

Introduction

The three essays in this issue of *BC Studies*, all written by historical geographers, deal with aspects of the contact process in nineteenth century British Columbia. Two questions are immediately raised: why is the contact process interesting, and do geographers have anything distinctive to say about it?

Few today would accept the early ethnographers' assumption that there are traditional and modern worlds with little of interest between. Societies move, especially in interrelation; there are not fixed points of reference. Nor, whatever the courts decide about title, were native societies simply pushed aside. There was resistance and, for both natives and non-natives, there was cultural change. The contact process is not a short, one-way street but a complex interaction that, in a sense, continues to our day. It is an aspect, in non-European settings, of the larger processes of colonialism and modernity which, here, have been recent, rapid, and relatively well recorded. Moreover, the location of different peoples and different activities in different parts of British Columbia where immigrants were surrounded more by wilderness than the past has tended to disaggregate the problems of analysing social change. I think the ethnographers were right to assume that British Columbia offers an intriguing vantage point on the modern world. Had they given more attention to the societies around them and less to the search for "uncontaminated" traditional ways, they would have run squarely into the contact process and its ramifications, that is, into issues bearing on colonialism and the nature and special powers of modernity. It is hard to imagine a more important line of enquiry.

Strident disciplinary claims are not needed, especially in these increasingly ecumenical times. But people do write out of somewhat different intellectual traditions that, as long as they are outward-looking, enrich the whole scholarly undertaking. The intellectual tradition represented by these essays tends to seek a synthesis of people and place or, put more abstractly, of society and space. It operates at a variety of scales, some very local. It tends to assume that societies make sense contextually, that they

are bound up with the settings they shape and, in turn, are shaped by. Geographers insist on this reciprocal relationship: neither society nor space is an independent variable. Most historical geographers turn to the archives, and go to the field less for ethnographic investigations than, loosely, to get to know the region they are studying. An increasing number are interested in social theory and textual criticism, the former because it addresses many general questions about modernity and explores the society-space relationship, the latter because it is relevant both to the analysis of texts and to their own writing. So practised, historical geography interacts with history, historical sociology, anthropology and literary criticism without quite being any of these fields.

Such, briefly, is the broad, somewhat interdisciplinary yet, overall, quite distinctive perspective that underlies these essays on the contact process and the larger geographical engagement with early British Columbia. From my vantage point, there seems room for it.

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