ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

The following are three reviews by me, and seven reviews of four of my earlier books. As things go in the literary and academic world they and the topics they refer to are now unknown and long forgotten. It is somewhat vain to expect them to find many readers today. Well, what the hell! -- Rolf Knight, September 2014


7-9 "Smoke From Their Fires"; review by Rolf Knight in *Raincoast Chronicles*, No. 7, Summer 1978


14 Review of *A Very Ordinary Life* by John Smith in *Northern Times*, November 2, 1975

15 Review of *A Very Ordinary Life* by Howard White in *Raincoast Chronicles*

16-17 "Discovering An Indian Proletariat", review by Stan Persky of *Indians at Work*, in *Canadian Dimension* 1981

18-19 Review of *Indians at Work* by Sheila M. Van Wyck in *Canadian Reviews of Sociology and Anthropology*, 1980

20 "'No. 20 Line' brings B.C. history to life", review of *Along the No. 20 Line* by Geoff Meggs in *The Fisherman*, September 5, 1980

GREY OWL’S RETURN:
CULTURAL ECOLOGY AND
CANADIAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES*

Rolf Knight


Cultural Ecology is a collection of twenty-two articles whose common element is a concern with some ecological feature of a Canadian indigenous society. They deal almost exclusively with relations of food production and their interaction with environmental and cultural arrangements. The articles are grouped in five sections, according to geographical areas—Great Lakes, Boreal Forest, Grasslands, Pacific, Arctic—which are, according to Cox, “the major vegetation regions of Canada” and which “correspond as well to differing cultural provinces” (8). The book is intended as an introductory reader for courses dealing with Canadian native peoples as well as for courses in ecology and is proving very saleable on the present college market.

Cox’s brief preface-introduction outlines the rationale for the present collection. Its purpose is to indicate the pre-eminence of cultural ecological study played by Canadian indigenous people (and their students) and to heighten an appreciation of the work of Frank Speck. Simultaneously, the collection is intended to disabuse readers of an allegedly crude materialist approach to cultural ecology supposedly typified by the work of Marvin Harris and others. Opposed to the above, in Cox’s mind, is the critical importance of an ethnico-ecological approach, which is the study of “relations of production” strongly tempered by the ecological views of the people themselves. Cox suggests that Speck’s peripatetic discussions of Naskapi religious cosmology foreshadowed an understanding of the reticulate interactions of ideology and subsistence organization. Presumably, we are going to have to include supernatural factors, such as the Master of the Beaver spirit, in our determinations of ecological processes, since some groups clearly believe they exist.

In order to emphasize the importance of ecological studies of Canadian Indian populations, analyses dealing with any group now resident outside of Canadian territory have been excluded. Whatever qualms one has about the “ecology in one country” approach, it must be admitted that a body of some valuable ecological work is presented, although the collection as a whole is far from being a balanced presentation of cultural ecology. A less acceptable aspect is that the selection has been skewed to show the work of Frank Speck as central to Canadian ethnohistory. The majority of the articles deal with Boreal Forest groups, and with the partial exception of Leacock, those writers whose analyses of Boreal Forest groups conflict with Speck’s are relegated to the bibliographic section. Works excluded are those of Diamond Jenness, the founder of Canadian ethnohistory, A.G. Bailey, and Edward Rogers, the most knowledgeable ethnologist and ecologist of Boreal Forest hunting and trapping groups in Canada today.

The body of Cultural Ecology begins, fittingly enough, with Speck’s “Economic and Ecological Aspects of Iroquois Culture,” an appreciation of the “glory that was Iroquoia” and of the wide roster of foods and productive techniques which supposedly fulfilled all the peoples’ needs to their own satisfaction. This theme is a big seller in grade schools these days, and this article would be appropriate and suitable for that audience. An extract of Tooker’s “Subsistence of the Huron Indians” presents a compilation of what ethnohistorical accounts have to say about Huron horticulture and food economy in general. Valuable as such a compilation is, it underscores the limitations of reconstructing ecological processes from the traditional ethnohistorical sources. Trigger, in “Settlement as an Aspect of Iroquoian Adaptation at Time of Contact,” attempts a reconstruction of pan-Iroquoian settlement patterns as reflective of, and responsive to, forces of productive economy, trade and warfare and, as such, is an excellent example of how mainly ethnohistorical and archaeological descriptions are different from but may be transmutable into ecological analyses.

The Grasslands section consists of a two-page note by Downs, “Comments on Plains Indian Cultural Developments,” that emphasizes the developmental potential of Plains groups by underscoring the pastoral aspects of horse-mounted hunting. Fisher’s “The Algonkian Plains” pro-
vides an overview of Cree and "cognate" groups on the Canadian plains and prairies, and describes them as evolutionary adaptations from Boreal Forest groups.

The Pacific region opens with Sanger's "Development of the Pacific Northwest Plateau Culture Area," an archaeological chronicle of movement and differentiation of Paleo-populations on the Plateau. Then follows Julian Steward's "Determinism in Primitive Society," a discussion of the triumph of cultural free will over ecological determinism among the Carrier Indians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The American Friends Service Committee provides "The Fish and Their Environment," an excellent article on salmon and their river environments in Washington State. Weinburg, in "Models of Southern Kwakiutl Social Organization," proposes a general systems approach for the analysis of equilibrium and change in southern Kwakiutl social organization and potlatching. Ruddle's "Chiefs and Commoners: Nature's Balance and the Good Life Among the Nootka" provides a restatement of traditional ethnographic material on the Nootka potlatch system, treating it as a mechanism to adjust changing and disparate food resources, settlements, and levels of chiefly power to the mobilization and distribution of what constituted the Nootkan "good life." It is a well-balanced article, not marred by the fact that Cox treats it as an answer to those he terms the "Oxfam group" (anthropologists like Suttlc, Vayda, and Piddocke, who view salient features of West Coast cultures as adaptations to conditions of shifting temporal food scarcity.

The Arctic and Barren Grounds section contains Smith's "The Chipewyan Hunting Group in a Village Context," a readable account of the progressive entry of Euro-Canadian agencies and "intrusive" native populations among an isolated Chipewyan "band," the increasing contraction of boundaries of effective community, and a pattern of growing sedentarization. Paine in "Animals as Capital" compares underlying principles of land, animals and other resource utilization among northern hunters and herders. The most important point I take from his comparison is that despite certain similarities, hunting and herding involve basically different strategies of resource use: pastoralists utilize animals as "capital," trying to expand their herds and draw as few animals from them as possible, but "without animals as capital, hunters collectively draw and consume income from their animal resource; to a large extent this is a naturally regulated yield" (312).

Damas in "Environment, History and Central Eskimo Society" delineates similarities and differences in social organization and food production among three Eskimo groups. He attempts to ferret out the causes of this similarity and variation through the comparative application of such processes as (a) similar adaptations of a common cultural base to common environmental opportunities; (b) distinct adaptations of a common cultural base to different micro-environmental opportunities; and (c) diffusion and cultural drift of cultural patterns largely unrelated to or equally effective in the various micro-environments involved. It is a quite elegant article and in lieu of any other statement should have served as an introductory guide to indicate one way in which ecological studies may be placed in broader context.

As indicated, the articles in Cultural Ecology deal almost exclusively with the organization of food production and its interrelation with other facets of social organization. This, of course, is the "classic" and limited view of the realm of cultural ecology. Not a single article attempts a systematic analysis of an existing nutritional pattern. Not a single article deals with the variety of interactions between specific cultural patterns and specific diseases, or with epidemiology in general. No article deals substantially with the dynamics of demography or meaningfully with cultural population policies. Only one article (Trigger's) deals systematically with the ecological consequences of warfare and competition for resources (although Fisher, Weinberg, and Ruddel do allude to its importance). In short, the editor's selection of articles reflects a very restricted view of the factors involved in cultural ecology, in the spheres of both culture and environment. While this is no failing in the individual articles themselves, it is a serious flaw for an introductory reader entitled Cultural Ecology.

Corresponding to the restricted view of cultural ecology is the virtual exclusion of contributions by disciplines other than cultural anthropology. This obviates one of the most valuable aspects of ecological study - the application of multi-disciplinary research on a topic. There is not a single article by a geographer, a plant or animal ecologist, or an epidemiologist. In fact, the host of disciplines which could contribute to a study of cultural ecology are left unmentioned. Transmitting this chauvinistic anthropological view is certainly no benefit to readers.

