

## Introduction: The Fraser River War

Daniel P. Marshall

The following document, here published for the first time, has been hidden in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (Colonial Correspondence, GR 1372, Box 126: 1617, British Columbia Archives and Record Services). It is an exceptional primary source for placing the future Colony of British Columbia in the context of the transboundary west. More than thirty thousand goldseekers invaded the Native lands of B.C. in 1858, setting off Native-White conflict that Canadian historiography has usually isolated to events south of the forty-ninth parallel. Yet, in the absence of fully constituted British authority, the Fraser River landscape more closely resembled the American West, especially as described by Captain Snyder to Governor Douglas in the aftermath of the Fraser River War. Snyder outlined to Douglas how a large foreign mining population had effectively taken the law into its own hands. He warned that a war of extermination had been contemplated by miners, reflecting the similar genocidal attitudes of the California gold fields. Finally, he said that well-armed Euro-Americans not only overrode British sovereignty prior to the establishment of the colony, 19 November 1858, but that a significant number of Treaties of Peace were concluded by them in an event that effectively broke the back of full-scale Native resistance and ultimately precipitated the formation of Indian reserves.

In the discourse that follows, "democratically elected officers mustering under arms" is language typical of the settler-armies that formed to prosecute the Indian Wars of the 1850s in Washington and Oregon. And just as Native peoples and mining populations were not defined by the international border, neither was the kind of racism and armed conflict that inevitably marched north into Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Document One: H.M. Snyder, letter to James  
Douglas, Fraser River, Fort  
Yale, 28th August 1858

To His Excellency  
James Douglas  
Governor of Vancouvers Island

Dear Sir

Having just returned from a short campaign up to Thompson River, to suppress the out breaks of the indians, that had occurred on Frazer River.<sup>2</sup> It had become so alarming that the miners had been driven from their claims. From within fourteen miles of the forks as far down as to the Indian Rancherie,<sup>3</sup> twelve miles above this place. In fact so alarming was the news from above that hundreds were leaving this place to returne to their homes. My resolve was soon made and I will no[w] procede to give you an abstract of my plan and proceding. On the 16th of the above month a company was formed to procede at once up the river. And by a unanimous vote I was elected their Captain.<sup>4</sup> Being delayed in making our arrangements, we did not leave this place [Fort Yale] until the morning of the 17th. Two miles from this place we came to a halt, when I called the role and found that fifty-two men answered to their names. When I stated the object I had in view, and the manner in which I intended to procede, which was to take an interpreter with us and make pease with the Indians by peasible means if we could, and by force if we must, on those terms I would consent to be their commander and on no others. On taking the vote an unanimous consent was given. We then elected our other officers and took up our line of march for the river below Saylors bar<sup>5</sup> which is eight miles from this place.

On our approaching the river we could heare and see a few Indians at a distance but on arriving at the river none of the Indians was to be seene. We came to a halt. I then in company with the captain of the Austrain [French] Company that joined us at this place, which consisted of eighty men, and taking our interpreter, we three proceded down the river for three quarters of a mile when we saw an Indian.<sup>6</sup> Our interpreter called him to us. [W]hen he told him our object we then proceded down some 2 miles farther when the Indian gave one yell. And then you could see the Indians coming in every direction from the mountains, gulches, ravines & bushes.



Here in the presence of all of them, we made a Treaty of pease with them and after stating our object they appeared to be highly delighted with what we had proposed to them. The Chief sent his son with us an[d] two other Indians. We proceded to the indian Rancherie above some five miles farther up.<sup>7</sup> Here we found 2 other companys and quite a large number of miners that had been driven from their claims above.<sup>8</sup> We camped here for the night and held a counsil of war with some sixty indians, and pease was made with them at this place. I had a consultation with the 2 captains that we found at this place as their views were different from mine and the Captain of the Austrain Company. They wished to procede and kill every man, woman & child they saw that had Indian blood in them. To such an arrangement I could not consent to. My heart revolted at the idea of killing a helpless woman, or an innocent child was too horrible to think of. They requested me to state my views to the crowd which consisted from six to seven hundred. I consented to do so and after I was through, and on taking the vote, I found that they were almost unanimous in supporting my course.

