

SEEING BRITISH COLUMBIA

JEAN BARMAN

THE *BC STUDIES* FIELD TRIP to the southern Interior provides a forceful reminder of the complex relationship that exists in British Columbia between the whole and its parts. To understand this province, we need to stand on its head the old adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is to the parts that we must look.

The whole that we know as British Columbia is a political entity emerging out of the fur trade of the first half of the nineteenth century and the gold rush, beginning in 1858. Both had strong external links, the first to British colonization, the second to American expansionism. These two somewhat haphazard events caused a particular piece of land to become a British possession, then a province of the new nation of Canada.

The parts that make up British Columbia are quite a different matter. The province's difficult geography virtually determined that the parts, sometimes virtually inaccessible to each other, would develop distinct characters. They have cohered differently, in some cases, then fragmented through particular combinations of spatial, economic, and human circumstances.

Rather than seeing British Columbia in terms of parts, it is the whole that mostly engages us. Part of this neglect is understandable. The political entities that are the province and the nation absorb our time and energy, and principally regulate us politically, financially, and socially. It is the whole that is most often evoked in print or other media. We take the whole as our reference point, sometimes so much so that we forget that the parts exist at all. Those of us who live in urban settings are the most neglectful. Our smugness in being Vancouverites or Victorians causes us to conflate our part with the whole. Confident

in our demographic superiority with over two-thirds of the province's population living in our midst, we fail to realize we are only one part of the whole. We equate ourselves with British Columbia.

The parts that comprise British Columbia want their own viewing. By seeing the parts, we come to a much better understanding of the whole. The seeing may be literal, and tourism is in this case no bad thing, or it may come through everyday sensitivity to the parts made visible through events occurring in their midst. Particularly for those of us confined to the demographic bulge of the province's southwestern corner, we have to look intently in order to see British Columbia as more than a reflection of ourselves.

The distinctive characters of British Columbia's parts were forcefully revealed on the *BC Studies* field trip through the southern Interior. With 12 per cent of the province's population, the southern Interior is made up of several parts. The two of these that have long intrigued me as a historian are the Nicola and Okanagan Valleys. The human histories of the two valleys began similarly, then diverged. Home to Aboriginal peoples who made strategic use of their setting and its resources, the valleys were intruded upon by newcomers from the early nineteenth century. Although no major fur-trade posts were established there, both valleys served as transit routes for trade goods and furs. From 1860 it was possible for British subjects, or anyone else swearing allegiance to the Queen, to take up 160 acres of land before it was officially surveyed, and it was retired fur traders and "played out" gold miners who gave the Nicola and Okanagan Valleys their first newcomer settlers. There were, as well, missionaries come to "Christianize and civilize" Aboriginal peoples. Early preemptions around the Oblate order's Okanagan Mission, sited on Okanagan Lake near present-day Kelowna, were mostly by former fur-trade employees recruited from Quebec. Their holdings were unassuming, particularly as compared to those of young Englishmen who got their start as colonial officials.

The nature of the fur trade and gold rush ensured that most newcomers would be men. In settling down, many of them found wives from among local Aboriginal women, which meant that their families became much more integrated into their settings than would otherwise have been the case. This circumstance rebounded to these families' disadvantage when, as more newcomers arrived with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the mid-1880s, racial attitudes hardened towards Aboriginal people. Newcomer settlement around the colonized world was premised on the superiority of pale

skin tones over the darker hues of the indigenous peoples whose lands were being usurped. The resulting economic gains were used to justify differential treatment based on physical appearance. Newcomers perceived Aboriginal peoples' conversion to Christianity as the only way for them to overcome, if only a little, their supposed inferiority.

Hybrid families were sidelined. Wives were ridiculed as "squaws," children denigrated as "half-breeds." Offsprings' occupation of an in-between, or liminal, space made them particularly suspect as newcomers, and Aboriginal people drew apart. Men coped differently. Those with pretensions, like many of the Englishmen who had established large ranches in the Okanagan Valley, abandoned their Aboriginal wives for newcomer women. Susan Allison, whose memoir has been published under the title *A Pioneer Gentlewoman*, was among the many young brides who discovered, on arriving at their new home, a first family as perplexed as was she by the other's presence. Other men held on. They were increasingly pushed to the margins, if not in their own generation then in that of their children. The continuing sexual imbalance among newcomers meant that many hybrid daughters "married White," to use descendants' terminology, and so squeezed into the edges of the emerging dominant society. Newcomer families' fear of the young male hybrid as threatening the sexual purity of their daughters turned many sons to Aboriginal women, as had their fathers. Other hybrid offspring intermarried.

The population surge following the transcontinental railroad and the federal immigration campaign of the early twentieth century affected the Okanagan and Nicola Valleys differently. The scarcity of arable land, less than 3 per cent overall in British Columbia, led newcomers to covet the farms and ranches of their predecessors. Most of the first generation were bought out, pushing descendants even further to the edge. Yet, apart from a mining flurry bringing the town of Merritt into being, the Nicola Valley remained a fairly modest place, whereas the Okanagan Valley was transformed into a kind of fruit-growing heaven on earth. Canadian governor general Lord Aberdeen initiated the shift on his Coldstream ranch located near the northern Okanagan town of Vernon. Irrigated, subdivided farms of earlier settlers were boomed across Britain at a time when many younger sons of the middle and upper-middle class were at a loss for a genteel occupation. As they settled into family life, the necessary add-ons arrived, including private schools like those they had themselves attended in Britain. Their sons were sent, to quote the Reverend Austin Mackie (in charge of the Vernon Preparatory

School), “to mix with other boys of your age & station in life” in order to become “a gentleman.” Other prospective fruit growers, arrived from within Canada, were generally more modest in their social aspirations. By the time of the First World War the two parts of British Columbia we know as the Okanagan and Nicola Valleys, respectively, had developed quite separate senses of self.

