

*This Blessed Wilderness: Archibald McDonald's letters  
from the Columbia River, 1822-44*

Jean Murray Cole, editor

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001. 297 pp. Illus., maps. \$75 cloth.

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**I**N 1821 ARCHIBALD McDONALD arrived on the Northwest Coast as an officer in the Hudson's Bay Company, which had just merged with its arch rival, the North West Company. He remained in the Columbia District for the next twenty-three years, first commanding Fort George (Astoria) (1826-9), then Fort Langley (1829-33), thereafter Fort Colville (1833-44). McDonald retired in 1844 due to failing health and settled at Lake of the Two Mountains, Lower Canada (Quebec), where he lived until his death in 1853. McDonald's career spanned a time when the European fur trade of the Pacific slope underwent major transformations. His position as a senior company officer gave him an excellent vantage point from which to view the changes that were under way. McDonald's letters from Forts George, Langley, and Colville, which comprise the first three parts of the collection Jean Murray Cole has put together from various archives (Hudson's Bay Company Archives, British Columbia Archives, Yale University Archives, and Kew Gardens Library) touch on all aspects of the business. And, as is generally the case with fur traders' correspondence, McDonald's letters also provide many valuable first-hand accounts of aspects of the local Native economies and offer insights into the relationships various First Nations had with the company.

It is the fourth section, covering the five years from 1845 to 1849, which is unusual for a collection of this sort; it is also a surprise, given the book's title. Here the editor has included letters McDonald wrote from his retirement home in Lower Canada. This correspondence offers a rare insight into the kinds of adjustments fur traders had to make when they retired from the "wilderness" to "civilization." McDonald reveals that he had a keen interest in the local political scene, which was undergoing wrenching changes. As an example, in a letter, dated 3 February 1848, to a correspondent in London, England, McDonald wrote: "our late electioneering excitement all over the two provinces is now about over & a pretty kettle of fish we conservatives made of it. The reformers (or rather the Rebels & Radicals) in the next House of Assembly will be two to one - so much for good sound Constitutional law & a lasting connexion with the Mother Country" (260).

Cole has followed all of the editorial conventions that have become commonplace to publications of fur traders' papers. In a general introduction she presents the reader with a concise biography of McDonald, who first arrived in North America at Fort Churchill in 1813 as the leader of the ill-fated second group of Red River-bound settlers that the earl of

Selkirk had dispatched to his colony. Subsequently McDonald became involved in the fur trade, and he served with George Simpson (later Sir George) in the Athabasca District just before his arrival in the Columbia District. McDonald favourably impressed Simpson, and this helped his career immediately afterward when Simpson assumed the governorship of the company. In addition to her biographical introduction, Cole opens each of the book's four parts with a succinct history that aims to put the group of letters that follow in their proper context. In footnotes throughout the work, she also provides essential biographical information about the people who are mentioned in McDonald's correspondence.

While Cole's adherence to editorial conventions is a strength of the collection, it also is one of its weaknesses.

She does not provide the reader with any information about the First Nations, who owned the territory where the company built its posts. This omission is most glaring on the map of the Columbia District (2), which shows only rivers and trading posts. It conveys the no longer acceptable impression that the land was vacant apart from the European establishments. Also, by failing to refer readers to the appropriate anthropological literature, those who are unfamiliar with the cultures of Pacific Slope First Nations are not provided with the background information they need to evaluate McDonald's descriptions and assessments of local Native customs. These shortcomings notwithstanding, Cole is to be congratulated for pulling together an extremely valuable collection.

*A Tour of Duty in the Pacific Northwest:  
E.A. Porcher and H.M.S. Sparrowhawk, 1865-1868*

Dwight L. Smith, editor

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172 pp. Illus., maps. US\$85 cloth

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**I**N THE MIDDLE YEARS of the nineteenth century the colony of British Columbia was a major producer of gold, and we tend to think of it in those terms. British Columbia played a second important role to which this book calls our attention. Thanks to its sources of coal and its secure harbour at Esquimalt, the colony served

as a nodal point in the web of steamship routes that bound the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans into a single strategic and commercial system. This role is brought to life by the private journal and water colours of Commander Edmund A. Porcher, captain of the gunboat *HMS Sparrowhawk* during a three-year turn of duty.