

BOOK REVIEWS

Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1830 - 57
Edited by Helen M. Buss and Judith Hudson Beattie
UBC Press, Vancouver, 2003.
xiii + 497 pp., plates, illus., maps., refs., index.

The fashion was hats, fur hats constructed from the pelts of beavers — a must-have accessory in the 1700s and 1800s. Those early fur-traders, adventurers all, crossed North America, working from the Atlantic region overland to the West Coast. Eventually they established a marine transport system with sailing vessels, first into Hudson's Bay and then to and fro along the Pacific Northwest Coast. A variety of books have been written about those early traders and a number of other diaries or journals detailed those trips but seldom have we had the chance to examine personal correspondence and letters sent directly to those working in the trading posts or on the company sailing vessels. Now we have an enthralling peek into the lives of the families, friends, and sweethearts of those working in the fur-trade. Judith Hudson Beattie, formerly Keeper of the HBC Archives and her colleague Helen M. Buss, University of Calgary, have collaborated to present hidden contents of undelivered letters from 1830 to 1857.

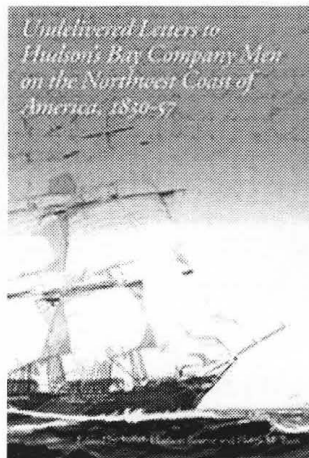
Although many family letters were written to company employees, some were simply returned to the company archives in London as "undeliverable." This selection draws from over a hundred of those undelivered letters. We can glimpse mid-1800s English customs or moral standards, and experience the sadness of lost communications with family members thousands of miles from

home. Fur trade vessels sailed back and forth across the oceans carrying letter packets while the individual the letters sought might pass in another vessel, sailing the opposite direction. In some cases injury, death or desertion made it impossible to deliver the letters in a timely fashion. Some typical entries:

"My dear brother if you could not come home you might at least have sent a letter . . ." (32).

"Your father died last September and your brother Nick (of cholera)" (35).

On Nov. 27, 1838 a mother writes, "I am uneasy about you since you have written only 1 letter since you left in 1836" (118).



The many forts and sailing ships often were confusing to families who were uncertain of where exactly their relatives might be. For instance, William Johnson's relatives wrote to him at York Factory on Hudson Bay, apparently unaware that he was in fact thousands of miles west, as shown by his unfortunate drowning in an accident at Fort George, now Prince George, B.C.

In addition to letters on specific individuals, there is a wealth of detail

about the HBC forts, ships, managers, workers and sailors. Many of the details are about the working situations of many of the letter recipients. The authors give a short summary of the history of twenty-one of the ships plying the waters off the Northern Coast, including copies of ships' logs, correspondence books, servants' wills and accounts, and staff records.

The letters themselves are classified into four groups: men on ships, voyageurs, men at the posts, and immigrant labourers. This allows us to discover the distinct personality and working conditions of a range of people. The authors have included biographical sketches, information about the activities at the trading posts, life on board the ships, and local customs such as marriage to native women. There are photographic reproductions of twenty-four actual letters, some containing items such as a lock of hair or examples of cross-writing, in which a single sheet of paper is used to compress the greatest amount of news.

As we read about these writer's activities and concerns we are drawn into their private lives and thoughts. The correspondence offers a fascinating insight into homespun memories, incidents, aspirations, and fears as the writers sometimes rebuke, warn, cajole and offer advice to distant sailors. The authors provide a biographical background to many entries and as for the letters from "voyageurs," written in French; an English translation is included. The reader of English life in the mid 1800s.

We find instances of sadness as we learn of disease and deaths in some families or accidents at home. The thrill of the birth of a newborn is tempered by the constant concern over the future and lack of family funds. Concerned relatives admonish the sailors about overindulging

in drink, or initiating illicit relations with distant women. We learn of missionaries and foreigners marrying aboriginal women. In some cases, men who already had English wives back home would marry a native woman. After many years of service in the West, some would simply leave their native wives behind to return to their original wives and family in England. The authors noted that "Many men in Fort Vancouver at this time maintained relationships with Aboriginal women, their unions, while not Christian marriages, [were] sanctioned by Chief Factor McLoughlin. The men were permitted to build dwellings for their Aboriginal wives, and the Company allowed rations to be allotted to these women, whose unpaid labour contributed mightily to the fur trade's success."

