

Soldiers, Settlement and Development in British Columbia, 1915-1930¹

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One of the major problems that confronted Canadian leaders after the Great War was the reabsorption of discharged servicemen into civilian life. To resolve the problem the federal and provincial governments cooperated in establishing a national policy on returned soldiers. British Columbia was instrumental in initiating the development of the national policy and implementing a unique provincial soldier settlement program.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the impact of one policy, the British Columbia Land Settlement and Development Act of 1917, on the settlement of returned soldiers. This act was created under the province's own soldier settlement program. The main objective of the act was to provide the government with the power to acquire potential agricultural land that could be brought into production by the returned soldier. Two aspects of the act will be considered: "Settlement Areas" and "Development Areas." The former are defined as areas where agricultural production was being retarded by reason of lands remaining undeveloped, the latter as heavily timbered areas on which soil conditions were highly favourable to agricultural production. The analysis will explain the rise and decline of soldier settlements in British Columbia under these two aspects of the Act between 1915 and 1930.

Background to the Establishment of the Land Settlement and Development Act

In October 1915 the Canadian government organized a meeting in Ottawa where representatives from the Military Hospital Commission and the provincial governments discussed the potential problems that the soldiers would face on their return to Canada. It was agreed that provincial committees would be established to handle the responsibility of finding employment for discharged soldiers in each province. In accor-

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge financial support from the Simon Fraser University President's Research Fund in the preparation of this article.

dance with this agreement, the British Columbia Returned Soldiers' Aid Commission was organized on 29 November 1915.²

The commission's objectives were basically the following: (1) to establish a Provincial Bureau to provide for the distribution of the labour-supply created by demobilization and immigration; (2) to provide education, technical and agricultural training for returned soldiers; and (3) to devise a land-settlement policy that would place returned soldiers on farm lands.³ The first two objectives were immediately acted upon by the provincial government; however, the third objective was somewhat more complex and received a great deal of attention from the commission.⁴ In 1916 the commission recommended to the provincial legislature that a co-operative land settlement plan be adopted whereby community settlements be established for placing "all returned soldiers" on the land. By designating "all returned soldiers," the commission pointed out that "we have made no discrimination, and think they should be open to any man who has served the Empire either under our own flag, that of the Mother-land, or any of the other Overseas Dominions."⁵

In viewing the overall plan, the commission made thirty-one recommendations. Some of these included the following:

1. That an independent Board of Commissioners be appointed to select suitable lands for settlement; to direct the preliminary land-clearing or equivalent improvements; to approve of the purchase of all stock, implements, etc.; and to administer all the funds in connection with the co-operative settlements.
2. That the land-grant take the form of farms of such acreage as may, in the opinion of the said Board of Commissioners, be best adapted to the different classes of farming to be pursued thereon, in accordance with the location and adaptability of the land. . . .
3. The farms to be located in such districts as may be determined upon by the Board of Commissioners, and that such provision be made by the Government as may enable the said Board of Commissioners to acquire such lands and to carry out the co-operative land settlement, and that these lands be in blocks of such size as to provide for at least sixty allotments.

² British Columbia Public Archives (PABC), Microfilm Files 25-F-1-25-F-752, Roll 1, 1915-1929, "B.C. Returned Soldiers' Aid Commission" (BCRSAC).

³ Province of British Columbia, *The Provincial Returned Soldiers Commission of British Columbia* (Victoria, 1918), p. 6.

⁴ PABC, Memorandum, Meeting Returned Soldiers Commission, 30 June 1916, pp. 1-3.

⁵ Province of British Columbia, BCRSAC, *Report* (Victoria, 1916), 6 Geo. 5, p. J5.

4. The farms to be subdivisions of selected areas of suitable size in these respective districts, such areas to be Government lands if available, or to be acquired by the Government for the purpose, and to be within easy access of transportation and markets.
5. Each of the foregoing areas to constitute a Co-operative Settlement, for which purpose it shall be laid out or disposed of as follows: Sufficient acreage to be reserved for a Demonstration Farm, Central Organization Plant, roads, recreation grounds, etc. The balance of the acreage to be subdivided into farms of such size as may be decided upon by the said Board of Commissioners with regard to the location and the class of farming to be followed thereon.⁶

Apart from the organization of the settlement, the commission recommended that various forms of government financial assistance be made available to the individual settler such as \$500 per allotment to cover land improvement costs and a maximum \$1,350 loan to purchase farm supplies. It was further recommended that the men be trained in farm work, free of cost for all returned soldiers, and that there should be a trained agricultural adviser for each settlement. In summary, the commission indicated the following advantages to be enjoyed by the holder of an allotment in one of the suggested co-operative settlements.

He becomes the owner of a 'picked' farm with enough cleared land to enable him to make an immediate start; buildings, livestock, and machinery are supplied in accordance with his expressed wishes, at rates far more reasonable than he could hope to obtain by buying individually; he enjoys good transportation facilities; the support of a co-operative system of purchasing all supplies and selling all surplus produce; the benefits to be gained from having assistance and advice of experts always at his service; the ability to avail himself of courses of instruction in agricultural matters and the advantages of social life as compared with the isolated condition of the majority of our settlers.⁷

In 1917 the provincial legislature not only had to make a decision on this latter recommendation but also had to deal with individual speculators and a number of British companies⁸ which held large amounts of idle agricultural land in the province. To solve these problems the provincial government passed An Act to Promote Increased Agricultural Production.⁹ This act was also known as the Land Settlement and De-

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. J5-J8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. J5.

⁸ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, 1923, p. Z6.

⁹ British Columbia, *Statutes*, 1917, Chapter 34.

velopment Act. A Land Settlement Board in the Department of Agriculture was created to administer and carry out the provisions of the act.

