

Sir James Douglas as Seen by His Contemporaries: A Preliminary List

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Some years ago I started a file on Sir James Douglas,¹ fur trader and colonial governor of Vancouver Island from 1851 to 1864 and of British Columbia from 1858 to 1864. I confess I had no specific reason for beginning this modest collection except the intrinsic interest of the subject itself. We have already a fair idea of the life of this man. Two sizeable biographies have appeared: Walter N. Sage's *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1930) and Derek Pethick's *Servant of Two Empires* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1969). This profile has been strengthened by other studies, including Dorothy Blakey Smith's *James Douglas: Father of British Columbia* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), Margaret Ormsby's "Sir James Douglas," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10 (1972), 238-49, and an interesting study on our subject's early years: Charlotte Girard's "Sir James Douglas' School Days," *BC Studies*, No. 35 (1977), 56-63.

While making no critical appraisal of these works, I am nonetheless of the opinion that the definitive biography of this fascinating and influential man (if ever a "definitive" bibliography is possible) has yet to be written. I, for one, would hope that a personal, and by that I mean "inside," perspective can be added to what we already know about

¹ Born 5 June or 15 August 1803, probably in Demerara, British Guiana, the son of John Douglas, a Glasgow merchant holding interests in sugar plantations, he received a good education in Lanark and Chester. At age 16 he was apprenticed to the North West Company in 1819 and joined the Hudson's Bay Company in the merger of 1821. He served in the Columbia Department after 1826, principally as accountant at Fort Vancouver under Dr. John McLoughlin. Rising rapidly in the service (Chief Trader, 1834; Chief Factor, 1839), he succeeded McLoughlin as the dominant Company official in the Columbia (later Western) Department in 1847. He founded Fort Victoria in 1843 and was in charge there from 1849, when the Company moved its western headquarters from Fort Vancouver, until 1858. Appointed Governor of Vancouver Island in 1851, Lieutenant-Governor of the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1852 and Governor of British Columbia in 1858, he was knighted (K.C.B.) in 1863 and retired as Governor of Vancouver Island and British Columbia in 1864. He died 2 August 1877 in Victoria.

Douglas. Other aspects of the man are also absent from our general understanding — his views on religion, his private business activities and his personal friendships, to cite but three examples.

While a screening of his public and private correspondence tells us much about Douglas “the man,” it may be of use here to list what descriptions of him, twenty-nine in all, have been given by various contemporaries. I have arranged them by date, exact or approximate, and have provided in each case the source, in manuscript or print and, wherever possible, in both. I would be obliged if persons with other contemporary descriptions of Douglas not listed here would send them to me and, if enough are received, I shall endeavour to compile a subsequent list for publication in this periodical.

1826

“Mr. Douglas’ salary I consider as inadequate to his merit. . . . He has served Six years of apprenticeship under able Masters during which period he acquired a good knowledge of the trade, of the General character of Indians & of the Method observed in Conducting the business — which added to a good Education, sound sense, and a frame of body and of mind able to carry him through any difficulty, qualify him in a high degree, for the service in which he is engaged.” William Connolly, HBC trader, Fort St. James, and Douglas’ future father-in-law. E. E. Rich, ed., *McLoughlin’s For Vancouver Letters, 1844-46* (London: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, vol. 7, 1944), p. 310.

1832

“A Scotch West Indian: About 33 Years of age, has been 13 Years in the Service. A stout powerful active Man of good conduct and respectable abilities: tolerably well Educated, expresses himself clearly on paper, understands out Counting House business and an excellent Trader. Well qualified for any Service requiring bodily exertion, firmness of mind and the exercise of Sound judgement, but furiously violent when roused. Has every reason to look forward to early promotion and is a likely man to fill a place at our Council board in course of time. Stationed in the Columbia Deptmt.” Sir George Simpson, Governor, “Character Book,” A.34/2, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg; in Glyndwr Williams, ed. *Hudson’s Bay Miscellany, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Hudson’s Bay Record Society, vol. 30, 1975), pp. 204-05. (Simpson’s earlier

appraisals of Douglas, for the 1820s, are in A.34/1, fol. 52; noted in *ibid.*)

c. 1844

"I formed rather a favourable opinion of Douglas at that time, so far as my acquaintance with him was concerned. He seemed to be kind and was apparently disposed to give all the information that we could desire." General Joel Palmer, U.S. Army and Supt. of Indian Affairs, Oregon, 1853-58, *General Joel Palmer's Narratives*, ms., 1878, p. 14; PA 58, H. H. Bancroft Coll., University of California, Berkeley.

