

## BRITISH COLUMBIA INTERIORS

by Virginia Careless\*

Museums and historic sites today commonly use historical restorations or reconstructions of period rooms to present social history to the public. The British Columbia Provincial Museum is no exception to this practice, exhibiting one of the earlier reconstructions of a street scene in Canada. But such work in B.C., as is probably the case elsewhere, is not just a matter of going to libraries and archives for the necessary information. Records about home life and furnishings are relatively rare. They are the more rare here for B.C. history is in a very embryonic stage, social history being one of the last areas to be tackled by historians -- constitutional, military, political and economic history attract their attentions first -- and material history is an even newer field than social history. Thus it will be some time before British Columbia's material history, especially in the area of domestic furnishings, can be known in any detail. Reconstructing B.C. interiors is difficult because studying them is in itself so hard to do. Accordingly, this article will address the question of researching historical B.C. interiors rather than the nature of the interiors themselves, and it will suggest what steps can be taken to improve the present situation.<sup>1</sup>

This situation exists not only because repositories have yet to gather more detail on home decorating in B.C. but also because there is not a great deal to be gathered, especially on the earlier days. British Columbia is a young province and in some places a frontier province. Its past is so recent that many of its pioneers are still living. However, the fact that the pioneer experience is so near to us still does not bring detailed knowledge of it within our grasp. We have little information on this past. Perhaps this may be because people who are struggling to cope on a very basic level or who have so recently emerged from that state do not have time to record much of their daily life. In many cases, the pioneers have not kept much other than family treasures, the ordinary belongings being

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worn out or gladly discarded for more modern and more comfortable furnishings. Ironically, therefore, although B.C.'s pioneer experience is much more recent than Ontario's, for example, the 1880s here are as much the Dark Ages as the 1820s there.

We in British Columbia have an advantage that Ontario historians do not, namely of being able to talk to some of our early settlers; but memories tend to grow fuzzy with time, especially on details of styles and dates of household furnishings. Interiors are difficult to study in most places, especially vernacular interiors, for they are not very often recorded. Descriptions of ordinary homes occur sometimes in literature, sometimes in diaries and letters, but one must do a great deal of hunting in such sources for infrequent and sketchy mention of household furnishings.

Visual records of ordinary homes are rare because it does not occur to many people to photograph such a familiar part of their lives and also, for earlier periods, because indoor photography was an uncertain and potentially destructive process. The magnesium powder used for flash pictures left nasty, large, smoke blotches on ceilings, not to mention fallout on furnishings. One comes across the occasional photograph of people who wanted badly enough to have a photographic record of their belongings. They are to be seen sitting in their best chairs by their parlour tables which are covered with various treasures. But there are no pictures on the walls, for there are no walls or light fixtures or ceilings in these photos, and the carpet lies on a floor that looks as if it was probably green and organic.

Given this paucity of information how is one to approach the study of B.C. interiors? One solution is to increase the material available on home life and furnishings. One can look for relevant manuscripts such as letters, diaries and autobiographical accounts. Printed materials, both those produced in B.C. and these verified as used here, are important: newspapers, magazines, store catalogues, decorating books, cook books, household manuals, etc. Any painting or photographs of interiors are particularly desirable. One can augment these by photographing interior details of old houses, if unchanged, and collecting samples of old wallpapers. One can interview the province's "old timers", gathering general reminiscences and specific details from those involved in building and decorating trades.

This task, however, will take time and will need a number of people involved in similar activities for it to be productive.

A second approach is to look at larger considerations and attempt to get an overview of the nature of B.C. itself: what elements are there in the province that shaped the experience of its inhabitants, resulting in characteristics that may be identified as British Columbian? What factors would have affected people's lifestyles and, among other things, their taste and choice of styles and objects?

One of these, and perhaps the most fundamental, is the environment. Climate probably affects exteriors more than interiors. It determines what types of buildings are erected and how sturdy they must be to withstand a region's weather. It introduces such considerations as whether a house should have storm windows to keep out the winter's cold and screens to keep out the summer's flies? Should there be a back kitchen for cooking in hot weather? does the heating system need to be large or minimal? and so forth. The environment also dictates what materials are available to work with. The abundance of wood in B.C. shows in the amount of wood trim in house interiors. The particular grain and colour of the softwood affects the colours and textures of furnishings chosen to harmonize with it. Many floor borders consist of intricate patterns in coloured woods. Here again a style is very directly related to the local environment.

