

Rolf Knight. *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1996.

review by Douglas Harris

Despite its rough and ready publication, the first edition of *Indians at Work* (1978) had an important impact on the study of Native peoples in British Columbia and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Knight develops an argument that Native workers played a significant role as wage labourers and independent producers in British Columbia's early industrial economy. He rejects the belief that Native people became "irrelevant" after the fur trade. Rather, they worked in the canneries and fishboats, logging camps and lumber mills, ranches and farms, mines and railways, and a myriad of other casual and seasonal jobs. From the gold rush of 1858 until the great Depression of the 1930s, their labour was an important part of British Columbia's industrial history.

A much revised and considerably more polished second edition of *Indians at Work* is now available. Given that the first edition has long been out of print, the reissue is particularly welcome, and no doubt will be read by a new generation of interested British Columbians and students of Native and labour history.

Knight's style remains unapologetically argumentative. He is taking historians, particularly Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1977, reissued in 1992), to task for minimizing and even ignoring the role of Native people in the industrial economy, and for relegating them to passive, unfortunate observers in the post-fur-trade era. At least until the Depression, argues Knight, industrial wage labour was an important source of income for Native people, and in certain regions of the province they were an important source of labour.

Often an irreverent and frequently pointed critic, Knight attacks many common assumptions about Native people, particularly the idea that Native participation in the industrial economy was limited by cultural constraints: "The body of this book can be taken as a refutation of the view which holds that native Indians were occupationally limited by the continuing imperatives of their aboriginal cultures" (p. 20). Further, Knight is keen to dispel notions of a pre-contact "golden-age." Native life was not, he argues, essentially conservationist, peaceful, egalitarian or consistently bountiful.

He disparages the romanticization of Native life. Instead, he offers a view of Native people as adaptable workers, as willing and able as anyone else to make the transition to the wage and piece work of the emerging industrial economy. This is, perhaps, his most enduring contribution.

*Indians at Work* is an important book, and Knight's influence has been considerable. However, the limitations of the first edition remain in the second. Its strength lies in its focus on Native labour; the central flaw is Knight's exclusive reliance on a class-based analysis. There are many personal attributes by which one can define a group or identify a similarity of interest, yet in *Indians at Work* Knight has chosen to emphasize class. Regardless of ethnicity or gender, Knight is inclined to find a similarity of interest between Native labourers and the non-Native working class. He argues that the situation of Native people as fishers, miners, handloggers, cannery workers or farmers was little different from that of non-Natives. Neither group had steady or permanent employment. Both relied on a mix of wage labour and subsistence production to sustain themselves through much of the period, and were dismayed at the increasingly restricted access to what were formerly common resources. However, Knight is inclined to find an affinity of interest even where the relations were highly antagonistic and often violent. Thus, despite the virulent anti-Indian sentiment of the American miners who swarmed up the Fraser River in 1858, Knight suggests the violence has been overplayed. Unlike the bureaucratic colonial officials, labeled by Knight "an aspirant squirarchy," at least the miners "sometimes wound up working beside and living with Indian people" (p. 85). Knight is reaching for a working-class solidarity that simply did not exist.

Most importantly, Knight's class-based analysis ignores the processes of colonialism. This is plainly evident when Knight likens the residential school experience of Native children with the public school experience of non-Native children. Both schools may have meted out stern discipline, but the residential schools had an additional purpose—the subjugation of Native culture through the assimilation of Native children. Residential schools were not just public schools for Native children. In emphasizing the adaptability of Native peoples and the similarity of the non-Native working class experience, Knight minimizes the impact of British colonialism and, later, of the paternalistic Canadian state. The history of Native peoples in Canada is immensely complicated by missionaries, residential schools, treaties, the Department of Indian Affairs, Indian agents and, of course, the *Indian Act*. All of these reflect the particular colonial position of Native people in Canada that Knight does not adequately take into account. In the new edition he continues to discount the first 150 years of colonialism in

British Columbia and to locate the marginalization of Native peoples in the recent past:

Despite a variety of contractions and booms which affected Indian wage workers in the past, the unemployment and reserve dependence that came to affect increasing numbers of Indian people today is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was initiated during the collapse of the Great Depression, was reversed by the economic conditions during the 1940s, but came to fruition later. High levels of unemployment among Indian communities is a product of relatively recent political and economic forces. [p. 320]

Knight recognizes that the similarity of interest he perceives between Native and non-Native workers does not translate into class consciousness. In early industrial British Columbia, Native peoples did not view themselves as part of the "proletariat." However, Knight does not address this issue. Instead, by repeatedly asserting the similarity of circumstances between Native and other workers, it is as though Knight were trying to create a historical class consciousness spanning the ethno-cultural divide. He recognizes that Native people continued to identify themselves as members of particular Native communities, and that some Native involvement in labour union activity may have been a form of "ethnic defense." Nonetheless, Knight does not follow these observations to their likely conclusion—that class consciousness does not exist because Native experience and interests are markedly different than those of the non-Native working class, and that Native identity remained strongly based in culture rather than class.

