

"OH I'M JUST SICK OF THE FACES OF MEN"

*Gender Imbalance, Race, Sexuality, and Sociability in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia**

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I N 1893, NICOLA LAKE SCHOOLTEACHER Jessie McQueen penned a letter to her mother in Nova Scotia. "Oh I'm just sick of the faces of men," she wrote.¹ With this exasperated quip, McQueen touched upon an issue which may have troubled nineteenth century non-native British Columbian women even more than it confuses late-twentieth century social historians. Non-aboriginal men outnumbered non-native women roughly three to one throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. This paper will address the important implications of this skewed demography by making three related arguments. First, it will trace how Canadian historians have used two main frameworks to analyse non-aboriginal gender imbalance: the "scarcity model" (the notion that women's experience improves commensurately with their scarcity) and the "volcano theory" of male sexuality (the assumption of a fixed quantity of male sexual energy). Second, I will argue that the roots of the "scarcity model" and the "volcano theory" can, in large measure, be traced to nineteenth century colonial discourses. Third, I provide a tentative analysis of how gender imbalance affected white women that recognizes the historicity of the "scarcity" and "volcano" models, but is not constrained by them. Using census materials, missionary reports, personal recollections, and travel literature, this section will examine how white women negotiated relations with men and with women of other cultural groups. Ultimately, I argue that gender imbalance and

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¹ Quoted in Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto, 1991), 130.

colonial race politics combined to increase white women's opportunities for heterosexual contact while restricting their social options outside the heterosexual nexus.

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While no academic historian has offered a sustained analysis of skewed gender ratios, folklore of the Canadian west has been more forthcoming. Tales of the first white women to enter First Nations territory are legion, as are stories trumpeting the plucky derring-do of lone European women traversing among frightening and exotic frontier white men.² Canadian feminist historians have been hesitant to either corroborate or challenge this legacy bestowed by popular memory. Indeed, a quarter-century of inquiry into women's history has produced little on the effect of a skewed demography on women's experience. This is not surprising. Historians exploring women's lives in Canada have been preoccupied with proving that, contrary to the words of an earlier generation of male scholars, women not only were present in the Canadian past but were crucial in the development of economies and politics alike. Given the politicized nature of the effort to prove that "women were there," it is understandable that few historians of gender have been interested in exploring their relative absence.

If lacking in specific analyses of non-aboriginal gender imbalance, Canadian historiography is replete with works which touch upon this issue. With some notable exceptions,³ most of the fragments about skewed demography utilize, either implicitly or explicitly, two frameworks. First, there is what I will call the "scarcity model," or the idea that women's experience improves commensurate with their rarity. The "scarcity model" is based upon a simplified understanding of neo-classical economics. Basically, it borrows the supply and demand cycle of Adam Smith and imposes it on gender relations. If Smith's product rises in price when demand exceeds supply, so women's value and options soar when their numbers trail behind those of the male population. This

² See, for instance, N. de Bertrand Lugin, *The Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island, 1843-1866* (Victoria, 1928).

³ See Barman, 89-90, 210-11, 349-50; John Belshaw, "Cradle to Grave: An Examination of Demographic Behaviour on Two British Columbian Frontiers," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Calgary, 14 June 1994; Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago, 1993) Ch.6; Susan Jackel, ed., *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914* (Vancouver, 1982); Sylvia Van Kirk, "A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1875," in Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag, eds., *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (Vancouver, 1992).

argument has been used most extensively to interpret the gender history of New France, but has also been invoked to explain the women's experience in a number of other Canadian and international contexts.⁴

The alternative method of explaining the social implications of a skewed demography has been to utilize, to borrow Marion S. Goldman's phrase, the "volcano theory" of male sexuality.⁵ This framework assumes that there is a fixed quantity (always unspecified) of male sexual energy which, if not funnelled into monogamous, same-race heterosexual relationships, will burst forth in a variety of "deviant" behaviours. Given that a non-aboriginal demographic imbalance deprived men of their "natural" objects of desire — white women — it is not surprising that the "volcano theory" has been used to explain skewed gender ratios. In particular, Canadian historians have suggested that where white women were scarce, white men responded in three particular ways: by utilizing and permitting a thriving and open flesh trade,⁶ by becoming radicals,⁷ and by forming relationships with

⁴ For the most clear example, see Jan Noel, "New France: Les femmes favorisées," in Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, Second Edition (Toronto, 1991). On Noel, see Micheline Dumont, "Les Femmes de la Nouvelle-France Étaient-Elles Favorisées?" in *Atlantis* 8:1 (1982): 118-123 and Jan Noel's response, "Women in New France: Further Reflections" in the same issue. For other variations on the "scarcity" theme, see Yves Landry, "Gender Imbalance, Les Filles Du Roi, and Choice of Spouse in New France," in Bettina Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History* (Toronto, 1992); Anne-Lise Head-Konig, "Demographic History and its Perception of Women from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century," in Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson and Jane Rendall, eds., *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington, 1991); Peter Ward, *Courtship, Love and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Montreal, 1990) esp. Ch.3; Marcia Guttentag and Paul F. Secord, *Too Many Women? The Sex Ratio Question* (Beverly Hills, 1983).

