

# Tramp Printer Extraordinary: British Columbia's John "Truth" Houston

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John Houston was one of the few men accorded the peculiar privilege of reading his own obituary. On 4 March 1910 *The Victoria Colonist*, *The Victoria Times* and *The Vancouver Province* reported his death prematurely and printed lengthy reviews of his life. According to the *Colonist*, he was "the pioneer journalist of the Canadian Kootenays, and known and loved by many from Mexico to the Arctic circle."<sup>1</sup> The *Times* referred to him as one of B.C.'s "most historic and picturesque characters" and went on to say: "It is possibly correct to say that John Houston was the best known Canadian newspaperman on the Pacific coast. He was a typical Westerner, of the sort that Brett Harte immortalised in the days before the stage coach had been put out of business by the iron horse."<sup>2</sup> What is more, in an editorial published the same day, the *Times* paid Houston the considerable compliment of referring to him as "the Nestor of the press of British Columbia."<sup>3</sup>

Although he was in fact very ill, Houston undoubtedly read these reports and their subsequent retractions with some mirth. A cartoon of him reading his obituaries appeared on page one of the *Times*.<sup>4</sup> In the same issue, in a story entitled "John Houston's Death is Denied," that paper explained that "John Houston has always had a faculty for doing the unexpected."<sup>5</sup> Three days later the *Province* borrowed a line from Mark Twain and noted that the news of Houston's death "was greatly exaggerated."<sup>6</sup> Houston himself got in on the fun when he wrote C. H. Gibbons, who had penned the obituary in the *Province*: "I didn't know I was dead till your paper came and even then I might have questioned

<sup>1</sup> "Passing of a Veteran Newspaperman," *Victoria Colonist*, 4 March 1910, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> "John Houston Passed Away," *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> "John Houston, Printer and Journalist," *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> "Reading His Obituary," *Victoria Times*, 5 March 1910, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> "John Houston's Death is Denied," *Victoria Times*, 5 March 1910, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> "Legislature Day by Day," *Vancouver Province*, 8 March 1910, p. 9.

the accuracy of the information if I hadn't known its reliability. . . . Don't be putting in any correction — I'll make good on the story."<sup>7</sup> True to his word, he died at 3:30 p.m. on 8 March 1910.

Such an odd and well-publicized exit was a fitting end for John Houston, one of the most interesting and neglected figures in B.C. history. He was an imposing and strong-willed individual given to fierce opinion and vast enthusiasm. He had a knack for making both loyal friends and ardent enemies. A crusading journalist who established seven newspapers in six different locations in B.C., he thundered in a grand fashion at such giant companies as the CPR, the Great Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific. A champion of the common man, he disliked the "well-bred hypocrisy" he felt was "necessary to make social intercourse smooth and agreeable."<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, his career was explosive. More than once he had to defend in court what he had written in his newspapers.<sup>9</sup> In the political arena, he served four turbulent terms as mayor of Nelson, was twice elected to the provincial legislature, where his obstreperous behaviour gained him notoriety, became president of the Conservative Party of British Columbia, and would have become a cabinet minister were it not for intra-party rivalry and his stubborn lack of tact. A contemporary, who described him as a "rough diamond," summed him up well when he wrote: "He was dictatorial and aggressive, a rugged individualist, and if you didn't agree with him it was "be damned to you," but with it all he was the most democratic of mayors, with a heart as big as an ox for his friends and those in need, hiding these finer qualities under a rough exterior and bear-like growl."<sup>10</sup>

While Houston's accomplishments make him important, it is his personality that fascinates. He caused commotion wherever he went and seemed

<sup>7</sup> C. H. Gibbons, "Many Interior Towns Have Happy Memories of John Houston, Nelson's First Mayor," *Vancouver Province* (undated (c) 1928). Copies in PABC (Provincial Archives of B.C.) Vertical File on Houston, and in the R. G. Joy Papers, PABC.

<sup>8</sup> *New Westminster Truth*, 25 December 1889, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> R. G. Joy, "John Houston," Unpublished manuscript, typescript ('T'), p. 16, in R. G. Joy Papers (PABC); Dick Diespecker, "Houston the Magnificent," *Vancouver Province*, 19 July 1947, n.p.

As a defensive precaution when taking different personalities to task, Houston "always wrote his editorials by hand and in three parts. And the three parts were given to three separate printers to set. After it was in type, the original manuscripts were collected and burned in the office stove." Diespecker; R. G. Joy, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> W. E. Wasson, "Wasson Vividly Pictures Nelson's Founders; Houston a Great Man; Gives Highlights of 43 Years," *Nelson Daily News*, 27 January 1943, p. 4.

to delight in the fact. Indeed, perhaps more than anything else, it was his faults that made him famous. During the provincial election of 1903 he reportedly said he had more imperfections than any fifty men, women and children in Nelson. To this *The Nelson Economist* responded:

An open confession is good for the soul, but Mr. Houston should be more careful in dealing with figures. He should have said more imperfections than any 1000 men, women and children in Nelson; it was merely a case of juggling with figures.<sup>11</sup>

Two years later *The Nelson Tribune* put things in perspective when it commented that Houston's "weaknesses have been condoned for the sake of the marked ability and energy he has shown in the public service."<sup>12</sup>

The problem, according to *The Ymir Herald*, was Houston's "lack of adaptability" and the "fact he lived thirty or forty years too late."<sup>13</sup> Like many others who went west during the latter part of the nineteenth century, he was infected with wanderlust. Frontier journalism was peculiarly suited to his talents and needs, for it allowed him to move from place to place and combine prospecting and real estate speculation with newspaper publishing. While in Donald, B.C., he occasionally relied upon a committee of citizens to put out his paper while he was away placer mining.<sup>14</sup> While a resident of Nelson it was not uncommon for him to abandon his editorial or civic responsibilities and disappear from the city for varying lengths of time. An Idaho newspaper maintained that he possessed "the most inexplicable idiosyncrasies of any man that ever did as he blamed pleased,"<sup>15</sup> and the *Colonist* said he "was only at home on the edge of civilization."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Editorial Comment," *Nelson Economist*, 22 August 1903, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> "Editorial," *Nelson Tribune*, 29 September 1905, p. 2. In an editorial on page 2 of its 16 October 1905 issue, the *Tribune* noted: "John Houston has made mistakes, some of them so serious that in the case of any ordinary man they would deserve to be visited with severe censure, but against these mistakes has to be set fourteen years of unremitting effort to make Nelson a city and to advance its interests."

<sup>13</sup> "As Others See/ John Houston as He Appears to the Ymir Herald/ Born 40 Years Late/ In Pioneer Days of the Great West He Would Have Been Invaluable," *Nelson Tribune*, 17 October 1905, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Donald Truth*, 14 July 1888, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> "A Pen Portrait/ of John Houston by The Wood River Times [of Hailey, Idaho]/ Bohemian Journalist/ Idaho Recognized His Better Qualities and Regarded Him as an Original Genius," *Nelson Tribune*, 4 October 1905, p. 1. (Herein after referred to as *The Wood River Times*.) In an editorial on page 2 of its 16 October 1905 issue, the *Tribune* agreed with *The Wood River Times* and said of Houston: "it is admitted that his idiosyncrasies are so numerous and marked that he might do almost anything."

<sup>16</sup> "John Houston," *Victoria Colonist*, 9 March 1910, p. 4.

In more urban settings these tendencies caused problems, for as Houston himself remarked: "The blunt sincerity of the frontiersman stamps him as a barbarian and he is never popular with well-bred hypocrites."<sup>17</sup> Yet while this man — described on one occasion as "rash, impetuous, wilful,"<sup>18</sup> and on another as "obstinate and combative"<sup>19</sup> — often could not control the uglier aspects of his "rugged pride" and "dour personality,"<sup>20</sup> it seems likely that he also cultivated certain characteristics as a means of poking fun at or criticizing the well-bred hypocrites he abhorred. According to the *Times*,

his written word often was unnecessarily bitter, and his speech was accompanied by a vehemence that frequently bordered on the malevolent. This was only a masque, however. Again and again he has delivered the most scathing attacks on opponents in the House, and relapsing into his chair has shaken with suppressed laughter to witness the consternation his remarks had caused.<sup>21</sup>

Then there was the time in Nelson in 1901 when a collection was taken to buy prizes for the contestants in the Dominion Day regatta. In an effort to embarrass the respectability of the finer class, Houston, then serving his third term as mayor, made sure that even the prostitutes from the local red light district contributed. Needless to say, the matter caused quite a stir.<sup>22</sup>

Houston was born in Caledon township, Peel County, Ontario, in November 1850.<sup>23</sup> His father, William Houston, was Scottish, while his mother, Mary (Thomas) Houston, who was born in Canada, was of Welsh extraction.<sup>24</sup> A good student, John Houston "was somewhat precocious, and absorbed all he could till the age of 14," when he was sent

<sup>17</sup> *New Westminster Truth*, 25 December 1889, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> "Editorial," *Nelson Tribune*, 16 October 1905, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> "Consequences of Cowardice," *Victoria Times*, 30 October 1903, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> "John Houston, Printer and Journalist," *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> "John Houston Passed Away," *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Roy Brown, "Good Old Days," *Vancouver Sun*, 2 September 1953, no page given. Copy in PABC Vertical File on Houston.

