

allowing Raban to dodge addressing directly what this voyage has come to mean to him. Numerous relatively small errors combine to make a careful reader aware of sloppy editing; for instance, he misidentifies the popular park Bowman Bay as Cornet Bay, writes of the company "Microscroft," refers to bulb farmers as those in the cut-flower trade, misuses nautical terms ("rope," "pier") that any self-proclaimed captain – or his editor – should know, and equates local Shakers with the English and eastern American religious

sect (same name, different belief). The book design is also less than useful: the table of contents is missing, maps on the inside covers are out of order, and the photo on the bottom half of the cover should be transposed to mirror the top half (Raban discusses the effect this should have at length in the text). These minor irritations, when combined with a lack of cohesiveness, make the project seem hurried and less than meaningful as a whole. At its best, the book offers extremely interesting isolated reflections.

*Hideaway: Life on the
Queen Charlotte Islands*

James Houston

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999. 259 pp. Illus., map. \$29.99 cloth.

*Oar and Sail:
An Odyssey of the West Coast*

Kenneth Macrae Leighton

Smithers: Creekstone, 1999. 152 pp. Illus., maps. \$24.95 cloth.

By Adam C. Waldie
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THESE two delightful books about life and adventure on the BC Coast appeared within days of each other in the fall of 1999. Both authors are aficionados of the area, but neither are native-born British Columbians. Both have an obvious love of the language, and both are excellent writers. The text and end papers of *Hideaway* are illustrated by striking black-and-white sketches by the author, and *Oar and Sail* has been enhanced by bold scratch board pieces reminiscent of lino block cuts. These

were provided by the author's son, Dr. Rod Leighton of Smithers.

Hideaway, by the well-known Canadian author, artist, and entrepreneur James Houston, is a personal essay relating the life he enjoys at his home on the Tlell River, Queen Charlotte Islands, where he spends six months of the year (when he is not travelling or living at his other home in Connecticut). An artist by profession, he studied print-making under one of the masters in Japan, and he is credited with having taught the art to the Inuit. George

Swinton, writing in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* (1999) states frankly that, "largely owing to the insights and promotional energy of James A. Houston, a young artist from Toronto, 'Eskimo art' or 'Inuit art' as we know it today, came into existence 1948-49." To many of us his name is known for his best seller, *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller*. His current book, *Hideaway*, brings his perceptive observations closer to home.

Oar and Sail, on the other hand, is the account of a long, dangerous row-boat trip from Vancouver to Prince Rupert taken over a period of two years by Kenneth Macrae Leighton, late professor of anesthesiology at the University of British Columbia, on his retirement in 1991. He describes warmly the legendary but evanescent friendships he struck up with fellow boaters he met on his odyssey, particularly those who came to his assistance. However stubborn and single-minded he might have been on occasion, he retained his good judgment and accepted needed assistance when it was proffered. He died in 1998 of hepatitis C, which may well have been an occupation-induced illness.

Both books are built on the authors' own narratives, but their endearing qualities for most British Columbians will likely be the vignettes involving local colour and history. In bygone days the Queen Charlotte Islands were familiar territory to thousands of migrant students, loggers, fishers, government and military personnel, and itinerant doctors like myself. With the severe curtailment of the resource industries, the recent closure of the armed forces station and hospital at Masset, the elimination (forty years ago) of scheduled passenger-boat service from the Lower Mainland, and the prohibitive cost of air fares, fewer and fewer residents of the province are familiar

with these fascinating islands. Similarly, the north central coast is not as vital to thousands of British Columbians as it was forty or fifty years ago. Forest industries have literally fled the mainland coast to cross the Gulf of Georgia and Johnstone Strait in favour of upper Vancouver Island. The huge pulp and paper operation at Ocean Falls has long since been abandoned, leaving but a ghost town, and commercial fishing is all but extinct.

Both authors, while describing life on the Coast as they see it today, include generous hints of what it has been in the past. Houston, particularly, refers en passant to the well known early Russian occupation of the Charlottes, and he describes in interesting detail one of the survivors of a little known influx of German settlers, which occurred fifty years ago. He relates with nostalgia the presence of an elitist club of medical doctors on the Tlell River, but he neglects to tell us that it was sold off two years ago, a victim of old age and high air fares.

However, Houston is at his best in describing the colourful local people. He provides a startling account of a couple of Native girls in their Sunday finery interrupting their trip to the local coffee shop in order to gather *gaaw*, which had appeared unexpectedly in the bay. *Gaaw* is the valuable herring spawn that clings to seaweed and sells for a fortune when dried and shipped to Japan. Any saltwater damage to their gowns, or to their friends' brand new pickup truck, would be more than rectified by their windfall profits.

Leighton became a marathon runner in later life, and his whole hair-raising adventure on the Coast makes us think that he is obsessed with "pushing the envelope," as the current expression goes. Anyone who has spent time in small boats between here and Prince

Rupert will appreciate the extremes of physical exertion and stamina that he demands of himself. Pete McMartin, in a recent discussion of Leighton's odyssey in the *Vancouver Sun*, ques-

tions what made him do it, but those of us who were privileged to know him in a professional capacity realize that, to him, dealing with risk was life itself.

The Spruces

Rex Holmes

Prince George: Caitlin, 1999. 192 pp. \$15.95 paper.

By Jon Swainger

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SET in the Peace River country of the spring, summer, and winter of 1932, Rex Holmes's novel, *The Spruces*, relates the homesteading trials of Kevin and Joanne McCormack, a young couple fleeing the urbanized distress of Toronto in search of a new beginning in north-eastern British Columbia. Inexperienced, painfully naïve, and often too prideful to either solicit or accept help, the McCormacks file for an abandoned homestead boasting a house and a spruce forest. What they find, of course, is a shack in the midst of a swamp, twenty miles from town and distant from neighbours. Fortune, however, does not abandon them entirely. They are befriended by Ed Reed, a local dray man who moves them out to the homestead; offers some practical guidance on getting started; and, in the course of the novel, lends valued assistance, wise counsel, and encouragement.

Left on their own, the McCormacks stumble through the spring and summer, slowly becoming more adept at life on the land while, at the same time, surviving near-starvation, hovering insanity, the peculiarities of a bachelor

neighbour who lives in squalor, and the frenzied chatter of a neighbouring woman who craves companionship other than that of her husband and their brood of children. Winter and the hours of darkness it brings almost consume Joanne McCormick, who falls into a delirium that, in turn, tortures her husband who is at war with his own demons. The arrival of spring provides the opportunity for Kevin to strike out for town and finally ask for credit at the local store, where the proprietor begrudgingly offers charity along with a generous helping of sanctimony. Faced with the dilemma of either submitting to the merchant's dressing down or returning empty handed to his ailing wife, McCormack swallows his pride and accepts the charity.

Salvation, however, seemingly arrives in the uncollected mail that had accumulated since their arrival; for not only had McCormack's father sent a money order, but Ed Reed had left a note offering work and a cash advance. Only one day after his humiliating encounter with the local merchant, McCormack is able to triumphantly