

The Promise of Paradise: Utopian Communities in BC

Andrew Scott

Vancouver: Whitecap, 1997. 223 pp. Illus., maps. \$17.95 paper.

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For over a century British Columbia has been the location of attempts to found experimental, utopian, or ideologically driven settlements, including some religiously based ones that resembled in their eccentricity Heaven's Gate or the Order of the Solar Temple. Most of these intentional communities were short-lived – a major exception being the Doukhobors – and their legacy often passed away with them. Andrew Scott's book, *The Promise of Paradise*, is an account of fifteen communities of this type, including Metlakatla, Bella Coola, Quatsino, Cape Scott, Sointula, Brother XII, the Aquarian Foundation, and several small post-Second World War alternative communities (such as Argenta in the West Kootenays). Six of these colonies had a racial or ethnic basis, and all of them featured some sort of communitarian living. The latter, especially in the case of the Doukhobors, aroused particular concern from the provincial authorities. As a rule, throughout the twentieth century the Canadian state (at both federal and provincial levels) favoured individualism and private enterprise. It was deeply suspicious of socio-economic systems based on co-operation and collectivism wherein property and resources were held in common and everyone was working for the good of all rather than for individual enterprise. Since private property and individual ownership were seen as the Canadian way, all of the ventures discussed in *The Promise*

of *Paradise* were subject to varying degrees of criticism, suspicion, and, in extreme cases such as the Doukhobors, outright government intervention leading to imprisonment.

It is clear the author means this account to be a popular history. Hand-drawn maps and historical photographs add to the reader's enjoyment. The language is folksy and journalistic. In the present-day examples, such as in the West Kootenays, the Nass Valley, and WindSong near Fort Langley, the author has relied on interviews. In the historical cases, he has taken the trouble to actually visit the sites and thus is able to provide the reader with a "feel" for these settlements that, in some cases, date back a century. His description of the site of the Danish settlement of Cape Scott at the northern tip of Vancouver Island is particularly gripping. One quickly senses, even today, the futility of establishing a settlement in such a remote and harsh location.

On the other hand, for the historical settlements – those founded before 1945 – there is really nothing new here. Scott has recourse to all the standard secondary sources, such as George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic on the Doukhobors, Paula Wild on Sointula, and Ivar Fougner's diary on Bella Coola, and he draws his information from these accounts. He makes no attempt at an overall analysis incorporating all of these communities. What did they have in common, what not? Why was British Columbia at-

tractive to such groups of people? That dissenters and non-conformists got as far as the Pacific coast and could go no further is not a very compelling answer: "British Columbia was the end of the road," according to Scott (10). Why did all the historical settlements and most of the post-Second World War ones fail? To take but four of them – Sointula (Finns), Bella Coola and Quatsino (Norwegians), and Cape Scott (Danes) – we can establish, in addition to the factor of location and the absence of a road link, a lack of ideological cohesion, the inability to select new settlers, a lack (from the start) of a firm economic base, and an absolute dependency on outside capital and trade with the Lower Mainland. All these factors worked against the continued viability of these communities. Similar comparative analysis might have been applied to the religiously based settlements of Metlakatla (Tsimshian First Nations and the Anglican Church), the various Douk hobor settlements, and Brother XII.

Leadership is another fascinating point of comparison. Both Kurikka and Brother XII were theosophists, and both Sointula and the Aquarian Foundation were accused of being "free love cults." With charismatic characters such as Christian Saugstad, Matti Kurikka, Peter Verigin, Brother XII (Edward Arthur Wilson), and William Duncan, this is a natural point of analysis. To what extent did these settlements fail precisely because of faulty leadership on the part of men without whom, ironically, the colonies never would have been founded in the first place? These are some examples of missed opportunities in *The Promise of Paradise*.

Although it covers some of the same ground as Justine Brown's *All Possible Worlds: Utopian Experiments*

in *British Columbia* (1995), the most original chapter concerns "post-war alternative experiments." Most of these would be described today as "back-to-the-land" or "hippie" settlements. Dating back to the 1950s, some of these still exist. Representative of this group are Kootenay Co-op Land Settlement Society, Lasqueti Island colony, New West Co-op, Argenta (near Kaslo), the Emissaries (near 100 Mile House), and Ochiltree Organic Commune (northeast of Williams Lake), which operated originally on a Marxist philosophy. Ironically, some of these communities were able to obtain government support in the form of Opportunities for Youth (OFY), Local Initiatives Program (LIP), and other types of grants. Although difficult to imagine today, these federal government programs were supposed to keep the lid on the radical potential of the youth and the counter-culture movements of the late sixties. In a lively fashion, the author recounts the origins, usually in rural settings, of dozens of these alternative societies designed for cooperative or communal living. By comparison the urban housing cooperatives of the seventies and eighties supported by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and discussed in the final chapter, sound very tame indeed. WindSong, with its ninety-six residents, was featured recently on the CBC-TV Noontime Show as a typical 1990s cooperative providing only marginal communal elements compared to the "hippie communes" – in Scott's words, a hybrid "half mall, half apartment building" (200).

The message of this book seems to be that "all utopias are doomed" because "the goal is unattainable" (17). Nevertheless, the author remains upbeat and optimistic. Utopian com-

munities still, as in the past, have a role to fulfil; namely, as "places where we keep trying to invent improved versions of ourselves so we can survive and evolve as a species" (17). Such a sentiment echoes the convictions of

Sointula's founder Matti Kurikka (1863-1915), who had in turn drawn upon the thought of Owen, Fourier, and Saint-Simon. It would appear the utopian tradition still thrives in British Columbia as part of a long heritage.

Totem Poles and Tea

Hughina Harold

Surrey: Heritage, 1996. 218 pp. Illus., maps. \$17.95 paper.

No Path But My Own:

Horseback Adventures in the Chilcotin and the Rockies

Cliff Kopas with Leslie Kopas

Madiera Park: Harbour, 1996. 225 pp. Illus., maps. \$26.95 cloth.

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Each year, small publishers across British Columbia put out popular first-person accounts of British Columbia's past. Hughina Harold's *Totem Poles and Tea* and Cliff Kopas's *No Path But My Own* are two such offerings. These books, via small bookstores and tourist centres, present British Columbia's history to a wide, international audience. For many readers, they represent British Columbia's past more so than any newly published monograph or even a handily written survey text. And so it is right that we question the images they present, the stories they tell.

Taking *No Path But My Own* and *Totem Poles and Tea* as examples, we see that the travel narrative is still an important form in popular historical writing. They offer us views of our

past that are both useful and imaginative, that are potentially disruptive of traditional interpretations yet also constitutive of them. Assessing these books as history means coming to terms with the travelogue genre and the gendered and racialized meanings this genre creates.

Both books are set in the 1930s and involve young adults who come to maturity on the "frontiers" of non-Native BC society. *Totem Poles and Tea* centres around Hughina Harold's work as a nurse-schoolteacher with the Mamalilikulla people of Village Island. Compelled by the belief that she "had witnessed things that should not be forgotten," Harold revisited the letters she wrote to her mother at the time and compiled them into a seamless narrative. The result is a detailed picture of her relationships both with