

## Book Reviews

*A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia: The Recollections of Susan Allison*, edited by Margaret A. Ormsby. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1976. Pp. li, 210, *illus.*, \$18.95, \$7.95 paper.

*A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia* presents the fascinating story of a remarkable woman, Susan Moir Allison. Although her recollections, written when she was in her eighties, lack the immediacy of a daily journal, they provide an important record of the development of the southern interior of British Columbia in the latter half of the nineteenth century and make a significant contribution to the regrettably limited writings of Canadian pioneer women. The original manuscript is much enhanced by Margaret Ormsby's thorough annotation and extensively researched introduction which sets the story of the Allison family in a wider context.

Of Scottish-Dutch ancestry, Susan Moir was born in 1845 in Ceylon, where her father owned a plantation. When Susan was four, the sudden death of her father resulted in the family's return to Britain. The widowed Mrs. Moir and her three children found sympathy and support from well-to-do relatives; Susan received a good education in London, becoming proficient in French, Latin and Greek. Eventually, Mrs. Moir remarried a charming but spendthrift Scot, Thomas Glennie. Having inherited a legacy, Glennie was attracted to the gold colony by the prospect of cheap land which would enable him to play the country squire. With his wife and two step-daughters, he travelled to British Columbia via the Panama Canal in 1860. On the advice of Governor Douglas, he took up a homestead near the scenic, bustling town of Fort Hope, then the head of navigation on the Fraser River.

Like those gentlewomen who immigrated to Upper Canada several decades earlier, Mrs. Glennie found herself ill-equipped for her new life — ignorant of basic domestic skills such as making bread and washing. Her troubles were compounded when Glennie, having run through his

money, deserted the family in 1864. Daughter Susan took in sewing and embroidery to help make ends meet and then helped her mother establish a school in Hope.

Although perhaps an unintended comment, the experience of Mrs. Glennie and her two daughters underlines how completely a woman's destiny was shaped by her marriage. Susan's elder sister, Jane, married Edgar Dewdney in 1864. Her lifestyle reflected her husband's financial and political success; in the 1890s she became chatelaine of Cary Castle during Dewdney's term as lieutenant-governor.

How different Susan's life! In 1868, she married a man twenty years her senior, John Fall Allison, a rancher and miner who did much to open up the Similkameen district. Shortly after the wedding, the young bride rode over the Hope Mountains to her new log home near the present site of Princeton. For many years she was practically the only European woman in the area. It was not an easy life. Cattle drives frequently took her husband from home, and he suffered several financial reverses.

Yet Susan Allison became genuinely attached to her "wild and free" life, especially during the seventies when the family lived at Sunnyside, the first European home on the west side of the Okanagan Lake. Her youth, common sense and lively curiosity enabled her to make a successful adjustment to pioneer life. Mrs. Allison's genuine interest in the Similkameen Indians, many of whom provided her with help and companionship, puts to shame the disdainful treatment often accorded the Indians by the European wives of earlier fur traders and missionaries. While she mastered native skills such as drying venison and making moccasins and straw sun hats, she also maintained the niceties of civilized living. She was not about to abandon her habit of dressing for dinner, in spite of the ridicule of her husband's crude partner, and she treasured her small library of books. Even when times were hard, the Allisons subscribed to English and Scottish journals.

Mrs. Allison tends to play down her own courage and fortitude. With the help of only the neighbouring Indian women and her husband, she gave birth to fourteen children, all of whom lived to maturity. In addition to her domestic duties, she dutifully ran her husband's trading store and post office and kept the accounts. She faced disaster and near-disaster. In one of her earliest adventures, she made it through a raging forest fire with her month-old baby while accompanying her husband to Hope. The true test of her mettle came in 1883 when the house burned down during one of her husband's absences. She managed to rescue all the children and showed great resourcefulness in fitting out temporary living quarters in an

old cabin. Of this experience she observed philosophically: "I learned the real value of things by it." Further calamity struck in 1894, when flood waters devastated the Allison's by-now substantial property, carrying away their home and thirteen outbuildings. John Allison died in 1897; his wife, who became known as "The Mother of the Similkameen," survived him by forty years, dying at the age of ninety-two.