⁵ See Marion S. Goldman, *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode* (Ann Arbor, 1981), 35. While Goldman explains this concept as a contemporary explanation of male behaviour, and does not use it particularly critically, her outlining of the concept is suggestive.

⁶ See, for instance, James H. Gray, *Red Lights on the Prairies* (Toronto, 1971); John McLaren, "White Slavers: Prostitution Laws and Patterns of Enforcement, 1900-1920," *Criminal Justice History* VIII (1987): 53-120.

⁷ Some historians of western labour demonstrate their reliance on the "volcano model" when they connect radicalism with high proportions of single workers and the absence of "family lives." See David Jay Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier," in W. Peter Ward and Robert A. J. McDonald, eds., *British Columbia: Historical Readings* (Vancouver, 1981); Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1967); Stuart Jamieson, "Regional Factors in Industrial Conflict: The Case of British Columbia," in Ward and McDonald, and S. D. Clark, "Mining Society in British Columbia and the Yukon," in the same volume. The idea that men deprived of a "home life" responded with radicalism also informed the planning of industrial towns. See Rex A. Lucas, *Minetown, Milltown, Railtown: Life in Canadian Communities of Single Industry* (Toronto, 1972); Northern British Columbia Women's Taskforce, *Report on Single Industry Communities* (Kitimat, Fraser Lake, and McKenzie B.C., 1977); Meg Luxton, *More Than A Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto, 1980).

First Nations women.⁸

Both the “scarcity model” and the “volcano theory,” whether evoked subtly or explicitly, are based on essentialist understandings of both sexuality and race. Practitioners of the “scarcity model” never compute aboriginal women (or, for that matter, men) into their arithmetical evaluation of women’s status and men’s options. Moreover, the model is fundamentally based on the assumption of the universality of heterosexuality, a contention that is belied both by recent work on the historical construction of sexuality and by growing historical evidence.⁹ The “volcano theory” similarly depends on a nexus of trans-historical conceptions of both race and sexuality. It too presumes a vigorous heterosexuality. Indeed, despite the credence given to the “mightily masculine” character of the industrial frontier, only Terry Chapman has raised the possibility that work-camps may have provided fertile ground for a homosexual subculture.¹⁰ Like the “scarcity model,” the “volcano theory” also holds that mixed-race relationships are at worst unfathomable and at best the products of abnormal historical circumstances. Certainly few of the historians of prostitution or of western labour consider that white men may have formed meaningful connections with First Nations women. Historians of the fur trade, while concerned with establishing the salience of mixed-race relationships, nonetheless explain their frequency as the product of white women’s absence.¹¹

Neither of the main ways that Canadian historians have used to explain non-aboriginal gender imbalance are, therefore, particularly helpful. Both the “scarcity” and the “volcano” models are based on essentialist notions of race and sexuality, and both simplify complex

⁸ For a brilliant account which ultimately suggests that the existence of mixed-race relationships was the result of white women’s absence from the fur trade, see Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg, 1980). Also see Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, 1980) and Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*, Second Edition (Vancouver, 1992).

⁹ See, for a lucid summary of social constructionist analysis, Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Identity* (London, 1991). On men’s same-sex relationships in New France and women’s same-sex relations in British Columbia, see Jay Cassel, “Love in the Time of War: Same-Sex Relationships in New France” and Karen Duder, “Public Acts and Private Languages: Bisexuality and the Multiple Discourses of Constance Grey Swartz,” papers presented to Out of the Archives, 14 January 1994, York University. On other women who sought alternatives to heterosexuality, see Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920* (Toronto, 1987).

¹⁰ See Terry L. Chapman, “Sex Crimes in Western Canada, 1890-1920”, (PhD Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1984), esp. 146-157.

¹¹ See, for instance, Van Kirk’s comment that “Had it been possible for fur traders to bring their wives out at an earlier date, it is doubtful whether intermarriage with native women would have been so extensive”. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 173.

social processes. Despite these problems, historians have failed to offer alternative explanations of how non-aboriginal gender imbalance affected the social experience of both men and women, First Nations and white in the Canadian past. This is not incidental, but rather suggests that the "scarcity" and "volcano" models are integral not only to twentieth century scholarship, but also to colonial discourse itself.

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In order to create a more challenging analysis of gender imbalance, race, sexuality, and sociability in nineteenth-century British Columbia, we need first to recognize the historical roots of the "scarcity" and "volcano" models. I want to suggest that these two concepts' intellectual ancestry lies in the works of colonial promoters. By "colonial promoters," I mean a loose collection of individuals who sought to heighten British Columbia's prowess through white settlement under both colonial and Canadian governments. Some worked for societies that directly promoted immigration,¹² others were missionaries, and others still were journalists or writers much like the Maritime "promoters" described by Brooke Taylor.¹³ They often lacked common political, religious, or social commitments, but were united by their common commitment to encouraging white settlement.

