

## Book Reviews

*Spilsbury's Coast: Pioneer Years in the Wet West*, by Howard White and Jim Spilsbury. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing Co. Ltd., 1987. Pp. 272, cloth \$24.95.

*Spilsbury's Coast* is the first instalment of the autobiography of Jim Spilsbury, the radio repairman from Savary Island who formed a highly successful Vancouver-based radio-telephone manufacturing company during the Second World War. This book deals with Spilsbury's family, his youth, and his early career; a later volume will deal with his post-war career as president of Queen Charlotte Airlines and radio manufacturers Spilsbury and Tindall.

Like a curiously large amount of B.C. history, this book begins in an English country house in the late nineteenth century. Spilsbury's grandfather, known only as "the Governor," was a Church of England clergyman who presided over an eleven-member family at The Langlands, Finedon, Derbyshire. The family owed its wealth to an ancestor named James Ward who made a fortune constructing canals in the early phase of the industrial revolution. By the 1880s, however, "they were what you call landed gentry, meaning they just lay about doing nothing, living off a community of tenant farmers." "None of them could do anything except sit around showing off their breeding and eating up the family fortune."

Three of the Governor's five sons came to British Columbia. "Uncle Frank" arrived in 1878 and built a split-cedar shack on the Fraser at Whonnock. After a few years he got bored, returned to England, and transferred the land to his brother Benjamin, a Cambridge graduate. "Uncle Ben," however, also got bored and moved to the new city of Vancouver where he teamed up with businessman R. V. Winch. In about 1890 he transferred his property to his younger brother, Ashton Wilmot Spilsbury or "Dad," a graduate of Repton, the English private school, and Clare College, Cambridge. Ashton cleared part of the 360-acre farm and

in 1898, aged twenty-six, married twenty-seven-year-old Alice Blizard of Fort Langley, a recent immigrant from London, England.

Ashton was generous, sedentary, and somewhat ineffectual; Alice was practical, assertive, and independent. In 1905 they returned to Findern for the birth of their son, named Ashton James Ward Spilsbury after their canal-digging ancestor. "Name him after the only member of this family who ever made any money," said the Governor, leaning on his cane, "it's high time somebody else made some money!" The Spilsburys, however, considered Alice "a caste below them and they treated her accordingly," a fact which "changed her whole life — and Dad's life too." She became fiercely unpatriotic and nonconformist. Her son recalls that "she cut her hair short like a man's and took to wearing men's trousers. To show her absolute disdain of everything proper and British, she became an ardent suffragette, she adopted the cause of the anti-British terrorists in Ireland, and generally became a very difficult person to live with. She led my poor dad a hell of a life, really."

In 1906 or 1907 the Spilsburys returned to the farm at Whonnock where they attempted, unsuccessfully, to manufacture Devonshire Cream for the New Westminster market. Just before the First World War they sold their farm and invested in a thirty-six-foot boat, a project which fizzled in the pre-war depression. Broke, the Spilsburys moved into a tent on Savary Island some hundred miles north of Vancouver. Laid out in 1910-11 by an investors' syndicate, the island became a summer resort for Vancouver's well-to-do, one of whom took pity on the homeless family and invited them to stay in his summer cottage over the winter of 1914-15. The next year the Spilsburys moved back to their tent, where they remained until 1924. During these ten years Ashton and his son Jim built fences, dug wells, built and repaired summer cabins, worked on the island's roads, and cut firewood for the summer residents. Fortunately for the family, Ashton had been at Repton with the man who became governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. "Dad was overdrawn and overdrawn again," Spilsbury writes, "and the Hudson's Bay would carry him. If they hadn't, we never would have made it." Tent life ended in 1924 when Ashton inherited \$20,000 from his mother's estate, and he was able to build "a very comfortable home" on two choice waterfront lots bought for the family by Alice Spilsbury's friend Miss Ethel Burpee.

Jim Spilsbury's only schooling took place between 1914 and 1919 at the Savary Island school; he hated the experience and graduated when he was fourteen years old. His mother — who loved disciplined organizations like the army, the navy, and the cricket team — got him enrolled in the

merchant marine, and he went to China as an apprentice officer on the lumber carrier SS *Melville Dollar*. His interest fired by the ship's wireless radios, he quit the merchant marine in 1920 and returned, aged fifteen, determined to become a ship's wireless operator. Over the next few years he worked as a hooktender's helper, learned to operate a donkey engine, spent a summer cutting shingle bolts, and in 1922, aged seventeen, got his L.D.E. or Logging Donkey Engineer's steam ticket. After two years in the woods, and with a thousand dollars saved, he quit logging and began his career in the communications industry.

He was already a radio expert. In 1922 he jolted the residents of Savary by picking up a San Francisco station that was one of the first to broadcast not Morse Code but music and the human voice. "This was the *human voice* coming out of space. . . . For sheer shock to your system the Sputnik wasn't in the same league." In 1923 he began building his own radios, helped by a correspondence course in electrical engineering and encouraged by his mentor Frank Osborne, who designed and produced his own marine engines at his machine shop in Lund. By 1924 Spilsbury was building advanced radios for summer cottagers, and in 1926 he established a radio repair business. "Just overnight," Spilsbury recalls, "radio boomed. And it carried me with it."

