

# The Writing of Local History: A Review Article

CHARLES W. HUMPHREYS

*The Cape Scott Story*, by Lester R. Peterson (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1974), 134 pp., illus. \$3.95; *Errington*, compiled by Stanley C. W. Stokes (Errington, B.C.: Stanley C. W. Stokes, 1971), 128 pp., illus.; *Maple Ridge: A History of Settlement*, by the Maple Ridge Branch, Canadian Federation of University Women (1972), 120 pp., illus.; *Mission on the Fraser*, by John Cherrington (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1974), 222 pp., illus.; *The Town That Got Lost*, by Pete Loudon (Sidney, B.C.; Gray's Publishing, 1973), 111 pp., illus. \$7.50; *The History of Terrace*, by Nadine Asante (Terrace, B.C.: Terrace Public Library Association, 1973), 243 pp., illus. \$4.25; *History of Port Coquitlam*, by Edith D. Chambers (Port Coquitlam, B.C.: B. A. Thompson, 1973), illus. \$3.95; *New Westminster, The Early Years 1858-1898*, by Alan Woodland (New Westminster, B.C.: Nunaga Publishing, 1973), 72 pp., illus.

The writing of local history has obvious attractions for those inclined to take up the task: very often, primary materials are at hand; prolonged research trips to distant points are not required; the physical dimensions of the subject seductively hint at a relatively easy chore; and, frequently, people with clear recollections are still alive. Yet, despite these supposed advantages, the road to a successful local history is marked by troublesome potholes. Once the author has completed the required research, the first major problem presents itself: the manner of ordering this abundance of material. Does one put the people on the ground and pursue their collective histories to the conclusion; then, drop back in time and pursue other themes, such as politics, educational facilities, or municipal services, each in turn? Or, should the author attempt to hold together the entire history of the area and advance through the municipality's story on a relatively even front? So, the first problem is one of control, holding the materials in check and not permitting them to dictate the writing of the

history. Out-of-control local histories simply become long lists of names and more names or hodge-podges of significant and insignificant facts.

Generally, the authors of four of the books, *The Town That Got Lost*, *Mission on the Fraser*, *Maple Ridge* and *The Cape Scott Story*, manage to keep their materials under control by one device or another. Only in *Mission*, however, is the story told on a broad front with the author keeping a variety of themes and subjects together chronologically. *Errington* is not subjected to such control and this creates certain problems. *Terrace* consists largely of short biographies from pages 39 to 154, and this is a mark of failure by the author to discover a satisfactory method of control. *History of Port Coquitlam* is an example of runaway local history. To support this contention one only need glance at the short biography of A. R. Millard wherein it is revealed that this man once caught an 800 pound sturgeon, grafted a mountain ash to a pear tree, and had six named pallbearers at his funeral. *New Westminster* is, after a brief introductory essay, chiefly a pictorial presentation and thus cannot be categorized with the rest. Consequently, the above comments do not apply to this careful and interesting selection of early photographs.

A second problem associated with the writing of local history is that authors frequently draw back from sharp judgments or probing analyses. Generally, in local history writing, familiarity does not breed contempt. In a way this is almost regrettable because local history is essentially social history, often concentrating on the settlement and development of a community and the social institutions created by the residents. Thus local history becomes people history. Yet, too often, local historians fail to flesh out local people who are not presented warts and all. Specifically, a careful reading of *Errington* makes it clear that E. J. Feary was once a local figure of power and prominence; at various times he was secretary of the school board, secretary-treasurer of the Errington War Memorial Hall and postmaster. Further, although he was no longer on the school board when this occurred, his daughter was kept on as a teacher of one and a half years' experience while another, with almost a decade's experience, was dismissed when the provincial department of education ordered a staff reduction. Now one would like to know more about this man and the shape of the local power structure, but the reader is left to guess at these things.

At one point, Cherrington in *Mission* exemplifies the author who avoids sharp judgments. Here is his congenial discussion of Chinese labourers, the C.P.R. and John A. Macdonald:

... After the route had been cleared, the grading began. This task fell to Chinese coolies. The CPR initially imported a thousand Orientals, and planned to bring in many more for the final phase of tie and rail construction. This sparked a bitter reaction in various quarters of the province. ... the Chinese were seen as detrimental to the economy. Orientals, ran the argument, would invade the province by the thousands and take jobs that could otherwise be filled by poor men of the British Empire. Even worse, Orientals were known to work for starvation wages, and then send their money back to China. The Chinese, however, had come to stay. When loud protestations about the "yellow peril" reached the ears of the prime minister, Sir John simply stated that the railway would be built by whatever labour could be found. Perhaps he was rather amused by those grumbling politicians who so recently had demanded a railroad at all costs.

