

Chad Reimer. *Before We Lost the Lake: A Natural and Human History of Sumas Valley*. Halfmoon Bay, BC: Caitlin Press, 2018. 255 pp.

“In May and June this prairie is completely covered with water. The Sumass river, from the rapid rise of the Fraser, reverses its course, and flows back into the land instead of out of it. The lake fills, overflows, and completely floods the lower lands. On the subsistence of the waters, we pitched our tents on the edge of a lovely stream. Wildlife were in abundance; the streams were alive with fish; the mules and horses revelling in grass kneedeep – we were in a second Eden!” (John Lord qtd in 10)

With these words written by British naturalist John Lord in 1866, Chad Reimer begins his history of Sumas Lake, and how it was “lost.” Much of the Central Fraser Valley was covered by the lake, and when spring freshets arrived, the lake expanded to an incredible size. Millions of waterfowl arrived to breed each year. Salmon and sturgeon teemed in the lake’s shallow waters. For local first peoples, it was in fact a kind of “Eden” – except, perhaps, for the clouds of mosquitoes and midges that unbearably tormented human and beast.

Chad Reimer mentions Mennonites only once in *Before We Lost the Lake*, and yet the relevance of the book to the Mennonite story is obvious. From 1929 onward, Mennonite immigrants and refugees arrived in the warm and fertile Fraser Valley. Their aptitude for farming soon raised them from poverty to prosperity. Yet, few of them – perhaps none – would have questioned the value of draining Sumas Lake, even though a landscape was devastated and, more importantly, writes Reimer, an aboriginal way of life was stolen.

The author begins with prehistory. It is usually assumed, says Reimer, that the Fraser was the most important of the rivers to flow into the lake. The Nooksack from the south, the Sumas from the northeast, and the Chilliwack from the east all played a greater role in the formation and continuance of the lake than did the Fraser. Then, as early as 7000 BC, the first peoples arrived. According to Sto:lo oral tradition, the lake people were called the Sema:th; Sumas Lake was so central to their lives that they called it simply “the lake.” Their largest community may have been situated at the mouth of the Sumas River, a key location from which to watch for war parties, particularly the Cowichan, raiding from the west coast.

With the BC Gold Rush of 1858, the ancient ways of the Valley’s first peoples changed forever. It is not well known, writes Reimer, that gold miners often travelled north through Sema:th territory, and the local First Nations soon learned to charge them dearly for guiding them and canoeing them across the lake. British and American surveyors, charged with precisely locating the 49th parallel, arrived at roughly the same time (John Lord was among them).

Settlers were appearing in the Fraser Valley as well. Unusually, Reimer writes, many Valley pioneers consisted of entire families – men, women, and children. Their relations with the Sema:th were generally cordial, but epidemics, especially smallpox, arrived with them. The Sema:th had little resistance to European diseases, and they died by the thousands. In Sto:lo oral tradition, the story is told of a village where a single boy remained. He travelled to another village, where he found a single girl survivor. The two then lived together.

The desperate story that followed could have been very different for the Indigenous. James Douglas, first governor of the colony of British Columbia, was married to a Métis woman and sympathized with the aboriginals who were being squeezed out of their land by European immigrants. The “Douglas Reserves” that were allocated to the Sema:th under his watch were large, and the local Indigenous expressed their satisfaction. However, Joseph Trutch, a

bureaucrat working under Douglas, worked to cut the Sema:th reserves to tiny and often useless plots of land. Fatefully, Trutch was later to become governor of British Columbia.

The vast wetlands of Sumas Lake, writes Reimer, were considered wastelands by European planners and settlers. Nearly from year one of settler arrivals, the drainage, or “reclamation,” or even “redemption” of Sumas Lake was visualized. Proposals to drain the lake came and went over the last half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Plans were hampered by government bungling and business scams.

Finally, the reclamation actually happened, to the disbelief of the Sema:th, who had seen so many proposals and projects fail that they believed the lake would never be drained. But it was, and their way of life vanished after dykes were built, pumps installed, and land moved between 1920 and 1924. Reimer writes: “Planners and engineers of the Sumas drainage project did not foresee the impact of their works on the natural hydrology of the Sumas and Fraser Valleys. Nor did they foresee their effect on Sumas Lake’s rich and complex web of plant and animal life. Like others in their profession, the drainage engineers were largely blind to this organic world, what we today call its ecosystem. They viewed the natural world not as a living organism, but as a machine” (208).

A historical bias, yes, but certainly defensible. With his meticulous research, Chad Reimer may have written the definitive story thus far on the draining of Sumas Lake. Reimer earned his PhD at York University and has written several local histories, including *Chilliwack’s Chinatowns*. He lives in Chilliwack.

*Before We Lost the Lake* is available at bookstores and online, and can be accessed in the MHSBC library.