

Comments on Norman Ruff's Review of *The Rush for Spoils*

Dr. Norman Ruff's review of my *The Rush for Spoils* in the Spring 1973 issue of *BC Studies* has a certain air of authority. It is filled with quarrelsome minutiae, flecked with page references and quotations, embellished with occasional minor witticisms and weighed throughout with censorious pronouncements reminiscent of scholarship. All of this is contained within an eight page treatment of a book whose publication the reviewer considers to be "potentially an event of some significance."

Now Dr. Ruff's review might itself qualify as an occurrence of some importance were it a responsible and informed assessment of *The Rush for Spoils*. Unfortunately it is exactly the opposite. What passes for a careful evaluation is a haphazard search for nits. What appears to be a full and thorough treatment of *The Rush for Spoils* is in substance a sad mélange of error and distortion.

For someone who loudly protests about meticulous documentation and in large part confuses minor editing with reviewing, Dr. Ruff proves remarkably lax and sloppy in his own work. In his first footnote (page 69), he twice refers to the middle name of Hubert Bancroft as Howie when in fact it should read Howe. In the same note he misspells the title of Albert Métin's classic work *La Colombie Britannique* which comes out in Dr. Ruff's work as *La Columbia Britannique*. On the next page (70), there is a mistaken reference to the name of British Columbia's first Liberal premier, known to his contemporaries as Harlan Brewster, but who Dr. Ruff wrongly identifies as Harold Brewster. General A. D. McRae is twice incorrectly referred to on page 72 as A. D. MacRae, although to give Dr. Ruff his due, he does finally get the General's name right in a footnote.

These are all, of course, minor inaccuracies which, like the few Dr. Ruff discovers in my 318 page volume, would scarcely be worth noting. What does require comment and correction, however, is the spate of inaccuracies and distortions contained in sections of the review where Dr. Ruff pursues his curious path of denigration. In some instances, Dr. Ruff stumbles at the very moment he gloats over the discovery of a nit. In other instances, he brazenly distorts what I write, misreads words, sentences and passages, and imputes errors and omissions where none exist. The net result is an ineffectual self-parody.

A transparent device of Dr. Ruff is to cite omissions where they do not exist. "Another notable omission," he writes on page 72, "is any reference to Bowser's death during the 1933 election campaign." Had he

checked page 307, footnote 164, he would have noticed that I cite Bowser's death — "W. J. Bowser died of heart failure during the campaign." On page 72, Dr. Ruff misreads my sketch of Colonel James Baker, then proceeds to censure me for failing to mention that Baker had been elected on three occasions before the election of 1898. Within the context of my brief exposition, this "omission" is no omission at all except to Dr. Ruff who seems to have his own unfathomable reasons for wanting to cram some extra material into my book. But this is hardly all. Dr. Ruff advances from error to absurdity when he writes that I placed Baker "in the fictitious riding of Kootenay (West) South." Had Dr. Ruff bothered to check page 68 of my book, he would note my reference is to the real riding of Kootenay West (South) rather than to his own fictional invention imputed to me. Dr. Ruff could have avoided this self-parody by noting from my statement that Baker ran for office *soon after* his arrival in British Columbia, that the election in question was Baker's first, in 1886, in which, whatever its name, there was — unlike 1898 — only one Kootenay riding. I suspect Dr. Ruff would have done best not to have raised the question in the first place.

Dr. Ruff's essay abounds in similar errors and absurdities. On page 72, he accuses me of obscuring General McRae's dealings with "nominees of party machines." This is nonsense. An ordinary reading of my account of McRae's wartime experiences would discern that I discuss partisan corruption in purchasing. On page 74, he writes of my "disregard" of "a prorogation of the Legislative Assembly in 1899." In fact, in the very next paragraph, on page 71, after describing the opening and events of the session of 1899, I wrote "the government was in deep trouble, however, when the session ended." The thirty-two divisions Dr. Ruff writes of on page 74 in reference to the 1900 session of the Legislature should read thirty-one. Dr. Ruff chides me (page 72) for ignoring Smithe's presence in the House on the opening day, January 27, of the session of 1887. While Mr. Smithe may have been there on January 27, the correct date for the opening of the session is January 24. On page 73, Dr. Ruff writes that "both text and footnote refer to the appearance of Rossiter's affidavit in the sixth issue of 'The Searchlight' when it actually appears in the seventh issue." Wrong again. Mr. Finerty's affidavit is actually included in Searchlight number five and is referred to in the sixth issue. On page 72, the reader is treated to perhaps the most ludicrous example of Dr. Ruff's bungling when he writes: "Rather more disconcerting is the information that Captain James

Cook's visit in 1778 was his 'third visit' rather than third voyage" (p. 12). The logic of this statement is baffling.

