

BOOK REVIEW

Gold Dust on His Shirt: The True Story of an Immigrant Mining Family. Irene Howard. Toronto, Ontario: Between the Lines, 2008; photographs; xi-xiv + 250 pages; ISBN978-1-897071-45-8; \$26.95 (paper).

Irene Howard weaves the life and personalities of her Swedish father, Norwegian mother and four brothers into the history of early twentieth century metalliferous mining. Set primarily in British Columbia, *Gold Dust on His Shirt* celebrates the itinerant, transborder lifestyle of her immigrant Scandinavian family. In addition to being an engaging family story about personal lives, including amusing anecdotes, Howard also looks at the deaths and daily hardships suffered by men at work, the toils of women at home, and the circumstances of children, as the natural resources of the province were exploited. There is however a subtle adversarial thread throughout the narrative that pits labour against authority; the author resents the way governments and companies abused the health of miners; her father died of tuberculosis complicated by silicosis.

Readers should know that this is a family story more than a scholarly study. Howard makes no claim to have engaged the extensive secondary literature in this area. Although she consulted scholarly texts and archival materials, in both North America and Norway, there is a heavy - too heavy? - reliance on her personal recollections and those of her brothers. Through oral interviews all of them contributed personal observations of events that took place sixty and seventy years earlier. In places the author creates endings and imagined conversations - "But a folk tale needs an ending and ... I take it upon myself to spin [one]"(p. 103) - despite an earlier assertion that she was "committed to writing from the historical record" (13).

Nonetheless, feminist scholars will benefit from chapter six which looks at the domestic sphere occupied by miners' wives. Reproduction was a life-and-death issue for the whole family as husbands shared in the tensions brought about by unwanted pregnancies. Howard's mother died at the age of forty-two of "milk leg" - a maternal mortality - only ten days after delivering a stillborn boy; it was her seventh recorded pregnancy. Because of this, Howard frankly discusses various (illegal) abortifacients and birth control practices that were common among mining families of the time. Scholars interested in childhood will also find the Nilsson (anglicized Nelson) family dynamics useful. Five and six year olds were assigned household duties that held to strict gender roles: Men chopped wood, dug ditches and shoveled manure ... women washed dishes (112).

This book would have been strengthened by drawing on the work of scholars like Jeremy

Mouat or Robert McIntosh who have written extensively on Canadian mining communities. Karen Buckley's examination of death in B.C. mines could also have guided this effort into making a more nuanced argument. Instead, Irene Howard's story is similar to those found in *We Lived a Life and then Some* or *Boston Creek, Golden Echoes of an Ontario Mining Camp*. This genre is directed to a general readership and celebrates more than analyzes gender, class, ethnicity and families.

Gold Dust on His Shirt affectionately chronicles the pioneering spirit and triumphs of the author's family over the course of the twentieth century and is, ultimately, a gentle, loving treatment of parents and siblings.

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