1844

"Douglas was a man that would hold back on his dignity; he would step around in a way as much as to say: 'you are not as good as I am, I don't belong to your class'." Joseph Watt, Oregon immigrant, in *Palmer's Narratives*, *loc. cit.*, p. 14.

1846

"James Douglas left Fort Vancouver just in time — he was too unbending for the Times." George B. Roberts, clerk, Fort Vancouver. "Recollections of George B. Roberts," PA 83, p. 7, H. H. Bancroft Collection, University of California, Berkeley.

1850

"I saw Mr. Douglas — he did not impress me very favourably, being of very grave disposition with an air of dignity — cold and unimpassioned. A dark-complexioned man — with rather scanty hair, but not too scanty — muscular — broad-shouldered — with powerful legs a little bowed — common to strong men; in fact he was a splendid specimen of a man. His clothes were rather shabby and seedy-looking — but I suppose he had plenty an outfit in the vessel. In fact every ones clothes looked seedy — when compared with the Captain's and mine, for we had of course dressed respectably for the occasion, but altho the clothes were not fashionable, the wearers looked strong healthy active and clean — save Benson who looked a sloven, with a pair of sea-boots on — part of his trowsers being within them. Mr. Douglas was coldly affable — but he improved vastly on acquaintance afterwards." John Sebastian Helmcken, "Reminiscences" 5 vols., 1892, II, 84-85; published as *The Reminiscences*

of *Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken*, ed. Dorothy Blakey Smith (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1975), p. 81.

early 1850s

“Mr. Douglas was not humorous — never joked — always staid and decorous and often had some subject to talk about which often he had picked up in a review or newspaper, but personal experiences were not much talked about, excepting when the C[hief] F[actor]s and C[hief] T[raders] happened to collect in Victoria or strangers asked questions.” Helmcken, “Reminiscences,” III, 84-85; Smith, ed., *Reminiscences*, p. 140.

1852

“It was easy to see that here indeed was a man, middle-aged, tall and well-knit, with keen features, alert and kindly. I recognized the type that has broken out of our island home in all the centuries to colonize and civilise — the born pioneer.” Admiral John Moresby, *Two Admirals* (London, 1909), p. 122.

c. 1853

“always personally vain and ambitious of late years. His advancement to the prominent position he now fills, here, I understand, rendered him imperious in his bearing towards his colleagues and subordinates — assuming the Governor not only in tone but issuing orders which no one is allowed to question.” Sir George Simpson, in Ormsby, *op. cit.*

1854

“For the Governor of Vanc. Island has been in the Company out here ever since he was a Boy about 15 Year of age and now he is a Man upwards of 60 years now — so you may say he has been all his life among the North American indians and has got one of them for a wife so how can it be expected that he can know anything at all about Governing one of England’s last Colony’s in North America.” Annie Deans, settler, to mother and sister, 29 Feb. 1854, Annie Deans Letters, EB/D343A, P.A.B.C.

1855

“On August 1st Governor Douglas gave a ball for the British ships H.M.S. *Dido* and H.M.S. *Brisk*, anchored at Esquimalt, and the Ameri-

can officers were invited. It proved interesting — with many ladies, some quite pretty. Everything that could be had in the eating and drinking line was on the table. The governor looks all over and acts exactly what he is. He is quite tall and well made and Pomposity itself." Philip C. Johnson, crew member U.S.S. *Active*, "Private Notes," quoted in Franz Stenzel, *James Madison Alden: Yankee Artist of the Pacific Coast, 1854-1860* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1975), p. 42.

c. 1856

"Douglas was a cold brave man. . . . There was something grand and majestic about Douglas — in the first place, he was broad and powerful and had a wooden hard face when necessary, which said very plainly, I am not afraid but *noli me tangere*. When in this state he had the shape of a horseshoe on his forehead unmistakably — and we all knew then to be cautious, for there was something wrong, something to be put to rights, whether with the officers or others." Helmcken, "Reminiscences," III, 63; Smith, ed., *Reminiscences*, pp. 129-30.

