

*The Lord's Distant Vineyard:  
A History of the Oblates and the Catholic Community  
in British Columbia*

Vincent J. McNally

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THE RELIGIOUS AND CHURCH history of British Columbia remains largely untapped and untold. This neglect has caused us to fail to recognize the connections and themes that link local histories to larger denominational and social movements around the world. What we are left with are often very reactionary, simplistic perspectives examining only the "shadows" of denominational history and painting a picture of religious history that is terribly marginalized rather than connected to a much larger series of stories about the spiritual and religious themes of Canadian and, indeed, human history. Add to this the reality that most scholars are no longer fluent in denominational jargon or sensitive to religious themes at work in Canadian history, and it is no wonder that this story remains untapped and untold.

In Vincent J. McNally's *The Lord's Distant Vineyard: A History of the Oblates and the Catholic Community in British Columbia* not only is part of this history finally being told, but it is also being told with sensitivity. A far cry from A.G. Morice's simplistic *A History of the Northern Interior of British Columbia* (1906) and the triumphalist *Cross in the Wilderness* (1960) by Kay Cronin, McNally

approaches the largest and most influential Roman Catholic religious order in British Columbia's history with a critical eye. He reveals and deconstructs both the "rugged individualism" of legend and the "shadows" of Oblate history.

McNally outlines, both chronologically and geographically, the history of this religious order from its ultramontane roots in revolutionary France through the early days of colonial British Columbia and Vancouver Island. He explains the eventual emphasis on missionary work and gives a contemporary chronology of recent developments among both European and First Nations congregations. All of this is accomplished with some reference to the pivotal roles played by religious orders of women, various First Nations communities, and the activities of both the Roman Catholic hierarchy and ordinary priests working in various locations across the province. Rivalry between the Oblates and secular clergy in Vancouver is put in context, thus explaining much of the tensions and strains that have plagued the Roman Catholic community in Vancouver for decades.

At several points McNally provides a fascinating, though incomplete,

explanation of the Oblate motivation to evangelize First Nations communities. He often refers to the Oblates' "repressively Jansenistic spirituality" (153), "obsession with pelvic morality" (153), and "authoritarian personality type" (166). This explanation, I believe, moves away from his stated desire to focus his critique upon social and institutional systems and, instead, moves dangerously close to merely pathologizing the "accused" and, thereby, trivializing the experience of the "victims" of Euro-Canadian attempts to assimilate First Nations communities. Were he to maintain his focus on the institutional level, McNally might have further explained the cult of Jansenism and placed it within its proper context – the development of Christian heresies and Roman Catholicism. Instead, he reduces it to pelvic concerns and psychological personality types!

Furthermore, a number of aspects of this history are not treated. An explanation of Oblate activity along the Coast and on Vancouver Island in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is not balanced by a similar explanation of activities in the Interior

of British Columbia or of the period after the Second World War. McNally's research inadvertently indicates, once again, the seeming irrelevance of religion to British Columbians in the Interior and in the second half of the twentieth century. We now know that this was not, and is not, the case. In keeping with his "critical" premise, McNally might have given space to the voices of First Nations peoples and to *their* perceptions of the Oblates through time and in different regions. Perhaps its most significant drawback, McNally's research silences their voices and thereby juxtaposes "Oblate activity" with seeming "Aboriginal passivity."

*The Lord's Distant Vineyard* goes a long way towards telling part of the story of religion in British Columbia. Its significance to readers is not only its accessible presentation of the history of the largest Roman Catholic religious order in the Pacific Northwest. The book also contributes to the making of a complete history of the Roman Catholic Church in British Columbia – one that is sensitive and critical and, therefore, generally palatable to religious and secular audiences alike.