

Book Reviews

British Columbia: A History of the Province, by George Woodcock. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990. xv, 288 pp. Illus. \$34.95 cloth.

Anyone familiar with even a small sample of the more than forty books by George Woodcock will expect "a good read"; his most recent volume will not disappoint such readers. Others, and they must be few in number, will enjoy their discovery of one of our most lucid and engaging prose writers. With enormous skill Woodcock presents a great deal of information without compromising style and readability. Thanks to the author's extensive travels over many years, his strong sense of place, and his descriptive powers, the physical features of this most diverse of provinces are often vividly present to the reader.

In introducing his book, the author notes that the last general history of British Columbia, Margaret Ormsby's, was published more than thirty years ago, while Martin Robin's more specifically political and avowedly radical two volume history was completed nearly two decades ago. Woodcock's justification for writing another general history is hardly necessary, for, as he points out, earlier histories inevitably become outdated with the passage of time, which brings new research and different perspectives. However, a new history is warranted in Woodcock's view "even more because of shared limits of approach. Both [Ormsby and Robin] are essentially histories from the point of view of the white population." Promising to remedy this defect by presenting a reconstruction of native cultures 'before history' and an understanding of their continuing significance, Woodcock delivers admirably on his promise.

In emphasizing the role of native peoples in the history of the province, Woodcock is not simply responding to current fashion, for his credentials as a student of Indian cultures have been well established in several earlier books going back to the 1950s, although he now considers some of that work to be "superficial in its insights." His emphasis on native cultures allows the author to devote over half the book to the colonial period before

British Columbia's entry into the Canadian confederation in 1871 when three-quarters of the population were still rooted in those cultures. After that, attention is increasingly directed toward the activities of white people, but the Indian peoples are always visible as actors in history, in recent times progressively recovering a positive identity and "beginning to face the white men as Maquinna faced Cook, equal and distinct."

Woodcock captures well the rapacious and exploitive character of the province's economic development and the politics based on it. How much is summarized in his reference to the 1880s premier, Robert Beaven, as "the first of a series of politically weak leaders who would act as servants rather than restrainers of the economic and political predators about to descend on the vast storehouse of natural resources that was British Columbia." A century later how little had changed!

While fully depicting entrepreneurial vigour at the top of society, Woodcock gives considerable attention to working men (little to women), their trade unions, and the socialist parties they supported. Other challenges to the dominant patterns of society are found in the utopian communities which have been notable features of the province, and of long-standing interest to Woodcock, beginning with his studies of Doukobhor settlements. Well before the Doukobhors, missionaries of several denominations had established model communities — "villages of God," as Woodcock describes them. The first and most famous of these, Metlakatla, William Duncan's settlement of Tsimshians near Port Simpson, was typical of others in attempting to rescue its inhabitants not only from a pagan past but also from the worst features of the modern world, as these were defined by the Victorian missionary mind.

Woodcock explores the impact since World War II of successive waves of immigrants, especially Asians, which has now made the province *British Columbia* "only in name and in history." Acknowledging that the life of the province is not totally devoted to "getting and spending," Woodcock gives concise but illuminating attention to the expansion of education and the growth of the creative and performing arts.

Three maps show the territories of the major groups of native peoples, early fur trade routes and posts, and the later development of transportation, while forty-five well-chosen black-and-white photographs of people and places from Captain Cook to W. A. C. Bennett add much to a handsome volume.