

Building Community in an Instant Town: A Social Geography of Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge, British Columbia by Greg Halseth and Lana Sullivan, xxvii + 310 pp. UNBC Press: Prince George (2002).

BC's single-industry communities that lie outside the Province's heartland of the Lower Mainland and Southern Vancouver Island have experienced a dreadful pummelling over the last quarter century. Because of technological change, alterations in labour practices, failing global markets, hostile trade acts, and diminished resource bases, to name just a few of the body blows, single industry communities are reeling. There is not much sense of this, though, in Halseth and Sullivan's book about the emergence and subsequent trajectory of two of BC's recently formed single industry communities: Mackenzie, incorporated in 1966, and a product of the forest products industry, and Tumbler Ridge, incorporated in 1981, and a result of coal extraction. Rather, Halseth and Sullivan offer an often insular and celebratory reading of the two towns, ignoring the larger tumultuous and sometimes-violent context in which they are embedded emphasizing instead the salve of community.

It is not exactly clear what they mean by community, though. They provide an encyclopaedic listing of formal and informal community groups found in both towns, as well as an equally encyclopaedic listing of community events. But surely, these are only the means by which community is expressed rather than being community itself. Further, there is no sense of people within either community. No one speaks. Apart from the Preface where two men associated with respectively Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge provide personal testimonies, we do not hear voices from the towns. There are only lists and desiccated tables of figures. Perhaps this feature is the oddest of all. Greg Halseth, in particular, is passionate about BC's small communities, and holds a CRC chair in Rural and Small Town Studies at UNBC. His media interviews are full-blooded and compelling in part because he talks about people and their sometimes difficult lives in single industry towns. But this is not often apparent here.

The first half of the book is better than the second. Divided into four parts, the book's first two sections discuss the founding of Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge, and the socio-economic relations that sustain them. Both communities were the consequence of BC's 1965 Instant Towns Act, legislation that allowed the rapid construction and political incorporation of towns based on the development of remote resource sites. In Mackenzie's case, this was the forest resource of the central interior, and in Tumbler Ridge's case, it was deposits of North-east coal. In both instances, they were fully planned communities, the model being Kitimat designed in the early 1950s by the prominent US planner, Clarence Stein, who was associated with the garden-city movement. Driving Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge were not bucolic hinterland activities of the kind usually envisaged in the garden-city movement, though, but gritty staple resources: two-by-fours, kraft pulp, and coal. Halseth and Sullivan do a good job in discussing the nature of staples production in Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge. Still mainly "men's work," it is linked to relatively high wages, high rates of unionisation, and periodic employment fluctuations. Empirically they also do well in discussing housing and the gender relations that stem from such staples work – flat-line or declining housing value in real terms, low female wages in both full-time and part-time work, and strains on family life because of shift work. Lacking, however, is interpretation, any wider corpus of ideas that animate and provide meaning to what we are told.

This problem is exacerbated in the book's remaining two sections that discuss respectively civic and civil society. Civic society means for Halseth and Sullivan government, and the provision of government-funded services. So, we are given lists of committees, committee memberships, town councillors, flow charts of committee structures, and budget statements. But there is neither explanation, nor a conceptual framework to interpret them. At least in my discipline of geography, of which Greg Halseth is also a member, there has been a sustained theoretical discussion since the late 1970s about the state at every geographical scale, and its relationship across scales. All this work is ignored. The discussion of civil society is perhaps even more unimaginative. The two chapters in this section provide a comprehensive inventory of all formal and informal community organizations, and a calendar of events for each month of the year. But no wider ideas are provided to make sense of what any of it means.

The single industry communities of British Columbia, of which Mackenzie and Tumbler Ridge are part, deserve to have their story told. I'm convinced this is possible only by setting such communities against the larger canvas of industrial capitalism, and the full body of literature and ideas that exist to understand it. Halseth and Sullivan seem to think that relating only the narrow, internal facts of community life are enough. They are not. It is thin description. As a result, an opportunity has been lost to tell an important narrative about a seemingly abiding feature of BC's geography that turns out not to be so abiding, the single industry town.

Trevor J. Barnes
Department of Geography
University of British Columbia