<sup>23</sup> R. G. Joy, "John Houston," Unpublished manuscript, script ('S') based on an interview 9 August 1938, with Houston's nephew Harry, p. 1, in R. G. Joy Papers, PABC; Fact Sheet, PABC Vertical File on Houston. The former of these two sources gives Houston's birthdate as 17 November 1850, while the latter maintains it is 14 November 1850.

<sup>24</sup> R. E. Gosnell, "John Houston," *A History: British Columbia* (Victoria: Lewis Publishing Co., 1906), pp. 502-03; Joy, "Houston," 'S' Manuscript, p. 1; *Fact Sheet*, PABC Vertical File on Houston. In an editorial on page 2, *The Nelson Tribune* of 16 October 1905 wrote of Houston: "He had a temperament derived from French ancestry which rendered him very excitable. . . ."

to Guelph, Ontario, where he wrote an examination of some sort and won a book prize as a result.<sup>25</sup> The next year he was an apprentice in a print shop in Chicago, where he had relatives.<sup>26</sup> He noted a quarter century later that he had “enjoyed . . . placing many long miles between [himself] and that . . . old stony farm” on his first trip away from it in 1865.<sup>27</sup>

From Chicago the young man ventured south. He spent a number of years working in the newspaper business in Missouri and Texas.<sup>28</sup> Years later he would claim that he had been reared in those states and had matured in British Columbia.<sup>29</sup> The quality of this rearing, however, was questionable, for, as *The Nelson Tribune* noted, “his rough early life, without much restraint, had tended to develop lack of self-control.”<sup>30</sup> From the southern states he moved to New York City, then west to Great Falls, Montana. The dates of these moves are not known, but Houston worked in the newspaper business in both places.<sup>31</sup>

Fortunately we have somewhat more detailed information about his life in the early 1880s. Idaho was experiencing a mining rush at the time and not surprisingly Houston, who was lured by one El Dorado after another, was there. He was foreman of *The Boise Statesman* for a while, then in 1881 he tramped to Hailey, where he became the first foreman of *The Wood River Times*.<sup>32</sup> “At that time the Times was published in a tent. . . . There was not a house in the town that had a roof. . . . Hailey was a city of tents. It had a population of 4000 souls. Money was common as dirt. Forty-five saloons supplied thirst quenchers.”<sup>33</sup> Houston, according to his co-workers, “was indefatigable, repeatedly working for three days

<sup>25</sup> Joy, ‘S’ manuscript, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*; Gosnell; D. A. McGregor, “John Houston: Memorial to a ‘rough diamond,’” *Vancouver Province*, 26 August 1970, p. 4, reprinted in D. A. McGregor, *D. A. McGregor and his writings* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, n.d.), pp. 39-43.

<sup>27</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 1 November 1890, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> McGregor; Joy, ‘S’ manuscript, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> “John Houston Staked Early Claim at Prince Rupert Townsite, Letter States” (article based largely on a letter from W. J. Raymond of *The Prince Rupert Empire*), *Nelson Daily News*, in R. G. Joy Papers, PABC. (Hereinafter referred to as Raymond.)

<sup>30</sup> “Editorial,” *Nelson Tribune*, 16 October 1905, p. 2. Similarly, *The Victoria Times* of 4 March 1910 (p. 5) wrote: “. . . a considerable portion of his early life was spent in Texas where he no doubt imbibed the spirit of the ‘wild and woolly’ West which became so prominent a characteristic in later years.”

<sup>31</sup> Joy, ‘S’ manuscript, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *The Wood River Times*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

and two nights at a stretch, stopping only an hour for meals."<sup>34</sup> What is more, after only a month in the town he was also something of a real estate entrepreneur, owning three log cabins which produced a monthly revenue of \$130 for him.<sup>35</sup>

During the winter of 1881-82 he was off again. In the company of George Hibbert, who later became a well-known Oregon editor and newspaper proprietor, he returned to Butte by wagon. The two men reached their destination in January 1882, "after suffering hardships that would have killed most men."<sup>36</sup> But come the spring, Houston was back in Hailey, where he resumed his old position which he called "the only white man's office in the new Northwest."<sup>37</sup> He was only there a matter of weeks, however, before he was off once more, this time driving a flock of sheep. Some months later he was in Wisconsin running the state printing office. A year after he was in Dallas, Texas, where he was in charge of a \$100,000 printing business for a short period of time. From there he tramped across the southwest to Los Angeles.<sup>38</sup> It is quite possible that, in addition to his natural tendency to wander about the west, alcoholic excess had something to do with the frequency with which he changed jobs. When he was young he had joined The Band of Hope, a temperance society,<sup>39</sup> but somewhere along the line liquor took hold of him, for, as he wrote during the last years of his life when he again became a temperance advocate:

I speak of these matters and what they mean to both communities and individuals, not as a religious fanatic or a temperance crank, but out of bitter experience, as one who has played the game in many new cities and camps, and by his own mistakes lost fortunes, health and the regard of many whose good opinion he most valued.<sup>40</sup>

After Los Angeles, Houston turned up next in Calgary about 1886 or 1887. How he got there and where he had been in between is not known. He worked for *The Calgary Herald* for a while,<sup>41</sup> and then, following the CPR, moved into British Columbia for the first time. At Donald,

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Joy, "T" manuscript, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Prince Rupert Empire* quoted in *The Victoria Colonist*, 4 March 1910, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Donald Truth*, 2 June 1888, p. 8.

which he thought had urban possibilities because of its status as one of the new railroad's section points, he established *The Truth* on 2 June 1888.<sup>42</sup> Donald, however, proved to be a disappointment. In the paper's sixth issue, Houston wrote that he was "a blanked fool" for living in such an uncertain place rather than being "back in York state on a farm, living contentedly and raising game cocks."<sup>43</sup> In another of the paper's early issues he wrote:

Truth's typographical imperfections, it must be confessed, are numerous. It was printed from a handful or two of very old type, borrowed from the Calgary Herald, one page at a time on a "nutcracker" press. Its editor was broke, owed three weeks board and had no standoff liquid inspiration. Hence, none of its articles are inspired, all of them sober truth.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless the newspaper developed quite a reputation. According to R. G. Joy, who arrived in Nelson in 1893, it "was something of a mining paper. . . . [It] was widely quoted by United States mining journals, extracts from [it] appearing weekly in the mining press of San Francisco."<sup>45</sup> Joy also maintains, in his unpublished history of Nelson, that Houston arrived in Nelson via Bonner's Ferry, Idaho, during the first half of 1889.<sup>46</sup> However, unless Houston was just making a visit of inspection to Nelson, which he had referred to as "the sure-enough town of the Toad Mountain country," this date is undoubtedly incorrect, for he was still publishing *The Truth* at Donald.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, later that year he moved to New Westminster, where he re-established *The Truth* on 5 September 1889. Hence, considering the fact that he went on to establish *The Nelson Miner* in June 1890, it seems more likely that Joy was a year early in dating Houston's permanent arrival in the Queen City of the Kootenays.

Nelson, which sprang into existence shortly after the discovery of the Silver King mine in 1886, was emerging at this time as the transportation and supply centre for the new West Kootenay mining region. In 1889, according to "Irish Jack" Morgan, it had "the makings of a Wild West camp. There was an atmosphere of excitement and activity. The citizenry

<sup>42</sup> McGregor.

<sup>43</sup> *Donald Truth*, 28 (or 23) July 1888, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 June 1888, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Joy, "T" manuscript, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> R. G. Joy, "History of Nelson and District," Unpublished manuscript, pp. 38, 54, in R. G. Joy Papers, PABC.

