

Book Reviews

Vancouver (The Romance of Canadian Cities Series) by Eric Nicol.
Toronto: Doubleday Canada, Ltd., 1970. XV, pp. 260, *Illus.* \$8.95.

Eric Nicol, newspaper columnist, dramatist, and distinguished humorist, is almost a native Vancouverite. Born in "the middle of a Kingston winter," he arrived in Vancouver in August 1920, at the age of eight months, and he is still sure that his "baby fat was grateful for its transfer to the milder climate." Apart from some periods of absence "dictated by World War II and post-graduate education," he has remained within this city of his choice for some fifty years and more and, if I read him aright, he has no intention of seeking greener or richer fields. His love for the city is profound and apparent, and about it (or should "it" be "her"?) he writes with deep affection, tempered by justifiable criticism. He wears no blinkers, nor even rose coloured glasses. His research has been arduous and thorough, and he knows full well that periods of blackness have often blended with times of sunshine and gentle rain during the growth of this miraculous city — a city whose real history can be encompassed within the lifespan of a man.

But should this particular work even be called history? Vancouver's life stretches across a century of time, and is here contained within a relatively short book of some two hundred and forty-seven pages. It is a brief story and "does not lend itself to treatment as an epic. Too many of the notable episodes . . . have a strong element of the ludicrous." Moreover, much of the early history is "to a large degree anecdotal, possibly apocryphal. No sweep of grand armies, no Lady Hamilton entertaining the fleet attracted official historians to the scene of Vancouver's subjugation by an armada of realtors. To paraphrase Henry Ford slightly, of early Vancouver it may be said that "history is bunkhouse." So the author in his wisdom prefers to call his work a biography, but a biography that "carries

no warranty of being objective. A man can no more be objective about the city that has been his home for most of his life than he could about a woman he has lived with for nearly fifty years. He cannot quote the statistics of change — the 36-24-34 that has become 36-36-36 — without some intrusion of personal feeling.”

So as a biography — an impressionistic and at times a most subjective biography — this work must be judged. And as such it is very good — highly readable, often entertaining and at times humorous, well organized, and, as far as I can judge, basically accurate in those portions where factual accuracy can be attained.

The task that Mr. Nicol set for himself is by no means a simple one. The materials at hand were bulky but of uneven value: a few books that touched on the fringes of Vancouver's history; some academic theses dealing with geography, or ethnic groups, or early political events; articles, pamphlets, and brochures; the occasional publications of Major Matthews, and the materials in the archives, carefully guarded by the Major over many years; general histories of British Columbia, including the rich compilation of Howay and Scholefield, and the standard classic by Dr. Margaret Ormsby; newspaper files, B.C. directories, and a host of articles; and the excellent *Vancouver: From Milltown to Metropolis* by Alan Morley, first published in 1961 and updated in its second edition of 1969. But of this last work little use was made, for, as Mr. Nicol himself told me, he wished to avoid dependence upon it in order that he might achieve a fresh and an independent interpretation of the life of his beloved. And this he has done, for in spite of some overlapping, Nicol is not Morley nor Morley, Nicol. The two works stand side by side — both good, yet each unlike the other. And both worthy of close attention.

But this having been said, I do not intend to dwell on comparisons. The task in hand is to review the Nicol book.

The organization of the book is basically chronological, though the paces through time are of uneven length. At certain moments the steps forward are vast and hurried, at others, short and lingering, especially in those bracketed periods when high drama surges to the surface — the discovery, the emergence of Gastown, the incorporation of the city, the great fire, the arrival of the first train, the anti-oriental riots, the notorious affair of the *Komagata Maru*, the Janet Smith murder case, the Great Depression, and Hurricane Frieda.

The opening chapter is entitled “The Setting.” It might well be called “Genesis, according to Nicol.” Containing some notes of levity that might have offended the priestly author of the first chapter of the Holy Book,

it is a brilliantly shaped and polished little jewel that reflects the geological beginnings of the Vancouver area and describes its flora, fauna, and climate.

The city clings to the coast, a crustacean that has found just enough foothold at the tide line a latitudinal minute before the continent plunges into the sea. The two parallel mountain chains extending from California to Alaska, abruptly, breathtakingly, commit to the deep the valley between them. . .

