

## EDITORIAL

---

READING THAD CARHART'S evocative meditation on music and Paris, *The Piano Shop on the Left Bank* (Toronto: McArthur and Co., 2000), I suddenly falter over two sentences in which Carhart's piano teacher reflects upon the challenge of understanding and playing the masterpieces of famous composers: "It's a way of looking at life, isn't it? There is no such thing as perfection" (106). These words remind me that I should be writing this editorial rather than enjoying, vicariously, the hidden delights of the City of Light because they capture something of the nature of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences and of the articles in this issue of *BC Studies*. As the pages that follow reveal, understanding evolves. Much as the acoustic and tonal qualities of pianos have changed over the years, so scholars have found and continue to find new ways of "looking at life" and society. They regularly offer new perspectives on seemingly old topics. And they challenge readers to think about things anew. The articles in this issue are not so much final words or definitive statements as they are contributions to a conversation – a conversation carried on over years, even decades, and subject to certain (also changing) conventions. All of this can be hard to figure out as scholarly interests (or perhaps, more formally, theoretical fashions) shift, as each generation writes its own history, and as competing views (sometimes reflecting different ideological positions) vie for attention and primacy. But it is enough to remember that, just as musical scores are forever open to interpretation, so there is no final answer to most of the questions explored by the contributors to these pages. Most things are ambiguous, and our best efforts to comprehend them succeed, even as they fall short of certainty, if they stimulate reflection, broaden understanding, and help to refine the ways in which we think and act in the world.

All of the following articles reveal the ambiguity of everyday circumstances and, to some extent, challenge prevailing ideas. Brendan Edwards's account of the multifaceted public life of Squamish Band member Andrew Paull is richly rendered. A political activist, journalist, and sporting personality who played a prominent part, before and after the Second World War, in provincial and federal debates about Aboriginal rights, Paull objected to portrayals of Native persons as lazy and incompetent. His trenchant insistence that his people were capable, thoughtful, and able to handle their own political, social, and economic affairs challenged the consensus of his time, just as his acknowledgment

of the positive sides of his experience at residential school complicates present-day depictions of those institutions, which focus on their negative aspects, label them “a great shame,” and ask “what went wrong?” Paull was neither the first nor the last Native person enabled by his or her residential school experience to use “the tools of the white man ... to speak for and fight for the rights” of indigenous peoples. And this is no small thing when we remember that Paull became (in the assessment of George Manuel) “the spark and catalyst” of the contemporary First Nations political movement.

Daniel Heidt’s interrogation of the words, deeds, and reputation of Howard Green, a long-serving MP from British Columbia, offers another instance in which the propensity to label blinkers and distorts understanding. Heidt does not deny that Green held and expressed views that would be considered racist today. But, as good historians will, he seeks to judge the individual in context. Green’s views were not unusual in their time, and wartime security concerns underpinned his antipathy to persons of Japanese ancestry (and others); moreover, his attitude towards people of Japanese origin moderated through time. Ambiguities abound in Heidt’s reading of the record. Green’s critics failed to appreciate the complexity of circumstances and exaggerated or misrepresented his views regarding Japanese Canadians, yet they won a political and symbolic victory with the renaming of the Howard Green Building, so called in recognition of his long years of public service.

Focusing on the hinterland and the city, the forest and the downtown core, respectively, James Lawson and Gordon Roe address the consequences and ambiguities of neoliberalism, an ideology that philosopher Michael Peters describes as regarding “all human behaviour as guided by ‘rationality, individuality, and self-interest,’” and which, in recent years, has been a fundamental tenet of government in British Columbia. Their articles throw important light on the intricate ways in which a particular ideological commitment shapes policy, behaviour, the agendas of local organizations, and, ultimately, human life and death. Lawson traces the intimate ties between the restructuring of state and industry, between outsourcing and its human costs, and between union militancy and union marginalization in the BC forest industries. Roe details how an activist community demanding public provision of services for the disadvantaged of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside has turned into a modern therapeutic community, as Smith and Lipksy (1993, 208) put it, “a vehicle for devolving social services to non-governmental providers to enhance individual responsibility and reduce claims for

public spending.” These are timely and important interventions in public debate that speak directly to policy options and our societal conscience as both authors make clear that lives are at stake in the choices we make.

Finally, in the first of our Case Comments, Margot Young offers an arresting reflection on the legal and humanitarian questions raised by the proceedings initiated by the City of Victoria’s attempt to remove a tent city of homeless persons from Cridge Park in 2005. As she notes, Canadian courts are notorious for excluding basic social and economic rights from protection under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the BC Supreme Court judgment in this case challenges this pattern of failure. But the gains in terms of social justice are meagre indeed. What Young rightly calls “the tougher and real question” remains: why should anyone in Canada end up sleeping in a park – even with the shelter of a tarp or cardboard box?