

*Wilderness of Fortune: The Story of Western Canada*, by James K. Smith. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1983. Pp. 310; illus.

To those interested in Western Canadian and particularly fur trade history, James K. Smith is well known as the biographer of David Thompson and Alexander Mackenzie. His newest book surveys the history of the Pacific and Prairie west from the period of pre-contact to the alienated seventies. Two chapters focus specifically on British Columbia, with further comment placed appropriately in chapters that have been topically and chronologically organized.

While this book might be properly identified as an illustrated history, it is not to be dismissed as just another of those volumes long on handsome or exotic illustrations and thin on penetrating comment. On both counts, pictures and text, this book deserves high praise. While the illustrations include some of the old stand-bys too often reproduced, the great majority are fresh, fascinating, and often in colour (though the captions on some of the photographs are not as precise as one would wish). The text demonstrates, moreover, that the author has done more than just search for pictures and paintings and that he is conversant with most of the better monographs that have appeared on western Canadian history over the past decade. What results is a very solid overview that is supported by an interpretive foundation.

As a survey of western Canadian history, however, the book would be even more attractive if it were not quite so heavily weighted in favour of the period before 1900. Comprising about two-thirds of this volume, this is the strongest part of the book, and it reflects an author at home with his material. Given the lesser emphasis played upon the twentieth century, the chapters devoted to western settlement, the war years, the booming twenties, the depression and the contemporary west are a little too brief. While the fur trade has received its proper due, and more, the stuff of twentieth-century wilderness fortunes, mining and forestry in British Columbia, and agriculture or petroleum on the prairies, warrant a greater profile in both illustrated and written comment. But this is a modest quibble. Smith has captured something of the grandeur of the western wilderness and the drama of its occupation while largely avoiding the sentimentality and romanticism that plagues and distorts almost all of the earlier popular histories of western Canada. In all, this is an appealing book that readily merits a place on one's gift list.