Sixty million years ago, during the age of mammals, the granddaddy of the Fraser flowed through the lower mainland area and out to sea. From the super-delta of this river was hardened the sandstone of Stanley Park and Kitsilano Beach, in whose beds lie fossils of semi-tropical plant life — palms, sequoias, giant ferns. . . .

The ultimate mix of the eons' geological blender was glacial drift and sand or sandy loam, and delta clay, fine-grained and containing an abundance of organic matter. Exceptionally fertile, combining good water-holding capacity with drainage, here lay a garden waiting for the gardener. Before he came it was already covered by some of the largest plants on earth — magnificent stands of Douglas fir, a forest whose individuals stood hundreds of feet tall, with skin thicker than most fully-grown trees. Eden grew disguised by its own prodigiousness.

From these beginnings, the book moves rapidly into the atmosphere of recorded history — the arrival, in 1971, of the Spaniards in the *Santa Saturnina*, under Pilot Commander José María Narváez, in the Point Grey area, and the coming, a year later, of Captain Vancouver and some of his crew in the small yawl and even smaller launch that they used for mapping the coast and exploring the deep but uncertain channels and inlets. This small band of gallant Englishmen were the first Europeans to pass through the First Narrows and to penetrate Burrard Inlet, so named "after Sir Harry Burrard of the navy." They were welcomed by Indians who "showered the visitors with handfuls of soft white feathers"; they rowed far up the channel; and, on their return on the following day, they were headed for the gulf when they encountered the Spanish ships of Galiano and Valdéz. It was a clear-cut moment in history, as well as being "a sudden congestion of traffic." It was also a prelude to the history of a city.

It was a prelude because for the seventy years or so that followed Vancouver's parting look at English Bay "Burrard Inlet seems to have remained undisturbed by white men." But by the late eighteen-fifties and the early sixties the situation had changed with dramatic swiftness: the crown colony of British Columbia had been established with the village

of Queensborough (New Westminster) as its capital; the lure of gold drew thousands to the Fraser River; seams of coal were uncovered near the First Narrows (hence Coal Harbour); and the hewers and sawers of great timber were established at Moodyville on the north side of Burrard Inlet and on the south, where Captain Edward Stamp opened the sawmill (later known as the Hastings Mill) that was to become the nucleus of the city. Moreover, the Three Greenhorns (Morton, Brighthouse, and Hailstone) had purchased that land which was later to become the West End (price \$1.01 per acre), and John Deighton — the famous Gassy Jack — had started to sell his potent beverages to all who were thirsty and had cash in hand. “Gastown, as it was to be known, was born of a saloon. Montreal and Ottawa had their genesis at the junction of great rivers, but Vancouver’s was the confluence of beer and whisky.”

From this point on, Mr. Nicol moves with controlled skill through the next ten decades that witnessed the explosive growth of the new born child. Rightly he dwells, with affection, humour, sympathy, and admiration, on the drama and tragedy that marked the years 1886 and 1887. Within a few months the city was officially incorporated (and baptized) by an act of the Legislature (royal assent given 6 April 1886); the first civic elections held and the first mayor, Malcolm Alexander MacLean, elected (with scandalous abandon, “vote early and vote often”) on 3 May; the city consumed by fire, 13 June of the same year, only to arise again like the phoenix out of its own ashes in time to welcome, with banners and uncontrolled shouts of joy, the arrival of the first through-train from the east on 23 May, 1887. “The locomotive’s number plate bore the talismanic words ‘Arcadia’ and ‘Eldorado’, and this being the golden anniversary of Queen Victoria’s reign and the next day (May 24) her birthday, the engine headlight bore her portrait.” It was, in truth, a traumatic series of events, yet in the midst of this confusion, the city fathers “in a moment of fantastic vision, had the foresight to preserve for all time a tidal island of natural forest as a park for the future generations of Vancouver — *as their first official action.*” Stanley Park had been created.

The pages covering these events are all written with a brilliant touch, but none more so than those composing the twelve page chapter, “The Fire.” Every citizen living today should read it, if he wishes to have an awareness of his past. The settlement was small (in the election of 3 May, four hundred and ninety-nine votes had been “cast by an undisclosed number of voters”), and those who dwelt within the new city lived in slightly built wooden shacks and houses. Around their perimeter rose

towering forests, intermingled with massive piles of slash, some of which were being burned to clear areas needed for the expected expansion of the freshly born town. Then the wind shifted and rose to hurricane proportions. All hell exploded and within minutes what had just been incorporated as a city ascended into the heavens as a pillar of fire. "The dawn of the morning after revealed the dull devastation. . . . Every structure, every living thing above ground and for a foot below it, had been effaced, except for the Hastings Mill buildings, the Regina Hotel on Abbott and Water streets . . . and the Bridge Hotel with its eight or ten smaller buildings on False Creek." Between six hundred and a thousand buildings had been destroyed. Yet out of this devastation grew the city that we know today.

