

Book Reviews

The Forge Glows Red: From Blacksmith to Revolutionary, by Tom McEwen. Toronto: Progress Books, 1974. 261 pp. Cloth \$8.95, paperback \$3.95.

Few Canadian workers have written their memoirs. Far fewer have found anyone eager to publish an account of the life they led and the people they met and worked with. Tom McEwen is one of the fortunate exceptions.

In many respects his reminiscences follow a pattern familiar to readers of autobiographies of Communist leaders of his generation and social background in any Western society. The harshness of his early life is persuasively described in some detail, a salutary reminder of the way in which the children of the poor were brought up and young workers were treated before 1914. He admits to only intermittent interest in public affairs before the Bolshevik victory in Russia shows him the true way. The Soviet Union then becomes the catalyst which increasingly influences the behaviour of the autobiographer. He joins the Communist party, where he finds kindred spirits. In spite of occasional mistakes, which he attributes to his insufficient grasp of Marxist-Leninist theory and Bolshevik organizational principles, the convert marches on and climbs the party ladder, fighting the "class enemy" who tries to disrupt the march of the "most advanced detachment of the working class." In the final chapter of the autobiography the author looks back over his life and prophesies victory for his adopted cause. With a rousing re-affirmation of faith he can lay down his pen, fully aware that he has performed yet another task on the "Agitprop front" and that a publishing house associated with the Communist party will publish his life story for the edification of party members and sympathizers.

McEwen, like many others, emigrated to Canada in the years before 1914 and found employment on the Prairies. Like others who became politically conscious under the impact of the First World War and the

Russian Civil War, he gravitated towards the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). Unlike most others, he remained faithful to that party, in which he held a variety of senior posts. At the age of seventy-six he began his autobiography, the completion of which, he tells us, was delayed by close on three years of infighting in the ranks of the CPC.

The bulk of his story is devoted to his youth in Scotland, his years in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and his activities as leader of the Workers' Unity League in 1930-1931. His work as the CPC representative at the Comintern headquarters in Moscow and his periodic visits to the U.S.S.R. are treated in a bland manner. As he disarmingly puts it:

My position was and is that the working people and their political parties in this and other capitalist countries are subjected to more than enough downgrading of Soviet achievements and objectives . . . without Communists and progressive workers getting drawn into this 'credibility' pastime. . . . It is therefore not my intention at this late date to seek to change my life pattern from a student of socialism, inspired by its gigantic achievements, to one primarily interested in its 'shortcomings.'

He shows similar discretion about how the politbureau of the CPC operated from week to week, how it reached its decisions and how it checked on the performance of local party organizations.

To the student of B.C. politics McEwen has little to offer although he has lived on the West Coast for over three decades, has edited the local Communist newspaper for many years and has contested several Vancouver Island and Lower Mainland ridings in federal and provincial elections. The few pages he devotes to the travails of the Communist weekly confirm what is already known about its circulation problems. The major controversy within the B.C. section of the CPC in 1945 is ignored, while the one that arose after the entry of Soviet troops into Prague in 1968 is dismissed in a short but robust attack on the "auxiliary wrecking crew — working from within."

All in all McEwen's memoirs may be viewed as yet another Communist attempt to present certain events and people in a certain light. The focus is very much on the obstacles the CPC encountered — and in some instances overcame — in organizing workers, Prairie farmers and the unemployed; in meeting the challenge of the authorities who denied freedom of assembly to the Communists in Toronto in 1929; and in presenting solutions to the problems facing Canadian labour between the two world wars. The autobiographical approach provides a useful way of telling the Communist version, since no reader expects the elderly McEwen to follow the canons of scholarship or to abandon the style he has

used to castigate anti-Communists, non-Communists and ex-Communists in his column in the *Pacific Tribune*. The result is a series of vignettes varying in interest and accuracy, interspersed with the kind of moralizing to which the Communists are prone in print and on the platform.

University of British Columbia

IVAN AVAKUMOVIC

British Columbia Chronicle 1778-1846: Adventurers by Sea and Land, by G. P. V. Akrigg and Helen B. Akrigg. Vancouver: Discovery Press, 1975. xv, 429 pp., \$14.95.

This handsome volume is just what the title implies — a year-to-year chronicle extending from 1778, when Captain Cook and his crew became the first white men known with certainty to have set foot in what is now British Columbia, and 1846, when the Oregon Boundary Treaty made the 49th parallel the dividing line between British and American territory west of the Rocky Mountains. The unusual arrangement invites browsing as well as sustained reading. Entries vary in length from a few lines to a dozen pages, according to the interest and importance of the happenings in individual years. There is no padding for the sake of uniformity, and the overall course of events emerges clearly.

