

TOURING WITH TROUNCER: *Community, Adaptation, and Identity.*

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*Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness,
but by the style in which they are imagined.*

Benedict Anderson

IF REGINALD JOHN TROUNCER BINDLEY had not been killed by a falling tree on the Coldstream ranch, would he have become a British Columbian? Would he have made this place his home? And if he did, how would he have built a community here and, in the process, constructed himself anew?

Our tour of British Columbia, it seemed to me, became about adaptation and community, about coming to terms with place and circumstances, balancing old habits with present exigencies, and rooting oneself in a new environment. Trouncer symbolized both the epitome of failure and the long-standing impact of even ill-fated newcomers to the Pacific Slope. Yes, Trouncer was killed by a falling tree as he cleared land (unaccustomed to such work as a younger son of gentry?). But even his failure transformed that tiny plot of land irrevocably. His burial, the first in the Coldstream cemetery, made that place a space for remembrance, removed from either subsistence or leisure. And in colonial circumstances, such cemeteries are highly-charged



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zones of conquest, as the bones of the dead laid to rest in 'foreign' soil lay claim not just to the geography but to the history of the place, positioning a colonial chronology over a much longer indigenous past. Trouncer's bones speak of new identities, transplanted communities, immigrant sensibilities. At least they did to me.

So let us imagine for a moment that Trouncer joined us on our *BC Studies* tour. Sharing his insights, he would have told us about the various tensions within immigrant lives that creatively produce community and identity. And he would have done so with particular attention to place. For as we traveled through the Coldstream and the Slocan, we discovered settings and characters suggesting two very different modes of reconciliation with this place we call British Columbia. The Coldstream we visited was a community that created its view of British Columbia through the lens of nostalgia, indeed at Lake House, through the leaded panes of Arts and Crafts fenestration. Trouncer's community was one of fox hunts and preparatory schools, of orchards grown in a dry belt on borrowed water.

The Slocan, however, seemed a different place. Across the Monashees, no amount of pastoral longing could stifle this irascible landscape. Here community formed by working within the land, whether literally in mining, or figuratively within what was possible in a rugged, tree-covered place. The Slocan, as we saw it, was much more a place of variety, of piecing together a livelihood, of transience, but, in the midst of that, of enduring ties of generosity. Two very different worlds, two very different British Columbias, and these, Trouncer reminded us, were small samples of what was possible in this western cordillera.

Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere.

Annie Proulx

By the time Trouncer joined us on the trip, we had already reminded ourselves that the places we visited had First Nations' histories as well. Earlier in the trip we encountered reserve allocations, cut-offs, and commonage agreements. Once on the Douglas Lake ranch, a half-million acre enterprise formerly owned by Chunky Woodward, we shifted from Native to newcomer worlds. From our vantage point as scholarly nomads, that change was visible mainly through icons.

Where rodeo cowboys and respected elders were celebrated in images on the walls of the Nicola Valley band office, on the Douglas Lake Ranch out attention turned to fox hunts and to ranch buildings that represented social hierarchies of class, status, race and gender. We were beginning to enter Trouncer's world, but he was not the only ghost along on the trip. The absent presence of First Nations remained with us, even as our attention was drawn to the transfigured landscapes and the imagined communities of the newcomers.

Reaching the Coldstream valley, we seemed to enter a world composed exclusively of immigrants. The transformations to the land were obvious whether typified by irrigation flumes, well-established orchards, strip malls and subdivisions, or the dozen or so bottles of VQA Okanagan wine we drank that evening. But Lake House was, for me, the best example of the modes of adaptation characteristic of the region. Situated on the shores of Kalemalka Lake, this beautiful Arts and Crafts home seemed somehow uncomfortable in its locale and, introverted, called us away from its grounds to the interior. Inside, our perusal of its contents highlighted fetishized elements of Britishness: the Jane Austen teapot, the glassed case of prized jewelry, family portraits of men with mutton-chop sideburns and women, corseted, looking diffidently into space. The house, now a heritage trust, encouraged a sense of voyeurism, of peeking into another world, a private one that was on display. It was as though, having once cultivated exterior respectability, Lake House sought to prove those claims today by encouraging a closer look into boudoirs and closets. But such examinations only enhanced the claustrophobic hothouse feel of the place, the sense that Lake House is a remarkable monument to longing, an exotic transplant weathering the shock of life in a foreign locale.

