

Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939

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Historians of British Columbia have seldom paid much heed to the province's modern social structure. Some have cast passing glances at the subject but, to date, none have undertaken its systematic study. In her general history of the province Margaret Ormsby emphasized the importance of its genteel Anglo-Canadian elite, the aggressive materialism of its political and economic leaders, and the rootlessness and volatility of its working men.¹ Labour historians have approached the problem from a rather different perspective, concerning themselves with the conflicts, institutions and ideologies of British Columbia's wage earners.² Students of race and ethnicity have examined cultural influences upon the structure of provincial society although, by and large, such concerns have been incidental to their interest in specific racial or ethnic groups.³ In recent years only Robert McDonald has directly confronted the problem in his work on the Vancouver business elite, one small but important segment of provincial society.⁴

To the extent that this question has been a subject of comment, class has long been the predominant concern, particularly among historians of

¹ Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto, 1958).

² Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston, 1968); Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1967); S. M. Jamieson, "Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-66," Task Force on Labour Relations, Study No. 22 (Ottawa, 1968); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto, 1977); David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto, 1978).

³ George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (New York and Toronto, 1968); Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of Japanese Canadians* (Toronto, 1976); W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal, 1978).

⁴ R. A. J. McDonald, "Business Leaders in Early Vancouver, 1890-1914" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1977). Patricia Marchak's "Class, Regional, and Institutional Sources of Social Conflict in B.C.," *BC Studies*, 27 (Autumn 1975), 30-49, examines the contemporary social structure of the province.

the left. On the whole their use of the term has been descriptive rather than analytic, unfortunately so for the concept of class is far from unambiguous. While the various theories of class need not detain us here, it should be noted at the outset that the concept can be employed both objectively and subjectively. In the former sense class often becomes a tool of social analysis. Criteria are established with which to define one or more groups or classes and then individuals are assigned to the categories so established.⁵ But class is also a reality to be felt and believed, a subjective condition experienced by all members of a community. It is in this sense that Edward Thompson, the noted historian of the English working class, uses the term, describing it as "a *historical* phenomenon . . . something which in fact happens (and can be showed to have happened) in human relationships."⁶ Of the two approaches the latter, with its emphasis on the subjective experience, seems to approach historical reality more closely and thus better helps us understand how past generations perceived and experienced their social relations. Consequently the term is here employed in this second, subjective sense and invokes the perception and experience of men and women who lived in British Columbia.

How, then, is social class linked to the problem of social boundaries? Simply put, consciousness of class is one of the major sources of social cleavage in modern communities. Through their mutual awareness as members of a group, with common interests, experiences, aspirations, and so on, people distinguish themselves from others who do not share these attributes. They perceive a gulf, of whatever dimensions, between "them" and "us." Furthermore, while usually well grounded in social and economic reality, such boundaries are ultimately of the mind. In one sense they exist because they are believed to exist, whatever the underlying reality. Thus in itself class consciousness creates lines of social demarcation, frontiers based on the belief that significant differences exist among various social groups.

The history of the labour movement in British Columbia reveals that radical and militant industrial unionism was pronounced in the province, especially during the first twenty years of this century. Bitter, protracted and sometimes violent confrontations between labour and capital recurred over these years, a time when working men also created their own political institutions and sought to mobilize support for a wide range of left-wing

⁵ This is the approach of John Porter in *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto, 1965), especially chapter 1.

⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, England, 1968), p. 9.

social, economic and political goals. These activities were concentrated in Vancouver, Victoria, the coal fields of Vancouver Island and the Crow's Nest Pass, and the hard rock mine towns of the Kootenays, although they also flared up from time to time in railway construction and lumber camps after the turn of the century. Most of the province's labour historians have implied, if not stated, that such developments were expressions of a working class consciousness fed by the migration to British Columbia of class-conscious British and American immigrants and fostered by the sharp class divisions characteristic of the resource extractive industrial frontier. The rapid expansion of industrial capitalism in the province polarized society in British Columbia. In response working people created a social movement to defend and advance their own interests.⁷

What remains unclear at present, however, is the extent to which these working people constituted a self-conscious social class, one which clearly distinguished itself from other social groups in the province. How pervasive was class consciousness among British Columbia's wage earners? Who shared in a collectivist mentality and who did not? Satisfactory answers to these questions are well beyond the limits of this short paper, but perhaps a few observations may serve as a useful point of departure for enquiry into the problem. First, as a group the leaders of the working class movement — the union organizers and executives, the labour politicians, journalists, and ideologues — were highly class-conscious. Whatever the consensus among them as to means or to ends, in general they all sought the common goal of benefit for wage earners. They identified a common enemy, industrial capitalism and its agents, and they attempted to win victory (however defined) at its expense. Working class consciousness also reached beyond the confines of this small elite. To the extent that many British Columbian workers were involved in the process of creating their own institutions, defending their own interests, and pursuing their own goals, they did constitute a separate, self-conscious social class.