<sup>47</sup> *Donald Truth*, 29 September 1888, p. 2.

consisted mostly of prospectors, miners, speculators, gamblers, and mule skinneders.<sup>48</sup> To this can be added the comments of Colonel R. T. Lowery, who, like Houston, was also a tramp printer. He pointed out that while "the camp was new and short of frills, boiled shirts, parsons, lawyers and prohibition lawyers," it nevertheless "had plenty of whiskey . . . and several pianos."<sup>49</sup> Houston was undoubtedly attracted by the town's rugged frontier characteristics, but he also knew its development possibilities were considerable as a result of its strategic location on Kootenay River between Kootenay and the Arrow Lakes.

Sporting the nickname "Truth," he soon became the town's foremost promoter.<sup>50</sup> He involved himself with the Kootenay Lake Telephone Company, the Nelson Electric Light Company, the first attempt to have the town incorporated, which ended in failure in 1893, and various other enterprises. Moreover, immediately upon arrival he went into a real estate business with Charles M. Ink and W. Gesner Allan, both of whom were to assist in the establishment of *The Nelson Miner*. Their success as realtors, which saw them sell "twice as many lots as all other agents in the town put together" between 1890 and 1892, was attributable, in large part, to two things: the free advertising the *Miner* provided for the the various properties they had to sell and the *Miner's* constant and enthusiastic promotion of the wealth and future potential of the West Kootenay mining district.<sup>51</sup>

Such was Houston's commitment to the new community that there was seemingly no limit to the causes and concerns to which he would turn his attention. On one occasion he took up a collection to make sure that

<sup>48</sup> Rev. T. P. Freney, "Parish History of Nelson," Unpublished updated manuscript, p. 2. Copy in Special Collections, David Thompson University Centre Library, Nelson.

<sup>49</sup> Mollie E. Cottingham, "History of the West Kootenay District," (Unpublished MA Thesis, UBC, 1947), pp. 159, 175; Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Vancouver: Macmillan, 1971), p. 315; F. J. Smyth, *Tales of the Kootenay* (Cranbrook: Courier Press, 1942), pp. 34-35.

<sup>50</sup> Joy, "Houston," 'S' manuscript, pp. 3a, 6.

<sup>51</sup> T. C. Collins, "History What is History," *First History of Nelson, B.C.: With Sketches of Some of Its Prominent Citizens, Firms and Corporations* (C. A. Rohrbacher and Son, 1897), p. 9. Houston, according to Joy, had met Ink in Great Falls, Montana. (Joy, 'S' manuscript, p. 2.) Two Houston and Ink commercial blocks were built in the early 1890s. (See *The Nelson Miner* issues of 11 April 1891, p. 1; 18 April 1891, p. 1; 23 January 1892, p. 1; 30 January 1892, p. 8; 12 March 1892, p. 8; and 7 May 1892, p. 8.)

Houston, who continued to sell real estate in Nelson until well after the turn-of-the-century, built another commercial block bearing his name in the late 1890s; he sold it in March 1901 for \$25,000. ("John Houston real estate ad," *Nelson Tribune*, 24 January 1903, p. 2; *Nelson Tribune*, 14 March 1901, p. 1.)



“Irish Nell,” who did the laundering for the town’s bachelors, did not go without Christmas dinner.<sup>52</sup> Another time, upon learning that a young couple’s wedding was in jeopardy for lack of a licence, he used the *Miner’s* telegraph to wire Victoria to procure the number of the needed licence so that the evening’s wedding, which was one of the town’s first, could go ahead.<sup>53</sup> Dealing with a more weighty matter, he wrote in the spring of 1891:

Some time ago THE MINER called the attention of the authorities to the presence in our midst of hobos, pimps, and tinhorn gamblers. It would be well for the authorities to look that paragraph up, and then look around and see how many men there are in Nelson who are trying hard to swell the ranks of these thieving, despicable, and worthless classes.<sup>54</sup>

Houston was also doing battle with the CPR at this time. In 1890 it had leased the Columbia and Kootenay Railway and Navigation Company for 999 years. In return for building twenty-eight miles of track from Sproat’s Landing, at the southern end of Lower Arrow Lake, to Nelson it received 200,000 acres of Crown land. What is more, as if this was not enough, an amendment to the Columbia and Kootenay Railway Subsidy Act additionally granted the company fully one half of the townsite of Nelson.<sup>55</sup> In response to all this Houston wrote: “. . . it is generally understood that the townsite of Nelson is to be a sort of garden patch for one railway company . . . the Canadian Pacific. . . Nelson is therefore handed over, bag and baggage, to the owners of a jerkwater railway.”<sup>56</sup> He went on to refer to the Columbia and Kootenay as an “abortion-like branch” and “a bastard railway corporation,” while labelling the CPR “the greediest railway company on earth.”<sup>57</sup>

It was shortly after this that the first of Houston’s many absences from

<sup>52</sup> Diespecker.

<sup>53</sup> R. G. Joy, “Houston Wired for Marriage Permit in 1891, Only Hours Before Wedding,” *Nelson Daily News*, 20 December 1948.

<sup>54</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 30 May 1891, p. 4. Apparently Houston was periodically carried away with zealotry of this kind, for when he was first elected mayor of Nelson “he ordered the police to cut down all gambling establishments.” In this case, however, some sort of accommodation was reached and such places continued to operate, perhaps because their patrons were, by and large, his political supporters. (R. G. Joy interview with A. A. Pitchford, in R. G. Joy Papers, PABC.)

<sup>55</sup> “Columbia and Kootenay Railway Subsidy Act,” *Statutory History of the Steam and Electric Railways of Canada, 1836-1937* (Ottawa: Department of Transport, 1938), chapters 21 and 36.

<sup>56</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 25 April 1891, pp. 7, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* for: 25 April 1891, p. 1; 2 May 1891, p. 1; 25 April 1891, p. 1.

Nelson occurred. On 13 June 1891 the *Miner* noted that Houston had "disposed of his interest in the paper, together with all his Nelson property." Less than a month later, however, he had returned, reacquired his position with the *Miner*, and seen Allan off on a two-month visit to San Francisco.<sup>58</sup> Considering this and the fact that less than a year later Houston permanently severed his ties with the *Miner*, it is hard not to wonder whether there was not some point of contention between Houston, Ink and Allan. Indeed, when Houston established the *Nelson Tribune* in November 1892, he did so with two new partners, C. V. Dake and W. J. McKay.<sup>59</sup>

He was to maintain his association with the *Tribune* for the next thirteen years. It, however, was far from being his only concern during that period. In 1892 he held a miner's certificate and likely did some prospecting;<sup>60</sup> in 1893 he held an auctioneer's licence, served as his own auctioneer, and sold a large number of lots he owned at New Denver in the Slocan Valley;<sup>61</sup> in 1895, while extensive development of the Red Mountain mineral claims was commencing, he helped establish *The Rossland Miner*;<sup>62</sup> and throughout these years he was launching his political career.

During the late 1890s Nelson had numerous saloons and licensed hotels and they played an important role in elections. According to James W. Gallacher, who arrived in Nelson on 6 January 1897, "the various candidates would take crowds and visit the various saloons and hotels and set up the drinks."<sup>63</sup> Doubtless Houston used this technique to good advantage. A leader in the drive to have Nelson incorporated, which succeeded in 18 March 1897, he was elected the first mayor of the new city on April

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 July 1891.

<sup>59</sup> Joy, 'S' Manuscript, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6; also, Joy, 'T' manuscript, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> "Miner Makes History Again," *The Kootenay Miner*, 4 January 1973, p. 2. Copy in the PABC Vertical File on *The Rossland Miner*.

<sup>63</sup> R. G. Joy interview with J. W. Gallacher, in R. G. Joy Papers, PABC. Political contests were not only a boon to the sale and consumption of alcohol, but also inspired gambling. During the 1903 provincial election, when Houston defeated S. S. Taylor for the Nelson seat, it was reported: "More money will change hands on this contest than on any election in the history of Nelson. One Taylor man alone claims to have \$1800 on the result. Last night at the Hume [Hotel] money was flowing as freely as a spring freshet, and there were very few offers from either side that were not promptly taken up. Men who had never bet a cent on anything before, flashed bills of all denominations in the faces of their opponents." ("Political Gossip," *Nelson Economist*, 3 October 1903, p. 1.)