Two sections of the act specifically dealt with the returned soldiers problem, although no part of the act specified the establishment of cooperative community settlements as recommended by the commission. Section 45 designated that soldiers or their widows could purchase land from the board and be entitled to an abatement on the purchase price to the amount of \$500 provided he or she had fulfilled all the prescribed requirements in respect of the land set out in the act. Section 46 specified that the board had the power to establish "Settlement Areas" on undeveloped agricultural lands where returned soldiers and bona fide settlers could occupy "designated settlement areas."¹⁰

The provincial government felt that it had made considerable progress in establishing aid programs and a land-settlement policy for discharged soldiers. However, it believed that the federal government should contribute to part of the costs of the provincial aid programs and that the Dominion as a whole should be involved in an overall land-settlement policy¹¹ as emphasized by the recommendations of the British Columbia Returned Soldiers' Aid Commission to the provincial legislature.

It appeared to us that the matter of land-settlement was of prime importance, and we accordingly prepared a plan for placing returned men, who wished to engage in farming in community settlements. . . .

We are entirely of the opinion, however, that the problem before us is one which will have to be met and dealt with by the Dominion as a whole. It is, in our opinion, not possible for any one Province to arrive at a solution which would be adopted by all of them. The matter can only be settled by the co-operation of all the Provincial Governments with the Federal Government. Here in British Columbia we have done all that is possible in the way of outlining what appears to us a feasible and beneficent scheme for the provision of the man who will cultivate the land. Most of the other Provinces have . . . tentative schemes for the same purpose under way, though, . . . none of them have appeared.

It is now the part of the Federal Government to see if it is possible to arrange a scheme which will be applicable to the Dominion as a whole.¹²

In accordance with this belief the provincial politicians urged the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Province of British Columbia, *The Provincial Returned Soldiers Commission of British Columbia* (Victoria, 1917), p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.* For a preliminary discussion between British Columbia and the Dominion government before the establishment of the act see PABC, Brewster Papers, R. L. Borden to H. C. Brewster, 13 January 1917.

federal government to convene a national conference to discuss the question of establishing a national policy.

Responding to the suggestion, a Parliamentary Committee on Returned Soldiers was appointed by the federal government in March 1917 to inquire into the work being done by the provinces. The committee requested the British Columbia Returned Soldiers' Aid Commission to supply them with a report on the provinces' plans for solving the discharged soldier problem. After securing similar reports from other provinces, the Soldier Settlement Act¹³ was passed in September 1917 at the session of the Dominion Parliament, and was described as "An Act to Assist Returned Soldiers in Settling Upon the Land and to Increase Agricultural Production." The act established a Soldier Settlement Board composed of three commissioners to administer the provisions of the act. Some of the provisions included the granting of loans to a maximum of \$2,500 for returned soldiers to be used for such purposes as land improvement, erection of farm buildings and the purchase of stock. The loans were to be offered at 5 percent interest over a period of twenty years and could be applied to holdings already owned or leased by returned soldiers or to assist them in settling free Dominion lands. In this latter case, the act authorized the reservation of any available Dominion lands for the purposes of the act, and provided for the granting of a free entry for 160 acres of Dominion lands in addition to the standard homestead site of that size. The act stipulated that returned soldiers receiving loans should be qualified to farm. In order that this requirement be met the act made provisions for the agricultural training of returned soldiers and for the supervision of the farm operations thereafter. The beneficiaries of the act were to be Canadians who served overseas and members of the Imperial forces who had served in a theatre of war.¹⁴

On 30 January 1918 the Soldier Settlement Board of Canada began the task of implementing the act. At this time many hundreds of men who had homesteads or farms in western Canada before enlistment had returned home due to injuries and were pressing for loans to re-establish themselves in farming operations in time for spring seeding. To resolve this problem, the board instructed the Dominion Land Service to have its western agencies act immediately on all soldier loan applications.

While the board was reasonably successful in granting loans to returned soldiers it was not as successful in allocating free Dominion lands. The

¹³ Canada, *Statutes*, 1917, Chapter 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

board found that the number of applications far exceeded expectations and felt that there were insufficient areas of suitable land that could be made available to the returned soldiers under the act. With a seemingly endless flow of soldiers returning to Canada and clamouring for work and land the Dominion government found itself in an uncomfortable dilemma.

During this period of indecision, John Oliver, the Premier of British Columbia, proposed that the nation-wide problem was by no means insoluble and that Prime Minister Borden should call a national conference to discuss possible amendments to the Soldier Settlement Act. Borden willingly assented to Oliver's suggestion and in November 1918 a conference was convened at which a number of amendments to the Federal Act were adopted.¹⁵ Some of the most significant amendments pertained to land reclamation, land expropriation and agricultural training of soldiers. It was also agreed that through a scheme of co-operation with the provinces, the Dominion government would provide the funds

by which the Provinces by means of purchases or through the exercise of their constitutional powers as to expropriation, may acquire such amounts of land within settlement districts, now in private lands and uncultivated, as will be of a character and extent . . . to meet the general needs of settlement, and that the Soldier Settlement Board of the Dominion should be empowered to render special help to settlers as defined by the Soldier Settlement Act, who come in under such a scheme.¹⁶

All of the amendments were incorporated in the revised Federal Soldier Settlement Act which became effective on July 7, 1919.¹⁷ From the beginning John Oliver had a keen interest in the re-establishment of the veterans, and his success in influencing the federal government to amend the act seems to arise from his own beliefs on the role that the returned soldier should play in the development of British Columbia.

Oliver was a plain man, filled with rustic virtues. He was a farmer — a dirt farmer, he called himself — and proud of it.¹⁸ Raised on a farm at Hartington, Derbyshire, England, he was 14 when the family emigrated to Canada and settled on a farm at Maryboro in Wellington County, Ontario. At 20 John decided to move to British Columbia, where he

¹⁵ Canada, Conference of Dominion and Provincial Governments, Ottawa, November 1918, pp. 1-7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Canada, *Revised Statutes*, 1919, Chapter 71.

