

Book Reviews

The Writing on the Wall, by Hilda Glynn-Ward [Hilda Howard] with an introduction by Patricia E. Roy. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974. \$4.95 paper. (Social History of Canada series, number 20.)

The writing on the wall bore a stark and simple message: the yellow peril threatened British Columbia. This, at least, was the conviction of Hilda Howard, the British born Vancouverite whose alarm prompted this curious novel, published first in 1921. It is a tale of the Oriental penetration of British Columbia. The cunning "Chink" and the wily "Jap" are the villains of the piece; slyly they insinuate themselves into the province, hoping, in time, to make it theirs. Gordon Morley, the unscrupulous politician, sells them his honour and his province in return for wealth and power. But Lizzie McRobbie, clear-sighted and incorruptible, understands the real menace of the Asian. She knows Columbia's destiny must be both British and white. Her husband Carter, a wealthy cannery owner and Lieutenant-Governor of the province, is uncertain at first. Basically, yet blinded by self-interest, he employs Oriental labour and does not see the error of his ways. But in the end, confronted with the Legislature's Oriental franchise bill, he sees the truth with horror. Branding the measure the thin edge of the wedge, he refuses his assent and calls for a white British Columbia. The moral of the parable could scarcely be more obvious.

The Writing on the Wall was no literary masterpiece. In fact, it was nothing more than a crude anti-Oriental tract. Prejudice against Asians, that hardy perennial, had taken root in British Columbia half a century before the novel was published. Mrs. Howard's work was one expression of the province's recurrent nativism. This new edition includes a lengthy

introduction by Professor Patricia Roy, one which unfortunately contains a number of minor inaccuracies. The Chinese were disfranchised in 1872, not during the 1880's (p. vii). Chinese labourers were not imported by the CPR during the early 1880's (p. vii) but by Andrew Onderdonk, the American railway engineer who held construction contracts from the Canadian government. American agitators did not organize the Vancouver Asiatic Exclusion League in 1907 (p. xxix, n. 7); it grew out of the activities of the local Trades and Labour Council. Nor did the League incite the mob to violence before the riot of September 7, 1907 (p. viii). Its organizers intended only a peaceful protest.

The introduction's major weakness, however, is its failure to do what any introduction should: assess the significance of the work it introduces. Indeed Professor Roy has inflated the novel's real importance. She suggests that it was a propaganda piece, intended to arouse British Columbians and educate eastern Canadians. But Mrs. Howard seems a most unlikely propagandist. Before the book first appeared she had no formal links with organized anti-Oriental protest. Nor did she play any role in later campaigns. After publishing the novel she did little more than write occasional letters to editors, in which she inveighed against the Oriental immigrant. Professor Roy also skirts the task of assessing the novel's impact. In truth, the book was largely ignored. It did not capture the attention of many British Columbians, even those prominent in anti-Oriental circles. As for "educating the east," it failed utterly. (One notable Ontarian, however, did make room for the novel in his library — William Lyon Mackenzie King.) One can only conclude that the social impact of Mrs. Howard and her work was slight.

What little importance the novel had lies elsewhere. It was Mrs. Howard's peculiar gift to tap that great reservoir of hostile Oriental stereotypes stored away by generations of British Columbian xenophobes. Her work is a compendium of popular negative images. She flashes before her readers' eyes a seemingly endless series of pictures illustrating Chinese and Japanese depravity. These were the stock in trade of all who called for a white British Columbia. Today this remains the only interesting feature of the novel. It is neither a memorable work of literature nor a significant historical document. In short, there seems no justification for its second printing.