

## EDITORIAL AT THE END OF A CENTURY

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**T**HE YEAR 2000 MARKS THE END OF A MILLENNIUM that does not fit British Columbia. The long, complex history of this place cannot be so measured; the nearest known event occurred on the other side of the continent. A thousand years ago, more or less, Leif Eiriksson crossed what later became known as Davis Strait and overwintered at Leifsbudir. The century just ended is a much better fit. A hundred years ago a national census described the province, and there will be another such census next year. Between lies a visible century of remarkable change, and in this last issue of *BC Studies* in 1999 we offer some editorial reflection on it.

In 1900 only some 175,000 people lived in British Columbia, probably fewer than had inhabited the same space one hundred and fifty years earlier. With 30,000 people, Vancouver had just passed Victoria as the largest city in the province. Except in the dry belt, in the lower Fraser Valley, and within a few miles of Victoria on Vancouver Island, there were virtually no roads anywhere, not even in the Kootenays, economically the liveliest corner of the interior after some ten years of hard-rock mining excitement. Elsewhere in the interior, the range cattle industry was established in the dry belt, and orcharding was beginning in the Okanagan. Gold-rush excitement had shifted to the Klondike, leaving a few hydraulic and dredging operations behind in the Cariboo. On the coast, fishing had extended seaward from the main salmon rivers, and canneries operated seasonally at many points. Logging had spread around much of the Strait of Georgia but could not move far inland. Donkey engines and logging railways were just beginning to enter these forests.

The population was predominantly British, particularly the wealthy and powerful. Many immigrants had come from eastern Canada,

many others directly from Britain, particularly from England – unlike the predominantly Scottish and Irish migrations to the Maritimes and Ontario. Considering the proximity of most settlements to the United States and the momentum of adjacent American resource economies, the percentage of American-born in the population (10 percent) was remarkably low. Different parallel streams of east-west migration were resettling British Columbia and Washington state. Much smaller numbers had come in the opposite direction: Chinese entering British Columbia in numbers with the Fraser River gold rush of 1858 and recruited some twenty years later to build a railway; and Japanese, here from the early 1890s, primarily as fishers. Such people faced the pejorative stereotypes and racialized boundaries drawn by a predominantly White society, and lived somewhat apart – their labour useful but their presence unwelcome – at the margin of White society. Then there were the peoples who had always been here but who, after more than a century of disease and depopulation, were only some 15 percent of the population in 1900. Legally wards of the dominion and dispossessed of most of their lands and fisheries, they were even more thoroughly marginalized, their labour often needed (less so as the immigrant population grew) yet their future assumed to disappear as they were assimilated or died out. Most of them lived on tiny reserves scattered across the province, considerably less than 1 percent of provincial land.

The expatriate British society that dominated British Columbia in 1900 drew tight boundaries around itself and sought to reproduce British ways by fending off otherness as it could, and to create a dynamic, prosperous economy by transforming what it took to be wilderness into resources and connecting them to outside markets. The rhetoric of development, progress, and local boosterism was much in the air. This was an immigrant society. Most non-Natives had not been born here. Two thirds of the non-Native adults were men, many of them drawn by the male employments in the resource industries. Compared to the British Isles or even to eastern North American cities, there was little paid work for women. Some 500 women were teachers, a comparable number nurses, and a few were stenographers or secretaries. Most of the rest worked, but not for pay. Society was inflected male, just as it was inflected British and White. Approximately 47,000 British Columbians voted in the provincial election of 1900, none of them female, Asian, or Aboriginal.

This British Columbia of one hundred years ago is wide open to different interpretations. Was it, for example, a heroic beginning that laid a foundation for provincial progress and civil virtue? Or was it, rather, a narrow, defensive colonial society, strewn with exclusions, its majority struggling to be British on a different ocean on the other side of the world? Whatever it was, it was not much like British Columbia today.

Now more than four million British Columbians live in a place that is mapped, photographed, and classified in ways that were only beginning a hundred years ago. A hollow political shell has been filled in with information and management strategies as well as people. Regional balances have changed. The Kootenays are relatively less dynamic than they were, the Okanagan is more so. The Lower Mainland and southeastern Vancouver Island, which, in 1900, contained about half the provincial population, now hold some three quarters of it. Vancouver has become a city of the Pacific Rim, much less tied than it was to a provincial resource hinterland. The old, dominating resource industries are all threatened – by resource depletion, alternative use claims, industrial restructuring, and international competition. High technology and service economies grow in their stead. The composition of the population has drastically changed. Only some 4 percent are now Aboriginal people (a rapidly growing percentage). The numerical dominance of people of British stock is gone, a consequence of increased immigration from Continental Europe from the early years of the century and then, with the introduction of colour-blind immigration policies in the 1960s, of far more arrivals from Asia. Recent immigrants learn English, adapt to laws and institutions derived from Britain, and watch American television within a society in which they themselves comprise much of the cultural momentum. This is a different British Columbia.

Among the myriad comparisons that could be made across a century of change, we highlight four: the construction of roads, the failure to assimilate “Indians,” the creation of a respectable polyethnicity, and the incorporation of women.

