

EDITORIAL

THROUGH MORE THAN FOUR DECADES, and 167 issues, the pages of *BC Studies* have included remarkably little about the province's Okanagan region. A keyword search ("Okanagan") of all back issues returns thirty-eight entries. Of these, almost half mention the region incidentally, in developing thematic arguments, in treating other parts of the province, or because individuals of interest passed through or had (sometimes tenuous) connections there. A similar number of entries point to book reviews (seven) and the journal's regular notes on contributors (eight). Four reference review essays. Leaving these and entries in the Bibliography of BC aside, we identify Duane Thomson's 1994 article "The Response of Okanagan Indians to European Settlement" and Patrick O'Neill's 2003 article "Carroll Aikins's Experiments in Playwriting" as the only contributions that focus specifically on the Okanagan. Narrowing the search term produces no significant improvement in this picture. "Penticton" yields two entries in addition to those produced by the previous search – a review essay and a book review. "Vernon" gives us eight hits with no significant addition to our tally of Okanagan content. "Kelowna" is more fruitful: among seven items listed under this term, Pat Roy's "A Tale of Two Cities: The Reception of Japanese Evacuees in Kelowna and Kaslo, BC" from 1990 and Carolyn MacHardy's 2005/06 review essay "Reflections on 'Oasis': Representing Kelowna, 1905-2005" add substantially to the stock of Okanagan regional scholarship in this journal.

This is remarkable. As BC historian Jean Barman has pointed out, one of the province's earliest and most prestigious local historical societies is in the Okanagan Valley, and its annual publication has done much to record and maintain interest in the past of this place.¹ Moreover, the Okanagan has long been an alluring fragment (or figment) of Canadian (and wider) imaginations. Encouraged by extravagantly optimistic promotional materials, the migrants who came to the Valley (from the United Kingdom as well as from other parts of Canada) to establish orchards and find the good life early in the twentieth century "imagined a sort of beautiful halo around everything."² In the 1920s,

¹ Jean Barman "Seeing British Columbia," *BC Studies* 131 (2001): 9-14.

² Quote from Paddy Acland in David Mitchell and Dennis Duffy, eds., *Bright Sunshine and a Brand New Country: Recollections of the Okanagan Valley, 1890-1914* (Victoria: Provincial Archives, 1979), 32. The best short summary of the experience of English orchardists in British Columbia is Cole Harris, "Introduction," *Letters from Windermere, 1912-14* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), ix-xxii.

"Confederation poet" Bliss Carman extolled the virtues of the Okanagan, where "The temperate days go by / With simple life and joyous / Under a stainless sky." To his mind it seemed clear that those who "would behold the face / Of Beauty in her dwelling-place," should visit Skaha Lake, to "Take the Kaleeden road and dare / The danger for the glory there. / [Where b]eauty will meet you as you fly / enraptured between earth and sky." For the Fredericton-born poet, this was Paradise enow. The loveliness of the Valley held him in its thrall: "Here time takes on new leisure / And life attains new worth. / And wise are they who treasure / This Eden of the North."³ Years later, in 1976, Vancouver Island-born and Vancouver-resident sculptor Richard Prince referred to the valley "as a sort of mythical summer vacation land."⁴ And even as I write, in November 2010, the travel section of a newspaper in far-away New Zealand headlines a spectacular selection of photographs with the phrase: "Canada's Okanagan region has the potential to spellbind with its mix of nature and development."⁵

With the 2011 *BC Studies* conference scheduled for the University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus, it seemed both timely and important to address the relative shortfall in attention paid the Okanagan region in this journal. In hope of providing a forum for scholars resident in the Valley to reflect upon their home place, plans for this special issue were first circulated to those UBC-O colleagues whose declared research interests suggested that they might be able to contribute to such an enterprise. Each of the three articles yielded by this process and featured in this issue happily (albeit perhaps somewhat fortuitously) speaks, rather directly, to the announced theme of the 2011 conference: "Sustainability and Change: Studies in BC's Past, Present and Future Communities." Complemented by two additional articles, solicited directly by the editor of *BC Studies*, they offer a thought-provoking set of reflections upon present issues in and future challenges for the Okanagan region (and, by extension, upon issues and challenges facing British Columbia, Canada, and much of the so-called "First World").

