

Aging in British Columbia: Burden or Benefit?

Herbert C. Northcott and P. Jane Milliken

Calgary: Detselig, 1998. 133 pp. Maps. \$18.95 paper.

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As BC journalist Bruce Hutchison once modestly remarked about the province, "It is the normal, accepted ambition of most Canadians to spend their last days here." Herbert C. Northcott and Jane Milliken, two Canadian academics with research backgrounds in health and aging, question Hutchison's assumption by asking two key questions: Who are British Columbia's elders? And is this population cohort good or bad for the province?

This tightly organized and clearly argued book is a companion volume to Northcott's 1997 *Aging in Alberta: Rhetoric and Reality*, and it is evidently envisioned as second in a series of regional studies on this topic. Pulling together research by prominent scholars in the field as well as government data and reports, the authors focus their attention on demography, health, and social policy. The first section of the book is a survey of the demographic characteristics and the state of health of British Columbia's older population, often comparing them with those who live in other regions of the country. The authors then turn to a discussion of federal and provincial health and social welfare policy for aged British Columbians. A brief concluding chapter considers the question posed by the book's title: Are British Columbia's seniors a social and economic burden or do they bring positive benefits to our province?

This volume will be a useful text for students and professionals new to the field of gerontology. Non-Canadians, as well, will find the book a good introduction to this topic. Yet, while the merits of succinct policy analysis are obvious, Northcott and Milliken's economical approach to what is undoubtedly a huge topic makes for dull reading. Without question, a lay readership of seniors – who, after all, are the subject of the book – would find this a very difficult read. Discussions of policy need not be dry if all the actors – professionals, caregivers, clients, and policy makers – come on-stage and have their say. Demographic statistics can be brought to life if some of the more interesting facts they reveal are pursued in greater depth (and there are many possibilities to do so in this book).

Nonetheless, I liked this book and learned from it. I was unaware, for example, that there are equal numbers of older men and women in many of British Columbia's rural communities – a major difference from larger urban centres, where older women greatly outnumber their male cohorts. The fact that in 1991 11 per cent of men over sixty-five in British Columbia were either employed or looking for work has made me question my assumption that the culture of retirement has taken a firm hold in Canada. This book also increased my understanding of the difficult question of state medical ser-

vices for seniors. For example, Northcott and Milliken tell us that the high cost of providing health and hospital services to British Columbia's aging population is really the cost of care to the sick and dying rather than to the larger community of elders.

I felt that I knew British Columbia's elders better when I finished this book, but I still longed for a personal perspective and some philosophical ruminations about old age at the millennium. True, both of these were beyond the mandate set by the authors. But two scholars with such expertise in old age must have many insights into senescence. For instance, it seems clear that Northcott and Milliken are presenting us with two groups of elders: well-educated people who live in comparative comfort and have input into the political decisions that shape their lives and those who live in poverty and isolation, effectively disenfranchised from society. What, I wonder, are Northcott and Milliken's thoughts about this situation?

Dr. Mary Pipher, therapist author of the bible for feminist mothers, *Reviving Ophelia: Helping You to Understand and Cope with Your Teenage Daughter* (1994), has just published *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders* (1999). Pipher offers us some useful insights into old age and agism. She argues that we treat our elderly like children and fail to understand that their emotional characters were defined in a pre-Freudian world. Then we shut them off from society by limiting access to public spaces to those who are physically challenged or unable to drive. Pipher's analysis, however, is primarily rooted in the realm of emotion, downplaying the importance of money, housing, and health. Setting the two volumes next to each other on my bookshelf, I was left thinking what a powerful statement about aging would come from a synthesis of these two approaches. And what better place to situate such a study than in British Columbia, the premier Canadian retirement locale for much of this century?

*Holding One's Time in Thought:
The Political Philosophy of W.J. Stankiewicz*

Bogdan Czaykowski and Samuel V. LaSelva, editors

Vancouver: Ronsdale, 1997. 407 pp. \$37.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

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Most of the seventeen essays in this handsome volume were first presented in 1995 at a colloquium on the political thought of W.J. Stankiewicz at the

University of British Columbia, where Stankiewicz (WJS) was a member of the Department of Political Science for three decades. The book's apt title comes from Hegel's description of the