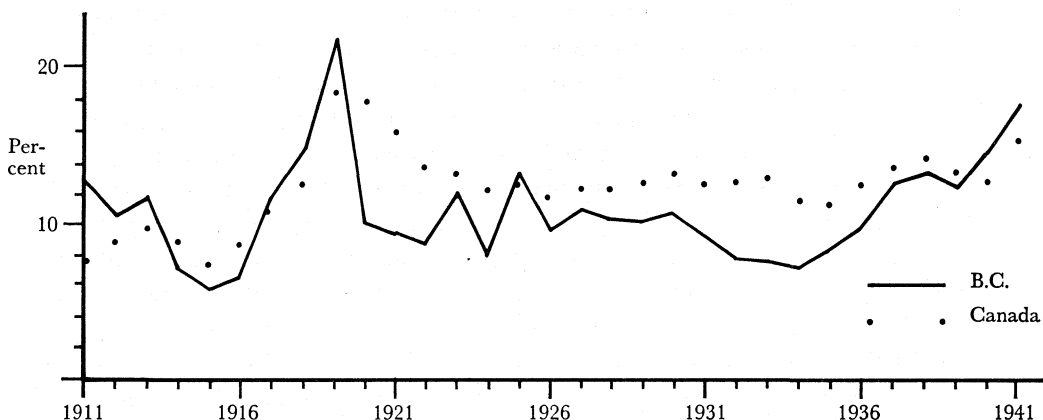
Yet the breadth, depth and persistence of such commitments within the wage earning community remain somewhat unclear and there are important indications that all three were rather less extensive than historians of the left have sometimes inferred. One is that, despite its militant and oft-times radical posture, the trade union movement attracted only limited popular support, at least if participation can be considered a reliable index. Between 1911 and 1939 on average the movement enrolled a bit more than 10 percent of the non-agricultural labour force in the province.

⁷ These themes are explored at length in the studies listed in footnote 2, as well as much of the article and thesis literature on the subject.

Only in 1918 and 1919 (when the rates approached 15 percent and 22 percent respectively) did enrolment substantially exceed these levels, and these were exceptional years of great social and political strain. By 1920 the rate had dropped back to about 10 percent and thereafter it did not fluctuate too widely until the general growth of the trade union movement commenced during World War II. (For comparative purposes it is useful to note that the proportion of the non-agricultural labour force in trade unions before the Second World War was roughly the same in British Columbia as it was in Canada as a whole. Fluctuations in provincial and national participation rates paralleled one another closely. [Graph I⁸]) Undoubtedly, given the high rate of labour mobility in the province, a

GRAPH I

*Percentage of the Non-Agricultural Labour Force
in Trade Unions, 1911-1941, British Columbia and Canada*



⁸ The data on which this graph is based were obtained in the following way: the British Columbia rates were ascertained by Phillips, who established a ratio between the annual union membership in the province as reported in *Labour Organization in Canada* and the size of the non-agricultural labour force as determined for each year by straight line extrapolation between decennial census benchmarks. Phillips, Appendix I, p. 169. The Canadian rates were determined by establishing the ratio between the annual national union membership reported in *Labour Organization in Canada* and the size of the non-agricultural labour force as determined for the years 1911-1920 by straight line extrapolation between figures reported in the 1911 and 1921 census in M. C. Urquhart and K. A. H. Buckley, eds., *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto, 1965), column C4. Rates for 1921 to 1941 were obtained by establishing a ratio based upon statistics reported in Urquhart and Buckley, column D412 (total union membership in Canada) over column C52 (persons with jobs in non-agricultural industries).

somewhat larger, although unknown, proportion of the wage earning population would have joined the union movement at one time or another, for as workers changed jobs they must have moved in and out of unions. But even then it would seem likely that the great majority of wage earners in British Columbia at no time joined a union before 1939.

The failure of the trade union movement to broaden its base was due to a number of interrelated factors. Many employers were strenuously opposed to unionization in their industries and, when confronted with such a threat, used every weapon in their considerable arsenal to defeat it. By and large they held the position of strength in these contests for they could hire and fire virtually at will unless unions could effectively control their access to the labour market. Generally speaking the state allied itself with capital in these confrontations. Successive provincial governments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were committed to a program of rapid industrial development, particularly in the resource and transportation sectors. As a result the legal climate they created for trade union formation was, to say the least, inhospitable. In extreme instances governments engaged in virtual strike-breaking activity as, under aid to the civil power provisions, militia units were called out in defence of property. To some extent the nature of the provincial industrial economy retarded union growth as well. Those industries which were seasonal, those relying on transient and unskilled labour, those located in remote frontier areas and those characterized by decentralized patterns of ownership and production proved especially difficult to organize. Institutional weakness also beset labour at times, often because of sharp, internal ideological cleavages which set the movement against itself and in the process often channelled energies away from union growth.