The cutoff date of 1846 offers several advantages. This early period is often dealt with in somewhat summary fashion in the first chapters of more comprehensive studies; separate treatment serves to highlight its distinctive character. In particular, it emphasizes the fact that until 1846 the fur trade was for practical purposes the only economic activity in the region. Settlement in the ordinary sense was non-existent. A few hundred fur traders were the sole white inhabitants.

The earlier chapters illustrate interesting contrasts between activities by sea and by land. The maritime fur trade, which centred upon the sea otter, began in 1785 and had largely run its course and virtually exterminated its quarry by 1825. It did not result in the building of forts or the founding of settlements. For the most part it was conducted on a hit and run basis; immediate profit, not a long trading relationship, was the object in view. Furs were secured by foul means if fair means failed, and the inevitable result was violence and massacre. Some exploring was done, incidental to trading voyages, but serious exploration was the work of official government-financed Spanish and British expeditions, with Vancouver's superb and detailed survey of 1792-94 much the most important.

By contrast, on land the fur trade was conducted from a network of trading posts, many of which were maintained over a long period, and some of which have been succeeded by towns and cities. Contact with the Indians was continuous, and good relations and fair dealing were important to both parties. Exploration, for the purpose of ascertaining the nature and fur resources of new areas, and of locating the best travel routes, was part and parcel of fur trade activity. Fraser, Thompson and Mackenzie are the three names that come first to mind, but it is well to remember that for Fraser and Mackenzie exploration was an exceptional activity; their remarkable discoveries were made in a relatively short portion of their long careers as traders. Thompson was unique in that he was employed primarily as a geographer; for him, trading was a secondary activity.

Incidentally, the Akriggs, who have definite likes and dislikes, are highly critical of Thompson. Despite his achievements they feel that he "was hardly of the stuff of which leaders and heroes are made." Nor are they impressed with Captain Gray, who may have entered the Columbia River and thereby given the United States what was probably its best claim to the Oregon country, but whose treatment of the Indians was harsh in the extreme. But praise is given as well as blame; the long entry for 1824 accords proper recognition to the amazing persistence and endurance that characterized Samuel Black's exploration of the Finlay River and its hinterland — a truly remarkable feat by a fur trade explorer who has been almost forgotten because his discoveries had no immediate practical value.

Politically the most important events of the period were the Nootka Sound agreement of 1790, by which Spain abandoned her claim to exclusive ownership of the Pacific Coast, and the joint occupation agreement between Britain and the United States in 1818, which left the coast open to the nationals of both countries until such time as they could reconcile their claims and agree upon a boundary to divide their territories.

This is the background for one of the book's major themes, the steps by which the United States managed to have the boundary pushed as far north as the 49th parallel in 1846, in spite of the fact that the British had strong claims to a line that would follow the Columbia River, and so include Puget Sound and most of the State of Washington in British territory. In this the Akriggs believe that Dr. John McLoughlin, who was in charge of the operations of the Hudson's Bay Company west of the Rockies from 1825 to 1845, played an important part. It is a serious

charge, but the evidence to support it is substantial. There was much of the rebel in McLoughlin's nature. In 1832, in his private *Character Book*, George Simpson had expressed the view that McLoughlin "would be a Radical in any Country — under any Government and under any circumstances." McLoughlin openly expressed his sympathy with the rebels of 1837 and in a private letter written in 1841 he described the constitution of Canada as being "a Despotism in Disguise." Viewed from his wilderness empire in the Far West, the United States appeared to be a haven of liberty, freedom and democracy. He was convinced, moreover, that eventually the United States would gain possession of Oregon, a prospect that did not dismay him and undoubtedly increased the warmth with which he welcomed and assisted the first American missionaries and immigrants. The Hudson's Bay Company was aware of this but hesitated to retire him or even propose to transfer him to another district for fear that he might leave the service and organize an effective opposition. The Company did act eventually, but only on the eve of the Oregon Treaty.

McLoughlin had reason to change his views in later years. As early as 1840 a bout with a land-grabbing missionary slightly cooled his ardour; the attitudes and activities of the thousands of American settlers who poured into the country after 1842 increased his anxiety; by 1845 he was appealing for British naval protection. Nor did Oregon prove to be the promised land he had expected. American authority was no more than well established when a notorious clause in the Oregon Land Donation Law stripped him of his land holdings. Shortly before he died in 1857 McLoughlin was quoted as declaring: "As for me, I might better have been shot forty years ago than to have lived and tried to build up a family and an estate in this government."

