

Book Reviews

The Politics of Racism; The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War, by Ann Gomer Sunahara. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1981. Pp. xii, 222.

This is a very good book, unquestionably the best study we have yet had on the unhappy fate of Canadian Japanese during the Second World War. The research is complete, much more so than in Ken Adachi's *The Enemy That Never Was*, the tone is generally moderate even in the face of the appalling actions of the government and people of Canada, and the prose is clear. A first-rate job.

The heroes are also the right ones — Hugh Keenleyside and Henry Angus of the Department of External Affairs, who fought for a sane policy; RCMP Assistant Commissioner Mead, who believed the Japanese loyal; and the Japanese Canadians themselves, who endured tribulations with fortitude. The villains are the correct ones, too — men such as Hon. Ian Mackenzie, the British Columbia Minister in Ottawa whose virulence was matched only by such out-and-out racist fanatics as Macgregor Macintosh, Mackenzie's appointee to committees charged with responsibility for the Japanese problem, and Mackenzie King, whose government acted out of political motives in expelling the Japanese.

And yet this reader has doubts that this is the whole story. First, I am uncomfortable with the idea that Mackenzie King was a racist. It is now almost conventional wisdom to charge that the Prime Minister was anti-Semitic and anti-Oriental and to point to his government's policy of excluding Jewish refugees in the 1930s or to its refusal to admit Oriental immigrants. It is not my intent to justify the unjustifiable; I could not even if I had the will to do so. But King, like all of us, was a product of his times, and in his era the level of racism that society tolerated (and expected) as a norm was higher than it is today. One could denounce "the yellow peril" or "the kikes" without violating accepted standards of civilized society — and probably without being a racist. If everyone acted

this way, and I think virtually everyone did, then is King a racist? Macintosh and Mackenzie, on the other hand, exceeded that definition with their vicious vindictiveness. I wish that Ms. Sunahara had been willing to venture on those kinds of distinctions.

Secondly, it does not seem to me that her account, able and complete as it is, adequately explains why the people of British Columbia were so adamant in their opposition to the unassimilated Japanese in their midst both before and after 7 December 1941. The politicians, busy attempting to mobilize Canada for war, were not about to enmesh themselves in the difficult task of expelling the Japanese from the Pacific Coast unless there was massive popular support for such action. That support was there, and given the government's priorities — to keep the people's eyes firmly fixed on the overriding issue of the need for the fullest prosecution of the war — it had to act to meet B.C.'s concerns, particularly as the single Minister from British Columbia wanted it to act and was likely prepared to resign if it did not. In a war situation, King had no option but to go along, and Sunahara quotes Jack Pickersgill's later comment that "King, in his heart, did not approve of the [Japanese] policies. . . . He recognized that opinion in British Columbia, that counted as far as votes were concerned, could not be ignored." That rings almost exactly true for me, although in 1941-42 it was support for the government's war policies and not votes that mattered.

Similarly, that kind of attitude explains why King's cabinet, full as it was in early 1942 of tired, harassed men waging a far vaster war than they could ever have contemplated, rejected the liberal advice of the civil servants and went along with stern action. There was a war on, Hong Kong and its Canadian battalions had been lost, there seemed to be a threat to the Coast from the Japanese Empire, and the Japanese Canadians either were in danger from Anglo vigilantes or were themselves a potential danger to the state. (If Takeo Nakano's *Within the Barbed Wire Fence* is correct, some *were* a danger to the state.) In any case, the politicians decided they had to act on this political question, no matter what the bureaucrats said. I do not like that decision one whit, but I can understand, as Ms. Sunahara cannot, why it was made. I can also understand why the people of B.C. and Canada supported it enthusiastically, and it does not surprise me that a few years later opinion began to shift toward support for a policy of leniency. The Canadian tendency, amply demonstrated by October 1970 and its aftermath, is to support brutal action in a crisis and to feel sorry about it afterwards. Again, I wish that Sunahara had managed to get these kinds of points into her book.

Finally, I bridle just a bit at Ms. Sunahara's assertion that the secret files of government have been revealed to her alone and for the first time. Ken Adachi had every opportunity to make use of the same material (with one or two relatively minor exceptions) she saw; if he failed to use the King and Mackenzie Papers, both of which were open, or departmental files, that was only because he did not choose to do so. It does no credit to the author of a fine book to suggest that she is revealing the truth suppressed by a guilty government. The government was guilty, and this is the truth. Let the truth speak for itself.

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Within the Barbed Wire Fence, by Takeo Ujo Nakano with Leatrice Nakano. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. Pp. 126, *illus.*

For most immigrants British Columbia has been a place for doing, for getting ahead and making a future. In such a setting change tends to be located in the environment rather than in self, and life takes on a particular materialism. "Nature" becomes "resources" and as such is bared to the arsenal of industrial technology. This has been the predominant British Columbian pattern, but not the only pattern. Some immigrants sought havens in mountain valleys, others peered mystically into the forest, and almost everyone worked out a new life here in relation to memories of home elsewhere. Thus the past enters British Columbia as nostalgia and, for some of the most sensitive among us, nature represents the best of what is new.

Takeo Ujo Nakano was one of the many who came to get ahead. As a teen-ager on his uncle's berry farm in Hammond in 1920 he dreamed of owning a large farm of his own. Later, a mill hand at Woodfibre, he dreamed of putting aside enough money so that he, his wife (whom he married in Japan in 1930) and their daughter could return comfortably to Japan. Events would take another course. After Pearl Harbor he was sent to a work camp in Yellowhead Pass. His wife and daughter went to Greenwood. Eventually he learned that he would be reunited with his family, but official plans changed and he found himself in the Slocan Valley. He and several other deeply disappointed men refused to work, and for their intransigence were sent to jail in the Immigration Building in Vancouver and from there to a prisoner-of-war camp at Angler on the north shore of Lake Superior. There he lived with hundreds of other