¹⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 9 October 1954. For an analysis of John Oliver see James Morton, *Honest John Oliver* (Toronto, 1933).

pre-empted 160 acres in the municipality of Surrey. A short time later he purchased a quarter section on the shores of Mud Bay in the municipality of Delta and developed one of the most prosperous farms in the area. When he became Premier his philosophy of hard work and achievement did not change. He believed in an agricultural way of life that to him represented the cornerstone of a healthy and prosperous society. He assumed that the returned soldiers would automatically agree with his beliefs and that they would prefer to settle on the land and become farmers. Margaret A. Ormsby summarizes this viewpoint by stating that

since his horizon remained bounded by the prosperous country towns which had grown up in the flat, green fields of the lower Fraser Valley, and his Liberalism bore the imprint of the rural conservatism of the prosperous Delta farmer, he had taken it for granted, without either enquiry or consultation, that the soldiers would prefer to settle on the land.¹⁹

At the time, Oliver's philosophy seemed to be in agreement with the views of the federal government. In the House of Commons on 23 June 1919 Hon. Arthur Meighen, Minister of the Interior, in replying to questions on amendments to the Soldier Settlement Act, stated:

The primary and great principle of this Bill is to secure settlers on the lands of this country — to secure settlement of our idle lands, and to make settlers of those who have proven themselves the backbone and stay of the nation in its trouble. We believe that we cannot better fortify this country against the waves of unrest and discontent that now assail us, as all the rest of the world, than by making the greatest possible proportion of the soldiers of our country settlers upon our land. Of course, every class of citizen is necessary to constitute the national life, but the class of citizen that counts the most in the determination of the stability of a country against such forces as I mentioned a moment ago is undoubtedly the basic class — the agricultural class. That class is the mainstay of the nation. So the purpose of this Bill is a national one primarily. Its purpose is to strengthen the fibre of this country by building into the basic industrial structure of the best blood and bones of our nation.²⁰

Once the amendments had been agreed upon in November 1918, John Oliver did not wait for the passing of the legislation almost a year later, but immediately decided to implement the agreed upon national policy by passing an Act to Provide Lands for the Use and Benefit of Returned Soldiers,²¹ which was referred to as the Soldiers' Land Act and

¹⁹ Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto, 1958), p. 407.

²⁰ Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, 1919, p. 3863.

²¹ British Columbia, *Statutes*, 1918, Chapter 80.

covered any resident of British Columbia who had engaged in active service, either at home or abroad, during the Great War. The act provided for the Lieutenant-Governor in Council to purchase lands for returned soldiers out of the consolidated revenue fund, provided that the aggregate of such payments did not exceed \$500,000. Also, 160 acres of land could be granted or leased to any soldier or community of soldiers, except in the case where such lands were suitable for pastoral purposes only.²² Oliver, having appointed a "Superintendent of B.C. Soldier Settlement" under the Department of Lands to administer the Soldiers' Land Act,²³ was now in a position to control land development and the settlement of returned soldiers and bona fide settlers under the Soldiers' Land Act and the Land Settlement and Development Act. It was under the latter act that veterans had a direct impact on the British Columbia landscape.

The Impact of the Land Settlement and Development Act

In British Columbia Oliver was confronted by the problem of securing attractive land for settlement as most of the reasonable agricultural land was held by speculators. To resolve this problem, he decided to use section 46 of the Land Settlement and Development Act, which provided for the establishment of "Settlement Areas" on undeveloped agricultural land under the control of the Land Settlement Board. Prior to designating the Settlement Areas, the board had to choose the location and determine how to acquire properties within the site. It was agreed that the Settlement Areas should be located near transportation facilities on land that would require very little improvement to bring it into production to support permanent settlements.²⁴ Once the board had designated a Settlement Area the owners of the various parcels of unimproved land were to bring that land to board standards of active agricultural production within a specified time. If owners failed in this obligation a tax of 5 percent of the appraised value would be levied in addition to all other taxes, or they had the option of surrendering the land to the board at the appraised value to sell to bona fide settlers.²⁵

On 2 July 1918 the Land Settlement Board designated the Bulkley

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, 1918, L10. See PABC, Premier's Papers, Oliver to Nechako Valley Land and Development Company, 30 September 1919.

²⁵ British Columbia, *Statutes*, 1917, Chapter 34, Section 42.

