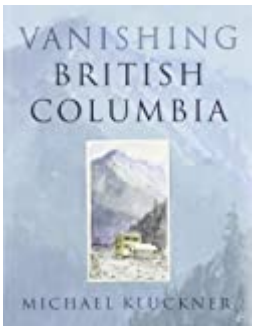
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Kluckner. *Vanishing British Columbia.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005. 223 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-1125-5; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98493-3.

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Published on H-Canada (November, 2006)

Documentary Art for a Postindustrial Province

The week the review copy of watercolorist Michael Kluckner's *Vanishing British Columbia* arrived in the mail, I took a trip up Vancouver Island from Victoria on the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway (the E&N), one of the vanishing "corridors" the artist showcases in the book. VIA Rail operates a single passenger dayliner along the route, reluctantly fulfilling what British Columbia has long maintained is Ottawa's constitutional obligation to provide rail service on the island in perpetuity.[1] The trip to Nanaimo takes just over two hours and along its route overgrown sidings and branch lines testify to the railway's former importance to southern Vancouver Island's forest industry, while the passenger depots at Ladysmith and Nanaimo, now unstaffed and dilapidated, speak to the optimism that followed the island railway's completion in 1886. At the Nanaimo station, constructed in 1920, the waiting room is decorated with a mural painted by school children in commemoration of Sir John A. Macdonald, who, in driving the last spike on the island railway, preserved British Columbia for Confederation. Outside the station, I was immediately confronted by the Nanaimo Bathtub Days parade, a boisterous procession of monster trucks, jet boats, sea-doos, and bikini models in which the Empire Day committee float adorned with Union Jacks seemed, like the train on which I had arrived, a relic of a bygone era. The sounds of revelers bound for the world championship bathtub races quickly drowned out the sound of the E&N's departing whistle.

Among the passengers who traveled on the E&N in its heyday were journalists and artists out to document the progress of British Columbia in the years after the completion of the CPR. When these travelers alighted at Nanaimo they saw "the Newcastle of the Pacific," a prosperous coal mining town conveniently linked by rail to the Royal Navy's refueling station at Esquimalt. Their depictions emphasized, in addition to the sublimity of its landscape and the exoticism of its "vanishing" aboriginal peoples, the national and imperial significance of British Columbia's industries. Their writings and illustrations captured the province at a pivotal moment in its history and anticipated a bright future as an industrial and commercial heartland of Canada and the Empire. Over a century later, Michael Kluckner introduces himself as an heir to the documentary artists of the past (p. 10). Like those artists, he has succeeded in capturing

a province in transition. The central theme of this collection of paintings is, however, very different from the leitmotif of progress that pervaded nineteenth-century documentary art. This is an evocative documentation of an increasingly postindustrial British Columbia, a landscape of struggling or abandoned mines, railways, mills, farms, and the communities they supported. Some towns, like postindustrial Nanaimo, have successfully made the transition to a tourism- or service-based economy, taking advantage of affordable real estate and proximity to recreational attractions. Heritage is often a significant component of these revitalization efforts, which reinvent railway rights-of-way as bike trails and highlight past industries through quirky local festivals. Most former resource towns, however, continue to struggle. From Atlin, Britannia Beach, and Canal Flats to Xa:ytem, Yahk, and Zeballos, the communities Kluckner chooses have all experienced "depopulation and abandonment" (p. 10). The medium suits the subject matter well; Kluckner's watercolors have a softness and simplicity and capture the haunting, ephemeral quality of the places he depicts in a manner not possible with a bold palette of oils or the crisp pixelation of digital photography.

Kluckner describes his personal map of British Columbia as dotted with sites of "roadside memory" and, though of slightly unwieldy size for rest-stop consultation, *Vanishing British Columbia* might serve as an unconventional travel guide to the province. The Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean may dominate the accepted image of British Columbia, but Kluckner's travels take him to all regions of the province, including those, such as the "unexpected granary" (p. 108)–complete with a United Grain Growers elevator–at Whonnock, that defy the popular conceptions of Canada's far west. Nor does his choice of historical sites resemble that which appears in bus tour or cruise line itineraries. Instead of painting the well-known Cariboo gold rush town of Barkerville, for example, Kluckner offers a painting of a typical miner's house in the company town of Wells, Barkerville's less famous Depression-era neighbor.