The nexus of ideas offered by the colonial promoters did not spring, Athena-like, from their peculiar Victorian heads. Rather, they borrowed ideas about gender, race, and sexuality from older traditions such as the Colbert-inspired scheme to export white women to New France¹⁴ and the popular political debate in mid-nineteenth century England about "redundant women"¹⁵ and applied them to the British Columbian context. The analyses of colonial theorist Edward Gibbon Wakefield were another crucial component of their intellectual heritage. Wakefield, some of whose theories of colonization were

¹² On these in Canada, see Barbara Roberts, "'A Work of Empire': Canadian Reformers and British Female Immigration," in Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto, 1977).

¹³ See M. Brook Taylor, *Promoters, Patriots, and Partisans: Historiography in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Toronto, 1989). Also see Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London, 1991).

¹⁴ See Landry and Brown, 4-5 for discussion of policies regarding marriage, miscegenation, and colonization in New France.

¹⁵ On the debate about female emigration, see A. James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration 1830-1914* (London, 1979) 20-47; Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988), Ch. 1 and Ch. 5; Charlotte Macdonald, *A Woman of Good Character: Single Women as Immigrant Settlers in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand* (Wellington, 1990).

adopted by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1849,¹⁶ had a complex analysis of the place of women in colonial development. Reacting against what he understood as "[a]ll the evils which in colonization have so often sprung from a disproportion of the sexes,"¹⁷ Wakefield argued that "moral" white women were necessary to a colony's moral, religious, and economic health.¹⁸ It would be these ideas, recycled and recast, that would provide much of the framework that Canadian historians of the 1970s used to deal with issues of gender imbalance.

The colonial promoters joined others influenced by Wakefield in highlighting white women's scarcity in colonial contexts. London's *Times*, for instance, commented that "there is probably no country where the paucity of women in comparison to men is so injuriously felt."¹⁹ Yet these commentators did not merely comment on white women's absence. Rather, they assumed that this was, in itself, a moral and political problem that begged speedy action. First, they mused that white women could compel white men, especially working-class ones, to cease their "uncivilized" masculine behaviour. White women, Byron Johnson wrote, "were regarded with much wondering curiosity and some amount of chivalric respect by the miners, who, with the greatest self-denial, actually refrained from swearing within earshot, or squirting tobacco juice within a yard of them."²⁰ The presence of women missionaries was said to dampen immediately the wild spirits of gold miners. When Miss West, an Anglican missionary, was posted to minister to "a band of white men unaccustomed to social or religious restraints," the men "asked what they had done to deserve to have a woman sent among them." These unruly fellows were soon, Reverend Riley assured his British readers, won over by West's womanly civilizing influences. "They saw," he wrote, "how true womanliness accorded with self-sacrificing service to Christ, and therefore dropped their scornful arguments."²¹

White women, then, were constructed as civilizing agents who could quell the disorderly masculine behaviour associated with the

¹⁶ See Richard Mackie, "Finding home: British settlement on the west coast before 1858," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Victoria, May 1990.

¹⁷ Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *A View of the Art of Colonisation: With Present Reference to the British Empire: In Letters Between a Statesman and a Colonist* [1849], in M.F. Lloyd Pritchard, ed., *The Collected Works of Edward Gibbon Wakefield* (London, 1968), 972.

¹⁸ See, especially, Wakefield, 840-41, 968-69.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 19 June 1862, quoted in Barman, 90.

²⁰ R. Byron Johnson, *Very Far West Indeed: A Few Rough Experiences on the North-West Pacific Coast*, Third Edition (London, 1872), 59.

²¹ Alice J. Janvrin, ed., *Snapshots from the North Pacific: Letters Written by the Right Bishop Ridley (Late of Caledonia)*, Second Edition (London, 1904), 84.

frontier. They could also, colonial promoters hoped, deter white men from wedding aboriginal women. This was a particular concern of the Anglican Columbia Mission Society, which later helped to sponsor the bride-ships that arrived in 1862 and 1863.²² Where mixed marriages reigned, the Bishop of Oxford mused at an 1861 mission meeting:

You make any true relation between the people and the settlers an impossibility . . . With a degraded people to deal with, with people used, under their heathen system, to a low, 'squaw' estimate of woman, how is it possible but that, in pouring forth from this country a mass of men, not governed by high moral or religious principles, you should be doing to that native race the most deadly and irreparable wrong?²³

A man with a penchant for hyperbole, the bishop cautioned the audience at another meeting to "remember that the mixture of those different bloods is all against the new colony." "You know," he continued, "how a very small portion of an evil influence will weaken down a vast volume of good influences."²⁴ Only the massive and well-coordinated importation of white women, he thought, could quell such national and racial contagion.