An ambiguity runs through a number of articles that are primarily studies of ethno-ecology (rather cursory ones at that) rather than ecological studies per se. How a people understand and evaluate their environment is, of course, important to what they do with it. But it should be clear that ecological beliefs and evaluations are not the same as the materially specifiable interrelations which exist between populations and their environment, whether perceived or not. This applies to simple indigenous societies as well as to modern industrial-based societies. Some of the more purely ethno-ecological analyses, while providing certain provocative ecological suggestions, are marked by a paucity of quantified data, even a seeming disinterest in the multifaceted interrelationships of broadly environmental phenomena. This can be devastating as a strategy since for many cultural ecological problems it is impossible to come to a determination of what forces are at work unless some degree of quantification is attained. For instance, in deciding the effective harvestable yield of Pacific Coast salmon runs under traditional conditions, it
might be crucial to know whether preservation techniques required twice the labor power as catching the fish.

In one of the more sophisticated and well-documented articles in the reader, Damas says "to the thorough-going ecologically-oriented fieldworker, my attempts to use ecology as a control will seem superficial. The dedicated ecologist would be concerned with an accurate count of game in the area, with calorie intake and output, etc. These approaches are not possible for the areas I have studied, for the Central Eskimo area presents changed cultures and societies operating in changing ecological regions" (291). Fair enough, but surely some articles in the collection should present the intricate and quantified data to which Damas alludes.

The central set of articles, the second section of the reader, deals with Boreal Forest populations. They are introduced by Speck’s *The Family Hunting Band as the Basis of Algonkian Social Organization* (1915), probably the most widely known of his general discussions. The crux of the article is that “the whole territory claimed by each tribe was subdivided into tracts owned from time immemorial by the same families and handed down from generation to generation. The almost exact bounds of these territories were known and recognized, and trespass, which indeed was of rare occurrence, was summarily punishable” (59), and “this [territory] is his family inheritance, handed down from his ancestors. Here in the same district his father hunted before him and here also his children will gain their living” (61). Although Speck mentions the presence of bilateral kin arrangements in the family hunting bands and admits of a certain flexibility in land use, his is essentially a description of a patriarchal, patrilineal micro-band whose territories are basically fixed and exclusively owned by “the families.” This is allegedly the basis of a system through which game and fur animal stocks are conserved on a sustained yield basis.

Cooper and Penard’s *Land Ownership and Chieftancy Among the Chipewyan and Caribou-Eaters* (1929) extends an essentially similar description of territorial use and ownership to these trapping and herd-animal hunting Athabaskan groups (which Speck himself thought unlikely). Gaucheries such as claiming an internal equity among Chipewyan groups because “they have an innate sentiment of justice—so much so that theft was unknown among them before the white man came and by his example taught them thieviness” (Cooper and Penard 79) or stating “instinctively, the hunter understands how to operate with a natural law of conservation which no game commission can improve upon” (Speck 61) can only partly be dismissed as the phraseology of that period.

Leacock’s *The Montagnais-Naskapi Band* restates her position that the degree of exclusive territorial control obtained among Algongian hunting groups stems primarily from responses to competitive fur trade. In addition, she succinctly outlines some of the ecological and demographic factors which continue to require a flexible and pragmatic approach to resource utilization and group composition even with commitment to trade-trapping. She holds that despite recent evidence of relative food affluence among some sub-tropical hunters, the primarily ecological and social relations of Northern Algongian groups were characterized, as they have usually been thought to be, by adaptation to recurrent food scarcity.

Feit’s “The Ethno-Ecology of the Waswanipi Cree: How Hunters Can Manage Their Resources” may be taken as a counter to Leacock’s view. He holds that Waswanipi hunting techniques, their conservation practices, and their ecological knowledge are so effective that they are always able to procure game animals in sufficiency. In support of this view we are given ethno-ecological statements by the Waswanipi “who say that, when they want a moose they get a moose, and when asked what happens if they don’t get a moose on a given day, they say they try again later, and they will get a moose” (118). Such emic commentary, while suggestive, is hardly conclusive and we will have to await Feit’s more quantified ecological study of the region, which indeed does promise to be outstanding. In the meantime, his evaluation of Waswanipi hunting-trapping and conservation effectiveness does not square easily with other accounts. First, while Algongian groups did attempt animal conservation under certain conditions, historical evidence indicates that when these populations were fully engaged in hunting and trapping (and not just for an important supplementary income, as today), game and fur animal populations were frequently decimated (Elton 1942: 364, 379; Innis 1930: 265, 337; Mason 1967: 8, 30, 31). Moreover, there are numerous accounts of temporal food scarcity and outright starvation among Northern Algongian well into the present century. A single example, from the Montagnais of the Moishe River reported by Speck himself in 1912: “An exceedingly high mortality among children as well as among adults among these miserable half-starved, half-frozen hunters causes the distribution of orphans and half orphans” and “the band had lost fourteen able-bodied men and twenty-four children through starvation, freezing and disease while in the interior on their hunting territories” (Speck 1918: 147).

Tanner’s “The Significance of Hunting Territories Today” is of particular significance since it is the only paper written especially for Cultural Ecology that specifically exemplifies the ethno-ecological approach outlined by Cox. Tanner discusses his 1971 replication of Speck’s earlier description of family territories among the Mistassini Cree, mentions that some continuity and certain discrepancies exist, and states that his paper is a critical response to the “solution” proposed by this reviewer (Knight 1965, 1968) to comparable discrepancies among the Rupert House Cree.

What Tanner apparently wishes to dispute is my claim that fixed territories, with exclusive use by particular family hunting groups, could not have been maintained over any long period of time because of drastic fluctuations in human demography and faunal resources of specific tracts. Tanner suggests that I have “perhaps purposefully used a dis-
torted account of the hunting group" (104) and that this alleged misunderstanding of Algonkian territoriality and group composition stems from a too-strict reading of Speck’s descriptions, incorrectly assuming that the family hunting group has the characteristics of an extended biological family. The supposed fallaciousness of my view presumably stems from an allegedly crudely materialist ecological approach that Tanner believes must be superseded by the application of ethno-ecology. Actually, I have diagrammed the genealogical and demographic composition of all trapping groups in the Rupert House area in 1961, discussed the bilateral, flexible nature of their composition as well as their stability, and devoted a half chapter to detailing the activities, movements, and changing composition of three such groups during a year (Knight 1968). The demographic history for the band as a whole and some component units of it are also dealt with. My critique (1965) did indeed read Speck’s accounts of territorial use and control and group composition strictly, in order to indicate its unworkability, as described, on purely ecological grounds.

The major thrust of Tanner’s analysis is that the composition and flexible recruitment mechanisms of hunting-trapping “families” (micro-bands) were such that they would be able to obviate any significant demographic fluctuations and that a wide roster of processes existed whereby faunal fluctuations on given tracts could be adjusted to. Territories themselves were moved, boundaries and tracts redivided, and extensive “hospitality” allowed families to join with established hunting groups in novel tracts (with the increasing difficulty of reaching their old territories, between a quarter and two-thirds of Nichicun hunting groups regularly trap with Mistassini units [104]). Tanner’s description of the specifiable processes of adjustment of group composition and land use is both knowledgeable and valuable. But, in fact, it indicates processes quite antithetical to those described by Speck. The bulk of Tanner’s account of Mistassini ethno-ecology revolves about their cosmological conceptions of land, animals, spiritual forces and man’s place in this scheme. From this, Tanner surprisingly concludes that Speck’s accounts of Cree territorial utilization, ownership, and group composition were, despite some discrepancies, essentially correct. Why? Because they supposedly approximate the underlying Cree folk models and ideals of how these processes and phenomena would best be constituted. Ethno-ecology has here merged on becoming theological ecology.

The remainder of the section includes Fisher’s “The Cree of Canada: Some Ecological and Evolutionary Considerations,” an overview of the Cree adjustments to differing ecological and trade-colonial contexts. He emphasizes that variation and adaptability are inherent in Cree organization and that this process applies equally to precontact and later situations. Buckskin in “The Squatter on the Resource Frontier” mentions the “squatter” (his word, not mine) communities that recurrently grow up around northern resource towns and suggests strategies of how government and development companies may most expeditiously deal with them. Laatsch in “Rock, Wood, Water” rounds off the section with a readable evaluation of the effects of dam construction on the ecology of the people of the Lake Athabasca delta.