Nevertheless, when all of these factors are considered, part of the explanation for the limited numbers that joined the provincial trade union movement must surely lie with the non-participants themselves. What motives brought them to British Columbia? What hopes and expectations had they for their economic future in the province? What attitudes had they toward their fellow workers? What social and economic order did they envision for the west coast province? What role in it did they see for themselves? What were their attitudes toward the labour movement and left-wing politics? Recent work on the provincial left suggests answers to these questions insofar as they concern the working class elite. Whether these answers hold true for the great majority who never joined a union is a matter of little more than conjecture at this point. But the relatively narrow base of the trade union movement does suggest that collectivism

had its counterpart in individualism among provincial working men, that equality of opportunity was at least as compelling a motive as was equality of condition, that ultimately the promise of achieving working-class goals in British Columbia was more than matched by the prospect of personal gain.

A second indication that class consciousness was relatively limited in extent can be found in the history of left-wing politics in British Columbia. From the early 1880s, the first days of the labour movement in the province, trades unionists stood for office, although initially with limited success. By the turn of the twentieth-century left-wing politics had taken a decidedly radical turn with the formation of the Socialist Party of British Columbia. Thereafter labourite and socialist candidates fought in every major electoral campaign, both federal and provincial. From 1903 onward a socialist or labour presence was continuous in the legislature.⁹ But at no time before 1933 did the left constitute more than a small minority in the House. Usually there were only two or three of its spokesmen sitting at any time. On one occasion, despite its small size, this delegation was influential; in 1904 the first two socialist MLAs held the balance of power and used the opportunity to exact major improvements in labour legislation from the then Conservative government. But such an occasion did not recur, and thereafter labour and socialist members had to content themselves with an opposition role. With its representatives in such isolation the political left in the House was open to several blandishments. The most prominent socialist MLA was expelled from the Socialist Party of Canada in 1912 for staking coal lands in the province, an entrepreneurial gesture quite out of keeping with party orthodoxy. Two years later the two-member socialist opposition was co-opted by the Liberals.¹⁰

At the polls labour and socialist candidates also enjoyed only limited success. During the twentieth-century pre-depression provincial elections the left wing vote in British Columbia fluctuated between 4 percent and 15 percent, averaging about 11 percent of all ballots cast.¹¹ The greatest

⁹ Labourite and socialist members elected to the British Columbia legislature: 1903—3; 1907—3; 1909—3; 1912—2; 1916—1; 1920—3; 1924—3; 1928—1; 1933—7; 1937—7. *The Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, 1905, 1908, 1910, 1914, 1917, 1920, 1924, 1928, 1934, and 1938.

¹⁰ Robin, pp. 101-02.

¹¹ Percent of the popular vote earned by labourite and socialist candidates in provincial elections in British Columbia: 1903—15.2 percent; 1907—?; 1909—11.9 percent; 1912—11.8 percent; 1916—8.8 percent (includes all candidates for whom no party affiliation is given); 1920—15.1 percent; 1924—12.8 percent; 1928—4.1 percent; 1933—32.6 percent; 1937—29.1 percent. *The Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, as in footnote 9.

electoral strength of the left lay in the province's two major urban areas, particularly in Vancouver, a multi-member constituency and by far the largest in the province. There it regularly fielded a full slate of candidates and polled between 12 percent and 18 percent of the popular vote, a respectable showing to be sure but far from enough to elect any members.¹² For victory it depended on the mining regions of Vancouver Island and southeastern British Columbia, where labour militancy and class polarization were pronounced and where the relatively small electorates of the constituencies facilitated success on polling day.

The role of the provincial left in federal politics is equally revealing. Although labour, socialist and communist candidates contested every twentieth-century election before 1935, it was only in that year that nominations were made in every constituency. Earlier elections were fought only in those areas where there was strong support at the provincial level. Before the CCF first entered the federal electoral lists in the province, the popular vote for candidates of the left fluctuated between 4 percent and 10 percent.¹³ Even in 1917, when radical politicians mounted a concerted drive against conscription — their most ambitious political thrust to date — they failed to win a seat, not just in the province but all across the west. Indeed the province's six labour candidates attracted only 5.6 percent of the popular vote, one of the lowest proportions in any election during the pre-CCF years. As Ross McCormack has observed about the 1917 vote, "there can be no doubt about the basic cause of the radical candidates' poor showing. The majority of workers were not prepared to abandon the old parties and vote as a class,"¹⁴ a conclusion which can equally be drawn of all provincial and federal electoral contests in the province before the rise of the CCF. Not until 1930 was the first independent labour candidate elected to Parliament from British Columbia. Consequently, to the extent that the popular vote, electoral victory and legislative influence can be considered reliable indi-

¹² The major exceptions were 1903 and 1928, when the left attracted 25.3 percent and 5.7 percent of the vote respectively. R. H. Neelands, a Federated Labour candidate, won the suburban seat of South Vancouver in 1920 and 1924, but no left-wing representative was elected from the city's multi-member constituencies until 1933.