Despite its eclecticism there is a strong coherence to the collection. Kluckner emphasizes five themes that transcend the geographic structure of the book, including transportation corridors, the influence of government and institutions, company towns, folkloric landscapes, finding shelter, and places of exile and utopia. There are paintings of beachside cabins on Savary Island and a roadside diner at Pouce Coupe; of the post office in Greenwood and the neo-classical court house in Revelstoke; of the grand mansions of mining magnates and orchardists and the simpler homes of ranchers and railway workers; of the restored Grand Trunk Pacific railway station at Smithers, complete with beanery, and the abandoned Spokane Falls and Northern railway station at Salmo, still standing after the tracks in front of it have been torn up and sold as scrap. A concentration on the exurban experience is another unifying theme. The neglected E&N roundhouse in Esquimalt and the grain fields of rapidly suburbanizing Saanich are the only images from greater Victoria. Vancouver is largely unrepresented. The focus on the hinterland is a departure for Kluckner, whose previous books documented the impact urban development has had on historical buildings and neighborhoods in Canada's cities.[2] In *Vanishing British Columbia*, he is motivated by a desire to explore another corollary of rapid urbanization–the marginalization of rural communities.

Just as rural communities have been marginalized through decisions and demands that originate elsewhere, so has the hinterland been a site of social and ethnic marginalization, and Kluckner's paintings and text draw attention to rural British Columbia's paradoxical role as paradise and prison. A painting of the former St. Michael's residential school at Alert Bay appears within a few pages of images of the Finnish socialist utopia at Sointula. An even more striking contrast emerges in his treatment of the southeast, at once connotative of utopia for Russian Doukhobors and American draft dodgers, and of exile for Japanese Canadians. Here, as elsewhere, Kluckner has done his research well. Archival photographs and an accompanying text based upon extensive reading, and most notably upon oral history, document the internment experience and complement the watercolors. Throughout the book, the interviews and letters he includes demonstrate compellingly that "people want to hang their family stories onto specific buildings and places" (p. 215). He has also collaborated with the local historians and historical societies working tirelessly, with very modest resources, to draw attention to local heritage through designation, preservation, and walking tours.

It is difficult to find fault or omission with a collection that is, after all, grounded so firmly in one man's experience of British Columbia's human landscape. However, if there is one corridor that receives less attention than it perhaps deserves, it is the Inside Passage and the central coast. Powell River, a City Beautiful-inspired pulp mill town and the only federally designated historic townsite in western Canada, is included, as are Stewart and the Queen Charlotte Islands on the North Coast. The

now demolished BC Packers cannery at Alert Bay, which forms the frontispiece to the book, is but one of many that have fallen victim to the centralization of fish processing, while the decline of the salmon fishery, the softwood lumber dispute, reductions in ferry service, and the automation of lighthouses have left their monuments in the coastal outports just as surely as the closure of mines and the abandonment of company towns and family farms in the interior. True, much of the vanishing heritage of coastal British Columbia is accessible only by water and thus doesn't fit the pattern of roadside memory, but perhaps this makes publicizing it ever the more imperative.

Like the documentary artists of the past, whose works promoted tourism, settlement, and investment, Kluckner is not a dispassionate observer. *Vanishing British Columbia* is a plea to preserve these remnants of rural British Columbia's past, but the artist concludes that the outlook for historical buildings in the hinterland is not bright. As resource companies downsize or close, and the provincial government, in spite of its much vocalized commitment to "the Heartland," centralizes services in larger towns and cities, small communities will struggle to survive and their built heritage will slowly vanish. In some places even the documentary artist was too late. One of the most poignant watercolors in the collection is of the single surviving chimney of "the oldest operating store in British Columbia" (p. 174) near Pavilion, destroyed by fire in 2000. Elsewhere, however, there is hope that these paintings won't be the only remnant. In evoking, through his pictures and writing, the beauty and the historical significance of the landmarks of his personal map of British Columbia, hopefully Kluckner will inspire a wide audience to take an interest in these places and in preserving them.

Notes

[1]. In 1994 the provincial government challenged, before the Supreme Court of Canada, a VIA proposal to cancel E&N passenger service. The court ruled against the province, finding that the federal government was under no constitutional obligation to operate the railway. See *British Columbia (Attorney General) v. Canada (Attorney General); An Act Respecting the Vancouver Island Railway (Re)* 2 S.C.R. 41 (1994).

[2]. Michael Kluckner, *Vancouver the Way It Was* (North Vancouver: Whitecap, 1984); *Victoria the Way It Was* (North Vancouver: Whitecap, 1986); *Toronto the Way It Was*(North Vancouver: Whitecap, 1988); *Paving Paradise: Is British Columbia Losing Its Heritage?* (North Vancouver: Whitecap, 1991).

Citation: Forrest D. Pass. Review of Kluckner, Michael, *Vanishing British Columbia.* H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

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