The environment also influences furnishings in a less direct way through economics. Until the Canadian Pacific Railway was well established the mountains cut B.C. off physically, hence economically and culturally, from the rest of Canada. The major trade was with the United States down the coast, and with goods came ideas and tastes. Also by this route came British goods and ideas which had gone around the Horn or, later, through the Panama Canal or across the States by train. In many cases the styles thus brought to B.C. were similar to those found in eastern Canada, and understandably so, for both regions shared the larger cultural context of Great Britain, indeed of Western Europe. But until the 1890s at the earliest, most imported items in B.C. were not made in eastern Canada or brought from eastern Canada unless carried by settlers from there. For this reason Eaton's catalogue, so useful and standard a source in the east, cannot automatically be used for restorations in B.C.

Another element influencing choice of furnishing is settlement. Each province has its own particular representation of the populations of different cultures and countries. These people have introduced customs, tastes, styles and objects from their lands of origin and their traditions all together make up the totality that may be identified as the particular nature of a province, its local "flavour". Some of the more noticeable groups in British Columbia are, in rough order of arrival, native Indians, British, Americans, eastern Canadians, Chinese, Scandinavians, Doukhobors and Japanese. B.C. does not have, for example, a large Italian population, as found in Ontario, or large numbers of people of Eastern European descent, as in the Prairie Provinces.

Other factors determining the stylistic influence of B.C. population groups include the following: when people arrived in B.C., in what numbers, where they settled and their socio-economic position. Some settling groups more than others dictated fashion in the province. Those of a British cultural background, which includes eastern Canadians and Americans, were the group of pre-eminence in B.C. Often what is referred to as "British Columbia style" is only the taste of this particular group. There were other groups and therefore other ways of furnishing a home. However, the problem is hard to rectify, at least at the present. The British group is the most documented, patchy as that documentation is. Information on the other ethnic groups in B.C. is even scarcer and much more data is needed before accurate restorations can be done of their homes.

Is there such a thing as a "British Columbia interior"? Photographs of rooms in B.C. are not readily recognizable as such. They could be of another province, the United States, or even England. This state of affairs is understandable for, as has been noted, all these areas shared the same basic culture and hence tastes. But if similar in basics, these areas were not identical. Each had its own local variations of styles and it is in those variations that the essence of a region is to be found. It is relatively easy to recreate a room with general Victorian features. It is much harder to give that room a particularly British Columbian character. One must know which of the English Victorian, Canadian Victorian or American Victorian elements were used here and which were not. One must also know the time lag between the invention of styles elsewhere and their appearance here. One must know further what the local styles were and what was added.

The local variations often found as apparently insignificant features in a room, are important to the presentation of a region's history. Woven cedar-bark baskets in a room of otherwise English style not only labels the setting as British Columbia but also brings to mind the very important fact of the presence of aboriginal peoples here. From this point a viewer can be led to consider the particular nature of the Indians of the province and their relationship with the white population. Objects from the Orient and India tell about the type of person who settled here, in this case ex-colonial civil servants, British travellers and soldiers. They also indicate the types of lifestyle and attitudes that were brought to this province and shaped its growth. We may be dealing with minor details, but they are crucial ones.

There are ways of furnishing that are British Columbian and they reflect the setting and the settlers of the province. But it will take some time before we can consider that we know the elements that make up the B.C. style. As has been shown here material on this subject must first be collected and then the documentation must be assessed and analyzed. Our knowledge of B.C.'s style lies in the future, as does our ability to do really accurate restorations and reconstructions. Some of the approaches discussed here may help in reaching that future.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. A first step has already been taken by the author. See Virginia Careless, Bibliography for the Study of British Columbia's Domestic Material History, History Division Mercury Series No. 20, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, 1976, 77 pp. Available on request from the History Division, National Museum of Man.