

Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990. (305 pp.)

This is a book with strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths are that the author deals with aspects of Native history in British Columbia that others have ignored and, on some points, presents new interpretations. Its weaknesses are that the coverage of that history is uneven, and the scholarship is not always impeccable.

There has long been a real need for writing on the history of Native people in 20th-century British Columbia. Until recently, scholars have focused on the 19th century, and this concentration has been particularly true of Native history. By describing the history of the Indian land question and Native politics in British Columbia from the beginnings to the present day, Paul Tennant has filled a major gap in the literature. He deals in some detail with colonial land policy and the dispossession of the Indians and then looks at the development of Native protest and politics, particularly in the last forty years. In a sense the first part of the book is about European actions and the second about Native responses. Tennant presents a strongly argued, revisionist point of view on some aspects of Native history. He is, for example, highly critical of those, like myself, who have argued that James Douglas was relatively generous, at least compared to what came later, in his treatment of Native people. On this point Tennant introduces a level of debate that is sorely needed in British Columbia history.

There are, however, some problems with this book and the first has to do with scholarship and evidence. There is an example of this concern in the very first paragraph of chapter one. Tennant asserts that today the estimate of pre-contact Aboriginal population of British Columbia is between 300,000 and 400,000. These numbers are higher than most scholars have advanced. The only evidence that Tennant offers to support his figures is a statement by the ethnographer Richard Inglis in the *Vancouver Sun*, 21 November 1987, that the population of the coast from California to Alaska was 500,000. Such evidence on a contentious issue is simply not good enough, and there is worse to follow. Tennant then goes on to say that lower estimates, among other things, serve "the implicit purpose of demeaning aboriginal claims and buttressing white myths" (p. 3). Aside from the fact that the high figures may also be politically motivated, it seems to me that scholarship on Native history is in big trouble if those who believe that the evidence points to a lower point-of-contact population figure than Tennant's unsubstantiated guesses are to be accused of denigrating Native claims.

Nor should Tennant's interpretation of James Douglas be allowed to go unchallenged. His disagreement with the line that I take in *Contact and Conflict* is more apparent than real. In developing his argument that governing-factor has been let off the hook by other scholars, Tennant first makes that point that the policy of non-recognition of Aboriginal title began before Douglas left office in 1864. This is not new. Others, including myself, make it clear that the shift on title came under Douglas. If title were the sole issue, then Tennant might have a good case. But as he himself notes a number of times, title was a major, but not the only issue. The question of Douglas's relative generosity also involves other aspects of policy, such as the size of Indian reserves. Here Tennant concludes, after a bit of massaging of the evidence, that Douglas's policy was to allocate only ten acres per Indian family. He makes much of Douglas's statement, uttered near the end of his governorship as he opened the British Columbia legislature, that the reserves he had laid out "in no case exceeded the proportion of ten acres for each family concerned" (pp. 33-34). Though it is open to interpretation, this comment could be taken as a statement of result, rather than intent. Moreover, as Tennant goes on to point out, though he refers to only two of a number of examples, some Douglas reserves were much larger than ten acres per family. Tennant also plays down the numerous letters in which Douglas instructed officials that reserves were to be laid out according to the wishes of the Indians. Though he is initially perplexed by Douglas's remark before the legislature, his puzzlement is quickly replaced by absolute certainty. Two pages later we are told that Douglas's "explicitly enunciated" policy was one of "allowing no more than ten acres per family" (p. 37). It is true that the Douglas record is not always consistent but, oddly for a political scientist, Tennant does not seem to entertain the possibility that Douglas's statement before the legislature was for public consumption and therefore perhaps we should rely more on the written record of his instructions to his officials.

There are other matters of detail on which Tennant's interpretation of Douglas can be questioned. He holds the governor culpable for not finding the money to deal with Indian land claims. After all, notes Tennant, Douglas was able to raise loans to build roads. He does not, however, go on to suggest which major financial institution would have been willing to advance a large sum of money to the government of the colony of British Columbia to extinguish Aboriginal title; nor does the fact that there was upwards of \$9,000 in the colonial estimates mean, particularly in the depressed conditions of 1864, that there was even one dollar of real money available for the purpose. On a more general level, Tennant's argument is confined to land policy and does not take in other

areas where Douglas tried to be even-handed, such as the application of law and order. And finally, even after he has done his best to blow the whistle on James Douglas, Tennant then goes on to concede that quite different and detrimental Indian policies emerged in British Columbia after he left office.

Tennant's book also takes on a rather different tone after he leaves the colonial period. The coverage is weighted at the two ends of British Columbia history. After a detailed account of the 19th century, he moves very rapidly through to the recent past. About half the book deals with the last four decades. In contrast to the critical and analytical tone of the first part of the book, the last part is largely descriptive. Tennant certainly does not apply the same scholarly rigour to his discussion of Native politicians that he does to James Douglas. We are rather presented with a succession of organizations and leaders with little overall analysis. Some of the generalizations that are made are unconvincing. For example, Tennant claims that early Native political organization represented the development of "pan-Indianism" (pp. 68ff). The concept is never well defined and, given the continued division between groups and organizations, difficult to sustain. Then in the 1970s "tribalism" is said to be re-established, making one wonder whether "pan-Indianism" had ever really existed. Tennant is able to write on recent Native politics because he has been very much involved in the events, even if only as an observer. Much of the evidence for this section comes from interviews with some of the players. It is a pity that there is no listing of the interviews in the bibliography and it would be most unfortunate if they have not been placed in archives. No scholar is ever objective, but, because of his personal involvement, Tennant tends to be somewhat partisan. He is particularly well disposed towards the views and actions of Bill Wilson. One can only hope that Tennant's is not the last word on Wilson, any more than he has had the last word on Douglas.

To return to my initial point, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics* has strengths as well as weaknesses. There is one theme that runs clearly and consistently through the book. The argument from beginning to end is that the Native people of British Columbia had a valid title to the land when the Europeans arrived, that their title has never been extinguished, and that they have been absolutely consistent in asserting these two points. Given the travesty of the recent judgment by Chief Justice Allan McEachern in the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en case, it is timely that we be reminded of these things. In that alone, Paul Tennant has made a valuable contribution.

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