15 of that year when he defeated John A. Turner by 299 to 204 votes.<sup>64</sup> On 13 January 1898 he was re-elected by acclamation.<sup>65</sup>

During these years his most controversial action was championing the city's acquisition of the Nelson Electric Light Company. Despite having installed the first hydro-electric plant in B.C., the company had a checkered history.<sup>66</sup> Originally incorporated on 23 April 1892, its lighting system was to have been functioning by 26 April 1893, but, due to land acquisition problems, it was not operational until 1 February 1896, and even then the service it provided was less than adequate.<sup>67</sup> Its poor performance was one reason why the 1893 effort to have Nelson incorporated failed, for the voters were fearful of being saddled with it.<sup>68</sup> It was also a factor in the 1894 provincial election when J. Fred Hume, Conservative, defeated G. O. Buchanan, Liberal, in the South Riding of West Kootenay; the earthy Houston, who was president of the Electric Light Company, was Hume's campaign manager, while the aristocratic Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, who owned the land the company required for its dam, was Buchanan's campaign manager.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> John Joseph Malone, "Reminiscences," Unpublished manuscript, 1930, p. 4 (PABC); *Nelson Daily News Extra*, 4 August 1972, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 15 January 1898, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Boyd C. Affleck, "City Power Plant had Major Part in Nelson's History," *Nelson Daily News*, 7 August 1947. (PABC)

<sup>67</sup> David Scott and Edna H. Hanic, *Nelson: Queen City of the Kootenays* (Mitchell Press: Vancouver, 1972), pp. 56, 59, 63, 67.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 55, 61.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56. It is likely that there was yet another dimension to Houston and Sproat's rivalry, for while Houston was far and away the pre-eminent figure in Nelson during the 1890s, Sproat, who had surveyed the government townsite of Nelson when it was known as Stanley in 1888, claimed to be the town's founding father. (The history of Nelson's name has been shrouded in confusion since 1897, when T. C. Collins wrote in his contribution to *The First History of Nelson, B.C.*: "The town was called both Salisbury and Stanley for some time, until application was finally made by the residents for the establishment of a post office. In this application the place was called Stanley, and as there was already a post office of that name in Cariboo, the name of the place was changed to Nelson, in honor of Hugh Nelson, at that time lieutenant-governor of the province." Actually Stanley was the name Sproat applied to the government townsite, while Salisbury was the name Harry Anderson, a mining recorder, used to designate the future Fairview area to the east, which he had applied to pre-empt a number of months prior to Sproat's survey. The confused local residents, however, were unaware of this distinction. *The Donald Truth* referred to the place as Salisbury until 27 October 1888, when it published a letter from a miner at "Stanley." Fortunately, the matter was being settled once and for all about this time. Sproat's correspondence to the Department of Lands and Works reveals the process. On 29 August 1888 he wrote: "Colonel Baker [the father of Cranbrook, who gave his name to Nelson's main street] recommends the name of Stanley as an easy two-syllabled word, and the name of the Governor General; and Mr. Fletcher, the P.O. Inspector, sees no

With such a past, it is not surprising that Houston's efforts to get the city to buy the company for \$40,000 ran into some stiff opposition.<sup>70</sup> A number of citizens protested vociferously against the proposed bylaw on the grounds that the company was not worth nearly that much. On 9 January 1898 a referendum defeated the issue by nine votes, but a subsequent recount, during which a number of ballots included on the first count were misplaced, passed the issue by two votes. Thereupon the bylaw's opponents took the matter to court on the grounds of voting irregularities and conflict of interest — in addition to Houston being president of the company, three aldermen were shareholders or directors in it. The city lost the case, but appealed to the B.C. Supreme Court, which overturned the decision.<sup>71</sup> Finally in 1899 the city purchased the company for \$35,400.<sup>72</sup> This was not the end of the matter for Houston, however. Along with "a host of sins of omission and commission," the *Economist* dredged up the issue again during the provincial election of 1903 and declared that "rarely if ever has [Houston] studied the fitness of his actions as a public man."<sup>73</sup>

The political fallout that resulted from the city's efforts to acquire the Electric Light Company was one reason why Houston lost to Hamilton G. Neelands in the 1899 mayoralty race. Houston, however, also attributed his defeat to the fact that the *Miner* had been taken over in the fall of 1898 by a number of mine owners who strongly promoted the views of the Nelson District Mine Owners' Association.<sup>74</sup> Another contributing factor, according to J. J. Malone, a pro-Houston alderman, was the

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objection to it, as the Cariboo Hamlet of that name, near Van Winkle, is not a postal name." Then on 3 September 1888 he wrote: "If the name 'Stanley' is not approved might I suggest 'Nelson' as name of Lt. Gov?" In his letter of 2 October 1888 he enclosed a proposed advertisement for the sale of lots at Stanley. However, on 4 November 1888 he informed the department: "The sale at 'Nelson' was very successful." The change of names undoubtedly took place on instruction from Victoria to ensure that potential buyers realized that the land for sale was in the West Kootenay and not in the Cariboo.

<sup>70</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 17 May 1898, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> Scott and Hanic, pp. 66-68.

<sup>72</sup> *Nelson Tribune*, 6 August 1898, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> "Political Gossip," *Nelson Economist*, 26 September 1903, p. 1. *The Economist* wrote in the same article: "There are those who seek office for ambition and those who are public-spirited, as against those who are purely 'pot-hunters' in the business. Looking back, one can remember that John Houston was always anxious to secure public utilities in a private way and then hand them on to the public at the very top price — for example, the electric light plant."

<sup>74</sup> "History of a Newspaper," *Nelson Tribune*, 24 July 1901, p. 1.

emerging “moral reform element.”<sup>75</sup> Each of these things was, in its way, a manifestation of the basic split which existed between Nelson’s monied and working classes during this period. On the one hand there were men like Frank Fletcher, a CPR land agent who served as mayor in 1901 and 1902; he spoke of “the better class” and considered himself one of its leading members.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand there was Houston and his followers; Houston disparagingly referred to Fletcher and his kind as “white-shirted hoboes.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Houston’s newspaper contended: “there are too many snobs and toadies in Nelson . . . who imagine that because they were born in a certain locality across the Atlantic they are better than their neighbours who were born on this side of the Atlantic.”<sup>78</sup> Things were so bad that on 2 December 1901 the *Tribune* declared that a “policy of class hatred . . . has held sway in Nelson for three years.”<sup>79</sup>

Earlier that year, on 30 June, the *Miner* angrily opined: “Here the frontier spirit is still rife; not only rife, but at the present moment triumphant, and the man who dares lift a voice in protest, or reproof, or warning, is overwhelmed with the abuse of every rowdy, blackguard, and ruffian in the city.” Sensitive to such criticism, the *Tribune* responded the next day by saying: “No town in Canada of the same population is more orderly than Nelson . . . has more comfortable houses . . . has so few narrow, intolerant, bigoted, mud-throwing deadbeats.”<sup>80</sup> There was, however, less truth to the *Tribune*’s exaggerated remarks than there was to the *Miner*’s comments. This clash of frontier and civilization, in what was soon to be B.C.’s third largest city, presented the *Tribune* and Houston with something of a problem, for, while they sought to promote civic pride and social responsibility, they did not want to alienate the significant portion of their supporters who patronized Nelson’s abundant saloons, brothels and gambling houses. Given this predicament, it is not surprising that the *Tribune* did not mention the existence of such establishments in its remarks of 1 July 1901 quoted above.

The fact of the matter is that the forces of civilization were gaining sway over those of the frontier. More and more influence devolved upon the strawberry social set, people who would congregate in “hordes . . . in

<sup>75</sup> Malone, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> See the *Nelson Tribune* for 1901. Fletcher makes a variety of such remarks.

<sup>77</sup> Scott and Hanic, pp. 61, 63.