Against this should stand Macdonald's remarks to a Hamilton election audience, as recorded in the *Toronto Daily Mail* of June 9, 1882:

... A question has been put to me which is a very pregnant one, and one which should be answered. It is whether I am in favour of CHINESE LABOUR. I have been told that the labouring classes in Canada have been threatened with an influx of Chinese. I do not want Ah-Sing, though a very good fellow, with the four aces up his sleeve — (laughter) — I do not want the yellow or the brown man. Seriously speaking, I believe it is a misfortune to introduce a different race, of a different cast of mind, of inferior civilization, and lower morals. ... We are cutting a railway through the Rocky Mountains, and within five years we hope to have the Pacific and Atlantic connected by a railway, every mile of it built on Canadian soil. In order to build that we must employ labour. It cannot be obtained in British Columbia. ... The contractor has been obliged to employ Chinese as navvies, but, when the road is finished they will go back. ... there shall be no competition from the Chinese who lives on rats when he cannot get mice, and never washes himself, who eats potatoes with the skins on, and who wears one shirt a year. (Laughter and cheers.) ...

Obviously, a somewhat different picture of Macdonald emerges from this second quotation, a picture drawn exclusively by Macdonald's own words.

Local historians frequently shy away from thorough probing of distasteful matters. In *Maple Ridge*, for example, it is very gently suggested that the Finnish community hall at Webster's Corners had socialist origins; later, it is quietly noted that the building was ordered closed for a time during the second world war. Now, surely, this occurred early in that conflict when the Canadian government, by means of sweeping orders-in-council, dissolved organizations and shut the halls of any associations that had potential for fascist or communist sympathies. This episode is deserving of a few more words, not only to shed more light on the

incident, but to place this bit of local history in the broader context of Canadian history in order to view it in the larger perspective.

This last point raises another problem faced by the writers of local history: the need to place local events against the provincial, national or world scene. This is necessary in order to see if local occurrences fit the larger picture or stand at odds with it; and to make the appropriate comments whatever the case. As a case in point, the following statement is made about Webster's Corners in *Maple Ridge*: "During the first world war there was much unemployment." If accurate, this observation demands some expansion because it certainly stands at odds with generalizations that have been made about the larger Canadian community during this conflict.

Another example of this problem occurs in *Terrace* where, between pages 164 and 168, one is provided with a very sketchy story of a mutiny of soldiers located at the army camp on the Skeena river during 1944. It would appear, although the reader is never directly informed, that this occurred when Mackenzie King came to the hard decision to use the "zombies" for overseas duty. Nothing of the larger picture is provided, however, and the result is a story in isolation which, as presented, seems to have no relationship with events elsewhere in Canada. Yet, in actual fact, the events in Terrace at this point in time were most directly connected to a host of consequential themes in Canadian history.

Thus, these historians all have difficulties with three problems associated with local history writing: controlling the material, thoroughly probing the evidence, and placing events in the larger perspective. Consequently, someone writing a general history of the province or probing a particular theme on a national scale — say, anti-German sentiment during the first world war — will have to go to these histories to pick up this substantial fact or that interesting point but, generally, such an author will still have to do more probing, more research, more analysis, and certainly more interpretation. That writer will still have to pull the pieces together. He will, for example, have to poke around that closure of the Finnish hall in an effort to flesh out the story; or he will have to take a harder look at John A. Macdonald and Chinese labour for the C.P.R.; or he will have to dig further into the events in Terrace during 1944.

This is not to suggest for a moment that the majority of these volumes are without value. Loudon's story of Anyox is quite delightful and his reminiscences of growing up in that town approximate James Gray's *The Boy from Winnipeg* in evoking the atmosphere of another time and place. Nor can one ignore how the story of Maple Ridge makes it clear that rail

and then road had differing effects on the prospects of Hammond and Haney. One has to appreciate the fact that Peterson has written *The Cape Scott Story* with its grim recounting of a futile, but heroic, attempt at settlement on the northern end of Vancouver Island, an attempt that was thwarted by government bungling and broken promises, miserable weather and an absence of roads. One can even be amused by the wistful way in which Cherrington holds up the past as a good example to a rather bad present, as when he lectures the teachers of today on p. 139. But, on the whole, a great deal more could have been done with most of these books.

In light of this it might be appropriate to offer a suggestion. It would seem that what this province requires is an agency which would provide advice and criticism for local history writers. In addition, it might provide something approximating a standard format for such works. This is not to suggest that such an agency would commission histories or place the work in the hands of so-called professionals; not at all, although it might, in exchange for a publication subvention, insist upon certain standards. Thus a minimum level of footnoting might be secured (a shortcoming in all the above books); an insistence upon pagination could be made (*Port Coquitlam* possesses none); and a comprehensive and orderly bibliography could be demanded (none of the above completely fill such a requirement). Further, advice might be given about organization, ideas could be proffered about editing, and suggestions made on the difficult task of picture selection. Then the final product would much more accurately represent the long hours of loving labour by local historians. Unfortunately, this is not generally the case at present: the end result does not correctly reflect the time and energy and money so selflessly given.