By common account, ecological/environmental, economic, and social (or socio-political) concerns need to be considered in plotting the course of sustainable development (or to achieve sustainability). By conceptualizing this understanding with the help of a Venn diagram

³ The quotations are from Bliss Carman, "In the Okanagan" and "Kaleeden Road," both of which appear in his *Far Horizons* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1925).

⁴ Prince quoted in Carolyn MacHardy, "Reflections on 'Oasis': Representing Kelowna 1905-2005," *BC Studies* 148 (2005) 93-101.

⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 5 November 2010.

comprised of overlapping rings, sustainable strategies can be located at the intersection of all three circles. Beyond this, in those areas where two circles intersect, we might see the Social-Environment overlap denoting “bearable” conditions, the Environment-Economic overlap denoting a zone of “viable” activity, and the Economic-Social overlap denoting equity issues. This disaggregation is useful in weighing where particular challenges lie with respect to sustainability concerns because, in this reckoning, truly sustainable strategies are simultaneously viable, equitable, and bearable – economically, environmentally, and socially.

We begin this issue with an arresting contribution from Fern Helfand of the Creative and Critical Studies Program at UBC-Okanagan. Her photo-essay speaks visually, textually, and directly to the rapidity and implications of change, and to the challenges of sustainability, in the Okanagan region. Responding to the environment around her and training her camera lens upon the suburban residential developments that are springing up across the Okanagan Valley (and in many rapidly urbanizing areas of the developed world), she captures the fabricated nature of the settings inhabited by many people in contemporary Western societies. Helfand’s response to such places is essentially critical. Often marketed for their views (“Panorama Peaks”) and their locations on the edge of “Nature,” these places occupy an eccentric position in the Sustainability Venn diagram, near the outer perimeter of the economic circle. They may generate profit for their developers and those who speculate in real estate, but their heavy, ecologically-disruptive footprints, and the high level of automobile dependence forced upon those who live often anonymous, transient lives within them, mean that they are far from sustainable developments in environmental and social terms.

In his certain-to-be-provocative (because all discussions of water futures are provocative these days) article exploring the possibilities for a more flexible and efficient water allocation system in the Okanagan, economist Johannus Janmaat works close to the centre of our Venn diagram. His concerns speak to all three constituent circles, and his text turns on ideas such as environmental health, water governance, the viability of agriculture, and the (in)justice entailed in reallocating scarce water. These are pressing issues in a dry land with a rapidly growing human population, and they are given added point, in 2011, by the spectre of climate change and increasing aridity. Janmaat urges upon his readers and policy-makers the importance of developing a water market or water trading system “before we find ourselves in the midst of a serious drought.” But we should not ignore the past as we worry about the future.

Margaret Ormsby, one of the province's most important historians, who was born near Vernon and who loved the Valley deeply through the years, reminds readers of her centennial history of British Columbia that "the summer of 1931 was the first of a series of long, hot, dry seasons [in the Okanagan]. As the supply of water ... became exhausted, the irrigation flumes dried out and cracked, and in the orchards the leaves hung limply on the trees ... But still the apples grew, and in such quantity that the disposal of the crop ... became an acute problem."⁶ Times were tough, but people and plants proved resilient. Eighty years on, economic and social circumstances in the Valley have changed almost immeasurably; however, given the ideological battle lines that have been drawn in discussions of water privatization, perhaps we need to be a little cautious about harnessing the threat of environmental crisis to the service of a particular dogma. Janmaat advances an argument. It offers much food for thought, and a good deal to chew on. His position is a legitimate one, expressed cogently. But he is well aware that he is intervening in a debate that will continue, vigorously, as citizens try to decide whether water is properly part of the commons or a market commodity.

