

Matter for Reflection: *BC Studies* and British Columbia History*

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Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass¹

So *BC Studies* has made it to no. 100. For one hundred issues it has provided a regional voice that could not always be heard in national and international publications. And, through thick and thin, this journal has become a major part of British Columbia's culture. One hundred issues or, put another way, twenty-five years of publication, is, social historians would tell us, a generation. To celebrate this coming of age, the editor has called upon some of the contributors to reflect on the first hundred issues of *BC Studies* and the developments in their field over the last generation. This is a dicey proposition, for mine is a generation of historians not much given to reflecting upon themselves. Still, as I look back, it is clear that we have written more British Columbia history than any previous generation. Whether it has been better history is another matter.

When *BC Studies* first appeared, one might have been forgiven for thinking that it would not last twenty-five years. The earlier journal, the *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, had not published an issue for a decade when *BC Studies*, no. 1, winter 1968-69, came out. The *Quarterly*, published by what was then the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, had confined itself to the region's history. The new journal was to be interdisciplinary and was also to include articles by non-academics in an effort to appeal to a wider audience. Yet the first issue, with its deconstructing totem on the cover, was a slim one. It contained six short and fairly

* Though none of them is responsible for anything written here, I had helpful conversations as I was thinking about this article with Ken Coates, Cole Harris, Mary-Ellen Kelm, Mark Leier, Bob McDonald, Pat Roy, Bruce Stadfeld, and Peter Ward.

¹ T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 89. By using these lines from "The Hollow Men" I do not mean to be gender-specific.

specialized articles, two book reviews, and a bibliography of recent publications on British Columbia. The new journal was a noble experiment, but would it last?

BC Studies has not merely survived, it has gone from strength to strength. Much larger issues with articles on a growing variety of topics have followed the original slim volumes. Sometimes special numbers have been devoted to single themes, and some of those have been published separately as books. In the fortieth issue, the first editors, Margaret Prang and Walter Young, rather diffidently noted that the journal had taken thirty-nine steps in ten years and thus confirmed their belief that there was a need for a place to publish writing on British Columbia.² Since issue no. 59, the journal has continued under the editorship of Allan Smith and now has reached its twenty-fifth anniversary. For a generation, then, *BC Studies* has published scholarly writing on this region and, like any journal, it has reflected both the strengths and the weaknesses of the writers that contribute to its pages.

Historical writing has dominated *BC Studies*. According to my calculations, the first fifty issues included a total of 208 articles, and of these, nearly two-thirds, or 64 per cent, can be designated as history. The articles on history were written at a rate of about two to one by historians and non-historians: the actual percentages being sixty-eight and thirty-two respectively.³ I may have made some arbitrary classifications in coming to these figures, and they are perhaps slightly, though I think not much, skewed by special issues. In the first fifty there were, for example, two special issues on archaeology and one on economics. Though archaeology is obviously about the past, I have generally classified those articles as non-history — likewise work by economists that is not specifically historical. There were two other special issues in the first fifty: one in honour of Margaret Ormsby which, perhaps inevitably, was all history, and another, a collection of papers from the first B.C. studies conference, in which, less inevitably, all the articles were historical. In the second half of *BC Studies*' run, the balance (or perhaps imbalance) between history and other disciplines has been about the same. Of a total of 169 articles in issues 51 to 98, 63 per cent were history. Interestingly, in spite of the growth of the profession, the proportion of historical articles written by non-historians has increased from 32 to 44 per cent. Again, I do not think that the special issues on

² Margaret Prang and Walter Young, "Editors' Note," *BC Studies* 40 (Winter 1978-79): 3-4.

³ By "non-historians" I mean writers who are not historians by profession, though most of them are academics.

Native people, photography, the city of Vancouver, historical geography, and anthropology and history in the courts made much difference to these proportions.

Clearly, historians have done much to shape *BC Studies*. All of the major names associated with the writing of British Columbia history over the last twenty-five years have appeared at the head of articles and the foot of reviews. The journal has witnessed the succession of scholarly generations, most obviously perhaps in the special issue in honour of Margaret Ormsby, but also in the articles published by graduates with newly minted theses. Graduate programmes in history expanded across Canada in the 1960s, and by the end of the decade, as *BC Studies* began publishing, the University of British Columbia was producing its first Ph.D.'s in British Columbia history. These historians, who began writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, have clearly left their imprint on this journal. In the meantime, graduate programmes had developed at Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria, and now another generation is beginning to re-interpret the history of the province. The changing interests and ideas, as well as the enduring prejudices, of the province's historians have found expression in this journal. Thus *BC Studies* provides the matter with which to reflect on twenty-five years of historical writing on British Columbia.