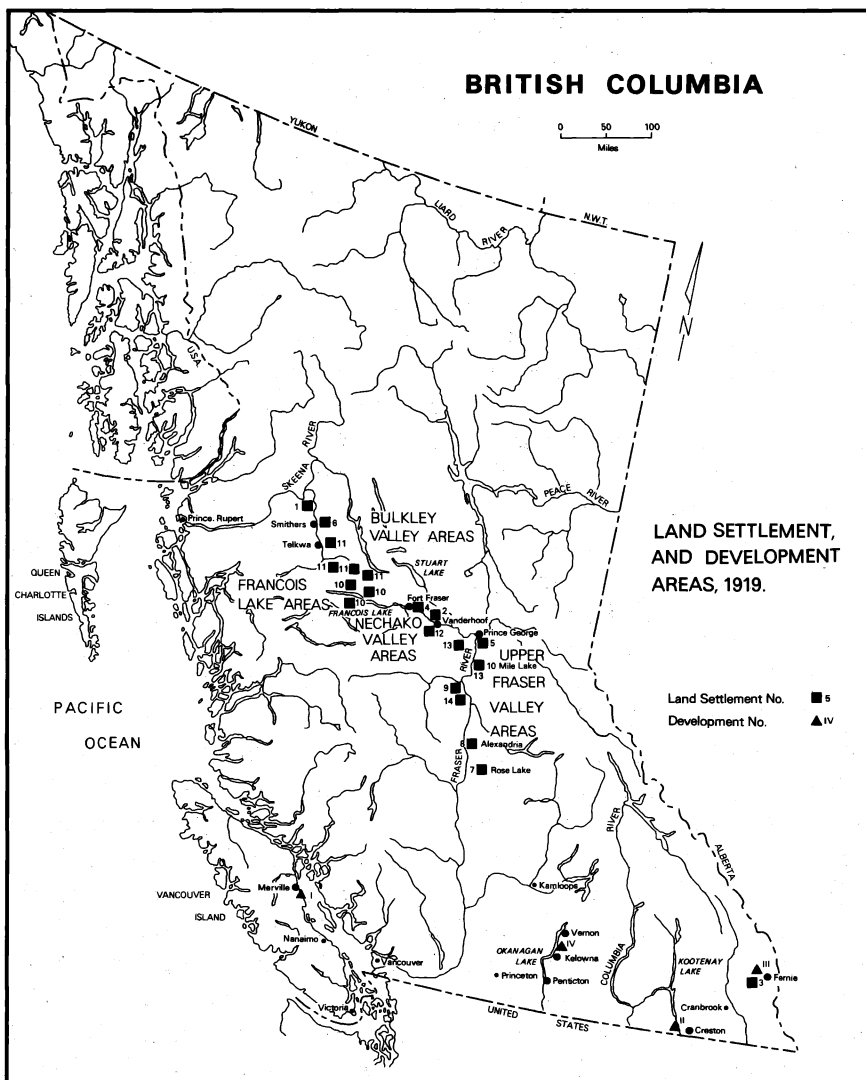


FIGURE 1

Land settlement and development areas, 1919

and Nechako Valleys as the first two Settlement Areas.²⁶ In these two areas the board controlled over 17,000 acres near Telkwa and 35,358 acres near Vanderhoof. By the end of 1919 the board had designated fourteen Settlement Areas, thirteen of which were located in the central interior, mainly on or near the Grand Trunk Pacific or the Pacific Great Eastern Railway. The other area was located in the Kootenays at Fernie (figure 1).

By 1920 in nine selected areas the board had designated 121,141 acres, of which 46,647 were purchased by the board for a cost of \$210,642.29 and 19,156 acres were resold to bona fide settlers. Almost all of the acquired land in Area No. 1 and more than half of the lands available in Area No. 2 were sold to bona fide settlers. In Area No. 5, 4,160 of 11,601 acres were sold to twenty-six new settlers, while 1,040 acres were improved privately to escape the penalty tax (table 1).

On the positive side, the board's settlement policy had the effect of inducing private owners to improve their land to escape the penalty tax. In Areas 1 and 2, for example, during 1919-20 a total of 10,927 acres were improved. Combined with the board's settlers, a total of 37,466 acres were improved as against 14,850 acres before the two areas were established.²⁷ Indirectly, many private owners and land companies sold their holdings at reduced rates in order to conform "with the invariably reasonable valuations placed on similar lands by the Board's Appraisers."²⁸

However, the policy also had a negative effect on settlement development. Although land was open to all bona fide settlers the board anticipated that a significant proportion of the settlers would be returned soldiers. In 1920 there were approximately 120 settlers in the Settlement Areas. Only fifty-three returned British Columbia soldiers, each of whom was allowed the statutory rebate of \$500 on the purchase price of lands that they selected, took advantage of the 19,155 acres that were sold by the board.²⁹ By the end of 1922 the number of applications for land declined, and the board reported that its work was continuing "on a modified scale."³⁰ During that year the board opened negotiations with representatives of a number of British companies which still owned large tracts of vacant land in the areas, with a view to co-operation in the settlement of lands. As a result of the general understanding reached, it

²⁶ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, Land Settlement Board, 1919.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1921.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. T6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. T5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1923, 25.

TABLE 1
Nine Selected Settlement Areas in British Columbia, 1920

<i>Area</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>District</i>	<i>Purchase Price \$</i>	<i>Development Costs \$</i>	<i>Total Acreage</i>	<i>Acquired</i>	<i>Sold</i>	<i>Available For Sale</i>
1	Bulkley Valley	Telkwa	30,200.60	3,240.32	17,214	5,484	4,719	765
2	Nechako Valley	Vanderhoof	72,672.07	7,815.23	35,358	13,730	6,970	6,760
4	Nechako Valley	Marten Lake	16,735.17	1,450.06	14,268	3,872	1,617	2,255
5	Upper Fraser Valley	Prince George	55,643.21	2,602.61	18,663	11,601	4,160	7,441
6	Bulkley Valley	Smithers	5,318.40	1,042.25	5,310	1,368	466	902
7	Upper Fraser Valley	Rose Lake	23.01	890.41	6,521	1,582	—	1,582
8	Upper Fraser Valley	Alexandria	1,448.88	576.03	3,311	1,625	—	1,625
9	Upper Fraser Valley	10-Mile Lake	14,100.65	539.66	4,875	4,058	—	4,058
10	Francois Lake	Francois Lake	14,482.30	2,950.31	15,621	3,327	1,223	2,104
Total 9 areas			\$210,624.29	\$21,106.88	121,141	46,647	19,155	27,492

SOURCE: British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, Land Settlement Board, 1921, T5, T12.

was proposed that the board be ready to assist in the location of approved settlers brought out by the companies from the British Isles, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.³¹ Even with this effort by the board the number of settlers had risen to only 194 and the total land occupied in the Settlement Areas was 29,327 acres; it is not likely that more than 80 of the settlers were veterans (table 2).

A partial explanation of the lack of success in attracting settlers lies in the board's choice of the Settlement Areas. "Most of the settled areas in the central interior suffered from low soil productivity, marginal climate, and lack of established markets."³² For example, the board indicated that in the Nechako Valley, Areas 2, 4 and 12 were suited for "mixed farming and dairying."³³ However, this type of intensive farming required established markets with a population large enough to support this kind of agricultural activity. The two markets in this area, Vanderhoof and Fort Fraser, had populations of 350 and 50 respectively. To compound the problem, dairying requires an available processing facility at the market.

Disappointed with the failure of the settlement area policy to attract more bona fide settlers, particularly veterans, Oliver made the decision to pursue the concept of settlement by communities of soldiers. The idea was not new. The concept had been initially proposed by the British Columbia Returned Soldiers' Aid Commission³⁴ in 1915. In January 1919 a similar plan had been discussed by 300 returned soldiers on the voyage from Liverpool to Vancouver aboard the *Empress of Asia*. John Bird, a returned soldier who was aboard the ship, described the discussion of the plan.

After leaving the Canal, on the run up the coast to Victoria and Vancouver, meetings were held by about 300 of the men to formulate a plan to settle comrades of the battlefields on community settlements. There was born what became known as the 'Empress of Asia' Plan for Community Settlement of returned men. The idea was that the men would work at their variously appointed tasks under selected foremen as if in the Army. . . .