There are millions of miles of roads in British Columbia now, most of them logging roads. The essential twentieth century machine in British Columbia may not be the steam locomotive, or even the automobile, but the bulldozer. It, more than anything else (except, in the north, the bush plane), has opened up British Columbia. As a result,

the international economy reaches into places that, a century ago, it could not begin to approach; nature is increasingly commodified; landscapes are transformed; and hunters and hikers enter places that, not long ago, they would never have reached. Such access, suddenly achieved, has been exploited and underregulated. It has yielded profits, wages, damaged land, and ephemeral communities. Increasingly towards the end of the century, it has run into alternative visions that are less about progress and development than about preservation and continuity. Native land claims, abstract and hardly urgent when lands could not be reached, are focused by bulldozers and logging trucks.

It seems to us that the province has not quite caught up with the implication of the bulldozer's road-building ability. It has opened up a bonanza which an immigrant society happily accepted without much thought about the long-term implications, whether ecological or social. We are not far from the model, far older than the 20th century, of the seasonal work camp lasting as long as the resources it exploits. Such a model is not inevitable, but is, rather, a corollary of a particular political economy. Moreover, for all the changes recently wrought, British Columbians are still custodians of middle latitude landscapes that are among the least transformed by human agency anywhere in the world. We think models are more likely to change and responsibilities to be better met if the bulldozer loses much of its dominance. There will be, we hope, other ways of moving logs, more reasons for cutting fewer trees, and more diversified local economies.

After more than 100 years, it is now possible to assess the politics of Native assimilation. They have failed, even though the drive to extirpate Native cultures extended across a broad, relentless front. Deliberately small reserves pushed Native people into the workforce, there to become "civilized"; missionaries and Indian agents promoted sedentary, agricultural lives dominated by Christian teachings; and residential schools sealed children away from parents, language, and Native customs. This cultural battering transformed Native societies even more rapidly and drastically than the sudden convergence of different cultures of unequal power was bound to do. In this light it is particularly remarkable that Native identities have survived so strongly. The goal of most Native people in British Columbia is not to be assimilated into the larger society. The past, they know, is unrecoverable, and Native people, like others in contemporary society, variously construct, understand, and debate their identities. Few however doubt that they are, or that they want to be, Native.

This, we think, has important implications. British Columbians are living with the results of a failed politics of assimilation: high unemployment rates in Native communities, poverty and other social pathologies, rapid rural to urban migration. To put it bluntly, Native people have not had sufficient access to resources to enable them to live in their own communities in some comfort and dignity. Yet, for all their problems, Native communities have survived, and show every sign of continuing into the foreseeable future. And so British Columbians have a choice: to continue the politics of assimilation (probably with no more success than in the past and accompanied by escalating protest, violence, and repression), or to respect the right of Native people to be different and provide for it. The latter entails increased access to resources close to the communities where Native people live. This will be expensive, but perhaps immigrant British Columbians – that is the 96 percent of us – need remember that we have lived for a considerable time off the bounty of land taken from Native people. Our responsibilities to those who were here, governing themselves, before an outside state was superimposed on them, are different from our responsibilities to immigrants coming voluntarily to a new country. At this point the Native question intersects the Quebec question, both of which are at the heart of Canada, a country built out of such differences and unable to live peacefully with itself without recognizing and supporting them.

Except for Native people, the polyglot, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial society that now comprises British Columbia is made up of immigrants. Immigration has assembled people and ways of life that, previously, were geographically separated, and it was precisely this collapse of geographical isolation that threatened so many settlers. Hence their many attempts to keep people out or at bay, to draw racial boundaries, and to establish a White and British society. It would be a losing battle. Cultures cannot be so fixed, especially in an immigrant society, but people tried and the intensity of their hostility to others, particularly to Asians, is some measure of how much has changed. We are not naive. There is still much racism here, yet, when seen in relation to the British Columbia of a hundred years ago, a remarkably open, tolerant society has emerged in this province. An extraordinary social experiment is underway, particularly in greater Vancouver, and from our vantage point the results are encouraging. Having escaped the cocoon of retrospective, expatriate Britishness, Vancouver is a more interesting and welcoming city than ever before.

Recent immigrants shed some old ways, adopt some new ones, learn more or less English, and become active participants in the evolution of an exceedingly dynamic society.

And women, far less constrained than formerly, have entered all aspects of British Columbian life. A hundred years ago the women's movement, as such, was small, White, and middle class. Now it is exceedingly widely based. More women than men attend our universities. The strongest remaining male bastions are boardrooms and the trades: women are still a small part of business leadership and have not broken down the image of a man and his tools. But again, considering the overwhelmingly male cast of British Columbia a century ago and the relative invisibility of so many of its women, the change is remarkable.

In his poem "Pacific Door," Earle Birney pointed out that "there is no clear Strait of Anian/ to lead us easy back to Europe." He was right. This is a different place, a different society. A hundred years ago British Columbians struggled to reproduce what they could not. Now we live more comfortably with a new creation that has its own serious problems, but also its excitements and grounds for satisfaction. In the language of another day perhaps, a great many British Columbians have much to be thankful for, and we also think, as the province slides into another century, some matters to keep in mind: the charge of a precious physical land, the redress of a lop-sided colonial account, the respect due our great variety of peoples and lifeways. It is somehow in this mix, if we can manage to work it out, that the particular opportunity of a new century in this remarkable place would seem to lie.

*The editors*