The consequence was that next morning thirty one men joined my company swelling the number under my immediate command to Eighty-two men.<sup>9</sup> From this place we proceded on the morning of the 18th some five miles further up where we crossed the river to the eastside and then proceded to the foot of the big canion where we found Captain Grayham of the company that would not adopt our plan. I found that this course had driven the Indians into the mountains and that we would not be abel to see any if we could not come to a better understanding with each other. I againe solicited him to joine us, but he would not. I then stated to him that if he was still determined to persue his course, that I would returne with my men as I did not feel disposed to make so long & tedious a journey for nothing. He final[l]y consented to remaine where he was until I had went to the head of the canion. And if I could make pease with the Indians & send a white flag through the canion, that he would return to this place on those conditions and understanding. We took up our line of march taking the old Brigade Trail.<sup>10</sup> And encamped at night at the lakes ten miles from the foot of the canion. On the morning of the 19th we took up our line of march at 4 o'clock and by twelve we had reached the head of the big canion at what is called chinees camp. We ware not more than one & A half hours making pease with three different Chiefs, they appeared to rejoice to think that pease was to be restored. My next duty was to send a white flag to Capt. Grayham at the foot of the canion w[h]ich I immediately dispatched in charge of five men with the Chief's son as their guide, and urged them to make the distance by dark if possible.

On the morning of the 20th we took up our line of march after having notified the chinees that they must leave their claims for four weeks, or until such times as pease was restored. As they ware suspected of being partly the [means] of the difficult[y] with the Indians.<sup>11</sup> At the same time there was an unanimous vote given that their claims should be protected to them. After this we proceded on our mission accompanied by one of the chiefs to the first rancherie which is a few miles above Anderson River [near Boston Bar]. At this place we held another counsil and the same success met our efforts. From this place we took another chief with us and proceded on when we came to two other rancheries. This was something like twenty miles from the canon. [H]ere we ware compelled to halt for some time for the Chiefs to cross the river as they ware on the opposite side of the river. We made pease with them and proceded on againe some five miles where we camped for the night.

On the morning of the 21st we ware on our march by sunrise. This day we made pease with 4 different Chiefs and camped within seven miles of Thompson River. Here we was met by *Spinlum*.<sup>12</sup> The war chief of all the tribes for some distance up & down Frazer River and for one hundred miles up Thompson River they had heard of our coming & had sent a runner after him seventy five miles above the forks on Thompson & he had got the news and met us at the latter place. We held at this place a counsil of war with a large boddy of Indians [and] they ware well pleased with what we told them. Then the War Chief made a speech to the Indians that had collected together. He is a very cool calculating man and spoke to them for at leas[t] [a] half hour. At ten o'clock he left us, to meet us next morning at the forks, where we arrived at 9 o'clock, and raining at the time.<sup>13</sup> Here I proceded at once to hold our grand council which consisted of Eleven Chiefs and a very large number of other indians that had gathered from above and below. We stated to them that this time we came for pease, but if we had to come againe, that we would not come by hundreds, but by thousands and drive them from the river forever. They ware much suprised & frightened to see so many men with guns & revolvers. For in marching along in single file they looked to be three times the number their was.

We remained at this place but five hours, as we ware scant of provissions & had but little money. All we could get here was beef, and that was worth fifty cents, and but few had money to buy any. We then took up our line of march at 2 P.M. To returne we marched some fifteen miles and camped for the night. At day break we ware on the march on the morning of the 23rd and camped at Boston Bar at the mouth of Anderson River. The same evening, having made thirty miles this day, as most of our men ware out of provissions at this place



all we could get was twenty pounds of flower. The next morning at sunrise, the 24th, we ware on our line of march for the head of the big canon. We arrived there at 9 o'clock. At this place I sent a part of my men over the mountain trail in charge of my orderly Sargent, to see if they could meet any one packing provissions for my men. With the rest of my men I proceded through the canions taking with me the Chief from the head of the canon for the purpose of bringing him to Fort Yale. About midway of the canon we came to a large rancherie, after a short delay. The chief of those Indians came with us. Still farther down we came to another rancherie, and brought their Chief with us. We came through the canions safe and camped at the Indian village [Spuzzum] twelve miles from Fort Yale after having performed one of the hardest days labour that it ever fell to the lot of men to performe, half starved, waren down with fatigue and some of them bare-footed. There we camped for the night and among all of my men there was not enough provissions for to make a meal for three men.