Since history has played such a major role in the regional journal, presumably historians believe they have something important to say about how this region sees itself. The most obvious message from the *BC Studies* historians is that the province's history is diverse and varied. The earlier generation of historians who wrote for the *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* had a very clear, if narrow, view of the provincial past. They concentrated on the period of exploration and colonization prior to British Columbia's entry into Confederation in 1871, they were interested in the white, male leaders of enterprise and government. Margaret Ormsby's *British Columbia: A History*, which came out in the same year as the last issue of the *Quarterly*, is a good representation of this approach.⁴ Shortly after her general history appeared, Margaret Ormsby reflected on what remained to be done and published an article entitled "Neglected Aspects of British Columbia's History." The piece was slight, given its subject matter, but it included brief comments about the need for writing on economic history, on immigration into British Columbia, on the development and culture of cities, and on religious history. But the overwhelming message from the leading British Columbia historian of the day was that we

⁴ Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958).

must attend to the writing of political history.⁵ That advice has been largely ignored.

The historians writing in *BC Studies* have, at first glance, taken a much broader view of the past. A switch in emphasis from political to social history has led them to look at a different set of subjects. We have started to write Native people — the majority of British Columbia's population until the end of the nineteenth century — into the province's history. Ethnic groups such as the Chinese, Japanese, and Sikhs have received some attention, though much of it focuses on white British Columbians' reaction to their presence rather than the culture and history of the minorities. Historians writing about the culture and labour of working people have shown that other classes besides the economic and political élites contributed to building this province. And while some historians have explained the importance of race and class in British Columbia history, others have drawn our attention to the crucial role of gender. The earlier view that history was made by men has been effectively challenged by those writing about women's lives and experience. The most recent general history of the province, Jean Barman's *The West Beyond the West*, is a very different book from Margaret Ormsby's, and it reflects many of these recent trends.⁶ Provincial politics is the least of her concerns as she concentrates on social history and writes about Native people, ethnic minorities, workers, and women.

Much of this new work by historians has been facilitated by new techniques and stimulated by scholarship in other disciplines. Particularly through the use of oral history, and to some extent material history, those who did not leave written records have begun to have some voice in the province's history. When *BC Studies* began, scholarship on the Native past was the reserve of anthropologists and archaeologists, and they have continued to educate the historians who have since moved into the field. Historical geographers have made an important and lively contribution to our understanding of how the particular terrain of this province has affected its history. And historians have drawn on work in other social sciences such as sociology, political science, and economics. Interestingly, the more traditional relationship between history and literature has not been clearly articulated. As an interdisciplinary journal in which much of the history

⁵ Margaret Ormsby, "Neglected Aspects of British Columbia History," *British Columbia Quarterly* 23 (April 1960): 9-12.

⁶ Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

has been written by non-historians, *BC Studies* has done much to foster this communication between disciplines.

This fragmentation of the historical vision is, in many ways, a good thing. Historical writing has become less exclusive and élitist. It has a closer relationship, we would like to think, to human life as it has been lived. Certainly the inclusion of previously anonymous groups and individuals in the history of the province has been a real achievement. But as they congratulate themselves for these wonders that they have performed, historians have been less willing to acknowledge that there is a level at which this diversity is more apparent than real.

Every enthusiasm contains its own narrowness, and, though they are as unlikely as the previous generation to admit it, the current historians of British Columbia have some very distinct limitations. They tend, for a start, to be preoccupied with subject matter. As certain subjects are deemed more acceptable than others, there is too much emphasis on what we write about rather than how we write about it. Thus the most empty-headed and badly written piece of work on Native people or women is likely to be more highly regarded than an insightful and well-written piece of political history. One might expect historians, more than anyone else, to realize how quickly young turks become the old guard, but apparently they do not. A great deal of today's history is being written by Donald Creightons with a difference: equally as dogmatic about what are appropriate subjects, they lack his clear thinking and graceful writing. Replacing one set of subjects with another is not broadening the scope, it is just refocusing a narrow vision. If we were self-critical enough we might admit that we are, in our own way, every bit as narrow in our concerns as the previous generation. The difference is that we are more self-righteous about our limitations.

Thus, in spite of changing fashions, there are still major gaps in the writing of British Columbia history. One could, more than thirty years later, write an updated version of Margaret Ormsby's "Neglected Aspects of British Columbia's History." Though the list might be somewhat different from hers, it would contain as many items and some of the gaps would be just as large. There is still much more writing on the period up to the end of the nineteenth century than after, and so British Columbia historians should be thinking about getting into the twentieth century before it is over. For all the attention to social history, we lack the basic, detailed demographic information to show how and when this west coast society developed and how it was structured in terms of, say, ethnicity, gender and class. Though some would argue that nothing has defined the nature of British Columbia more than its resource-based economy, we have

still not written much good economic history. British Columbia, like any other province, expresses itself collectively through its politics. And yet we remain, as Ormsby put it, "ignorant of the mainsprings of our political development," because political history fell into disfavour before much of British Columbia's had been written.⁷ There is also a huge geographical void in our history as historians have concentrated on the southwest corner of the province and paid relatively little attention to the interior and the north. Yet, important as all these subjects may be, the historians of this province need to do much more than merely fill the yawning gaps in our knowledge of the past. There is a much more fundamental problem to be addressed.

