

The Frontier World of Edgar Dewdney

Brian Titley

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999. 171 pp. Illus. \$75 cloth.

*Long Day's Journey:**The Steamboat and Stagecoach Era in the Northern West*

Carlos Arnaldo Schwantes

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999.

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BRIAN TITLEY, a historian and professor of education at the University of Lethbridge, has written an authoritative and revealing biography of a figure that is not well known in British Columbia. This is a stylish, edgy study: it crackles with energy, twinkles with wry humour. "Biography is akin to necromancy," Titley writes, "We exhume the bodies of the dead – skulldiggery, if you like – and breathe life into them. But we cannot question them, and our reconstruction hinges largely on the fragments they leave behind, whether deliberately or accidentally" (viii). The author of several major studies on colonialism, racism, and Aboriginal administration in western Canada, Titley knew where to look in the National Archives of Canada, the British Columbia Archives, the Glenbow, and other repositories for the documentary fragments of Edgar Dewdney.

Edgar Dewdney was lieutenant-governor of British Columbia from 1892 to 1897. Before that he was federal minister of the interior (1888-92), lieutenant-governor and commissioner of Indian affairs for the North-West

Territories (1880-88), and Conservative MP for Yale (1872-80). He also represented the District of Kootenay in the colonial Legislature of British Columbia (1868-70).

Dewdney was a qualified surveyor and engineer when, in 1859, he came to British Columbia from England at the age of twenty-four. He assisted Moody and the Royal Engineers in laying out the townsite of New Westminster; he helped with the construction of the Cariboo Road; and he blazed and built a strategic trail to the goldfields at Wild Horse Creek. Having surveyed and constructed many other key routes, he has been called the father of road making in British Columbia.

The Frontier World of Edgar Dewdney is an important book, one that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of British Columbia and the prairie west. It is notable not only for its snappy style and impressive scholarship, but also for the author's stance with respect to his subject. "I do not consider Dewdney a great man or a nation builder. Rather, I see him as a type – a representative

of that class of adventurer who saw in the western frontier an unprecedented opportunity for self-aggrandizement" (ix).

Titley doesn't like this type of character and he certainly doesn't like Edgar Dewdney. Indeed, he is contemptuous of Dewdney and nearly everything Dewdney did or represented. Consider, for example, his remarks on Dewdney's decision to stand as member of Parliament for Yale in 1872: "Neither ranching nor mining had made him rich, and he faced an uncertain future of successive surveying contracts. What he really wanted was a sinecure – a well-placed government appointment with a steady income that would allow him to speculate in business ventures as he saw fit. He believed that politics might lead to such arrangements" (26). As it turned out, Dewdney did fairly well for himself financially by speculating in land around Regina and mines near Rossland. And he succeeded in becoming "viceroy" of British Columbia, "a position with a good salary, social prestige and not too much work" (102). But Dewdney was never as blatantly venal or as cynically corrupt as were many of his contemporaries. John H. Turner, who was premier during Dewdney's stint in Cary Castle, and Edward G. Prior (premier, 1902-03; lieutenant-governor, 1919-20) spring to mind. (They must be quaking in their graves, praying that Titley doesn't turn his "skulldiggery" searchlights on them!)

Titley dislikes Dewdney not simply because he was a political opportunist. He dislikes Dewdney's patronizing attitudes towards Native peoples on the Pacific slope, the coercive policies he administered as Indian commissioner on the prairies, and the insipid way he conducted himself as

minister of the interior ("no statesman-like vision, no spark of originality, no independent thought" [142]). Most of all, he dislikes Dewdney because he subscribed to, and apparently benefited from, the "loose moral code of frontier capitalism" (85).

The author's disdain for Dewdney is evident in assessments of seemingly innocuous traits, such as Dewdney's abiding love of the wilderness in British Columbia. "Grand, savage, untamable old nature!" Dewdney rhapsodized during a vice-regal excursion up the Coast in 1893: "Man with all his inventions and scientific means of overcoming obstacles would have a poor chance of asserting himself in these parts." Titley comments: "A fine tribute from one whose early career had been spent carving trails through the wilderness" (124). The very last sentences of this scarifying biography also resonate with derision and disdain: "It is no small irony that the main thoroughfare in Regina is called Dewdney Avenue. Could it be a deliberate tribute to the shady moral code of frontier capitalism with which the West was won?" (143).

In British Columbia, Dewdney is commemorated by several place names, including a community, a mountain, two peaks, a couple of flats, a creek, and an island. His name is also associated with the Dewdney Trunk Road, an old highway that extends east from Pitt Meadows into the Fraser Valley. The road runs parallel to the Fraser River and close to the American border. South of the line, as Carlos Schwantes explains in *Long Day's Journey*, frontier capitalists developed an extensive transportation network using steamboats and stage-coaches.

Schwantes is professor of history and director of the Institute for Pacific

Northwest Studies at the University of Idaho. This book is a companion volume to his *Railroad Signatures of the Pacific Northwest* (1993). In *Signatures*, Schwantes demonstrated how railways affected regional development in the late nineteenth century. In *Long Day's Journey*, he looks at an earlier era and shows how a sparse population, scanty capital investments, and a difficult terrain determined the success or failure of regional steamboat and stagecoach enterprises in the "northern West" (i.e., Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming).

Schwantes is less critical than Titley in describing the frontier world of the northern west and the non-Native entrepreneurs who sought to dominate it. Moreover, he takes a rather benign view of the transportation networks maintained by the steamboat pilots and the Concorde stagecoach drivers (who revelled in such titles as "kings of the river" and "knights of the rein"). For example, Titley argues that Dewdney's trail from New Westminster was "more than a conduit of trade ... it was also a line of contact to a remote corner of the colony so that the state could assert its control" (18). While acknowledging how roads and rivers facilitated the activities of American troops, census officials, and postal

workers, Schwantes says relatively little about attempts by the state to exert political or cultural hegemony in the northern west.

Schwantes is also more sanguine than is Titley in his overall assessment of this historical period. In the concluding sentences of his book he says simply that the "steamboat and stagecoach era was a distinctive age, with its peculiar definition of time and distance and the odd juxtaposition of frontier travel with the travail of a long day's journey" (370). This is not to say that Schwantes's book is cursory or facile. Indeed, this is an instance in which good looks may be deceiving. This looks like a coffee-table book; nearly every one of its 400 glossy pages is adorned with a beautifully reproduced colour or black-and-white illustration. And it feels like a coffee-table book; the dust jacket, cover boards, and paper stock are heavy, and it is presented in a modified folio format. But make no mistake; this is a formidable piece of scholarship. It includes eight pages of endnotes and fourteen pages of "Suggestions for Further Reading." The bibliography is authoritative and comprehensive, and includes many works relating to the history of transportation in this province. *Long Day's Journey* is a tour de force.