

Book Reviews

The Rush for Spoils: the Company Province 1871-1933 by Martin Robin.
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1972, 318 pp. \$5.95 paper.

Down to the McBride era, British Columbia was reasonably well served by historians and other observers. Although their accounts betray the dominant prejudices of their times, in terms of literary output they left a number of comprehensive works on the early exploration and subsequent economic, political and social development of the province.¹ Margaret A. Ormsby's book, published in 1958,² was the first comprehensive history of British Columbia to appear since 1928. Like her predecessors Ormsby was concerned with an account "from the earliest times" but her treatment of the post-McBride period has remained the only scholarly overview of modern British Columbia. A small number of historians and social scientists have produced an assortment of articles, theses and one or two books on the political and economic life of the province but systematic analysis is still at a rudimentary stage. The appearance of a new provincial political history by a political science professor is therefore potentially an event of some significance.

The Rush for Spoils is volume one of the first major attempt to provide a political history of British Columbia which focusses explicitly on the modern post-Confederation period. The author, Professor Martin Robin,

¹ Hubert Howie Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howie Bancroft, Volume XXXII: History of British Columbia, 1792-1887*, San Francisco: The History Company, 1887; Alexander Begg, *History of British Columbia: From its Earliest Discovery to the Present Time* (Toronto: Briggs, 1894); R. E. Gosnell, *A History of British Columbia* (Victoria: Lewis, 1906); Albert Métin, *La Colombie Britannique: Etude Sur la Colonisation au Canada* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1908); E. O. S. Scholefield and R. E. Gosnell, *A History of British Columbia; Sixty Years of Progress* (Victoria: British Columbia Historical Association, 1913); F. W. Howay and E. O. S. Scholefield, *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present* (Vancouver: Clarke, 1914); and F. W. Howay, *British Columbia: The Making of a Province* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1928).

² Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1958).

has assumed a mammoth task and deserves to be commended for his ambition.

In the preface, one is led to expect "... mundane political history, the sort that treats the fight between the classes for shares of the wealth, disputes between parties over the course of development, the ways and means used by politicians to purchase allegiance, ..." (p. 9). Unfortunately, if one uses this as a criteria by which to judge this work, Professor Robin proves to be a sheep in wolf's clothing. True the politics of railways and land giveaways are discussed but certainly no more so than in the work of the earlier historians. The names and activities of labour and socialist groups and their leaders appear only fleetingly. The descriptions of social conditions and related political conflicts in fact take a poor second to elaborate, amusing and colourful character sketches of the premiers and other political leaders of the province and their social as well as political activities. As one is told of McBride's "flaccid figure," his "buffalo figure," his "paunchy figure," his "chubby countenance," his "rotund presence," his "stubby presence," or Simon Fraser Tolmie's "portly guise," and that Harold Brewster was a "stout shrewd canner," one wonders what such obsessions have to do with "illuminating the political side of British Columbia history" (p. 9).

In his actual interpretation of the political history of the province, Professor Robin falls back on an ecological explanation in which he imputes peculiarities of the party system to selected economic and social characteristics. The basic linkage is one in which the resources of the province lead to particular forms of economic activity, which lead to a particular social structure which, in turn, generate particular forms of political conflict modified by external cultural spillovers. In an introductory overview, Robin presents the reader with a number of stimulating propositions. He holds, for example, that: "A class conscious industrial working class emerged early in response to the needs of the company-dominated extractive industries." (p. 23); "The major relationship in British Columbia was the wage relationship." (p. 23); "The mediating influences of the middle classes, and the sanguine currents of 'public opinion' were absent from an environment where company and worker directly confronted one another." (p. 27); "... the divisive effect of status differences was more than offset in British Columbia by the cohesive forces of the closed company environment." (p. 27); that B.C. farmers lacked "a broad rural class consciousness" without implying a "lack of political consciousness" (p. 39); and that British Columbia society is "internally balkanized and class-divided" (p. 48). The ringing

sound of these statements is however unmuffled by any attempt at systematic analysis. Furthermore, perhaps lest anyone should take him too seriously, the author also cryptically adds in a footnote that "One should not, of course, exaggerate the extent of the workers' concern with industrial or political matters." (p. 269). Later, class conflict becomes submerged in the details of Liberal and Conservative electoral victories which, in the final analysis, are seen as negative ones in that these parties win largely by default due either to the fragmentation or collapse of their opponents (p. 213, p. 231). One does not expect very precise testable propositions or hypotheses in a work of this nature but such sweeping generalizations are far too facile to be taken as profound insights into the political process.

