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The Colony of Vancouver Island: 1849 to 1855

In 1846 Great Britain and the United States resolved the question of sovereignty, or political control, to the territory that was the Columbia District of the Hudson's Bay Company. Notwithstanding its bombastic threat to fight, the latter did not succeed in its demand that American control extend to the latitude of 54° 40'.

The boundary of the 49th parallel was extended westward from east of the Rockies except for the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Fort Victoria had been established on this tip in 1843. The actual location of the boundary through the Gulf Islands, however, would result in another international incident between Britain and the United States, with the latter threatening as before to go to war unless it got its way. This was the infamous "Pig's War" in 1859.

By 1849 Fort Victoria had replaced Fort Vancouver as the headquarters and main depot of the HBC on the West Coast. Under the terms of the Oregon Treaty, the HBC retained navigational rights on the Columbia River and retained its property south of the 49th parallel. Initially the Company planned to continue to use the brigade trail from Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River to access its trading posts north of the boundary.

These plans were quickly changed by two events:

- American import duties on goods brought in or out of Fort Vancouver; and

- bitter warfare in the region between the First Nations and the newly arrived settlers who were taking over the former's traditional lands.

In her history of British Columbia (*British Columbia: A History*, 1958, MacMillan) Margaret Ormsby, at page 128, writes "Overzealous American customs officers in the Puget Sound ports often caused the Hudson's Bay Company, which still had posts on American soil, much embarrassment by their interpretation and application of American revenue laws." *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

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The year 1847 witnessed the last fur caravan travelling the brigade trail from Fort Kamloops to Fort Vancouver. A new route to the coast was found—from Fort Kamloops down the Thompson River, then overland to a new post, Fort Hope, and down the Fraser River to Fort Langley, the terminus of the Hope brigade trail.

Even though the Hudson's Bay Company had lost its trading rights in its Columbia District, up to 1859 it still

had the exclusive trading rights in the territory north of the 49 parallel and west of the Rockies. This region comprised the District of New Caledonia and the remainder of the District of Columbia. In 1849 the population on the Island and the Mainland remained predominately aboriginal. The small non-aboriginal population was comprised mainly of Hudson's Bay Company men and its employees—Europeans and Hawaiians, or "Kanakas" as they were called.

In 1849 the British government had little interest in the region in the Pacific North West over which it now had sovereignty. Notwithstanding its indifference, it did not plan to abandon its sovereignty to the region. The opportunity to establish a naval station at Esquimalt on Vancouver Island for its Pacific Fleet ensured its continued interest.

This was especially true in 1854 at the outbreak of the Crimean War between Great Britain and Russia. Britain needed its Pacific station and also did not want the region to fall under the control and sovereignty of the United States. Nevertheless, it was the discovery of gold in 1858—with the ensuing flood of non-aboriginal people into the region, the majority being Americans, many of whom were eager to make the region part of the United States—that forced Great Britain to assert its control over British Columbia.

Britain wanted to maintain its presence on the cheap. In a unique

proposal, the government proposed to privatize the administration and responsibility of colonizing settlements on Vancouver Island. It agreed to have the HBC act as its agent to colonize the Island.

In 1849 the British government made a deal with the Company. Under a grant made by Royal Proclamation, the HBC was given absolute lordship over, and proprietorship of, Vancouver Island in return for payment of a nominal rent of 7 shillings and an agreement by the Company to create a colony of British subjects within five years. This arrangement was met with opposition in Britain.

Then, as today, people were opposed to privatization. But then as now, the issue of saving money was crucial. The costs of governing the Island were to be recovered from the sale of land and natural resources. To ensure the HBC did in fact bring in settlers, the agreement was conditional. If, after five years had lapsed the HBC had not established a settlement, the land would revert back to

the Crown and the Company would receive no compensation.

Even if the Company did create a settlement, in 1859 at the end of its monopoly in trading rights, its proprietary rights on Vancouver Island would also terminate although the Company would be reimbursed for its expenditures and property. The government also retained the right to appoint the new Governor to the new Colony of Vancouver Island. It was concerned about the willingness of the HBC to bring in settlers and create a colony.

In 1850 the first Governor of the Colony of Vancouver Island, Richard Blanshard, arrived in Fort Victoria. There was no private residence for him, no civil servants, no police, no army, and no jail. He had accepted the post without pay on the belief he would be granted substantial land; he was mistaken. He soon discovered he had no real authority. The real power on the Island remained

with the Hudson's Bay Company and its Chief Factor, James Douglas.

Almost everyone on the Island worked for the Company and followed the decisions of the Chief Factor. Blanshard quickly became frustrated in his attempts to act as Governor and asked to be recalled. In 1851 the British government recognized the tacit political control of the HBC and appointed James Douglas as Governor of Vancouver Island. He also remained as Chief Factor of the Company.

The Company began efforts to establish a settlement. They came to a halt, however, in 1849 when news of the discovery of gold in California resulted in a mass desertion from the Fort of almost all tradesmen. Even so the Company itself continued to prosper; it expanded its commercial activities to meet the new demands for materials and food in California.

Although in the New Caledonia District and in the Yukon, the Company

continued to pursue its traditional role as fur trader, commercial activities now replaced this role on Vancouver Island.

But even in New Caledonia, the fur trade continued to decline in importance. Silk hats had become the fashion and the demand for beaver pelts slumped. And the animals were being trapped out.