Drawn tightly to the drama of the beginnings, Mr. Nicol devotes somewhat over a hundred pages of text (or slightly less than half of the whole book) to bring his reader to the year 1880. Vancouver then was officially four years old. The next eight decades are covered by impressionistic jumps. The movement forward is generally rapid, though moments of paused concentration are achieved when the author lingers on the few high points of comedy, melodrama, or tragedy that have marked the city's growth from childhood through adolescence to some degree of maturity. Mayors, aldermen, and sundry other politicians are generally given short shift, with the marked exceptions of the colourful Louis D. Taylor, eight times mayor, and the even more colourful Gerald Grattan ("Gerry") McGeer, a man of "natural eloquence and a genial bellicosity," who, having ousted Taylor, guided the city through the worst of the Depression years, went briefly to the Senate in Ottawa, only to return to Vancouver to be once again elected mayor in 1947. He died in office.

Apart from politics, Mr. Nicol comments with considerable acidity on the lack of racial tolerance that has marked — and marred — the city's story. It began early and lasted late. "Vancouver lost no time in blotting her history notebook with racial bigotry." Anti-Chinese riots rocked the city in January, 1887; the Asiatic Exclusion League, a "highly flammable organization," provoked disastrous riots against all Orientals in September 1907; and at the beginning of 1942, thousands of Japanese, many Canadian born, were rounded up and sent to communal camps in the interior and to the east of the Rockies. "Reacting to the treachery in the Pacific and fear of treachery in the Gulf of Georgia, Vancouver citizens succumbed to the mob psychology that gives justice a very low priority."

Sandwiched in between these general land attacks on Orientals was the

case of the *Komagata Maru*, a ship loaded with 376 East Indian passengers, who were not allowed to disembark because of discriminatory exclusion laws. For nine weeks the ship rested in mid-harbour, while lawyers and government officials wrangled over laws and rights. Finally, after being offered modest compensation, the passengers gave up the struggle, and out through the First Narrows sailed the decrepit vessel. "Cooler heads had prevailed, though few of them belonged to the citizens of Vancouver, who had called out the militia, including the Sixth Vancouver Regiment and the Irish Fusiliers, in order to deal with a ship-load of half-starved Asiatics."

Finally, one other case involving a struggle between ethnic groups that Mr. Nicol discusses in extraordinary detail was the case of Janet Smith, "the Scottish Nightingale." A maid in a Shaughnessy home, she was found dead with a bullet hole in her head on 26 July, 1924 — a central year in the gay and reckless twenties. The body was found by Wong Foon Song, the cook. The mystery (for mystery it was and is) is treated with conciseness and caution by Morley, who covers the matter in a page and a half. Outside of Wong and poor Janet, he names no names and gives few details. But Nicol, with the enthusiasm of Dr. Watson reporting a baffling problem to Sherlock Holmes, narrates the events with great minuteness, though he applies no Sherlockian powers of deduction to provide a solution. Though the extent of his treatment may be disproportionate to the overall length of his tale of the city, it makes for fascinating reading, especially for lovers of the macabre. When the first coroner's jury declared the death accidental, the Scottish societies rose in their wrath to demand more thorough investigations, and when Wong was kidnapped, brutally treated, released only to be charged with murder (a charge later dropped), the leaders of the Chinese community rose in their own particular brand of wrath in the defence of their fellow-countryman. The subsequent complications, gossip, charges, counter-charges, libel suits and trials rocked the town's staid citizens for months on end, and may, in the end, have purged them of some of their intolerance and hate. "Racial prejudice they could not expect to die, but it was at least a slightly chastened Vancouver that patronized the little neighborhood greengrocer whose shop could always be depended upon to be open, and that brought fruit and vegetables to the back door by the indefatigable driver of the Model T Ford truck with the funny name (Lee Chew Fat, Wong Wing Bong) painted on the black van. Although it may never be known why Janet Smith died, she did not die entirely in

vain." All in all, it is a fine piece of narration, and the justification for its length is found, I am sure, in its final sentence.