¹³ Percentage of the popular vote earned by labourite and socialist candidates in British Columbia constituencies in federal elections: 1900—10.0 percent; 1904—4.3 percent; 1908—6.7 percent; 1911—3.6 percent; 1917—5.6 percent; 1921—10.2 percent; 1925—7.3 percent; 1926—6.4 percent; 1930—9.5 percent; 1935—34.6 percent; 1940—28.8 percent. J. M. Beck, *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections* (Scarborough, Ontario, 1968), *passim*.

¹⁴ McCormack, p. 135.

cators, the left was only a marginal political force in British Columbia before the great depression. Even then, with a greatly enlarged base of popular support and the rise to major party status of the CCF, it remained confined to an opposition role in the provincial and federal legislatures. Its political strength still was concentrated in the mining districts and major urban areas of the province.

What, then, does this suggest about the nature of social boundaries in British Columbia before World War II? First, as labour historians agree, it indicates that class lines were most sharply drawn and working-class consciousness was most pervasive among those who worked in the resource extractive industries, particularly coal and hard rock mining. These industries were located in three geographic areas in the province and hence this strong sense of class was substantially regionalized. Second, in other provincial communities, especially urban areas, class-conscious working class elites attracted significant popular support. Nevertheless in Vancouver, where the largest concentration of left-wing sympathy was to be found, labour and socialist candidates never polled more than a small proportion of the vote before the depression, and this indicates a lack of broad sympathy among working men and women for the various goals of the working class movement. Even when the inherent bias of the electoral system against the propertyless, transient and alien is acknowledged, it seems safe to conclude that the majority of wage earners in the province preferred the two traditional political parties to the class-based parties which they could call their own.

It took the depression — a social and economic crisis of major proportions — to force a major shift in these attitudes, for a more broadly based socialist party did not take root in the province until the early 1930s. While the CCF was to some extent an outlet for popular protest, its growth also revealed a widening sense of class, a heightened sense of common grievance, and a new sense of shared purpose among many in British Columbia. Yet even this impulse toward class polarization seems only to have extended to an enlarged minority within the province. By itself electoral evidence is far from conclusive, but it does reaffirm the implication of provincial trade union history that, while significant elements in the community were strongly class conscious, the majority of wage earners did not share this outlook.

At this point it might legitimately be asked what retarded the growth of an awareness of class among working people in British Columbia. Given our limited knowledge of the history of provincial society, answers to this question at present must remain provisional and speculative, but

perhaps speculation is not out of place at this point. One important factor, the profoundly individualistic and materialistic outlook of much of North American society, was far from specific to the province and, although its strong influence must be acknowledged, it need not detain us here. There were, however, three interrelated factors more particular to British Columbia whose contributions were significant. First, although little is yet known about the provincial labour market, it seems to have been highly fluid, and this no doubt hindered the spread of group awareness among wage workers. Labour mobility was pronounced in the province for several reasons. Seasonal rhythms and wide fluctuations in business cycles characterized many industries, notably those in the construction and the resource extractive and related secondary manufacturing sectors, which employed between one-quarter and one-third of the labour force. Furthermore there were very few impediments to labour mobility. Only a small proportion of the available jobs were sheltered through union agreements, and thus wage earners could seek employment throughout the province relatively unhindered. Asians aside, they also had unimpeded access to the American workplace before the depression, and throughout much of this period the burgeoning economy of the prairies offered another range of alternatives. For those who so chose, cheap rail and ocean transport made return and onward migration possible too. Thus the influence of market forces on labour in British Columbia seems to have been relatively untrammelled and this, in turn, encouraged high rates of labour mobility. The marked preponderance of males in the province before the Second World War further facilitated this process.¹⁵ Undoubtedly this instability hampered the growth of the trade union movement by increasing organizational problems. At the same time it likely retarded the growth of group self-awareness and, by encouraging individual initiative and the pursuit

¹⁵ Sex Ratios in British Columbia and Canada, for the total population and ages 20-64, 1901-1941 (men/1000 women):

Year	British Columbia		Canada	
	Total Population	Ages 20-64	Total Population	Ages 20-64
1901	1770.0	2279.8	1050.4	1071.1
1911	1786.3	2287.7	1129.2	1221.3
1921	1269.2	1441.1	1063.7	1106.4
1931	1246.5	1374.1	1074.4	1120.8
1941	1136.4	1168.5	1052.5	1074.3

Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1961 *Census of Canada Bulletin* 1:2-2, table 20-1.

of personal gain, promoted a pattern of motivation which countered the growth of working-class consciousness.

The subject of motives introduces a second characteristic of British Columbian society, one related to the expectations of working men, which also discouraged the development of collectivist mentalities. Again our knowledge of the attitudes and assumptions of labouring men (outside the working class movement's elite) is so fragmentary that at this point any comment is admittedly conjectural. Yet it seems reasonable to argue that high labour mobility sustained a climate of opinion in many ways uncongenial to the growth of class awareness. Labouring in frontier economies, especially during boom conditions, is in its own way as speculative an activity as the investment of capital. Frontier regions usually attract migrant workers with the promise of wages and other material benefits superior to those enjoyed at the migrants' point of departure. Workers who move to such regions are essentially putting their labour at risk in much the same way that an entrepreneur employs financial capital. This speculative impulse would seem the energizing force behind much of western Canadian settlement during the pre-depression years, that of British Columbia included. The long-term motives of those who came to the westernmost province no doubt varied widely. Some sought permanent resettlement with stable employment in new communities. Others, however, looked for short-term work at high wages in order that they might accumulate savings and establish themselves elsewhere as farmers or small businessmen, to choose two of many possible examples.¹⁶ Quite likely such aspirations underlay much of the participation in railway construction and other seasonal or limited-term occupations.

