

BOOK REVIEWS

BRITISH COLUMBIA IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS: A REVIEW ESSAY

Ron Jobe

The mere mention of British Columbia conjures up for most adult Canadians an image of rugged mountains, crystal blue lakes, awesome stands of old-growth forest, endless rolling ranchlands in the Interior, miles of deserted coastlines, and blue skies. The rugged outdoor adventures in Roderick Haig-Brown's *Starbuck Valley Winter* (1943) and the illustrations of Anne Blades's classic *Mary of Mile 18* (1971) remind us of the impact of landscape on story. But what has been happening recently to give children a sense of what BC is really like?

An examination of titles published since 1992 reveals the fascinating insight that, although British Columbia has the second highest number of writers, most of them include only generic locations in their work. Publishers may be reluctant to place a setting specifically in BC, preferring their books to be action-and-character oriented. There may be a belief that children in other parts of Canada or in the United States do not want to read about a specific provincial setting; rather, they want to relate to one of their own — either real or imaginary.

Several talented picture-book artists do provide an image of our province. As the young girl in Sheryl McFarlane's *Jessie's Island* writes, "If you come to my island, I will show you"; and Sheena Lott's watercolours help us to realize all there is to see. These watercolours elicit the mood created by weather and Pacific fronts as well as the action of eagles, harbour seals, orcas, sea otters, and ferries. They even elicit the joy of playing on the beach. The same duo's *Moonsnail Song* eerily captures a young girl's remembered associations with finding the shell: "Her moonsnail sings of tidal flats, of water-ripped sandy shores and otters rolling in swaying kelp." A similar excitement about the discovery of nature takes place in Ann Blades's *Back to the Cabin*, where two boys, expecting to be bored, find delight

in fishing, watching loons, building a fort, and experiencing cold-lake swimming as well as frightening thunder storms.

Rain? It sometimes appears in picture books. Of course it rains in Vancouver — a fact well known to a drenched cat in Lois Simmie's *Mister Got To Go*. She is allowed to perch on a windowsill inside the Sylvia Hotel until the rain stops, but then she has to go. She doesn't, of course, and Cynthia Nugent's splendid scenes of a drenched English Bay are contrasted to the humorously detailed glimpses of the happenings in the hotel itself. *Mister Got To Go* stays on and becomes a hotel tradition; her true story can still be purchased in the hotel lobby. A rainy cityscape is also important for a mentally challenged girl who finds a lost wet dog in Nan Gregory's *How Smudge Came*. She smuggles him into her group home and takes him to her job at a hospice. But the dog has to go. Determined, the girl goes out to find him again and does so at the local SPCA; alas, when she does, the dog has been given away. But to her joy, the patients and staff of the hospice have him for her and will provide him with a loving home.

Historical picture books place even greater importance on the visual location of the action than do non-historical ones, as is evidenced by Ainsley Manson's *A Dog Came, Too*. The story follows Alexander Mackenzie's expedition as it traverses the province in its search for the sea. Ann Blades highlights her watercolours with details of the expedition not included in the terse text. She depicts the changing ruggedness from mountain peaks to rapid-crested rivers, tall forests, and broad waterways. It is true — a dog really did come, too!

Paul Yee's *Ghost Train* offers a stunningly visual consideration of the Chinese workers who helped to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Harvey Chan focuses his art on the one-armed daughter, Choon-yi, sent for by her father. Upon her arrival she finds out that her father has been killed in a blast on the tracks, but he comes to her with a message to paint a picture of the fire-car train. The painting, left on the tracks with incense burning, is transformed into a massive train. The souls of the departed Chinese workers board this train, and Choon-yi takes the painting back to China, where, by burning it, she releases their souls.

Several writers of books for older children have set their novels in British Columbia, but the province serves only as a backdrop to the action. Linda Bailey's trio of kid detectives in *How come the best clues are always in the garbage?* work in the Fairview Slopes and Granville Island area of Vancouver. *How can I be a detective if I have to baby-sit?* is set in a tree-planting camp in northern BC. In Ginny Russell's *Step by Step*, Kim and her dad are trying to recover from the death of her mother, and, as she tries to sort things out, she often rides along the Delta dykes looking out for snow geese and other birds. Readers are aware of the locations, but their influence fades as the stories develop.