On pages 74-75, Dr. Ruff includes the following statement which affords him another opportunity to practice confusion. "If his capacity for exaggeration fails him and the land given in support of the Eagle Pass Wagon Road becomes 6,000 rather than 60,000 acres (p. 61), the remainder of Robin's description stays remarkably close to the original." The failing here is Dr. Ruff's inability to read correctly page 61 of my work in which I write of "a grant of 60,000 acres of land in the Yale and Kootenay districts to Gustavus Wright to construct a wagon road . . ." I make it very clear that the 6,000 acre give-away was to the C.P.R. in Coal Harbour and not for the construction for any wagon road — "Finally the government alienated 6,000 valuable acres of land in Coal Harbour at the mouth of Burrard Inlet to encourage the Canadian Pacific Railway to do what it would have done anyway . . ."

Elsewhere, Dr. Ruff continues to pile error on distortion. He spends an entire paragraph (page 73) trying to prove I am guilty of "hyperbole" but succeeds merely in confounding the figures. I grant that the "over 15,000" relief camp workers cited on page 236 might properly have read 14,912, but seriously wonder why Dr. Ruff bothers the reader with such trivia. On page 73, he asserts there were 73,628 registrations to April 30, 1932 but the number actually mentioned in the Annual Report of the Department of Labour for 1932 is 72,548. After flourishing a bagful of figures to prove my hyperbolic sins he comes to the considered conclusion, gleaned from government sources, that the "total number actually receiving relief for May 1932 was 64,262" a figure which badly obscures the extent of the problem. On page E 12 of the Department of Labour's report for 1931, a figure of 106,550 is cited for persons who received direct relief up to April 30, 1932.

Dr. Ruff's catalogue of misrepresentations does not end here. On page 73, he asserts that material cited in my treatment of the post-McBride period under the "Oliver Papers" are to be found in the Public Archives of British Columbia in the files of the Pattullo Papers. In fact, most of the Oliver letters used in *The Rush for Spoils* were researched five years ago when they were kept in storage uncatalogued, in cardboard boxes, separate from the body of Pattullo's letters and papers. I never did receive a clear answer from archivists whether these letters were the *Oliver Papers* or the *Pattullo Papers*. Since John Oliver was premier of British Columbia for ten years, and a good part of the letters were his own, written while premier, I thought it sensible to refer to them as the *Oliver*

Papers. I don't know what their present archival status is, but it does seem odd to lump a decade of the letters of one premier, written while in office, into the papers of a subsequent premier. I trust, for example, that the main body of Laurier's letters are not to be found in the Public Archives of Canada in the papers of Borden, or that the bulk of Woodrow Wilson's presidential letters are not lost among Warren Harding's Papers.

Dr. Ruff's remarkable facility for distortion is given free reign in his snide treatment of my account of McBride's political success. On pages 72-73 is found the following statement — "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 esteem' " (p. 129). Anyone who bothers to check these statements will quickly realize that Ruff has torn them from their context to satisfy his own need for derision. The first statement, that "McBride's personal popularity had peaked," was an obvious reference to his conclusion of the tough first four years of his premiership preceding the difficult 1907 election. The second statement refers to the unprecedented esteem he enjoyed after being returned by large and increasing majorities in the 1907 and 1909 elections. The third statement, on page 129, contains no immediate temporal reference whatsoever, is retrospective and obviously applies to the time earlier alluded to, in and around 1909. Not satisfied with this gross distortion, Dr. Ruff ends the paragraph by accusing me of perpetrating a "painful . . . absurdity" when I wrote on page 209 that "the sole Interior Provincial candidate returned was D. H. Stoddart elected for Chilliwack" (page 73). What was meant by the word "Interior," written within the context of an argument that the provincial party was primarily an urban party, was simply "outside of the island and Vancouver city." While "Interior" may not have been the most felicitous word, its use was obvious and scarcely merited Dr. Ruff's loud declamation.