<sup>78</sup> *Nelson Tribune*, 2 December 1901, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 July 1901, p. 2.

the garden of a respected family . . . to pay 25 cents for a dish of strawberries and ice cream, and thus help to pay the deficit on the church's heating bill or expand the foreign missionary activities of the organization."<sup>81</sup> These people, according to George Ferguson, who grew up among them, "were strict in their sabbatarian observances," generally frowned on card-playing, social drinking and dancing, and "regarded with horror the gayer approach to life which was brought to Nelson by the pay days of the mining and lumber camps."<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, the town's brothels were moved from the east end of Baker Street to a more discreet location down on Lake Street.<sup>83</sup> This change, with all that it implies, explains why in 1899 the *Tribune* could admit in its columns that "houses of joy" existed in Nelson while in 1901 it could not.<sup>84</sup>

Elected to his third term as mayor in 1900, Houston was undoubtedly disgruntled by certain aspects of the city's transformation. This may have influenced him to move into the larger arena of provincial politics, the chaotic nature of which doubtless appealed to him more than Nelson's increasingly stuffy sophistication. Indeed, his election to the Legislative Assembly on 9 June 1900 occurred during the most turbulent period in B.C.'s political history, when personal government was grudgingly giving way to party government. Lieutenant-Governor Thomas R. McInnes, who characterized the province's legislators as "an utterly amorphous and self-seeking pack of politicians," maintained: "the trouble is that at present we have about as many leaders, or would-be leaders, as followers. I need not go over the names of those in the old House who considered themselves pre-eminently qualified to become premier — it would include about one third of them."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> George V. Ferguson, "Queen of the Kootenays," *The Beaver*, vol. 19 (Spring, 1960), p. 21.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Nelson Tribune*, 11 April 1900, p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 April 1899, p. 2. On 4 July 1901 the *Tribune* reported: "Nelson has a sensational preacher of the Baptist persuasion, namely Morgan. He is attempting in frothy sermons to show that the city of Nelson is engaged in illegal practices and winking at vice. An inspection of the police court docket of Nelson will show that there is nothing in what Morgan is ranting over." Houses of prostitution did, however, exist in Nelson at this time. While an inspection of the police court docket might not have revealed anything, this would not have disproved Morgan's charges. Police throughout B.C. tolerated considerable prostitution at this time. (Dale B. McClanaghan, "History of Prostitution in Victoria: 1880-1920," Unpublished manuscript, December 1976, PABC; City of Nelson, B.C., *Police Daily Record Books*, particularly August to November 1907 and July and October 1908, Nelson City Hall.)

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Ormsby, p. 323.

It was owing to McInnes' actions in dismissing Premiers Turner and Semlin in August 1898 and February 1900 that "respect for all constitutional authority had suffered a sad eclipse . . . throughout the province."<sup>86</sup> By a vote of 28 to 1 the Legislature passed a resolution of non-confidence in Premier Joseph Martin, appointed by McInnes to replace Semlin. To make matters worse, when McInnes read the throne speech to the House, every member, with the exception of Martin and the Speaker, walked out. After Martin's government was defeated at the polls in June 1900, Prime Minister Laurier, at the request of the majority of the new B.C. legislature, summarily dismissed McInnes and replaced him with Sir Henri Joly de Lotbinière. Both the new Lieutenant-Governor and the new Premier, James Dunsmuir, were dedicated to bringing a sense of order to the legislature so that attention could again be paid to the public business, which "had been completely neglected for over a year."<sup>87</sup> The coalition which formed Dunsmuir's government, however, was united only by its opposition to Martin, and internal conflict soon reduced its majority to a mere two or three seats.<sup>88</sup>

It was into this political maelstrom that John Houston rushed with a penchant for chaos all his own. *The Nelson Economist* reported that

the pride of the West during his recent visit to Nelson appeared in broad daylight on Baker street [sic] wearing rings and other ornaments, which plainly indicate the corroding influence of Victoria society. It was hoped that John Houston would be proof against the vanities of the world, but his recent metamorphosis is just another instance of the danger that lurks in association with society butterflies.<sup>89</sup>

A little over a year later, in May 1902, he was the chief actor in a dramatic and highly irregular incident. Allegedly drunk, although he later maintained he only "had had four or five big jorums of Scotch whiskey" and was therefore still sober, he interrupted debate, defied the Speaker's order to be seated, and stood his ground for an amazing twenty minutes.<sup>90</sup> Prior to stalking out of the chamber he declared that as far as he was concerned "the Speaker is only the member for Esquimalt. Bring

<sup>86</sup> Ormsby, p. 322.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 319-25; F. W. Howay and E. O. S. Scholefield, *British Columbia From the Earliest Times to the Present*, vol. II (Vancouver, S. J. Clarke, 1914), pp. 467-87.

<sup>89</sup> *Nelson Economist*, 27 March 1901, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> *Victoria Times* for 2 November 1903, p. 2, and 7 May 1902, p. 3; "Stormy Tide at Victoria," *Nelson Daily News*, 7 May 1902, p. 1.

your sergeant-at-arms and put me out. The sooner we bring this disreputable legislature to an end the better. (Opposition applause.) I will have the Speaker rule fairly or have him fired out."<sup>91</sup> Such unparliamentary behaviour by a government supporter, albeit an unruly one, was made possible by the government's tenuous position. Defeated the night before on a railway bill, it was so fearful of another defeat that it was "obliged to stand helplessly to one side, deaf to the entreaties of the Speaker for assistance."<sup>92</sup> The opposition leader, Richard McBride, argued that the government not only "had no control of the House," but allowed the Speaker to be insulted and "the dignity of the House degraded."<sup>93</sup> Houston, who maintained that "if every member who got drunk were excluded from the House, they would not often have a quorum," was never censured, reprimanded or asked to apologize, although the incident would later be used as an excuse to stop his political advancement.<sup>94</sup>

Premier Dunsmuir resigned 21 November 1902 and was replaced by Colonel E. G. Prior. By the following spring, however, Prior and a number of his cabinet had been implicated in the Columbia and Western Railway scandal. As a result, "the opposition took possession of the House; the Government only existed by the indulgence of their opponents."<sup>95</sup> By June Prior had been forced to resign and the Lieutenant-Governor had appointed Richard McBride to form a new government. A Conservative, McBride had a problem in that Houston was now president of the provincial Conservative Association.<sup>96</sup> On one occasion during the June session Houston called McBride's Attorney-General, A. E. McPhillips, a "d--d fool."<sup>97</sup> More troubling was Houston's opinion of the CPR with which McBride wished "to live in peace and amity."<sup>98</sup> According to C. H. Gibbons, the "member for Nelson was out with knife and tomahawk in quest of the company's scalp. He sniffed brimstone at each and every C.P.R. move and mistook the first transcontinental steel highway for the track of a Satanic tail."<sup>99</sup> These things, in addition to his

<sup>91</sup> *Victoria Times*, 7 May 1902, p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Victoria Times*, 2 November 1903, p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Howay and Scholefield, p. 523.

<sup>96</sup> "Houston Thrown Down," *Victoria Times*, 24 October 1903, p. 1; "John Houston's Story of Affair," *Victoria Times*, 2 November 1903, p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> *Victoria Times*, 2 November 1903, p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Gibbons.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*



generally unpredictable behaviour, doubtless played a significant part in his being denied a cabinet position after the 3 October 1903 election, which was the first in the province's history to be held on party lines.

It was alleged that Houston felt himself more deserving of the Premiership than the youthful McBride.<sup>100</sup> Such was his ambition that he unsuccessfully sought the Conservative nomination for Ymir in addition to that party's nomination for Nelson.<sup>101</sup> *The Nelson Economist* described him as "simply a soldier of fortune, who fights for promotion and substantial recognition."<sup>102</sup> A week after the election, though, the *Economist* was writing of "the grit and generalship he displayed [when] he saw defeat staring him in the face." "Mr. Houston," the *Economist* went on, "stopped his campaign sheet and took hold of the work himself with the [successful] result which was recorded last Saturday . . . this paper . . . cannot help admiring his abnormally developed nerve . . . in Nelson there are a large number of Liberals who place friendship for John Houston above party consideration."<sup>103</sup>

That an anti-Houston newspaper could describe Houston as a soldier of fortune who had grit, generalship and the ability to win Liberal votes while running under the Conservative banner is indicative of the fact that he was much more a personality and a power-unto-himself than he was a party man. If anything he was a populist. Yet even though he once heard William Jennings Bryan speak in Spokane<sup>104</sup> and many of his views (antipathy to large corporations, support for trade unions, empathy for the common man) were in accord with general populist philosophy, the populist label nevertheless remains inadequate considering his real estate dealings and his tendency toward frontier profiteering. In political terms, the most consistent thing about him was the power of his personality. The

