

Book Reviews

The CPR West: The Iron Road and the Making of a Nation, edited by Hugh A. Dempsey. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984. Pp. 333, illus., index. \$24.95 cloth.

To commemorate the centennial of the arrival of the CPR in Fort Calgary the Glenbow Museum organized "The Great CPR Exposition" in 1983. Hugh Dempsey, an assistant director of the museum, invited a number of scholars to "explore the social and economic significance of the railway" at a well-publicized academic conference held at Banff to coincide with this exhibit. The fifteen publishable papers arising from that conference are reproduced in this volume.

The editor makes no attempt to integrate the separate pieces or sum up at the end. He simply identifies the authors and presents their papers. This is normally considered to be an abdication of editorial responsibility. Apart from appearing in rough chronological order, the papers bear no relation to one another. From the problem of oriental labour at the beginning to the 1939 Royal Tour at the end, the reader simply bounces about randomly wherever the curiosity of the participants alights.

If no particular theme or substance unites these papers apart from the thin line of the railroad, perhaps they are more closely related in style. Is there a way of writing western Canadian railroad history? The light editorial hand and the variety of contributors make this a suitable occasion to consider that question. Many of the senior scholars in the field of western history are represented (Dempsey, Jameson, Stanley); some less familiar names appear (Hart, Jones, Marsh, Mitchner), but the bulk of the freight is carried by academic historians in the upper ranks (Breen, den Otter, Eagle, Regehr, Roy and Stamp, with whom Kula and Foran might be associated).

As a rule these essays do not take a question as their point of departure; they are not conscious entries in any debate, nor do they venture any novel

interpretations themselves. Theory is never tested or used as a guide, nor are new methods attempted. Attention is fixed upon events and personalities — though sometimes groups — rather than trends, movements, forces or ideas. Essentially these papers are reports on documentary hordes based upon a commendable familiarity with all of the relevant surrounding primary sources. The typical document is a letter, departmental file, government report or newspaper item. Archival research is the hallmark of this kind of writing, as is the restricted focus, the narrative form and the reluctance to venture beyond simple summary statements.

The result is a curious historical literature which makes reference only to itself. One searches in vain in the extensive footnotes for evidence that anyone anywhere else has ever written about similar matters or that western Canadian issues could be illuminated by comparison with experience elsewhere. No other discipline or field of inquiry has anything useful to say, apparently. Western history is sufficient unto itself. The usual descriptive term for such work is antiquarianism.

No matter how new the evidence or novel the sources, not much can be made of a subject without some external reference point. The CPR may well have been at the forefront in all sorts of things; it may have been applying concepts developed elsewhere and modifying them for the western Canadian environment; it may have been simply another "case" of fairly uniform railroad behaviour. But we will never know from writing of this sort.

These general remarks having been made, exemptions must be granted to several contributors. A. A. den Otter conceives of the CPR's relationship to the western Canadian coal mining industry within a broader framework of the economics of the firm, and David Breen's essay on the early petroleum industry is cast in the wider framework of industrial development.

Most of the papers are well written, some have considerable charm and poignancy, and the publisher is to be congratulated on the handsome production, but one is left with the impression after reading these separate pieces that if we are to see the CPR in a new light we will need a good deal more than new documents.