The Company had extensive agricultural activities at Fort Langley and on the Island. The Puget's Sound Agricultural Company—whose shareholders were Company men who had established a large farm in the Cowlitz Valley, now south of the border—acquired four farms in the vicinity of Fort Victoria: Colwood, Craigflower, Viewfield, and Constance Cove.

Gentlemen bailiffs managed these farms for the plan was to create a local squire-archy that would introduce the customs of the English landed gentry. Captain Edward Langford was bailiff of Colwood Farm where he entertained lavishly, at the expense of the Company. Other operations—salted salmon and sawmills for lumber—were established by the Company, primarily for export.

Then coal beds were discovered on the Island and in 1852, a mining centre was opened at Nanaimo. Scottish miners were brought out to the Colony but many fled to the goldfields of California. Indians, men and women, were relied on to mine the open-faced pits.

On the Island, James Douglas and the Company were attempting to fulfill the agreement to create a British colony. Settlers were needed. Douglas wanted settlers to get free grants of 200 to 300 acres. He was overruled by officials in England who adhered to theories that land must be high-priced to ensure that only “quality settlers” would colonize the Island and who in turn would uphold the social standards of Victorian England.

Unfortunately many of this class of settler brought with them the English upper-class prejudice against trade and commerce. And to keep out the “riff-

raff,” the price of land was set at £1 an acre, with a minimum purchase of 20 acres. If 100 acres was bought, the purchaser was required to bring out five single men or three married couples. In contrast, free grants of 640 acres in Oregon were available for settlers. As a result, many of the labourers brought out to work on the farms left for free land in the United States.

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The social life at Fort Victoria was changing rapidly with the increase of English settlers and visiting naval officers. The Fort was becoming a “little England,” which meant unfortunately that the English class system was introduced. The wives of many of the officials of the Company were of mixed blood, as was Mrs. Douglas, and they were not accepted fully into the changing social life of the Colony by some of the newcomers. Years later, Amelia Douglas, the first Lady of British Columbia, received the honour of a private audience with Queen Victoria.

One problem facing the HBC was that the colony was remote from England. The sea voyage was not for the faint-hearted. English settlers took six months to arrive at Victoria. Among the many hazards on the voyage were fierce storms and the outbreak of disease aboard the leaky, filthy, rat-infested ships. Food was bug-infested. Quarters were cramped and overcrowded.

On arrival many were disappointed. Life was not easy in the new colony. There was little accommodation available for newcomers, especially if they were not Hudson's Bay Company people. What accommodation there was, was very primitive. The Colony suffered from a lack of skilled labour, servants, and

tradesmen—most had run off to the goldfields in California.

If a settler wished to purchase goods or materials, he had to deal with the HBC— at inflated prices. The Company dominated all the aspects of living at Fort Victoria and non-Company settlers resented it. These newcomers blamed Douglas and the Company for their discomforts and disillusion, even though Douglas was an able administrator who worked diligently and capably to improve matters.

The newcomers also complained about the high cost of living; goods had to be bought from the Company, who marked trade goods up to California prices: 300 percent over cost. But come they did: Dr. Helmcken, Captain Langford and his family (George Langford was the first white child born in BC), Captains Grant and Cooper, and the McKenzies and Skinners with their families.

On the other hand, the newcomers also brought diseases: smallpox, measles, scarlet fever, influenza, etc. These diseases had a devastating effect on the native population who had never been introduced to them and had no immunity.

What about the First Nations peoples? In establishing Fort Victoria, the Hudson's Bay Company occupied lands that the local natives had considered their land since time immemorial. The government advised Douglas that the First Nations should be allowed to keep possession of the lands they occupied and cultivated.

If the First Nations were living in areas on Vancouver Island where Europeans wanted to settle, then Douglas—between 1850 and 1854—entered into 14 “Treaties.” In exchange for a small sum of money, the First Nations peoples involved surrendered their title to all land within a designated area “forever,” except for their village sites and cultivated fields. They were also allowed to hunt over unoccupied lands and to carry on their fisheries.

Fort Victoria by mid-1850 was the centre for trade by the Company, whose commercial activities extended south to San Francisco, north to Alaska, and west to Hawaii. Its European population was expanding rapidly; churches were established and schools built. In 1855 the Craigflower, currently the oldest surviving schoolhouse in BC, was opened.

But the social and economic life of the Colony was dependent on the Company. Many newcomers resented this and complained to the Colonial Office about what they perceived as a monopoly over all aspects of life in the Colony. These complaints increased after Douglas appointed his brother-in-law, David Cameron, as judge of the new Supreme Court of Civil Justice. When confronted with the assertion that Cameron had no legal training, Douglas responded that neither did anyone else in the colony.

One result of the petitions to London was the creation in 1856 of a representative

legislative assembly, even though only 43 European men could vote because they met the eligibility requirement of owning 20 acres. Little changed, however, as the majority of members of the new assembly were Company men.

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In 1855 the first census revealed that about 200 non-native inhabitants resided in Fort Victoria, with another 350 living on the nearby farms. Nanaimo had 150 settlers and handfals were scattered throughout posts in New Caledonia and

at other posts and properties of the Company. (See: Jean Barman in *The West Beyond The West. A History of British Columbia* [1991, University of Toronto Press] page 61.)

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The Gold Rush was what kept the region British. The flood of aliens forced Great Britain to act to assert its control over the Mainland by creating a new colony: the Colony of British Columbia. ▲

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