This latter section, I would suggest, clearly illustrates Dr. Ruff's shoddy, but transparent, technique of denigration. He prefaces his remarks with scornful assertions like "the number of inaccuracies, misrepresentations and omissions grows into a tedious list," "The most painful but unfortunately not the final absurdity," "Any patience with an author and sympathy for the enormity of his task begin to decline," "facts begin to blur into fiction," then presents limited false evidence, veneered with quotations, page references and an occasional footnote, in

support of his damaging assertions. All the while, of course, serious questions of interpretation, perspective, balance, insight, organization, and narrative flow, are carefully avoided.

This is nowhere more evident than where Dr. Ruff briefly and inadequately attempts to discourse on matters of substance. He accuses me, on page 75, of attempting "to back . . . generalizations by selected statements from various contemporary observers and biographers." He is right, finally. But his assertion that I used an unreliable authority in quoting J. B. Thornhill on economic and political matters, is unfortunate. It does not follow that because Mr. Thornhill had peculiar and prejudicial views on race, which were quite widespread at the time, all of his ideas on the economics and politics of British Columbia were necessarily wrong. I am sure Dr. Ruff will agree, for example, that Mr. J. S. Woodsworth's few instances of ethnic biases, evident in his *Strangers Within Our Gates* did not necessarily disqualify much of his trenchant analysis of the social problem in Canada in the early twentieth century. Dr. Ruff runs into similar interpretive problems when he accuses me, on page 75, of taking "supporting quotations . . . out of context." His example, again, is unfortunate. The important issue discussed on pages 205-206 is John Oliver's capitulation to the beer interest — and to the thirst of the wage workers — and the James Morton quote on page 206 is used to illustrate the premier's sorrow upon surrender. The capitulation, Dr. Ruff will appreciate, began with Oliver's agreement to hold a referendum on the sale of beer by the glass.

Dr. Ruff's remaining few excursions into content and interpretation are similarly picayune. He casually disposes of my 37 page portrait of the B.C. economy and social structure in the introductory chapter with the sweeping generalization that such "sweeping generalizations are much too facile to be taken as profound insights into the political process." His assertion that "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," has the ring of authority but none in fact. Any appreciation of the multitude of elections, government turnovers, and new premierships, which I document in the latter half of chapter two is sufficient proof, quite apart from any concocted indices, of a lack of "internal discipline and cohesion." Nor should the assertion on page 70 that there is nothing new at all in *The Rush for Spoils* be taken seriously. No evidence is provided for a statement which betrays a remarkable lack of appreciation of the perspective of earlier

historians like R. E. Gosnell, F. W. Howay and Margaret Ormsby, whose sunny Okanagan view whitewashes and distorts key elements in the province's history. His assertion that I fail to "acknowledge" Miss Ormsby's work on rural politics and the United Farmers of British Columbia is meaningless. I do not usually acknowledge works I am in no way indebted to, or do not use. As my footnotes illustrate, my discussion of the politics of the farmers is based entirely on other, more valuable sources. In her essay on the U.F.B.C. in the *B.C. Historical Quarterly* which Dr. Ruff mentions, Miss Ormsby spends two paragraphs on the social bases of agrarian conservatism: I set aside six pages in a more elaborate treatment of the same subject. As for the Provincial Party and its relation to the U.F.B.C., there is clearly a difference between Miss Ormsby's focus in the rural roots of the party and my own emphasis on the dominance of the urban and Conservative section led by A. D. McRae.

But distinctions, whether fine or otherwise, seem to little trouble Dr. Norman Ruff who, being a student of Oliver Goldsmith, might again peer into the Advertisement to the *Vicar of Wakefield* where it is written "There are an hundred faults in this *Thing*." No other word, I would suggest, except perhaps Curio, could better describe Dr. Ruff's shoddy exercise in junior editing.

Simon Fraser University

MARTIN ROBIN