Finally, a comment on the extract from Slobodin’s Band Organization of the Peel River Kutchin (1962) that deals with recurrent and nonrecurrent variations in the natural and social environment of that group over the last hundred years. To my mind, most students would learn more about the nature of culture-ecological relations in the context of other processes by reading Slobodin’s short and sensitive monograph (or similar ones) than they will by going through a collage of articles like Cultural Ecology. They would certainly acquire a truer appreciation of the forces at work modifying Canadian Indian cultures, and the vitality of the Indians’ responses.

Parallel to the restricted view of factors involved in cultural ecology is a simplified view of the competing socio-political forces and interests in Canada, past and present. Cox’s repeated invocations of Marx throughout his introductory chapter are merely window dressing, since virtually the only conflicts discussed are between native peoples and “white society.” This rarely proceeds past native equity and ecological good sense, and “white” rapacity and destructiveness. In short, there is nothing even vaguely approaching class analysis of the forces involved in relations between natives and Euro-Canadians. The competing interests, shifting alliances, and ideological strategies of different sectors and classes in Canadian society are left untouched. This is difficult to understand, since Cox and many of the contributors are involved in the current struggle for native land claims evolving out of the James Bay project and undoubtedly are aware of the complexities of intersecting interest groups.

Some articles treat cases of cultural ecology and related ideology among Indian groups as if no such competing class interests and forces previously existed in Canada. It is this “primitivist” view which leads Tanner (107) to find incredible the suggestion that ethnographic accounts of Algonkian territoriality and their wide dissemination may have been related to the interests of the Hudson Bay Company and other external agencies. A bare outline of this complex matter begins with the recognition that Speck was deeply committed to establishing the priority of native land rights, and that at the time of his “discovery” of the Algonkian territorial system he was funded by the Geological Survey, Dominion of Canada. The Geological Survey was interested in documenting Indian land claims in areas which were ceded by the Dominion government to the provincial governments of Ontario and Quebec in 1912 (with the stipulation that the provincial governments would extinguish native title). We should also recognize that regional game and fur depletions had been a recurrent problem for Indians and the Hudson Bay Company for
almost a century and that, especially between 1900 and 1929, the irreducible competitors for the H.B.C. fur trade in the Boreal Forest were “white” trappers. These trappers not only frequently decimated fur resources, but because of their capital and mobility, were able to profit at the expense of the fixed H.B.C. posts.

The H.B.C. had been toying with the establishment of beaver preserves since the midnineteenth century, but after 1869 it lost its monopoly of all lands draining into the Hudson Bay. When the beaver preserve and territorial quota system were initiated by provincial and federal government aegis in the 1930s (partly administered by H.B.C. post managers), rights were reserved exclusively for local Indian trappers. This finally excluded “white” trappers and retained the fur resources for Indian populations who at the time were still bound to H.B.C. trade through credit advances. Of course, the intricacies and cross-cutting interests involved were much more complex, and much is still obscure. But it seems likely that the dissemination of the exclusive, “private property” view of Algonkian hunting and trapping territories was a useful component in obtaining legislation excluding nonnative trappers from these areas. Indeed, this was a beneficial result, in the short run, for Indian trappers.

According to Cox, Speck’s work among the Northern Eastern Algonkian is currently misunderstood as being that of a “scholarly reactionary” because his theories on aboriginal land tenure were used to belabor cultural evolutionary schema, particularly those of materialist or Marxist derivation. He holds that despite somewhat shaky theorizing, Speck was a fine ethnologist who had an insight into the nature of cultural ecology among these hunter-trappers far ahead of his time. This, along with Speck’s championing of native rights, should serve as a guide to contemporary Canadian anthropologists.

It cannot have escaped the notice of anyone who has taught a course on Canadian native peoples during the last few years that a large number of the students are possessed of romantic, if not outright distorted, views. One of the more benign and innocuous is the view that current social and ecological problems are soluble by appreciation and incorporation of the spiritual ways of peoples “closer to nature.” In more openly reactionary terms, the interest in native peoples is often used as a vehicle to legitimize a disinterest or actual hostility to the claims and problems of the nonnative poor and working class in general. Similarly, this interest serves some as a spurious identity with Canada’s “first citizens” in opposition to the claims of more recent immigrant populations, and to validate general beliefs that ethnicity is always overwhelmingly more important than class.

Cox and Tanner are legitimately and decently concerned with the current political and ideological significance of studies of native land tenure. But they might well consider whether they are not playing into the hands of a Tory ethnic nationalism, a regressive proponent that transmutes the current phrase of “multi-culturalism” into the more traditional Canadian concept of “a place for everyone, and everyone in his place.” The poverty of this approach is glaringly apparent in a quote from Speck himself. In an undelivered address arguing against making opportunities for integration available to American Indians, Speck held this would lead to cultural assimilation, and that:

An Indian with no native individuality is to the public at large merely a dark-skinned man who passes casually in the busy work-a-day American world, most unfortunately, as either a mulatto, Japanese, Chinaman, Italian, or Syrian. Moreover, the shame of it is that when thoroughly deculturated the Indians often lose their pride enough to mingle and marry with their social inferiors among certain classes of Negroes or whites.

Now, how can we, in truth and honesty with ourselves and our friends, the Indians, ask them to lower themselves socially to the level of our heterogeneous dark-skinned masses? (Speck 1914, in Hertzberg 1971: 122).

Professor Knight teaches in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto.

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SMOKE FROM THEIR FIRES

Reviewed by Rolf Knight

I was born at Fort Rupert in the year 1870. It was coming on to winter. Soon after I was born the Walas Kwakiutl lost forty men in front of Fort Rupert. They got upset in their canoe and all got drowned.

So begins the life history of Charles Nowell, as told to anthropologist Clessie Ford in 1940. Largely unknown outside a small circle, Smoke From Their Fires is the most illuminating and probably the best autobiography to come from a native person in B.C. Dealing as it does with detailed recollections from fifty to over one hundred years ago, there will be no other such account.

What raises Nowell's story far above analogous biographies is the honesty and gusto of his reminiscences (Ford's resolution not to tamper with them). Smoke From Their Fires is neither a fashionably romanticized nor bowdlerized tale of an Indian chief, nor was it written to support the political mythology of professional native organizations. Speaking near the end of a long and eventful life, Nowell has few regrets and no apologies to make. For instance, he recounts a "love affair" of his younger days which misfires when the grandparents of the girl catch them in the act:

They hollered out, "Hello there! Who's there?" and I got so scared I just ran in the house. My undershirt was so short I had to pull it down over my pecker. The next day we was invited to a feast, and all the Fort Ruperts went. And while I was at the feast, the men that saw me spoke, and one said he saw a naked man who got so scared he ran into one of the houses. I felt so bad I slid down in my seat. He also says we ought to keep watch because some men from other places that don't know enough to wear clothes is coming into our village and prowling around.

Alongside the current crop of hymnals to native spirituality this kind of thing is very refreshing.

Throughout his adult life Nowell was a knowledgeable and unequivocal supporter of traditional Kwakiutl ways. In the context of his own experiences he weaves descriptions of the nature and power of sorcerers and Kwakiutl spirits; of how the intricacies of kinship and inheritance are learned and work; of marriage and child-rearing, of myths and menstrual taboos; of proper Kwakiutl ambitions and social etiquette and much more. The chapter entitled "Lagius Gives Me a Copper" deals with the complexities in Nowell's acquisition of an important social rank and is one of the classic descriptions of the potlatch system.

At another point he describes the elaborate stagecraft that went into mounting the Winter Dances, stagecraft which would stagger American audiences when Nowell and half a dozen other Kwakiutl performers attend the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. A fragment describes his earlier initiation into the "secret" of a Towidi dance:

They put her in the box while all the people saw her put in there in her blue blanket and tied the box, and they put the box on the fire and poured on the oolacheen grease. The fire burned and the box burned, and she was still singing inside, and then the box go up in flames, and they can see her burning in her blue blanket, and all her relatives just cry and cry. Although they know it is not real, it looks so real they can't help it. It was all a trick. There was a hole under the box with a tunnel leading out of the house, and the woman went out of the box and put a seal in her place wrapped in a blue blanket, and then someone sang into the fire through a kelp tube, her song. Oh, it looked real.

