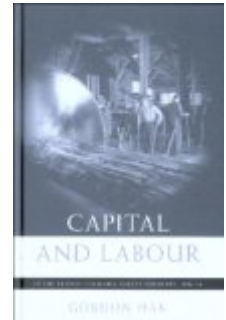




Gordon H. Hak. *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934-74.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007. 258 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7748-1308-2.



Reviewed by Benjamin Isitt

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Commissioned by Stephanie Bangarth (King's University College, UWO)

Gordon Hak provides a comprehensive picture of British Columbia's most important industry during the heyday of Fordist capitalism. Combining hands-on experience of the work process with original archival research, Hak explores patterns of ownership, state regulation, labor relations, technology, and the emergence of the environmental movement. His fluid and detailed narrative raises the bar for business and labor history.

Hak traces continuity and change in British Columbia's logging, sawmilling, and pulp and paper sectors. He engages debates on Fordism and postwar industrial relations, and examines changes in forestry during capitalism's "long boom," the period of economic expansion and state regulation from the 1930s to the 1970s. This book is cut from a different cloth than such boosterist business histories as G. W. Taylor's *Timber: A History of the Forest Industry in British Columbia* (1975), Donald MacKay's *Empire of Wood: The Macmillan Bloedel Story* (1982), and Ken Drush-

ka's biography of H. R. Macmillan (1995), providing an even-handed treatment of capital and labor.

Hak maps the interconnected patterns of ownership among logging, sawmill, and pulp and paper operations on British Columbia's coast and interior. He illuminates the process of corporate consolidation and vertical integration, and locates forest communities as "nodes in the global capitalist economy" (p. 40). Pulp and paper, in particular, required large-scale capitalization, provided by American, British, French, Swedish, and Japanese firms. Wood pulp was exported in a semi-processed state for manufacturing and consumption elsewhere.

Export-oriented economic relationships made British Columbia forestry firms and workers--and the province generally--highly susceptible to fluctuations in global supply, commodity prices, and capital flows. Within unions, such as the International Woodworkers of America (led by Communists until 1948) and the Pulp, Sulphite, and Pa-

permill Workers, economic dependency and top-down union hierarchies fueled robust antiimperialist sentiments and spawned secessionist movements. Economic volatility translated into political volatility. The old-line provincial Liberal and Conservative parties were relegated to the sidelines for the closing half of the twentieth century, as the populist Social Credit and New Democratic parties ruled.

Hak effectively demonstrates the contradictions of Fordism, which “generated more goods to satisfy consumers” but simultaneously “produced routine, mind-numbing workdays for employees” (p. 192). As the educational level of workers rose, against the backdrop of automation and a widening radicalism in the 1960s and early 1970s, the structures of Fordism provoked an unprecedented level of illegal “wildcat” strikes. One-third of British Columbia’s unionized workers walked picket lines in 1972, the year voters turfed out Social Credit and propelled the New Democratic Party to power.

Hak does a good job locating his topic within a broad, interdisciplinary literature on forestry and environmental politics. Studies by environmental historians Richard Rajala and Patricia Marchak, geographer Roger Hayter, and political scientist Jeremy Wilson inform his Fordist approach: “Business and radical environmentalists inhabited different ideological landscapes” (p. 178). Growth and sustained yield shaped the practices of logging companies, a view generally shared by labor unions. Environmentalists, in contrast, challenged the logic of Fordist economic growth. Denuded landscapes and ravaged rivers provoked the ire of city-dwellers, who joined an array of environmental groups, while industrial pollutants and depleted resources transformed the conservationist ethos within the resource-dependent working class.

The weaknesses of this book largely relate to its breadth, particularly the inclusion of the

coastal and interior forestry sectors into a single monograph. The two sectors were starkly different, owing to variations of climate and terrain that necessitated divergent patterns of profitability, ownership, and technology. Coastal forestry was grounded in the extraction of massive old-growth trees, with the highest volume of timber and highest grade of wood in the world. Interior forestry, in contrast, was dependent on smaller trees and shorter harvesting seasons, and therefore produced enterprises with narrower profit margins and more modest returns. Ownership was more home-grown, reflected in 750 small-scale sawmilling operations at mid-century compared with 50 firms along the coast. Hak’s transitions between the two sectors are sometimes abrupt, breaking the flow of an otherwise smooth and engaging narrative.

On the whole, Hak has produced an important study that augments our understanding of British Columbia, its forest industry, and the Fordist era generally--and challenges prevailing approaches to business and working-class history. Hak’s book is thoroughly researched, wisely structured, and well written.

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