

**Lillooet Nördlinger McDonnell. *Raincoast Jews: Integration in British Columbia*. (Vancouver: Midtown Press, 2014), 224 pp., ISBN: 9780988110120.**

In *Raincoast Jews: Integration in British Columbia*, Lillooet Nördlinger McDonnell sets out to answer two ambitious questions: “How and why did Jewish integration take place in British Columbia from the beginning of the gold rush era in 1859 through to and until the dawn of multiculturalism in 1971? What was the historical nature of social relations between Jews and their non-Jewish compatriots?” (16) She attempts to answer these questions by examining the lives of five B.C. Jews whose lives together span over a century: Cecelia Davies Sylvester (1848–1935), Hannah Director (1886–1970), Leon Koerner (1892–1972), Harry Adaskin (1901–1994) and Nathan Nemetz (1913–1997). She uses microhistory as her method of analysis.

Nördlinger McDonnell focuses on British Columbia because “the study of Canadian Jewry has focused predominantly on Quebec, Ontario and to some degree the Prairies – where Jewish settler populations have historically been higher.” (19–20) She rightly points out that limited attention has been paid to B.C. in some of “the most comprehensive volumes pertaining to Jewish Canadian history – including works by Benjamin Sack, Louis Rosenberg, Gerald Tulchinsky, Richard Menkis and Norman Ravvin,” and that David Rome and Cyril Leonoff’s works “remain some of the few contributions to the field.” (20)

Her choice of subjects is less convincing. While each represents “an example of Jewish integration in B.C. society for his or her era,” (17) and they are of “divergent backgrounds” and “experienced integration differently,” they are hardly “peripheral Jews.” (20) Indeed, the description on the book cover refers to them as “five leading

Jews,” which they were. By Nördlinger McDonnell’s own account, Davies Sylvester, one of the first Jewish residents of Victoria, was involved more than most of her contemporaries in the Jewish and general communities, as were her father J.P. Davies, her brother Joshua and her husband Frank Sylvester.

Director “made an indelible mark on Canadian history,” writes Nördlinger McDonnell. “Not only was she the first woman to be elected as a trustee and become chairman of the school board in Prince George, but she also became the first known Jewish woman elected to public office in Canada.” (51) When Director and her husband, Isidor, who was a well-known businessman, moved to Vancouver, they remained active in the mainstream community, and were also important members of the Jewish community, including being the first to publish a newspaper for the community.

Koerner did not identify publicly as a Jew for most of his life, so perhaps could

be considered peripheral in that sense, but he was a prominent businessman and philanthropist who was recognized with many honours both during his lifetime and posthumously. For his part, Adaskin helped form and was part of the internationally known Hart House String Quartet, and helped to establish and then headed the University of British Columbia's music department. Among his many honours was being invested as an officer to the Order of Canada. Nemetz rose to the highest judicial position in the province, becoming chief justice in 1988. As Nördlinger McDonnell notes, he "was the first Jewish Justice of the Supreme Court of B.C. He was the first Jewish person to be a member of the senate and board of UBC, as well as being the university's first Jewish chancellor. He was also one of the first Jews to be allowed membership in the Vancouver Club since the time of David Oppenheimer (who served as Vancouver's second mayor between 1888 and 1891 and who was one of the Vancouver Club's original founders)." (159)

Despite having chosen more known individuals who, therefore, may have left more of an historical trail behind them, Nördlinger McDonnell runs into a problem common with microhistory: a lack of data. Her main primary sources are oral histories from the Jewish Museum and Archives of British Columbia, as well as letters, photographs and other material from family- or personally-donated fonds at the JMABC and archival collections at the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria.

The detail gleaned from this material ranges from charming encounters – that Director led sing-songs with the labourers who boarded at her and Isidor's home and that Nemetz thought his mother "was a remarkable person" (195) – to the more mundane, such as Davies Sylvester's husband eating bacon and beans when he was on the road or

Koerner's letters reporting to then director of immigration Frederick Blair about the number of people his company employed and how much capital it had brought over from Europe. These details add to the readability of *Raincoast Jews* and offer a personal, not widely known, perspective to what has already been written about these Jewish Canadians. However, the majority of information in *Raincoast Jews* comes from secondary sources or published primary material, such as *A Fiddler's Choice*, Adaskin's memoir, on which much of his chapter is based.

There is just not enough primary material (interviews, diaries, letters, government documents, etc.) to shed much light on the reasons for the subjects' actions. Thus, Nördlinger McDonnell is unable to say with any authority why any of her subjects became involved in voluntary organizations, public service or philanthropy and what, if any part, their Jewishness played in these decisions. She must speculate and some of her connections and explanations are questionable. Rejection of Judaism, or at least a fluid interpretation of its laws and rituals, seems to be a requisite for integration, which Nördlinger McDonnell defines as "the social incorporation

of individuals into the social, economic and political structures of a larger society.” (17) Even the fully assimilated “Raincoast Jews” she examines exhibit elements of Jewish tradition congruent with liberal ideals and culture, such as fulfilling the duty of charity. However, none is a religious Jew, and this omission makes it difficult, if not impossible, to generalize the book’s findings for Jews as a group.

In addition to other individual factors – socio-economic status, commitment to profession and/or the remoteness and size of community in which a person lives – Nördlinger McDonnell argues that the level of integration is influenced by the social relations between Jews and non-Jews, the second question she explores. She explains how Canadian society was more open to immigrants in general, and less anti-Semitic in particular, prior to the First World War and in the early days of multiculturalism, so it was easier for Davies Sylvester, Director and Nemetz to be identifiably Jewish, while Koerner and Adaskin lived in the more intolerant inter-war (Depression) and Second World War period.

One of the few original sources used to answer this second question is a fascinating discussion with Rosalie Segal about the Vancouver Club, and it is unfortunate that no reference is given for this exchange. Another important source for the Nemetz section is not given a complete reference in the endnotes and there are other typos, incorrect institution names and editing issues in the book as a whole that, though minor, make a reader question slightly the diligence of the research, which is not fair to Nördlinger McDonnell. Given the constraints of the available resources, she has done an excellent job of introducing readers to five notable Jews and she deftly sets the individuals into their larger society.

In *Raincoast Jews*, there is some attempt to minimize biases – including those posed by what people choose to donate to archives – but, by the author’s choice or because of insufficient data, there is little critical of her five subjects. The closest the book comes is with regard to Nemetz who, though “a positive influence on the bench, he was never known as a profound legal authority ... he did not contribute any radical changes to the legal landscape.” (183)

*Raincoast Jews* gives readers a tangible idea of what it meant to be a Jew in British Columbia in various decades, by giving individual examples, but it falls short of being an in-depth study from which concrete conclusions or new hypotheses can be drawn. Looking at a century of Jewish life in British Columbia with a sample of one person in each era was not the ideal approach if the goal is to learn more about the integration into mainstream society of B.C. Jews, as opposed to that of other immigrant groups or Jews elsewhere in Canada. Perhaps more could have been learned by an examination of five (or more) diverse contemporaries because, while Nördlinger McDonnell successfully illustrates how each of her subjects “reflected or challenged the larger historical changes taking place around them and the manner in which they reinforced or crossed existing social boundaries,” (20) a

more challenging question is whether their experiences were unique or whether they were representative of a broader B.C. Jewish experience.

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