

Book Reviews

Overland from Canada to British Columbia by Mr. Thomas McMicking of Queenston, Canada West, edited by Joanne Leduc. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981.

Many historians and others of that ilk tend to regard editorial scholarship as the least demanding intellectually and the most mechanical technically. Editorial scholarship is seen to have the singular virtue of being able to be picked up and put down at will without the need for the sustained effort and the close concentration required for the creation of the written text. This is a very simplistic view of the role of an author. To do the job properly a very carefully conceived approach to the original work to be considered must be made. Any person perusing the admirable volumes produced by the Yale University Press of James Boswell, Horace Walpole or Benjamin Franklin will instinctively be aware of such a plan.

A good editor is very like a good theatrical producer. The latter knows that he must not obtrude himself too much on what is finally seen by the audience. What is perceived must be right for the play, not something to satisfy the ego of the producer. The editor, like the producer, cannot allow the trappings to obscure what is being said. Moreover, elaborate costume design and elegant sets cannot hide the fact of a badly acted play or one that is unsubstantial. "The play's the thing," and so too is it with a text to be worth the time and effort of a good editor.

Joanne Leduc understands her role very nicely. She has prepared an introduction to Thomas McMicking's journal that is precise and thoughtful. She has done her research carefully in a wide variety of scholarly institutions and given the requisite background information in the notes. Sadly, some of the value of the latter is lost by the decision — one presumes of the University of British Columbia Press to diminish the costs — to place the notes at the end of the book. Since most of the notes are explanatory it is extremely irritating to have to keep turning to the end of

the printed text for the reader to make use of such material. Footnotes which are merely reference material can quite properly repose at the conclusion of the material itself, but when the notes are explanatory, charmingly informative and well written, it is unfortunate that they are not placed where they can be read easily. The upshot is, of course, that most readers never bother with these notes and all of the good efforts of an editor go for nothing. Miss Leduc deserves better treatment than is allocated to her by the format of the book.

To continue with the thespian comparison, an inadequate play cannot be carried even by great actors and actresses. Regretfully it must be said Thomas McMicking is not a particularly distinguished or perceptive writer. His story of the expeditions begun in Canada West in the spring of 1862 and ending on the west coast in early September is interesting enough recounting the various adventures along the journey. However, it is essentially just a narrative — in its present form it appeared as a series of articles in the *British Columbian*, a newspaper printed in New Westminster. (The present editor has wisely not subdivided the text as it was first published.) Crossing overland was far from easy, and all of this is recorded faithfully and correctly but without much panache. McMicking declared he did not recommend or encourage “the overland route” despite the fact that it was cheap and not overly difficult, but rather he was writing to encourage the building of a transcontinental railway to allow for mass settlement of the prairies. Telling the story as he does, and it must have been a tedious business travelling at such a slow pace, it would be evident to any reader that a railway, or at the very least a proper road system, was essential for the British North American colonies to develop properly.

McMicking was obviously a sensible individual. He organized the expedition properly and directed it very competently. There are few accidents and little loss of life, aside from drowning, and “the Overlanders” could feel satisfied that they had such good leadership. McMicking’s account is rarely humorous — his remark on roasted skunk is virtually the only comic comment — and he was obviously a very solemn young man. He gives praise or critical comment when he deems it necessary. His fellow “Overlanders” seem sensible indeed. One in particular deserves much praise, and that is Catherine Schubert, the only woman in the group, who is, indeed, a most admirable character. McMicking singles her out for special commendation.

For the local history enthusiast this is a nice addition to the bookshelf.

As noted earlier, the editorial work is impeccable and the illustrative material well chosen. Thomas McMicking, the author, is an agreeable companion for an evening, but even his best friend could never say that he was a great writer.

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Vancouver: An Illustrated History, by Patricia E. Roy. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, and National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, 1980.

As one of the contributors to the History of Canadian Cities Series, I had been reluctant to review companion volumes. I feared the unseemly prospect of appearing to tell tales out of school or, at the other extreme, becoming a booster for the series rather than a critic of the volume at hand. Nonetheless, in the course of supervising a series volume through the complicated and often molasses-like processes that mark the sponsorship of the project, it seemed increasingly appropriate to review *Vancouver* in light of an insider's perspective on what was done and why. Accordingly, I have reviewed the book with an eye to the objectives of the series, the hazards of a transcontinental co-ordination of publication, and the particular viewpoints of Patricia Roy on labour and political issues. I have singled out the latter for comment because they represent the most controversial stance apparent in the book — its assent to the elite's perception of the city.

The series was designed to meet scholarly standards while reaching a general readership. Scholarly monographs, certainly those produced about my city (Hamilton), have set high academic standards but frustrated interested and intelligent citizens who were not initiated into the special rites of controversial methodologies.

More commonly, Canadian cities have been the subjects of uncritical and unmethodical urban biographies. When he initiated the series, author and editor Alan Artibise prepared a guide to assure a balance of the academic and the popular. Furthermore, to promote comparative studies, all volumes had to contain sections on the urban economy, population, the urban landscape, civic politics, and society and culture. As well, serial information on population growth, national origins, religious denominations and other measures of urban characteristics had to appear in a set of tables. To date Alan Artibise's editorship has been vigorous; he