

## Book Reviews

*Working Lives: Vancouver, 1886-1986*, by Elaine Bernard, Logan Hovis, Robert McDonald, Louise May, Jeremy Mouat, Keith Ralston, Allen Seager, Andrea Smith and Veronica Strong-Boag. Vancouver: New Star books, 1985.

As noted in the preface to this beautifully illustrated and produced celebration of one hundred years of labouring life in Vancouver, fifty years ago such a project was almost unthinkable. William Bennett, a communist labour journalist and no relation to the reigning family of post-war British Columbia, commented on the city's Golden Anniversary with recognition that "little mention has been made of . . . the working-class, without whom there would have been no Vancouver, no celebration, no jubilee." To make sure that history did not repeat itself, the Working Lives Collective was formed, gathered each month for more than two years, assigned archivist Louise May the task of choosing photographs, divided up responsibility for writing substantive introductions to the themes of the volume, and sought other authors to pen the brief one-page accounts that accompany the many illustrations which make up the texts of each section. The result is a mine of information, the wealth surfacing in prose and picture. Like all mining ventures, there are some unproductive seams and not a little dross. But with a workforce of over fifty toiling to cover a chronological sweep of one hundred years, attentive to the episodic features of class conflict and organization as well as the enduring continuities of family, cultural, and job lives, the final text is a testimony to the hard work, resiliency and determination of both the Collective and the class they chose to depict.

Let me comment on the words first, for it is obvious that the Collective structured its illustrative choices around particular premises rooted in much recent academic writing on the history of workers in Canada. The three thematic sections of the volume, for instance, as well as their ordering — Working, Living, Organizing — reflect an insistence that labour's

past is more than simply unionization, encompassing lives both caught in and sustained by work processes and life cycles where the active creativity of workers runs smack into the determined limitations and necessities of a society ordered around the inequalities of class. Thus the “Working” and “Living” sections convey nicely the possibilities as well as the stark imposed realities of working lives in Vancouver’s one-hundred year history: loggers looked for work in saloons that were informal hiring halls, raising their glasses in recognition that they would soon be travelling north to engage in back-breaking forest jobs that left little time or energy for the leisurely drink; working-class families developed forms of self-reliance and solidarities that carried them through the cyclical hard times that struck every household and the domestic crises — unwanted pregnancies, gruesome abortions, the death or desertion of the breadwinner — that disrupted so many; within a working class mobilized along ethnic lines by capital, which designated specific work sectors the preserve of Japanese, Chinese, French-Canadian, native Indian, East Indian or white, impressive alliances could emerge on the shop floor at the same time as segmentation survived and the market triumphed in practices such as the Japanese picture bride system. In this connectedness of work and life, self-activity and structured limitation, we see some of the content setting the stage for organization and resistance.

In orchestrating the volume in this way, the Collective was obviously guided by a scholarly conception of what working lives are all about. That agreed upon, they then intended to use illustrations and texts to popularize this notion of labouring experience. Such effort is admirable. Unfortunately, the lengthy introductions, first to the book itself, and then to each theme within it, while containing much of individual merit, do not quite achieve this, in part because these introductions are rather uneven and lack co-ordination.

Allen Seager is at his populist best in the volume’s general introduction, leading the reader through the pre-Depression history of Vancouver labour with flair and ease, quoting champions of “the producing classes,” pillorying “colonialism’s bureaucratic drones” and a business class that proved to be, with the collapse of 1929, “the god that failed,” mixing metaphors with the best of the west coast demagogues. It is not until well into this tale that the history of Vancouver’s working class recedes from view and Seager hoists himself upon the social-democratic soap box to flail away at all of those politically to the right of the CCF-NDP, whose abandonment of, among other things, “military Keynesianism” he decries

as but one of many of “unplanned capitalism’s” slaps in the face of the people.

There is nothing wrong with this kind of introductory commentary, but one wonders about the turns not taken: about some attempt to address the meaning of the image of working-class life that so often appears in the stylized posing of an experience captured through a photographer’s lens; about the inevitable passivity of a class frozen at work, at play, or on parade; about who took the pictures and why; about the relationships of work and life or struggle and accommodation, and how they are “revealed” in a particular artistic medium.