Third, white women were deemed necessary to make white men permanent and responsible colonists. Matthew Macfie, in 1865, argued that the presence of white women was "urgently required on social and moral grounds." There were, he wrote:

many well-disposed single men prospering in the various trades and professions who are anxious to adopt this country as their home. But the scope for selecting wives is so limited that they feel compelled to go to California in search of their interesting object, and not infrequently are they tempted to remain on American soil — their industry as producers and expenditure as consumers being lost to the colonies. There is no territory on the globe presenting to virtuous

²² On this, see Jackie Lay, "To Columbia on the Tynemouth: The Immigration of Single Women and Girls in 1862," in Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, eds., *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.* (Victoria, 1980); Frank A. Peake, *The Anglican Church in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1959); Women's Migration and Oversea Appointments Society, *New Horizons: A Hundred Years of Women's Migration* (London, 1963); William Carew Hazlitt, *The Great Gold Fields of the Cariboo: with an authentic description brought down to the latest period of British Columbia with an accurate map* (Vancouver, 1974 [1863]), Ch.4.

²³ *Third Report of the Columbia Mission* (London, 1861), 51-52.

²⁴ *Report of the Columbia Mission, 1860* (London, n.d.), 24.

unmarried females such opportunities of entering that state upon which every right-minded woman cannot but look with approval.²⁵

The Bishop of Oxford agreed. British Columbia in 1860, he said, was at a crucial stage in its development as a "race." With "the absence of woman's healing and elevating society," the young colony risked falling outside of the realm of British law and religion and descending straight into heathendom.²⁶ Thus, white women were necessary participants in the process of colony-building in three ways: they would raise the moral tone of the white, male-dominated society, quell the rapid development of a mixed-blood community, and ensure that British law, mores, and economic development flourished.

There are many familiar sentiments in these passages. This is not incidental, but rather strongly suggests that the ideas of colonial promoters heavily informed the analyses of race, gender imbalance, sexuality, and sociability offered in the 1870s. Like practitioners of the "scarcity model," Johnson argued that white women would be treated with decorous care where they were few, and Macfie asserted that women's opportunities would increase commensurately with their rarity. The *British Colonist* was even more explicit in utilizing the "scarcity model." It linked women's marital selectivity to "the operation of a well-known law trade — that where there is a scarcity of an article in the market it always commands high rates, and some invariably refuse to sell till they get the highest prices."²⁷ If colonial promoters found the "scarcity model" useful, they also found the "volcano theory" a handy tool. Like students of prostitution, Riley connected the absence of women with disorderly male behaviour, a hoary trope which would be widely recycled in the anti-Asiatic movement that swept British Columbia during the *fin de siècle*.²⁸ Like scholars of the fur trade, the Bishop of Oxford suggested that the presence of white women would spell the demise of the mixed-race community.²⁹ Like many historians, the colonial promoters assumed

²⁵ Matthew Macfie, F.R.G.S., *Vancouver Island and British Columbia: Their History, Resources, and Prospects* (London, 1865), 497.

²⁶ *Report of the Columbia Mission, 1860*, 25-26.

²⁷ The *British Colonist*, 30 November 1861.

²⁸ For the argument that the absence of Chinese women was a major problem with British Columbia's Chinese community, see *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration: Report and Evidence* (Ottawa, 1885), esp. 89 and 106.

²⁹ This is also suggested in Fisher, 93. For arguments which challenge the notion that the arrival of white women spelled the end of harmonious race relations in colonial societies, see Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria* (Urbana, 1987);

that the arrival of white women symbolized the establishment of "civilization" and stability.³⁰

But rather than accepting these ideas as valid observational categories, historians need to analyse them as historically specific concepts that should only be used with great caution. The colonial promoters, after all, were deploying the "scarcity" and "volcano" models for particular and highly political reasons. Take, for instance, the political utility of the "volcano model." The colonial promoters did not assume that white men had a "natural" need for white women, but rather argued that white women needed to be imported to facilitate the "civilization" of the colony. Men like the Bishop of Oxford implied that disorderly behaviour and miscegenation were the natural state of white men, especially the white, working-class and often American men who peopled the gold rush. In calling for the importation of white women, they were calling for direct political intervention. Similarly, they used the "scarcity model" to encourage white women to emigrate. When Macfie waxed eloquent about the homage paid to women on Vancouver Island, he did so to encourage white women to pack up their bags and emigrate, not in order to provide later historians with a description of experience.

If we treat the "volcano theory" and the "scarcity model" as the discursive tools of colonial promoters, and not as valid observational categories, what are we to say about how a skewed demography affected sexuality and sociability in nineteenth-century British Columbia? While this analysis is necessarily tentative and partial, I would like to suggest two conclusions about how non-aboriginal gender imbalance affected one particular group — white women.

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Due to the deeply haphazard, culturally specific, and racist character of both colonial and Canadian census-taking, it is difficult to even gauge the extent of gender imbalance in nineteenth-century British Columbia. The colonial governments consistently abdicated their roles as modern state-builders by avoiding even estimating British Columbia's population. James Douglas, who began but never com-

Claudia Knapman, *White Women in Fiji, 1835-1930: The Ruin of Empire?* (Sydney, 1986); Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington and Indiana, 1991).

