

REVIEW:

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF WESTERN CANADA

by Tony Cashman

Edmonton, M. G. Hurtig Ltd., 1971; \$9.95

This book might satisfy Cy Brown relaxing indoors as the winter winds howl across his Saskatchewan farmland. Certain Winnipeggers, Edmontonians and Vancouverites will be pleased. So might Joe College sunning himself on the slopes at Simon Fraser or Sue Smith from Irma, Alberta. Indeed, the book might even enlighten your average Easterner from the valley, the Maritimes, or from the great metropoli of Montreal and Toronto. It might interest our American tourists. For the book convincingly reveals that west beyond Parry Sound and north of Grand Forks, North Dakota there are people - people with a heritage unique unto themselves and yet part of the great Canadian fabric. Tribute is paid to the hardy Western fur trader, sturdy pioneer, land tiller, railroad builder, oil driller and city dweller; to the men of the islands, the coast, the mountains, the valleys, and the prairies. One can read of indians, Mounties, buffalo, wheat, water, and grasshoppers; of rebellions, riots and strikes; of politicians, pilots and potash; of raging floods, mighty dams, and peaceful lakes; of the fur trade era, the boom years, the war years, the dirty thirties, the fabulous fifties, the high-rise sixties, and the dawn of the West's second century. And in addition, there are plenty of pictures. Yes, this book might please a lot of people.

But, unfortunately, this book is not going to please Thor Sigurdson, Sonia Buchinsky, Hermann Steinbeck or Zenon Maranchuk. Nor will it satisfy Western historians. It will disappoint anyone who is aware of the potential impact of visual documentation.

The author writes well. I like the lively style that allows him to display his expertise as an historian with the charm of a western armchair yarn-spinner. Mr. Cashman has attempted to present a well-balanced account of the political, social, economic, cultural and geographic forces that, over the centuries, moulded the Canadian West from the Shield to the Pacific Coastal Islands. There are no earthshaking or new interpretations for this is basically a popular history written, so it seems, from secondary sources and from insights gleaned from Western newspapers or heard in the backroom. Indeed, at times there are most refreshing insights into events and people, great and small. There are the familiar commentaries on Lord Selkirk, Governor Douglas, Amor de Cosmos, Louis Riel, the Roblins, the Bennetts, Aberhart, Douglas and Diefenbaker and all those who loom large on the Western horizon. More interesting are the references to people like Norman Criddle, Charlie Greenwood, Allan Macleod and Private Smokey Smith. In addition to reading about farming, lumbering, oil and potash, about the building of the CPR, the Manitoba Schools Question, the Regina Riots and Japanese Internment Camps, one learns about how the West first won the Stanley Cup in 1896 and the Grey Cup in 1935, and built Mount Blackstrap in the nineteen-seventies. But for all that, the text has some serious shortcomings. The omission of adequate discussions on the importance of fishing, cattle ranching, northern mining and religious communities may be excusable.

But to relegate mention of the contributions and roles of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Central, Eastern and Northern Europe to two small paragraphs and to ignore completely the role and contribution of their descendants is unforgivable. Perhaps the blame does not lie entirely with Mr. Cashman. It is true that there is little written on the histories of these peoples in the West. The holdings of our archives and repositories contain few accessible primary records of these groups. Nevertheless, most Westerners are aware of the presence of Ukrainians, Icelanders, Doukhobors, Mennonites and thousands more. In spite of this, Cashman has presented the reader with an Anglo-Saxon West. In so doing, he has written an incomplete history of Western Canada.

But Cashman's book is also an illustrated history of Western Canada. It is far from being the illustrated history of Western Canada. However, credit is to be given for the effort put forward. There is evidence of systematic forethought and method in the selection of the some one hundred fifty illustrations.

Cashman has made his pilgrimage to the usual sources: the national and provincial archives, Glenbow, McCord and the RCMP Museum. He has also made use of various galleries and from them chosen some of the best selections for his book. It is unfortunate that he did not tap the rich resources of the lesser known Western repositories such as the Vancouver Public Library and the Western Development Museum.

In general, there has been a comprehensive and appropriate selection of illustrations with a good balance of artistic and photographic documentation. Many of the images we have seen before: the inevitable portraits of Louis Riel and the C. W. Jeffreys pseudo-representations that always serve to fill the gap when no contemporary image can easily be found. However, it is refreshing to see many new items. Cashman is to be commended for his choice of paintings and watercolours which his publishers judiciously allowed to be reproduced in colour. The use of the Emily Carrs, the Paul Kanes, the Hinds, and the Russells enfuse a vitality into the book. Some of the illustrations are most intriguing: the W. Hind watercolour on page 52; the Boorne and May photo on pages 132-3; the painting by A. C. Leighton on pages 244-5. The photo on page 179 of World War One volunteers at Youngstown, Alberta is indicative of a good blend of text with illustration to create a mood or emphasize the impact of an event.

