

## Book Reviews

*Vancouver* (The Romance of Canadian Cities Series), by Eric Nicol. 1970. Revised edition. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, Ltd., 1978. Pp. xv, 265; *illus.*; \$11.95.

One of the more important developments in the field of historical writing in recent years has been the rapid growth of interest in the study of cities and the process of urbanization. Books, articles and theses have been written in a steady stream and it is no longer possible to decry the lack of scholarly attention to Canada's urban past. Vancouver has received its share of scholarly scrutiny, as any up-to-date bibliography will indicate. Works by such scholars as E. M. W. Gibson, W. G. Hardwick, D. W. Holdsworth, Norbert MacDonald, R. A. J. McDonald and P. E. Roy are especially noteworthy. It is against this background that Nicol's re-issued "romance" of Vancouver must be judged.

When published in 1970, *Vancouver* at least had the distinction of being one of the first (it was preceded by A. Morley's *Vancouver: From Milltown to Metropolis*, published in 1961) book length accounts of Vancouver's development. At the time, almost any volume on the city's history was welcome, since it suggested that local history (it was rarely called "urban" history at the time) was worthy of attention. In other words, whatever its weaknesses in 1970, Nicol could be dealt with amiably by scholars since he was a pioneer working in an area that professional historians had chosen to ignore.\* The situation has changed dramatically since 1970, but Nicol's 1978 edition does not reflect or even acknowledge the changes. Indeed, it can only be assumed that Nicol and his publisher were out to make a quick profit, for although the dust jacket proclaims that the new volume "is an updated version," there are no more than six pages of new material. The bibliography, inadequate even in 1970, has not had one item added to it. Nicol did not even take the trouble to make

\*See the review in *BC Studies*, no. 10 (Summer 1971), pp. 56-65.

easy and obvious revisions — Pat McGeer, for example, is still referred to as the leader of the provincial Liberal party (p. 218).

At best, Nicol's study is a history of Vancouver by a Vancouver man written for Vancouver people. There will be many in the city who will derive some pleasure from this romantic, episodic account. As was noted in the 1971 review of the volume, it is highly readable, often entertaining and, at times, humorous. *Vancouver* is notably better than many other local histories since Nicol can at least write. The academic reader, however, will be disappointed and frustrated since the author has lost the forest in the trees, producing an often trite study. The chronicling of events that occurred in Vancouver, and the capsule biographies of colourful mayors and other personalities that make up most of the volume, offer no pattern, viewpoint or critical assessment of the city building process. Nicol, like many local historians, simply never asks any of the important questions, content instead to devote ten pages to the Janet Smith murder case. Without frames of reference and a sense of the larger process, such a presentation of dates and opinions is close to meaningless.

*Vancouver* has other problems. Nicol, like many other local historians, chose not to include footnotes. To be valid and useful to others, local history, no less than any other kind of history, must be properly documented so that readers may at least be assured that the study is based on the best sources available, rigorously tested and treated by standard research criteria. There is little evidence of such an approach in this volume. Indeed, there are numerous occasions not only when Nicol's facts are in error, but where he displays a political and racial bias that indicates he has done anything but solid research. Two examples can be cited, although there are others in the book. The provincial election of 1933, which resulted in the CCF displacing the Conservatives as the official opposition, is discussed as follows: "Three seats, won by Ernest E. Winch . . . Harold Winch, and Mrs. Dorothy Steeves, were Vancouver ridings that accounted for an appreciable proportion of the 31 percent of the total votes that had gone pink. Politically, the East End of the city was now closer to Moscow than Point Grey" (p. 172). Not only does this passage contain irresponsible hyperbole, it contains several errors. Ernest E. Winch was elected in Burnaby, not Vancouver. Dorothy Steeves ran in Point Grey in the provincial election of November 1933. She lost. She did not win a seat until July 1934 when, following the death of North Vancouver member H. C. E. Anderson, she was elected in a by-election. Referring to the Japanese evacuation of 1942, Nicol states that the Japanese "accepted their lot with good grace" (p. 193), an opinion that begs

the question and simplifies a very complex issue. It is true that as a group the Japanese did not make any concerted effort to resist, but a lack of resistance does not imply acceptance. The fact was that there were divisions within the Japanese community about how to react to the evacuation, a complicating factor Nicol chose to ignore. These kinds of superficial statements are common in *Vancouver* and must make any reader wary of virtually all the author's assertions.

It is one thing to write humour, something Eric Nicol does well. It is quite another to attempt to disguise humour as history. *Vancouver* is a parochial and rambling book. It is not history, even of the rudimentary sort. There are no themes, no connecting threads, no analyses, no grappling with complex questions. Instead there is one anecdote after another, some in good taste, several in poor taste. If you read the book in 1970, don't look for this edition. If you didn't read it then don't bother now. There are many superior studies available that deserve attention.

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ALAN F. J. ARTIBISE

*Victoria, Then and Now*, by Roland Morgan and Emily Disher. Vancouver, B.C.: Bodiman Publications, 1977. Pp. 127; *illus.*

*Old Wooden Buildings*, by Donovan Clemson. Saanichton, B.C.: Hancock House, 1978. Pp. 96; *illus.*

The present interest in Canadian studies and in local history has seen a veritable spate of books in the last half dozen years. The majority are designed for the general public and make no pretence to being works of scholarship. This is not to say that these books are incompetent but rather they do not place undue emphasis on the trappings so beloved of academia. Popular history serves a useful function — too little of it has been done in Canada previously — and, while it may not necessarily confront the substantive questions posed by historians, it does present aspects of the cultural ethos that otherwise get neglected in the tons of literature imported from elsewhere.

*Victoria, Then and Now* is a pictorial history of the provincial capital from late in the nineteenth century until the present day. For each scene illustrating life in the past its modern counterpart is given for comparison. The photographs showing Victoria in earlier decades are well selected.