

Book Reviews

As Wise as Serpents: Five Women and an Organization That Changed British Columbia, 1883-1939, by Lyn Gough. Victoria: Swan Lake Publishing, 1988.

Speaking to the 1899 annual provincial convention of the British Columbia Women's Christian Temperance Union, Maria Grant exhorted her listeners to heed the biblical injunction to be "as wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (p. 73) in the pursuit of their central and interconnected goals of prohibition and woman suffrage. A sixteen-year veteran of the movement, Grant spoke with both the acumen of an experienced campaigner and the fervour of a missionary recruiter. Like her principal subjects, the leading lights of the British Columbia WCTU, Lyn Gough was also imbued with a sense of mission. Dissatisfied with the neglect of the WCTU in "our history books" Gough decided to right this omission, a task which was made all the more compelling by her assertion that the WCTU "dominated the life and times of the province for several decades and left its indelible imprint on our laws and social customs" (p. ix). The result is an historical account of the B.C. WCTU presented in the context of the reform careers of five prominent Victoria women: Maria Pollard Grant, Helen Grant, Cecilia McNaughton Spofford, Margaret Townsend Jenkins, and Emma Lazenby Spencer.

Gough's approach to her subject is indicated by her decision to use for a title a portion of Maria Grant's reference to Matthew 10:16, in which Jesus directed the apostles to go "forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." Similarly, the author set out in apparently uncharted and possibly hostile territory. Armed with primary source materials, principally the WCTU yearbooks, statutes and journals of the Legislative Assembly and newspaper accounts of specific events, Gough slogged her way through fifty-six years of day-to-day happenings. The product of her explorations is a chronological narrative which describes some aspects of the WCTU's involvement in the provincial prohibition and female franchise campaigns and touches

on several of the related interests of members, including a curfew law for juveniles, matrons for female correctional facilities, the banning of cigarette smoking by minors, an aged women's home, and the creation of a juvenile court. Greater coverage is accorded those issues of particular concern to the five stellar members of the Victoria branches whose lives were intertwined with the heyday of the WCTU. Thus, considerable attention is devoted to Maria Grant's role in promoting woman suffrage, Emma Spencer's dedication to a Victoria refuge home for unwed mothers and former prostitutes, Cecilia Spofford's mission shelter for single transient men in the capital, Margaret Jenkins's twenty-year tenure on the Victoria school board, and Helen Grant's selfless service to each of these causes.

While the author is to be commended for her tenacity in ploughing through the substantial body of primary sources available on this topic, this reader cannot help wishing that Gough had forsaken her outmoded, isolationist, and often tediously detailed narrative approach in favour of a more interpretative perspective. The activities of the B.C. WCTU are not set in the reform context of which they were an integral part. The women's reform movement, the social gospel movement and the urban reform campaigns of the turn of the century, for example, largely escape notice. A similar fate befalls current scholarship in social and feminist history. The author's disinclination to pursue even a narrow definition of the relevant secondary literature has deprived her of the opportunity to analyze her subject in light of the questions and theories proposed by other writers interested in Canadian temperance organizations. One searches in vain for references to old standard works such as Ruth Spence's *Prohibition in Canada* or the short but directly relevant *Historical Sketch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union of British Columbia 1883-1953*, by Lydia Macpherson. Albert Hiebert's 1969 thesis, "Prohibition in British Columbia," similarly remained unnoticed. Familiarity with Wendy Mitchison's interesting analysis of the organization of the national WCTU and Nancy Sheehan's comparative studies of the Alberta and Saskatchewan WCTUs would have suggested worthwhile avenues for exploring the British Columbia situation and may have encouraged the author to clarify the relationship between the B.C. WCTU and other B.C. women's organizations.

Unfortunately, *As Wise as Serpents* falls short of the author's goal to reinstate the B.C. WCTU into its rightful place in the province's history. Gough failed to substantiate her claim that the WCTU "dominated the life" of the province. Rather, the association was an important influence among several, particularly in the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries. The B.C. WCTU could be profitably

re-examined in this broader context. In addition, students interested in topics such as the role of élites, group dynamics, familial connections among reformers, education and problem solving, evangelism, maternal feminism, and the pursuit of power will find the B.C. WCTU of interest.

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The Vagabond Fleet, by Peter Murray. Victoria: Sono Nis, 1988. Pp. 260.

The story behind the North Pacific sealing schooners — the vagabond fleet — is complicated, and it has taken all Peter Murray's skills as a journalist to describe the several decades of international bickering, human greed and animal suffering which characterized this brief period of history. By and large, Murray has written a very readable book, which includes some good yarns about sealers and the ships they sailed in; despite some reservations, I recommend it. Thirty years ago, as a young scientist participating in yet another international study of fur seals, I would have appreciated much of the historical material which has been brought to light.

The early maritime traders collected a small number of fur seals from Indians living on the outer coast of British Columbia. However, it was not until the mid-1850s, when independent traders located trading establishments along the west coast of Vancouver Island, that the real interest in a pelagic harvest of fur seals began. To encourage Indian hunters, the early traders took the men and their canoes out to the sealing grounds, and returned them to their villages. The first pelts were taken to Victoria in 1864; by 1876 there were nine sealing vessels sailing out of Victoria, and this number increased until the end of the nineteenth century.

This early pelagic sealing marked the beginning of a commercial venture which had near-disastrous results. There was no harvest control and, to make matters worse, the majority of seals killed at sea were pregnant females. Pelagic hunting, combined with a land-based harvest on the breeding grounds, achieved the inevitable: by 1911, when an international treaty was finally reached between the United States, Great Britain (for Canada), Russia and Japan, the seal population had been reduced to about 10 percent of its former size.

Murray's book, although very readable, is a struggle for the serious historian or scientist. To achieve readability, tables and figures are sacrificed, and footnotes are rarely used. There are frequent references to statistics: harvest information, population trends, quotas, numbers of