Unfortunately, there are some extremely poor choices of illustrations which detract from the good selections. For example, the reproduction on page 48 of HBC 'beaver' was a misjudgment, as was the contemporary photo of the Fort Garry Hotel appearing on page 55. The photo of Stephenson's locomotion No. 1 is incongruous with the text and the pace of the book. The choice of the photo of the boundary marker on page 89 is a good measurement of the general quality of illustration research. The selected photo does illustrate the boundary marker but gives no indication of its relative size. Sounder research would easily have revealed several much better illustrations showing men standing by these markers. The symbolism attributed to the illustrations on page 193 and on pages 262-3 escapes me.

The selection and use of postage stamps as illustrations is always difficult. Cashman should not have included them. Instead, he might better have used more maps. That there are some five illustrations relating to the North West Mounted Police is somewhat unjustified, particularly as Cashman includes no illustrations reflecting fishing, cattle ranching,

northland mining, nor the ethnic groups and their impact on the West.

Even the illustrations selected reflect an Anglo-Saxon bias. Look closely at the group appearing in the photo on page 146. Are they truly "the faces of the Canadian West"? But, perhaps it is not the illustration that has been mischosen but the wording of the caption. Cashman is to be commended for inclusion of proper credit lines and attributions for most of his illustrations. Regretfully, his captioning is not always entirely appropriate or accurate. The portrait of John A. Macdonald on page 82 is wrongly attributed to Frederick rather than William Notman, while the photo on page 95 of the portage of the North Thompson was not taken by Notman as stated but by B. Baltzly. One questions whether the illustration on page 187 truly depicts "an unruly crowd", and few people outside of Saskatoon would refer to that great mound of earth - Mount Blackstrap - as a "symbol of the seventies and of the enormous technological power available to man". In an attempt to personalize his captions, Cashman loses a certain credibility.

The publishers, M. G. Hurtig Ltd. of Edmonton, are deserving of both accolades and criticism for this book. The lot of the Canadian publisher is a hard one. Skills are scarce, costs are high, markets are small, and without massive infusions of government or private grants, one cannot expect publications of the high quality and standards achieved by the foreign publishers. Thus, Hurtig is to be commended for venturing to publish this book. Moreover, they are to be praised for certain of its technical merits. The overall format is well planned. The book size and the texture of cover and page stock make it pleasing to hold and handle. The clean, bold type and text layout make for easy reading. The decision to use full colour plates was a costly but wise one. They enhance the book inestimably. But the decision to use toning on other selected illustrations was a disaster. The anaemic blue, cream, and pink tones scattered throughout the book detract from the positive strengths of the full colour plates. The sickly toning of Lord Selkirk's portrait on page 38 does no justice to the Lord and depresses the viewer. The toning detracts from the full impact of such illustrations as that on page 179 or exaggerates and makes less credible the evidence of an illustration such as that on page 121. The toning also suppresses detail as it has done on page 106. It would have been far better to have dispensed with toning and concentrated on sharp black and white illustrations.

There are other technical features of the book that detract from its virtues. In essence, the layout of the illustrations lack soul. There seems to be no sensitive relationship between the art editor and the illustration. One senses a cold, unfeeling, mechanical manipulation with little attempt to grasp the meaning of the illustration and to emphasize its most important or dramatic aspects. The frontis-piece illustration on page one is most promising. It utilizes the impact of the photograph to dramatize and set the mood for the book. But on page two, the reader is depressed immediately by a heavily contrasted muddy print. He becomes even more depressed when, upon coming to page 161, he realizes that the frontis-piece on page one is only one half of the original photograph and that a unique opportunity for an imaginative illustration layout was missed. An art editor more sensitive to the impact of illustrations would have seen the advantage of placing the other half of the original photo as the second frontis-piece image on page two. One must also be critical of the cropping and sizing of the illustrations. Although most of the cropping is presentable, it is poor on pages 208 and 210, unacceptable for the

portrait on page 240, and inexcusable for the photo on page 148-9. In terms of sizing, the overall handling of the portraits is inconsistent and often illogical. One can understand the blow-ups of portraits of Louis Riel and John A. Macdonald, but what rationale or fixed rule ever dictated that the poor portrait of Mrs. Tilly Rolston be treated in such a gross manner? The views have been handled better, but it is unfortunate that the Barkerville scene on page 74 and the majestic Baltzly view on page 95 have been reduced while the less inspiring views on page 55 and 163 have been enlarged to full page. Finally, it should be noted that although the quality of the reproductions is generally good, Hurtig should have insisted that better photo prints be supplied to them for such illustrations as the frontis-piece on page two, the CPR construction scene on page 106, and for the group photo on page 130 of Big Bear and his son. The originals are surely in far better condition and our repositories have little excuse for supplying poor quality photo reproductions.

Fortunately, the textual and technical shortcomings of An Illustrated History of Western Canada can be remedied. The book merits a second and third edition. May Hurtig exhaust its present production run and republish Cashman's work - with a few corrections!

--Richard Huyda
Public Archives of Canada