

Arthur & Cyril Shelford, *We Pioneered*. Victoria: Orca Book Publishers, 1988.

Bridget Moran, *Stoney Creek Woman: Sai'k'uz Ts'eke - the Story of Mary John*. Vancouver: Tillacum Library, 1988.

Living on the Margin

Ootsa Lake is located near the northern limits of the Fraser drainage system. Its waters flow eastwards into the Nechako River where, a hundred or so miles later, they are joined by the modest contribution of Stoney Creek. Within this compass Arthur Shelford and Mary John spent most of their lives. They shared a common environment and, hence, some of the vicissitudes of life on the margin or periphery of British Columbia. Much, however, divided them. They inhabited different worlds, separated by the walls of culture. Arthur Shelford, at Ootsa Lake, was of mainstream British Columbia: a White settler. Mary John, or Sai'k'uz Ts'eke to use her Carrier name, is of Aboriginal British Columbia. Read in conjunction, their recently published recollections provide contrasting glimpses of some of the crucial processes that have shaped, and continue to shape, culture and society in British Columbia.

Arthur Shelford was born in England in 1886. In his early twenties, feeling confined and constrained by life in London, he joined the flood of immigrants crossing the Atlantic to people the "empty" spaces of western Canada. After examining parts of Alberta and coastal British Columbia he was joined by this brother and, together, they decided to homestead. Attracted by the glowing phrases of Provincial Bulletin of Information #22 they located at Ootsa Lake in 1910.

Homesteading at such a time and place was no easy matter. It was a round trip of some 150 miles to the nearest store; twice that to Hazelton and the nearest doctor. Life was stripped down to essentials, with little money and much work. These early years made an indelible impression on Shelford and they make up the bulk of his reminiscences, written down in 1966. From these Spartan beginnings Shelford's story is a familiar one, at least in outline: the arrival of more settlers and the emergence of a small community - based on ranching, trapping and logging; the gradual strengthening of the links to the outside world and its innovations and imperatives. Along the way Shelford and his wife achieve not wealth, but a modest competence; finally, in symbolic recognition of the appropriation of the land, the family name has been perpetuated in the Shelford Hills and Shelford Creek. All in all, it is a story of progress; indeed, the book may be seen as an expression of the "idea of progress," writ small and in anecdotal form.

There is one flaw to this familiar and comforting picture: Ootsa Lake,

like the rest of western Canada, was not an "empty land." Shelford, a decent and engaging man, knew this. The Indians of the Ootsa Lake area, the Wet'suwet'en, do make appearances in his narrative; there is even a chapter entitled "On Pioneers and Natives," although it is rather more concerned with settlers than Indians. But there is no attempt to portray the lives of Indians in the area; this, after all, is the settler's story. Nonetheless, a picture of Indians and Indian/White relations does emerge: I will comment upon three of its aspects.

First, the Indians are seen as possessors of knowledge, and even wisdom, concerning the environment - especially with reference to wildlife. Second, Shelford recounts a number of anecdotes in which Indians are outwitted by smarter Whites. The substance of such incidents is less significant than the attitudes they convey. Thus Shelford concludes a description of an encounter with "Indian Andrew" by noting that: "Andrew is long since dead, but (his son) Jimmy and his family, are still our very good friends and, whenever Jimmy eats at our table, you could never wish for anyone with better table manners" (p. 125). Listen to the tenor of this remark. It is, I would suggest, that of an adult offering praise about a child for some piece of good behaviour. I suspect that this tone is not accidental. Until the revision of the *Indian Act* in 1951, Indians were, indeed, legally children. From this perspective Shelford was an accurate reflection of his times.

The third facet of Shelford's picture is the most important; it comes to the heart of the issue: Indian reactions to the entry of Whites into their territories. Shelford does not pretend that Whites encountered no opposition, but he portrays Indian objections as ephemeral and inconsequential. The question is addressed most directly in an account of a meeting with "Indian Andrew." Andrew's hunting grounds were at the head of Ootsa Lake, not far from Shelford's homestead. "Like many Indians at that time (prior to World War 1)," Shelford noted,

Andrew sometimes voiced the opinion that it was no good that the White men come and take the Indian land and fur. And so one day I had it out with him and told him that, if the White man was to be in the country at all, he had to have some of these things. 'Which you like best, Andrew?' I asked him. 'No White man come, then you get no railroad, no roads, no rifles, no matches, blankets, knives, axes, pots and pans, and such things, but live just as Indians used to do on fish, beaver, deer, bear and berries.' Andrew looked thoughtful for a few moments and then said, "I think maybe White man better stop." [p. 124]

Two features of this encounter are striking. First, there is the assumption that the "terms," or conditions, under which White settlement took place were, and remain, the only ones possible. To receive the "benefits" of Euro-Canadian technology the Indians had to be deprived of

practically all of their territory. Second, there is the clear implication that the Indians, as exemplified by Andrew, acquiesced in this Faustian equation. There, if we rely on Shelford, matters would remain. However, there is a good deal that Shelford does not tell us.