When one is told that "The pursuit of stability accordingly became an enduring theme of twentieth century British Columbia," (p. 41), and that "Force was never the bond of union between the province and Dominion." (p. 47), one can only feign surprise that this was not so. Elsewhere, where one would like rather more supporting evidence, the author appears willing to accept conventional explanations. The classic interpretation of the period prior to the introduction of party lines as one of intense political instability is readily accepted without any attempt to examine other evidence of internal discipline and cohesion among the pre-party factions. While not acknowledging her work, Robin also falls back on the same interpretations of the political activities of the British Columbia farmer as given by Margaret Ormsby in her study of the United Farmers of British Columbia.³

As an account of the details of British Columbia history the volume also proves in places to be highly unreliable. In a book of this scope it is perhaps inevitable that a few errors in reporting will creep in. They resist the efforts of even the most diligent proof reader and give delight to any reviewer who sees in every small slip an opportunity to score. When the number of inaccuracies is small their identification often tells more about the reviewer than the author or the publisher. When, however, errors multiply with each re-reading of the book, the problem lies more in the ability of the author to accurately research and report his findings than in the picayune pleasures of the reviewer or the technical difficulties of publication.

Typographical errors which produce the "Victoria and Sydney" railway (p. 22), coal mines in the 1840's in "Prince Rupert" (p. 24),

³ Margaret A. Ormsby, "The United Farmers of British Columbia: An Abortive Third-party Movement," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, XVII, Nos. 1 and 2 (January-April, 1953), 53-73.

"General Musgrave" (p. 51), Liberal leader "J. A. MacDonald" (p. 90), the "Grant Trunk Railway" (p. 94), "Nachaco" (p. 141), "Harney, New Brunswick" (p. 166), "*Farm and House*" (p. 197), "Dunvers Osborn" (p. 200) are careless slips. Rather more disconcerting is the information that Captain James Cook's visit in 1778 was his "third visit" rather than his third voyage (p. 12); that Alfred Cornelius Flumerfelt had been a "leading government forestry official" (p. 19); that Judge F. W. Howay was a professor (p. 44); that Robert Dunsmuir joined with "a consortium of four Americans dubbed by Gustavus Myers the Pacific Quartet" (p. 22) in the chartering of the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway some six years after the death of Mark Hopkins; that the terms of Union "involved the construction of an inter-oceanic railway within twelve years from the date of union," (p. 46) rather than ten years; and that the B.C. Federation of Labour was created in 1911 (p. 143) rather than 1910.

When Professor Robin says that, "William Smithe never met the new legislature. In failing health, during the campaign, he was too ill to take his seat when the House prorogued in January 1887." (p. 62), not only does Robin appear not to understand the meaning of "prorogue" but he also ignores Smithe's presence in the House on the opening day, January 27, 1887.⁴ The description of Major-General MacRae's career (pp. 194-195), based upon MacRae's April 5, 1923, address at New Westminster is also garbled. Robin's account of MacRae's experiences as a chief remount officer totally obscures his dealings with the "nominees of party machines" on the purchasing committees.⁵ Professor Robin's sketch of Lieutenant-Colonel James Baker (p. 68) is likewise subject to misinterpretation. In reference to the 1898 provincial election, Robin not only places Baker in the fictitious riding of Kootenay (West) South but he also neglects to tell us that Baker had first been elected to the Kootenay area in 1886 and the 1898 victory was his fourth. Another notable omission is any reference to Bowser's death during the 1933 election campaign.

The number of inaccuracies, misinterpretations, and omissions grows into a tedious list. The most amusing sequence is the account of McBride's political success in which we are told that in 1907, his "personal popularity had peaked" (p. 99), that in 1909, he reached "the pinnacle of his career" (p. 115) and still later that, he was at "the high point of public

⁴ British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Journals*, Session 1887 (January 27, 1887), 4.

