

TAKING LOCAL HISTORY SERIOUSLY

A Review Essay

JEAN BARMAN

The Ambitious City: A History of the City of North Vancouver

Warren Sommer

Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2007. 342 pp. \$44.95 cloth.

Chewassen, Tsawwassen or Chiltinm: The Land Facing the Sea

Gwen Szychter

Delta: self-published, 2007. 181 pp. \$35.00 paper.

Available from the author, 5122 44th Ave., Delta, V4K 1C3.

Desolation Sound: A History

Heather Harbord

Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2007. 260 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Dog Creek: 100 Years

Don Logan

Victoria: Trafford, 2007. 186 pp. \$25.00 paper.

Available from the Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin.

Hollyburn: The Mountain and the City

Francis Mansbridge

Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008. 204 pp. \$24.95 paper.

Kamloops History: Fictions, Facts and Fragments

Wayne Norton

Vancouver: Plateau Press, 2007. 111 pp. \$16.95 paper.

Lantzville: The First Hundred Years

Lynn Reeve, ed

Lantzville: Lantzville Historical Society, 2007. 96 pp. \$25.00 paper.

Nothing without Effort: A History of Langley

Warren Sommer

Langley: Township of Langley, 2008. 337 pp. \$49.95 cloth.

Available from Langley Centennial Museum.

Penticton, British Columbia: Celebrating a Century

Yasmin John-Thorpe and Penny Smith, eds

Penticton: Penticton Writers and Publishers, 2007. 108 pp.

\$50.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

The Story of Dunbar: Voices of a Vancouver Neighbourhood

Peggy Schofield, ed

Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007. 441 pp. \$39.95 paper.

Tidal Passages: A History of the Discovery Islands

Jeanette Taylor

Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2008. 316 pp. \$24.95 cloth.

*Vancouver – Stories of a City: A History of Vancouver
Neighbourhoods and the People Who Built Them*

Lisa Smedman

Vancouver: Vancouver Courier, 2008. 320 pp. \$44.95 cloth.

*Voices from the Sound: Chronicles of Clayoquot Sound and
Tofino, 1899-1929*

Margaret Horsfield

Nanaimo: Salal Books, 2008. 365 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

Williams Lake: The Heart of the Cariboo

Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin. 2 vols. Williams Lake: Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin, 2003, 2008. 232, 233 pp. \$30 each, paper. Available from the Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin

*Yi Fao/Speaking through Memory: A History of New Westminster's
Chinese Community, 1850-1980*

Jim Wolf and Patricia Owen

Victoria: Heritage House, 2008. 141 pp. \$19.95 paper.

THE WRITING OF HISTORY comes in many forms and fashions. Those of us who seek to interpret the past with words approach the task with different backgrounds, preconceptions, and passions. For all of this diversity, a hierarchy exists in some minds between kinds of written history, with academics, not unexpectedly, liking to place themselves at the top. While the argument that lengthy scholarly training in theory, method, and historiography has merit, it should not preclude paying attention to writing from other perspectives. Local histories have particular utility in British Columbia, whose large size and diversity makes it extremely difficult for any single person to interrogate every place closely and, thereby, to understand the province as a whole, cognizant of all its parts.

Local histories explore, often from an insider perspective, the relationship between a relatively small physical area and the human beings who have, through time, attempted to impress themselves on it. The area becomes localized by virtue of arrivals claiming it as their own. In comparison with scholarly texts, many local histories are content with being relatively modest - in the words of one such work, "simply a snapshot of some of the happenings, and of some of the people who made things happen" (Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin, Introduction, n.p.). Others are more ambitious. Virtually all, whatever their form, contribute to our understanding by evoking place from the perspective of families and communities with the intimacy that proximity brings.

Taking local history seriously, we come to realize how fertile a field it has been for publishing in British Columbia over the last little while. Some locations in the fifteen books noted here are known to most of us, others less so.

Few among us are likely familiar with all of their histories or, for that matter, are able to locate them precisely on a map. These considerations are part of what makes local history so valuable an addition to understanding this province of ours.

The fifteen books divide into three groups. The first five are in the mainstream of local history by virtue of attending to discrete communities dotted across the landscape. The centennials of the coal-mining community of Lantzville on Vancouver Island, fruit-growing Penticton in the southern interior, and ranching Dog Creek in the Cariboo gave the impetus to locally produced readable accounts that nicely incorporate vignettes and family stories. A two-volume history of Williams Lake, published by its very fine Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin, opts for a combined historical and topical approach, thus permitting readers to single out those aspects of that ranching community's past that are of most interest to them. Wayne Norton's foray into the history of Kamloops explores topics that engage him, including outsiders' first impressions and the postcards, collectables, and persons that depicted this interior ranching town to outsiders.

Seven of the books focus on the Lower Mainland, which is hardly surprising given that this relatively small area of British Columbia, which includes Vancouver, its largest city, has, since the 1920s, housed half the province's population. All the same, as Lisa Smedman's account of the growth of Vancouver neighbourhoods and the story of one of them, Dunbar, emphasizes, the city is not that unique, thriving in good part because it retains in its neighbourhoods a sense of the local with which residents can comfortably identify. Warren Sommer's solid

histories of nearby North Vancouver, another centennial project, and of Langley in the heart of the Fraser Valley not only narrate their stories but also place them within larger regional, provincial, and national frameworks. More focused are Francis Mansbridge's fascinating history of the recreational use of the mountainous Hollyburn area above West Vancouver, Jim Wolf and Patricia Owen's evocation of New Westminster from the perspective of its Chinese community, and Gwen Szychter's historical "self-guided tour of Tsawwassen ... to be enjoyed through a leisurely walk or drive, or in the comfort of a favourite armchair" (11), which, sadly, lacks maps to guide the reader.