³⁰ On this in the American west, see Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," in Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., *The Women's West* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1987).

pleted a census of the white population of Vancouver Island in 1855,³¹ disappointed the Colonial Office in 1864 with the comment that “[n]o machinery exists in the Colony by which these statistics . . . can be furnished — No Law has been enacted for the Registration of Births Marriages and Deaths.”³² The governors of the mainland tried harder, but produced results that were little better. In 1867, they provided some sketchy estimates and the comment that “[t]hese returns are but very roughly approximate and cannot be taken as a true account.”³³ The first Canadian census of 1881 benefited from machinery more befitting a modern state,³⁴ but the problems inherent in census-taking in general and in enumerating British Columbia’s widely dispersed and ethnically and racially diverse population in particular remained.³⁵

TABLE I
*Total British Columbia Non-Aboriginal adult population
by sex, 1867-1901*

YEAR	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
1867	7,626 (83%)	1,615 (17%)	9,241
1870	5,477 (73%)	2,035 (27%)	7,512
1881	13,431 (74%)	4,613 (26%)	18,044
1891	41,354 (75%)	14,081 (25%)	55,435
1901	81,946 (71%)	33,687 (29%)	115,633

Source: Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, Table 11, 369 and British Columbia, *Blue Books of Statistics, etc.* — 1867. “Adult” refers to individuals fifteen years or older. All statistics are rounded off to the nearest whole number. The 1867 figures are based on tabulating the figures for “whites,” “Chinese,” and “Colored.”

Yet some basic information does emerge from the clouds of confusion that swirl about nineteenth-century British Columbia. Aboriginal populations are estimated to be roughly sex equal,³⁶ although First Nations gender ratios varied both regionally and culturally.³⁷ The

³¹ See the half-filled returns written in longhand, Vancouver Island, Governor (Douglas), *Census, 1855*, C AA 10.7, British Columbia Archives and Records Service [hereafter BCARS].

³² Vancouver Island, *Blue Books of Statistics — 1864*, mfm. 625A, BCARS, 224-225.

³³ British Columbia, *Blue Books of Statistics — 1867*, mfm. 627A, BCARS, 140-141.

³⁴ Colonial “censuses” apparently were conducted (in the case of Douglas’ 1855 effort) from personal knowledge or, in 1860s British Columbia, by local magistrates. See British Columbia, *Blue Books of Statistics — 1867*, 40.

³⁵ For an excellent discussion, see Robert Galois and Cole Harris, “Recalibrating Society: The Population Geography of British Columbia in 1881,” *The Canadian Geographer* 38:1 (1994): 37-53.

³⁶ See Barman, 369.

³⁷ Galois and Harris, 43.

immigrant communities, on the other hand, displayed a profound gender imbalance which the march of the nineteenth century only partially modified. In 1867, roughly 17 per cent of British Columbia's adult non-native population was female. By 1881, natural growth and immigration had raised the female portion of the adult non-native population to only about 26 per cent. From there, the female percentage of the population actually shrunk slightly; in 1891, females made up roughly 25 per cent of the adult non-aboriginal population. (See table 1)

Gender imbalance, however, was not an equal-opportunity affair. Rather, it was a phenomenon that varied along the lines of age, race, and region. While inconsistencies in data prohibit a consistent analysis of these factors over the nineteenth century,³⁸ the available evidence suggests that gender imbalance could vary substantially. Gender ratios were, not surprisingly, particularly unbalanced among adults; in 1891, for instance, the numbers of non-aboriginal male and female children were essentially equal, while women made only 32 per cent of the non-native population between the ages of 15 and 24.³⁹ The extent to which gender imbalance was a racially determined phenomenon is demonstrated by the 1870 figures, which have white females at 33 per cent of their "race," "Colored" females as 36 per cent of their group, and Chinese females as only 3 per cent of the Chinese population.⁴⁰ A further complication was region, with the less colonized areas displaying a more extreme gender imbalance than older immigrant settlements. In 1867, for instance, only 9 per cent of Hope, Yale and Lytton's non-native population was female, while Victoria's non-aboriginal women made up 27 per cent of their community.⁴¹

But how did the social milieu this quantitative evidence partially describes shape white women's experience of sexuality and sociability? What, in other words, did it mean to be a white woman in a society where male dominance was a demographic as well as a social fact? First, the "scarcity model" contains a grain of truth insofar as the way in which non-aboriginal gender imbalance was constructed did increase white women's opportunities for heterosexual contact. White women were represented by colonial promoters not only as the har-

³⁸ The colonial *Blue Books*, for instance, count people by race but not by age, while the Canadian censuses enumerated people by age but not (with the exception of 1881) by race.

³⁹ *Census of Canada, 1890/91*, V.2, 2-5.

⁴⁰ *Census of Canada, 1870*, V.4, 376; On racist immigration policy and practice, see The Women's Book Committee, Chinese Canadian National Council, *Gin Gwo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* (Toronto, 1993), 17-23.

