

The Wilderness Profound: Victorian Life on the Gulf of Georgia, by Richard Somerset Mackie. Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1995. xiii, 314 pp.. Illus., maps. \$19.95 paper.

This book has a double nature as biography and local history. It is both a biography of George Fawcett Drabble (1833-1901), one of the leading figures of the agricultural settlement founded at Comox in the 1860s, and a history of the early years of the Comox settlement to the end of the nineteenth century.

At Comox Drabble was often viewed as a man with mysterious antecedents. Richard Mackie has elucidated some of the unusual features of his private life. He shows that Drabble departed from England for Vancouver Island in 1862 in strange circumstances, leaving behind not only an apparently prosperous career as a farmer and maltster but also a wife, who died soon afterwards, and children, who never joined their father in the colony. He aptly illustrates Drabble's varied domestic life by placing side by side photographs of two of his sons, an English son clothed in the conventional suit of a middle-class Edwardian gentleman, and a British Columbia son wearing the impressive ceremonial regalia of a Kwakiutl chief, a rank inherited through this son's mother.

Mackie concludes, however, that in his private life Drabble must remain to the end a shadowy and enigmatic figure. He concentrates therefore on Drabble's public activities in the Comox district. During various periods from the 1860s to the 1890s he was a farmer, a grist-mill operator, and a coastal trader, but his most important role was as a land surveyor, a profession in which he had been trained in England. He surveyed many Comox pre-emptions, and laid out and supervised the construction of roads and bridges. He served as public works superintendent, government agent, school trustee, as magistrate for many years, and in numerous other capacities. So extensive were his activities that Mackie is able to construct a regional history around them that embraces much of the northern Gulf of Georgia, and to reach beyond the biography of a single figure to bring in many other early Comox settlers.

Mackie's starting point in his research is a series of little booklets in which Drabble recorded not only his field notes as a surveyor but also many of his other activities. In addition, Mackie makes good use of the existing histories of the early Comox settlement, most notably Eric Duncan's classic first-hand account, *From Shetland to Vancouver Island*, which went through three editions when it was published in Edinburgh in the 1930s. He goes again over ground covered in some chapters of the most comprehensive local history, *Land of Plenty: A History of the Comox District* (1987) by D.E. Isenor and others, but makes many valuable additions. More fully than any previous historian he draws on the relevant governmental and legal records in the provincial archives: these records are so extensive that one may sometimes wonder why the early Comox settlers constantly complained of government neglect. He makes excellent use, too, of early Comox diaries and letters, and

has gained access to some important sources in private hands, for example the diaries of William and Mary Harmston, that have not been available to previous historians. He has been well served by his publishers, and has included good sets of maps and illustrations.

Mackie has brought to his study not only much fresh archival research but also a lively style of presentation. He combines clarity of outline and argument with abundant interesting social and economic detail. He conveys well the quality of life in an isolated settlement that already had some twenty-five years of development behind it when Mary Harmston recorded in her diary the news of the destruction by fire of the new town of Vancouver in 1886. He brings out the unique features of a place that like the Gulf Islands could be reached only by boat but unlike them was on the edge of a great hinterland of forest and mountain, wilderness profound indeed, in which early settlers occasionally became lost never to be seen again. A main theme of his historical narrative is the diversification from the agricultural settlement of the 1860s into logging and coal mining in the 1880s and 1890s, as it became apparent that much of the district's future would lie in the exploitation of the resources of this hinterland.

While Mackie shows appreciation for the work of Drabble and other Comox pioneers in establishing in very difficult circumstances the physical, social, and institutional infrastructure that still determines much of the character of the district, he does not write in the simple triumphal mode that might once have prevailed. He never allows us to forget that the new Comox settlement of the 1860s was established in an area of very much older Native settlements. He recognizes that the figure of the surveyor is now often seen as the very symbol of the destruction of the natural world and its indigenous inhabitants. He comments: "Drabble assigned permanent section or lot numbers to all the land he surveyed, and he obliterated Native cultural, spiritual, or economic sites beneath a cartographic grid of squares, rectangles, and straight lines." He notes how "shamefully" small were the areas marked on the new maps as Indian reserves throughout the Gulf of Georgia. This volume is evidence that more than 500 years after Columbus the writing of local history has become increasingly complex and increasingly informed by an awareness of larger issues. One might perhaps paraphrase the axiom that all politics is local and conclude that all history is local.

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Historic Nelson: The Early Years, by John Norris. Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1995. 320 pp. Illus., maps. \$36.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

The author seems to have read every existing record of the earliest White visitors to the West Kootenays. He links these sketchy references together to