelled the waters of the Pacific Northwest, and I should follow suit. From the time she was a toddler, Pagh explored regions within reach of the State of Washington in her parents' small motor cruiser and came to love the life aboard. I was a wife and mother on board, rather than a daughter, and the boats we chartered for summer holidays that took us from the San Juans to Knight Inlet and eventually around the north end of Vancouver

Island were all small sailing craft. If I am prejudiced in favour of sail, I share Nancy Pagh's love of small boats and happy memories of times afloat. Of course, there were also difficult moments, and I can certainly relate to a major theme of Pagh's study: the way in which women's homemaking concerns are translated to their floating environment. Imagine my dismay when a bucketful of oysters, which I gathered with considerable difficulty during the morning, was chucked overboard in the afternoon. My chief concerns were domestic; the men on