

Comptes rendus de livres

Michael Kluckner, *Vanishing British Columbia*

BEN BRADLEY

Kluckner, Michael. *Vanishing British Columbia*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005. 224 pp., illus., maps, cloth, \$49.95, ISBN 0774811250.

Historians of Canada have overlooked the country's highways and the buildings and spaces located along them, and the literature on automobiles has routinely bypassed small towns and rural areas. *Vanishing British Columbia* is a non-academic but well researched and highly visual book that touches on all of these topics. Loosely organized around the idea of "roadside memory," it also deserves the attention of anyone interested in popular, publicly oriented approaches towards material and landscape history.

Known for his watercolours and advocacy for the preservation of built heritage in British Columbia's rapidly-developing southwest corner, Michael Kluckner here turns his eye to the province's hinterlands. He explains that his "mental map" of British Columbia is punctuated by "landmarks from earlier generations of human settlement," which, linked together by today's road network, form a kind of "roadside memory" (9). For Kluckner, this encompasses almost anything visible from highways and back roads: fruit stands and auto-courts, old farmhouses and cabins, abandoned Doukhobor communal houses, disused churches and bridges, inaccessible buildings across a river, even the almost extinct Garbage Gobblers — the litter barrels stylized as grinning dinosaurs that once inhabited the province's rest stops.

Many of these landmarks will be recognized by anyone who has motored around British Columbia, and in this sense Kluckner's roadside memory is a shared one. It is not an explicitly argued point, but *Vanishing British Columbia* shows that these familiar landmarks deserve more consideration by public and academic historians. Every highway corridor has buildings, structures and spaces that attract the attention of travellers and pique their curiosity, but which go unvisited because of the

placement of fences, the route of the road, the tempo of traffic, and so forth. People passing these widely recognized but little-known sites/sights think about history, wondering: Why was that built there? Who lived or worked in it? What were their lives like? Why is no one there now? Too often it is only after these landmarks have been destroyed that answers to such questions become available, usually in the "obituaries" of local newspapers and historical society newsletters. Kluckner recognizes that many people learn about and appreciate places, regions and provinces visually and through interaction with material history — that is, through landscapes — and *Vanishing British Columbia* is his attempt to add historical depth to their mental maps before these landmarks disappear.

This is more a work of documentation than of advocacy. Kluckner sees little hope for preserving many roadside landmarks, few of which are centrally located or especially old or grand. He explains that "[s]o little of the history of these places has been recorded in museums and archives, and most of it, I believed, would likely disappear 'within a heartbeat' as families dispersed and memories dimmed" (10). The number of his paintings reproduced in *Vanishing British Columbia* reflects this documentary impulse. In 160 impressionistic watercolours, Kluckner tries to capture the relation between roadside structures and their natural and social settings — it is not his intention to produce detailed architectural studies, though he sometimes includes floor plans. The paintings are accompanied by research that draws on oft-overlooked local histories, heritage inventories and specialist historical literature (for example, books for railroad enthusiasts), as well as interviews with local residents. Impressive amounts of information about certain landmarks have been extracted from these sources, but the coverage is highly uneven: some buildings are discussed for several pages, while others have only a few pertinent details relayed in a caption. Complementing the paintings and

research are hundreds of images, including promotional materials and advertisements, architectural drawings, postcards and photographs. Chapters are organized by region, and each opens with a detailed map. *Vanishing British Columbia* is surely one of the most lavishly illustrated historical works produced by a Canadian university press. Rare is the page that contains only one image, and Kluckner's subtle watercolours contrast sharply with brash chromatic snapshots and postcards from the postwar years, which retain much of their luminescence and are sharp enough to be perused with a loupe. This is a book in which images are more than mere illustrations, and UBC Press deserves special praise for both the quantity and quality of reproduction.

The aspect of *Vanishing British Columbia* of greatest interest to material and landscape historians is Kluckner's involvement of the wider public in determining the book's content. When he began working on the theme of roadside landscapes in 1999, he set up a Web site (as of April 2005: www.michaelkluckner.com/bciw.html) and posted his work in progress, including paintings, images and research. This caught the attention of people searching the Internet, particularly those looking for information to contextualize genealogical research. Dozens contacted Kluckner to share information about their own or their family's experiences of visiting, working or living at a particular location; many also contributed photographs from family albums and other ephemera — at one point Kluckner refers to the book as “genealogy tied to specific historic places” (217). When added to the Web site, these accounts and images drew more correspondents, as did coverage of the project in newspapers and on province-wide radio — this reviewer followed the resulting “snowball effect” on-line for several years. Kluckner makes extensive use of these sources, sometimes including long passages of contributors' own words and their remembered descriptions of daily life, and the comings and goings of friends and family powerfully reiterate to readers that old houses and abandoned businesses were (and are) more than physical

structures: at one time they were the homes and workplaces of living, breathing people.

Vanishing British Columbia will prove highly engaging for readers with a basic knowledge of British Columbia's regions and history. Though writing for a popular audience, Kluckner rarely crosses over into nostalgia, is thorough with citation and does not gloss over the province's social history. He shows that ruined and abandoned buildings do not appear by some “natural” process but, instead, provide tangible evidence of failed schemes, disrupted communities, displacement and dispossession, as well as the passing of people who “eked a living from the fringes of the modern British Columbia economy” (121). However, even those well versed in British Columbia's roadsides and built heritage may find the pace dizzying, given the number of places dealt with, the uneven amount of detail provided and the shifting periodization. Also, Kluckner is no industrial archaeologist: the attention-grabbing infrastructure of resource extraction, processing and circulation does not figure prominently in his roadside memory. Perhaps this is because much of this detritus has already been memorialized by plaques and interpretive markers, but it is especially unfortunate that highways — the structures that form the connective tissue of Kluckner's roadside memory — go largely overlooked. Are there Canadian automobile roads that deserve to be considered historical landscapes worthy of preservation and serious study in and of themselves? The narrow, winding route of today's Highway 1A through Banff National Park jumps to mind as a possible example.

Vanishing British Columbia is sure to be a success in the gift and coffee-table book market, but it is more than the typical picture book. Kluckner's detailed exploration of familiar but little-known landmarks and his public and collaborative methodology merit the attention of scholars interested in memory studies, architecture and built heritage, ephemera and vernacular photography, and landscape history in general. Though his specific subject matter may not be familiar to every reader, his approach towards it will nevertheless prove of interest.