Although a "traditional" Kwakiutl man, Nowell was capable of meeting the industrial world of that era head on. In 1887, as a young man who has been to school in Metlakatla a few years, he travels to a job in the Fraser River canneries, along with hundreds of other upcoast Indians. After the end of the salmon run there he works briefly in the hop fields of Washington State and then on to the bright lights of Seattle. "Dead broke," he returns to Vancouver and gets a job as a stoker in the North Shore sawmill, and later does a stint as a longshoreman and then load checker on the Burrard Inlet docks.

The same winter, back at Quatsino, Nowell and a crew of already well-travelled Kwakiutl sealers ship aboard the schooner Rosie Olsen, bound for a one-year sealing cruise in Japanese waters. They are in Yokohama for about a month to refit.

During the time we was there I stayed with a Japanese girl, and all the boys had their Japanese girls. When the carpenter built us canoes, we began to seal hunt. Charley Wilson was the hunter and I steered the canoe. When we got through hunting there, we went inside to Hakodate. While we were going through the inlet, we ran against a sandbar during the night. It was foggy and raining that night, and our schooner got wrecked.

During the three-month layover in Hakodate they haggle with rickshaw drivers, scout the city for a restaurant they like, round up the rest of the crew and find a boarding house advertising "'All Euro-
peans Welcome,' that means sailors there." After various adventures they arrange with a shipping agent for passage to B.C. and work their way back on another schooner which plays hide-and-seek with American patrol ships guarding the seal rookeries of the Aleutian Islands.

Charlie Newcomb's combination of traditional knowledge and understanding of the non-Indian world made him popular with the anthropologists, and through his association with Dr. C.F. Newcombe he became well travelled as an 'Indian dancer.' He was called upon to dance before King George during a royal visit to Vancouver, but says, "I wasn't feeling well and didn't go." One request he did accept was that of the World's Fair in St. Louis.

At the time all the big people of the Fair came to see us, we were given notice about a week beforehand that they were going to come. So we got everything ready - our dancing blankets, and a headdress with ermine skins on the back, and Bob Harris made everything ready for himself, because he was a Hamatsa. We kept Dr. Newcombe busy at that time, getting all the stuff that we wanted. There was a little African pygmy that used to come and see us. He liked to come because we always had bananas, and this little fellow loved bananas. He didn't seem to want to eat anything else; as soon as he came in, he looked at the bananas hanging up and say, "Huh - Banana!" Bob Harris wanted to make a little man just like him, so I told him to come in every day and sit down and eat bananas while Bob Harris was making a little man with some bones and mutton flesh. He made it just like him, and when it was finished it was put in an oven, and Bob Harris looked at after that while it was baking. Bob Harris take it out and hold it up alongside of the little man, and the little fellow would offer it a banana. Bob Harris was making a whistle; he pinch the little fellow to make him squawk, until he made a whistle that sounded just like him. He made the mouth of this thing to move; when he pinch the little fellow, he watch how he open his mouth, and he put the whistle under the skirt of the little fellow he made, so that every time he presses where the whistle was, he make the right noise. He filled the inside with a tube of blood.

We went to the place where all the people was - they say there was about twenty thousand people that came that time. We was put to start first. We had a screen that was painted in a square - about eight feet square. We told the little fellow how it was going to be done, and not to tell his friends about it or we won't give him any more bananas. We had this baked mutton as a man inside the screen, where all our dressers are. We begin with a Bella Bella dance; the West Coast people all knew the songs, and they was singing while Bob Harris and I was dancing. When we got nearly through with one song, Bob Harris made a mistake in beating, and then he says, "Hap-hap-hap." I got behind the screen and dressed as an Indian and came back and told the people in English that the Cannibal is mad now, because they made a mistake in beating the board, and we don't know what he is going to do, because he is so fierce. The two young men from West Coast came and held him - trying to keep him from going toward the other people. Bob Harris was struggling to get free from their hold. Finally he got away from them, and he ran around. When he got to where this little fellow was sitting, he picked him up and ran behind the screen and left him there. Then he took hold of this thing he made just like him and made it squeak and yell, and when he came out in front of the screen, it was yelling loud. Bob Harris came in front of us and set this little fellow in front of us and push his head down and bite the neck until out came the blood all over his face. All the little pygmies got up with their spears and was coming to kill Bob, and all the people in the audience thought sure he had bitten his neck off, but the guards just pushed them back and told them to sit down. The little pygmies just went home while Bob Harris was eating the mutton. I was the one that was cutting the flesh in strips while he was eating them, and crying, "Hap-hap." When he got through eating - some of us helped him because we were hungry - I looked around and saw there was no Indian in that place; they had all got frightened and went home.

I told the men in the hall that we had done a great thing that is only done in the wintertime, and that we are going home to our Indian house where we will try to bring him to life again. Dr. Newcombe never came near us, he was so scared of what Bob Harris had done. That was a murder, he said; that means he is going to be hanged. I told him to keep away from us. "You are a white man," I says, "and you better not come near us." I told the guards to go and put fire into our Indian house. While he was gone, we kept on singing songs, turning around as we go. People come with their kodaks taking our pictures; the guards couldn't keep them away.

It was evening when we get to our house and the house was already full of white people. Last of all the people that owned the Fair came in and sat in the front of the house. All the ladies and gentlemen were sitting right on the ground with their silk dresses on - right on the dirt - because they were told by the guards that is the way the Indians sit. Dr. Newcombe came over to us and want to have a talk with me. I look at him with a strong fierce look on my face and told him not to come near.

So we begin with one song and sing it, and Bob Harris get up and go around the fire singing with the rattle in his hand. Then he go to see the body that he had eaten and say, "The bones are all stuck together now." I interpreted to all the people in the house. Then we sang another song, and then he got up and went around the house and went up to where this little fellow was lying on a table. It was the little pygmy himself, lying under a mat. He says, "He has flesh on his bones now; the whole body is in good order." Then we sang another song, and he went around again, lifted up the mat, and felt, "He is quite warm now," he says. He came back and we sang the last song. Then the West Coast men was dancing over the dead man with their hands shaking while we were singing. When we got through, Bob Harris went around the house, still using his rattle, singing, and went toward to where the little man was lying and lift up the mat. He took the mat off, and took the little man up and sit him up on the table, and he begin to look around stiff like as we told him to do. Bob
Harris took him down from the table and took him around the house, holding him by the hand. And all he say is, “Banana. Banana!”

Then they came back and sit down, and I got up and spoke to all the people: “I am very glad to learn that our friend here, Bob Harris, done this great thing. You all saw him when he ate the flesh of this little man that is standing by his side. This is the same man that was dead, and his flesh was all eaten up. Now he has his flesh and his life back, and now he is alive. And I am glad that there will be no law that will come against us.” Dr. Newcombe slapped his knee and say in a loud voice, “Smart boys!” Then he got up and made a long speech, telling the people about the Indians in British Columbia and how they could do wonderful things.

After experiences such as these, Nowell and his compatriots were not easily overwhelmed by culture shock at developments in B.C. Such luxuries were left to a later age. Indeed, in the late 1880’s and the 1890’s native people were working in and holding their own in virtually every major industry in the province. During the next forty years Nowell himself worked as a fisherman, sawmill worker, labour recruiter for Brunswick Cannery and as an assistant to the Provincial Museum.

Smoke From Their Fires recalls dozens of native men and women of that era. Their doings are woven through the story, as are the places they worked and lived: Matilda Hunt, Stephen Cook, Tlaodlas and many more. These are not the textbook stereotypes of a “primitive” society where all activities are governed by custom and everyone follows the prescribed rules. They are real people, very much like people we all know today. Another stereotype Nowell assaults is the one that asserts that in the “good old days” every native person was part of one big happy family. Charlie Nowell was an important Kwakiutl chief, yet even he describes, with dismay, the treatment of “commoners” in some of the coastal villages.

Nowell’s story is deceptively simple and straightforward. But it yields additional insights with successive readings. Twenty years ago, when I first read Smoke From Their Fires, I saw it as another, better than average, life history of a man coming of age during the last phase of traditional Kwakiutl society. Now I see that it is much more.