<sup>100</sup> "Facts, not Fiction," *Victoria Times*, 26 October 1903, p. 4; "Affairs Are Now At A Standstill," *Victoria Times*, 28 October 1903, p. 1; "Correspondence with Governor," *Victoria Times*, 29 October 1903, p. 1; "Consequences of Cowardice," *Victoria Times*, 29 October 1903, p. 1; "Consequences of Cowardice," *Victoria Times*, 30 October 1903, p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> *Nelson Economist*, 22 August 1903, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Nelson Economist*, 10 October 1903, p. 1. Describing Houston's formidable political machine, the *Economist* wrote: "Each man was given his work to do, and everyone who knows how John Houston carries on his campaign fully realizes that the work would be well and faithfully performed. He always knows where every vote is, and the right time to get it and where it will do most good. So well has he looked after this work that it is estimated every outside vote for his side has been brought in. At noon it was believed that a great deal more than half his vote had been polled." "The Voting in the City Today," *Nelson Economist*, 3 October 1903, p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> Joy, 'S' manuscript, pp. 2-3.

jubilant words of *The Grand Forks Sun* after his 1903 re-election are testament to this. *The Sun* wrote: "John Houstonized Nelson, but there will be a circus in Victoria when that plumed knight, flushed with the laurels of victory, demands the reins of government from McBride and undertakes to Houstonize that city. Go in, John, and give us a good entertainment."<sup>105</sup>

It was not long after when rumours of Houston's likely ascension to the inner sanctum of provincial power began to roll in. *The Economist* reported on 17 October that Houston was to be appointed Provincial Secretary, but that he was being counselled by one of his advisers "to accept nothing less than Mr. McBride's portfolio."<sup>106</sup> *The Victoria Times* maintained that Houston issued an ultimatum to McBride demanding "a seat in the cabinet, with supervision of the Department of Lands and Works."<sup>107</sup> According to the *Times*: "He did not think it possible, considering the position of the government [with its slim 22 to 20 majority and the Speaker not yet appointed] and the position of John Houston as the revered head of the Conservative party of British Columbia, that the council would prove obdurate."<sup>108</sup>

But obdurate it was, and on 23 October Houston learned that the Lieutenant-Governor was blocking his appointment to the cabinet. "I would like to know if I have been told the truth," he wrote in a letter to the Lieutenant-Governor. "If it is the truth, then the people of the little city of Nelson have been slapped in the face, and I will be compelled to leave British Columbia, for if I am unworthy to administer a department of the provincial government, I am equally unworthy of sitting as a member of the legislature. . . . I am ashamed to-day to hold my head up in the street." On 24 October the Lieutenant-Governor responded by saying: "It is true. I objected on account of the unfortunate incident of last session, when you forgot what was due to the legislative assembly as well as to yourself, in your responsible position."<sup>109</sup>

There is more to the story than these letters indicate, however. While the *Times* contended that the Lieutenant-Governor probably realized that McBride's recommendation of a cabinet position for Houston "was made,

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in *Nelson Economist*, 10 October 1903, p. 2.

<sup>106</sup> "Political Gossip," *Nelson Economist*, 17 October 1903, p. 1; "Houston Registers Vow to Heaven," *Victoria Times*, 30 October 1903, p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> "On the Warpath," *Victoria Times*, 24 October 1903, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> "Facts, not Fiction," *Victoria Times*, 26 October 1903, p. 4; Howay and Scholefield, p. 527.

<sup>109</sup> "Correspondence with Governor," *Victoria Times*, 29 October 1903, p. 1.

not in the interest of the country, but under the compulsion of political exigencies," it also maintained that "the Cabinet undoubtedly feared the effect which the elevation of Mr. Houston would have upon the chances of the party before the country."<sup>110</sup> Moreover, R. G. Tatlow, the Minister of Finance and Agriculture and a close friend of McBride's, was quoted as saying the story that Houston had been denied by the Lieutenant-Governor was "all bosh."<sup>111</sup> Indeed, not only did Houston blame McBride and his cabinet and say that the Lieutenant-Governor had been "stimulated to object," but the *Times* came to maintain that the government's scheme was "to use the Lieutenant-Governor as a buffer between Messrs. McBride and Houston."<sup>112</sup>

In the midst of the heated debate the affair generated, Houston told a representative of *The Vancouver World*:

You can say for me that I will not be a member of the McBride government. No, nor of any other government. You can tell them in the World that John Houston is going to go back to Nelson, and that he is going to close up business there, and that he is going to leave British Columbia for good and for all. . . . I am done. You can put it that I am done. I have worked hard and faithfully in this province for fifteen years. I have been a Conservative, a loyal consistent one. I did not go to Victoria, as your paper said, with an ultimatum to McBride. However, I expected to be used at least decently. But yesterday I got the dirtiest deal that ever a white man got in the province of British Columbia.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>110</sup> "Facts, not Fiction," *Victoria Times*, 26 October 1903, p. 4; "Houston Thrown Down by M'Bride," *Victoria Times*, 24 October 1903, p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> Ormsby, p. 335; "Protest Against Pooley's Return," *Victoria Times*, 27 October 1903, p. 8; "Correspondence with Governor," *Victoria Times*, 29 October 1903, p. 1.

<sup>112</sup> "Correspondence with Governor," *Victoria Times*, 29 October 1903, p. 1, and "Houston Registers Vow to Heaven," *Victoria Times*, 30 October 1903, p. 1; "More Extraordinary Still," *Victoria Times*, 28 October 1903, p. 4, and "Affairs Are Now At A Standstill," *Victoria Times*, 28 October 1903, p. 1; and "John Houston's Story of Affair," *Victoria Times*, 2 November 1903, p. 2. According to the *Times* Messrs. McBride, Tatlow and McPhillips "protested vigorously against the [May 1902] insult to which the Speaker was . . . subjected, and advocated the most dramatic measures for disciplining the member for Nelson." ("Affairs Are Now At A Standstill," *Victoria Times*, 28 October 1903, p. 1.) In *Sir Richard McBride: A Study in the Conservative Party of British Columbia 1903-1916* (MA Thesis, Queen's University, November 1959), p. 38, Brian R. D. Smith maintains that McBride was probably much relieved by the Lieutenant-Governor's refusal to appoint Houston to the cabinet. Smith goes on to say: "McBride likely only invited Houston to prevent him leaving to join the opposition. By not protesting the Lieutenant-Governor's act of refusal, McBride of course assumed constitutional responsibility for the refusal."

There is no mention of the affair in McBride's correspondence.

<sup>113</sup> "An Extraordinary Situation," *Victoria Times*, 27 October 1903, p. 4.

When Houston arrived in Nelson a public meeting was held and a resolution was passed protesting the Lieutenant-Governor's action "in denying to a representative elected by the people to accord him the honor of constitutional government" and deploring "the fact that British Columbia has as a Premier a man who allowed the Lieutenant Governor to reject his advice without tendering his resignation."<sup>114</sup> Houston himself declared that he would be faithful to the Conservative party, "but by the 'living gods' I will down the men who have done me dirt at Victoria. I will not fight the Conservatives, but I will fight Richard McBride, Robt. Green, R. G. Tatlow, A. E. McPhillips and Charles Wilson."<sup>115</sup> This proved to be an idle threat, however, as McBride, who was to serve as Premier for the next twelve years, not only secured a working majority by winning the support of the legislature's two socialists, but his policies also started the province back on the road to economic health after years of dangerously high deficits.<sup>116</sup>

Houston's career, on the other hand, was now heading downhill. After his Pyrrhic victory at the Nelson meeting, he went to Bullfrog, Montana. In a letter to C. H. Gibbons, he referred to himself as "the runaway member for Nelson" and said he deserved all the criticism that had been printed about him. Sometime later he returned to the legislature, but, to quote Gibbons, "his parliamentary duties were performed perfunctorily and listlessly."<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, according to *The Nelson Tribune*, "he never once registered a party vote against the government."<sup>118</sup> In an editorial at the time of his death, *The Victoria Times* maintained that his failure to achieve a cabinet position was "a blow . . . from which he never recovered. The iron entered into his soul and embittered a nature which, on the surface at least, was never of the sweetest. It increased his scorn for politics and politicians."<sup>119</sup>

Houston, however, did not abandon politics. In 1905, while still serving in the legislature, he again sought and won the mayor's office in Nelson. This, his fourth and final term as mayor, was distinguished by perhaps his most important political achievement. He had always maintained that the city's Cottonwood dam and power plant would adequately

<sup>114</sup> "Houston Registers Vow To Heaven," *Victoria Times*, 30 October 1903, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, and "John Houston's Story of Affair," *Victoria Times*, 2 November 1903, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> Ormsby, p. 541; Howay and Scholefield, pp. 528-30.

<sup>117</sup> Gibbons.

<sup>118</sup> "Editorial," *Nelson Tribune*, 4 November 1905, p. 2.

