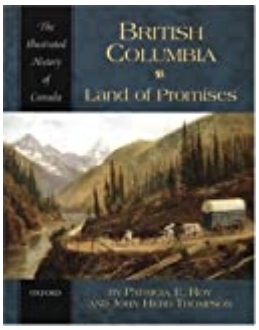
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Patricia E. Roy, John Herd Thompson. *British Columbia: Land of Promises.* Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2005. 224 pp. $36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-541048-8.

Reviewed by James Murton (Department of History, Nipissing University)

Published on H-Canada (March, 2007)

Imaging British Columbia

In 2001 the Australian guidebook series Lonely Planet invoked a unique "dynamic at work in BC," a result of the "almost mystical allure of BC's physical environment," to explain why British Columbia was the first Canadian province to get its own Lonely Planet guidebook.[1] The sentiment is not unique. Jean Barman writes in *The West Beyond the West* (1991) of dreaming of British Columbia while growing up in Winnipeg. British Columbia is also a place to which people come–a land of promises, according to Patricia E. Roy and John Herd Thompson, though a place that often dashed hopes and a place, very often, of promises unfulfilled. This idea, these promises, and the competing agendas they generated, run through Roy and Thompson's deftly written and surprisingly rich (given its length) survey of the history of British Columbia.

British Columbia: Land of Promises is the fifth volume to emerge in Oxford's Illustrated History of Canada series. Roy and Thompson start it, somewhat puzzlingly, with an unresolved discussion of how odd it is to write the history of a country as the story of its regions. Almost lost, as part of a section on how the book is organized, is what seems to this reviewer to be the book's most obvious theme–that the history of British Columbia to date has been one of the struggle over the development of the province, and so over the power to control, and distribute the benefits of, its natural resources. As Roy and Thompson make clear, the most obvious of the many promises that British Columbia offered new arrivals was economic prosperity. This was a promise that the provincial government often struggled to keep, given the cyclical nature of the province's resource-dependent economy. Political economy, then, forms the backbone of the book; the struggles of British Columbians, of various ethnicities, genders, and classes, to deal with the ups and downs, constitutes its heart.

The opening chapters are particularly strong, reflecting both the strength of the recent scholarship on colonial British Columbia and Roy and Thompson's handling of this scholarship. The book starts by invoking the physical geography of British Columbia–the omnipresence of mountains, ordered into ranges running north-south, the customary division of the province into "coast" and "interior," and its distance from the centers of European power and the world economy. This is followed by a useful dis-

cussion of the difficulties of terminology in discussing First Nations people and a concise sketch of the subsistence systems of First Nations around the time of first contact in the eighteenth century. Struggles by various European countries, particularly Spain, Britain, and the United States, for control of the territory and the fur resource meant that by the 1790s, "the once remote Northwest coast had been integrated into an international capitalist market" (pp. 22-23). First Nations were key players in this trade, although the extent to which we might see them as equal partners is debated by historians. Regardless, the fur trade status quo was upset by a rush of gold miners–American, Chinese, and European–who flooded into the Fraser Canyon and the Cariboo region starting in 1858. The next era of British Columbia's history had begun, a stage that ended in 1885 when the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR) in the recently named city of Vancouver meant that British Columbia was about to assume a new place within Canada and the British Empire.

Successive chapters continue the themes of economic and social development, promise and disappointment. The industries that in many ways continue to define the province–mining, forestry, fishing, and (to a lesser extent) agriculture–are explored. The reliance on the extraction and sale of resources has left British Columbia with a boom-and-bust economy and a sharp division between capital and labor, with the result that the bust of the 1930s was especially severe west of the Rockies, as was the reaction to it by the working class. The On-to-Ottawa trek, begun in Vancouver by disgruntled relief camp workers, and the occupation of the Vancouver post office, violently broken up by police, was followed by a sustained boom the likes of which no one had ever seen. The postwar was a story of expansion and prosperity across North America; in British Columbia, it was a tale written in concrete and asphalt. Hydro dams, sponsored by the Social Credit government of W.A.C. Bennett, rose above the Peace and Columbia Rivers. Hundreds of miles of paved highway were built, on which the Highways Minister, "Flyin' Phil" Gagliardi, felt it was his right to travel as fast as he liked. The concrete edifice of Simon Fraser University bore witness to an expanding state and society. A few lonely voices, such as the conservationist Roderick Haig Brown, worried about the costs, but they were drowned out in the general cheer. Inevitably, bust followed boom. The faltering of the resource economy helps explain the fractious politics of the last three decades, the subject of the final chapter.

This is a lively, efficient synthesis of existing work. I must admit to some disappointment. I had hoped for a book that would give us Patricia Roy's take on British Columbia and its history, based on her years of scholarship and deep knowledge of the province. A reviewer should not ask for a different book than the one that was written, however, and what this book does very well is demonstrate the value of a genuine synthesis. Presenting the conclusions of a broad range of current scholarship in the form of a readable general history that incorporates the social along with the political and the economic, is no mean feat.

