

Leslie A. Robertson. *Imagining Difference: Legend, Curse, and Spectacle in a Canadian Mining Town*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005. Pp. xlv, 300.

The mining town in question is Fernie, a century-old coaltown tucked away in the bottom right-hand corner of the British Columbian map. On the scorecard of special pleading, Fernie does quite well: not only has it been blighted by floods, mudslides, mine disasters, famine, pestilence, and calamitous fires, it has been so marginalized within the province that it was once left off an official map of BC communities (p. 70). That disconnect from the British Columbian core, coupled with the limits on formal relations with neighbouring Alberta, has served to isolate Fernie from larger provincial master-narratives. What Leslie Robertson discovers in the Crownsnest Pass is a rich tapestry of local stories and understandings that stake out the power of the parochial.

Robertson's principal argument is that the telling of stories and the way we tell those stories situates us, (dis)empowers us, and reveals our preoccupations and prejudices. Briefly stated, there exist several versions of a story involving a late-nineteenth-century prospector named William Fernie, whose exploitation of some or all of the indigenous Ktunaxa people led to bad feelings and, perhaps, a curse levied by the natives on the valley and the nascent town. Putting aside for the moment the question of whether the Ktunaxa have a belief system that accommodates the invocation of curses (a question that remains unresolved), the various iterations of the story involve archetypes like the "Indian princess," the Horatio Alger figure, bold and daring European capitalists, and the fatalism for which coalminers are notorious. "Cursing," Robertson writes, "successfully incorporated the complex of colonial belief: normalized enmity between indigenous people and Europeans, erasure of indigenous economic interests, the essentialized mystical nature of indigenous peoples, and the every-present threat of rebellion" (p. 23). The legend and the story constitute a particular kind of "history" and, as historians will appreciate, history is eminently useful.

Robertson walks the reader through the different takes on the Fernie Curse legend, demonstrating its utility for legitimizing this group and delegitimizing that one, for justifying privilege and denying rights. This makes for a complex and challenging book. The body of writing is lithe, although the arteries occasionally become clogged with theoretical jargon. But it is an important book and one to which educators and historians alike ought to turn.

Robertson tweaks out the ways in which communities understand and learn their past(s). This is, at bottom, about how people know who they are. Although the classroom is occasionally invoked, it is the strength of common storytelling that makes memory in Fernie. We are invited to take this further: the Fernie myth(s) may be used to stand in for the Fathers of Confederation, the transcontinental railway, the Northwest Rebellion, Vimy Ridge, or any of a dozen other touchstones in the national mythology.

There are, to be sure, weaknesses. Robertson is an ethnographer with a solid gold ear, but she is not a historian and at times it shows. First, her vision of people in the past is somehow free of a sense of the future: they act because of their past and their present but not because of a future in which they might hope to live. Agency thus becomes divorced from goals. Second, Robertson makes the rather obvious point that current events reshape interpretations of the past, which is to say, every generation writes its own history (p. xlv). Sometimes, as well, Robertson does not explore alternative interpretations of her sources — most of which are interviewees with whom she met in the 1990s (pp. 146, 237).

Of late, William Fernie and his alleged perfidy have been subsumed in the local imagination by other tales, some of them with even weaker pedigrees. The shadowy outline of a “Ghostrider” on the cliffs above the town and an utterly invented and cheesy “mountain-man”-style mascot for the ski and tourism industries are more readily recognized icons. Both iconic newcomers function as devices for understanding gender, race, class, sexual, and other differences in the community. The imaging and imagining of history, community, who belongs and who does not, continues. It is, perhaps, less an academic exercise than an ongoing process in the modern and, yes, the post-modern age.

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