<sup>119</sup> "John Houston, Printer and Journalist," *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 4.

provide for the city's electrical needs. But such was not the case. Indeed, the Cottonwood dam and power plant seemed jinxed. Back in 1900 Houston had had the timber dam raised four feet to increase the flow to the turbines and thereby generate more power, but the effort was for naught as in August of that year the increased pressure caused the dam to burst, the resulting torrent sweeping a number of cabins down the mountainside and into the West Arm of Kootenay Lake.<sup>120</sup> Then in 1904 a forest fire destroyed the flume diverting water from Whitewater Creek to Cottonwood Creek.<sup>121</sup> Not surprisingly when Houston returned to the mayor's office in 1905 he dramatically reversed himself, admitted that the Cottonwood dam and plant would never meet Nelson's power needs, and proposed that the voters approve a bylaw allowing the city to borrow \$150,000 to erect a new power plant at Bonnington, on the other side of the West Arm.<sup>122</sup> Houston's initiative, which was perhaps influenced by the humbling experience of his confrontation with McBride, was passed 109 to 3 by the voters.<sup>123</sup> The new plant started operation on 21 July 1908.<sup>124</sup> It was so successful that it provided the city treasury with substantial annual profits which allowed for lower tax rates and vastly extended municipal services for years to come.<sup>125</sup>

But all was not rosy for Houston in 1905. He had undoubtedly made the switch back to civic politics because he felt he could have things more his own way. He soon discovered, however, that this was not the case. Shortly after being elected, council granted him the power to make changes from time to time in minor city-paid positions.<sup>126</sup> Using this power, he unilaterally decided to replace fireman Samuel E. Coulter with J. T. O'Connor.<sup>127</sup> The reason for this, according to a subsequent statement from the mayor's office, was political.<sup>128</sup> As a result Aldermen Duncan M. Macdonald and J. E. Annable, who had been elected to council as supporters of Houston's Progressive Party, switched their

<sup>120</sup> Scott and Hanic, pp. 70-72.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Boyd C. Affleck, "City Power Plant Had Major Part in Nelson's History," *Nelson Daily News*, 7 August 1947. Copy in PABC Vertical File on Nelson's History.

<sup>124</sup> Scott and Hanic, pp. 73-74.

<sup>125</sup> Affleck; Wasson; Malone; and, Eric Ramsden, "B.C.'s Quartette is Fifty," *Vancouver Province*, "Magazine Section," pp. 1-2.

<sup>126</sup> *Nelson Tribune*, 22 May 1905, p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 May 1905, p. 1; *Nelson Daily News*, 12 May 1905, p. 2.

<sup>128</sup> *Nelson Daily News*, 13 May 1905, p. 2.

allegiance and in so doing gave Houston's opponents control of council.<sup>129</sup> The new anti-Houston majority not only stripped the mayor of the power to make changes in municipal employment, but also voted to reinstate fireman Coulter.<sup>130</sup> While Houston was able to veto this latter move, the larger Coulter-O'Connor issue persisted for some time. In August, while Houston was tending to city business at the coast, O'Connor resigned following complaints from the Fire Chief and others that he was not competent.<sup>132</sup> Houston's opponents on council took advantage of this, and his absence, to reappoint Coulter.<sup>133</sup> The next day the *Tribune*, recalling that Houston had declared in May that Coulter would not be a member of the Fire Department as long as he was mayor, predicted that the mayor would no longer serve the city.<sup>134</sup> The *Tribune* was right too, for the prideful Houston did not return to Nelson. Notifying no one, not even his wife, he disappeared for a full six weeks. It was not until 29 September that the *Tribune* informed the public that Houston had been located at Goldfield, Nevada, in the area of the West's newest mining boom, where he was working as a journeyman printer.<sup>135</sup> Two weeks later, on 16 October, the *Tribune* published his letter of resignation, which read in part:

I should have dropped a line before now; but as I was a wanderer thought it best to defer writing until I had a post office address. . . .

I might write something personal; but the least said the better. The decision of Judge Irving [to allow the continuation of the injunction brought by the West Kootenay Power and Light Company against the construction of the City of Nelson's new Bonnington power plant] made me disgusted; that decision, coupled with the fact that I seemed to be unable to make any headway in business at Nelson, developed a fit of despondency.

It was continual worry, and borrowing from Peter to pay Paul.

I am discredited. I am broke in my old age; but I gave Nelson and its people the best that was in me for 15 years, and every dollar I made is still in evidence in Nelson in property that is paying taxes.

<sup>129</sup> *Nelson Tribune*, 22 May 1905, p. 1.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* for 11 August 1905, p. 2; and 14 August 1905, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 August 1905, p. 1.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 29 September 1905, p. 2.

The debts I left will be paid if I live; for I have good health and there are just as many chances to get ahead now as in former years.

I sent in my resignation as mayor today to take effect at noon on Monday Oct. 23. The council showed its calibre by passing that \$1 a month motion; but, then, all things will come right in the end.

HOUSTON<sup>136</sup>

The next day his wife, of whom little is known other than that she was loyal to her husband despite his fiery unpredictability and frequent absences, left to join him.<sup>137</sup> Ironically, Coulter, who had put an end to Houston's political career, resigned from the Fire Department shortly after being reappointed.<sup>138</sup>

Houston remained in Nevada throughout 1906. In early 1907 he returned to B.C. Premier McBride had called an election and a number of people in and about Nelson had raised and sent a purse of money to Houston as encouragement to re-enter the political fray.<sup>139</sup> In an interview he gave to a Spokane newspaper, which was reprinted on page 1 of the *Nelson Daily News* 15 January 1907 issue, Houston said:

My return is not actuated by personal ambition. I took an active part in the politics of British Columbia for 15 years and in doing so made warm friends and many bitter, vindictive and treacherous enemies. There is enough of lowland Scotch blood in me to make me like my friends and just enough highland Scotch to make me hght [sic] my enemies. Some of my enemies

<sup>136</sup> On 29 September 1905, p. 2, the *Tribune* noted in an editorial that *The Spokane Spokesman Review* had "reported that the absent mayor's daily evening paper, *The Tribune*, has a deficit of \$5,000." It also noted that the *Spokesman Review* was quoting a dispatch from the *Nelson Daily News*. In response the *Tribune*, which was soon to cease publication, declared: "We therefore wish to state most emphatically that *The Tribune* was in no financial sense the paper of the mayor. It belongs to The Tribune Publishing Co., and the Mayor holds less than one-tenth of the subscribed stock. In the next place, it is absolutely false that there is a deficit of \$5,000 as alleged, or any deficit."

<sup>137</sup> *Nelson Tribune*, 16 October 1905, p. 4. His wife, Edith May Keeley, was a native of York county, Ontario. (Gosnell; Joy, "T" manuscript, p. 5.) It is not known when and where they married, but, according to Joseph D. Graham's diary (PABC), they were together at least as early as 1892 when a party was held at "Mrs. Houston's." What is more, there is an updated photograph of Mrs. Houston and her daughter in the Nelson Museum. When John Houston died at Quesnel in 1910 Mrs. Houston was en route from Ashcroft in a special stage in an effort to be with him; where she was living at the time is not known. ("John Houston Dies At Quesnel," *Victoria Colonist*, 9 March 1910, p. 1; "John Houston Has Crossed Divide," *Vancouver Province*, 9 March 1910, p. 11.)

<sup>138</sup> *Nelson Tribune*, 21 August 1905, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> "John Houston's Return," *Nelson Daily News*, 10 January 1907, p. 5; "John Houston's Return," *Nelson Daily News*, 11 January 1907, p. 1.

are candidates in this election and I shall endeavour to help my friends defeat them.

The political situation in British Columbia is in no way different from the political situation in any of the Pacific coast states. Both leading political parties are dominated by railway or other corporations who put up campaign funds and then see to it that for every dollar contributed \$100 is returned by special legislation. . . .

The McBride government gained office in 1903 and if it evolved any great measures it has kept them pigeonholed for none have been laid before the legislative assembly. . . .

I came to Goldfield in the hope of bettering myself financially, having lost \$20,000 in trying to keep a newspaper on its feet in Nelson. I have worked as a printer, prospector and mining broker and like hundreds of other former residents of British Columbia now in Goldfield or adjacent towns, have had varying success.