A Committee was elected on the ship to place the plan and views of the men before the Provincial Cabinet, at that time headed by the Honourable John Oliver (Honest John) as Premier. They were sympathetic to the idea and an endeavour was made by a delegation sent to the Federal Government

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. Z6.

³² Simon Fraser University, Special Collections, "History of the B.C. Land Service," 1970 (author unknown), p. 16.

³³ PABC, pamphlet, Settlement Areas Nos. 2, 4, 12, 1921.

³⁴ PABC, Microfilm Files 25-F-1-25-F-752, Roll 1, 1915-1929, BCRSAC.

TABLE 2
Thirteen Selected Settlement Areas in British Columbia, 1922

<i>Areas</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Total Acreage in Areas</i>	<i>Acreage to which Board has Title</i>	<i>Acreage Under Option</i>	<i>Acreage Sold</i>	<i>No. of Settlers</i>	<i>Acreage Improved Under Act</i>	<i>Total Penalty Tax Assessed Against Un- improved Lands</i>
1,6,11	Bulkley Valley	41,756	9,447	2,325	6,234	44	10,264	\$10,236.20
2,4,12	Nechako Valley	81,182	21,863	2,643	11,644	75	12,997	28,918.90
10	Francois Lake	15,621	5,319	—	2,333	15	3,168	2,691.26
5,7,8, 9,13,14	Upper Fraser Valley	54,580	23,230	2,275	9,116	60	6,001	6,827.78
Total 13 Areas		193,139	59,859	7,243	29,327	194	32,430	\$48,674.14

SOURCE: British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, Land Settlement Board, 1923, Z6.

at Ottawa to enlist their aid, but the plan was turned down by the Honourable Arthur Meighen, Minister of the Interior, as economically unsound.³⁵

John Oliver was more than sympathetic, as described by John Bird, toward the soldiers' plan. He appointed a Select Committee, chaired by G. G. McGeer, to meet with the soldiers' Committee, comprising Lieutenant A. F. Walker and Lieutenant W. H. Kirchner, to discuss and evaluate their plan. McGeer reported back to Oliver and stated that the Select Committee spent a good deal of time in discussing the different details of the co-operative plan of land settlement with the delegates, and "while your Committee does not agree with all the details of the said plan, it believes the general principles of co-operative land settlement as outlined by the delegates to be practicable, sound, and feasible. Your Committee is firmly of the opinion that the assistance provided to be extended to each individual returned soldier should be made available for use by returned soldiers organizing themselves into any such co-operative plan."³⁶

Despite the warnings from the federal government that the concept was financially unsound and, furthermore, that the plan did not fall totally within the regulations of the Federal Soldier Settlement Act, Oliver, with positive advice from the Select Committee, was able to try out his experiment under his Land Settlement and Development Act.

Since there was a considerable amount of idle forest and logged-off land in the province, Oliver decided that such lands would be most suitable to convert into agricultural production. Oliver instructed the Land Settlement Board to purchase these lands and designate them as "Development Areas" under the act and to institute his co-operative plan³⁷ for soldier settlements.

Under Oliver's plan, each Development Area would be surveyed in large units. Only soldiers who wanted to work co-operatively and acquire farms would be chosen to clear the land. For their labour in clearing the land together, the veterans would receive \$4 per day per man. The objective of the low wage was to keep down the soldier's costs when he purchased his land, the price of which would be based on the original sum paid by the board for the land, plus the clearing costs.

Work camps, which would contain temporary buildings and a co-operative store, would be established within each unit. After the areas

³⁵ PABC, *Lister*.

³⁶ British Columbia, *Journals of Legislative Assembly*, 1919, 9 Geo. 5. See PABC, Pattullo Papers, add. mss. no. 3, vol. 9, file 11, nos. 159, 162.

³⁷ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, 1920, p. M59.

had been cleared, lots would be subdivided and the workers would clear and fence a five-acre plot of each of the subdivided lots, a plan intended to place as many settlers as quickly as possible on their own land. As soon as the veterans attained their land which would be allocated by lot they could erect their permanent buildings. When enough soldiers were settled on their lots, the board would transfer the management of the store and other institutional buildings to the community. To oversee the entire plan, the Land Settlement Board would appoint a supervisor for each Development Area. If complaints arose, a soldiers' committee could confer with representatives of the board.

Early in 1919 the board purchased the Merville Development Area, comprising approximately 14,000 acres of logged-off land, from the Comox Logging Company (figure 1). The area was situated "about six miles from Courtenay, in the Comox Valley, on the east coast of Vancouver Island and extended from the Strait of Georgia on the east to and beyond the Tsolum River on the west."³⁸ The area was connected to Courtenay, the business centre of the Comox Valley, by the Island Highway as well as by several well-maintained side roads. Other transportation links in the area included the Comox Logging Railway and numerous abandoned logging roads. Prior to the Land Settlement Board acquiring the area, M. H. Nelems, a board director, indicated that the site had been logged and burned over, "leaving the land fairly clear of everything but stumps and logs."³⁹ From his observation of the soils in the area, he concluded "that at least fifty per cent of the land offered will prove suitable for agriculture and the balance for pastoral purposes. . . ."⁴⁰ Later a technical soil report prepared for the board indicated that only two of the three types of soil found in the area could be brought up to agricultural standards.⁴¹

Despite the rather bleak agricultural potential offered by the site, the board designated 8,000 of the approximately 14,000 acres for develop-

³⁸ British Columbia, *Land Settlement Board Interim Report*, 1920, p. 27.