In British Columbia history, more empirical matter has not necessarily produced more creative reflection. Historians may have become comfortable with new subjects, but they are ill-at-ease with new ideas. Historical writing on this province, like British Columbia itself, still has a sense of the frontier about it. The historian is expected to sally forth, stake out a new piece of ground, build fences and tame the wilderness, rather than cultivating land that has already been pre-empted. Thus in British Columbia, we are producing lots of new information about the past. What we lack is challenging discourse about that information.

If we are to have a more lively history of British Columbia, its historians need to learn to grapple vigorously with ideas. We must exorcise the ghost of Leopold von Ranke and with it the belief that we can reconstruct the past by the industrious accumulation of accurate details. We must stop piling up information in the illusory hope that, at some point, the pile will turn into a coherent version of history. In British Columbia, too much pioneer empiricism goes on in isolation from the rest of the world. Though parochialism does not make even good parish history, we still write much of our history without engaging with ideas and approaches used in other areas.

At the same time, we must avoid the other extreme of recent scholarship. Excessive devotion to theory will not solve our problems any more than the witless collection of facts. We need to resist the notion that we can simply pull in any available theory from outside the province and apply it to British Columbia regardless of whether there is evidence to sustain it. It may well be that the French historian and thinker Michel Foucault, has useful insights to offer on, say, the subtleties of power relations, and so reading Foucault may prompt us to look at British Columbia in a different

⁷ Margaret A. Ormsby, "Neglected Aspects of British Columbia's History," *British Columbia Library Quarterly* 23 (April 1960): 10.

light.⁸ But we should remember that Foucault wrote about an old and settled culture, whereas British Columbia is a new and rapidly moving society. Efforts to apply Foucault's ideas to British Columbia often degenerate into an exegesis of the vagaries of his writing rather than the subtleties of power in this region.⁹ There is also a tendency to cite a particular bit of Foucault while ignoring the range of his thinking. Perhaps there is something to be said for a moratorium on the use of big D and F words — Derrida and Foucault — by historians, especially those who have not read either one very closely, even in translation. Unless we are careful, the current theoretical fads of discourse, deconstruction, and post-modernism, which are all taking academics in the direction that little is knowable, will end up being the last refuge of a know-nothing generation, "Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw."¹⁰

In the writing of history, there is an important distinction between theory — that is, knowing what other people think — and ideas, which is thinking for ourselves. Historians of this province must spend less time merely describing historical events or parroting other people's theories, and put more effort into mediating ideas and empirical observation in order to explain this particular province's past.

So far, few big ideas have sprung up from the study of British Columbia as a particular place. Non-Native British Columbia is a new society, but unlike the historians of other new societies, we have not developed ideas that define the essence of our particular form of newness. There is no British Columbia equivalent to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and Louis Hartz's fragment theory for the United States, or Russell Ward's concept of mateship as fundamental to Australian society, or, more recently, Miles Fairburn's assertion that atomization explains the early development of New Zealand.¹¹ None of these notions about other societies

⁸ For an introduction to Foucault's ideas, see Paul Rainbow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); and, for an effective application of them to British Columbia, see Daniel Clayton, "Geographies of the Lower Skeena," *BC Studies* 94 (Summer 1992): particularly 55-58.

⁹ See, as an example, Tina Loo, "Dan Cranmer's Potlatch: Law as Coercion, Symbol, and Rhetoric in British Columbia, 1884-1951," *Canadian Historical Review* 73 (June 1992): 165.

¹⁰ Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *Collected Poems*, 89.

¹¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962); Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964); Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966); Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and Its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society, 1850-1900* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989).

has gone unchallenged, and some are now almost completely rejected, but in British Columbia we lack both the original idea and the ensuing debate. We are not given to thinking about what is fundamental to this province: what makes it tick. And with Jean Barman's recent regional history, which is apparently based on the assumption that "British Columbia's distinctive identity rests in its diversity and ambiguity," we have general confusion before there have been any well-considered constructs.¹²

This discomfort with ideas has also been reflected in *BC Studies*. Amidst all the empirical articles, two big ideas about British Columbia history have come under discussion. But, unfortunately for scholarship, in each case the discussants failed to engage the idea, and debate was choked off for want of intellectual air to breathe.