So it was, almost a century later, that the *BC Studies* field trip encountered the Southern Interior. Our glimpses of the Nicola and Okanagan Valleys linked past and present.

The Nicola Valley remains a modest place. Among the few visual exceptions is the copper-covered cupola of Merritt’s Coldwater Hotel, dating from 1908 and reminiscent of the valley’s short-lived mining boom. Following a comfortable lunch there, we are taken in hand by my UBC departmental colleague Shirley Sterling, her brother Austin Sterling, and cousin Tim Voght. They take us to a sweat lodge along the Coldwater River, then to tea hosted by other family members on the Joyaska reserve. Shirley’s family members takes pride in their descent from local Nlaka’pamux chiefs, also from William Voght, a gold miner who preempted the site of the future Merritt in 1873, and his Aboriginal wife Clama. Although the couple were legally married in an Anglican ceremony, their children were increasingly set



Tim Voght and Austin Sterling.

apart. In 1888 local teacher Jessie McQueen explained how, even though “Tena Voght is a half breed ... she is clever & pleasant, and just like white folk.” The Voght’s three daughters – Christina, Sophie, and Matilda – all married White, whereas William Jr. (from whom Shirley descends) and his brother Tim turned to Nlaka’pamux women. So far as Shirley and her family are concerned, it is not a matter of identifying as Aboriginal or newcomer but, rather, as something of both.

Our overnight stop introduces us to another gold miner who settled down in the Nicola Valley. Joseph Guichon from the Savoy region of France preempted land in the Nicola Valley in 1873. Together with



Tim Voght at the sweat lodge at Coldwater River.

his newcomer wife (got from Victoria), the enterprising Guichon built up a large stock ranch. Shortly after the turn of the century, he built the elegant Quilchena Hotel, at which we stay. At the hotel's inauguration on 3 July 1908, according to one report: "The ball opened about ten o'clock and the dancing kept merrily up until one o'clock when a sumptuous repast claimed the attention of the numerous guests. Dancing was continued until about 5 a.m., when ... the guests left for their homes." As to why a hotel in the middle of ranch land, one story has Guichon gambling on a new rail line set to run from Vancouver to the Kootenays passing by his ranch, another that he only wanted to provide a stopping place for travellers by road between Kamloops and various Nicola Valley locations. There was no rail line, the automobile reduced the need for overnight stops, and prohibition deprived the hotel of its principal source of revenue. The hotel closed down in 1921. One of Guichon's sons moved in with his family, but in 1958 an enterprising grandson, Guy Rose, reopened the hotel where it now presides over a 30,000-acre working ranch that runs 3,000 head of cattle.

The initiative and hard work of men like Voght and Guichon is lost from view as we cross into the Okanagan Valley. We bypass Kelowna, whose big-city glitz eclipses not only Merritt but also its humble origins as Okanagan Mission, which survives as a heritage park. Heading to the Coldstream district along Kalamalka Lake, we drive through subdivisions of newish homes on our way to Lake House. Now a heritage site, it was one of the substantial residences erected by Britishers come to grow apples or, rather, to watch them

grow as they played tennis or otherwise recreated in the heady years before the First World War. Many of them departed to fight for “God and Country.” Those who remained or returned soon discovered it cost more to grow fruit than to sell it. “A penny a pound or on the ground” became a rallying cry that stirred some hearts but did little to turn things around. With changing times Lake House was acquired by the family that ran the local private school, educating their sons and, increasingly, also Vancouver’s wealthy elite into British pretensions. Again, past and present come full circle. Among our group is Richard Mackie, the great nephew of the family that owned the Vernon Preparatory School, who takes us around Lake House and also to the site of the long-closed school. Not surprisingly, one of the earliest and certainly the most prestigious of the local historical societies formed in British Columbia to draw attention to the parts is in the Okanagan Valley. It is only appropriate that we are invited to tea by a dedicated member before being on our way.

The *BC Studies* field trip only glimpsed two parts of British Columbia that, rubbing up against each other, became different historically and continue to be so into the present day. The Nicola Valley remains an everyday place, at least to some extent able to accommodate difference. Both the Voght-Sterling and Guichon-Rose clans continue to take pride in their heritage even as they respond to change. The Okanagan Valley, in particular the Coldstream district, has largely archived its past. *Okanagan History*, the annual publication of the Okanagan Historical Society, gives a reminder of an older, colonial way of life, two strands of which are echoed at Lake House and Okanagan Mission. There are also hints of continuity, the gloss of Kelowna reminiscent of the Aberdeens’ and others’ efforts to reform this part of British Columbia. We each see British Columbia’s parts differently and have different opportunities to do so, the important point being to keep our eyes open so as not to take them for granted.

Few of us have a history that comprises only the whole that is British Columbia, however much it might sometimes appear, particularly to those of us living in the province’s southwestern corner. It is in the parts, much more than in the whole, that this place called British Columbia acquires its sense of self. It is in the parts much more than in the whole that the past marks the present and that the present finds meaning in, and alternatively fragments, the past. To see British Columbia, and ourselves in British Columbia, it is to the parts we must look. The sum of the parts is far greater than the whole.