Other writers make the location integral to their text. Ranching in the Cariboo is brought to life in Marion Crook's *Summer of Madness*, as sixteen-year-old Karen Stewartson helps to find out who is poisoning the cattle in the region. Readers see the landscape through her eyes, as she "enjoy[s] the breeze sifting through the poplar leaves and the sunshine angling through the evergreens, dappling light and shadow on the grass below." From her house she "could see grass, shrubs, the dock and the lake beyond. Water hemlock and purple asters swayed slightly in the breeze beside the dock. A mallard nibbled at the weeds near the shore." Kit Pearson loves sharing detailed descriptions of the places that she, as the writer, and her characters inhabit. In *Awake and Dreaming*, Theo's actions are anchored to specific locations in Vancouver and Victoria. The reader always senses where they are, especially when they take the ferry through Active Pass to Victoria.

A typical literary device involves a character coming to British Columbia and discovering a region along with the readers. A most powerful example of this is found in Declan in James Heneghan's *Torn Away*. A rebellious young teen, Declan has survived seeing his family killed in Northern Ireland, and he by no means wants to be with his uncle in Otter Harbour. "At first he saw the strange evergreen trees but he did not know them or care about them. Emerging into the brightness of sea and sky . . . he saw very little of it."

Julie Dawson uses the same "discover BC" theme. In *Cougar Cove* an eleven-year-old city girl arrives to spend the summer on a remote part of the west coast of Vancouver Island. She is not wilderness smart but gradually enjoys becoming aware of life in the forest — birds, squirrels, and a young fawn. Observing a cougar with her cubs allows her to lose her feeling of terror, and, when another cougar tries to attack her friends, she is able to scare it off. Chelsea, in *Fire Burning*, is a disturbed, fire-obsessed teenager who arrives to spend some time at her cousin's summer home near the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The fury within her is matched by her smouldering observations of the coastal world around her.

Writers of historical novels sometimes concentrate on the power of the setting. Paul Yee, in *Breakaway*, gives a well-researched glimpse of life in Chinatown in the 1930s through the eyes of Kowk-ken Wong, a high-school student who loves to play soccer. The sights, sounds, and smells of Chinatown are contrasted to those of the family's farm along the North Arm of the Fraser River. One can walk in Kwok's shoes and sense the lost dreams of, and the effect of the Depression on, so many Chinese-Canadians who had to deal with the plight of owing money, the bigotry and racism of the time, and the fight to keep their land from greedy developers as well as from the forces of the river itself.

A trio of other histories gives readers a good sense of parts of our province. In *White Jade Tiger*, Julie Lawson uses the vehicle of time travel to allow a teenage girl, on a class excursion in Victoria's Chinatown, to walk back

into the Fan Tan Alley of 1881. She meets a boy coming to find his father, who is helping to construct the Canadian Pacific Railway, and she accompanies him to the Boston Bar area in his search for a long lost amulet. Constance Horne's *Trapped by Coal* depicts life in 1916 in a small mining community on Vancouver Island. The ever-present dangers of coal mining, both below and above ground, are fully realized in this book. Mining had a massive impact on the local environment, especially due to the cave-ins of poorly shored-up shafts. Mary Razzell's *White Wave* focuses on the ever-present impact of the coastal landscape on life in a small hamlet during and after the Second World War. Jenny Johns is full of hope when the war is finally over and her father is expected to return, but she has to leave to go to high school in another community and is not certain that he will ever come back. Razzell dramatically entwines her heroine with the coastal rainforest.

Very few information books for young people focus on British Columbia. The photographs in Alexandra Morton's *In the Company of Whales* offer glimpses of a spectacular coastal setting. The pride of creation experienced by First Nations carvers is caught in Vickie Jensen's *Carving a Totem Pole*, in which sepia-coloured photographs give a timeless quality to the process.

What perspective on our province are children acquiring in their literature? A review of children's books published since 1992 reveals only a handful of fiction titles. Those writers who describe a British Columbian setting tend to avoid urban areas, preferring to set their adventures in the wilderness, especially in coastal areas. Picture-book writers and illustrators are more likely to focus on our province's natural heritage, probably because their child readers are fascinated by the many details shown in the illustrations. Children learn from what they see and read, making it important that books provide a sense of what British Columbia is really like.

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The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia, edited by Hugh Johnston. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1996. 352 pp. Maps. \$26.95 paper.

The Pacific Province is the work of current and former faculty and graduate students from Simon Fraser University. Its editor, Hugh Johnston, reports that this new history of British Columbia is "a team project in the sense that, while the authorship of each chapter belongs to one or two people, the contributors as a group determined the general framework — a thematic approach within broad periods — and discussed, critiqued and suggested changes to each others' drafts."

The prototype in English for the genre of collaborative histories that are more than collections of discrete articles but less than a single, multi-authored text is the *Cambridge Modern History*. Lord Acton, who conceived and planned this text, also provided us with criteria by which we can judge the merits of such works. Acton told contributors: "Our purpose is to obtain