While we shall never know the motives of most provincial working men, those of Norman Noel are fortunately not completely hidden from view, for he was one blanket-stiff who left a record of his itinerancy. A young English bachelor from a middle class (although evidently not wealthy) background, he spent four years in British Columbia from about 1907 to 1911. He was successively a fruit farmer and farmhand in the Okanagan, a swamper in a lumber camp in the Selkirks, a cowboy near Grand Rapids, a deckhand on a Lake Okanagan steamboat and a navy and housebuilder in Alberta.¹⁷ Admittedly Noel was atypical. His social and

¹⁶ On the cost of starting a farm on the prairies at the turn of the century see R. E. Ankli and R. M. Litt, "The Growth of Prairie Agriculture: Economic Considerations," *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, I, ed. D. H. Akenson (Gananoque, Ontario, 1978), pp. 35-64.

¹⁷ Norman P. R. Noel, *Blanket-Stiff, or a Wanderer in Canada, 1911* (London, 1912).

economic background set him apart from most transient workers in western Canada, as did the fact that his father finally bailed him out and paid his way back to England. But in terms of his goals and experiences he may well be representative of a large group of labouring men in the pre-depression West. Until we learn much more about labour mobility throughout western Canada there is no way of knowing. Nevertheless Noel's experiences reveal the essentially speculative character of labouring on resource frontiers. His objectives clearly were short-term, his central purpose to maximize savings in order that he might move on to a more congenial or promising location and occupation. His odyssey was that of an individual in quest of personal gain.

A third source of individualism (and concomitant solvent of working class consciousness), closely tied to the second, was the strong and undoubtedly widespread desire for upward social and economic mobility. These are common aspirations in immigrant communities; indeed, the quest for such ends is one of the most compelling forces underlying migration. British Columbia offered its share of success stories to the interested observer, testimonials to the truth of the myth of upward mobility. Immigration promotion literature also cultivated belief in the promise of the province. Of course, as recent work strongly suggests, upward mobility was extremely limited, at least if entry into Vancouver's business elite before World War I was any indication.¹⁸ But the determining influence was not how much mobility occurred but rather how opportunities in the province were perceived by those who sought them, and certainly one important strand of popular thought emphasized that British Columbia offered ample scope for individual initiative, whether for the entrepreneurial capitalist, the small investor, the aspiring farmer or the working man. In this case, too, it would seem that the image of opportunity sustained a sense of individualism which continually cut across the class-based rhetoric of labour leaders and socialist politicians.

By themselves these three factors merely suggest explanations for the limited growth of class consciousness in British Columbia before 1939. Proof, if such can be had, must await a much more extensive study of the conditions, attitudes and experiences of the province's wage earning population and the economic institutions with which their lives were framed. At present, however, it appears that, despite the influence of articulate socialist politicians, vigorous labour leaders and militant trades unionists, working class consciousness was not notably widespread in British Colum-

¹⁸ McDonald, *passim*.

bia until the 1930s, and even then it was only embraced by an enlarged minority within the community. The great majority of British Columbians seems not to have subscribed to collectivist social convictions and, in the absence of widespread class consciousness, class boundaries were at best secondary divisions in provincial society.

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On the contrary, the major cleavages in British Columbia's social structure, at least until World War II, were those based upon race. By 1870 the presence of three distinctive racial groups — native Indians, Asians, and Caucasians or whites — had already created a multi-racial community in the province. Over the next seventy years the provincial population grew more than twentyfold and its racial balance changed markedly, as the following table shows:

*Population of British Columbia by Racial Origin, 1870-1941*¹⁹

<i>Year</i>	<i>% White</i>	<i>% Asian</i>	<i>% Indian</i>	<i>Total Population</i>
1870	24.9	4.3	70.8	36,247
1881	39.3	8.8	51.9	49,459
1891	55.1	9.1	35.9	98,173
1901	74.8	10.9	14.3	178,657
1911	87.1	7.8	5.1	392,480
1921	88.2	7.5	4.3	524,582
1931	89.1	7.3	3.5	694,236
1941	91.8	5.2	3.0	817,861

Immigration greatly augmented the size of the white component of the community, and that of the Asian segment, although to a much lesser extent. Meanwhile the proportionate size of the indigenous population shrank drastically; indeed, it diminished in absolute numbers, for the census recorded a higher Indian population in British Columbia in 1870 than it did in 1941.²⁰ By 1891 white predominance was already well established, and within two decades it had become overwhelming. Nevertheless, whatever the shifting balance of race and its influence on the position of Asians and Indians, the two minorities remained significant, distinctive elements within provincial society.