When urban geographer Carlos Teixeira sees forested hills being turned into paved plateaus where large and fancy dwellings stand row on row, he is less impressed by patterns of economic and urban expansion than moved to worry about the housing experiences, stresses, and coping strategies of the new immigrants who cannot afford to occupy such accommodation. Questions of social justice are at the core of his concerns. Perhaps it is no great surprise that adequate and affordable housing is in extremely short supply in one of the most expensive real estate markets in the country, but this does not make the situation right, defensible, or wise. The hollowing out of government and sharp declines in the provision of social services in recent decades have taken their toll on communities. Despite some willingness to address the problems of housing provision at the municipal and provincial levels, and innovative agreements at the regional scale, well-meaning efforts have often foundered for want of federal support and the inability or unwillingness of private-sector interests to assume the costs and risks of leadership on this matter. The issues here are, overwhelmingly, social and economic rather than environmental/ecological, but addressing them in ways that produce a more equitable society would surely improve the prospects of community sustainability.

⁶ Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), 444-45.

Teixeira's analysis also reveals that the housing challenges facing immigrants are compounded by discriminatory attitudes towards them among some members of the larger host society. This issue is at the centre of the fourth contribution to this issue, written by sociologist Luis Aguiar and his collaborators Ann McKinnon of Okanagan College and Dixon Sookraj of the School of Social Work at UBC-O. Focusing on reactions to the arrival of 140 black Jamaican workers and students in Kelowna in 2007-08, these researchers identify an asymmetrical discourse that worked to stereotype the newcomers and to cast them as a threatening "other" broadly unwelcome in the community, which they describe as being "racialized as a white space." These are difficult matters, and many will feel uncomfortable upon hearing, or disagree with, some of the claims made in this article. But the larger argument reveals the tensions generated when neoliberal economic strategies embrace the recruitment of foreign "guest workers" but fail to acknowledge that those who arrive may be defined by some according to socio-cultural repertoires "culled from a collective memory of racisms." Again, those who would aspire to a more sustainable future are reminded that this must turn, in part, on a strong commitment to social justice and equity.

The final article in this collection is a wide-ranging and stimulating reflection on change and sustainability in the Okanagan, past, present, and future. Written by Melody Hessing, who (like Fern Helfand) responded enthusiastically to my invitation to contribute to this issue of *BC Studies*, it provides a provocative springboard for further thought about the future of the Okanagan region and engagement with the broader challenges of sustainability. Drawing from and extending ideas in her recent *Up Chute Creek: An Okanagan Idyll*, Hessing's contribution is ultimately about the mutual shaping of landscapes and people, a rumination on the awesome powers that humans hold in their grasp and a reminder of their/our capacity to transform environments and shape societies for good or ill.⁷ It is time, she says, for all of us to give thought to the consequences of our actions. Indeed it is.

In bringing this issue to completion I was moved to consider, again, an image that appeared in colour in the 2005-06 issue of *BC Studies*. This was of Byron Johnston's contribution to "Oasis," an exhibition held in 2005 to mark the centenary of the City of Kelowna. Entitled "Oasis Part-Too" it was a courtyard installation in which a tall orchard ladder

⁷ Melody Hessing, *Up Chute Creek: An Okanagan Idyll* (Kelowna: Okanagan Institute, 2009). This volume was reviewed by Theresa Kishkan in *BC Studies* 166 (2010): 114-15.



Byron Johnston, "Oasis Part-Too" 2005.

missing some of its rungs rose from a supernaturally green golf course, in one corner of which toy versions of a luxury automobile were enclosed in transparent plastic bubbles that reminded me of water bottles. Another image of this installation appears to the left. Here Johnston encapsulates many of the environmental challenges facing the Okanagan: the shift from food production to recreation, the shortage of water, the shrinking limits of automobility. And then there is that chair atop the rickety old ladder. It is perhaps the type of chair upon which a civic leader might sit in a small-town council chamber. From this chair, as art historian Carolyn

MacHardy observed in her probing review of the Oasis exhibition, "it is easy to take an optimistic, long-range view, both literally and figuratively, and to speak of concerns about development, sustainability, and land use. However, a look straight down to what is happening on the ground suggests that optimism is no more than empty rhetoric."⁸ Let us hope that the several engagements with Okanagan ground in the pages that follow help to sharpen our understanding of the important issues surrounding questions of development, land use, social justice, and sustainability, and enable us, collectively, to eschew empty rhetoric in favour of effective action for a better, more sustainable future in the Okanagan and elsewhere.

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⁸ MacHardy, "Reflections on 'Oasis,'" 99.