While the thematic introductions by Robert McDonald (*Working*), Veronica Strong-Boag (*Living*) and Keith Ralston (*Organizing*) are useful, they repeat some of the content of Seager’s larger introduction as well as skirting the relationships between image and actuality that demand consideration in a book such as this. McDonald and Strong-Boag are, to be sure, less flamboyant than Seager, and their commentaries are structured around their respective concerns with the organization of work and the formal and informal ways in which the welfare of the working class has been “protected.” The irony is that McDonald, the historian of Vancouver’s powerful capitalist interests, and Strong-Boag, the feminist historian of the welfare state and its various institutions, can end their accounts with such divergent conclusions. For McDonald the lessons of looking at a century of work are stark indeed: “The essential powerlessness of Vancouver’s working people continues” (33). Strong-Boag, however, sees the lessons of a century of living as holding forth far more in the way of potential: “Vancouver’s working people have a long history of solidarity. Their courage, ingenuity and co-operation holds promise for the future” (97). Small wonder that the book was built on recognition of both necessity *and* desire.

Keith Ralston’s introduction to the “Organizing” section could have resolved this apparent impasse with a sensitive discussion of how workers have moved to overcome powerlessness through organizational campaigns that linked the structured exploitation of the workplace, the oppression of life in a class society and the recurring historical capacity of the working class to survive and regroup on the basis of a refusal to surrender all of life to the employer. Yet Ralston’s account of one hundred years of organizing is rather wooden, a texty tour of the political and economic institutions of the working class that actually tells us little about organizing, organizers and their victories and defeats. Regardless of whether he is concerned with the Knights of Labor or the Independent Canadian

Transit Union, Ralston offers us up very conventional wisdoms with little in the way of interpretive support. About the most conventional of organizational breakthroughs — the International Woodworkers of America successes of the 1940s — Ralston is surprisingly silent, mentioning the IWA only in passing in conjunction with credit unions, newspapers and the use of radio in the 1930s.

Seager, McDonald, Strong-Boag and Ralston are all academics. Words are their business. Not so with many of the contributors who produced the short texts that appear beside each photograph or figure. Here we read accounts of the smaller events and experiences situated within the larger themes already introduced: of work in *specific* sectors, such as mills, breweries, sugar refineries, garment factories, shipyards, banks, hospitals, homes and schools; of courting, marrying, drinking and sporting; of socialists, union women, the One Big Union, the unemployed struggles, public sector workers and, of course, Solidarity. These passages were written by students and trade unionists, as well as by other academics. They are fascinating glimpses into the larger history this book is all about, and some are as elegant and as enlightening as many a scholarly article. In one brief page unionist/student Mike James introduces us to the essential contours of work in the maritime sector. Gillian Wade outlines the history of working-class housing admirably, while Louise May provides a brief account of the making of Strathcona, an immigrant working-class neighbourhood threatened in the 1950s with being “re-developed” out of existence. The list could be extended almost indefinitely.

But what of the *pictures*? Are they just an adornment to the text, or do they really speak loudly, and at length, on the matters they are obviously meant to address? In a way we just do not know, for as I have indicated above, there is no attempt to decipher the meaning of the images captured in the past and recreated here. Nevertheless, something can be said, or at least some questions posed. The starting point is with the suggestion that photographic images of working lives are situated within specific contexts, where class is embedded in and hence reflected through particular ideological and social constructions.