The text reflects a wide range of sources, amongst them the records of the East Indian Company, which have rarely been consulted by students of West Coast history. The numerous maps and illustrations include interesting unfamiliar items, such as the first chart of the Fraser River, prepared by Captain Aemilius Simpson in 1827, and a drawing of the Russian establishment at Sitka, which at the time must have been the most imposing structure north of California. Although the bibliography is correctly described as select, it is an up-to-date listing of 135 titles (two of them published in 1974) that will meet the needs of anyone except the specialist.

One can quarrel with only one small matter of fact. The text states that Cook "right to the end . . . remained ignorant of the visit made earlier by the Spaniards" to the coast of British Columbia. But Cook

states in his own journal that "Some account of the Spaniards having visited this Coast was published before I left England. . . ." But this is an insignificant blemish on a most attractive book. Readers will look forward to a second volume, now in preparation, which will continue the chronicle from 1847 to 1871, when British Columbia joined Canada.

Vancouver

W. KAYE LAMB

Whistle Up The Inlet, The Union Steamship Story, by Gerald A. Rushton. Vancouver: J. J. Douglas, 1974. 236 pp., illus., \$10.95.

The Princess Story: A Century and a Half of West Coast Shipping, by Norman R. Hacking and W. Kaye Lamb. Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1974. 360 pp., illus., \$9.75.

Until the completion of the province's highway system, the provision of reliable and regular air service, and the arrival of the fast automobile ferry, the coastal towns and settlements of the province and the major cities of Vancouver, Victoria and Nanaimo relied entirely on the coastal steamers to provide the essential freight, mail and passenger links. Few British Columbians can recall either the night boat to Vancouver or the Union Steamship run to Ocean Falls without twinges of nostalgia. The recent decisions by the provincial government to purchase the *Princess Marguerite* and the *Prince George* reflect a willingness to keep this facet of the province's maritime character alive.

Gerald Rushton has written an engaging and generous narrative of the Union Steamship Company from its beginnings in 1889 to its disappearance in 1959 when it was taken over by Northland Navigation. During that seventy-year period the Union ships stitched together the logging camps, canneries and mills that dotted the coastline from Masset to Howe Sound. Rushton is kind to the company — which is not surprising since he was assistant manager prior to the take-over — and makes no attempt to write a dispassionate historical analysis of either the role of the company in the growth of the province or of the operation of the company itself. He is content to tell the story of the individual vessels and the trials of the men who ran them. He makes occasional reference to some of the more glaring managerial gaffes, and to the inadequacies of federal subsidy policies, but, in the main, the story is suffused with that warm glow that seems to typify recollections of ships and the sea.

The Princess Story virtually completes the picture for the two books together cover almost completely the history of the ships involved in scheduled coastal navigation in British Columbia. Norman Hacking wrote the first half of *Princess Story*, beginning with the Hudson's Bay Company services and concluding with the Klondike gold rush. Kaye Lamb picks up the narrative with the acquisition in 1901 of the Canadian Pacific Navigation Company by the CPR. Both have relied extensively on the pages of the newspapers for the period — newspapers which chronicled the comings and goings of the various ships with a wealth of detail that was entirely appropriate for communities so utterly dependent on steamship services.

To an even greater extent than in the Rushton volume, Lamb and Hacking tell the story of the individual vessels; neither investigate in any detail the companies behind the ships or attempt any careful analysis of the relationship between company policy, current politics or any of the other factors that shaped transportation policy in British Columbia. But that was clearly not their intention. Writing as steamship "buffs" for, presumably, other steamship "buffs" they follow with loving care the passage of each ship from the builder's ways to the breaker's yard. Lacking the insider's knowledge of Gerald Rushton they cannot recount some of the adventures that occurred on board, but they do provide a faithful and reliable record of the "lives" of some memorable vessels.

In both books the illustrations and the tables listing the specifications of all of the vessels complement the narrative splendidly. The illustrations alone constitute a valuable contribution to the record.

It remains now for the serious historian of transportation and communication in British Columbia to stay firmly ashore and investigate the policies of the companies involved, examine the relationship between these policies and politics, and answer many of the questions that these delightful volumes raise but, understandably, make no attempt to answer.