¹⁹ *Census of Canada, 1871-1941.*

²⁰ In 1870 there were 25,661 Indians in the province; in 1941 there were 24,875. *Ibid.*

Internally each racial group was further subdivided by intricate cultural patterns. Language differences alone sustained boundaries among the Indians west of the Rockies, and native society was even more finely graduated on the basis of kinship, status, economic activity and property ownership, to name four important variables. The Asian immigrant community consisted of three separate elements: Chinese, Japanese and East Indian, each with its own distinctive culture, its own internal structure, its own migration patterns, and its own process of adjustment to new world society. White British Columbia, too, was far from monolithic, divided by ethnicity, religion and many forms of special interest. And yet, whatever these internal subdivisions, they were secondary influences upon the overall configuration of provincial race relations. Historically, the governing assumption which has shaped race relations in British Columbia — particularly among whites, for we still know very little about the racial attitudes of Indians and Asians — has always been that provincial society was composed of three racial components.

In sharp contrast to the limited extent of class consciousness, belief in the persistence of major racial differences was extremely widespread in the province. White British Columbia clung tightly to a series of convictions about Asians which continually emphasized their distinctiveness as an element in provincial society.²¹ What evidence is available suggests that this was the case for white perceptions of Indians as well.²² These beliefs emphasized the perpetual inferiority of Asians and Indians and encouraged the differential, discriminatory treatment they received at the hands of successive generations of whites. In particular such attitudes underlay the limitation of social and economic opportunity for members of both minorities. For them race was more than a state of mind. It was a daily experience, a living reality in a way that class among whites seldom was.

One obvious sign of racial cleavage in British Columbia was the franchise restriction which denied citizens of Indian and Asian ancestry the vote, with only minor exceptions, until after World War II. The immediate significance of this fact was that, lacking an electoral role, the two groups had little opportunity to influence the governments which ruled them. They could work through the informal channels traditionally used by special-interest groups when pressing themselves upon legislators, but

²¹ Ward, *passim*.

²² Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver, 1977), pp. 73-94; H. B. Hawthorn, C. S. Belshaw, and S. M. Jamieson, *The Indians of British Columbia: A Study of Contemporary Social Adjustment* (Toronto, 1960), pp. 58-59.

given the sentiments of provincial politicians these were far from wide open. For this reason the Chinese and Japanese communities relied heavily on their consular and diplomatic officials to represent their interests in Canada. Unfortunately for them, native Indians had no such available spokesmen, for officials of the Department of Indian Affairs served their federal masters far more than their Indian wards. Nor should the symbolic significance of the franchise question be overlooked for, whatever political influence either group might otherwise have exercised, their lack of a vote was a clear sign of their second-class status. Without one of the major privileges of Canadian citizenship they obviously stood on a lower rung in the hierarchy of race in the province.

Nevertheless, franchise restrictions normally were something of an abstraction, most evident on election days. In other areas of experience the racial cleavage in provincial society was much more omnipresent. Rural and urban residential patterns assumed an explicit racial character. Generally speaking, Indians were settled on reserves which were located in areas remote from white settlement or, when found in close proximity, remained separate enclaves. Gradually some Indians became integrated into urban life, but they constituted only a small minority.²³ Most cities and towns in British Columbia had their Chinatowns, and the Vancouver region, home of the majority of immigrants from Japan, had three distinctive clusters of Japanese settlement — Powell Street, the south shore of False Creek, and the nearby fishing village of Steveston. In rural areas, however, Asian settlement was somewhat more diffused. Urban racial minorities congregated for several reasons — market factors, restrictive covenants, white community pressures, and group cohesiveness in particular. But whatever the explanation, this limited the possibility of interracial contact and simultaneously provided visual evidence of the racial frontiers in provincial society.

The social organization of British Columbia similarly reflected its racial trichotomy. Each racial segment possessed distinctive social institutions, the vast majority of which were culturally or racially exclusive. Among Asians, the Chinese, Japanese and East Indian communities formed their own voluntary associations, organizations which reflected the various interests of their separate constituencies: social, economic, religious, political, educational and philanthropic. Despite their similar socio-economic and legal status the three Asian minorities did not create shared institutions. Each group was inward looking and its institutions remained ethno-

²³ Hawthorn, pp. 67-68.

centric. Although the organizational structure of Indian society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is largely unexplored, there, too, race must surely have been a primary determinant of group membership. A rather more intricate pattern of associations and institutions characterized white society, and its internal ethnic boundaries were perhaps not as rigid as those among Asians and Indians. Nevertheless, race was a fundamental criterion for inclusion, as only very infrequently did non-whites join the organizations of the white majority. The major significant exceptions were the various Christian missions founded by whites for the social and spiritual welfare of the two minorities. Because of their remoteness from major centres of settlement the Indian missions generated limited interracial contact. Greater racial intermingling occurred in the urban missions to Asians, although in this instance too it was never particularly extensive. Nonetheless, the mission hall was virtually the only place where interracial rapprochement occurred before World War II. In many respects Christian missionaries were as profoundly nativistic as most whites in the province.²⁴ Be that as it may, they were also virtually the only ones who built bridges between the white community and those of other races.