Available from Raincoast Chronicles, see p. 56
The Great War and Canadian Society collection is strengthened if we dismiss the claims that it represents Canadian society as a whole during the period. The body of the text is drawn from interviews with some 85 Torontonians who, with some exceptions, basically represent an Anglo-Canadian component of southern Ontario. Some 40 are Anglo-Canadians by birth while another six migrated from elsewhere in Canada. Another 26 are British immigrants to southern Ontario and there are only half a dozen extracts briefly touch upon life outside that region. BC is covered by one paragraph reminiscence of a British Salvation Army lassie whose family was briefly stationed in darkest Fernie. While the accounts are drawn from individuals of most classes it seems to be a disproportion from those stationed on the various rungs of the middle class. Intended or not, the message is clear — these Anglo-Canadians were the Real Canadians. Just like the schoolbooks always said.

In the chapter “A Rural Way of Life” we hear that Edwardian proprieties, church and religion, maxims from Boys Own Annual, temperance societies, and accepted social order were the boundaries of people’s lives. This sounds rather unlike some “farming” regions on the Prairies during that period, with their mixture of boozing, red lights, fights, cooperative dreams and raucous populism. The implied commonality of values based upon common blood, soil and traditions, if it ever existed, was elsewhere undergoing considerable change by the 1900s. While Great War and Canadian Society provides passing allusions to rural workers and their families, there are no accounts of loggers, miners or other resource workers. In other regions of Canada (as in BC, northern Ontario and elsewhere) such resource workers and stump ranchers were more typical of the rural scene than the farm yeomanry celebrated here.

“City Streets” suggests that class, ethnic and cultural differences were greater in urban areas (i.e. Toronto) than in the countryside and were, in a sense, a foretaste of the disharmonies to come. Some, like Les Beauchamp’s account of childhood in a “poor” area of Toronto in 1913, are especially evocative. Yet with few exceptions even these urban accounts transmit a picture of remarkable rusticity. The Kings were still in their counting houses, the domestics were downstairs, God was in his heaven and almost all was right with the world. The recollections provide a rich store of the subjectively important, finely drawn status distinctions, and the clear implication is that Real Canadians were nothing if not conscious of being a cut or two above the “lower orders.”

“Newcomers” deals with the immigrant experience in Toronto; over three-quarters of them were from Great Britain. They had to adjust to Canada as well, and the majority were working people, not squires. Yet it is almost as if they had stepped out of Robert Tressell’s descriptions of his fellow workers in Mugsborough of the time. You would never know that there were Sam Scarlets, George Hardys, Emie Winches, Tim What’s-his-name, British miners and other working-class-conscious immigrants among them.

Scattered through the various chapters are accounts by a half dozen Ukrainian and Jewish immigrants to Canada. Almost all of the passing references to strike participation or radical viewpoints come from their accounts. For instance, take one Sam Beckman (all names are pseudonyms). Raised in Tsarist Lithuania in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a member of the Jewish Arbetary Bund, a participant in the 1905 revolution before coming to Canada, a socialist street corner speaker in Toronto, and later a member of the Communist Party. And yet his brief account as presented might leave you with the feeling that his views and politics were mainly a colourful variant of Jewish subculture in Toronto. Incredible as it may seem, Canada was not necessarily a

strangely modern world to some immigrants, but rather a colonial, relatively stagnant, if tranquil, society.

"Joining Up," "Orders," and "At the Front" deal with Canadian volunteers, conscripts, and Red Cross ladies at home and abroad during the Great War. Extracts capture the initial flag waving and the patriotic hysteria which became endemic on the homeward front. They also document nicely the war weariness which gradually set in among soldiers. Few soldiers subscribed to Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori, nor was there much in the way of A Terrible Beauty to be seen. Actually, there are only two accounts of the fighting up front (total, three pages) and the mutual, senseless butchery of that conflict seems almost tangential to the collection.

That these men generally played down the official hatreds manufactured for the war effort and selectively toned down the horrors of that conflict strikes me as among the more human and moving facets of the collection.

The chapter "At Home" deals mainly with men and womenfolk keeping the home fires burning and mounting watch on the Humber against subversion and slackers. It rings true and is part of a tradition which we see being dashed off and retailed for use in the current cold war. Interwoven in this chapter are moving reminiscences of the official telegrams announcing a death in the family and recollections of the quiet bravery which most maintained in the face of that anxiety. They too did their duty — but who were the pipers and who paid the price?

"At Work" intends to document life on the job during the industrialization of that period. It deals mainly with the war industries, focusing on the new role which women temporarily acquired as wage workers. It is strange that the fullest description of the work scene given is that by a middle-class woman who interrupted her singing career to do a year's stint of war work in a munitions factory. (Presumably she represents those myriad "munitions girls" blissfully singing Land of Hope and Glory during their 10 and 12 hour shifts in the defence plants.) It is a valuable account by a basically decent person but it does not escape patronizing class snobbery. Factory work for her was an adventure quite removed from the realities of working for a living, of trying to wrest some joy and build some future on the wages and insecurities of factory labour. She comments on the supposed spendthrift character of one ex-domestic working on the factory floor. "But she thought that if you were rich, you waste, and rich people don't waste. The reason they're rich is because they have never wasted" (158). Really? And that's what Ontario working women during World War I thought?

In "The World Transformed" we move from the armistice to those changes experienced as having been wrought by the Great War on Canadian society of the 1920s. Supposedly, Canadians had passed into the innocence of a rustic world into the modern era, with all of the "social problems" of the jazz age. These might be summed up in the immortal words of the bard as, "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm, Afta Dy've Seen Paree?". The "less stable types" couldn't easily fit back into their previous lives, some girls began smoking, drinking and even worse, respect for religion and that old time tradition was sort of shot to hell. Surely the changes were greater than that. Or was the Great War and the decade which followed really a period of mourning reaction in Canada?

To me, the most telling account of the "aftermath" are the reminiscences of Richard Mills (172-175) — a remarkable commentary on nativist reaction which must be read. Mills' account contains a passage which may be taken as a maxim by those who believe working class history has to be dehumanized. Says he, "You don't go through life how you should think, you deal with people the way they do think, and work from there" (172).

Ironically, Mills' maxim is the conclusion to an account where he describes how he facilitated the lay-off of a number of Bell plant workers without antagonizing their union, a nugget of anti-labour history.

Undoubtedly, the accounts documented in Great War and Canadian Society could be duplicated in most parts of Canada, including BC. But consider a handful of events during the same period which producer a somewhat different picture of Great Canadian society. Item: In the fall of 1912 the mainly British and Anglo-Canadian miners of the Vancouver Island coal fields, following a then 40 year history of militancy, launched into what became known as the Great Coal Strike. A few of the more dramatic highlights of that strike include a body of Nanaimo miners who disarmed and sent packing a gang of special deputies sent in to police the mines. At the Extension pithead a sustained gun battle broke out between miners and scabs. Fifty miles north, on the Cumberland fields, striking miners and their families marched through the centre of town singing the Workers' Marseillaise — and so forth. The mining areas were once again occupied in a military operation which included detachments from every regular and militia unit on the unPacific coast. Some two hundred miners were arrested and some two dozen ultimately convicted, tried, and jailed by the noted anti-labor justice, F.W. Howie (a much respected provincial historian). The region was still occupied by troops, the mines were run by scabs and the strike lockout was still on in August 1914. Nor was the Great Coal Strike divorced from other similar developments in BC during the last decade of that not-so-belle epoch. Such struggles involved ultimately tens of thousands of men, whose lives were neither as harmonious, Victorian nor docile as the Great War and Canadian Society collection suggests.

Item: BC did witness a rally to the colours which may have been as enthusiastic as in Orangeville. However, substantial numbers of working people here came to recognize the war for what it was and were neither ready to volunteer, nor supported conscription, nor were ready to submerge their interests to the call of King and Capital. During the war some of the previously unorganized resource industries were finally unionized.

Item: One particularly well known case of "draft resistance" may be instructive since it involved something more than the actions of a single individual. Albert Goodwin was an English immigrant who became a coal miner, participated in the Great Coal Strike, and became the secretary of the International Mine, Mill and Smelterworkers Union. Ill with TB, he was reclassified fit for military service after attempting to organize the Cominco company camps and smelters. Goodwin went into hiding in the bush near Cumberland, where he was tracked down and killed by a Dominion Police constable on 27 July, 1918. The response of many thousands of working people in BC was quite different from the patriotic whitefeathering recounted from Toronto.