In the early 1970s there was a brief flurry of commentary on Martin Robin's valiant attempt to write a history informed by a single explanatory factor. Robin argued that the province as a whole was like a company town writ large, and thus society and politics in British Columbia were characterized by a high level of class polarization. His thesis was outlined in earlier articles and then worked out in detail in his two-volume history of British Columbia, *The Company Province* and *Pillars of Profit*.¹³ Even before the first volume had appeared, readers of *BC Studies* were warned of the perils of taking Martin Robin too seriously. In an essay reviewing a chapter in a collection of essays on provincial politics, Alan Cairns lambasted Robin for careless research, a cavalier attitude to factual information, and for a writing style that emphasized dramatic effect over scholarly accuracy. Robin, legitimately, I think, asked in response why Cairns had paid virtually no attention to his overall thesis. The reply was that his general interpretation was invalidated by slipshod research and writing. One issue later, Norman Ruff's review of *The Company Province* provided a litany of Robin's factual errors and inconsistencies rather than a discussion of the ideas expressed in the book.¹⁴ It may well be that there is a

¹² Jean Barman, "Letter to the Editors," *Canadian Historical Review*, 74, March 1993, 72; and *The West Beyond the West*, 353.

¹³ See Martin Robin, "The Social Basis of Party Politics in British Columbia," *Queen's Quarterly* 72 (1966): 675-90; and reprinted in Hugh Thorburn (ed.), *Party Politics in Canada* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1972); *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972) and *Pillars of Profit: The Company Province, 1934-1972* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973).

¹⁴ Alan C. Cairns, "The Study of the Provinces: A Review Article," *BC Studies* 14 (Summer 1972): 73-82; Martin Robin, "A Comment on Alan C. Cairns' 'The Study of the Provinces: A Review Article,'" and Alan C. Cairns, "A Reply to Pro-

threshold over which carelessness about detail invalidates a general idea; nevertheless, our understanding of British Columbia history would have been better served by debate on Martin Robin's important argument than, as he put it, "a haphazard search for nits."¹⁵

The second major idea discussed in *BC Studies* was Peter Ward's thesis that race, rather than class, was the more significant line of cleavage in British Columbia society. In an article published in the Spring 1980 issue, Ward suggested that class consciousness was less clearly developed than others had claimed, while the boundaries between races were much more distinctly drawn and difficult to cross.¹⁶ Four issues later, Ward's ideas were challenged by Rennie Warburton. Once again, readers of *BC Studies* were warned, like adolescents whose judgement might be wayward, to "be wary of accepting the conclusions reached in Professor Peter Ward's recent article."¹⁷ Warburton basically asserted that, on the one side, Ward looked only at class consciousness and not at the objective reality of class, and on the other, that ethnic groups in British Columbia were also subject to the class structure. Though none of this necessarily bore on the logic of Ward's argument — which was not about the existence of class and race, but the relative importance of the two — it could have been the beginning of an instructive dialogue. Warburton also made the extremely important point, which others have since taken up in more detail, that perhaps gender was a more fundamental division than either race or class. Unfortunately Warburton could not leave it at that. He closed with a bit of personal innuendo, suggesting that Ward's motive in raising the question of the relative importance of race and class was "to deal another blow to scholars on the left . . ."¹⁸ While Ward's response was understandable, it also ended debate. He and Warburton would just have to agree to disagree, he thought, since they were "as ships that pass in the night."¹⁹ They had seen each other on their radar but were not really in communication. The level of what discussion there was on this issue may have been a notch or two higher

fessor Robin's Comment," *BC Studies* 16 (Winter 1972-73): 78-82; and Norman J. Ruff, Review of *The Rush for Spoils*, *BC Studies* 17 (Spring, 1973): 69-76.

¹⁵ Martin Robin, "Comments on Norman Ruff's Review of *The Rush for Spoils*," *BC Studies* 18 (Summer 1973): 84-89.

¹⁶ Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 17-35.

¹⁷ Rennie Warburton, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment," *BC Studies* 49 (Spring 1981): 79.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁹ Peter Ward, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Reply," *BC Studies* 50 (Summer 1981): 52.

than the reviews of Martin Robin's work, but again it was not very illuminating.²⁰

Another symptom of our unwillingness to engage in debate is that, outside of the book-review section and the occasional specific dispute, there has been little vigorous discussion of historical writing in *BC Studies*. British Columbia's historians are not particularly prone to reflecting on each other's ideas by writing historiographical pieces.²¹ Review essays of particular aspects of British Columbia history are rare in the first half of *BC Studies'* run, and there are even fewer in the second half. Many of the book reviews in *BC Studies* also lack intellectual bite. Positive reviews often show little enthusiasm, while critical or negative reviews of history books usually follow the polite academic formula of damning with faint praise.