Over the next fifteen years Spilsbury ignored repeated suggestions that he move to Vancouver. Jilted by his summer cottage girlfriend — the niece of a wealthy Vancouver yachtsman and businessman — he bought a boat with which he tapped the radio needs of the camps, canneries, and settlements between Sayward and the Sechelt Peninsula. On a typical trip he travelled forty miles inland by railway from Rock Bay to the Hastings Mill logging camps to fix a dozen temperamental radio sets. During these trips around "Spilsbury's Coast" he provided radios to everyone from the Greek scholar S. K. Marshall of Evans Bay to the writer Francis Dickie of Read Island, who "spent a lot of his time strolling around his garden with no clothes on like William Blake"; to the "old renegade Englishman" Captain J. Forbes Sutherland of Surge Narrows, who could not pay for his new radio and threatened Spilsbury with a double-barrelled shotgun; to the numerous remittance men who could be found "living like savages in little hovels made of bark but still arrogant as kings."

In 1937, when he was thirty-two, he married his childhood sweetheart Glenys Glynes, one of Savary's "summer kids" from Vancouver. His family had no objections because "she was English." With their son Ronald and their new boat they continued their coastal tours. Spilsbury started to build sophisticated radio telephone transmitters and in 1941 — taking ad-

vantage of the wartime economic boom — he teamed up with Jim Hepburn, a radio enthusiast from Victoria, to form Spilsbury and Hepburn Ltd. From their Vancouver base they manufactured or installed radio telephones for the government, the armed forces, and for the mining, fishing, logging, and tugboat companies engaged in war-related work. The book ends in 1943, when Spilsbury bought a float plane to serve distant customers and formed Queen Charlotte Airlines, which was merged with Pacific Western Airlines in 1955. As pilot he hired Uncle Ben's son Rupert Spilsbury; appropriately and symbolically on their first flight they flew over the "old family homestead" at Whonnock, and Jim was astonished at the change in scale. "I knew I would never be able to look at that coastal world in quite the same way. It had become less mysterious, less forbidding, less grand. It really *had* become smaller."

Several important themes are reflected in *Spilsbury's Coast*. One is the general tendency of early settlers to abandon farming in favour of the logging, service, and transportation industries. A second is the end of isolation caused by the radio communications revolution. A third is the transition from waterborne to airborne transportation; Spilsbury shows the coast as it was in the last thirty years before the seaplane, and in this respect *Spilsbury's Coast* belongs with such epics as Muriel Blanchet's *The Curve of Time* and Gilean Douglas's *The Protected Place*. It is an informative and enjoyable book.

Slightly incongruous is the generic "wet west" subtitle and a tendency to lump the well-heeled Spilsburys in with the less privileged residents of the coast. Howard White's claim that Spilsbury was "just a guy from around here" is literally true, but it is equally clear that Spilsbury's world was not that of the builder Frank Gagne or the cook Red Mahone. A photo shows the English community on Savary — dressed in tennis whites and boater hats — waiting nonchalantly at the dock for the weekly steamer from Vancouver. The Spilsburys were members of Savary Island's Anglo-oriented professional élite. Island friends included Colonel and Laurencia Herchmer, Captain Ashworth of the Royal Savary Hotel, Dr. Lea of Vancouver, Burnet the surveyor, the Anglican clergymen John Antle and Alan Greene, and the wealthy Miss Ethel Burpee, whose brother-in-law introduced Spilsbury to Emily Carr (he considered her "a revolting old crank"). The Spilsburys — mother, father, and son — had connections in the larger world which they did not lose by going to Savary and which they did not hesitate to use. Their isolation may even have increased the importance of their social and business connections.

Howard White is right, however, in taking encouragement from the

example of Spilsbury's early career. His radio telephones, like Osborne's marine engines, the Empire Machine Works' donkey engines, and Easthope motors, were home-made and not imported from Kalamazoo or Hamilton. Spilsbury rejected the temptation to go to Vancouver until he was nearly forty years old, choosing instead to cultivate his own potential and the economic potential of the inside coast. His story has contemporary relevance: while nurses, teachers, graduate students and others leave British Columbia in droves, *Spilsbury's Coast* suggests that there are ways of staying.

*Pender Island*

RICHARD MACKIE

*An Error in Judgement: The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community*, by Dara Culhane Speck. Talonbooks: Vancouver, 1987. Pp. 281.

For more than a century in British Columbia, white church-sponsored hospitals and residential schools have dominated the landscapes of native reserve communities. Their presence and authority have rarely been questioned. To the outside world these were necessary institutions created to improve the quality of health and education. In recent months, however, newspaper reports of church leaders, school officials, and dormitory supervisors sexually abusing children under their care have shattered this image of well-being.

Twenty years ago, another kind of abuse in native communities — deriving from the sometimes poor quality of medical child care — would have been conveniently and easily silenced. But today is a time of speaking out.

In 1979, in the small town of Alert Bay on Cormorant Island, British Columbia, a native child died from a ruptured appendix in a well-equipped hospital while under her doctor's care. In times past, the roots of such a tragedy might have been known but not aired. In 1979, this was not to be the case. A few in the community had been reared in the spirit of the political activism of the 1960s, and, upon witnessing this death, they did not let it pass.

One of these was Dara Culhane Speck. Culhane Speck had moved to Alert Bay in the early 1970s from Montreal. She describes herself as having been very much a part of the political and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Her fourteen-year-long association with the community, as a band member through marriage, and her participation in native political