1856²

"Governor Douglas, a man of noble and herculean frame, and of Cromwellian order of mind, necessarily governed. He erected light houses, public buildings, bridges, made roads, etc., and would have done more, had the House, instead of carping, seconded his efforts. He was a far-seeing man, of great intellect, compared with whom honorable members were mere pigmies, yet capable of thwarting and of offering often injurious opposition. He had to deal justly with the Colony, H. M. Government, Hudson Bay and Puget Sound companies, Fur Traders, etc. He felt and knew that the interests of all these in the Colony depended upon its prosperity, and that they were not antagonistic. They indeed *were* the colonists. Conscious of this, he endeavored to use them all for the promotion of the progress of the colony he loved so much. He would have used them more for this purpose, had he not been thwarted by the House and one who only had ideas of making money and narrow streets I know this." *The Colonist*, 1 Jan. 1891; in Smith, ed., *Reminiscences*, p. 338.

² This was published in *The Colonist* (Victoria) 1 Jan. 1891; reprinted in Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed., *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1975), Appendix, pp. 331-40. Internal evidence seems to point to about 1856 for Helmcken's view of Douglas, but it may have been written later.

1858

"This Mr. Douglas was the chief trader of the Hudson Bay Company on the island previous to the discovery of gold and consequent excitement; and the Government at home, not being able to find a better man, have appointed him not only Governor of the island but also of the whole of British Columbia for the time being: he is a rough Scotsman and as he has been nearly all his life here amongst the Indians he is not a particularly polished or educated man, but he is just the man suited to the exigencies of the case, having a thorough knowledge of the country and of the Indians; and being moreover a man of strong good sense and strong will: indeed such a man is most necessary with the Indians here for they are a troublesome lot." Lieut. Frederick W. Richards, flag lieutenant to Rear-Admiral Robert L. Baynes, quoted in P. W. Brock, "H.M.S. Ganges, 1821-1929," dossier in Maritime Museum of British Columbia, Victoria, p. 10.

1858

"The Government is a perfect farce. Though the Governor is a wonderfully clever man among the Indians, he does not seem to be governing a white population at all." Journal of Lieut. Charles William Wilson, 8 Aug. 1859, P.A.B.C., also, *the Frontier: Charles Wilson's Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel, 1858-1862, While Secretary of the British Boundary Commission*, ed. by George F. G. Stanley (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 29-30.

1858

"This imbecile fossil was the unworthy possessor of the Queen's commission." "... possessing barely sufficient judgment to establish an understanding with a tribe of debased Indians, (with whom he is allied by domestic ties,) ..." C. Aubrey Angelo, *Idaho: A Descriptive Tour and Review of Its Resources and Route, Prefaced by a Sketch of British Misrule in Victoria, V.I.* (1865; reprint, Fairfield, Wa.: Ye Galleon Press, 1969), p. 17.

1858

"I trust, and think, he is a safe and sensible man, barring his too close connection with the Company. If he is, detailed instructions will only hamper him. If he is not, they will do him no good." Herman Merivale

(Undersecretary of State for the Colonies) to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, 7 Aug. 1858, Bulwer Lytton Papers, D/EK101, Hertfordshire Record Office, Hertford.

1859

“Old Square-Toes” A civil servant; quoted in Smith, *Douglas*, p. 9.

1859

His appointment as Governor of British Columbia was “almost indispensable from his knowledge of the Country & influence with the Indians.” But under the suspicion of serving old masters and appealing to new ones “he has been somewhat spoilt by the flattery of the Secy of State. It appears to have been completely ‘I scratch you — you scratch me.’ He was not accustomed to so much soft sawder in his transactions with men of business, in whose service he gained the knowledge, & acquired the character wh^h justified the present appointment.” Edward Ellice to Duke of Newcastle, 21 Sept. 1859, E91, fol. 154, Ellice Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

1860

“The Governor himself was a genuine Douglas, kindly and urbane in manner — ‘A glove of velvet on a hand of steel’ — one of the wisest and best Governors we ever had, if he was arbitrary.” Susan Allison, in Margaret A. Ormsby, ed., *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia: The Recollections of Susan Allison* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1976), p. 6.