Since we historians do not speak clearly among ourselves about ideas, it is hardly surprising that we have not communicated them to others. The original hope that *BC Studies* should appeal to a wider readership has not been realized by academic historians who have made little effort to explain the past, and therefore the present, to the general public. Rather they talk and write for other historians, and then often only for small groups of like-minded historians. They spend much of their time, and a good deal of taxpayer's money, chattering away to ever-decreasing circles of docile listeners. Soon they will be like street-corner preachers calling earnestly to passing traffic. And because they do not exercise their talent for communication, it is quickly wasting away. One does not have to read a lot of recent history before concluding that most historians do not set much store by clear and graceful writing. They much prefer to write about obscure topics in obscure prose. It is no wonder that they are not widely read. Today's academic historians have left explaining British Columbia to a wider audience to the likes of Peter Newman who, in his books on the fur trade, parades colourful nonsense as a version of history.²² By turning inwards on themselves rather than writing for the public, historians have

²⁰ Others have since taken up the issue of class and race, though usually in an effort to show that Ward was mistaken. See, for example, the various contributions to Rennie Warburton and David Coburn (eds.), *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1978), p. 3 and *passim*; and Gillian Creese, "Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the 'Oriental Problem'," *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1988-89): 24-49.

²¹ An exception is Allan Smith, "The Writing of British Columbia History," *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 73-102.

²² Peter C. Newman, *The Company of Adventurers* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1985) and *Caesars of the Wilderness* (Markham: Penguin Books, 1987). I have commented more fully on Newman's approach to history in "Trading in Mythology," *The Beaver* 68 (January 1987): 51-55.

been complicit in the decline of intellectual values in our society. This is too bad, for the skills of logical thinking and clear writing which historians are supposed to learn and teach were never more needed than now.

There are, no doubt, many reasons why British Columbia historians are uncomfortable with the clear expression of ideas, but the first place to look is the nature of their graduate training. Doctoral candidates in history, having already spent five or six years reading Canadian history for two degrees, are then expected to spend another year or two doing the same thing before they can take their "comprehensive exams" and begin writing their doctoral dissertation. In other words, we insist that our apprentice scholars spend years reading what other historians, particularly those of the immediately previous generation who control their graduate and post-graduate careers, have written. It is only after they have been through this mind-numbing process that we will admit to the possibility that they might be able to think for themselves. Then they are sent into the archives to gather data and compile footnotes. Not surprisingly, often the result is that they do not produce original ideas. And even if they do, the process of writing the dissertation and publishing the results will be adjudicated at every step of the way by committees of their seniors who are frequently more interested in having new scholars toe the line than think for themselves. So if young historians do happen to exhibit signs of originality, they are likely to be quickly shown the error of their ways.

Scholarship by committee means that ideas get reduced to the lowest common denominator. Throughout their careers, academic historians are constantly being evaluated by committees of their peers. From conception (when we apply for research funding), to final presentation (when we publish), to evaluation (by reviewers and tenure committees), ideas are subject to scrutiny by sometimes ill-informed colleagues. Supporters of this system will argue that scholars should be subject to review in order to keep them reasonably honest and, up to a point, they are right. At the same time, this constant need to submit ideas to committees has a conservative effect on scholarship. Being dependent on the herd, it is easier to run with it, and so one constantly hears the sound of cattle stampeding across the academic landscape. This herding instinct is enhanced because nowadays, as many others have pointed out, we more often than not train competent academics, rather than creative intellectuals, in our universities.²³ One cannot

²³ See, for example, Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 13-19 and *passim*; Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (New York: Viking, 1990), particularly 257-75; Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 68-70.

imagine Frederick Jackson Turner getting research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council or a grant in aid of publication. Nor would he have been a better historian if he had.

Another impediment to innovative thinking is to be found right at the source: the archives. I would not pretend that big, new ideas are lying around in the archives, like nuggets in a stream-bed, just waiting to be picked up. Rather, ideas are more likely conceived either before the historian enters the archives or after leaving. One historian who taught me a great deal once pointed out that the "writing of history is not solely a matter of discovering facts. It is quite as much an exercise of the imagination." He went on to argue that better books are often written about sparsely documented periods, and therefore concluded that: "Fire, earthquake, and natural decay do not have an entirely evil effect upon historical records."²⁴ The archives do, however, provide historians with food for thought, and therefore they should be taking more notice of, and playing a greater role in, recent developments in the archival collections of British Columbia.

