

Homer Stevens: A Life in Fishing, by Homer Stevens and Rolf Knight. Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 1992. 260 pp. Illus. \$29.95 cloth.

Homer Stevens is one of British Columbia's most influential and respected labour leaders. In his latest work of oral history, Rolf Knight has created a fascinating and insightful examination of Stevens's career as a fisherman, union officer, and member of the Communist Party of Canada. One expects oral history to be readable and entertaining, and this book is no exception. More importantly, and unlike most work in the genre, it is an extremely useful book that comments on several important debates in labour history.

Particularly interesting is Stevens's insistence that racism in British Columbia stems from the class relations of capitalism. Because the fishing industry employs large numbers of diverse ethnic and racial groups, the union has had to think carefully about the relationship between class and ethnicity. For example, Stevens, himself part Indian, is highly critical of the native Brotherhood's deliberate blurring of class lines. Many Brotherhood officials insist that as traditional leaders they speak for all Natives, including those they employ on their own boats. As a result, the Brotherhood has often functioned like a company union. In plain, jargon-free language, Stevens makes more sense of the debate over class and race than many historians and sociologists.

Labour historians have recently become interested in interpreting labour law to "put the state back in" working class history. Too often the result has been to see the legal system as standing outside of class relations, of being "decentred," in Foucault's word. Stevens does outline the efforts of the United Fisherman and Allied Workers Union [UFAWU] to use the law to its advantage by trying to secure bargaining rights and to have fishermen covered by Workers' Compensation. But he has no liberal illusions about the fundamental nature of the legal system. His own experience with it included a year in jail for refusing to step outside his constitutional authority and order striking fishermen back to work. His observations make it clear that if the law is sometimes used to benefit workers, it remains an instrument of class rule.

Stevens's career as a labour leader is also a thoughtful addition to the literature on the labour bureaucracy. He is that most rare of longtime labour leaders: one who did not parlay his trade union career into a political patronage job or that of a highly-paid "consultant" or "spokesman." When Stevens retired after thirty-one years as a full-

time organizer and later head of the UFAWU, he picked up the tools of his trade and returned to fishing. Nor did he have a large nest egg, for as union president, he drew a salary that was usually less than the average seasonal return of the fishermen he represented.

A member of the Communist Party of Canada, Stevens also is living refutation of the view that labour leaders are always more conservative than rank and file. As often as not, the membership acts as a brake on a more militant leadership. But trade unionism is the art of the possible, and even left-wing leaders must eventually settle and come to terms with the employer. Unlike more conservative labour leaders, however, Stevens was keenly aware of the contradiction between what was possible and what was ultimately desirable. He was also aware of the tension arising from the need to push union members further while representing them accurately and responsibly. In his reflections on his career and times, Stevens gives us a considered appraisal of radical politics and reformism in the labour movement.

This biography is also useful for its description of the fishing work process. The hardships and the rewards are carefully, sometimes poetically, detailed. Stevens's childhood memories of growing up in a small Fraser River community are often compelling, and many of the details put a human face on impersonal historical trends, such as the consolidation of the canning industry and the development of monopoly.

The book would benefit from an index, and from a map of the many villages and towns that the text refers to. It would also benefit from a detailed discussion of the Communist Party of Canada. Throughout the book, Stevens makes reference to the Party and the role it played in his life and career. But we learn very little about the CPC and its activities in the province. Despite criticism, however, *A Life in Fishing* is an important book for historians of labour and of British Columbia.

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The Letters of Conrad Aiken and Malcom Lowry, 1929-1954, edited by Cynthia C. Sugars. Toronto: ECW Press, 1992. xxxiv, 350 pp. Illus. \$25.00 paper.

Theoretically, a collection of letters that constitutes an ongoing exchange between two correspondents will give us insights into the