I have lingered long on these aspects of the book in the hope of showing that here is no cold historian interested only in facts, but rather a writer who, in the midst of facts, inserts passionate pleas for the equality and brotherhood of man, for tolerance and understanding, for foresight and vision. In his closing pages he looks at the immediate past (the sixties) and the immediate future.

^a Little by little the grandeur and beauty were cut off, the view diminished by rising towers of concrete, by smog, by a pace of living that caused even the highest North Shore peaks, Sheba's Breasts indeed, to vanish in the fumes of frustration. . . . The successors to the men at City Hall whose first thought was to preserve the wilderness of Stanley Park had lost that genius for bold strokes, had become myopically fascinated by the graphs of tax revenues and rentable floor space.

. . . The charts of the city's future were as enigmatic, as perilous, as the west coast inlets appeared to the rowers of the captain's [Vancouver's] bark. If the hand on the tiller remained that of the developer, if the rudder responded only to Captain Silver Dollar, the city would founder.

. . . On the navigational skill of those aboard Burrard Peninsula, on the understanding of what buoys the quality of life, would depend Vancouver's attaining safe harbor among the great cities of the world.

A conclusion, it is, in which optimism mingles with despair; a conclusion to a book that is highly personal, and often subjective and biased. As such it should be read; as such it must be judged.

Accepting these limitations, how then does the work as a whole emerge? The answer is not simple. For the work, like all works, does have some faults that must be mentioned.

The research behind the writing has been careful and meticulous. The bibliography is good, but most of the quotations are not accompanied by footnotes, so back-checking cannot be done. This may be excused on the grounds that this book is designed for the general reader, and the general reader does not like pages cluttered by footnote numbers. So be it. But in one of the few footnotes that does appear there is a sad, sad error. It is to a quotation from a poem by Earle Birney, on page 201, and reads, " 'Man is a Snow' from *Street of Anian* by Earle Birney"; but the title of the Birney book is *The Strait of Anian*, and the Strait in question was that legendary narrow sea that hopefully might carry the early explorers of the Pacific northwest coast back to the bosom of the Atlantic and thence to England. Also, among the multitude of factual statements, a few insignificant errors have possibly crept in. For example, on page 122,

where Mr. Nicol looks with jaundiced eye at the architectural achievements of Vancouver's second decade, he writes: "Also styled in constipated classic was the Public Library, built in 1902 at the corner of Main and Hastings, succeeding the one-room library in a building on Cordova Street which in 1887 had succeeded the reading room in the Hastings Mill boarding house." Here the facts are jumbled. It is true that the Library had its origins in a Hastings Mill building and did, for some time, have quarters on Cordova Street; but in 1893 it had moved to new premises in the YMCA building at 169 Hastings Street, where it remained until its move into the new Carnegie building late in 1903. Then there is a second error — but this may be a matter of opinion and debatable. At the opening of the chapter entitled "Placenta of Sawdust," the author says: "Jonathan Swift was said to have chosen the situation of British Columbia for Brobdingnag, the land of the giants in *Gulliver's Travels*. He did not picture it as a place of retirement." But, my dear Mr. Nicol, you are wrong. Brobdingnag is a lush and fruitful land; its men are superbly muscled; its women are full-bosomed; and the king is intelligent, humane, far-sighted, tolerant. He is horrified and disgusted by the picture that Gulliver gives him of European culture. He and his country symbolize Utopian ideals. Brobdingnag is the one country visited by Gulliver to which one might desire to retire. It is, if you wish, Swift's prophetic vision of British Columbia — the paradisaical land as seen through the eyes of countless Canadians, from the prairies, from Ontario, from Quebec, and from the Maritimes.

But these are small points, and do not deny the integrity of the work as a whole.

The titles of some chapters may baffle the reader uninitiated in the language of the obstetrician ("The Placenta of Sawdust," and "The Umbilicus of Steel"), and the title of one particular chapter will certainly be meaningless to nearly all younger readers and to many oldsters not acquainted with the mysteries of the Morse Code. I refer to the one entitled "Dit, Dit, Dit, Dah" — three dots and a dash, or, if you wish, "... —". But is it the "V" for victory, or "V" for the Vancouver of the war years, 1939-45, or perhaps for both?