The professionalization of archives' staff over the last twenty-five years has produced many benefits for historians. More repositories, larger collections, better finding aids, greater expertise among archivists, and more efficient delivery of services have all made our lives easier. But not all developments have been so positive. There has also been a marked shift in emphasis from collecting private manuscripts to managing the records of institutions. This redirection of effort was signalled by the name change from the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (PABC) to the lugubrious British Columbia Archives and Records Service (BC Arse, perhaps!). The move from total archives to records management for particular institutions has important implications for the writing of British Columbia history, yet this profound change has happened with hardly a peep out of historians. Some may view this institutionalization of historical records as a good thing. Personally, I think that many institutional records are excessively dull and often conceal as much as they reveal. A provincial history informed largely by institutional papers would certainly be very limited and likely to be extremely boring. The depersonalization of the archives will also eventually lead to the depersonalization of history.

And now the final irony is that, having devoted so much time and energy to the preservation of institutional records, archivists are now obliged to deny or limit access to them under the so-called "Freedom of Information"

²⁴ W. H. Oliver, Letter to the Editor, *N.Z. Listener*, 24 March 1950.

legislation.²⁵ These days, historians are returning empty-handed from the archives in Victoria, having been asked to justify their belief that certain records are pertinent to their research before the staff will even begin the access process. One of my graduate students, who is writing a dissertation on black women in British Columbia, was recently required to show how the records of a boys' industrial school could be relevant to her topic. Next, perhaps, we will have to consult with archivists before we decide on the subject of a new research project. Not all historians may share my alarm at recent developments in the archives, but one wishes that they would express some opinion on these fundamental issues.

None of these problems, needless to say, is unique to this westernmost province. But there are local factors that limit ideas and reflection. Lively debate is further inhibited in British Columbia by the fact that the academic community is small. As Alan Cairns pointed out in the context of discussing Martin Robin's work on provincial politics, when there are few scholars working on a particular area they tend to disperse rather than concentrate their efforts to avoid what seems like wasteful duplication. "A division of labour emerges which discourages alternative explanations of the same phenomenon."²⁶ Moreover, in this small community, criticism of each other's ideas seems either to get mired in the mud of personal animosity or lost in the glow of mutual admiration. The discomfort with ideas in British Columbia is also, I think, sustained by isolation and a lingering colonial cringe. There remains a sense that the only good ideas are imported ones and that approaches are particularly valid if they come from the east. To the extent that it exists, this view discourages home-grown ideas and, in the end, regional history itself. There is, after all, not much of a stretch between the notion that the same themes inform the history of British Columbia as any other area of North America, and the conclusion that there is no need for a particular provincial history.

Of course, British Columbia has always been part of a wider whole and therefore must be seen in its context. This particular corner of the world is part of a larger continent, and it fronts on to the world's largest ocean. Its first people came here something like ten thousand years ago as part of a much broader migration of population. Later the area was caught up in the expansion of European nations. As a political entity, British Columbia began as a far-flung colony in the British empire, and in 1871 it became,

²⁵ British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, SBC 1992, chap. 61, and Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Amendment Act, SBC 1993, chap. 46.

²⁶ Cairns, "The Study of the Provinces," 76.

without much enthusiasm, the westernmost province of Canada. Just as British Columbia has always been part of a greater context, so its historians cannot ignore wider historiographical currents. At the same time, if context is important to the history of British Columbia, then so too are isolation, distance, and marginality. It may well be that the force of general themes developed in metropolitan centres is weakened by the time they reach this peripheral place. Certainly universal issues, such as race, gender, and class, intersect with region here in the far west and therefore play out in a particular way. British Columbia historians must do more to direct the traffic at this major intersection of sweeping hypothesis and regional distinctiveness.

The geographical given has, for example, been a powerful force in British Columbia's history. This province has a particular history because it has been worked out on a particular landscape. Historical geographers have done important and innovative work as they have reminded us of the significance of both place and space in explaining the past. British Columbia's terrain has been a determining factor in its history partly because the magnificent, overpowering landscape leaves its imprint on all who come here. But human beings have also left their imprint on the land. The relationship between people and the natural world is fundamental to understanding British Columbia. Historians should pay more attention to the impact, from the coming of the first peoples until the present, that human habitation has had on the environment.

There is an example to follow and modify that is geographically close at hand. In his recently republished book, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change*, Richard White looks at the ecological impact of human settlement on Whidbey and Camano Islands. From the first Native hunters through to the 1960s, when Whidbey Island was affected by the growing urban shadow of Seattle, White shows how humans have modified the natural environment. As he writes about the succession of plants and animals, White's book often takes on the cadences of nature writing rather than historical narrative.²⁷ White is one of a group of historians, including Richard Cronin and Donald Worster, who are rewriting American history with, among other things, attention to the ecological impact of manifest destiny and the settlement of allegedly free land.²⁸ Their example, if not

²⁷ Richard White, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1980, paperback edition 1992).