⁴¹ British Columbia, *Blue Books of Statistics, etc. — 1867*. The figures for "non-native" are based on tabulating the figures for "whites," "Chinese," and "Coloured."

bingers of civilization, but also as highly desirable. While the relationship between such constructions and social practice is unclear, it is likely that the persistent construction of white women as the ultimate object of male sexual desire did have some practical effects. The awe for white women in British Columbia, some authors suggested, was so powerful that it transformed otherwise undesirable women into highly alluring ones, working-class women into pinnacles of middle-class appeal. "Even the homely laundress," Johnson wrote, "was raised by the scarcity of her sex into a goddess for the nonce."⁴² The daughter of his Victoria landlady was similarly transformed by the dearth of competition. "So scarce was female society, however, that the fair Angelina, despite such drawbacks as are inherent in an uneducated Miss, was the centre of attraction."⁴³ Others commented that even "plain, fat, and 50" was acceptable to the "not very particular" miner.⁴⁴

Thus, the very women who were often constructed as "redundant" or a political threat when they filled the workhouses or faced a life of single, genteel poverty in Britain were transformed into subjects not only politically useful, but also highly desirable. When combined with the sheer numbers of eligible men, this discourse often rendered white women enamoured with their own sexual currency. Susan Moir Allison, the archetypal "pioneer gentlewoman of British Columbia," clearly enjoyed her status as one of the few white women in the Similkameen. She describes with sensual detail her meeting with a Hudson's Bay Company worker, "the most picturesque figure" she had ever seen, who later "said he was never more surprised in his life than to see a white girl on the trail."⁴⁵ A Nanaimo resident remembered that in the early twentieth century "girls did not want for partners when attending dances at the Institute Hall."⁴⁶ It was this experience an Ontario woman yearned to have. In 1880, she wrote:

I make a complaint of a plaugey pest
That's known by the name of the great North West
For this wondrous land of the setting sun
Has taken my beaux away, every one.

Yea, one by one have they all cleared out,
Thinking to better themselves, no doubt;

⁴² Johnson, 59.

⁴³ Johnson, 170.

⁴⁴ *The Times* 1 January 1862

⁴⁵ Margaret Ormsby, ed., *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia: The Recollections of Susan Allison* (Vancouver, 1976), 10.

⁴⁶ E. Blanche Norcross, ed., *Nanaimo Retrospective: The First Century* (Victoria, 1979), 148.

Caring but little how far they may go
From the poor lone girl in Ontario.

I'll sling my goods in a carpet sack;
I'll off to the west and won't turn back,
I'll have a husband and a good one too.
If I have to follow to the Cariboo.⁴⁷

If this poet ever got to the Cariboo, it is likely that her marital goals would have been quickly fulfilled. Indeed, all agreed that nineteenth century white British Columbian women married at young ages. Sundays in New Westminster, Frances Herring wrote, saw “young creatures, from fourteen to seventeen years of age” parade the streets. “[P]erhaps by another Sunday,” she wrote, one of these adolescent girls would “be wending her way over mountain and prairie on horseback to a well-to-do husband, whose acquaintance had been made within the week, and who had journeyed down with the express purpose of taking back a white wife.”⁴⁸ C. F. J. Galloway wrote about Lillooet that “there are always many young men looking for wives, and an attractive girl cannot remain single for very long.”⁴⁹

Census figures bear out the impression that white women married young in nineteenth-century British Columbia. While Peter Ward minimizes the regional differences in nuptuality,⁵⁰ an examination of age of first marriage, gender ratios, and province of residence suggests that a skewed demography had substantial impact. In 1881, women's first marriage in British Columbia took place at an average age of 20 years, while Nova Scotian women tended to wed at 25.9 years of age. Ten years later, British Columbian women still married at ages which dispute the regular musings about Canada's congruence with the “European marriage pattern.” In 1891, British Columbian women's first marriage took place at an average of 22.3 years, while Nova Scotian women wedded at an average of 26.4 years.⁵¹

As much as it suggests that women's opportunities for heterosexual contact were heightened in nineteenth-century British Columbia, this

⁴⁷ Anonymous in *Simcoe British Canadian*, 5 May 1880, Quoted in Dubinsky, 118.

⁴⁸ Frances E. Herring, *In the Pathless West: With Soldiers, Pioneers, Miners, and Savages* (London, n.d. [1904]), 86.

⁴⁹ C.F.J. Galloway, *The Call of the West — Letters From British Columbia* (London, 1916), 76.

⁵⁰ See Ward, Ch.3.

⁵¹ Ellen Gee, “Marriage in nineteenth-century Canada,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 9:2 (August 1982): Table IX, 320. While Gee does not specify which racial groups were included in these figures, it is likely that they reflect the white community more than the practice of other British Columbians given the cultural specificity of legal marriage.

evidence also hints at my second tentative conclusion — that a skewed demography restricted white women's options for experiences outside of the heterosexual nexus. The comments trumpeting women's ample opportunities in the marriage market also suggest that women were under substantial pressure to marry. The marriages they made, moreover, were not bargains struck between equals. Like women elsewhere in British North America, they entered marriages based, always legally and often enough socially, on an essentially un-reconstituted patriarchy.⁵² Moreover, they tended to marry men substantially older than themselves. In 1891, women in British Columbia married men roughly 10.4 years older than themselves, while Ontario spouses were separated by only 2.7 years.⁵³ Disparate ages between men and women could only increase the gap in social power that already existed between the sexes.

