

*Politicians of a Pioneering Province*, by Russell R. Walker. Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1969. 246 pp.

Russell Walker, reporter, lobbyist, political organizer and, it would appear, bon vivant in the frontier fashion, has published his scrapbook. Clearly he is enjoying his anecdotage and with the assistance of Mitchell Press offers to share it. The result is a formless ramble with no particular theme, apart from the significant role played by the author in a number of crucial events in B.C. politics in his capacity as fixer, lobbyist or what you will. In any case the reader is left in no doubt about the fact that Russell R. Walker was on the "inside."

His career as legislative reporter began with the *Vancouver Daily World* in 1919. A year later he had joined the *Province* and between that paper and the *Sun*, served in the press gallery for ten consecutive years. The newspaperman's salary in the twenties was not lavish — although a room in the *Empress* with bath was available for \$2.00 per day — but it was augmented handsomely by the politicians. As Walker points out on page 92, "my gratuities from ministers of the government amounted to an average of \$500.00 a session," and this was exclusive of funds received for lobbying. In 1924 he took on the additional job of providing Liberal party propaganda to the interior weekly newspapers, "mailing carefully prepared news reports to 45 weekly newspapers." This information must serve to cast some doubt on the validity of newspaper reports of legislative activity at that time and historians can, at least, be grateful for the warning.

But much of the book is about the politicians Walker reported and consorted with. The sketches are interesting and amusing and will, no doubt, help flesh out the characters of Bowser, Oliver, Patullo and their colleagues for students of that period in our history. The picture that emerges from this collection is that for the most part, these men were insular, insensitive and quite fascinated by their own power and importance. Equally interesting, but not particularly startling, are the gossipy passages that recount the drinking exploits of these political giants.

The whole book, however, is pervaded by a curious sense of unreality, perhaps a product of the author's rather coy and archaic style, but more probably the result of his view that the centre of the universe lay somewhere between the legislative buildings and the *Empress* hotel — a view which, if Mr. Walker is to be believed, was shared by many politicians about whom he writes. Indeed as one reads the book it is necessary to stop and remind oneself that the events are taking place in Victoria, not

Westminster, and these men are wrestling not with the problems of the world but with the footling questions of provincial politics. Such myopia is possibly the occupational hazard of the provincial legislative reporter.

At any rate, the book is worthwhile if read with due caution because it does provide the flavour of an era when politics was a man to man affair worked out in the legislative corridors or the rooms of the Empress, amid the reek of stale cigar smoke and good whisky; when a policy was won or lost on the basis of "gratuities" made or forgotten, with no attention paid to opinion polls or public issues. Come to think of it, that era may not yet be over.