Although he decided to run as an independent candidate in the Ymir riding, it was said that his return had been engineered by "his conservative friends."<sup>140</sup> Indeed, he was publicly accused of being a "stool pigeon" for the Tories.<sup>141</sup> However, *The Nelson Daily News*, reporting a speech Houston made at Ymir, wrote: "Mr. Houston showed up the McBride administration in a rather unfavorable light. At times his audience felt that he was the liberal candidate speaking against conservatism."<sup>142</sup> Despite such criticism, McBride's Conservatives rolled to a substantial victory. In the Ymir riding, Houston finished last among three candidates.<sup>143</sup>

His political career now over, Houston moved north to Prince Rupert, which, having been selected as the western terminus for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad, was B.C.'s newest frontier. The GTP had heard of Houston and his pointed criticisms of railroads and, in an effort to keep him out, ordered its Prince Rupert agent, James H. Bacon, not to sell or lease him any land.<sup>144</sup> Houston, however, outmanoeuvred the GTP by filing three five-year mining claims in the middle of the future townsite

<sup>140</sup> "John Houston's Return," *Nelson Daily News*, 11 January 1907, p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> "Open Letter to John Houston," *Nelson Daily News*, 29 January 1907, p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> "Hits 'Silk Stockings'," *Nelson Daily News*, 29 January 1907, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> *Nelson Daily News*, 3 February 1907, p. 1; *Trail News*, 2 February 1907, p. 1. These two newspapers reported marginally different totals for the Ymir riding.

<sup>144</sup> Gibbons; McGregor; Raymond: and, P. W. Luce, "John Houston's 'Weekly Empire'," *Vancouver Province*, 13 May 1947 (Copy in PABC Vertical File on John Houston).



on the pretence that he believed gold was there.<sup>145</sup> Not yet willing to give in, the company seized the cunning editor's press when it arrived at the dock and placed it in a warehouse.<sup>146</sup> This tactic also failed to deter Houston, who was apparently prepared for any eventuality, for he had arranged to have the first four issues of his new weekly, *The Prince Rupert Empire*, printed in Vancouver and mailed to him.<sup>147</sup> What is more, according to W. J. Raymond, a reporter who worked for Houston, the press was later "forcefully taken from the warehouse and in the course of time, was regularly functioning."<sup>148</sup>

Raymond arrived in Prince Rupert in the spring of 1909 when the town consisted of "shacks and tents perched on . . . stump-studded ridges and hills."<sup>149</sup> One of these shacks housed Houston's *Empire*, which was "one of the most widely quoted sheets in Canada" and was sent "to various parts of the world."<sup>150</sup> Houston himself was "the dominant personality in northern British Columbia."<sup>151</sup> Still his new success was not untroubled. Some three dozen squatters, who he had generously allowed to settle, without charge, on two of his claims turned against him. According to Houston they were "a gang of hoodlums" who, under the orders of a disgruntled hotel owner, "attempted to destroy a building" he was having erected. "By that contemptible crowd," he angrily declared, "no mud is considered dirty enough to throw at a man who once was overwhelmed with words of gratitude and vows of eternal friendship."<sup>152</sup> To make matters worse, there was hardly any advertising revenue to help support the paper.<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless, Houston managed to publish fifty-two issues the first year.<sup>154</sup> Shortly thereafter, however, in mid-1909, he threw in the towel and moved south to Mexico.<sup>155</sup>

After a few months at the southern end of the continent, the ever-

<sup>145</sup> Luce; McGregor; and Raymond.

<sup>146</sup> McGregor; Raymond.

<sup>147</sup> McGregor. The first issue appeared on 20 July 1907.

<sup>148</sup> Raymond.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Luce; Raymond.

<sup>151</sup> Luce.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> McGregor.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> McGregor; *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 5; *Victoria Colonist*, 4 March 1910, p. 3.

wandering editor made his way back to British Columbia, this time locating in the north-central part of the province, where he established *The Fort George Tribune*.<sup>156</sup> Although there were only a handful of whites in the area when he arrived, Houston knew his new paper would do well, for a land boom was just getting underway and provincial law required that all applications for land be duly published in a newspaper originating within the district.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, after what had happened at Prince Rupert, he undoubtedly felt the advertising bonanza he experienced at Fort George was poetic justice. Ironically, though, he fought a losing battle to keep up with the flood of land application notices, for his eyes and health started to fail.<sup>158</sup> According to Gibbons: "He fought stubbornly against fate — declined to listen to the doctors — drove himself until he cracked."<sup>159</sup> A day after his death, at the age of fifty-nine, *The Vancouver Province* wrote:

There is no doubt in the world that his death was the result of exposure at Fort George, and to some extent the consequence of his eccentricities of character. He lived in a shack covered with canvas, and very few men, even in the prime of life with a robust health, would have withstood a winter during which the thermometer went down to 50 below. He could have taken advantage of comfortable quarters with the Hudson's Bay Company, but his independence of spirit would not permit of him enjoying comforts under such circumstances. As stated by himself in writing his last editorial, he was sitting at the time with his feet on the stove, with his back to a driving cold, ill. Then the drive from Fort George to Blackwater and on to Quesnel [where there was a hospital], in his condition, occupying at least four days, was sufficient to test the vitality of most men.<sup>160</sup>

All this, of course, was quite fitting, for he died in the same reckless and rugged fashion that he lived. Fitting too was his commitment, right to the end, to journalism, for despite his achievements as a politician and city-builder he was first and foremost a frontier newspaperman. According to *The Victoria Colonist*, the fact that he "wrote of matters political

<sup>156</sup> *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 5.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*; Gibbons.

<sup>158</sup> Gibbons.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> "Legislature Day by Day," *Vancouver Province*, 9 March 1910, p. 6; Gibbons. Houston apparently died on the sleigh trail between Blackwater and Quesnel (*Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 5.) Gibbons, however, maintains he made the journey by steamer, although most sources agree that it was by sleigh and in the company of W. F. Cooke of Fort George. (Gibbons; "Author Knew Houston," Newspaper Article, No Source Given, R. G. Joy Papers, PABC)

in his straight-arm-jolt fashion, or whimsically chronicled the fact that he had not partaken of a drink since the 7th September last . . . gave his writings, although crude, the piquant zest of forceful directness and strict originality."<sup>161</sup> Even more flattering was *The Victoria Times'* assessment:

John was an artist in both a literary and typographical sense. His productions, no matter how inconvenient, not to say impossible, the conditions under which they were produced, were always as nearly perfect as was humanly possible from a technical point of view. He would never tolerate any work of a slovenly character. Whatever his hand set to do was done neatly and cleanly. As a newspaper writer his style was a model. It embodied a standard of excellence in simplicity, directness, conciseness and originality which journalists in all parts of Canada and many sections of the United States have envied and striven to copy. He thundered forth his unconventional and advanced ideas upon political and social problems like another Thomas Carlyle, but not in the almost incomprehensible, complicated jargon which has made the works of the great sage a sealed book to the great majority of students of philosophy.<sup>162</sup>

Thomas Carlyle or not, John Houston undoubtedly died a happy man, flushed with a journalist's sense of accomplishment. His last battle, which was reminiscent of one he conducted during his glory days at Nelson in the early 1890s, was a "short and successful campaign to compel the Dominion government to give Fort George much needed improvement in its mail facilities which he accomplished by maintaining the extra postal service at his own expense — and literally shaming the federal authorities into doing their duty."<sup>163</sup> Such generosity, audacity, and determination were typical, for, as Gibbons wrote, John Houston was "a trailblazer, a man of vision, a virile journalist, not always scrupulously correct in conduct or suavely spoken, but physically and mentally strong in times and places where strength was the mastery."<sup>164</sup>

<sup>161</sup> *Victoria Colonist*, 4 March 1910, p. 3.

<sup>162</sup> *Victoria Times*, 4 March 1910, p. 4.

<sup>163</sup> *Nelson Miner*, 21 June 1890, pp. 4, 8; *Victoria Colonist*, 4 March 1910, p. 3.

<sup>164</sup> Gibbons. Houston's body was returned to Nelson, where it was buried in the cemetery above the city. ("Veteran Journalist Died at Quesnel," *Victoria Times*, 9 March 1910, p. 2; Scott and Hanic, p. 76.) Later that year the town of Houston, between Prince Rupert and Prince George, was named after him. (G. P. V. and Helen B. Akrigg, *1001 B.C. Place Names* [Discovery Press: Vancouver, 1973], p. 85.) In 1916 a monument to his memory was erected on Vernon Street in Nelson. (Scott and Hanic, p. 78; Malone, p. 24.)