

BOOK REVIEWS

Exile in the Wilderness, by Jean Murray Cole. Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern Limited, 1979. Pp. xviii, 268, \$15.95.

A biography of Chief Factor Archibald McDonald is extremely timely. His career spanned the heyday of the fur trade and the initial disintegration of its carefully balanced social structure. McDonald was involved in Lord Selkirk's Red River enterprise and in the Hudson's Bay Company trade west of the Rockies. His wives and progeny, both mixed blood and white, provide an unparalleled opportunity for insight into the workings of fur-trade society. Unfortunately Jean Murray Cole's *Exile in the Wilderness*, despite its prodigious research, is little more than historiographical atavism that ignores these possibilities. The revolutionary contributions of John Foster, Sylvia Van Kirk, and Jennifer Brown which have redirected fur-trade scholarship as established in the 1930s have been completely neglected. E.E. Rich and A.S. Morton would have welcomed Cole's study. They would have agreed with her contention that the pre-1870 West was untouched and wild. In fact western Canada displayed a unique culture derived from the economic and social structure of the fur trade, activities to which Europeans, Indians and mixed bloods contributed and from which they derived identity and purpose. The wilderness is an illusion created by moderns steeped in National Geographic lore, not by the realities of the nineteenth-century fur trade.

Most fur traders would have sympathized with Henry Hallett who, being told by George Simpson that he might have to leave the West after twenty-nine years in the interior, wrote:

You are aware, Sirs, that by remaining in the Indian country such a length of time, the Customs and habits we imbibe are so different to those of the civilized world, add to which the attachement most people form to it, that it will be almost impossible for me to return to my native country.

One suspects that McDonald would not have found Hallett's views inappropriate to his own experience. McDonald himself took an Indian wife, and upon her death married a countryborn white woman untutored in the niceties of refined society. He fathered one mixed-blood son and several white children. McDonald pressed for the education of his wives and offspring, not because he feared the contagion of the wilderness, but because his position in fur-trade society demanded these refinements. He was responsible for ensuring the social status of his children. If they were to maintain his station they must have an education. McDonald's careful interest in science too was not a rejection of the wilderness but rather a desire to understand

the Indian country. Indeed his studies are rooted in a tradition started by seventeenth and eighteenth century bayside factors. When McDonald did retire, he did so not to his native Scotland, something one might have expected from an "exile in the wilderness," but rather to Lower Canada where he could enjoy the company of those he had known in the Indian country.

What analysis the biography offers sometimes borders on the psychologically naïve. Emotions are the uncomplicated ones of "joy," "delight," and "discouragement." Other assessments are simply careless. Life at isolated posts is labelled as "monotonous drudgery," but this is not borne out by example. Subsequent descriptions of riotous parties and difficult Indians scarcely contribute to the imagery of a dreary exile. It can be shown that life in the pre-1870 West, while by no means easy, was in fact more than bearable, and that levels of nutrition and the general standard of living were higher than in the Canadas and Great Britain.

While these comments would seem to be unduly harsh, they are not meant to detract from the careful scholarship and research that illuminates this work, although Shirlee Ann Smith in her review in *The Beaver* (Summer, 1980) has noted a few minor errors in fact and typography. In spite of any reviewer's comments, however, the book must be the landmark biography of Archibald McDonald. He could not have asked for a more sympathetic treatment. Carping historians, I suspect, would prefer a more analytical one.

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Society and Politics in Alberta: Research Papers edited by Carlo Caldarola. Toronto: Methuen, 1979. 392 pp., \$11.95, paper.

This is a useful book. It includes nineteen articles which have been organized around four themes. The first theme is the historical pattern of Alberta provincial politics. Four papers (written by L.G. Thomas, C.F. Betke, C. Caldarola, D.K. Elton and A.M. Goddard) discuss the successive regimes of the Liberals, the United Farmers of Alberta, Social Credit and the Conservatives. These are traditional but effective accounts which summarize party policies, describe elections, and consider the experiences of the parties in office. In the process, each article gives interesting insights into one of the standard questions about Alberta politics—why has there been a tendency toward one-party government? Inevitably, in exploring that question, emphasis is placed on the role of leadership, the well developed sense of regional grievance, and the general quest for efficient, managerial government.