

TALISMANS OF REGION

“EVEN THOUGH ONE ACCEPTS that regions *exist*, one should be aware that they are human, intellectual constructs. They exist only in the minds of the persons who define, and accept, the criteria and characteristics of the region.” This premise is fundamental to J. Lewis Robinson’s *Concepts and Themes in the Regional Geography of Canada* (Talonbooks, 1983), a readable textbook which contributes to the new regionalism which is reshaping our understanding of Canadian culture. If the “regions of Canada are not fixed or permanent,” but rather are “academic devices or conceptual frameworks, and an organizational framework for studying Canada and its parts,” then regional approaches to Canadian studies need not be equated with blinkered insularity, but will promise an appreciation of diversities, a sense of the cross-regional similarities which link the country, and sensitivity to international connections. Robinson retired in 1984 from the Geography Department at the University of British Columbia; appropriately, his book is designed by his son, David, until recently co-owner of Talonbooks, a firm whose great importance to Canadian literature lies in combining regional loyalty with national and international commitment. And Talonbooks is only one of many companies which have figured in the rapid growth of publishing in British Columbia, an industry which now, with sales near \$10 million annually, provides a significant regional alternative to the Toronto-based houses.

Robinson’s outline of the traditional concerns of regional geography — relationships between people and environment, regional landscapes (both natural and human features), distribution patterns, and changing geographical patterns — insists that our conceptual frameworks of region should be broad and varied. Turning to his own region, the Cordillera of British Columbia (which includes all the province except the Peace River area), Robinson finds that because of the mountains — a feature common to the region, but not a place where people live — “great contrasts within small areas are characteristic.” The multitude of de-

finable sub-regions within the Cordillera themselves suggest a form for a novel, or a poem, or a study of literature in B.C.

In defining regional geography, Robinson asks us to imagine how, among a group of television or printed pictures, we would identify in which parts of Canada each was taken. Certainly many of the buildings of Francis Rattenbury would be immediately identified with B.C. *Francis Rattenbury and British Columbia: Architecture and Challenge in the Imperial Age* by Anthony A. Barrett and Rhodri Windsor Liscombe (UBC Press, 1983) is an excellent study of the concepts which shaped some of the province's most memorable streetscapes. Rattenbury's story (British emigrant, flamboyant master of public relations, speculator in land and transportation systems, victim of the Depression, murdered by his wife's teen-age lover) is ripe enough for Jack Hodgins to parody. Barrett and Liscombe combine Rattenbury's biography with a critical study of the buildings which have come to be emblems of the province — the Legislative Buildings, the Empress Hotel, the Crystal Garden, the Vancouver Courthouse (recently spectacularly restored as the Vancouver Art Gallery by another famous shaper of B.C.'s landscape, Arthur Erickson; Rattenbury perhaps forecast this evolution when he described his design: "It looks quite swagger"). But the authors show that Rattenbury shaped towns and cities throughout the province: the Hotel Greenwood, in Greenwood; the Bank of Montreal in Rossland, Nelson, and New Westminster; the C.P.R. Hotel in Revelstoke. Through Barrett and Liscombe's detailed, but clear descriptions we become more intelligent readers of the province's public and institutional buildings: in the Legislative Building the authors identify not only Neo-Gothic elements alluding to the Imperial connection (the tourist's first reading of Rattenbury?), but its differentiation from American legislatures, and its Italianate and Romanesque details, which "placed it in the mainstream of North American architecture"; the Empress Hotel is seen as "a more symmetrical rendering of the château mode which . . . had come to be considered the Canadian national style by virtue of its mixture of English and French mediaeval and Renaissance features." International fashions and national styles combine with regional sensitivities: Barrett and Liscombe document Rattenbury's frequent efforts to use local materials — locally quarried stone, fir, and cedar.

It's no surprise to find that such a central figure in the region's iconography followed the gold rush to the Yukon: as Robinson shows, the region's economy (and, thus, its characteristic mode of thought?) is resource-based, extractive or exploitative. The forms of the gold rush are marvellously recreated in Pierre Berton's *The Klondike Quest: A Photographic Essay 1897-1899* (McClelland & Stewart, 1983). The photographs — of a sod hotel, of the men at the sluice boxes — are surprisingly crisp and detailed. The story lies in the faces, the changing faces, which make up "the Klondike look": "Emerging from the mountains after the long winter's struggle, each man presented a grotesque experience . . . their

ragged beards and patched clothing made them seem like creatures from some savage and foreign clime, for their faces were smeared with charcoal and their eyes were hidden behind slitted masks to guard against sunburn and snow glare." The shape of the regional story, Robert Harlow's *Scann* perhaps, may be built in here. As Berton tells it, after the most agonizing, humanly impossible journey to Dawson, "thousands did not even trouble to visit the fabled creeks." "Emotional lassitude dominated" and greed is not the motive after all: the journey, the adventure is all, and when there was no mountain to climb, no crashing river left to navigate, the story ends in dazed wandering. The laconically humorous version of this story is found in compact form in Paul St. Pierre's *Breaking Smith's Quarter Horse*, the writer's fictional version of a *Chilcotin Holiday* (the two volumes were re-issued in 1984, in large paperback format, by Douglas & McIntyre), when a man "knows not where he is going, whom he may meet, where he shall sleep, what he may eat or when he might return."