The population of much of Cumberland turned out in a cortège which carried Ginger Goodwin's casket to the town of a martyr's grave. News of Goodwin's assassination brought out mass meetings in Vancouver and resulted in the first "general strike" in BC history. While only a minority of BC workers participated, the port of Vancouver was brought to a standstill, sawmill and lumber workers shut down many plants, and supportive actions were scattered throughout the province. True enough, mobs of returned soldiers, homemakers, and others were soon formed to wreck the Vancouver Labour Temple, beat up the leaders of the strike and threaten others with prison, deportation, or worse. Temporarily suppressed, labour militancy in BC surged ahead a year later in the form of the One Big Union. While soon broken organizationally, these responses did not grow out of nothing nor did they disappear so completely as some may believe.
Nor was this merely the radical flamboyance of a few atypical labour agitators whose views were countered by the ordinary everyday conservatism of honest workmen as documented in Great War and Canadian Society. The one socialist commentary in that book is a single paragraph (in the "Aftermath") which implies that the view of WRI as a purely imperialist war was limited to small left-wing sects and only had somewhat greater currency in the 1920s and 1930s. That may have been so for southern Ontario, but it is definitely not true in some other regions in Canada.

Russell Hann's introduction to Great War and Canadian Society is neither an overview of the period nor a synopsis of the collected accounts. It is a review and critical commentary of how oral accounts have been used (or dismissed) in history and other disciplines. It is written with considerable verve and in my estimation is essentially correct in the ground it covers. The notes serve as an excellent selective bibliography and the body is only occasionally marred by the inevitable settling of scores in scholarly feuds. It is impossible to do justice to the points raised in less than a separate review; therefore a few unsystematic comments will have to suffice here.

The two most recurrent themes are that (a) ordinary people themselves are the richest repositories of what can be known about everyday life and attitudes but their accounts have rarely been given the prominence due them, and that (b) oral history is in various ways distinct from and even juxtaposed to history drawn from manuscript and other documentary sources. Hann criticizes those strategies which lead to the notion that history happens to the bulk of the population and drastically underestimates the contributions of the ordinary members of the community. Those in the ranks who became history's victims were rarely forlorn pawns in the hands of the powerful. Even when the protests from the powerless failed most completely, they constantly forced the dominant to modify their most cherished schemes. Most of the time they led a highly autonomous existence and the best evidence as to the independent nature of their lived experience is undoubtedly their own testimony (10).

Now that is well said. But, it is not the picture which comes across in most accounts in Great War and Canadian Society. Hann also provides a useful passionate defence of the accuracy of people's memory of their own experiences long into old age and he excoriates those who dismiss such accounts as mere tissues of fabrication or self-deception.

Increasingly it strikes me that most historians' view that oral accounts are inherently distinct from other documentary sources is misdirected. Means of interpretation, measures of reliability, and some manner of summation are required, whether we use oral or other sources. All sources are grist for the mill, whether oral reminiscences, diaries, government statistics, company pay records, even accounts from hostile observers — as some of the compilers of Great War and Canadian Society have eloquently stated elsewhere. All are ultimately based upon the events, experiences, and responses of people involved.

Anthropology, almost from its inception, based its findings upon both oral accounts and direct observation. For some generations it generally excluded study of formal historical materials — very much to its detriment, as we now know. Anthropologists have gathered life histories of ordinary people in non-industrial societies for well over 50 years. They were partly intended to make the lives of individuals from other societies humanly comprehensible to distant readers. Life histories were also intended to chart the ways in which cultural patterns were incorporated, utilized, adapted, or selectively dismissed by individuals. Such life histories stand in conjunction with and are only fully understandable when related to more comprehensive overviews of the societies. For instance, two anthropologists recognized as having produced among the finest life his-

Rolf Knight
Vancouver
Dear Western Voice,

A Very Ordinary Life, as told to Rolf Knight certainly warrants review space in the Western Voice. So I am sending this short review which you may see fit to print.

Yours sincerely,
John Smith

RR1 Port Washington
S. Pender Is., AB.C.
26 March 75

New Star Books
2504 York Ave., Van., B.C.
Paperback -- $3.95
Hardback -- $8.00

A Very Ordinary Life is the story of a woman born in Berlin in 1901, arrived in Canada in 1929, lived through the depression years, then the fifties and sixties. It turns out to be a most interesting and unusual book.

It would be hard to find a more consistent record of working class outlook, sympathy and allegiance than this book expresses. One of the unusual aspects of A Very Ordinary Life is that it is so well written that, as they always say about the thrillers, the reader finds it hard to put it down until he or she is finished. It is written in a simple effortless style that is maintained throughout.

Here is a personal account of a woman's life told against the background of cataclysmic world events. This is done so well that one always realizes that the personal experiences were in a sense an outgrowth and reflection of the tremendous social upheavals of the decades of the nineteen hundreds. While it is a very personal record it is also a story of pre-Hitler Germany, of the depression years in Canada and the war years and the post-war years. It is this aspect of the book that raises it far above the level of ordinary life stories. If it can be brought to the attention of the public, A Very Ordinary Life will almost certainly become a classic in the course of time.

One outstanding feature of the book is the refusal of the narrator to gloss over any of the events of her life. There is none of the attitude expressed here that we were all happy in the old days. The result is that the reader feels that the story is being told as it really was. There is a remarkable freedom from nostalgic romanticism which is hard to avoid in a work of this kind.

Rolf Knight says in his introduction: "Two generations ago millions of ordinary people in Europe and North America, workers, small artisans, farmers, men and women, old and young, were participants and constituents of a wide ranging, heterogeneous socialist culture." The period of which he is speaking has gone now, and in this time of atomic weapons and frenetically exploding technology, it is inevitable that socialist struggles will take new and different forms. The time period of this book which was only yesterday is already a long way in the past. But it is still the hope of millions that ultimate socialist solidarity, the socialist aim of the classless society will be the moving force of the workers of the world.

A very Ordinary Life identifies with and speaks for those millions. One hopes it will find its place in the literary heritage of the working class.
A VERY ORDINARY LIFE
by Rolf Knight
New Star Books, Vancouver.

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John Smith
A VERY ORDINARY LIFE
Reviewed by Howard White

The most unusual local book to come our way this year has a brown paper wrapper bearing on the front a crooked snapshot of a heavyset man with a genial, unfocussed look, one hand in his pants pocket, the other stroking the family Alsatian. Beside him is his moderately overweight middle-aged Frau, smiling awkwardly at the brownie as a backyard breeze plays with her calf-length print skirt. The text is on light newsprint and in the middle is a further cluster of motheaten snaps - tenement washlines, marching soldiers, dancing 1920's hippies called "Wandervogel", the woman again, younger, posing with a life-ring, the man again sitting on top of a Depression boxcar, both of them with another Alsatian beside a very crude log cabin with a Model A parked in front, the woman on the porch of a small house above Vancouver Harbour with an extravagantly beaming boy, men flocking to a camp cookhouse, the woman much later hoeing a backyard vegetable patch.

The book is called A Very Ordinary Life and it is the woman's story, beginning in the dank "cellar air" of a pre-first war Berlin tenement, continuing through such misadventures as panning gold in Lillooet in the thirties, working an endless succession of upcoast camps with her baker husband, ending "rusted in" by age and illness in a Burnaby apartment. Her name is Phyllis Knight and she tells the story, sensitively encouraged and edited by her boy, now an anthropologist at the University of Toronto.

In form and content the book is a tour-de-force of the commonplace. But the irony underlying it is that there is really no such thing as the commonplace. Things, like the lives of immigrant working people and books about such lives, which seem dull from where we sit, when studied closely invariably prove to conceal astonishing intelligence.

A world so nervous with rumours of war and depression as ours couldn't fail to be captivated by the accounting Phyllis Knight gives of the two world wars - seen from both sides - and three depressions she has lived through already this century. Her telling makes them as real as they could ever be for anyone who wasn't there, because she remembers them in such bread-and-butter terms:

Towards the end of the (first world) war the government started to recruit anyone who could carry a rifle, from sixteen old kids to men of fifty. My father was 45 when he was called... The upshot was he lost the printing business. All those years he scrounged and sold his soul, and he lost the whole shebang. For three years we were almost constantly hungry. Each family was entitled to a pound of bones each week - if you could get it. You'd crack the bones open with an axe and boil the marrow out of them. Talk about stone soup...