1861

“All people speak with great admiration of the Governor’s intellect — and a remarkable man he must be to be thus fit to govern a colony. He left England or rather Scotland as a boy of 15 in the Hudson B. Cos. Service, in which he has risen through the usual grades, and has acquired not merely immense local information, but general also, by reading. He has read enormously we are told & is in fact a self educated man, to a point very seldom attained. His manner is singular, and you see in it the traces of long residence in an unsettled country, where the white men are rare & the Indians many. There is a gravity, & a something besides which

some might & do mistake for pomposity, but which is the result of long service under the above circumstances. . . . The wonder is that having never been in England or in fact out of the Hudson Bay Territories all his life, he should appear to so much advantage, and should be in any degree fit for his position. He is making himself popular here (in New Westminster) & gives a dinner tomorrow to the chief officials of the Govt and to the Municipal Council." Sophia Cracroft; in Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed., *Lady Franklin Visits the Pacific Northwest: Being Extracts From the Letters of Miss Sophia Cracroft, Sir John Franklin's Niece, February to April 1861 and April to July 1870* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1974, Memoir No. 11), p. 64.

1861?

"He was a fine, far-seeing man. He called in to see us and told us what a paradise Similkameen was — Mountains covered with tall grass which could be converted into wheat fields or ranges for large herds of cattle and added with a Scotchman's pride 'there were thistles and heather growing in places.'" Allison, *Pioneer Gentlewoman*, p. 13.

1863

"In 1863 Governor Douglas was deservedly knighted. . . . Everybody knew Sir James and respected him. . . . Sir James had lived down all his enemies of any consequence returning with honor. He was a very self-contained man — rarely giving his confidence to anyone, and to me scarcely ever, he considering me to be a 'radical' — his abhorrence. . . . Of his bravery, courage, boldness and sagacity there is no question; he inspired respect — carried himself with dignity — natural to him, but which some supposed, put on. The indians loved him — looked on him as a father or friend and felt certain of favor and justice in his hands; so much so that his name and character extended from one end of the coast to the other and to the Interior likewise. He was a man of temperate almost abstemious habits — smoked in moderation but always on the verandah — at, but never in, his own house. Early to bed — early to rise. A very indefatigable worker, in fact the great fault he had was attending too much to details, a property probably inherited — arising from his H B Co's education. Of his love for the Colony, none gainsay, trying ever to promote its interest as well with H M Govt as the public." Helmcken, "Reminiscences," IV, 92-93; Smith, ed., *Reminiscences*, pp. 199-200.

1868

“... ever stiff and formal as in times past, qualities which from long habit he could now lay aside if he would, and probably ought not, if he could.” John Tod; quoted in Smith, *Douglas*, p. 10.

1868

“Altho’ he is very stout, and always in good health, yet old age has evidently wrought a perceptible change in his, once powerful mind, which seems now entirely absorbed in itself.” John Tod (to Edward Ermatinger, 12 Nov. 1868), Ermatinger Papers, P.A.B.C.; quoted in Sage, *Sir James Douglas*, p. 344.

1868

“I had a long chat the other day with our friend Douglas (now Sir James) ever stiff and formal as in times past, qualities which from long habit he could not now lay aside if he would, and probably ought not if he could.” John Tod (to Edward Ermatinger, 20 May 1868); Ermatinger Papers, P.A.B.C.; quoted in Sage, *Sir James Douglas*, p. 344.

1870

“You may probably think me unjustly severe on our old friend, but it is with sorrow I say it, that to all those who have known him for years, he has even appeared cold, crafty and selfish; and justly merits the reward he now reaps of isolation and desertion of all who have known him from early times.” John Tod (to Edward Ermatinger, 22 March 1870); Ermatinger Papers, P.A.B.C.; quoted in Pethick, *Douglas*, p. 284.

1877

“If he had occasion to speak of people’s faults, it was with gentleness and moderation.” Bishop E. Cridge at Douglas’ funeral; *British Colonist*, 15 Aug. 1877.

1878

“Governor Douglas treated the Indians with the affection of a father. This, coupled with his justice and firmness gave him unbounded influence with them.” Bishop E. Cridge, “Characteristics of James Douglas,” PC8, H. H. Bancroft Coll., University of California, Berkeley, p. 3.