It is tempting to see this exhibitionism as a curious inversion of the more common colonial practice of turning the indigenous inhabitants into objects of display. But what we find in the Coldstream of Lake House is a place denying every aspect of indigenous life. Indeed, in order for the residents of Lake House to find themselves in this valley, it had to be radically altered, first by the removal of First Nations and then by a massive rearrangement of nature bringing lake water to parched benchlands. Irrigation turned bunchgrass to orchards and by 1908, just a year before Lake House was built, the million fruit trees in the Okanagan valley had increased the price of land to \$1000 an acre. Into this milieu came a 'lower-upper-middle

class' emigrants, younger sons and a few misfits, for whom England could provide no suitable life and to whom the empire offered promise and opportunity. This class, the marginally pecuniary, Trouncer informed us, was exceptionally insecure. Ruin was always in sight, just beyond the horizon of mismanagement where the cost of keeping up appearances exceeded an income won by respectable means. It was, perhaps, this insecurity that drove the English expatriates of the Coldstream into their frenzy of replication of all things British. Refusing to be Canadianized, they built institutions of class privilege, like preparatory schools and country clubs. They fostered their sense of ethnic superiority through ritual and leisure, distilling 'Englishness' to visual markers like flannel trousers, Elizabethan silver, oak paneling and polo. However modularized English culture had become by the period, such a wholesale transplantation of culture did not take. There is a heartbreaking quality to Lake House and the nearby Vernon Preparatory School that goes beyond the memorials to fallen sons, their photos draped with purple, ribboned medals. Trouncer was not the only tragedy of the Coldstream.

Yet it would be unfair to paint too stark a picture; there is no anachronistic space of cultural stasis, even in the Coldstream. If British Columbia is a place of interconnected human communities themselves interacting with the land, then the Coldstream gentry contributed to the making of British Columbia as well. At the summer cottage of the Vernon Preparatory School's headmasters, English lads escaping the Blitz chopped wood, identified flora, and listened to the loons on Sugar Lake. And in the generational transition from immigrant to 'native,' new identities were nurtured even here in the Coldstream. The 'Britishness' of the Coldstream was, itself, a product of the desegregation of English culture brought about by imperialism. Parts of that whole combined with myriad other forces to produce a sense of being a British Columbian. Trouncer may not have witnessed such a reaggregation but near him in the cemetery, buried over a century later, lies Margaret Ormsby. Eulogized by some as a 'true British Columbian,' Ormsby represented, and, indeed, did much to facilitate, the production of a distinctive British Columbian identity. In her writing and teaching she instilled a sense of British Columbia as a place that was a "world in itself" but one that, from her vantage point in 1958, was still a very 'British' British Columbia. Trouncer would have understood that contradiction.

To adapt oneself to the contents of the paintbox is more important than nature and its study.

Paul Klee

In the Slocan, transplanting was a more risky venture. Fruit trees refused to produce, cougars ate the sheep, and the relations between capital and labour in this mining district allowed limited social space for an exclusionist gentry. Still, the remainders of imported cultures were everywhere, nowhere more than with the Sinixt people whose deaths from epidemics bereaved the land. The presence of that Edwardian generation of emigrants pervades the place from the irises of the concentrating mill manager's garden, peering up from a grassy slope high above the mill, ("landscapes full of alien species") to the fading respectability of New Denver. How different, after all, were Jack and Daisy Phillips of Windermere to the east, dressing for dinner and maintaining English habits, from Trouncer and his friends in the Coldstream? Not much really, but the Slocan we visited, while still largely English, also revealed a population who, unlike the Phillipses, adapted to this place and, within the limitations of climate and terrain, persisted. They did so, not by making over the land in their own image but rather, by trial and error, crafting a home from the resources of the new environment.

Few workers could afford to make the mistakes associated with a 'trial and error' existence. These men whose cabins clung to the slopes of Idaho peak were themselves swept away by the diminished demands of the world market and the closing of the mines. For them too, reskilling to suit changing labour needs was an adaptive strategy for survival, as was moving on to the next place of employment and opportunity. But we saw little of working class Slocan. So much of their environment has passed away through disuse, fire or simply because as transient workers who did not own property they did not modify the landscape in unique and identifiable ways. What remains of the mining infrastructure, the economic mainstay of the Slocan, is what is left of the major capital investments required: grown-over train tracks, a concentrating mill reduced to splinters by years of heavy snow, a rusting cable cut loose from an aerial tramway.