⁵ "Address delivered by Major General A. D. McRae, C.B. At New Westminster, B.C., on Thursday, April 5th, 1923," *The Searchlight*, No. 1 (1923), 11-12.

esteem" (p. 129). On reaching perhaps the most painful but unfortunately not the final absurdity which tells the reader that "The sole Interior Provincial candidate returned was D. H. Stoddart, elected for Chilliwack." (p. 209) one suspects that the author's carelessness goes beyond mere accident.

Like the text the footnotes also prove to be imaginative and accident prone. In addition to mistaken page references and misplaced capitals one also finds for example that according to Robin *Revised Statutes of British Columbia* were published in 1903, 1904 and 1912 (p. 279, p. 283); and that the results of the June 20, 1924 election appear not to have been reported by the *Daily Province* until December 18 (p. 209, p. 297). In addition both text and footnote refer to the appearance of Rossiter's affidavit in the sixth issue of *The Searchlight* (p. 202, p. 296) when it actually appeared in the seventh issue. Furthermore, material which he cites under the label "*Oliver Papers*" PABC is in fact to be found in the Public Archives of British Columbia in the files of the *Pattullo Papers*.

Any patience with an author and sympathy for the enormity of his task begin to decline when a tendency toward hyperbole also intrudes upon any pretensions to accurate reporting. Professor Robin writes that "By May 1932, over 15,000 men chafed and murmured in 237 relief camps while over 73,000 were registered in the rest of the province" (p. 236). Even allowing for some poetic license in his description of the behaviour of all 15,000, Robin's source, the *Canadian Annual Review*, does not support his statistics. "Over 15,000" are in fact 14,912 and, rather than actual occupants, this number represents the total number who had been transferred to the camps by the end of May 1932. The original source for the *Review*, the *Annual Report for the Department of Labour*, shows the actual occupancy to have been 8,286 at this date. Similarly, the "over 73,000" are in fact the 73,628 registrations to April 30, 1932 and the total number actually receiving relief (excluding those in the camps) for May 1932 was 64,262.⁶ Surely the real figures were sufficient to make the author's point without any embellishment.

One also finds the same kind of distortion in the author's discussion of the Semlin government.

The first session of the new legislature, which opened on January 5, 1899 was both hectic and productive. The government majority, complicated by the controverted claims, the resignation of members, by-elections and droves

⁶ British Columbia, Department of Labour, *Annual Report* 1931, E10 and E12; 1932, G12. (Victoria: King's Printer, 1932 and 1933).

of loose fish, rarely exceeded three or four and often depended upon the deciding vote of the Speaker. (p. 71).

There is no record of the Speaker casting a vote in any of the 19 recorded divisions at this session. It was in fact during the second session of the Eighth Legislative Assembly which opened on January 4, 1900 when the Speaker cast his deciding votes. Furthermore, while it is significant that the Speaker did so in 5 out of the 32 divisions preceding the defeat of the Government on February 23, one could hardly describe the occurrence as "often."

Even where a portion of an original source is directly quoted the author omits key words or phrases and substitutes his own exaggerated account. Professor Robin's version of Oliver's plea on September 3, 1921 to Mackenzie King that he not "force a by-election by appointing any of the British Columbia House representatives to a federal cabinet post" (p. 190) is clearly Robin's own interpolation. Mackenzie King could hardly have made any such an appointment at this time and the letter actually refers to the recruitment of Liberal members of the Legislature as "candidates for the Dominion election."⁷

Elsewhere, the author's attempt to compress events has led him to fall back on too hurried a précis of other historians. Thus, the disregard for a prorogation of the Legislative Assembly in 1899 is also repeated in the account of the McCreight government in 1872 (p. 50-51). After observing that "The McCreight ministry put through useful formative legislation during the first session . . .", Robin lists the major items and adds that "Shortly after the opening of session [sic], however, the government was defeated . . ." If this was the case one must admire the Legislative Assembly's dispatch. In fact the defeat came on the third day of the second session.⁸

Such an omission will appear surprising to those who turn to previous histories since elsewhere in his book Robin appears unable to improve upon their authors' accounts and contents himself with minor changes. Compare, for example, Volume II, Chapter XXVI of F. W. Howay and E. O. S. Scholefield's *British Columbia, from the Earliest Times to the Present* and Professor Robin's description of the Smithe, A. E. B. Davie and Robson governments. If his capacity for exaggeration fails him and the land given in support of the Eagle Pass Wagon Road becomes 6,000

⁷ Oliver to Hon. W. L. Mackenzie King (September 3, 1921), PABC, *Pattullo Papers*, Organization-Liberal.