³⁹ PABC, add. mss. no. 1, vol. 6, file f, Nelms to Smith, 31 December 1918, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Boving to Smith, 23 January 1919. Professor Boving of the University of British Columbia prepared a technical soil report for the board in January 1919. The report indicated that there were three soil types in the area. Type A was very light, and to bring the fertility of the land up to agricultural standards it would take a considerable amount of time and money. Type B was slightly acidic but could be remedied by the application of lime, and Type C was average but lacked depth and was of no significant agricultural value. For a report on pasture land in the area by the board's appraiser see British Columbia, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly*, 24 March 1920, p. 156.

ment. In April 1919 the board implemented Oliver's plan. The Merville Development Area was surveyed into seven units. Two work camps were established and seventy veterans were chosen to begin the procedure of rough clearing. On May 23 the *Victoria Daily Colonist* reported that the returned soldiers were doing excellent work in clearing the land and establishing their quarters and, even though there was some delay in obtaining the required machinery, they were enthusiastic and confident that they would make a success of their venture.⁴²

On completion of the rough clearing operations the units were surveyed into farm lots, ranging from 10 to 120 acres, that conformed to the abandoned logging roads. Several reasons for the board's decision to establish small holdings may be inferred. First, logged off land is expensive to clear and the board may have felt the resulting high cost of farms would discourage soldier settlers. Secondly, the board felt that it was necessary to get as much land as possible into cultivation. Large lots with fewer farms would take years longer to clear. Thirdly, smaller lots would accommodate soldiers who simply wanted to raise a few chickens and keep small orchards.

By the beginning of 1920 there were forty-five farms available for settlers, the average being fifty acres, with "450 acres ready for the plough."⁴³ These farms were selected by lot as planned, and it was reported to the board that the draw "had gone off in a most satisfactory manner with each man getting what he wanted."⁴⁴

However, there were a number of soldiers who were displeased with the costs of their farms and other decisions made by the board. In May 1920 the split between the soldiers and the board widened when the board decided to abandon the original idea of trying to make development and land settlement complementary. The board indicated that it wished to concentrate on development and that it was not feasible to promote the two functions under the same board without sacrificing efficiency. It further stated that the "settlers must be content to believe that they will get a square deal."⁴⁵

As of 1 June 1920 development operations on a pay-roll basis were terminated, "following which allotment was made of all lands subdivided, totalling 126 farm units, averaging, exclusive of small allotments,

⁴² *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 23 May 1919.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 20 January 1920.

⁴⁴ PABC, Bruce Alistair Mackelvie Papers.

⁴⁵ *Victoria Daily Times*, 6 February 1920.

between 50 and 60 acres each.”⁴⁶ The board’s new policy, which affected approximately 400 settlers, specified that development work was to proceed under a system of progressive payments, by which each settler could, if necessary, secure assistance each month to an amount not exceeding 60 percent of the estimated value of actual improvements completed during the month (table 3).

By March 1921, 867.08 acres had been cleared and 300.3 acres had been partially cleared at Merville. Fifty lots comprising 2,796 acres were sold. Thirty-eight settlers now had permanent farm houses on their lots, and three had temporary houses. In addition there were forty-seven shacks, thirty-one sheds, seven temporary barns and three permanent barns.⁴⁷

By 1922 it appeared that the agricultural soldier settlement at Merville was a success. Ninety of the Merville farmers owned shares in the Comox Creamery, which was established by the board on a co-operative system, with fifty of them shipping cream and eggs to the creamery. Dairying at the settlement was successful, as was the raising of poultry, pigs and sheep, and there was a healthy production of strawberries, eggs and clover hay. Orchards and fodder crops were also grown on the new land. Logging and coal mining camps in the area, as well as the cities of Vancouver and Victoria, were viewed as ready markets for the settlement’s farm products. The community townsite had developed to include a post office, school, church, store, garage, community hall and tea rooms.

In his report on the economic and social conditions of the settlement, S. H. Hopkins, District Supervisor of Agricultural Education, stated:

It is usually asked, “Are the Merville farms self-supporting?” I venture to say that right now several old-fashioned farms in the valley are not making their cream-check meet their feed bills. Merville has no apology to make for not being self-supporting at this stage! But 1922 will see a change.

Then, too, the community life is splendid. Farmers’ meetings, as well as dances, concerts, picnics, skating parties, etc., are well attended. The new community hall is well used. The recent children’s masquerade dance was an example of these numerous enjoyable affairs.⁴⁸

The success of the settlement was further publicized by the British Columbia Minister of Agriculture, Hon. E. D. Barrow, when he argued that the original idea of soldier settlements had been realized. He pointed out that “the Merville project had provided employment for 160 re-

⁴⁶ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, 1921, p. T6.

⁴⁷ British Columbia, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly*, 1921, 11 Geo. 5.

⁴⁸ *Victoria Daily Times*, 21 February 1922.

TABLE 3
Development Areas in British Columbia, 1920

<i>Area</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Soldier Settlement</i>	<i>Purchase Price \$</i>	<i>Development Costs \$</i>	<i>Total Acreage</i>	<i>Soldier Settlement Population (Estimate)</i>
1	Vancouver Island	Merville	69,699.91	437,221.89	13,660.09	400
2	Kootenay District	Camp Lister	187,431.46	286,195.81	5,936.05	70
3	Kootenay District	Fernie	10,256.65	24,572.57	1,193	0
4	Okanagan Valley	Kelowna, Christian Ranch	33,070.50	24,665.95	440	0
Total 4 Areas			\$300,458.52	\$772,656.22	21,229.14	470

SOURCE: British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, Land Settlement Board, 1921, T12.
 British Columbia Journals of Legislative Assembly, 1921, 11 Geo. 5, p. 77.

turned men at a serious time when they otherwise would have been forced to live on Government doles.⁴⁹

The *Victoria Daily Times* observed that Merville and the other British Columbia soldier settlements were the only successful projects of this kind in all of Canada.⁵⁰ Within three years soldier settlers at Merville had transformed a partially logged off area into an apparently viable farming community.

The government's optimism over the success of the settlement was shattered by an exceptionally dry summer in 1922. On July 5 a forest fire broke out near Merville and by the next day only "a land of blackened logs, stumps, and smouldering brush"⁵¹ was left. The fire destroyed fifty houses and the majority of the farm buildings, virtually wiping out the settlement. The material condition of the settlers was grave, as they were "absolutely destitute, having lost everything they possessed with the exception of the clothing they wore when they were forced to flee for their lives."⁵²

After the disaster Premier Oliver authorized the board to assist the settlers in rebuilding their homes and barns and to seed down all of the lands. Despite the assistance given by the board, the Minister of Agriculture was approached by the Courtenay Board of Trade and the Comox Valley farmers to reappraise the Merville project.⁵³ On the advice of the board, the Minister of Agriculture appointed a Committee of Reappraisal with the understanding that future policy on the Merville area would be based on the committee's report.