In her later life, Mrs. Allison fortunately found time to record much of the history which she helped to make. Future generations are particularly indebted to her for preserving some of the legends and history of the Similkameen Indians. In 1899, using the family name Stratton Moir, she published a long narrative poem called *In-Cow-Mas-Ket*, an account of the Similkameen Indians from the 1860s to the 1880s when they "were still a people." She also wrote a companion piece about the great bear hunter Quinisco, and recorded the stories told her by the old wise man Tam-tu-sa-list, who was well over a hundred when she met him. One wishes that more of these writings might have been included in the appendix, which does contain her account of the Similkameen Indians published by the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1891 and two of the legends. One is about the Big Men (presumably the Susquatch), with whose story, along with that of the famed lake monster Ogopogo, the European woman was fascinated.

Sympathetic glimpses of the Indians are provided in the narrative. Among the most memorable are that of the faithful mail carrier Poo-lal-lee, whose frozen feet were doctored by an Indian companion on the Allison kitchen table by the application of hot coals, and the stately Okanagan chief Penentitza, whom Mrs. Allison entertained at lunch. The book is also a veritable who's who of early British Columbia. In Hope and New Westminster in the early 1860s, Susan Allison made the acquaintance of such figures as Governor Douglas, Colonel Moody, the Trutch brothers and Peter O'Reilly. Their part in the history of British Columbia is succinctly elaborated in Professor Ormsby's footnotes. An interesting vignette is also given of the notorious McLean gang which terrorized the Okanagan valley in 1879. Several notables such as the geologist George M. Dawson visited the Allison ranch, but the most unexpected was undoubtedly the American general W. T. Sherman in 1883. The sword which Sherman presented to young Jack Allison is shown in one of the twenty-three well-chosen photographs which complement the text.

The University of British Columbia Press is to be commended for undertaking a series which will make such reminiscences of B.C. pioneers available in an attractive and useful form. In this second volume of the

series, however, the system of designating the footnotes by page and line instead of by number was found most irritating, especially when it breaks down, as it does on p. xxxvi.

The problem of ensuring that this expensive volume (\$18.95) enjoys the wide circulation it deserves is partially resolved by the publication of a paperback edition (\$7.95) which abridges the annotations but retains the full text of the memoirs.

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*Imperial Russia in Frontier America; the Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America, 1784-1867*, by James R. Gibson. New York, Oxford University Press, 1976. Pp. x, 257; *illus.*; \$6.00 (Pap. text ed.), \$10.00 (Cloth text ed.).

Russian America, which played an important part in the formation of British Columbia's boundary with Alaska, has been a subject of renewed interest in recent years on the part of both North American and Soviet investigators. This study in human historical geography represents a natural extension of and sequel to Professor Gibson's earlier book, *Feeding the Russian Fur Trade: Provisionment of the Okhotsk Seaboard and the Kamchatka Peninsula, 1639-1856* (Milwaukee, Madison, and London, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). In *Imperial Russia in Frontier America*, the author continues his thorough treatment of supply problems, extending the discussion to Alaska, Hawaii and Russian California.

As in the Far East, the development of agriculture and cattle raising was made extremely difficult by a whole catalogue of geographical impediments, starting with harsh climate, poor soil and difficult terrain. At the same time, alternative means of supply from Russia proved unreliable and very costly, while co-operation with (and consequent dependence on) more bountiful foreign sources placed the Russian colony at the mercy of its rivals — the trading ships from Boston and the Hudson's Bay Company.

Once the sea otter and fur seal, the major sources of income from Russia's North American holdings, had become depleted, the problem of food supplies became a major consideration in the Russian government's eventual decision to divest itself of its American colonies. Professor Gibson devotes his attention to this fundamental task of provisionment, and how Russian attempts to solve the problem "generated human settlement, resource development, and regional interchange" (p. ix).