

Book Reviews

William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia, by Jean Usher. Ottawa, National Museum of Canada Publications in History 5, 1974. Pp. xii, 163; illus.

Although many books have been written about William Duncan, this is the first scholarly study of his work among the Tsimshian Indians of British Columbia. Hitherto, books on Duncan have been by missionary apologists; accounts of the heroic missionary, always aided by providence and sometimes by the Church Missionary Society, labouring among the savage heathen. Jean Usher's book is a welcome departure from this norm.

This volume concentrates on two aspects of Duncan's career: the mid-nineteenth-century missionary background out of which he came, and his work among the Tsimshian up to his departure for Alaska in 1887. The author argues, sometimes a little tenuously, that while Duncan was imbued with the ideals and values of his Victorian and Church Missionary Society milieu, the initial success of his mission at Metlakatla can be attributed to his ability to adapt to the traditional culture of the Tsimshian. The two propositions rest uneasily together. There is some confusion about whether Duncan demanded an absolute conversion, both religious and secular, from his neophytes. We are informed on subsequent pages that Duncan was an ethnocentric Victorian but that he took pains to "establish what had been the Indian way of dealing with situations" (pp. 80 and 81), and, later, that he "imposed an entirely new way of life" and yet his followers at Metlakatla became "bicultural" because "some elements of the system were not necessarily incompatible with the old Tsimshian ways" (pp. 88 and 89). Missionaries in many parts of the world were to discover that there were certain points at which it was easier to accept minor aspects of the indigenous culture than to insist on a rigid adherence to new standards. But I am not persuaded that Duncan's concession to traditional Tsimshian culture were anything but mini-

mal. Thus it is consistent, not ironic, that the eventual failure of the first Metlakatla was largely due to Duncan's inability to satisfy "the social needs and pride of rank of the Tsimshian chiefs".

Usher holds that in establishing his village at Metlakatla Duncan followed principles and policies laid down by Henry Venn, the secretary of the CMS from 1841 to 1872. It is important, when assessing the work of missionaries in remote areas, to concentrate not so much on current theorizing in the metropolis but on what the individual is doing in the local area. Individual personality was probably more important than general theories in determining the success or failure of a particular venture. If we examine what Duncan achieved at Metlakatla there is considerable evidence to support the view that he ignored rather than followed Venn's advice. Control of all village matters remained in Duncan's hands, he did not train a group of native ministers, nor, it turns out, did he translate much of the Bible into Tsimshian.

One of the potential pitfalls of the biographical approach, particularly in the area of culture contact, is the temptation to see motives and events only through the eyes of the individual being studied. In order to meet the Society's demand for regular reports on their activities CMS missionaries wrote voluminous letters and journals. So even researchers who are predisposed to be critical tend to be influenced by the missionary point of view simply by the sheer weight of the evidence. The author of this book generally succeeds in avoiding this danger. She argues convincingly and correctly that Duncan was not an original social thinker and the limitations in his character are made apparent. There is, however, one point at which Duncan's word is accepted too readily. After a few months at Fort Simpson Duncan went to preach in the houses of the Indians for the first time. There is the suggestion that Duncan was being used by the Tsimshian leaders and that, once he had visited one house, other chiefs extended an invitation so that they would not be ashamed. We are told that if this was the case then it was not apparent to Duncan. Particularly during his first months among the Indians, Duncan's perceptions are not necessarily evidence of Tsimshian intentions. There was in fact no reason why it should be apparent to Duncan that he was being manipulated.

I have other, perhaps more minor, reservations about the book. The frequent mention of Samuel Marsden as a positive example for Duncan's work is somewhat unfortunate since recent research has shown that the CMS mission to New Zealand was a total failure as long as Marsden remained its leader. There is some confusion on the question of whether

Duncan was (p. 109) or was not (p. 52) dominating and authoritarian in his running of the village at Metlakatla.

In spite of such reservations there is no doubt that this book is an important contribution to the writing of British Columbia's history. Apart from the rather frequent use of bloc quotes it is written clearly and well, and the well-documented arguments demand the attention of all students of Indian-European contact on the northwest coast. One hopes, however, that historians will not consider that Duncan's career has now been covered and that it is not worth further investigation. There are some aspects not dealt with here that still demand attention, and it may well be that Duncan is such an enigmatic figure that only after several minds have been brought to bear on his career will we fully understand it. Duncan's psychological make-up accounts for much of what happened at Metlakatla. The work of Neil Gunson on the London Missionary Society missionaries in the South Pacific could well provide many clues for a deeper study of Duncan's personality. Then there is the history of his second venture at New Metlakatla on Annette Island, Alaska, which still awaits attention. Jean Usher has said an important, but hopefully not the last, word on William Duncan.

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The Surrey Pioneers, by Richard V. Whiteside. Vancouver: the author, 1974. Pp. x, 197; illus.; no price stated.

This exceptionally well-illustrated book is the product of a labour of love by the son of a pioneer Surrey family and a grant from the federal government's New Horizons programme. The photographs of pioneer homes, farms and businesses suggest that many early settlers earned a very good living from the forests and fields of Surrey, a municipality stretching from the United States border to the Fraser River, immediately south of New Westminster.

The brief, anecdotal sketches of ninety-three families who settled in Surrey before 1900 tend to be genealogical accounts. They do show that while Surrey was named after an English county and over a third of the heads of families included in the volume came from that country, many early settlers — including one native British Columbian — were Canadians by birth. In addition, there were a handful of pioneers from the United States, Sweden, Norway, Germany and Austria as well as from