But what of the community of Bosun ranch? This seemed to be a place where ideas were developed and tested, relationships nurtured patiently, social change generated from the coupling of English idealism and a location that demanded innovation. Just as the workers

who lived above them on Idaho Peak, the ranch residents were not immune to fortune's fluctuations. The ranch was, at various times, an orchard, a sheep ranch, a dairy farm, the site of a profitable mine, and a Japanese internment camp. Despite its many incarnations, all reactions to forces beyond the control of Slocan residents, there remained an air of casual privilege about the place. These were not people who, without work, were forced to move on. An English inheritance, perhaps, permitted experimentation and ensured survival for a while. But that same inheritance (both material and cultural) was not used, it seems, to re-enforce class and cultural boundaries or to insulate the Bosun ranch residents from the world around them. Rather, here 'Englishness' was filtered through a Fabian lens. And the privilege of class and the profits gleaned from others' labour were put to use to build community in ways that would benefit as many people as possible, as in the mine profits used to build a theatre and to put in a water works in New Denver, or the milk delivered to neighbours who lacked the money to pay for it. The residents at Bosun nurtured social relationships. Workers lingered over their jobs (it took so long to erect the old carriage shed I stayed in that it became known as the cathedral) and even a few of the Japanese men, who had not come to the ranch by choice, stayed on after the war to tend their gardens. In a place where the land prohibited long-term enterprises, relationships formed at Bosun ranch were sustained and sustaining. If there was longing here, it was not for the past but for a better future.

We cannot go back to our old homes, east of the mountains. In our hearts we never recross the border.

Bruce Hutchinson

So what if Trouncer had lived? What would he have told us, indeed experienced, about becoming a British Columbian? In the short time he lived here, he must have had a profound sense of the landscape, but I doubt he would have experienced it as destiny (despite his bosky catastrophe). In both the Okanagan and the Slocan we visited, fundamental environmental change occurred. And the nature of those changes determined, to a degree, the nature of the society that would emerge. As Daisy Phillips discovered in another Kootenay valley, the Slocan provided little scope for successful orcharding, whereas massive irrigation transformed the Okanagan into a fruit-growing

paradise. The relatively stable agrarian existence of the Okanagan allowed emigrants to achieve English lifestyles that would have eluded them at home. Through ritual, leisure, artifice, and architecture, Trouncer's generation sought a kind of refusal of the place they were in. Ultimately, the place would thwart them. However 'British' British Columbia was it was still a world away from Britain. And subsequent generations, raised to speak with a not-quite English accent, would work to build a new identity here.

The Slocan equally challenged its first generation of immigrants. But it was not the sequential attempts at subsistence that shaped this place most profoundly but rather the human relations it nurtured. It would be simplistic to think of the contrast between the Okanagan we saw at Lake House and the Slocan we visited at Bosun as simply a matter of politics. But the Fabian ideal of putting the profit of industry to work to flatten social hierarchies produced a different kind of community than that experienced at Lake House. But the local political geography of the Slocan frustrated the dreams of the earliest immigrants. Confrontation between labour and capital squeezed out the Fabian alternative and the candidate from Bosun received only a few votes when he ran in the 1909 election. Even Fabianism could not be transplanted wholly into the new environment.

In neither place was that first generation 'successful' in simplistic terms. Still they contributed enduring legacies of community, based on adaptation, and of identity, grown from a complex hybridization of conceptual practices formed in one place and transferred to another. The result is not fixed; and there is never a final product. Just as with our scholarship, we experience British Columbia simultaneously from outside, from the perspective of international writing, but also from deep within its mountain valleys. Just as those forces, both foreign and domestic, shift, so too does our view of this place. Expansive visions, big enough to glimpse a diverse landscape, emerge; survival, as it turns out, depends on it. Just ask Trouncer.



Jean Wilson, Mary-Ellen Kelm, Richard Mackie, and Bruce Braun.



A shelf in the cabin at Sugar Lake.