Later on, we read about a hidden marriage, that of Joseph Grenier, who travelled from 1815 to 1831 through Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Utah. His family had not heard from him for a five-year period ending in 1831. Sadly a few months after his death, by drowning in a whirlpool, with seven other companions, his father pleads with the Company to advise him of his son's fate. Normally the company would have remitted to his family any pay owing to a deceased employee. We then read, "However, investigation in the Columbia accounts reveals there was another heir. Joseph Grenier had married Therese Spokane, a woman of the Spokane tribe, according to the custom of the country. She and her young daughter, Marie-Anne, gradually spent the credit due to Joseph Grenier. The company had an established practice of dispensing funds of deceased employees for the needs of their Aboriginal families so that they would not become dependent on the Company. By 1839 the account was empty . . . and nothing remained for the (distant) grieving family, who may have been completely unaware of Joseph's family in the west."

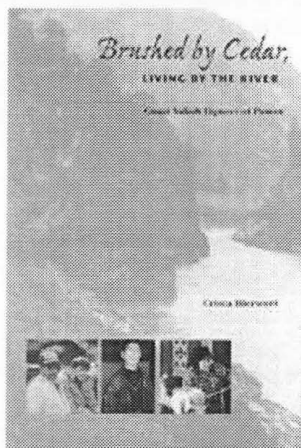
This publication is of interest to avocational as well as professional archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians, as it presents a deep picture of the early Canadian fur-trade. We learn of the over 400 trade posts set up in North America, are introduced to the variety of characters in the fur trade from voyageurs

to laborers and even ship's captains. Often a "dig" presents some clues to the lifestyle or culture of the inhabitants of a location but here we have a detailed written record of the aspirations, concerns and fidelity of families far removed yet tied by blood relations to the fur trade itself. The wealth of detail about life in the employ of the company leads us through many gates, including first-hand depictions of the fur trade culture, Aboriginal peoples, missionaries, post workers, and the families back home.

This publication is well written, thoroughly researched, and offers a comprehensive picture of life in the fur-trade. It should be relished over a period of readings, as with each glimpse one can discover new details.

Art Goyer

Art Goyer, recently retired, was the Internal Audit Manager for Hudson's Bay Company - Western Canada for Bay, Zellers, Fields. His archaeological experience includes participation in the joint -ASBC - UASBC dig at Montague Harbour on Galiano Island in 1990 - 1991.



Brushed by cedar, living by the river: Coast Salish figures of power
by Crisca Bierwert
University of Arizona Press,
Tucson, 1999.
xvii + 314 pp., illus., refs., index.

Crisca Bierwert has produced an ethnography that effectively conveys the multiple vantage points of a Coast Salish epistemology. She elaborates a worldview that concerns landscape, religion, and various sources of power.

Mountains, pools, rivers, and transformer stones are such sources—more so, they are agents of power in their own right and have effects upon human relations.

The perspectives in the ethnography are constructed with clear expositions of structural relationships, which are usually discussed in terms of dualities and oppositions, such as culture/nature, clean/unclean, or self/other. Here, the relationships are not polarities but are more often triangulations, incorporating the interventions and influences of the landscape and other powers. When discussing spirit dancing, for instance, the dualism of mind/body—emphasized by psychotherapeutic approaches (e.g., Jilek 1982, Amoss 1978)—is transcended by the agency of *syowen*, the spirit power that is both revealed and involved in the expression of the dance and song.

Another example concerns the multiple modes of knowing and relating to a place. Regarding Lady Franklin rock, along the Fraser River, Bierwert discusses the various representations of this fishing camp: it is at once a natural place, a social one, a place of danger, a historic landmark, and a mythic locus holding great meaning. These "shifting subjectivities" contribute to her experimental method in relating an epistemology.

Bierwert describes the Coast Salish manner of teaching through oratory, advice, and other traditions, as illustrative of Charles Peirce's method of abduction. In this method, the course of instruction seemingly leads one astray illogically, but in the end the process brings one's understanding into better focus. For the Coast Salish, this method was preferable to Western methods of teaching that are more direct, overt, and matter-of-fact. Within the ethnography, Bierwert employs these abductive methods to exhibit these transformative and protean perspectives. The discussions of landscape and spirit powers seem to extend down unmarked paths, yet ultimately it brings a broader perspective, revealing the framework from within. It is all part of her attempt to create "another awareness" (69-70).