The remaining three books turn attention to British Columbia's long coastline, where the local has more often been equated with individuals and families who "yearned to get away from the evils of civilization" (Harbord, 12) as well as from each other than it has been with discrete communities working together towards common ends. Heather Harbord's rich history of Desolation Sound, Jeanette Taylor's of the large area lying between Vancouver Island and the Mainland of which the Sound is a part, and Margaret Horsfield's of Vancouver Island's west coast each, with gossamer threads, stitch together stories and recollections into enjoyable and persuasive narratives that extend across time from the early establishment Brits, resourceful Scandinavians, religious zealots, and others serviced by coastal steamships and missionary boats to the later hippies, draft dodgers, and back-to-the-landers who also sought alternative, self-sufficient ways of life.

As well as marking out the many ways in which British Columbians have engaged with their settings through time and, thereby, defined what the

local means to them, these fifteen books expand our sensitivity to the past in other ways. One of these has to do with methodology. Local historians are limited by their sources, as, to a degree, is all historical writing. While local archives around British Columbia have done their best to acquire and maintain original records, all too frequently they have been starved of funding. The long-time tendency to equate the past worth remembering with the records of white men in positions of authority also limits the reach of archives. Local historians, and also communities interested in documenting their past, have as a consequence become imaginative scavengers of a sort, reclaiming the past through conversations with long-time residents. The authors' proximity to their subjects also opens the door to wonderful photographs, sometimes contributed by the families themselves, and virtually all of the books take advantage of this opportunity.

While such publishing initiatives are highly commendable, they run the risk of writing the past backwards in time from the perspectives of those who "came and stayed" (Szychter, 10) as opposed to the perspectives of those who were there first (i.e., Aboriginal people), who were there briefly, or who perforce lived in the shadows. The commendable ways in which the histories of Dog Creek, Langley, North Vancouver, Penticton, Vancouver (and its Dunbar neighbourhood), Vancouver Island's west and east coasts, and Williams Lake integrate Aboriginal people into the text are models for us all. The New Westminster and sections of the Dog Creek and Penticton histories are welcome counterparts to the tendency for Chinese British Columbians to appear, if at all, only anecdotally. Further, the internment of

the Japanese during the Second World War figures in several of the books.

Two intriguing topics running through the books exemplify the utility of local histories for interrogating broader topics as well as for reflecting on the local. The first has to do with making a living, the second with moving about for the sheer pleasure of doing so.

The many ways in which British Columbians have fashioned a living are everywhere evident in these fifteen local histories, be it the Lantzville cooperative whose members crawled into, worked, and then crawled out of a mine all to tap a single narrow coal seam (Reeve, 20, 22); the entrepreneurial Chinese men who fashioned successful businesses to the advantage of their families as well as to the larger New Westminster economy (Wolf and Owen, *passim*); woodcarver and Squamish chief Mathias Joe who, during the Second World War, “was happy to turn his talents to crafting the spars required on His Majesty’s ships” (Sommer, *Ambitious City*, 199); the Ladner Turkey Farms that, at their peak in about 1960, were “the largest producer of turkeys in Canada” (Szychter, 58–60); or the two Penticton pilots and mechanic so intrigued by “a new fangled flying machine” that they successfully introduced helicopters to British Columbia and beyond (John-Thorpe and Smith, 43). Then there are the many, many loggers, fishers, farmers, and ranchers whose perseverance in often difficult circumstances has anchored locality after locality. Virtually all of the books include stories of female teachers, some of whom soon moved on but others of whom married into the local community and continued to contribute to it throughout their lives. BC women employed outside of the home did more

than teach: those in Penticton worked in the local fruit cannery (John-Thorpe and Smith, 72), while their North Vancouver counterparts worked in the local shipyards during the Second World War (Sommer, *Ambitious City*, 202–3).

These books emphasize how mistaken it is to consider British Columbians as fixed in place. The province’s size has encouraged people to move about not only in search of a better life but also for recreation. As early as the 1880s, some British Columbians began to take themselves off to the seaside for extended periods during the summer, arriving in locations that included Tsawwassen (Szychter, 123–32, 149–53), Lantzville (Reeve, 50–52), and Penticton (John-Thorpe and Smith, 21). Desolation Sound has long been popular with boaters (Harbord, 15, 79, 94–95, 116, 202, 210–22, *passim*), and tourism helped fashion Williams Lake with its annual stampede and rodeo (Museum of the Cariboo Chilcotin, 182–97). The Langley history, in a section aptly entitled “Playground for Millionaires” (Sommer, *Nothing without Effort*, 171), pinpoints the role of wealthy Vancouverites. The Hollyburn history evokes the tension between recreation in the form of skiers constructing impromptu cabins, the demands of the larger economy in the form of lumbering, and municipal expansion with a penchant for regulation and control.

For all the contribution local histories make to our understanding, they are far too often on the margins of our attention. Means of publication play a role. Harbour Publishing, long committed to local history, is behind three of the books; smaller publishers are behind another five. The other half divide between community groups and self-publication (made increasingly viable

with changing technology). While local history has the advantage of sales that are geographically concentrated, resulting in less need for wide-ranging marketing, the downside is that some of the books are not available in public libraries, much less bookstores, outside of the specific locality to which they pertain.

Taking local history seriously benefits all historians. Reading accounts written out of a commitment to place, we perceive the advantages of putting less distance between our subjects and ourselves. Local historians delve into aspects of the past of both particular and general interest, including individuals' relationship to their physical settings, their diverse and imaginative means of making a living, and the need we all share for recreation. Taking local history seriously, we also come to understand how it is that the locality with which we identify as individuals and groups is in no way predetermined but, rather, is an ongoing process in which we all engage throughout our lifetimes.