Berton's reconstruction of the gold rush story is unusual among the concepts of this region in giving almost no place to the native Indians. Paul St. Pierre gives the Chilcotin story and voice in a tongue-in-cheek burlesque that would do both Coyote and George Bowering proud. Even Rattenbury, who, typically for his generation, paid no attention to native architecture (contrast Arthur Erickson), gave his Victoria home an Indian name, and was obviously attracted to Indian language, and to an Indian story of the mystery of language:

We have at last found a name for the house IECHINIHL, pronounced softly, Eye-achineel. It is an Indian name, and has a story connected with it. In one part of our garden I have often noticed there was a good many clam shells and there is also a spring of fresh water. Mentioning this to an old timer, he told me that for centuries our particular garden has been an Indian camping ground and that they had a legend that formerly all men were dumb and looked at each other like owls. But one day on this very spot the good spirit conferred on them the gift of speech. The name means "The place where a good thing happened." (I. is "good" in Indian.) Rather an interesting story. The legend is still in existence amongst the Indians.

Such an observation, in 1900, from a Yorkshire entrepreneur reflects how influential and visible the native peoples have been in the culture of the Cordillera of British Columbia (however sentimental or ignorant some of the manifestations may be). *Sliammon Life, Sliammon Language* by Dorothy Kennedy and Randy Bouchard (Talonbooks, 1983) weaves evocative stories with compact descriptions of the culture (food, rituals, plant technology) of the Sliammon people living along both sides of the northern Strait of Georgia. The B.C. Ministry of Education has purchased copies for all secondary school libraries in the province, where, I hope, some students may find the appendices on Indian place names, and catch some of Rattenbury's interest in the different understandings of their

region that are implicit there: K'a x ems p'ah, for example, is "Raven's chamberpot" about half a kilometre north of Bassett point, used by Raven in the Mythological Age when animals were people. And perhaps the elementary students will begin with the elegantly clear *La Mer et le cèdre* (Douglas & McIntyre, 1983), a translation of Lois McConkey's 1973 introduction to the Indians of the North-West Coast. This is a most welcome venture since French Immersion programmes have grown in British Columbia from 7,952 in September 1982 to 9,993 in September 1983, and 10% of all kindergarten students are now in immersion (and what does that say about the myth of the isolated region with its back turned on the rest of Canada?).

If these books will bring before the children in our schools alternate structures for understanding their regions, *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art* by Bill Holm (co-publication Seattle Art Museum, University of Washington Press, Douglas & McIntyre, 1983) illuminates for everyone some of the West Coast's finest aesthetic achievements. This catalogue of an exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum is as beautifully photographed as one could want, and the text is lyrical and rich in interpretive detail. The exhibition comes from regional private collections, a source which itself suggests how far the one culture has interpenetrated the other (again, I am convinced of the appreciation even as I recognize the injustice of sacred objects being displayed as trophies). One feature of this exhibition particularly startled me: it seems that basket art is by far the most extensively available form of Indian art in the region. And this is the *women's* art, skilfully incorporating spruce root, grass, maidenhair fern stem, cedar bark, and bear grass in the most intricate, durable, and practical forms, among the world's finest examples of such art. That upper and lower designs are often jogged out of alignment, in defiance of conventional aesthetic expectations, urges on us an alternative cultural definition of the relation between people and their environment, of the cultural objects which define any region. The catalogue conveys the possibility of a more holistic concept of region, where a people is intimately in touch with its environment, rooted in its traditions, and continually re-enacting its stories. Holm's graphic meditation on a dancing headdress is a case in point, evoking in the movements of the dance, the images of nature, and the aesthetics of the potlatch, the forms by which the Indians of the Coast spoke to one another and unified their community:

The dancer appears with blanket and apron and often a raven rattle. Knees slightly bent and legs spread, he jumps on both feet to the time of the song beat — short jumps, feet hardly off the floor, making the ermine rows covering his back jump in turn. The blanket was spread by the wearer's arms or elbows. The crown of sea lion whiskers holds a loose fluff of eagle down when the dancing begins. The whiskers rustle and clatter as the dancer bobs and tosses his head, shaking white whisps of down through the whisker barrier to swirl around his dancing figure. The white down means peace, or welcome, to the guests at a

potlatch. Chiefs dance to greet canoes invited from far villages. Canoe-borne visitors dance in turn, and the swirling down from their headdresses drifts shoreward on the wind and over the host and his tribe on the beach.

L.R.

UNABLE TO SWAY YOU, FATHER

Bernice Lever

Pounding my fists
on your fat chest
the hollow rhythmic thump
of my anger erupting from the empty
surprise of your mouth,

you, not even rocking
back on your work boot heels,
your very body a fortress
mocking my outburst

my sixteen year old anger
just a fourth daughter's frustrations
neither my flailing poems
nor drumming knuckles
made any sense to you
who could not know my outrage

with these siblings
narrow as the wooden slats
that half-blocked the hot air vents,
in that mountain house
you so carefully built,
a home we so recklessly split,
easily as kindling.