

Nation Building on Vancouver Island

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Wild Roses at Their Feet is a book written in 1971 about the pioneer women of Vancouver Island. The author, Elizabeth Forbes, was following a tradition of recording women's place in history. In 1928, *The Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island* was written to record the history of the earliest women on the island. That first volume, written by Nancy de Bertrand Lugin and published by the Women's Canadian Club of Victoria, urged the publication of a second volume by outlining prospective subject matter in its foreword. Lugin's list is worth repeating here since *Wild Roses at Their Feet* deals with some of the recommended topics. In 1928, it was suggested that a second volume 'should contain the following additional chapters, together with a good working index to both volumes:

More Colonial Ladies of Victoria

**In the Days of the Potlatch
Women Who Became Famous
Some Methodist Women
Pioneers
Wives of the Royal Engineers
The Women of Comox
The Women of Cowichan
Pioneer Women of Nanaimo
and
Women Who Settled on the
Islands'**

The introduction to *The Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island, 1843-1866* is a reflection of the era of maternal feminism. Many of the members of the Women's Canadian Club had been active members of suffragist societies. Instead of examining recent history they looked to the women in the island's earliest history through their own eyes. The introduction bears repeating in part because it illustrates how, 10 years after the heyday of the early feminism, the maternal feminist ideology lived on:

The composite story of the pioneer women of this last west is a plain one. It has to do with the great issues of loving and mating, of birth and death, and the struggle for existence under terrible odds. It is the describing of the first unfolding of a nation and it has the simplicity and grandeur of an epic . . . the man sees visions of the days to come and of the cities to be. But the woman's dreams are different. They are all of her children. Therein is the keynote to the pioneer woman's story, the love for her mate and the guarding and rearing of her young. Very primitive, but the truest thing in the world, and the one fact responsible for the birth of a nation.

The introduction continues with a combination of perspectives. The first as contemporary as tomorrow, the second looking back to that proud tradition of woman's moral superiority:

It is from a man's standpoint that nearly all history has been written. Man has usually played the title role. Except for the famous love stories which show woman at anything but her best, and a few great heroines, Queen Boadicea, Jeanne d'Arc, and the outstanding figure of the great Queen Elizabeth, man has been the pivot about which the world's Chronicles revolve. Full of high adventure, intrepid exploration, daring deeds as they are, it is when a woman's name flashes across the page that our interest is suddenly quickened, and the incident which had to do with her is the one most indelibly fixed upon our memory.

Nancy Lugin claims that, 'This is specially true in the narratives of the . . . Pacific Northwest. Women appear with so little frequency, and yet their part is such a colourful, romantic one that it is like a rainbow gleam across an otherwise cloudy page.'

When Lugin seeks to identify the coming of the first white women to the island, she does not hesitate to give authority to Indian narratives which tell of white women coming on Spanish ships and of the Haida in the Queen Charlottes discovering a shipwrecked white couple. However, she turns to the diaries of 18-year-old Frances Hornby Trevor Barkley to date 'the first accurate evidence we have of a white woman's part in the history of the North Pacific': 1787 and 1791. The author is willing to reinterpret history from a feminist point of view as she shows in her comments on the island reception given the Barkleys:

What a change when they reached the rock-bound coast of Nootka, with the grim forest clothing the foothills! Flocks of Indian War Canoes! The naked savages (sic) crowding the decks of the little vessel, pressing close to the young girl, the only white woman they had ever met, wanting to touch her to find out if she was real! though Dr. "John" McKay, who had been living at Nootka for a year, having been left behind at his own request when he accompanied the expedition under the

direction of James Strange, had told them that all of his countrywomen were "fair as the white lilies, with cheeks the colour of the ripe strawberries." Perhaps it was due to their admiration and curiosity that the Indians came in such numbers, bringing great quantities of sea-otter pelts; but cold history gives Dr. McKay the credit of influencing them.

Contemporary historians like Sylvia Van Kirk in *Many Tender Ties* and Jennifer Brown in *Strangers in Blood* have carried the 1928 analysis of Nancy Lugin to scholarly credibility:

The Colonial lady of Vancouver Island is a dual type, a combination of two distinctly different personalities. The one is symbolic of the civilization of the Old World, with its refinements, its culture, its conventionalities and restrictions; the other an emblem of the Western wilderness in all its rugged beauty and freedom. The one a charming lady in crinoline and lace, with curls and feathers. A very young person she was. The bride of nearly a hundred years ago was, for the most part, little more than a child, full of an eager curiosity, nearly always possessed of a lively sense of humour, and with a remarkable power of adaptability. One pictures her in an attitude of expectancy, a little fearful, yet wholly confident.

Her counterpart is grave-eyed and firm-lipped. There is the wisdom, the patience and tragedy of the centuries in her face. Not for her the frills and furbelows of fashion. She holds her shawl about her supple figure, and in her moccasined feet she moves with the easy grace of the wild thing of the forest.

These two women, hand in hand, typify the pioneer woman of the last west. Together they marched in the advance guard of the nation builders. Neither the one nor the other was afraid to follow where her man should lead. Indeed, they occasionally did the leading themselves. And always they stimulated and encouraged by their uncompromising allegiance, and inspired by the steadfastness of their ideals.

In 1971, with Lugin's book scarce but still available, Elizabeth Forbes and the Women's Canadian Club celebrated British Columbia's centennial year by writing and publishing *Wild Roses at Their Feet: Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island*. Not until 1975, International Women's Year, would Jan Gould write a history of women of all British Columbia. Forbes' book contains 58 one-to-two-page biographical sketches of women who contributed to nation-building on Vancouver Island during the early decades of the 20th century.

From reformer, to educator and adventurer, the subjects illustrate women's competence and individuality, as well as Forbes's undisguised admiration for their contributions to the community.

These are only two history books which concentrate on women's 'nation building' in British Columbia. A more complete reading list would necessarily include the following:

- 1) *A Century of Service* Sister Mary Downe
- 2) *Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia*, Margaret Ormsby
- 3) *Eight Women Photographers of British Columbia*, Myrna Cobb & Sher Morgan
- 4) *Emily Carr*, Maria Tippett
- 5) *God's Galloping Girl*, ed. W.L. Morton
- 6) *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in British Columbia*, Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess
- 7) *Journals of Lady Franklin*, ed. Dorothy B. Smith
- 8) *Modern Pioneers, 1909-1959* ed. Jill Douglas
- 9) *My Mother, The Judge*, Elsie Gregory MacGill
- 10) *The Remarkable World of Frances Barkley*, Beth Hill
- 11) *Watch Fires on the Mountains*, Margaret M. Street
- 12) *Women of British Columbia*, Jan Gould ©

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