

DAVID P. STEPHENS

Review of

Bradley, Ben. 2017. *British Columbia by the Road: Car Culture and the Making of a Modern Landscape*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Pp. 309. 56 B&W photos and illustrations. Includes list of illustrations, bibliographical references, notes, and index. ISBN 978-0-7748-3418-6, \$89.95.

Through refreshing and in-depth research, author Ben Bradley, Grant Notley Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of History and Classics at the University of Alberta, offers up an engaging road trip through time and space, guiding the reader along the twisting, turning, climbing, curated, landscape of the circa 1925 to 1970 British Columbia Interior highway system, where myriad man-made, natural, and historic vistas unfold. As Bradley describes his book, it is “first and foremost a landscape history and thus is concerned with the reciprocal relationship whereby people have continually shaped and in turn been shaped by their built and natural environments” (6).

British Columbia by the Road is delightfully interactive, in that the author encourages the reader to slip behind the wheel, deciding for themselves which of two possible routes to take: Route A: A Drive through Nature, or Route B: Paths to the Past. Bradley offers this option in an effort to allow the reader to explore the highway system, including the natural roadside vistas and attractions, as well as parks, monuments and plaques along the way. All the while Bradley, as a tour guide of sorts, discusses the two routes and the numerous and somewhat disparate variables which contributed to the development and growth of the highway system. Thus, the reader is provided an opportunity to engage with “two of the most prominent and popular types of roadside features—“nature” and “the past”—as they took form in parks and historic sites” (7). As such, *British Columbia by the Road* deals with the “intertwined histories of car culture and landscape” in one region of Canada (7). The reader is introduced to the historical, cultural, political, and social underpinnings which gave birth to this highway system and how it not only

served to connect the many villages, towns, and communities along the way, but how it helped to create a through-the-windshield vista of various roadside attractions, as well as presenting a unique taste of what each community had to offer.

I found the book to be a good read. To some, the many place names and historical foundations might seem a bit overwhelming to digest, as there is a lot of mileage to cover. Yet Bradley manages to skillfully bring the reader along as his writings wind through the landscape which reflects how government, businesses, communities, and residents conveyed themselves to, and interacted with, the audience which presented themselves at their doorsteps via the automobile. Overall, I felt the book to be quite engaging, and at times provocative, as my artist’s mind tends to define the highway system and the numerous roadside attractions as akin to performance art.

Bradley covers many variables, touching on significant economic, political, and social forces such as Fordism, racism, capitalism, employment, and tourism, among others. He fleshes out and interrogates the idyllic notion that the freedom of the road as offered by increased automobile ownership, combined with a new found degree of disposable income and leisure time available to the predominantly white middle class family, was not actually freedom of choice. Rather, it was more akin to a perceived sense of freedom as designed and manipulated by businessmen, civil servants, and others with a vested interest in curating what the family might experience while being conveyed along the B.C. Interior highways system, cocooned in the comfort of their automobile. As Bradley points out in his introduction, motoring was a “radical new way of viewing the province,” and during the early years of automobility in particular, the act

of driving, (and perhaps in this sense akin to performance art), could make travellers feel like active explorers of the landscape that surrounded them, rather than passive consumers, as had been the case with the predetermined routes and timetables of railway and steamboat companies. However, “seem” and “feel like” are key words here. As *British Columbia by the Road* reveals, the individualistic “freedom of the road” and the landscape experiences that were associated with it were more tightly constrained than they seemed (3). Thus, the highway system and the roadside attractions made the act of travelling by the road to a destination as significant as arriving by the road to the actual destination itself. Bradley states that “by the road” is to be understood in two ways. First, “in the straightforward sense of the location of the diverse features that motorists could see as they drove along the province’s arterial highways,” including wildlife, buildings and communities, landforms, and signs. More importantly, however, “by the road” also refers to “private automobiles and public roads combining to act as a medium of landscape experience, a medium that had significant structuring effects and was one of the dominant modes of visibility in the mid-century culture of time and space associated with Fordism” (4).

There is no doubt that Fordism played a significant role in terms of choosing, planning, and designing the routes through the interior. As Bradley notes, the government worked as “a builder of roads, manager of landscapes, developer of attractions, and promoter of both tourism and automobile travel” (108). To the average motorist along the highway, this political-economic “moment,” that “saw the state take an active role regulating, stabilizing and sometimes stimulating the economy,” might seem insignificant (4). Bradley, however, does a fine job of addressing this. He states that it is clear in an academic and political sense that Fordism played out as expected in terms of the BC government and elected officials taking an active role through their efforts of designing and constructing the arterial highway system. The advantages were not just for the common good, but also designed and measured by the successes and benefits as garnered by businessmen and politicians, some of whom felt they had a vested personal interest in the process as well as the anticipated outcomes.