Low rates of intermarriage were a further sign of the racial gulf in provincial society. In a community with a marked preponderance of adult males and with a cultural tradition of permanent monogamous marriage, one might reasonably expect competition among men for desirable mates to result in substantial miscegenation. But interracial marriage was extremely uncommon in British Columbia between 1870 and 1939. While Indian-white liaisons had been customary during the fur trade era, in all likelihood they ceased to be so after the dawn of the settlement era, although in the absence of evidence this cannot be said with certainty.²⁵ Marriages between Asians and whites were also infrequent. The great surplus of males in Asian immigrant society — far more pronounced than in the provincial population at large — combined with immigration law and the “picture bride” system of arranged marriage among the Japanese to give Asian males a virtual monopoly over their female counterparts.²⁶ Deep-rooted prejudice against intermarriage on the part

²⁴ W. Peter Ward, “The Oriental Immigrant and Canada’s Protestant Clergy, 1858-1925,” *BC Studies*, 22 (Summer 1974), 40-55.

²⁵ Hawthorn reported that 37 percent of a sample of marriages contracted in 1954 were mixed (62). No statistics on intermarriages for earlier periods are available but, given the more liberal climate of race relations which prevailed in the post-war era, it should not be assumed that this was reflective of pre-war marriage patterns.

²⁶ In 1911 and 1921 there were 27,898.0 and 15,347.8 males per thousand females

of both Asians and whites also limited racially mixed unions, especially those of Oriental men with white women which, considering the demography of Asian immigrant society alone, would likely have been more common. The statistical evidence on rates of intermarriage is skimpy but in 1942, when the Canadian government removed 22,000 Japanese from protected areas in the province, only 94 — about 1 percent of the married Japanese population — were exempted as partners in marriage with whites.²⁷ Thus the family, the basic unit of social organization in the community, also revealed the profound ethnocentric impulse which divided provincial society.

In the workplace the limited extent of racial intermingling was equally evident, although the relationships between race and occupation were somewhat more complex than others discussed thus far. The Indians of British Columbia lost their central role in the economy of the region with the decline of the fur trade. They entered the work force of the new commercial and industrial economy, but their introduction to wage labour was partial and protracted. Throughout this entire period they were concentrated in four industries: fishing and fish canning, logging and saw-milling, farming, and trapping.²⁸ During the early twentieth century the Vancouver docks also provided employment for some. As far as can be ascertained Indian workers in these industries commonly were segregated from whites and Asians, most often on the basis of job function. In the canneries, for example, fish were usually cleaned and prepared by Indian women. When jobs were not assigned on a racial basis and members of all groups undertook the same tasks, divisions based upon race nevertheless remained within the work force. Indian fishermen's organizations usually co-operated with their white counterparts, but they were not integrated into the industry's trade union movement. Vancouver's Indian longshoremen often worked in separate "bow and arrow" gangs and had their own union local until 1935 when, after a strike, it disbanded and they joined

amongst Chinese in Canada. The parallel ratios for Japanese were 5,018.0 and 1,966.7. Cheng, Tien-Fang, *Oriental Immigration in Canada* (Shanghai, 1931), 276. On the "picture bride" system see Young, Charles H. and Helen R. Y. Reid, *The Japanese Canadians* (Toronto, 1938), p. 15, n. 15.

²⁷ Adachi, pp. 235, 362-63. Adachi reports that the present rate of mixed marriage among Japanese Canadians is 60 percent.

²⁸ Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia: Volume I, The Impact of the White Man* (Victoria, 1964), pp. 86-87; Percy Gladstone, "Native Indians and the Fishing Industry of British Columbia," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, XIX, 1 (February 1953), 20-34; Hawthorn describes the occupational structure of the Indian community in 1954 (75).

regular dockside locals.²⁹ Even when they were incorporated into the provincial wage economy, the Indians in British Columbia seem generally to have constituted a separate component in the regional labour force.