²⁸ See, for example, William Cronin, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York and

followed too slavishly, should be instructive to British Columbia historians.

A geographical approach to history also raises the question of the relationship between metropolis and hinterland which is crucial to the understanding of any peripheral area. British Columbia as a whole has always been subject to various metropolitan influences. Barry Gough has argued that, in its formative years, British Columbia's particular character arose from the fact that it was "a British imperial frontier — a counterfrontier."²⁹ Later, cities in eastern Canada — Montreal, Toronto, and Ottawa — exerted an influence on British Columbia. A good deal of the province's internal history has also been written from a metropolitan point of view and is informed by the idea that influences flowed from the cities in the south to their hinterland. This approach limits our understanding of the rest of the province and the extent to which the interior and the north were sources of creative energy.³⁰ It might indeed be argued that it is the hinterland, and not the metropolitan centres, that defines British Columbia. But we will not know the answer to that question until we turn our attention away from Vancouver and Victoria. The provincial north, in particular, has been ignored.³¹ There is a whole other half of British Columbia north of Prince George that remains largely *terra incognita* to historians.

Geography does not, however, provide the only ground for British Columbia's uniqueness; nor are historical geography and environmental history the only methodological bases upon which to rewrite British Columbia history. Race and ethnicity have become important issues to historians in many parts of the world in the last twenty-five years. Again, in British Columbia, these general themes play out in a particular way. British Columbia's founding peoples established a unique and powerful civilization, and Native cultures are the starting point of a very distinctive human history. Their importance can be expressed just in terms of sheer numbers. About one-third of the total Native population of Canada lived in what became British Columbia. They were the only people in this area for the

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Richard White's general history of the American West, "*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own.*" *A History of the American West* (Norman and London: Oklahoma University Press, 1991), particularly 212-35.

²⁹ Barry Gough, "The Character of the British Columbia Frontier," *BC Studies* 32 (Winter 1976-77): 38.

³⁰ I have developed this point more fully in Robin Fisher, "T. D. Pattullo and the North: The Significance of the Periphery in British Columbia Politics," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 81 (July 1990): 101-11.

³¹ A beginning has been made to reversing this trend by Coates and Morrison, *The Forgotten North: A History of Canada's Provincial North* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1992).

first ten thousand years of its history, and it is only for the last one hundred years that they have not been the majority of the province's population. If British Columbia history begins with the land, it must move on quickly and certainly to give voice to its first people.

The last generation of historians have begun to write Native people into the provincial past. But they have only made a start, and historians, unlike ethnographers, have not yet paid much attention to the Native voice. They still rely overwhelmingly on written evidence and so need to come to grips with the technique of ethnohistory which has been advocated in other parts of Canada as a way of writing a more rounded history of Native people. Recognizing that no single source provides the key to unlock the indigenous past, ethnohistorians use oral tradition, ethnography, and archaeology in addition to the written record.³² British Columbia historians have not yet incorporated archaeological findings into their work and therefore cannot get back beyond the point of European contact. There is no equivalent to Bruce Trigger's important study of the Huron during the protohistoric period.³³ Nor have those writing Native history of British Columbia made much use of oral history. Ethnographers are beginning to show us the way, and they have made the point that Native stories are a delicate source.³⁴ Historians should be thinking about the issues involved in using oral accounts and oral history and then begin to incorporate them in their work. When we have mastered these techniques, perhaps we will be able to rewrite the history of British Columbia, as Bruce Trigger has done for New France, with Native people as leading actors rather than peripheral players.³⁵

Along with race, gender is another theme that intersects with the history of this region in a particular way. Recently historians have begun to draw our attention to the role of women in both Native and non-Native society

³² On the nature of ethnohistory see, Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Montreal and London, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976), I, 11-21; James Axtel, "Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint," *Ethnohistory* 26 (Winter 1979): 1-13.

³³ Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 111-63; and Bruce Trigger "The Road to Affluence: A Reassessment of Early Huron Responses to European Contact," in Richard F. Salisbury and Elizabeth Tooker (eds.), *Affluence and Cultural Survival: 1981 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society* (1984), 12-25.

³⁴ See, particularly, Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990); and also Harry Robinson, *Write it on Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Story Teller* (Vancouver: Talonbooks/Theytus, 1989).