The report, submitted to the Minister of Agriculture in March 1923, contended that one half of the Merville lands were worthless for cultivation and of no value whatever. Mr. F. R. Herchner, a forestry inspector and member of the committee, asserted that

it will be a thousand years before the land there [Merville] will be fit to grow crops on. The humus is absolutely destroyed. Some people, it is stated, have no choice but to go back to the land. This is very unfair, because even in the first place the settlement did not look a very promising place to make homes.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 March 1922.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ PABC, *Merville*.

⁵² *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 8 July 1922.

⁵³ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, 1923, vol. 1, p. 27.

⁵⁴ British Columbia, *Report of the Reappraisal Committee re: Merville Lands*, March 1923, p. 17.

The recommendations simply confirmed the findings of the 1919 technical report prepared for the board on the potential of agricultural production in the area. Faced with the facts a second time, the Minister of Agriculture, with authorization from Oliver, indicated to the veterans that all of the improved lands sold to them on special terms would be reappraised on the basis of their actual cash value. Further, the Land Settlement Board would grant title to each settler, take back long-term mortgage loans and withdraw entirely from the active supervision of the area so far as the settlers' affairs were concerned. Thus the community was left to work out its own destiny by the exercise of the ingenuity and ability of its own citizens.⁵⁵

The changes recommended by the Reappraisal Committee hastened the decline and eventual failure of the Merville settlement and development area. Dejected and disillusioned by what they regarded as their open abandonment by the government, many of the original settlers had sold their farms by 1929 and moved to the city. Others kept their holdings but found employment in logging camps and mines and on road improvement projects.

In June 1919, two months after the beginning of the Merville project, Oliver instructed the board to purchase from the Canyon City Lumber Company a second Development Area for the Camp Lister soldier settlement (figure 1) (table 3). It was a partially logged off area located southeast of the town of Creston, Kootenay District, and extended to the international boundary. Five thousand acres were taken over at once, "3,500 acres being purchased at \$30 per acre and 1,500 acres at \$35 per acre."⁵⁶ The latter tract included thirty acres of land sowed to alfalfa and clover, with some buildings and other improvements. The balance was to be taken over at a later date.

This tract of land was situated in the heart of a prosperous fruit growing and mixed farming area in the Creston Valley. The nearby town of Creston, with a population of 600, acted as the principal business and distribution point of the district. Since the town was located on the Crow's Nest branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway, produce from the valley could be placed on the prairie markets twenty-four hours sooner than that from any other fruit shipping district of British Columbia.

Before the Land Settlement Board purchased the property, two of its directors, C. R. Ward and W. H. Nelems, made an inspection of the area and stated that

⁵⁵ British Columbia, *Sessional Papers*, 1923, vol. 1, p. 27.

⁵⁶ *Victoria Daily Times*, 11 June 1919.

the Creston lands are the best . . . inspected in this section of the Province. Climatic advantages and marketing facilities are particularly good. The district has sufficient rainfall for fruit growing and agricultural purposes. On none of the lands is irrigation necessary.⁵⁷

Similarly, Hon. E. D. Barrow, Minister of Agriculture, also visited the area, and was favourably impressed.

After purchasing the site the board found that the area was actually located on a level bench about 400 feet above the Goat River, its surface broken by a few small gullies and knolls, while a steep mountainside rose to the east of the tract. The soil in the area contained a large percentage of clay and sand, and water would have to be obtained by wells ten to eighty feet in depth.⁵⁸

Despite these constraints on the possible development of an orchard industry, the board adopted almost the same policy to establish Camp Lister as had been followed in Merville. The area was surveyed into four units, with work camps established for clearing operations. The only change in procedures related to the pay-roll system. Although most of the veterans chosen to work in clearing the land were placed on the pay-roll system, some were offered individual contracts.

After the initial clearing of the units the land was subdivided to meet the requirements of orchard farming. Each area was surveyed on a north-south grid pattern with a community townsite in the middle. Wherever possible, the land south of the community townsite was divided into "20 acre fruit farms with a half section dividing into 16 units with 4 lots facing each way of the compass."⁵⁹ North of the townsite half sections were subdivided into ten-acre farms.

In 1920, 70 settlers were engaged in clearing five-acre plots on the ninety lots of twenty acres each in the first surveyed unit of approximately 2,000 acres. By the end of the year the soldiers had cleared 285 acres, partially cleared 38 acres, completed the construction of 18 permanent farm houses and were engaged in constructing an additional 15 homes. In the following year an additional 265 acres were cleared, 31 houses constructed, 50 miles of fencing completed and 14 miles of roads cleared and graded. By the end of 1921, 365 acres had been ploughed in the settlement and 28 of the five-acre plots had been planted in apple trees.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ British Columbia, *Land Settlement Board Interim Report*, March 1921, p. 30.

⁵⁹ PABC, *Lister*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Also see British Columbia, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly*, 21 March 1921.

During this time the townsite had developed to include a general store which operated under a co-operative plan, a post office and a school, which also functioned as community hall. As in Merville, there was a spirit of social harmony in the community. A veteran settler recalled:

As in all pioneer centres, community activities revolve around the school and it was not long before a Community Society was in operation conducting dances, card parties, theatricals and other various functions. Many jolly nights have been seen in the old school house, when it would seem that it would almost burst at the seams with the crowds which used to attend. One outstanding entertainment was the putting on of a three-act play, 'Tony the Convict' and which was repeated in the Grant Theatre in Creston.⁶¹

Despite the optimism of the settlers and the progress made in the development of the settlement during 1921, relations between the soldiers and the board were strained because the workings of the pay-roll system in the clearing phase were not adequate to sustain the soldier settler and his family. The soldier found himself sinking deeper in debt, as his \$4 per day payment was not sufficient to handle the rising costs of commodities.