The static quality of the *single* photograph raises this interpretive issue most forcefully, and in a book such as this, so concerned with the broad sweep of labour’s history, necessarily reduces the history to a set of snapshots. Thus, to take only the photographs in the “Organizing” section is to confront the obvious: why, of the twenty-four pictures, cartoons and facsimiles illuminating this theme, are so few — eight by the most liberal

count — action oriented? Accompanying the short text on the 1923 long-shoremen's strike, for instance, is a photograph of police combing the neighbourhood around Ballantyne Pier after 1,000 strikers marched during a 1935 conflict. My main concern is not that the text and photograph do not correspond in terms of event and chronology, although this is a small matter that might have been dealt with easily. Rather, the image of class emerging out of the illustration is one of conflict retreating in the face of state power, an image of dispersal that I suspect stands in contrast to the image of defiant resistance and struggle against considerable odds that might emerge from a *sequence* of photographs that showed the marchers gathering, moving forward, confronting the police, and escaping repressive assault with flight to their own community. No book such as this could afford the space to do this kind of thing for all of its subject matter and it is possible that such a series of photographs does not exist; but neither can books like *Working Lives* fail to address the problem.

Illustrative histories of this sort, moreover, should gesture toward the ways in which particular forces generate images that are conceived to effect a conscious ideological purpose. Many of Hine's classic industrial photographs, for instance, can be read as glorification of America's technological achievements, an overt attempt to sanitize working lives in the interests of presenting the march of industry in the most favourable, indeed mythical, light. Cape Breton's Leslie Sheddon also produced these kinds of photographic representations of working lives for the Dominion Coal and Steel Corporation. To look at some of the photographs in this collection — of women working at Burrard Yarrows during World War II, of a telephone operator (1915), of linemen in North Vancouver (1960), of painters at Vancouver's docks, of building tradesmen perched on the partially constructed Granville-Pender post office (1890) — is to think that something of this sort must have been going on in the origins of these depictions of working in Vancouver. Nor is this ideological content simply a matter of external manipulation of the actualities of class. In the stylized respectability of working-class marches, parades and Labour Day gatherings, advanced elements within the workers' movement sought to capture and preserve an image of class at odds with the grimy experience of labour. So, too, one suspects, did the families that "sat" for some of the contented patriarchal poses that preserved the idyllic within domestic life only to obfuscate and mystify the tensions, resentments and confinements of the home. What is striking in this pictorial depiction of one hundred years of working, living and organizing is the lack of dirt, squalour, anger and alienation that we know was associated with many

workers' daily lives. To be sure, this does appear, in photographs of arrests, kitchen work and cannery labour, but it is nowhere explicit and unambiguous. The medium passes on to us, implicitly and subtly, an undeniable message. We need some words to let us know why and how this is happening.

To raise questions like these is, no doubt, to stretch this work past what it was meant to do, to quibble too cantankerously. But this is much too good a book to let these matters slip by without comment. It is, of course, a celebration of one hundred years of working in Vancouver, and as that it is a great success. The Working Lives Collective should be justifiably proud. Certainly it has answered Bill Bennett's 1936 call for a tribute to working people, although Old Bill might have wondered whatever happened to the Communist Party, which receives only the most indirect treatment here. Why, he might ponder, do feminist unions in the 1970s merit explicit coverage, when the Communist Party, so much a part of Vancouver's labour history since the 1930s, receives no comparable space? Another Bill Bennett, however, surely won't see this as a problem. Indeed, what will the former provincial Premier have to say about this book? I expect he'll like the pictures.

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*Hamilton Mack Laing: Hunter-Naturalist*, by Richard Mackie. Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985. Pp. 282, illus. \$19.95.

The ambivalence towards nature that is revealed in the desire to at once both celebrate it and control it is perhaps particularly Canadian. The nature story is in many ways a Canadian genre, just as hunting is a major national pastime. Hamilton Mack Laing was an exponent of both, and, according to Richard Mackie, this "Hunter-Naturalist" saw no contradiction between writing stories that celebrated the natural world and also going out with his gun to kill vast numbers of birds and animals. Indeed, Mackie argues that Laing's apparently contradictory attitudes were a natural product of the Canadian frontier.

Mack Laing felt cheated by being born in Ontario in 1883, but he grew up in rural Manitoba as the west was opening up to settlement. After leaving school he became a teacher, serving in a number of small communities through the first decade of this century. It was during this period that he wrote his first stories. Laing was very much influenced by