

Book Reviews

The Forge Glows Red: From Blacksmith to Revolutionary, by Tom McEwen. Toronto: Progress Books, 1974. 261 pp. Cloth \$8.95, paperback \$3.95.

Few Canadian workers have written their memoirs. Far fewer have found anyone eager to publish an account of the life they led and the people they met and worked with. Tom McEwen is one of the fortunate exceptions.

In many respects his reminiscences follow a pattern familiar to readers of autobiographies of Communist leaders of his generation and social background in any Western society. The harshness of his early life is persuasively described in some detail, a salutary reminder of the way in which the children of the poor were brought up and young workers were treated before 1914. He admits to only intermittent interest in public affairs before the Bolshevik victory in Russia shows him the true way. The Soviet Union then becomes the catalyst which increasingly influences the behaviour of the autobiographer. He joins the Communist party, where he finds kindred spirits. In spite of occasional mistakes, which he attributes to his insufficient grasp of Marxist-Leninist theory and Bolshevik organizational principles, the convert marches on and climbs the party ladder, fighting the "class enemy" who tries to disrupt the march of the "most advanced detachment of the working class." In the final chapter of the autobiography the author looks back over his life and prophesies victory for his adopted cause. With a rousing re-affirmation of faith he can lay down his pen, fully aware that he has performed yet another task on the "Agitprop front" and that a publishing house associated with the Communist party will publish his life story for the edification of party members and sympathizers.

McEwen, like many others, emigrated to Canada in the years before 1914 and found employment on the Prairies. Like others who became politically conscious under the impact of the First World War and the

Russian Civil War, he gravitated towards the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). Unlike most others, he remained faithful to that party, in which he held a variety of senior posts. At the age of seventy-six he began his autobiography, the completion of which, he tells us, was delayed by close on three years of infighting in the ranks of the CPC.

The bulk of his story is devoted to his youth in Scotland, his years in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and his activities as leader of the Workers' Unity League in 1930-1931. His work as the CPC representative at the Comintern headquarters in Moscow and his periodic visits to the U.S.S.R. are treated in a bland manner. As he disarmingly puts it:

My position was and is that the working people and their political parties in this and other capitalist countries are subjected to more than enough downgrading of Soviet achievements and objectives . . . without Communists and progressive workers getting drawn into this 'credibility' pastime. . . . It is therefore not my intention at this late date to seek to change my life pattern from a student of socialism, inspired by its gigantic achievements, to one primarily interested in its 'shortcomings.'

He shows similar discretion about how the politbureau of the CPC operated from week to week, how it reached its decisions and how it checked on the performance of local party organizations.

To the student of B.C. politics McEwen has little to offer although he has lived on the West Coast for over three decades, has edited the local Communist newspaper for many years and has contested several Vancouver Island and Lower Mainland ridings in federal and provincial elections. The few pages he devotes to the travails of the Communist weekly confirm what is already known about its circulation problems. The major controversy within the B.C. section of the CPC in 1945 is ignored, while the one that arose after the entry of Soviet troops into Prague in 1968 is dismissed in a short but robust attack on the "auxiliary wrecking crew — working from within."

All in all McEwen's memoirs may be viewed as yet another Communist attempt to present certain events and people in a certain light. The focus is very much on the obstacles the CPC encountered — and in some instances overcame — in organizing workers, Prairie farmers and the unemployed; in meeting the challenge of the authorities who denied freedom of assembly to the Communists in Toronto in 1929; and in presenting solutions to the problems facing Canadian labour between the two world wars. The autobiographical approach provides a useful way of telling the Communist version, since no reader expects the elderly McEwen to follow the canons of scholarship or to abandon the style he has

used to castigate anti-Communists, non-Communists and ex-Communists in his column in the *Pacific Tribune*. The result is a series of vignettes varying in interest and accuracy, interspersed with the kind of moralizing to which the Communists are prone in print and on the platform.

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British Columbia Chronicle 1778-1846: Adventurers by Sea and Land, by G. P. V. Akrigg and Helen B. Akrigg. Vancouver: Discovery Press, 1975. xv, 429 pp., \$14.95.

This handsome volume is just what the title implies — a year-to-year chronicle extending from 1778, when Captain Cook and his crew became the first white men known with certainty to have set foot in what is now British Columbia, and 1846, when the Oregon Boundary Treaty made the 49th parallel the dividing line between British and American territory west of the Rocky Mountains. The unusual arrangement invites browsing as well as sustained reading. Entries vary in length from a few lines to a dozen pages, according to the interest and importance of the happenings in individual years. There is no padding for the sake of uniformity, and the overall course of events emerges clearly.

The cutoff date of 1846 offers several advantages. This early period is often dealt with in somewhat summary fashion in the first chapters of more comprehensive studies; separate treatment serves to highlight its distinctive character. In particular, it emphasizes the fact that until 1846 the fur trade was for practical purposes the only economic activity in the region. Settlement in the ordinary sense was non-existent. A few hundred fur traders were the sole white inhabitants.

The earlier chapters illustrate interesting contrasts between activities by sea and by land. The maritime fur trade, which centred upon the sea otter, began in 1785 and had largely run its course and virtually exterminated its quarry by 1825. It did not result in the building of forts or the founding of settlements. For the most part it was conducted on a hit and run basis; immediate profit, not a long trading relationship, was the object in view. Furs were secured by foul means if fair means failed, and the inevitable result was violence and massacre. Some exploring was done, incidental to trading voyages, but serious exploration was the work of official government-financed Spanish and British expeditions, with Vancouver's superb and detailed survey of 1792-94 much the most important.