The illustrations are well chosen, but in the printing they lack brilliance, sharpness, and texture. A few of the same pictures appear in the Morley and generally they are better. But I cannot fault the author for this weakness, and I can even feel kindly towards the publisher, for the typography and make-up are generally good, and the jacket is a delight.

And finally, what of the style and the mood of the work as a whole?

I hesitate to give a firm answer because I am sure that the reactions of readers will vary widely. Many a pedantic academic I am certain will look disapprovingly down his thin nose with perhaps an occasional condescending smile, and he may well be joined by the ultra-serious reader who is looking for a consistently elevated study of a great and moving subject. But Eric Nicol, from the days when he wrote for a campus audience under the pseudonym of Jabez, has devoted much of his working life to humour. He loves the quick quip, the satiric jest, and the unexpected, witty thrust. And this work contains a host of passages illustrating this facet of the author's personality. A few selections will suffice. In discussing the great fire he writes: "Other cities — Rome, London, Chicago, San Francisco — have had their histories glamorized by a great fire, but none has been as precocious in the accomplishment as Vancouver. . . . If it is the first intimation of a city's greatness that it burns itself down, Vancouver lost no time in qualifying for fame." Or in describing the meeting between the Lord Mayor of London and the Mayor of Vancouver: "In a ceremony so dazzling that it was optically safe to observe it only through a piece of exposed film, the Lord Mayor presented Gerry with a replica of the London mace. McGeer exhibited more pleasure at the gift than was indicated by his later comment ('Now what in Sam Hill would I do with a mace?') — but doubtless recognized a mace as a shillelagh that had been to college." Or, again, in commenting on the newly erected B.C. Electric Building, "'Grauer's Tower' . . . The building dominated the senior churches across the street. Henceforth, the power, if not the glory, was vouchsafed as 110/120 volts, and eternity was measurable in kilowatt hours." Or, on the take-over of the B.C. Electric by the Bennett government: "The May announcement struck the populace into the same awe with which earlier natives observed an eclipse of the sun. . . . The expropriation was followed by a year of litigation in which the company fought the arbitrary conditions of its execution with the mixed emotions of a man who sees his mother-in-law drive over a cliff in his new car."

To your taste? Who am I to say? But I do know that even Gibbon, that most classical of historians, can provoke many a smile by his sharp witticisms and his ironic jabs and that Shakespeare himself could not resist the lure of the quick pun or quibble, a facet of his writing that stirred the critical wrath of Dr. Johnson, the Great Cham: "A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it." And Nicol is Nicol, and Nicol, like murder, will out. But, as I have indicated, he is in good company.

For myself, I have richly enjoyed *Vancouver*. A skilfully written, and a richly informative, revealing biography, it is the love offering of a man who still adores his subject in spite of violent changes wrought by the quick passage of time. The proof of this shines through his farewell chapter, "Discovery the Second." "Vancouver is still a pretty girl who uses the wrong make-up . . . she hasn't learned how to walk. And like many of today's young matrons, she's getting overdeveloped towards the south. But crack the facade of cheap cosmetic, the rouge of neon lights, let the sea breeze wash her face, and Vancouver sits as fair as any maid in her bath."

Thank you, Eric Nicol. To your darling you have paid genuine, and at times gracious tribute, and, in so doing, have contributed a worthy memorial to yet another provincial centennial year.

University of
British Columbia

S. E. READ

Canada and the Canadians, by George Woodcock. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1970. pp. 344, *Illus.* \$8.50.

George Woodcock is one of the few truly mid-Atlantic writers resident in Canada. His latest book takes much of its strength from this. Looking at his country from the inside, but also with the knowledge and feelings of one who has lived abroad and travelled widely for many years, Woodcock brings special advantages to his idiosyncratic account of Canada. Although he was born in Canada he was educated in England and did not return to this country until he was thirty-seven. By then (1949) he had published biographical studies of William Godwin and the seventeenth century novelist and playwright Aphra Ben, as well as three collections of verse. Within four more years he had brought out four more books — on such varied topics as Peter Kropotkin, Oscar Wilde, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and travels in the Northwest. Although he joined the English department of UBC in 1956 one has the impression that, if not an airport professor, he must have been a sampan or outrigger professor, for his continued wanderings resulted in a series of distinguished travel books on Latin America, India and Japan. Yet all of this activity after 1956 left him time to take on the editorship of *Canadian Literature*, to win a Governor-General's award for *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*, to write a notable historical study of anarchism, a book on the