The Indian peoples of British Columbia, including the Wet'suwet'en, and even Indian Andrew, offered more than passing opposition to the loss of their territory. From the perspective of 1989, with land claims a pressing issue and court cases pending and in progress, this opposition is obvious enough. But there has been a chain of protest activity, extending back to the time of Shelford's arrival at Ootsa Lake and beyond. Within the confines of this review I can provide only two specific examples of this process.

Between 1909 and 1915 the Wet'suwet'en presented a series of grievances and claims for specific hunting areas to three different government commissions of enquiry: Stewart and Vowell (1910), McDougall (1910) and McKenna-McBride (1915). Included in these submissions was a claim for the hunting grounds at the end of Ootsa Lake. Moreover, Indian Andrew took steps on his own initiative to pursue his claims. With the assistance of a friendly White in 1914, Andrew brought his grievances to the attention of the Department of Indian Affairs. In addition to claiming two specific pieces of land, used by his family "from time beyond reckoning," he described something of his encounters with White settlers: "White men come in and run survey lines around his land ... (and told) him that he will not be again allowed to use his homes any more."¹ The struggle was, and is, an unequal one but Andrew's successors have not given up: the area around Ootsa Lake is included in the Wet'suwet'en claims currently before the Supreme Court of British Columbia.

Here, through the actions of the Wet'suwet'en and Indian Andrew, we have a very different view of the settlement process; Mary John, in her recollections, provides a good deal more information on this "other side of the frontier." Parts of Mary John's experiences are familiar enough, at least in general terms, but personal recollections add colour and impact to such generalizations. Here, for example, is a segment of Mary's description of Indian residential school:

We saw so many pupils whipped for speaking their Native language or running away or stealing food. The boys were thrashed for speaking to the girls, and the girls were thrashed for writing notes to the boys.

Mary (Sutherland) and I were terrified when we saw someone being whipped. We said to each other - in English - "This is not a thing our parents do to us." So even when we talked of our hunger, we did not use our Native language.

I was always hungry. I missed the roast moose, the dried beaver meat, the fresh fish from a frying pan, the warm bread and bannock

and berries. Oh, how I missed the food I used to have in my own home.

At school, it was porridge, porridge, porridge, and if it wasn't that, it was boiled barley or beans, and thick slices of bread spread with lard. Weeks went by without a taste of meat or fish. Such things as sugar or butter or ham only appeared on our tables on feast days, and sometimes not even then. A few times, I would catch the smell of roasting meat coming from the nuns' dining room, and I couldn't help myself - I would follow that smell to the very door. [pp. 38-39]

Mary John was born in 1913 of an Indian mother and a White father. But it was not until many years later that she met her father: he had "moved on" even before Mary's birth. She was raised, therefore, by her mother and, later, her Indian step-father. Mary spent her childhood following a traditional round of activities. With the changing seasons the family moved between resource sites to harvest game, fish and berries, returning to the village of Stoney Creek, near Vanderhoof, as a permanent base. This period, with a certain nostalgia, lives on in her memory as a time of happiness; but there were also darker elements. Visits to the White settlement of Vanderhoof brought encounters with the elemental racism of small-town British Columbia in the 1920s. During such visits, Mary recalls, the Indians camped on the edge of town:

We had no money to spend in a restaurant, and even if our pockets had been full of dollar bills, we weren't allowed to enter any of the cafes in Vanderhoof. Natives knew that if they walked into a restaurant, they would be asked to leave, and if they refused, the police would be called. [p. 27]

The key figure in mediating relations between White and Indian was the Indian agent. He (none were female) was supposed to act as the spokesman for the Indians in their dealings with the law and other governmental agencies. Yet for "ordinary day-to-day needs," Mary recalled, "the Indian Agent was the last person we asked for help." Of course, there were variations from one agent to another, but the following description catches an essential aspect of the relationship:

We often laughed about the reception Natives received from the Indian Agent when they needed his help and his office was closed. No matter what the weather, the agent would keep the Native on the doorstep outside his home while he went in and bundled himself up against the weather. Then he would step outside, closing the door carefully behind him. With the wind and snow swirling around the two of them, the problem would be discussed. I think it must

have been easier to get into Buckingham Palace than into the hallway of the Indian Agent's home. [p. 79]

The *Indian Act* of this period contained a variety of discriminatory elements; not the least of these was the prohibition of the Indian feast system, or potlatch. Instituted in 1884, the prohibition lasted until 1951, although it was enforced with varying degrees of thoroughness during these years. At times the gatherings were held "in great secrecy;" at other times the police "didn't seem to care." To understand the significance of this prohibition it is necessary to appreciate that the feast was the central institution of Indian cultures at Stoney Creek and elsewhere in British Columbia: the feast system contained political, legal, economic and religious dimensions. It is not surprising, therefore, that Mary had difficulty making sense of the prohibition. She wondered,

why the government would do such a bad thing. The villagers said, "The government thought that the Natives were giving too much away and that they were making themselves poor. The Natives weren't giving away - they were sharing. What they gave helped other Natives. We like to share. We like to give gifts. That is the way of our people." [pp. 60-61]

Another facet of the discrimination that Indian peoples faced in British Columbia was in terms of health conditions; even in the 20th century death was an all-too-frequent visitor to the other side of the frontier. Statistics convey part of this story; but they are abstract, faceless and emptied of emotional content. Mary's account provides human faces for this tragic process. Her earliest memories concern the devastation created on the Stoney Creek Reserve by the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918. They encompass the never-ending ringing of the mission bell and the "horror" of a mass burial. Tuberculosis also extracted a heavy toll, in part because, even in the 1940s, the people of Stoney Creek "didn't know that it was infectious, that extra precautions had to be taken to prevent the spread of this dread disease." [p. 93]

Mary's own family did not escape the toll extracted by such conditions. Three children died, of unspecified causes, during the early years of Mary's married life: this is mentioned, almost in passing, as if still too painful to dwell on. But death came in many other guises. In 1934, for example, Mary's father-in-law, Johnny, and one of his friends, died after consuming homebrew:

My mother did not discuss the cause of Johnny's death with me or with anyone, but from all the little bits I heard here and there I learned that Gus had made homebrew in a coal oil can. The can had not been washed to cleanse it of its deadly liquid. Johnny and

James must have drank coal oil along with the homebrew.
 When the two men were dead, one of my friends whispered to me,
 "That coal oil ate their insides clear away." [p. 85]

The *Indian Act*, of course, made it illegal for Indians to purchase liquor.

It would be remiss of me to leave the impression that Mary John's life has been one of unremitting gloom and repression. Looking back from the perspective of the end of the 20th century and employing the standards of urban British Columbia, it has been a tough life, full of hard work and struggles. But it has also been one of accomplishments and, dare I say it, progress. For example, Mary and her friends pushed the local Indian Homemakers Association into becoming a self-help institution, concerned with promoting renewed pride in local culture and tradition. This book represents one of its manifestations. Mary's story has been recorded with simple dignity by Bridget Moran, and I thank her for a job well done.

Bob Galois

Notes

- 1 Kane to Indian Agent, 15 June 1914; Public Archives of Canada, RG10, vol. 1285, p. 86 - reel C-13903.

Alan D. McMillan, *Native Peoples and Cultures of Canada: An Anthropological Overview*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988.

We can only blame ourselves, if we are not involved in anything.

Keeping in mind the above saying by an anonymous Indian elder, this reviewer, an Aboriginal (Anishinabe) person himself, has attempted to stay abreast of new materials and texts written about Aboriginal peoples. The major portion of these writings is usually presented by non-Aboriginal peoples. This is acceptable, if these writers are attempting to present a more factual account regarding the participation of Aboriginal peoples in the development of North America.

Zenon Pohorecky (1988), has written that McMillan's book is "a joy to find, this book is already booked for the course on Canada's Natives that I have had to teach for decades with no text" [p. 98]. Pohorecky for the most part concentrates on the structure of this volume rather than the quality of the work. Pohorecky is accurate in his assessment that the emerging discipline of Indian/Native Studies is lacking in texts and related materials that portray Aboriginal people as full participants in the historic development of Canada.