No general history, however, is entirely general. The emphases of current scholarship and the interests of the authors do shape the text. Unsurprisingly, given Roy's longstanding interest in the history of Asian British Columbians, the sections dealing with the Chinese and the Japanese are some of most compelling in the book. A notable achievement is the weaving of First Nations people into the province's history. Here Roy and Thompson are able to lean on a rich base of scholarship. There has been a recent outpouring of work on the history of First Nations in British Columbia. More notable than sheer volume is the determination of scholars like Cole Harris, John Lutz, and Wendy Wickwire to present Native history as central to the history of British Columbia. Harris argues that the history of the province is built on top of the reserve system, by which Europeans established the basic land base of the province and set out the basis for relations between Europeans and Natives. Lutz emphasizes the importance of First Nations people as laborers in the early industrial economy.[2]

The late nineteenth century was the point at which First Nations people became a minority in British Columbia for the first time, and their importance as laborers, and consequently their importance to white society as a whole, began to slip. Roy and Thompson chart this transition in a couple of pages. Confined to tiny, scattered reserves, First Nations people had only highly restricted access to the sort of timber, mineral or water resources around which others constructed local economies. Yet Native people did not disappear. They protested their lack of treaties and limited access to the land in political organizations such as the Nisga's Land Committee. This history is familiar from the work of scholars such as Paul Tennant, but what I like about Roy and Thompson's book is their presentation of a homelier story. "In settlements from Nanaimo to Hazelton," Roy and Thompson write, "white housewives traded with Aboriginal people who went door-to-door peddling fish or handicrafts such as baskets or blankets in exchange

for other food or used clothing. First Nations people also competed in local sports events and agricultural exhibitions, although often in separate categories" (p. 89). In this short description, we see beyond the politics to the people, finding a way to live, rowing in a Victoria Day regatta, showing off their wares at the fall fair, marginalized, but inescapably part of the scene.

That Roy and Thompson are able to so successfully evoke the history of British Columbia in such a short space has much to do with the use of illustrations. This book is a model of how to use visual material, and especially photographs, in a work of history. The authors explain in the introduction that they intend to use images not for their aesthetic quality but as evidence in their own right and so to help tell the story. In this I think they are entirely successful. Following the most current theory and practice, the authors refuse to accept photographs as simple windows on reality. They are careful to situate photographs in the social and material context of their production, which lets them speak to the history. A photograph of a man doing laundry outside of a log cabin might have been treated as simply an illustration of conditions in the backcountry. Instead, the authors give us the photograph's title ("Girl wanted, Atlin, BC") and the fact that it was taken by an professional photographer who sold it as a postcard; they note that "the imbalance in BC's gender ratio was 179 males per 100 females in 1901, after three decades in which development of the province's resource industries had attracted predominantly male migrants. The fact that photographer Bourne â¦ thought that a man doing 'woman's work' made a humorous subject suggests the tenacity of notions about what constituted 'men's' and 'women's' work" (p. 79).

Other images are similarly rich. A photograph of Sutekichi Miyagawa and his four children in front of his store is an occasion to explain the booming birthrate of Japanese before World War II and the paranoid response of provincial politicians. This attitude would lead to the branding of these people–Miyagawa in a sweater and tie, his daughters in skirts and tights, his store named the Davie Confectionary and festooned with large ads for Coca-Cola–as enemy aliens, subject to internment and the seizure and auction of their possessions (p. 119). Occasionally more information than we probably need is provided in the captions. But this is a minor quibble. The images are revealing and striking. Readers would gain much by studying just this part of the book.

An editorial cartoon by Len Norris, near the end of the book, sums up the attitudes of many British Columbians to their home. With soaring mountains and dense forests in the background, an Anglican priest turns to the visiting Archbishop of Canterbury and notes, "our great problem in BC, Your Grace, is the widespread local belief that this *is* heaven" (p. 161). Many British Columbians would agree, while recognizing that the air of melancholy and disappointment that runs through this book is also a part of the experience of the province. This is a book with its feet firmly planted on the ground of the place it chronicles. It would be useful in courses on the history of British Columbia or Canada, or as an example of the use of photographs by historians. But perhaps the best thing I can think of to say about it is that I both learned a great deal from it, and plan on buying a copy for my family.

Notes

[1]. Julie Fanselow and Debra Miller, *British Columbia* (Oakland: Lonely Planet Publications, 2001), 13.

[2]. Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002); John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-1890," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 3 (1992): 69-93; Wendy Wickwire, " 'To See Ourselves as the Other's Other': Nlaka'pamux Contact Narratives," *Canadian Historical Review* 75 (March 1994): 1-20.