Among Asians, employment patterns were in many respects similar, though these immigrants gradually entered a much broader range of occupations. As male sojourners, the first Chinese, Japanese and East Indians to arrive placed economic gain above all other objectives. For the most part they took unskilled jobs in mining, railway construction, agriculture and domestic service, although an important minority soon became skilled or semi-skilled workers in the fishing and canning industries. As sojourning declined, as new world families were formed, and as permanent settlement became an increasingly common goal, Asian workers dispersed themselves more widely throughout the provincial work force. Agricultural proprietorship, the skilled and semi-skilled trades, wholesale and retail merchandising and the professions all attracted their participation. The causes of this process are too complex for analysis here, but it must be noted that it had little more than begun by 1939. Despite the breadth of their occupational distribution, Chinese, Japanese and East Indian workers were heavily concentrated in a limited number of activities, especially various phases of the forest, fishing and agricultural industries, while lesser numbers were employed in a few commercial and service occupations. Within these sectors, and allowing for some significant exceptions (notably in the fishing industry), Asians commonly were limited to the lowest-paid, least-skilled jobs, where they often congregated to the exclusion of white labourers.³⁰

A similar pattern of segregation was also evident among small businessmen. The Chinese and Japanese in Vancouver were most often found in dry cleaning and laundering, hawking and peddling, dressmaking, boardinghouse keeping, and grocery and confectionery sales. In agriculture they were prominent in market gardening, soft fruit farming and greenhouse growing. Furthermore, a substantial (although unknown) proportion of each Asian group was set apart from white society in quite another way, finding its livelihood in trade or service within the minority community itself. To a considerable extent Asians seem to have functioned within a separate labour market of their own, one confined to a limited range of

²⁹ F. W. Thompson, "The Employment Problems and Economic Status of the British Columbia Indians" (MSW Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1951), pp. 35-37.

³⁰ Ward, *White Canada Forever*, pp. 16-18, 80-81, 110-12, 115-16; British Columbia, *Report on Oriental Activities Within the Province* (Victoria, 1927).

occupations, most of them arduous and ill-paid. This labour market had been created by sojourning immigrants who, in search of short-term financial gain through temporary migration, were willing to accept unpleasant tasks and low wages when white workers were not. Once created, this labour market became a self-perpetuating institution, imposing its conditions upon subsequent generations of Asian workers and, in the process, sustaining racial divisions within the provincial labour force.³¹

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Many years ago the distinguished student of South-East Asian society, J. S. Furnivall, described the plural society as one "in which distinct social orders live side by side, but separately, within the same political unit."³² In the hands of subsequent commentators this concept has been refined, though its essence remains unchanged.³³ Multiracial colonial societies, dominated by small European elites which governed large, non-white native and immigrant majorities, are those commonly considered to be plural and Furnivall's model is most appropriately applied to such communities. Nonetheless, modern North American society is also in some respects plural, for it has long incorporated within it significant, and more or less permanent, racial and cultural minorities. In Canada the most complex process of racial intermingling has occurred in British Columbia, where during the second half of the nineteenth century a culturally heterogeneous native population was overwhelmed by massive white immigration and lesser numbers of immigrants from China, Japan and India. The simple fact of majoritarian dominance distinguishes British Columbia from those plural societies described by Furnivall and others. Yet while the model does not make a tight fit, British Columbia exhibited significant plural features prior to World War II. Particularly important were the political subordination of racial minorities and their extensive social, geographic and economic segregation. The boundaries of caste were never entirely closed. Inter-marriage was possible though ex-

³¹ On the self-perpetuating tendency of another specialized, low-paying labour market see Gareth Stedman Jones' discussion of the casual labour market in late Victorian London in his *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Harmondsworth, England, 1976), pp. 92-93.

³² J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge 1939), xv; for a fuller discussion see his *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 303-12.

³³ In particular see the essays in Leo Kuper and M. G. Smith, *Pluralism in Africa* (Berkeley, 1969), especially Kuper's "Plural Societies: Perspectives and Problems" and Smith's "Some Developments in the Analytic Framework of Pluralism."

tremely uncommon. Some schools were segregated, but the separation was far from absolute.³⁴ Members of the minority races were absorbed very gradually into the labour force, not as members of a racial group but as individuals with no reference to race. And during the post World War II years a liberalizing trend in race relations rapidly undermined many longstanding social barriers. Nevertheless, historically, the major divisions in provincial society have been those of race. The boundaries separating one race from another have been much more rigid and less porous than any historic social divisions based upon the consciousness of social class.

The concept of the Canadian social mosaic has a long and complex history in the nation's intellectual life.³⁵ But except in the case of the French-English dichotomy, Canadians have seldom recognized theirs as a society with plural characteristics. (Indeed many have been unwilling to except French Canada and have sought a culturally homogeneous national community.) In English Canada, as in all modern Western societies, the dominant strain of popular nationalist rhetoric has been based upon the universalistic and egalitarian principles of liberalism. This has led to the widespread assumption that all citizens are individually and equally incorporated into membership within the state. Consequently the legitimacy of group membership in the national community has persistently been denied. This is evident in the continuing Anglo-Canadian rejection of French-Canadian demands for special status within Confederation and in the recurrent nativism which has greeted European immigrants. In British Columbia such convictions have long been the dominant strain in popular anti-Orientalism. Indeed, they have been pronounced throughout western Canada, where liberal individualism and egalitarianism have proved especially durable. In the process, however, these assumptions have obscured the reality of social segmentation in the West.

³⁴ Ward, *White Canada Forever*, pp. 62-64, 124, 127-28.

³⁵ Allan Smith, "Metaphor and Nationality in North America," *Canadian Historical Review*, LI, 3 (September 1970), 247-75.