

to a growing population. Canadians chose suburbs over European cities and single detached houses over apartments. Domestic goods were based on

the same principles, and one wouldn't expect anything else. Canadians, both men and women, preferred Fords to Volvos, and that is what they got.

### *The Sommers Scandal: The Felling of Trees and Tree Lords*

Betty O'Keefe and Ian Macdonald

Surrey: Heritage House, 1999. 192 pp. Illus. \$16.95 paper.

BY DAVID MITCHELL

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**B**RITISH COLUMBIA'S POLITICS have often seemed synonymous with scandal. Not only have the colourful cast of characters who have played prominent roles in provincial politics seemed unusually prone to quarrels, mishaps, and conflicts of interest, but the local press has demonstrated a penchant for exaggeration and hyperbole. Of course, not every indiscretion or misdemeanor committed by an elected representative constitutes an actual scandal. However, in recent years, an increasingly aggressive news media have tended to describe such recurring behaviour as "scandalous."

Nevertheless, British Columbia does have the misfortune of being the home of a few bona fide political scandals that have significantly shaped the tone and rhetoric of public discourse in the province. Perhaps the most significant such event occurred almost half a century ago and is known as the Sommers Affair. Robert Sommers was minister of lands and forests in the Social Credit government of W.A.C. Bennett. In 1958, after a lengthy and sensational trial, he was found guilty of conspiracy and accepting bribes,

becoming the first minister of the Crown in the history of the British Commonwealth to serve a prison term.

Surprisingly, *The Sommers Scandal: The Felling of Trees and Tree Lords* is the first book-length account of this important incident in British Columbia's history. And for this, the authors, Betty O'Keefe and Ian Macdonald, deserve thanks. They provide a useful chronology of the events leading up to the charges against Sommers and place the entire affair within the context of British Columbia's forest policy. Above all, it is a good, suspenseful story. Among the book's strengths is the recounting of the drama of the trial leading to the conviction that would eventually send Sommers to jail. Written in a lively style and based upon newspaper reports and interviews with key participants after the fact, there is no better available summary of the proceedings of this important legal case.

The authors have synthesized an impressive volume of research; however, the lack of documentation poses a problem. Written for a popular audience, the book fails to provide

specific references to sources for verification of details or fact. This is particularly worrying because of the apparent conjecture and inaccuracies found in some portions of the book. These are particularly evident in the authors' recounting of the history of party politics in British Columbia. For instance, when Vancouver lawyer Leslie Peterson became a Social Credit candidate late in 1955, we are told that he was seen as "the future leader of the party." In fact, such speculation would have been more than a decade premature. And CCF MLA Rand Harding is referred to as "Ron" Harding. These are examples of small but irritating errors that highlight concerns about the lack of documentation in this book.

*The Sommers Scandal* does explore a number of the more important questions surrounding this case, such as: how could Sommers be found guilty of accepting bribes in the awarding of a forest licence to a company when no one in it was found guilty of offering him money or

benefits? The book does not, however, adequately explain how such a serious political scandal failed to adversely affect the government of the day. Premier W.A.C. Bennett never seemed touched by the affair, and his Social Credit Party was re-elected both in its midst and aftermath. The authors are hardly sympathetic to the old Socreds, but their continuing triumphs at the polls seem a mystery in this account.

The authors conclude that this important scandal ultimately had little or no effect on forest policy in British Columbia. Such an unqualified judgment seems to ignore the political reality that future forest ministers would become much more cautious about involving themselves directly in the awarding of forest licences. The scandal also hardened the Socreds, making them a much more careful and combative political force. In fact, it is possible to argue that the Sommers Affair may actually help explain how and why W.A.C. Bennett would become British Columbia's longest-serving premier.

### *Pepper in Our Eyes: The APEC Affair*

Wedley Pue, editor

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000. 241 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

BY PAT MARCHAK

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**I**N NOVEMBER 1997 Vancouver was the venue for a meeting of the heads of state representing the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies. Though the meeting was intended to deal with trade issues, by far the major story it generated was

about the tactics the RCMP used against student protesters. This story was soon augmented by evidence that the federal government had exerted pressure on the RCMP to act in accordance with political, rather than legal, requirements for crowd control.