The skewed demography of nineteenth-century British Columbia also made establishing social, sexual, and emotional bonds outside of the heterosexual nexus difficult. For some women, otherwise routine interactions became fraught with a deep sense of sexual danger. K. Stannard, a "ladies companion" who visited New Westminster in the 1870s, found that there "were no females in the house" of the Grand Hotel except herself and her mistress. Despite her extensive travels, this predicament induced such apprehension into Stannard's heart that she regarded all knocks on the door with suspicion.⁵⁴

If some white women reacted to British Columbia's overwhelmingly male society with fear, others responded by becoming lonely. The scarcity of other white women and the socially imposed but individually perpetuated barriers between white and First Nations women meant that establishing female bonds was difficult. In 1856 Annie Deans, a Victoria dressmaker, mourned the death of her friend Mrs. Tait whom she counted "just as a Sister" and had "a great love for." She was apparently worried that this friendship could not be replaced, and urged her sister in Scotland to emigrate on the grounds that "it is always my lament that if I had a female Friend here I would like it much better."⁵⁵ When McQueen told her mother that she was "just sick of the faces of men,"⁵⁶ she thus articulated a sense of

⁵² See Constance Backhouse, *Petticoats and Prejudice: Women and Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, 1991), Ch.1.

⁵³ See Gee, Table IV, 321.

⁵⁴ M. Stannard, *Memoirs of a Professional Lady Nurse* (London, 1873), 162.

⁵⁵ George An [*sic*] Deans to Brother and Sister, 13 August 1856, Annie Deans Outward Correspondence, transcript, E B D343A, BCARS.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Barman, 130.

isolation which many shared.⁵⁷ Yet this was a loneliness premised on white supremacy and culturally specific modes of sociability which white women were either unwilling or unable to bridge. McQueen did not consider the Nicola or mixed-descent women around her when she remarked on the lack of female company.⁵⁸ Similarly, when Mary Moody, wife of Colonel R.C. Moody of the Royal Engineers, wrote to her sister describing a dinner party with other women as “[a]n event in the history of the place, where female[s] are so scarce,” she deployed a definition of “female” that was profoundly exclusive.⁵⁹ It had little enough room for the “colonial girls” she found badly dressed and ill-accomplished, less room for the wives and daughters of men under her husband’s command, and no room at all for the First Nations women who peopled New Westminster in the 1860s.⁶⁰

This lack of female solidarity surprised and disappointed some women. Herring’s novel, *Canadian Camp Life*, set in 1890s Boundary Bay, expressed shock at how young white women shunned a white man and his “half-breed” wife:

A clique! here in the backwoods, laughed Mrs Wentworth. “I should have thought where people, especially women, were so scarce, they would be thankful to come across a fellow creature and use their poor tongues!”⁶¹

Despite Mrs. Wentworth’s optimism, more than good will and a desire to talk was required to unite nineteenth-century British Columbian women. The barriers that separated women of different races and classes were not easily overcome. Susan Allison’s unsuccessful efforts to forge bonds with her Similkameen neighbour, Suzanne, illustrates well the saliency of cleavages cut among women. When

⁵⁷ On the importance of female bonds in the nineteenth century, see Carroll Smith Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1985); Margaret Conrad, “Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home: Time and Place in Canadian Women’s History,” in Strong-Boag and Fellman.

⁵⁸ See Barman, 170-1 for McQueen’s ambivalence about First Nations and mixed-descent women.

⁵⁹ Mary S. Moody to Em, 15 March 1861, Mary Moody, Outward Correspondence, transcript, Add. Mss. 60, BCARS. On Moody, see Jacqueline Gresko, “Roughing It in the Bush’ in British Columbia: Mary Moody’s Pioneer Life in New Westminster, 1859-1863,” in Creese and Strong-Boag.

⁶⁰ See Mary S. Moody to Mamma, 21 March 1859 in Mary Moody Outward Correspondence, BCARS, for Moody’s feelings about bourgeois colonial white women; see Mary S. Moody to Mamma, 11 February 1861 for the comment that she and Mrs. Bacon were “the only two ladies. . .” in New Westminster.

⁶¹ Frances E. Herring, *Canadian Camp Life* (London, 1900), 180.

Mrs. Allison and Suzanne met over Allison's childbirth, theirs was a tale of intercultural misunderstanding that the supposedly essentially female experience of childbearing did little to mediate. Allison wrote that "Suzanne was very good to me in her way — though I thought her rather unfeeling at the time. She thought that I ought to be as strong as an Indian woman but I was not."⁶² That Suzanne was likely her husband's "country wife,"⁶³ and that Allison later tried to hire Suzanne as a domestic servant no doubt further tested the ability of gender to overcome racial barriers in a colonial context.⁶⁴

White women in nineteenth-century British Columbia thus experienced a particular configuration of sexuality and sociability that could be as difficult as it was sometimes exhilarating. It was never determined by gender alone. British Columbia was a class society. It was also a racially divided one controlled by a minority white population constantly engaged in a process of colonization, and most white women seemed to have showed little inclination to transcend these relations. Yet whatever power they reaped from their status as "civilizers" was not without its costs. Constructed as colonial wives and mothers and sometimes faced with a society that offered them little else, theirs could be restricted lives. And women like McQueen, despite the wishes of the colonial promoters and later historians, found cold comfort in the male faces and considered the First Nations ones out of the question.