In his introduction and notes Knight stresses the political implications of the story, and it does give a very clear picture of what economic oppression is in our culture, but in the end both political and historical considerations are overshadowed by the tremendously moving personal story of Phyllis Knight. By drawing her mother's personal experience out to the full extent that he has, Knight has effectively pushed oral history technique into a literary dimension not approached by the Terkel and Broadfoot, and created a book with the emotional force of a great realistic novel.

One can go even further and argue that a book such as A Very Ordinary Life has an impact born of total credibility that no fictional work could equal. The thing is, this remarkable company of girlfriends, boyfriends, workmates did exist, and you could go to Vancouver and shake the hand of this woman to whom these all-too-real things happened - or could have until a few weeks ago. Phyllis Knight died in her Burnaby apartment this July at the age of 76, fortunately not too late to see her ordinary life made into this extraordinary book. One is tempted to hail her as a great woman and this book as a great monument to her, but the truth is she really was a very ordinary woman. The greatness readers will feel impelled to credit her with is the greatness that lies taken for granted, like the opal inside the dull stone, within all ordinary life.

Discovering An Indian Proletariat

by Stan Persky

SINCE ABOUT 25,000 of DIMENSION'S 50,000 readers are professors of anthropology, sociology and political science, maybe it's not too late to mention Rolf Knight's Indians at Work (New Star Books, Vancouver, 1978), an informal history of native Indian labour in British Columbia from 1858-1930, which, unaccountably, has yet to hit the academic (or any other) bestseller charts. The more's the pity, since labour historian Knight actually has something new to say about native people that significantly, augments (or demolishes) what the rest of us have been saying up to now.

The story we social scientists tell the kiddies about Indians in Canada goes something like this:

Communal hunting-gathering bands lived in the forest primeval endless golden aeons. Contacted, coerced or conned (depending on who's telling the tale) by European fur traders (sometime between 1650 and 1775, the Indiansfaithfully, doggedly, resentfully (choose one) labored in this mercantile capitalist industry until it petered out (1825-50). This was followed by a century of maltreatment, disease, decimation, neglect and increasing invisibility (population curve charts are here displayed by overhead projector showing a low point around 1930, with a slight recovery by the end of World War II). At which point (around 1950) there is twelfare administration which allows native people to languish but not entirely starve on various reserves and urban slums until cultural reawakening (c. 1969) brings us news of land claims, pipeline hearings and neo-spiritual revival.

Depending on your local anthropologist's inclinations and political leanings, the legend is subjected to various colorations and emphases. More traditionalist colleagues prefer to wallow in kinship charts, artifacts and nostalgia for golden age rituals, while their contemporary anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist counterparts aggressively offer this spectacle in terms of exploitation and oppression. Of course, good work is done within the existing framework, and occasionally the graceful prose and wry insight of say, Hugh Brody's The People's Land or the searing authenticity of Howard Adams' Prison of Grass come along to enliven these dull proceedings (although admittedly no duller than the business of other disciplines).

Naturally, the present state of affairs is hardly satisfactory to historical materialists and other reasonable labour historian Knight actually has something new to say about native people that significantly augments (or demolishes) what the rest of us have been saying up to now.

persons, since the current version does little to explain the precise relationship between an incursive mode of production (capitalism, which itself is subject to transformations over time) and a communal mode, nor how the producers of the latter are subjugated by (or is the current phrase "articulated into") the workings of the former. Especially unsatisfactory is that century of somnolence (1850-1950) during which it's implicitly alleged that a dying breed is out of sight and out of mind (presumably sequestered on mostly rural reserves) and has absolutely no relation to the going mode of production (nascent industrial capitalism).

This is where Rolf Knight comes in. In Indians at Work, Knight makes a simple, great and (for the anthropology business) cosmic discovery.

What Indians were doing was working for wages in capitalist frontier resource industries. That is, at least in British Columbia, at least from about 1860-1930, and apart from whatever else they were doing (subsistence, hunting or gathering, preserving or abandoning potlatches, living and dying in traditional or un-traditional communities). Knight, being inordinately modest about his accomplishment, is specific about the parameters, and profusely apologetic for the fragmentariness of his evidence. But the plain fact is that those heretofore not-very-visible native people were logging, fishing, fishpacking, cartaging, longshoring, farming, mining, sailing, and railroaddetailing in more or less the same fashion as were other non-native workers of the time.

Of course, once Knight demonstrates this remarkable thesis, it becomes rather unremarkable, even obvious. One is obliged to recall, as Knight points out, that "no region of native Indian societies has been more researched and written about than the North Pacific coast, yet...one is hard-pressed to discover the fact that, during the last quarter of the 19th century and on, Indian people everywhere in the province were working in the major industries of that period."

In addition to establishing this "fact," Knight is also able to clear up a variety of misconceptions by virtue of his own painstaking attention to the labour process, and tendentious opposition to the romanticism of some anthropologists. Thus, the old saw about native unwillingness to work by "white man's time" can be discarded once one knows that on the resource frontier "white" workers were equally unwilling to do so. Those who had supposed that there
was native abhorrence of farming on religious grounds (Mother Earth and all that) will no longer suppose so. There are several dozen other finely-wrought distinctions provided by Knight which can be left to readers to discover and enjoy.

Knight isn't a great writer (by "great" I don't mean great like Tolstoy, but great like Edward Shorter's *Making of the Modern Family* is great informal scholarly writing), but much is redeemed by the integrity he brings to his work, and if he isn't exactly elegant, he does have a biting wit. The prose, then, is, as they say, serviceable. More importantly, my students can understand what Knight is trying to say, and that includes the native students in the Aboriginal Studies Program (at Terrace, in northwestern B.C., where I ply my trade) who are at first slightly suspicious and then pleased to learn that what their parents and grandparents were doing for a living is worth knowing about and taking pride in. While *Indians at Work* is not a book designed to excite pity and outrage, in practice I've found that it does more to undermine racist attitudes than many a well-intentioned tearjerker.

No doubt, *CD* readers should have been alerted to Knight's ground-breaking opus months and months ago. I now belatedly must revert to a frank hustle: what you 25,000 fellow and sister professors oughta do is rush, don't dawdle, to your nearest secretary so that your orders for *Indians at Work* can be placed in time for next September's classes (which will also have the effect of rescuing this book from some tiny basement publisher's storage room where it is now no doubt languishing).

Native Indian involvement in, and adjustment to, the fur-trade market economy in Canadian history are well-known and much discussed in academic circles. So, too, are the various native societies and cultures of the pre-contact era. However, the roles and experiences of Indians in the early period of agricultural and industrial development that initiated the fur trade’s decline have received comparatively little attention. Historians have tended to consider native people irrelevant to subsequent Canadian history (for similar reasons, perhaps, to those which led many of them to take European contact as the dawn of Canadian history). Anthropologists, on the other hand, have usually concentrated on piecing together the surviving fragments of Indian society and culture, while at the same time controlling for the invidious influences of social and cultural change. Valuable traditional reconstructions notwithstanding, native people have, as a result, tended to disappear from the post fur-trade literature; until, that is, they emerge, redefined as a ‘problem’ in contemporary Canadian society. Typically, such treatments emphasize Indian cultural categories to the exclusion of other considerations.

Rolf Knight’s recent book, Indians At Work (1978), is a welcome contribution to the literature on Canadian native people, in that it serves to redress this imbalance. First, it focuses on one aspect of Indian life in the critical middle period between the decline of the fur trade and the 1930s Depression, hitherto an undocumented vacuum. Second, the aspect it examines in detail, native labour history, practically has been overlooked: at any rate, never before has it been the actual topic of comprehensive research. For such history to come as a surprise – even as a shock – is precisely Knight’s ambition. He demonstrates unequivocally that, contrary to popular conceptions and cultural stereotypes, native people in Canada have a long history of wage work and independent production of agricultural and other commodities; in British Columbia they were better adjusted to the Canadian economy and participated in it more fully fifty years ago than they do today. If future research follows up on his suggestive preliminary remarks about other regions of Canada during the same period, the entire record of native labour history may yet be set straight.

Knight’s book is based upon meticulous, painstaking research on a wide range of primary sources: travellers’ accounts, memoirs, government reports, mission documents, company records, band files, parish diaries, and others. In addition, he makes extensive use of historical and anthropological material, both published and unpublished. In doing so, he constructs a careful and, under the circumstances, remarkably detailed record of the nature and extent of Indian involvement in various sectors of the BC economy: cottage industry, agriculture (both subsistence and mixed farming), fishing and canning, sealing, shipping, forestry, mining, etc. In very general terms (which cannot begin to do justice to the richness of his material), Knight describes the process by which, as fur resources diminished, native people shifted the focus of their economic activities in accordance with new opportunities, and became increasingly involved in wage work in the new industries, and independent production.