⁸ British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Journals*, Session 1872-1873, (December 19, 1872), 8.

rather than 60,000 acres (p. 61), the remainder of Robin's description stays remarkably close to the original. To take a short example: Of the Robson government F. W. Howay wrote, "The session of 1890 saw the Robson Government entering wholeheartedly into the bonusing of railroads."⁹ while in Professor Robin's words "The Robson government entered wholeheartedly into the bonusing of railroads during the session of 1890." (p. 63).

Still more remarkable is the attempt by Professor Robin to back his generalizations by selected statements from various contemporary observers and biographers. Here the latter are given a deceptive air of authority where they support his arguments. John Bensley Thornhill who is quoted twice as a "discerning visitor" (p. 18) and a "perceptive visitor from Britain" (p. 130) is a particularly interesting example of this technique. Not only do his views on McBride and Bowser tend to contradict those of Robin but Thornhill also would appear to have suffered a momentary lapse in perception in his views on the ethnic groups within the Province. Are we to consider as discernment, for example, Thornhill's assertions that "the Italians are the least desirable" or that "the Coast Indians have been pampered and petted a great deal too much," and that "everybody will be pleased if they segregated the sexes and let them die out altogether"?¹⁰ If not, then why should we value any more his opinions which Robin quotes on the "individualistic inclinations of Coast residents" or the views of B.C. voters?

Supporting quotations are also taken out of context to support the flow of Robin's rhetoric. James Morton, for example, has provided us with a description of Premier Oliver's feelings on the introduction of legislation to provide for a local option in the sale of beer by the glass following the 1924 election and referendum. This appears in Robin's account, however, in the context of a description of Oliver's earlier announcement of the referendum (pp. 205-206). The use of informed insights can be a powerful tool in extending our knowledge but in the hands of an overly creative author fact begins to blur into fiction.

The title page of the book contains a quotation from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*. In summing up Robin's first volume, one is tempted to conclude that *The Vicar of Wakefield* also appears to have been one of his inspirational guides. Goldsmith wrote in introducing his

⁹ F. W. Howay and E. O. S. Scholefield, *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present*, Volume II, (Vancouver: Clarke, 1914), 450.

¹⁰ John Bensley Thornhill, *British Columbia in the Making* (London: Constable, 1913), 144-146.

work: "A book may be amusing with numerous errors, or it may be very dull without a single absurdity." No one could say Professor Martin Robin has written a dull book.

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Peoples of the Living Land: Geography of Cultural Diversity in British Columbia. Julian Minghi, ed. Vancouver: Tantalus Research Ltd., 1972, 242 pp. \$4.50.

This book was intended primarily as a sketch of the British Columbian "landscape of conflict" for participants in a symposium on "Cultural Discord in the Modern World," held at Simon Fraser University in the summer of 1972. However, the scope of the volume is broader, including a series of contributions on other aspects of British Columbian people and places. There are frequent attempts to spell out the relationship between culture or society and landscape, which may perhaps be regarded as the fundamental theme.

The province has, indeed, seen its cultural conflicts — not so that a Pakistani or an Irishman would be very impressed, but serious enough nevertheless to darken the lives of many of its inhabitants and mark its landscapes. The Indian has had to endure the encroachment of the whites; the oriental people have aroused prejudices in the rest of the population. The Japanese, of course, were forcibly removed from the coast. Americans and Canadians remain somewhat uncomfortable with each other in the Point Roberts enclave. All these issues, with some of their geographical concomitants, are treated quite forcefully in the four essays of this book dealing more or less specifically with conflict.

Other conflicts might well have been dealt with too. The more notorious of the Doukhobors have fought in their own inimitable ways with other Doukhobors and with "the government." Landholding, settlement and agriculture in parts of the Kootenays have thus taken on a particular cast, and the infrastructure has often been disturbed, to put it mildly. The "counter-culture" has been at odds with the establishment, confronting developers at the entrance to Stanley Park, or looking for backcountry places in which to lead organic lives. The "east-enders" of Vancouver have long felt disproportionately represented in civic government vis-a-vis the more affluent people from the west. One expects these feelings to be translated every so often into voting patterns. The farmer who wants to continue making a reasonable living on his farm feels himself put upon