* * *

This essay has ranged from historiography to empirical research to some tentative conclusions. It has argued three main points. First, it has traced how the "scarcity" and "volcano" models have defined how Canadian historians have understood gender imbalance. Second, it has argued that the influence of these two ideas stems from colonial promotional literature and that historians need to recognize the historicity of these notions without being constrained by them. Lastly, I have put forward two tentative conclusions about how gender imbalance shaped white women's experience of sexuality and sociability during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Rather than adjudicate whether non-aboriginal gender imbalance was "good" for white women, I have explored how white women, both married and

⁶² Allison, 28.

⁶³ Jean Barman and Jacqueline Gresko, personal communication, May 1991 and June 1994.

⁶⁴ Allison, 33.

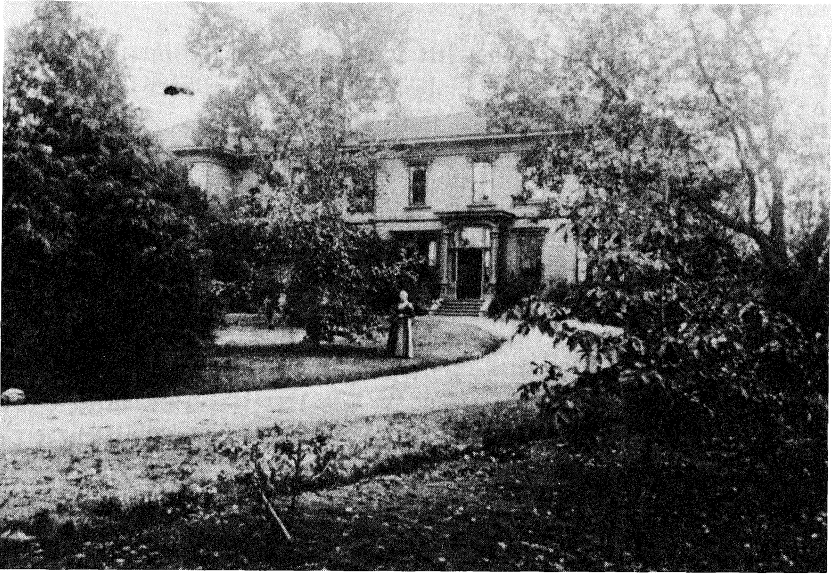
single, negotiated relations with men and with women of other cultural groups in British Columbia. While gender imbalance increased white women's opportunities for heterosexual contact, it restricted those economic and social possibilities not contained within the heterosexual nexus.

Yet this attempt to escape colonial discourse, written by a white British Columbian presently living in Toronto, has ultimately proved problematic in that my analysis minimizes the subjectivity of First Nations people. Some scholars of colonial discourse deal with this predicament by stating that their intention is to analyse white discourse and white discourse alone. While this position contains an important critique of the intellectual conceit inherent in attempts of contemporary (and usually white) historians to adequately represent the perspective of colonized peoples, it can also function to legitimize the neglect of First Nations histories. Yet we can only begin to surmise how the skewed demography born of colonialism affected aboriginal women. Sylvia Van Kirk's pioneering work argues that they sometimes were marginalized or displaced. Herring commented that white wives "often found an Indian or half-breed 'wife' ahead of them when they arrived in their new home, with a large family of children calling the bridegroom 'father.'"⁶⁵ When combined with the extensive social, political, and economic changes affecting First Nations women in the latter half of the nineteenth century, these shifts in the construction in male desire and female desirability could no doubt be devastating. Yet the colonial promoters self-consciously elevated the allure of white women, and probably over-estimated not only indigenous women's reliance on and interest in white men, but the extent to which white women replaced them.⁶⁶ According truth-value to such narratives, moreover, obscures the gap that separates indigenous and white representation and contributes to the construction of a history written from the vantage point of colonizers alone.⁶⁷ The story of colonial social and sexual relations, told from a First Nations perspective, cannot be told with the tools bestowed by the colonial promoters.

⁶⁵ Herring, *In the Pathless West*, 89.

⁶⁶ See Rev. Daniel Gordon, *Mountain and Prairie: A Journey From Victoria To Winnipeg, via Peace River* (Montreal, 1880), 107, for an obvious attempt to argue for the disrespectability of mixed marriage.

⁶⁷ On the differences in white and aboriginal historical representations, see Julie Cruikshank, "Images of Gold Rush Society: Skookum Jim and the Discovery of Gold," *Ethnohistory* 39:1 (Winter 1992): 20-41.



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