It should be noted that his intention is not to displace the important question of native cultural realities at the time (or, for that matter, in the present day); the scope of his work does not include an analysis of the extent to which traditional cultural values remained central to everyday life. What he
does do, however, is show that tradition did not limit fundamentally Indian economic activity when opportunities were available. To give but one example, Knight explodes the myth that Indians are only suited to unskilled labour, or to jobs that are similar to pre-contact subsistence activities, by describing the range of employment and working conditions of the time.

They learned and utilized the highly complicated and novel skills associated with team freighting, with sailing in the most treacherous waters of the world in the last days of sail, and with the cornucopia of harness, gear, and machinery required for horse-powered farming. Some Indian entrepreneurs acquired their own gas boats, steam tugs, logging donkey engines, and steam threshers. The conditions under which many Indian workers, men and women, were employed from the 1870s on were as industrial as you could get in B.C. (p. 179)

Knight describes the 1930s Depression as a watershed, because the general economic collapse of that period saw the end of extensive native participation in wage labour and independent production — agricultural or otherwise. Contrary to popular conceptions then, it was the Depression and not the decline of the fur trade that resulted in the evaporation of native self-sufficiency; the dependency and economic marginality which characterize so many contemporary reserves are relatively recent phenomena. Knight is careful to point out that non-Indian wage workers and producers also suffered the effect of the depression. Yet the demise of local and small-scale enterprise throughout the country, and the consolidation of control by large-scale capitalized industries in the Canadian economy seem to have had more serious and long-lasting effects in native communities. Knight suggests a number of variables which would have to be included in a comprehensive theoretical analysis of this lack of recovery: among others, technological change and occupational shifts in the regional economy, immigration and settlement, hiring policies, and the socio-economic implications of Indian legal status. Interestingly, he resists an independent explanation based upon the existence of racism among white employers, pointing out that racist attitudes transformed over time, and had their basis in the perception of material interests.

*Indians At Work* (1978) is a fascinating and readable account of a critical period in native labour history; as such, it should have wide appeal. It has important theoretical implications — especially with respect to current problems of reserve underdevelop-
'No. 20 Line' brings B.C. history to life

By GEOFF MEGGS


An amazing number of the fishermen who are going to lose their boats this year believe they are going broke because they are incompetent.

They have accepted the myth cultivated by the processors that good fishermen survive, bad ones go broke and that this is the best possible way to run an industry.

Most fishermen know better, particularly those who have fought during the past 35 years to build an organization to defend fishermen's interests. Their victories and achievements are part of our history, an inspiration and our proof that organization can effect change.

Unfortunately, the history of the working people who built the province is only imperfectly recorded. There is virtually no corner of the coast that has been untouched by workers' struggles for a decent life, but these sites are not the ones that attract Chamber of Commerce monuments.

In Along the No. 20 Line, Rolf Knight makes up for some of the gaps with a portrait of a part of B.C. that has seen more of such battles than any other - the waterfront of old Vancouver from Victory Square to Burnaby. For more than 50 years, this stretch was bound together by the No. 20 streetcar line, which carried workers from their homes in the east to the fish plants, logging agencies, docks and factories of the city centre.

In a personal reminiscence of his own childhood in the area and a selection from his interviews with others who worked and lived along the line, Knight proves once more that the real history of the province was made by ordinary people fighting a profit-motivated system for a chance to make a life for themselves.

Without the people who lived and worked along the No. 20 line there would have been no International Woodworkers of America, no UPAWU, no International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, no Marine Workers Union, no Canadian Seamen's Union. Without their achievements we would be far worse off today.

This is not to say that Knight has written a stodgy, academic labor history replete with dates and footnotes. The history is told in the voices of the participants and observers.

Among them was Ryuchi Yoshida, an early activist among Japanese workers and a prime builder of trade unionism among Japanese fishermen in the days when they were split from their white and Indian counterparts by racism. Yoshida's life was fully documented in his own words in an earlier Knight book.

A new voice, however, is Bill White, a shipyard worker in North Vancouver and later president of the shipyard workers union. He relates the story of the day he cut a hole in a bulkhead with a torch after assurance from fellow workers there was nothing on the other side of the wall. It's a good example of this book's attraction.

About halfway through the job, he started to smell. It's not like a stinky smell until it became overpowering, then went behind the bulkhead to check.

"There was a lunch bucket sitting there on the floor tight against the bulkhead and I'd cut right through it. A caulker was working not too far off so I asked him, 'Hey, do you know whose gutbucket this is here?' He took one look and came walking over to pick it up. It fell in two pieces and his sandwiches all burst into flame."

"It was my goddam lunchbucket,' he growled and flung it over the side of the ship. 'How was I to know?' I said. 'Most guys prefer a hot lunch.'"

Later, White cuts closer to the bone with kind of the commonsense statement that makes this book a pleasure.

"No matter what happens, the bosses try to turn it to their own advantage. When the economy fell on its ass in '29 they said, well, the solution is for workers to tighten their belts, work hard, and give the business everything it likes so it can get back on its feet and save the country."

"When the war came along they said, well, the solution here is for workers to work extra hard, peg wages down and give business a free hand so it can produce a lot of war goods and save the goddam country. And today, that's what they're saying again."

"In a boom economy or a bust economy their prescription is always the same: take less for yourself and give us more! And the bloody working stiff, he gets took in every time by the same damn line. You talk about those who forget their history having to repeat it now!"

Amen to that, Bill.

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Anthology of working class literature


Have you ever wanted to have at hand a real guide to the proletarian literature of the world — something you could use not only in your own reading but to give to others or cite for the significant existence of this culture? Now for the first time in any language so far as I know, such a volume is available, edited by Rolf Knight, Canadian author and scholar.

The major concentration of his listings consists of novels about working people in the 20th century, but he also includes some collections of poetry, drama and short stories as well as a smattering of non-fictional material such as oral histories. The scope is astounding: brief synopses of more than 3,000 titles originally in some 80 languages by circa 1,500 authors from over 90 countries. Each novel is concisely described in its historical and biographical context: we are given the kernel of its “story.”

In this manner, Knight presents overviews of the cultural and political life in literature of most countries of the world, including the Soviet Union, Vietnam, China, the U.S. — indeed from all continents. I have found his descriptions to be both fair and accurate. Especially useful are the meticulous accounts of the novels of such authors as Seghers of Germany, Laxness of Iceland, and Amado of Brazil — literally hundreds of authors from large and small countries everywhere.

The coverage of Knight’s section on the United States is well done; thorough if not exhaustive. The major works of such classic writers as Upton Sinclair and Jack London are described, as well as works by proletarian writers such as Jack Conroy and Meridel LeSueur, which are likely to be recognized as classics on the world scene. Typical of the gems which Knight uncovers are several books about the great Green Corn Rebellion in Oklahoma during World War I, books about textile strikes in the South, coal miners in Illinois, and so on. In addition, many of the most important autobiographies by U.S. left-wing figures such as William Z. Foster, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mother Jones and Mother Bloor, are listed and described.

The introduction is to the point and in places downright witty; for instance: “Whatever their viewpoint and focus, the works cited are usually free of hagiographic caricatures about the working class. They treat with the flaws and failings, the misconceptions, debilitating fantasies and narrow chauvinism which many working people around the world have been heir to — as well as their strengths and decency.” Here are the rebel writers of the world: “In all their variety, they are voices for the party of humanity.” In addition, there is a lengthy section at the end of the book describing the major guides to each country’s literature. Unlike most such reference books which tend to be dry and dull, Knight’s is delightful to browse through, since his commentary is so forceful and sprightly.

Knight’s hardy, almost ferocious independence and his evident love for his subjects make this a unique volume. (He has also been productive in compiling oral histories in Canada, and people’s history of various kinds, including Work Camps and Company Towns in Canada and the U.S., Indians at Work and similar books: for a full list of these titles, write Midwest Distributors, address above.) Traces of Magma is an expensive book but well worth the price, at its length of almost 400 pages. It ought to be in every American and Canadian library as a key reference source for world working class culture. And if anyone should ever doubt its existence, you can lay this title on ’em!

— Fred Whitehead