

As final resting place,  
 Canada is chosen.  
 On citizenship paper,  
 Signing  
 Hand trembles.

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COLE HARRIS

*Bull of the Woods, The Gordon Gibson Story*, by Gordon Gibson with Carol Renison. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1980. Pp. 310, \$16.95 hardcover.

Gordon Gibson, through his own words as recorded by Renison, comes through as a racist, sexist, bullying and often insensitive man. He also emerges as a tough, often courageous, sometimes high-minded and surprisingly honest entrepreneur. Perhaps because one senses that only such an individual could have run the risks he ran, built the mills he built and established the forest companies he did in the pioneer conditions of the 1920s to 1950s, one winces at the revelations but reads on.

Too much of the book is a personal diary, written as if in the first person, in which Gibson eulogizes himself. This is unfortunate because the events he brought about, the territory on which he imposed his will and the people whose lives he affected are exceedingly interesting to the reader who is concerned with British Columbia's history. Fewer precious revelations and more detailed descriptions of events would have made the book a lasting tribute to the man. He is worthy of a lasting tribute, the negative characteristics notwithstanding.

His version of the logging and fishing conditions and small mills in the 1920s, of boats, log-booms, storms and mishaps in dangerous seas through that decade and the next few, and, most particularly, of the establishment of Tahsis after the war are worth the reading.

During the war, the Gibson brothers obtained contracts to build several airports on Vancouver Island and the North Coast. Tofino, Ladysmith and Sandspit were among the projects. As well they obtained the rights to cut any spruce on Vancouver Island; hence the logging camps at Zeballos, Tahsis, Ucluelet and elsewhere. Out of these contracts and camps they built a not inconsiderable empire. It was no smooth development; there were tragedies, fires and losses, and there is little doubt that a capacity to take risks and live with the consequences was essential to their ultimate success. Tahsis was such a risk. Its success depended on

the possibility of deep-sea ships loading there, and of a small crew building the wharf, camp and site in a very short time. The task was completed, but its completion would not have been predicted by any outsider.

Gibson discusses — one wishes in greater detail — the scandalous Forest Management Licence giveaways of the (first) Bennett era. It was these that encouraged him to enter politics as the Liberal member from Lillooet. His anger was that of the “small” logger versus the giants, and it is as fresh today as it was during the Sloan hearings. The 1978 Legislature stands sadly as a repeat performance, but the original Gordon Gibson was no longer in the house in 1978 bringing to his anger and accusations the wealth of experience in the woods.

His argument had several aspects to it worthy of attention today. The one usually understood to be the whole of it was that big companies were given monopoly rights to timber. There is no doubt this is true. The argument of the 1950s government was identical to that of the 1978 government: that only big companies (like BCFP, which kept its timber licences even though the Minister, Sommers, was jailed for accepting bribes) could properly reforest and maintain the resource. Gibson contends that most of the reforestation argument was phoney because nature reforests faster and cheaper than foresters. He also maintains that the licences guaranteed these companies such an excess of resource rights that their inefficient use of the timber was predictable. He has little kindness in heart for Justice Sloan, whom he regarded as frontman for the monopolists. His comments on politicians of the time are illuminating: he respects Conservatives and socialists as doing their proper task in representing their respective class interests. His wrath is reserved for the opportunists and unprincipled, all of whom (though he exempts Gaglardi!) were in the government benches.

One gives a somewhat unrepresentative version of the book by concentrating on the interesting historical events. Running through it are anecdotes about the personal life of the man which are of less historical interest except as they might reveal attitudes probably common to his time and situation.

He talks in soap-opera terms of his love and respect for his mother, wives, and assorted “lady-friends.” Indeed, he says at one point that his closest friends were all women. This is consistent with the other view — that women are designed for the benefits of men and their rightful task is child-rearing and keeping the home.

He enjoyed the friendship as well of Indians, Chinese and other non-white men — again, however, within stereotyped roles. This leads to a rather amusing passage in which he is burdened with a Chinese male housekeeper because his wife objects to his female housekeeper in the Tahsis camp quarters. He quickly sends the new servant home because while he could tolerate the rumours of a liaison with the woman, it was too much to entertain rumours regarding a Chinese man.

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*The House (Convention Centre, Stadium, Rapid Transit System, Etc.) That Jack Built: Mayor Jack Volrich and Vancouver Politics*, by Stan Persky. Vancouver and Toronto: New Star Books, 1980. Pp. 226, map and photographs, \$3.95.

While this book fits within the “developers-are-the-root-of-evil” genre of contemporary urban political criticism, it steers clear of the simplistic self-righteousness and narrow malice that so often mark the genre and rests instead upon wide-ranging narrative presented with modesty, wit and humour. Persky’s deftly candid introduction serves to ward off most potential criticism. He calls his work “an informal assessment of recent Vancouver politics,” and states that “readers might as well be forewarned that this saga tends neither towards the scandalous nor the scholarly.” He is moved to write the book not only by “the sheer fun” of doing so, but as well by his belief that better civic government depends upon a better-informed public and by his conviction that those who think seriously about civic issues ought “to spend more of their time and talents addressing the general public rather than just talking to each other.” Persky confesses to the motive of “lending history a helping hand in making judgements.” Since the book is entirely a free-enterprise product, he does not have to express “obsequious thanks to grant-dispensing government agencies, as authors are often required to do these days.” He does give thanks to Joachim Foikas, Vancouver’s federally funded Town Fool of the late sixties, for reintroducing him “to the rhymes of Mother Goose, which, if not exactly precise about the evils of capitalism, none the less speak to the human condition.” Persky mentions that his interest in civic government was furthered in his student days by his being jailed for loitering in the vicinity of the Vancouver Police Department’s riot squad while it was on active duty.