

EDITORIAL

IN HER GRACEFUL REVIEW ESSAY in this issue, former *BC Studies* co-editor Jean Barman urges us to take local history seriously. Her words warrant attention – and provoke reflection. Local histories form a rich vein of writing about British Columbia. Barman’s review considers fifteen books published in 2007 and 2008 alone, and the outpouring continues. Dealing with settlements scattered across the province, and tracing – to borrow a phrase from Nova Scotian T.C. Haliburton’s account of Samuel Slick the Clockmaker – the “sayings and doings” of community members as they made their lives in these localities, local histories have the capacity to evoke places and to provide insight into the tribulations and accomplishments of individuals typically passed by (or over) in works of larger scholarly ambition, which are usually intent upon contributing to “big-picture” interpretations of national development or the human condition. They, as much as many more self-consciously “academic” works, can help readers to realize both their indebtedness to those who have gone before and their capacity to act in shaping their own lives and locales. Barman knows of what she writes. A trained and well-respected professional historian whose canvas has encompassed the province and the country, she has also crafted careful and valuable miniatures, such as her account of the forgotten families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch, and Brockton Point in Vancouver’s Stanley Park. It is important, she writes, for all historians to perceive the advantages (revealed in many a local history) “of putting less distance between our subjects and ourselves.” Indeed.

All of this brings me to reflect on the role of *BC Studies* in fostering an understanding of this large, diverse, and fragmented province. The words that fill the pages of this journal are, to a very large degree, those of scholars conscious of their professional training, attentive to the expectations of the particular guild through which they have been socialized into academia, and anxious to advance their careers. And yet their work, as it appears in these pages, is almost always close to “their subjects” – be their focus a particular place on the map of British Columbia, an important moment in time, a significant economic or technological development, or a certain group of people formed, for some period at least, into a community of action, an interest group, or a loose collective of some sort. This, it seems to me, is worthy of remark, and celebration, not least because it speaks to a crucial issue of larger significance regarding the ways in which universities and those within

them are defining their communities of interest and seeing their roles in society.

In large “research universities” in particular (and this coinage is itself revealing and worthy of critical interrogation) the prevailing yardsticks by which success, and faculty, are measured these days often seem to be as far from the local as possible. Institutions rush to “benchmark” themselves against other universities, invariably distant and preferably in other countries. The worth of publications is measured by the “impact factors” of the journals in which they appear (this measure, put simply, being the number of times that the articles contained in a particular journal are referred to in publications by other scholars around the world). Invitations to international conferences are considered more meritorious “contributions” than is sustained engagement with local communities. And so on. In this context, the word “provincial” exudes derogatory undertones more often than it connotes geographical or political space. By these measures, journals such as *BC Studies* stand to be quickly, and deeply, discounted.

Yet this is surely a mistake. Chasing the holy grail of international excellence at the expense of paying proper attention to one’s own garden not only shortchanges the local communities that most universities were created to serve (and whose taxes sustain a significant part of institutional operations even yet) but may also presage misfortune. As the power and reach of digital communications expand, seemingly exponentially, it becomes a fair bet to wonder whether or when governments might conclude that it makes less and less sense to support expensive institutions whose gaze is resolutely elsewhere. Why not let others bear the costs, and claim the glory, of cutting-edge “excellence” if we can share many of the benefits through an ever-expanding digital information commons?

Seeking to negotiate these challenges, *BC Studies* continues to make a strong claim for the importance “of putting less distance between our subjects and ourselves” – for the enduring value of clear and straightforward scholarly writing that speaks to the particular challenges and opportunities of living in and seeking to understand something of this large, diverse, and fragmented place called British Columbia – while recognizing and adapting to the changing circumstances of the twenty-first century.

The three articles in this issue of the journal exemplify the value of work at the local scale. Each tells us important things about what must, by any measure, be considered small places (the Museum of

Anthropology in Vancouver, the Stellako Valley in north central British Columbia) or a subset of the provincial population (members of the environmental protest movement in the 1990s). Yet, they do so with an eye to larger interpretive horizons. Jonathan Clapperton's study of the Museum of Anthropology helps us to understand a good deal about the origins and evolution of this striking, and enormously valuable and important, place and institution. It does so by focusing on many of the individuals who played significant parts in the development of the museum – who are revealed as people of their times, people like all of us, shaped by particular currents of thought, whose contributions were influenced by character as well as by circumstance, by design as well as by serendipity. By reading these developments against larger debates about “salvage” anthropology, postcolonial criticism, and so on, Clapperton also helps us to understand the extent to which perceptions and practices (both individual and collective) change, and to appreciate that the intellectual ground upon which we stand is no firmer than that which supported the convictions of our predecessors.

Richard Rajala's long article on seven years in the history of a short river not only reveals a good deal about the colourful characters brought into conflict over the use of the Stellako for log driving but also reminds us of the intensity of the conflict between proponents of economic development and resource conservation in the 1960s and, in some sense, confirms the old adage of an earlier generation of Canadian historians that the question of federal-provincial relations lies near the heart of the story of this country. Violence, flights of rhetorical fancy, financial and symbolic considerations, bluster and filibuster – all are here as Rajala helps to unpack the various positions people adopted with regard to the log drives and the reasons they did so, reminding us that echoes of these positions are with us yet.

In the third article in this issue, sociologists Mark Stoddart and David Tindall revisit the (in)famous protests against logging in Clayoquot Sound during the 1990s in order to explore something of the relations among gender, feminism, and environmentalism in British Columbia. Interesting methodologically as well as for its findings that gender was not central to the political claims of the environmental movement in British Columbia, even though ecofeminist ideas informed the thinking of environmentalists during this period, this study adds to the important earlier work of Catriona Sandilands, Maureen Reed, and Sherilyn MacGregor on ecological citizenship, an issue of continuing and pressing importance in the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, two notes on *BC Studies* itself. Shortly after, if not before, this issue arrives in mailboxes, we will have moved to recognize the power and value of open, web-based access to intellectual content by posting some of our material online. From this point, book reviews appearing in *BC Studies* 165 (Spring 2010) and later issues will be available at www.bcstudies.com/bookreviews. All contributions appearing in the “Case Comment” section of the journal, beginning with Margot Young’s article entitled “Rights, the Homeless and Social Change” (in *BC Studies* 164), will also be posted on our website at www.bcstudies.com/casecomments.

Finally, we will be moving in the next few weeks to make some changes to both the membership and the terms of appointment of the Editorial Board of *BC Studies*. We do this in order to ensure a regular pattern of renewal and the contribution of new ideas to the journal as well as to encourage more active engagement of board members in shaping future issues.

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