In addition, the financial returns from their orchards did not help many of the settlers, because only a few of the orchards produced quality fruit. These orchards were planted on the well-drained hillsides, whereas most of the fruit trees were planted on unfit soil. The settlers' problems were compounded in 1921 and 1922 when the area suffered a drought which dried up their wells. Confronted with these problems, some of the settlers ignored their farms and found work in mines and mills in the United States, and development work ceased. Others attempted to switch to livestock and the growing of alfalfa but found that their twenty-acre allotments were inadequate to sustain this type of farming. Others simply abandoned their farms.

By the spring of 1926 many settlers were no longer able to keep up payments on their farms. On 1 February 1926 the arrears of payment amounted to \$4,508.93.⁶² In the face of mounting public consternation over the government's neglect of the settlers and the growing debt they had incurred, Premier Oliver visited the area and met with the settlers. After the meeting Oliver ordered that the prices of the farms be cut in half under a new agreement. "While this gave new heart to the people to carry on, the major problem of irrigation still remained unsolved."⁶³

⁶¹ PABC, *Lister*.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

In order to examine the feasibility of installing irrigation facilities in Camp Lister and adjoining areas Oliver established a committee to report on economic conditions in the area. This report contained a number of examples of the harsh conditions experienced by the settlers which were attributed to the inadequate water supply:

R. M. Grogan a fruit farmer in the Camp Lister area, complained that the amount of water available is insufficient to grow a cover crop, which in his opinion is essential. He set forth the prices for his product from his trees from the year 1919 to and inclusive of 1926, which showed a gradual reduction from \$1.63 at the packing house in 1920 to 39-3/4 cents in 1926. . . . He places his cash outlay per box of fruit at 56-1/2 cents whereas his average returns for this period were only 48-1/5 cents. He believes that the rates in effect in the district are reasonable, providing there is an ample supply of water and a reasonable price for the product.⁶⁴

The Premier reacted favourably to the committee's report and ordered the installation of an irrigation facility at a cost of \$50,000. The project was completed by the fall of 1929 but had arrived too late, as only twenty-one soldier settlers remained in the Camp Lister Settlement.

Apart from Merville and Camp Lister two other Development Areas were acquired by the board for soldier settlement: 1,193 acres near Fernie in the Kootenay District and 440 acres near Kelowna in the Okanagan Valley (figure 1). During the early part of 1920 development work in both areas ceased. After investing \$34,829.22, the board realized that it would be too expensive to develop the Fernie area. Similarly in Kelowna, after \$57,736.45 had been invested, it was realized that the property required an irrigation system before it would be fit for soldier settlement (table 3).

Conclusion

In his efforts to place returned soldiers on the land Premier John Oliver of British Columbia was successful in influencing the establishment of a national policy by the federal government and a British Columbia settlement program for returned soldiers. In 1918, when Oliver became Premier, he realized that his "most pressing need was to discover a means to absorb the returning soldiers into peace-time occupations without at the same time displacing the regular labour force."⁶⁵ The

⁶⁴ British Columbia, Report of the Commission on Economic Conditions in Certain Irrigation Districts, 1928.

⁶⁵ Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History*, p. 405.

Federal Soldier Settlement Act had been passed, but Oliver felt that it was incomplete. With the work of the British Columbia Returned Soldiers' Aid Commission to draw upon and his own personal belief⁶⁶ that the returned soldiers would make a positive contribution to society if they were placed on the land, he was able to influence the federal government to amend the act so that the veterans could secure as much help as possible on their return to civilian life. In British Columbia John Oliver established the Soldiers' Land Act in 1918, and with the Land Settlement and Development Act of 1917 already in existence, he was in a position to use the acts to seek a solution to the returned soldier problem while at the same time contribute to the development of the province. However, the decisions made by Oliver and the Land Settlement Board in implementing the Land Settlement and Development Act contributed to the failure of soldier settlement in British Columbia.

One crucial decision made by Oliver and the board that led to the failure of soldier settlement in the province was the choice of sites. Individual members of the board, such as C. R. Ward and M. H. Nelems, visited certain Development Areas, including Merville and Camp Lister, and recommended to Oliver that these would be ideal sites to purchase. Their assessment was made on the basis that mixed farming was being carried on in the Comox Valley and orchard farming in the Creston Valley. In both areas the board felt that the farmers were successful, and consequently they assumed that the returned soldiers would become successful farmers if they settled in these two areas. Oliver made the decision to purchase the sites on the board's recommendation, which was based on a visit to the area. Prior scientific studies to determine the agricultural potential of the sites were never undertaken or commissioned by Oliver and the board before they made their decisions to purchase the Development Areas. They took account of the agricultural potential of the sites only after they were purchased.

Another critical decision made by Oliver and the board that proved to be incorrect related to the question of accessibility. For example, Oliver and the board attempted to attract settlers to the Settlement Areas in the Nechako Valley, but in doing so did not take into account the lack of markets in the area and the transportation costs that would confront the settlers once they established farms. Furthermore, in making the decision to establish the Settlement Areas they assumed that the majority of the settlers would be returned soldiers rather than other settlers. They

⁶⁶ See James Morton, *Honest John Oliver* (Toronto, 1933).

did not consider the fact that individual soldiers returning from the Great War might not want to take their families to a remote and relatively unpopulated part of the province to start a new life.

Oliver viewed his plan for co-operative community soldier settlements as a joint decision-making venture between the government and the soldiers. However, the board, with Oliver's approval, had the final decision-making power. For example, in 1920 and 1922 the board made the decision, without consulting the soldiers, to drop the pay-roll system for a new progressive-loan system of land clearing in Merville and Camp Lister respectively. The result of this decision left the soldiers without sufficient funds to support themselves, and in many cases they had reached a position of insolvency where they found it impossible to pay off their loans from the products of their land. Oliver had a mechanism in his co-operative plan whereby a soldiers' committee was established in each Development Area to confer with representatives of the board if any problem of this type should arise in the settlement. Oliver could have used this committee to obtain the views of the soldiers on this matter before he actually made his decision.

In summary, while Oliver and the board had good intentions for the placement of returned soldiers on the land so that they could become active participants in the development of British Columbia, their careless decisions contributed to the decline of soldier settlements in the province.