

Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle. The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember*. Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1982.

*Boss Whistle* is about the coal mining families and communities of Vancouver Island. While the story is written by Lynne Bowen, it is built from material generated by the local people from their own memories. Both the story and the efforts expended in its production are worthy of our attention.

Armed with 130 hours of taped interviews with 100 informants and the technical assistance of a team of local experts, Bowen and the Coal Tyee Society, which headed up the project, have produced a stirring and richly detailed account of the nature of the workplace and the workday for coal miners, everyday life in the various Island coal-mining communities, industrial struggles, and the tragic industrial accidents and deaths.

In the annals of North American coal-mining history the Vancouver Island coal-mining operations loom large — large levels of production (when Number One mine in Nanaimo, which was the oldest operating in British Columbia, closed in 1938, 18,000,000 tons of coal had been dug beneath Nanaimo harbour); large strikes (the Big Strike of 1912 to 1914, for example); and large explosions (between the opening of Number One mine in Nanaimo in 1884 to the year 1912, 373 lives were lost in Vancouver Island coal mines as a result of gas explosions, 64 of them in a single mine accident near Cumberland in 1901). All of this history and much more is related in a sensible blend of oral testimony and a narrative based on archival and secondary sources. Of special note, Bowen pays a great deal of attention to the racial question. The coal-mining work force in this region was a racially mixed, socially stratified one that included Chinese (a Chinatown in one community contained 3,000 people at the turn of the century), Japanese and blacks. The stories of discrimination suffered by the three groups are handled in a candid and unsentimental manner. The author and her informants convey a strong sense of all aspects of working in the mines and living in the various mining communities.

It is a moving, intimate and impressionistic story of people and places that obviously mean a great deal to Vancouver Islanders. Important also is the fact that *Boss Whistle* fits into a new and developing historiography in North America of writing local history from sources generated by local people themselves.