Knight's overriding concern with class is reflected in his opposition to land claims negotiations. He derides the division of resources based on ethnicity. Corporate and foreign control of resources is the root of social injustice. Therefore, Knight argues that control must be returned to working people, both Native and otherwise. Land claims on the basis of ethnicity are the misguided efforts of a "native Indian middle class," fueled by the complicity of the Canadian state and supported by the mass media. It is where the interests of the working class do not mesh comfortably with Native interests that Knight encounters the most difficulty. No doubt many Native leaders and others would agree with Knight's assessment that the control of resources is "the underlying issue" (p. 121). However, they would insist that Native peoples regain control of a portion of the land and resources given to them by the Creator and that are legally theirs.

Although Knight's focus on class remains unaltered, the second edition is much more than a reprint of the first with an additional preface. Knight has rearranged the order, bringing to the front several chapters on pre-

contact Native society, the fur trade and early settlement that appeared in an appendix in the first edition. The chronological order of events has been restored. Knight has also revised and supplemented the original text, largely by considering the subsequent work of historians, both those who support his conclusions and those with whom he disagrees. The old references are preserved in the footnotes; the new references appear in parentheses in the body of the text. For the most part, the reader of the second edition is able to establish what has been added. Knight does not appear to have reconsidered or added to the primary sources. The most notable deletions in the second edition are the pictures.

These changes have not addressed some other shortcomings. Knight is inclined to generalize with little or no supporting evidence. He provides an impressionistic account with many examples and wonderful accounts of a working person's life, but little sustained analysis of a particular industry or region. He has made extensive use of secondary sources, but is considerably removed from the archives or other primary sources. He is somewhat vague in his categorization of Native work, indicating that "virtually all Indian adults were employed in some way," but then defining "employed" to include "working for wages or in subsistence production" (p. 20). Apparently, Native people could be "employed" in either their traditional economy or the industrial market economy—the reader is unable to differentiate, though a clearer separation of the different types of work undertaken by Native people is essential to understanding their role in industrial British Columbia.

The inclusion of a chapter on the social and political structure of pre-contact Native societies is standard in Native histories. Knight has moved his—"The Ethnohistorical Background"—to the front, in deference to the chronological order. However, its focus on the social and political aspects of Native life is somewhat out of place in a book on labour history. It does not matter to Knight's study of Native participation in the industrial economy whether "warfare was a prevalent feature of the aboriginal world" or not. As a result, the chapter is isolated from the rest of the work, its contents little referred to in the following pages. An analysis of the pre-contact patterns of daily life would have been a better fit. A discussion of pre-contact fishing methods, for example, would complement the latter discussion of Native involvement in the industrial fishery and provide scope for comparative study.

Knight has indeed provided us, as he suggests in the title of his first chapter, with "a part of the picture"—a part that had been previously ignored. As a result, his impact has been considerable, and justifiably so. However, for Knight, the larger picture is the broader labour history of British Columbia. He does not stray beyond an analysis of labour and

capital. For those less inclined to rely solely on a class-based analysis, the larger picture includes the colonial relation of Native peoples to the immigrant population. That larger picture Knight continues to leave to others.

## Note

- 1 Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), p. xi, acknowledges Knight's influence on his work. "Although my focus is on politics rather than economics, my approach and intent are similar to Knight's." Diane Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto: U of T Press, 1995), p. 25, suggests that Knight's work "deserves special mention, for it exposed Indian participation in the early industrial economy to re-examination in ways that continue to stimulate Canadian scholarship in the 1990s." Frank Tough, *As Their Natural Resources Fail: Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1879-1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996) p. 299, describes *Indians at Work* as a "pioneering, but most influential work in the area of Indian economic history."

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David V. Burley, J. Scott Hamilton, and Knut R. Fladmark, *Prophecy of the Swan: The Upper Peace River Fur Trade of 1794-1823* (Vancouver UBC Press, 1996) 213 pp., index.

review by Frank Tough

Burley, Hamilton and Fladmark have made a notable empirical contribution to fur trade ethnohistory. This clearly written and well-illustrated study provides a synthesis of the archival and archaeological records for the Upper Peace River area. Essentially their research covers posts of the North West and Hudson's Bay companies during the competitive era. The authors proposed: to provide an account of the early fur trade history through archaeology and archival record, to describe the physical features and artifacts of the trade, and to tell the story of the research project (p. xx). The authors strove to make this an interesting narrative and they did bring some life to the individuals who participated in the trade.

The book is organized into eleven chapters and three major appendices. The contents include: a description of the Peace River region and early human habitation; an ethnographic description of the Beaver Indians or Dunne-za and the Sekani or Tsé-'kéh-ne; a more-or-less traditional recounting of fur trade history with an emphasis on the opening up of the Athabasca and Peace countries; an account of the archaeological field work done in the mid-1970s, which started up again the mid-1980s; descriptions of life,