Indians had an important role in selecting the minority of children who attended residential school. Normally, parents or guardians had the power to decide which children, if any, were enrolled.¹⁰ Heads of families were supposed to sign written contracts if they chose to give schools possession of their children. Cases of involuntary enrollment undoubtedly occurred, but they were scattered and usually unauthorized.¹¹

Principals attempting to fill their schools had to observe the Indian family's right to refuse enrollment. Joseph Hall, principal of Coqualeetza, at Sardis, tried without success to recruit pupils on Vancouver Island in January 1897. Parents were evidently quite aware of their rights and not about to be rushed. "Indians," Hall noted, "do not come to a decision at once in matters of this kind."¹²

Indian decisions were shaped by a multitude of considerations. Some natives, recalling that white men had imported alcohol and disease, imposed land settlements, and prohibited the potlatch, kept their children at home out of fear that the new schools would prove "an additional snare to the poor Indian."¹³ Parents who retained aboriginal religious beliefs were often afraid that education would separate their children from them after death.¹⁴ Still others were reluctant to send their young to boarding schools because the traditional Indian education, based on everyday observation and imitation of family and friends, would be interrupted even more thoroughly than it was by day schools.

In contrast, Indians who had reason to wish for social change or "advancement" might look with favour on the education of their children. Members of one band in the Fraser River Agency were particularly interested in education because they wanted "to see all their people put on a level with their white neighbours."¹⁵ The first residential school pupils sometimes did experience an exhilarating enhancement of their social status. A minister in Masset recorded that one Haida boy who returned from Metlakatla for holidays "walks about here quite the centre of an admiring crowd."¹⁶

¹⁰ Before 1920, residential schools could not legally enroll children by force. *IA*, 1920, p. 13.

¹¹ For examples of compulsory enrollment, see *IA*, 1911, p. 495; and Fred Thornberg, Correspondence, MSS, PABC.

¹² Joseph Hall to E. Robson, 14 January 1897, MS, PABC.

¹³ *IA*, 1891, p. 169.

¹⁴ *IA*, 1897, p. xxvi.

¹⁵ *IA*, 1898, p. 227.

¹⁶ *IA*, 1892, p. 259.

Natives who had converted to Christian beliefs usually found that their new religions prescribed the approach they should take to residential schools. When influenza struck natives in the Stuart Lake area in about 1917, parents who had ignored the priest's injunction to send their children to a nearby boarding school construed the disease as divine retribution for that disobedience.¹⁷ But, as Agent Frank Devlin reported, differences over questions of Christian doctrine could prevent enrollment:

Many of those who are not attending school are most anxious to go, but there is not accommodation for them. Their parents are very particular about sending their children to any school conducted by a religious denomination other than that to which they themselves belong.¹⁸

In deciding about enrollment, Indians took health conditions into consideration. Because of their precarious demographic situation, natives were especially anxious that their young live in the best available environment. Many were uneasy about entrusting their children to unknown, possibly harmful surroundings. Margaret Butcher, a teacher in the Kitimat Home, described the way any sickness in the school affected native attitudes towards it:

The Indians are so illogical, they do not consider the number of children who are brought through delicacy and sickness to strength and fitness, they only look at and count the children who are sick and 'are killed by the Home.'¹⁹

Principals were well aware that illness or death could have a disastrous impact on future enrollment. G. Donckele, principal at Kuper Island between 1890 and 1906, felt a sense of relief after he sent one sick girl home: "If her malady would have proven fatal at the School, there would have been great excitement amongst the Indians."²⁰

Although educators often found it difficult to recruit because Indians feared the schools were unhealthy, the reverse was occasionally true as well: the particularly good health records of individual schools might encourage parents to enroll children. Ebenezer Robson reported from Coqualeetza in 1895 that, due to the concerned efforts of his teachers, "the health of those intrusted to their care has been such, when contrasted

¹⁷ "Memoirs and diary, Indian School at Ft. St. James, later Fraser Lake: 'Lejac Indian School,' 1916-1922, Fr. Joseph Allard" (henceforth abbreviated as Fraser Lake School Diary), OR, reel 712.

¹⁸ *IA*, 1896, p. 88.

¹⁹ Margaret Butcher, Correspondence, 1919, MSS, PABC.

²⁰ G. Donckele to W. Robertson, 25 October 1900, MS, DIAN.