Bradley states Fordism’s most overlooked topics are “the initiatives to stimulate mass consumption through the development of public recreational and cultural amenities such as parks and historic sites. Parks and plaques served as ornaments for state-built highways and also as devices for modelling the views of an increasingly motorized citizenry” (6). Thus, the “shared landscape experiences” of the motoring public was as important as the act of pioneering itself, essentially forging a path through the wilderness over time, from one community to another (6-7).

As stated, Bradley presents the reader with a choice of two routes from which to begin their journey through the BC Interior highway system. Route A: A Drive through Nature, contains chapters one through four. Throughout, the reader is presented with a nice grouping of period black and white photographs, maps, and travel bureau advertisements, all of which combine to help paint a broader, more specific picture of the focus of each chapter and the route as a whole. Route A looks at the relationship between automobile and the environment, exploring how the government’s desire to create parks intermingled with road building projects. Bradley references David Louter’s concept of “windshield wilderness,” wherein the “vast majority of park visitors have their encounters with nature shaped by the vehicles and infrastructure that rank among the most intrusive and extensive developments within parks” (16).

Route B: Paths to the Past contains chapters five through eight. As in Route A, it also presents the reader with several black and white photographs, maps and advertisements which enhance the read. The section addresses the interrelationship of the provincial highway network and profit-seeking businesses. Small businessmen were “local boosters,” running “family-owned and-operated concerns such as autocourts, hotels, and gas stations.” Together, the provincial highway network and the local businesses offered up “manipulated landscapes” for the motoring public (108). Most of these businesses sought to stand apart from one another, and many associated themselves with the past by “placing relics of the BC fur trade or gold rush days in front of their establishments or by boasting that their buildings were linked to the frontier past” (108). Route B also touches on the 1958 centennial of the

establishment of the colony of British Columbia, while also addressing significant issues such as change and crisis, as well as the placement of roadside markers and monuments which commemorated a somewhat singular vision of a past as interpreted and conveyed through the lens of government bureaucrats and historic monument boards.

In addition, Bradley emphasizes in both a sensitive and serious manner, First Nations communities along the route. He marks their absence at this time in terms of the lack of their direct inclusion in the development of the Interior highway system and in the interpretive efforts to boost communities and promote history. He notes a predominantly white gaze on the past, where colonial endeavours and mindsets appear to have solely shaped the history of the Interior. As Bradley states, the “few monuments and museum displays that gave a cursory nod to the province’s original inhabitants tended to treat them as the supporting cast for the overland explorers and fur traders of the early nineteenth century, sometimes portraying them as helpmates and sometimes as obstacles to travel through the region” (111). Unlike the promotion, preservation, and interpretive efforts regarding the totems of the Coast, no equivalent efforts were made to interpret Interior indigenous culture. However, handicrafts—such as coiled cedar baskets and “Cowboy Indians” who competed at the Williams Lake Stampede—were monopolized and promoted by the “boosters and business owners, curators and authors, and planners and other experts working for government agencies in order to differentiate particular places so that they would appeal to the motoring public” (111).

Bradley sums things up quite well in his conclusion as he draws the reader in to focus and reflect on the various forces which shaped and defined the Interior highway system—much to the detriment of the First Nations communities while boosting the presence and significance of the white colonialist structure. He emphasizes how the experience of motoring along the Interior and engaging with the roadside attractions “was a widely shared experience, particularly to those who were white and middle class (234).” He observes that the opening ceremonies for various highways, routes, and bridges throughout the mid-twentieth century “were not just photo opportunities for grandstanding politicians; they were also very real instances of the Fordist state opening new possibilities to the motoring public as well as to big and small businesses” (234). Bradley fleshes out and presents the ways in which influence and power shaped and crafted the experiences of the motoring public in an effort to bring about prosperity and growth while at the same time providing much needed automobile routes as avenues for communication from one community to the other.

Overall, *British Columbia by the Road* is an excellent read, and it serves to shed light on the numerous forces and underpinnings which were at play in the development of the BC Interior highway system. It is a book which I feel will be of valuable interest to historians and curators as well as those with a keen interest in the growth of automobility or the opening up of the Interior of British Columbia, as it relates the significance and contribution of government, business, communities, as well as the motoring public, in the shaping of the province as a whole.