

In Nature's Realm by Michael Layland

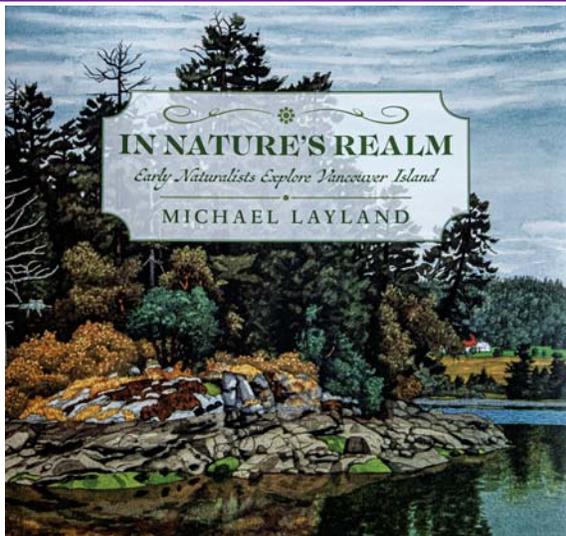
A Book Review by Stephen Ruttan

Michael Layland has done it again. In the past few years he has written award-winning books on the early map-makers and explorers of Vancouver Island. Now he has turned his attention to the naturalists. In his new book he has prepared a major study of the early naturalists who explored Vancouver Island. To say this fills a gap in our knowledge is an understatement. To my knowledge we have had nothing like it. Now, though, we have a large, comprehensive work, that covers many people and topics. For some of us it opens up a whole new area of study.

In his introduction, Layland tells us that the book is divided into four parts. First comes indigenous knowledge and use of the region. In the next section, he covers the earliest European records. This was a golden age of European discovery, and included people such as Cook from Britain, and Malaspina from Spain. The third part is the settlement area, with the settlers writing about the nature of their new surroundings. The fourth section of the book is especially wide-ranging. He writes about organized expeditions, such as those of the federal government. But he also has chapters on special topics, such as women and botany, and the history of importing songbirds to this region.

The chapter on Indigenous use shows the book's diversity. He describes the different Indigenous groups, and their use of the land and sea. But he also covers some special topics. He has a section on the clam gardens constructed by local groups. He writes on Nancy Turner, and her important studies on local ethnobotany. And, on a topic new to me, he writes about the bird-net poles, up to thirty metres high, that were constructed by Indigenous people to catch migrating waterfowl.

From pre-contact times till the First World War, Layland covers the work of many naturalists. Some, such as David Douglas and John Macoun, are well known. Others, such as many on the Spanish ships, are almost unknown.



Sometimes the famous and the obscure complement each other. Archibald Menzies, for example, was one of the most important collectors on the coast, and has a whole chapter devoted to his career. But important to understanding Menzies work is the research of a twentieth century scientist, Eric Groves. Groves has researched and written several papers on Menzies' work. These papers are central to our understanding of Menzies, and Layland includes an article on him in the Menzies chapter.

As well as text, the book includes dozens of illustrations which complement the writing. Layland has obviously searched far and wide for the appropriate pictures; I see, for example, that some come from institutions in Madrid. But some of the best comes from right here at home. Botanical and landscape paintings by Emily Carr, Emily Sartain, E. J. Hughes, and others show how our natural world has inspired some of our best artists.

Finally, I would like to mention something that might get overlooked: the notes and bibliography. Not only has Layland created the basic text for this subject, but in his twelve pages of notes and eight pages of bibliography he takes us much beyond the bounds of this book. The bibliography is very wide-ranging, and some items might be hard to discover on your own. This will be a standard reference text on Vancouver Island for years to come.

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Friends of Ecological
Reserves
PO Box 8477 Stn Central
Victoria, BC V8W 3S1

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ecoreserves@hotmail.com

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