

## Introduction: Native People in British Columbia

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This issue of *Native Studies Review* highlights recent research undertaken by graduate students and faculty in the History Department at the University of British Columbia pertaining to the province's Native People. In *Contact and Conflict* (1976),<sup>1</sup> Robin Fisher employed the standard chronological and conceptual framework for Native history in British Columbia, which divides the post-contact era into two stages—the fur trade and missionary/settler eras. According to this scenario, the heyday of the fur trade was a time of “undirected culture change,” when Native people still maintained a high degree of control over their lives and more or less freely determined which aspects of European culture to incorporate into their traditional societies. Conversely, the missionary/settler era is envisioned as being a time of “directed culture change,” when Native people were pushed to the margins of the emerging settler-dominated regional economy and society and lost control of their affairs.

The problems with this simplistic two-stage model have been known for some time. For the early period, for example, it focuses our attention too much on furs at the expense of other commodities, such as fish, which loomed so large in exchange. This view of history also underestimates the changes that Europeans wrought in the Native world through early commercial relations. Conversely, this two-stage model has led historians to underrate the agency of Native people during the missionary/settler era and minimize the contribution they made to later economic development. Anthropologist Rolf Knight was the first to take issue with the latter practice. In his highly innovative study, *Indians at Work*,<sup>2</sup> Knight took particular exception to Fisher's study for this reason. Knight noted that Native people took a very active part in all of the major resource industries of British Columbia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The failure to explore this dimension of the Aboriginal history of the province means that we lack the historical perspective with which to understand the roots of many of the concerns and problems Native people face today. The essays presented here continue to address this issue by

looking at a variety of resource-related aspects of the history of Native people in British Columbia.

It is well known that the salmon fishery was the mainstay of the subsistence economy of West Coast peoples for thousands of years. Less familiar is the fact that fishing for the purposes of extensive trade also was very important to many groups before and after contact. Keith Carlson, a Ph.D. candidate, provides evidence for this in a novel way by using linguistic data to demonstrate that a wide array of trafficking took place in the pre-contact world of the Stó:lö and with the Europeans immediately after contact.

Dianne Newell also addresses the issue of Aboriginal fishing and trading practices, particularly as they relate to the present-day controversy about whether Native people should have commercial rights to fish resources. Professor Newell explores the reasons why, until recently, scholars have downplayed, or ignored altogether, the participation of West Coast Aboriginal people in the pre- and post-contact trafficking and processing of fish. Newell reminds us that the voluminous social science literature that is the legacy of this early work is what informs Canada's judges today—judges who are being asked to define Aboriginal rights in law. She also notes that the popular ignorance about Aboriginal fishing customs have often led government regulators to devise counter-productive and damaging fish management schemes. Carlson's and Newell's work is timely in light of recent Supreme Court of Canada rulings that have adversely affected Aboriginal fishing rights.<sup>3</sup>

Brenda Ireland looks at another dimension of the traditional Aboriginal economy—trapping and trading furs. However, she shifts the focus to the missionary/settler period. British Columbia was the first province in Canada to introduce a trapline registration program, a scheme that eventually became a central conservation strategy in the fur industry throughout most of Canada. Ireland's essay, a revision and expansion of her M.A. thesis research (1995), explores the range of Native people's response to this effort. Her study demonstrates that the fur trade remained an important component of many Aboriginal economies long after the imagined early contact "golden age" of the industry on the West Coast. Ireland also makes it clear that Aboriginal people immediately understood that the effort of the state to manage fur and game resources had major implications for their land claims struggles. For the first time she also details how they sought to deal with this issue. By including the Treaty 8 area of British Columbia in her study, Ireland demonstrates that treaties provided little protection for Aboriginal economic rights.

Dan Marshall, who is completing his doctorate, focuses his attention on the Fraser River gold-rush, which historians have long regarded as being the herald of a new era in Aboriginal-Eurocanadian relations in British Columbia. Traditional approaches to this topic lionize Governor James Douglas for having established order in the region and thereby supposedly preventing any widespread bloodshed between the Natives and the gold-crazed newcomers. Marshall challenges this myth by showing that conflict was more widespread than previously thought and that Native leaders played a major role in keeping the peace. As his narrative unfolds, he also gives us a better picture both of Aboriginal participation in the gold-rush and of the darker side of the Americans who swept into the Fraser River territory and especially the salmon-rich Fraser Canyon, which was dotted with many ancient fishing sites. He vividly portrays how these newcomers attempted to apply in B.C. strong-arm tactics that they had developed on the mining frontiers of the American west.

Finally, Laura Cameron narrows our focus to a single place in the lower Fraser River Valley, Sumas Lake, a commons that was drained in the 1920s and remains alive only in the collective memories of the descendants of the Natives and white settlers who lived along or near its shores. This aspect of her M.A. thesis, completed in 1994, draws heavily on oral accounts, which she supplements with a wide array of documentary sources. Cameron explores the ways children and adults, males and females from two disparate cultural traditions perceived the lake and reacted to its transformation by "land reclamation" for the sake of "development." She accomplishes her objective by seeking to discover the kinds of "pleasure" Sumas Lake evokes in the collective memory of the local community. Her novel exploration offers us a highly innovative way to look at Native-Eurocanadian interaction on the land.

It is always difficult to predict the future research directions a discipline will take. This is especially the case with Native history, which has become increasingly interdisciplinary in scope and more responsive to First Nations' concerns and interests. The latter development does mean that the interest in resource access and management issues, the emphasis of this volume, is likely to remain a major area of concern for some time to come. This is especially likely in the aftermath of recent Supreme Court of Canada decisions concerning Aboriginal fisheries issues, particularly the *Van der Peet* ruling, which held that First Nations commercial rights to specific resources will be upheld if there is sufficient evidence to show that the trafficking in a given commodity was an essential part of a given First Nations' Aboriginal culture. Alone, this challenge will call for a Herculean

historical research effort along some of the paths explored here.

## Notes

- 1 Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774–1890* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977 [2nd ed. 1992]). This work was based on his Ph.D. dissertation, "Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774–1890," which he completed at University of British Columbia in 1974.
- 2 Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858–1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978).
- 3 For example, the 1996 decisions re: *R. v. Gladstone*, *R. v. Van der Peet* and *R. v. N.T.C. Smokehouse Ltd.* (Supreme Court of Canada).