

Book Reviews

Life and Death of a Union: The Canadian Seamen's Union, 1936-1944,
by John Stanton. Toronto: Steel Rail Educational Publishing, 1978.
Pp. 182.

There is no more dramatic tale in the annals of the Canadian labour movement than the history of the Canadian Seamen's Union. Founded in the depths of the depression by two unemployed sailors, the union spread rapidly among Canada's exploited seamen. And what exploitation! For less than a dollar a day these hapless men were required to put in twelve-to eighteen-hour shifts and work under the most trying of conditions subject to the whims of invariably cruel officers. There was no job security and sailors were required to pay their own transportation costs from port to port to their next jobs. Through the heroic efforts of a handful of seamen, most of whom were members or supporters of the Communist Party, the Canadian Seamen's Union soon became the spokesman for thousands of Canadian sailors. By the end of the war it was the largest and most powerful marine union in the country, so strong in fact that in 1946 for twenty-eight days the CSU closed the Great Lakes to Canadian merchant ships. From the Gulf of St. Lawrence to Thunder Bay no Canadian ship moved until the ship owners agreed to the terms laid down by the union.

At the beginning of 1947 the CSU seemed impregnable — strong enough to take on and defeat an alliance of ruthless ship owners and hostile national and provincial governments. Yet in just over a year the CSU had all but disappeared, its bargaining rights removed, its leadership decapitated, its membership demoralized, its power gone, the union destroyed.

It is hard to imagine a more striking melodrama than the rise and fall of the CSU. Both heroes and villains are readily identifiable and larger than life — brutal, greedy ship owners, scheming politicians, corrupt and cunning union bosses, valiant union organizers, defiant though guileless sailors. It is a story fraught with perfidy and violence, venality and mur-

der, a story full of beatings, kidnappings, fraud, and sweetheart deals, a story in which the Canadian government becomes a willing accomplice to a gang of union goons imported from the United States, and allows them — indeed encourages them — to run wild on Canada's waterfront. Indeed nothing more becomes the CSU than the manner of its death. It did not die from natural causes; it was murdered — though some argue that it was the self-inflicted wounds which ultimately proved fatal.

That anyone can write a dull, dismal book out of such material boggles the mind, but John Stanton has accomplished just that. And what a shame, for as a veteran west-coast radical and as a long-time lawyer for the CSU and other left-wing unions and causes, John Stanton seemed the perfect choice for this book. After all, he was involved in much of the CSU's history, he knew all the protagonists, and seemed to be aware of many of the important documents. Stanton's problem was that he obviously couldn't decide whether he was writing about the union, or his own memoirs, or a history of the trade union movement in Canada. Thus there are seemingly endless pages of unnecessary details on Mackenzie King's relationship with the Rockefellers and on insignificant cases Stanton handled on behalf of seamen. There is really nothing new in this book that has not already been said by others. Anyone will learn very little from this book — though obviously the bias is different.

And Stanton does have definite biases. He has little use for the Communist Party, referring to it throughout the book as the "old Communist Party." He does this, he tells us, to avoid confusing the party of Buck, Salsberg, et al, with the "new Communist Party" being formed at this very minute somewhere in Canada. For the demise of the CSU he blames "employer intransigence, government complicity, judicial bias and American thuggery." To this he might have added Communist party miscalculation, faulty union strategy and the hostility of organized labour in Canada.

Stanton was badly served by his editors. The book abounds with historical and typographical errors. For example, he mistakes Jim Laxer for his father Bob, and tells us that the All-Canadian Congress of Labour was founded in 1929, which is precisely two years after its real creation. Though these errors are disconcerting they do not make this a bad book. What makes it bad is not only what is in the book, but also what Stanton has left out. He provides few character sketches. Many of his readers — and naturally students of the Canadian labour movement — would have appreciated knowing something about Harry Davis or Dewar Ferguson or a dozen others who were active in the CSU and who Stanton must

have known. As well, he says very little about the SIU and Hal Banks, who ultimately provided the coup-de-grâce to the CSU. There is absolutely no mention of the hiring hall, which played a key role in the rise and fall of the CSU. The list is endless.

One gets the impression that this book was the result of a series of stream-of-consciousness sessions with a tape recorder. Granted, Stanton has built into the narrative some court transcripts, some clippings and even some documents from the Public Archives of Canada, but these often detract from the story he is trying to tell. Stanton obviously has a story to tell — and a fascinating one at that. Unfortunately he did not tell it in this book. His attempt to join such successful British Columbia radical amateur historians as Jack Scott, Harry Rankin and even the Vancouver Longshoremen has ended in failure. There is a book in John Stanton. Sadly, this is not it.

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IRVING ABELLA

W. L. Morton, ed., *God's Galloping Girl: The Peace River Diaries of Monica Storrs, 1929-1931*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1979. Pp. xlix, 307.

Monica Storrs, an English gentlewoman, came to the remote Peace River district of British Columbia as an Anglican Church worker in 1929, at a time when North America's last agricultural frontier was being rapidly settled. Although she initially committed herself to remain for only a year, she grew to love Peace River and its people, among whom she continued to live and work until 1950. *God's Galloping Girl* is Monica's own account of her first two years in Canada, written in the form of weekly diaries which were sent to England to be circulated among her friends and supporters. Monica maintained her regular diary report until World War II, but the typewritten copy preserved in the Archives of British Columbia is too extensive to be reproduced in its entirety in this volume. Therefore the editors decided to publish the complete text of the first two years rather than an abbreviated version of the whole period. As a result, readers do not learn of the maturation of Monica's work in the depression conditions of the 1930s, when she attempted to bring material assistance as well as spiritual encouragement to the penniless settlers and opened her home to students from outlying farms who wished to attend