At this place I saw one of the men that came through the canon with the white flag. From him I learnt the following particulars of the fate of Capt. Grayham & his Lieutenant.<sup>14</sup> He stated to me that on the evening of the 19th instant, when within 4 miles of the foot of the canon he met Capt. Grayham & a part of his men just at dusk. The first thing Grayham [had] done was to order his men to take the white flag that I had sent to him and throw it away, which was done. One of my men went and picked it up and slept on it the balance of the night.

They then layed down, my men some two or three rods from the rest. He says, if Grayham had any guard posted that they must of been a sleep. About twelve o'clock they ware arroused from their sleep by the firing of some guns. Grayham was shot through the back at the first [fire] and died some two hours afterwards. He thinks that the Indians had watched him, if it was Indians, and had scene the treatement he gave the white flag. His firs[t] Lieutenant was also killed in the first firing. Had he of done as he promised to do he would now be alive. On the morning of the 25th we marched into Fort Yale at eleven o'clock after being absent nine days. Woren down and many of them bare footed & their clothes all mos[t] torn off. We hard traveled at least two hundred & ten miles in nine days by forced marching on the account of being short of provissions.

Much credit is due to Mr. Yates our interpreter for assisting in laying the foundation of our good work.<sup>15</sup> To Mr. Battiece, our other interpreter, much credit is due for without him I do not believe we would of seen one dozen of indians. To those noble generous hearted men that volunteered and was under my command, to[o] much praise can not be awarded to them. They packed their own blanketts, provissions & guns and was at all times willing to obey my orders & to execute my commands. It is true we are all of us strangers & in a foreign

land seperated from all the fond ties that bind the loving heart to their native homes. But from this you will see that they ware ever ready and willing to take up armes to have redress of which we had so much to complain of, and hoping at the same time it will meet with your approval.

I have the honour of subscribing  
my humble name to this.

H.M. Snyder

To His Excellency  
James Douglas  
Victoria, Vancouvers Island

P.S. To the annexed you will find a list of the officers & men that served under me as their Captain. Should you have it in your power to recompence them for their service, it will be thankfully received and they are worthy of it. I feele well satisfied that the Treaty was the best that could be made under the circumstances, and think it will be held sacred by the Indians.

I have given each man a certificate that served in my company.

P.S. For the true statement of the above I would refer you to all my men, and to the captain of the Austrin company who will be in your city by the time this reaches you. His name is John Centras.

## Notes

- 1 A transboundary exploration of the kind of full-scale Native resistance described here is developed in Daniel P. Marshall, "Claiming the Land: The Fraser River Gold Rush and the 'Conquest' of Native Lands" (presented to the Canadian Historical Association Conference, Montreal, 26 August 1995).
- 2 The expedition marched from the territory of the *Stó:lō* into that of the *Nlaka'pamux* or Thompson Natives.
- 3 *Rancherie* is a Spanish term for village that was used throughout the Californian gold fields.
- 4 H.M. Snyder, Captain of the Pike Guards and Commander of the Company. Snyder was also a special correspondent to the *San Francisco Bulletin*.
- 5 The place name Sailor's Bar still exists on Fraser River today.
- 6 Although referred to as the Austrian Company, this collection of miners was composed entirely of Frenchmen under the leadership of John Centras. The French along the river may have had an additional incentive in organizing for war in that it was the killing of two of their nationality that precipitated this major clash.

- 7 Near present-day Spuzzum at the confluence of the Spuzzum and Fraser rivers.
- 8 For a miner's reminiscence of being driven out of the Nlaka'pamux territory, see "A Pioneer of '58," in W.W. Walkem, *Stories of Early British Columbia* (1914), pp. 51-62.
- 9 Snyder provided Douglas with a list of names and officers of those under his command, and apparently issued a "certificate of membership" to each of the participants. Officers in the Pike Guards were Captain H.M. Snyder, 1st Lieutenant John Gordon, 2nd Lieutenant P.M. Warner, Orderly Sergeant D. McEarchern and Quarter Master P. Gascoigne.
- 10 The Hudson's Bay Company Brigade Trail.
- 11 A rumour was current at this time that the Chinese were in league with Natives and supplying them arms.
- 12 Chief Cixpe'ntlam of the Nlaka'pamux peoples.
- 13 The "Forks" were the confluence of the Fraser and Thompson Rivers, or present-day Lytton.
- 14 Graham was Captain of the "Whatcom Guards," of Whatcom County, Washington Territory.
- 15 Yates was an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Yale.