³⁵ See Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*.

in British Columbia.³⁶ There is no doubt that women were “A Vital Presence,” as Sylvia Van Kirk describes women in the Cariboo gold rush, and that work on women has produced new insights into the history of the province.³⁷ Yet much of this writing is impelled by the need to understand the history of women in British Columbia rather than explaining the history of British Columbia through the experience of women. Moreover, the fact remains that the vast majority of the non-Native population, particularly in the formative years of British Columbia’s society, were men. Males made up a greater proportion of the population of this province until more recently in its history than any other province in Canada.³⁸ British Columbia, that is to say, was “A Man’s Country.”³⁹ It is fair comment, though only at one level, that the frontier experience in British Columbia “has been defined almost exclusively in male terms.”⁴⁰ It is true in the sense that much of British Columbia’s history has been written as if women did not exist. But, at the same time, historians have not considered the gendered experience of men either.⁴¹ We will remain ignorant of much that is essential about this province until we know more about what it has been like to be a man here.

Nor has the issue of class in British Columbia been fully explored by the desultory debates over first Martin Robin’s and then Peter Ward’s ideas. Though western exceptionalism has come under heavy attack by those who believe in universal issues rather than regional identity, one still suspects that the class structure of British Columbia was different from that of other provinces. It is hard to imagine that a province with a population that is very distinctive in ethnic and gender terms would not also have a unique class composition. We will only know the answer to that important question when we have comparative regional studies of class structure based on hard, empirical data as opposed to ideologically driven speculation.

Many of today’s theoretical perspectives, particularly those coming out of Europe, have to do with the development of modernity. They raise

³⁶ For an indication of this work, see Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag (eds.), *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1992).

³⁷ Sylvia Van Kirk, “A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1875,” in Creese and Strong-Boag, (eds.), 21-37.

³⁸ Peter Ward, “Population Growth in Western Canada, 1901-71,” in John E. Foster (ed.), *The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honour of Lewis H. Thomas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983), 163-68.

³⁹ I take this phrase from Jock Phillips, *A Man’s Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male — A History* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1987).

⁴⁰ Van Kirk, “A Vital Presence,” 21.

⁴¹ This point has already been made by Creese and Strong-Boag (eds.), 3-4.

questions about the nature of a modern society and the sometimes elusive power relations within communities. These notions may have some application to British Columbia and, at very least, the attempt to apply them will yield new insights. At the same time, we must remember that Europe was an old and ordered society that had developed over a long period of time. Non-Native British Columbia, by contrast, was a new and, in many ways, disorderly society that developed very rapidly.⁴² Modernity has come to British Columbia in little more than one hundred years. We need to look at the implications of that fast moving pace of change. For example, compared to Europe expressions of power in frontier British Columbia were rather rough, and not just around the edges. The blatant imposition of settler force over Native people does not necessarily compare easily with the subtleties of power relations within European institutions.⁴³ Here again, theories developed in other places are stimulating, but we still need to think for ourselves as historians of British Columbia.

The history of this province has, of course, been influenced by universal themes. Yet it seems to me that there is little point to the study of British Columbia history, as opposed to the history of any other part of the world, if there is nothing particular to be discerned about this province. British Columbia is not simply a replica of other places: it is unique and special. And it is that uniqueness that British Columbia's historians should be concerned to define. That is not to say that they should have tunnel vision, for clear distinctions can only be seen by looking at broad contexts. The historians who have written for *BC Studies* over the last twenty-five years have redirected the focus of historical writing, but they have not changed their approach. They have tended, that is to say, to write about new topics in the same old way. Consequently we are no nearer to understanding what makes this province such a particular place. We avoid taking a broad view of the ecosystem by examining tiny fragments of the past through a microscope. The narrower the focus, of course, the bigger the gaps that remain to be filled. And, as the last generation of British Columbia historians have clearly shown, it is much easier to identify gaps and divisions than to search for over-arching themes.

⁴² For some interesting insights into social disorder in colonial British Columbia see, Tina Merrill Loo, "Law and Authority in British Columbia, 1821-1871," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1990), 135-39.

⁴³ For an attempt to make this analogy see Bruce Colin Stadfeld, "Manifestations of Power: Native Response to Settlement in Nineteenth Century British Columbia," (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1993). Though he will not agree with its conclusion, this paragraph owes much to the lively discussions that Bruce Stadfeld and I had as he was writing his thesis.

Though much has been achieved in the writing of British Columbia history over the last twenty-five years, much more remains to be done. Historical writing on this province is, all too often, a “paralysed force, . . .” It has “Shape without form, shade without colour, . . .”⁴⁴ If the historical voice is to come alive in the next generation, historians must write with more power and enthusiasm. They need to devote less energy to dry details and empirical compilation and spend more time thinking about the general issues raised by the history of this place and its context. We need to work through the welter of mere information and make some sense of what it all means for defining this very particular province. Then, perhaps, something coherent will emerge. In its first one hundred issues, *BC Studies* has provided a great deal of matter for reflection. I hope that the next one hundred issues will offer less matter and more reflection.

⁴⁴ Eliot, “The Hollow Men,” in *Collected Poems*, 89.