

*The Illustrated History of British Columbia*

Terry Recksten

Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2001. 280 pp. Illus., maps. \$60 cloth.

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AS THE NOTES on the fly leaf explain, Terry Recksten, with the support of her publisher and half a dozen corporate sponsors, including the BC Archives, has produced the first major illustrated history of the province. Her aim has been to bring people and events to life with images, anecdotes, and an explanatory text. An illustrated history, in some instances, is merely a history with illustrations, with the text and pictures referring to each other only incidentally. That is not the case here. The text and illustrations are well integrated throughout. The text, which includes the main historical narrative, captions, and vignettes, is crisply written and inviting and succeeds admirably in contextualizing the images and events included. Text and illustrations together follow a traditional arrangement, with Cook, Vancouver, Blanshard, Douglas, and Seymour commanding their accustomed places in the early chapters. This is perhaps inevitable because as these early explorers and first governors were the sources of essential illustrative material. For example, without the artists on the European ships that visited the Northwest Coast in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, we would not have the paintings and drawings of the Mowachaht of Nootka Sound, their village at Friendly Cove, or the interior view of one of their houses.

In selecting images, Recksten has, with few exceptions, restricted herself to paintings, sketches, photographs, and objects from the times that she portrays. Her illustrated history does not include artistic reconstructions of the past, and this choice gives her book a documentary flavour. It means, of course, that her history begins like any conventional history. The first 11,000 or 12,000 years of human activity in British Columbia are explained in a few lines of text and with two images: one of petroglyphs and the other of stone tools and other artefacts discovered at an archaeological dig on Kuyper's Island. Once the pre-history has been dealt with, we are reminded by the images that follow that British Columbia's modern development coincides closely with the age of the camera. Chapters 2 and 3 depend on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century paintings and drawings. From the 1860s on, photographs tell the story.

The most familiar photograph in the book is that of Donald Smith driving the last spike on the Canadian Pacific Railway at Craigellachie in November 1885. A few other images have also been published many times previously. Most, however, will be fresh and unfamiliar, even to someone with a good-sized library of BC books. The BC Archives are the source of the majority of the more than 220 paintings,

drawings, and photographs Recksten has selected; but the list of museums, archives, libraries, and local societies upon which she has drawn is a long one. As a consequence, she has been able to choose many memorable images of which I can give only a few examples: a Tsimshian mask featuring pox marks, carved in the aftermath of the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1861; sixteen Doukhobor women pulling a plough through a windswept reach of grasslands near Grand Forks; a young Kwakwaka'wakw woman circa 1910 wearing large abalone-shell earrings; a Depression-era hobo shack occupied by two boys who appear to have scarcely entered their teens; and impounded Japanese-Canadian fishing boats massed together and stretching along the Annieville Dyke on the Fraser River near New Westminster in February-March of 1942.

A striking and playful photograph taken a century ago in the Upper Arrow Lake area shows a woman, Mattie Gunterman, supported by two friends and mounted on a wood stove in a log cabin. The caption mentions that the heavy camera, tripod, and glass plates for this and other Mattie Gunterman photographs had to be packed hundreds of miles by horse from Seattle. Unfortunately, Recksten does not often provide this kind of information. Generally, she does not name the artists and photographers whose work she uses, nor does she explain the circumstances under which they did their work. To be fully understood, paintings and photographs, like other documents, require analysis of both content and origin. The artist John Webber,

who accompanied Cook and whose work has been included without attribution in Chapter 2, was a professional. The artists with Vancouver were amateurs. In both cases their work survives in the original and in engravings in which elements were edited and changed according to the conventions and sensibilities of the engravers. There is much to explain about all of these images. The subject matter itself can be disputed, as with the likeness of George Vancouver. The National Portrait Gallery maintains that this work is probably a portrait of someone else. Moreover, as Maria Tippett and Douglas Cole have demonstrated in *From Desolation to Splendor: Changing Perceptions of the British Columbia Landscape* (1977), there has been a long evolution in the way in which British Columbia has been depicted by painters. Nor is the camera any more neutral than is the pencil or brush. The heavy equipment and long exposures of early photography dictated the kind of pictures made. In fact, most of the photographs included in this book are posed or staged or taken from a distance. The first spontaneous scene of action is a 1914 photograph of a party boarding the Sikh immigrant ship, the *Komagata Maru*. Even in later photographs, people are frequently camera conscious, whether in a classroom rehearsal for a gas attack or waiting their turn at a polio vaccination clinic. In other words, the making of a picture has a story and a context, and Recksten could have added to the value of her images by telling us more about them.