

The Alaska Highway: Papers of the 40th Anniversary Symposium, edited by Kenneth Coates. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985. Pp. xx, 208; \$22.95.

Conference papers are a drug on the market, and it is a brave publisher who risks money (or a granting agency's dole) on them. The quality inevitably is varied in the extreme, for all too often the organizers seem to have been obliged to include their chairperson's crony from Oshkosh, and ordinarily the subject matter is so broad that the only thing holding the book together is the binding (and these days, even the binding is likely to fall apart before the book is half read.) This collection of essays on the Alaska Highway may include some by cronies — it is hard to imagine that Alaska Highway specialists would not know each other — but certainly the subject matter is tightly focused.

What we have here are almost all of the papers presented to a 1982 conference at Fort St. John to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the construction of the great highway from Edmonton to Fairbanks. The fourteen essays are grouped into sections on the planning of the highway, its construction, the threat it posed to Canadian sovereignty, its impact on the people of the area and its postwar operations. The contributors are historians from Canada and the United States and specialists from other genres. What gives the book its utility is the range of the contributions, which include somewhat unusual subjects as medical problems during the construction of the project, the effects of the highway on Yukon Indians, and the army's planning for the defence of the highway in the early postwar years.

The most interesting papers (to this reviewer, at any rate) are those that treat the Alaska Highway as a problem in Canadian-American relations. The Americans had not been enormously concerned about a land link to their Alaskan Territory until Pearl Harbor changed the strategic balance, and then the pressures from Washington on Ottawa grew intense. The most striking contribution to this book is by Capt. Vince Bezeau, then of the Directorate of History, National Defence Headquarters. While acknowledging that the construction of the road was "a magnificent achievement carried out as a military project in time of war," Bezeau also argues — convincingly — that it was hastily planned, without due consideration for strategic necessity, and that it proved unnecessary in defence terms given what we now know of Japanese military plans as well as the fact that the bulk of Alaskan supply con-

tinued to go by sea, just as it did before the road was built. There is some hindsight there, to be sure, but it is largely convincing.

As striking, although it has been known for some time, was the extraordinarily lax attitude Ottawa initially showed to the threat posed by the influx of thousands of foreign troops to the maintenance of Canadian sovereignty. The slightly bitter joke among the locals was that the U.S. Army answered the telephone with "Army of Occupation," and for a time the senior "bureaucrat" representing Ottawa was a Chamber of Commerce official in Edmonton. It was the British High Commissioner to Canada, Malcolm MacDonald, who first blew the whistle, and Curtis Nordman, the conference organizer, tells the story of this able man's successful (and quite improper for a British diplomat) efforts to get Mackenzie King and the Ottawa mandarins to focus on the Northwest. For some time afterwards, the Prime Minister was wont to muse in his diary on the American "hand" spreading over the continent, and his government, just as soon as the war was over, paid the Americans in full for all their installations in Canada and gratefully ushered them out. Nordman happily also includes the full text of MacDonald's decisive memorandum on the subject.

This is a good collection of papers, well edited and well presented with maps and photographs, good enough to give the lie to those strictures about conference papers with which this review began.

York University

J. L. GRANATSTEIN