

TRACING THE FORTUNES OF FIVE FOUNDING FAMILIES OF VICTORIA*

SYLVIA VAN KIRK

A recent popular history of Victoria is entitled *More English than the English*.¹ While this might symbolize the ethnic aspiration of this city, it obscures the actual mixed-race origins of many of its founding families. Only recently has there been much pride or interest in the fact that among the most prominent of Victoria's founders were families who were also of First Nations origin. This article explores why this was so by looking at the processes of colonization experienced by five Hudson's Bay Company/Native families who were comprised of some of the earliest principal settlers of Victoria. A look at a map of the settlement in 1858 (Map 1, facing page) illustrates the dominant position of the family properties of James Douglas, William H. McNeill, John Work, John Tod, and Charles Ross. These men had all been officers of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC): all had Native wives, but of different First Nations origin. Although all these officers had toyed with the idea of retiring to Britain or eastern Canada, they chose to settle at Fort Victoria, the heart of the new Crown Colony of Vancouver Island (created in 1849). Coming from the elite of the fur-trade hierarchy, these men

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¹ Terry Reksten, *More English than the English: A Very Social History of Victoria* (Victoria: Orca, 1986).

had the wherewithal to purchase the expensive estates made available by the HBC. In Victoria, they hoped to maintain their social and economic standing by becoming part of the landed gentry, the elite class in the Wakefieldian colonization scheme that aimed to replicate an essentially British social hierarchy.²

For these men, Victoria offered the prospect of settling their families in “civilized” yet geographically familiar surroundings, where it was hoped that they would secure a place as part of the colonial elite. Being of mixed race, however, these families confronted particular challenges in adapting to this cultural frontier. Recent studies of prevailing colonial discourses reveal that the new settler society was intent on reproducing White British “civilization” — a project in which miscegenation was increasingly feared and denigrated. According to one commentator, the progeny of mixed unions were “a bad lot,” being weak both “morally and intellectually.”³ With Aboriginal ancestry quickly becoming a source of shame, Native mothers and children were subject to growing pressure to acculturate to the fathers’ British heritage. Assimilation can be seen as a strategy adopted by these families in an effort to maintain class status, which could be undermined by the racist attitudes of incoming colonists. Especially for the second generation, there was little room for a middle ground; these children could not build an identity that acknowledged the duality of their heritage.

Little attention has been paid to the fact that this process of acculturation was gendered and that it entailed different role expectations for sons and daughters, respectively. In examining the fortunes of the second generation in these five families, it appears that a complex interaction of gender and class dynamics, coupled with the particular demographics of early Victoria, enabled the girls to transcend the racist climate of the colony more successfully than the boys. The sons had considerable difficulty in securing the status of gentlemen; none enhanced, and most failed to maintain, the families’ fortunes.

² For an excellent discussion of the ideology behind the colonization scheme for Vancouver Island, see Richard Mackie, “The Colonization of Vancouver Island, 1849–58,” *BC Studies* 96 (Winter 1992–93): 3–40. According to Mackie, “the rank structures of the company and the colony merged. The Family Company Compact made the transition from a fur trade elite to a colonial elite through its control of land and political power” (31–32).

³ BCARS, E/B/AI 5.2, Alexander Allan, “Cariboo & the Mines of British Columbia” (1878); see also Adele Perry, “‘The Prevailing Vice’: Mixed-Race Relationships and Colonial Discourse in British Columbia, 1858–1871” (PhD thesis, Department of History, York University, 1977), ch. 3. For a more general study of the growing fear of miscegenation in the nineteenth-century Anglo-American context, see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge 1995).

Racial stereotypes helped to blight the sons' prospects, as did deficiencies in colonial schooling and the vagaries of pioneer agriculture. If they married, and quite a few did not, it was (with one exception) to Métis or Indian women. Both occupationally and socially, the mixed-blood sons, even in these elite families, could not really compete with the influx of aspiring young Englishmen. Many of the daughters, however, were well secured within the colonial elite. Paradoxically, although the daughters' options were restricted to marriage, the second generation was highly successful in fulfilling that role. Unlike their brothers, colonial demographics worked to the advantage of the daughters; in the early decades there were few marriageable immigrant women who could compete with the acculturated daughters of former HBC officers. All the daughters of the second generation married; almost all married White men. Their marriage patterns evolved from marrying promising young HBC officers to marrying colonial officials and incoming White settlers. Newcomers to the colony were soon aware of the influence of what was dubbed the "Family Company Compact" and the advantage that could accrue from marrying "a big wigs daughter."⁴

A fascinating window on the experiences of these families and the process of acculturation is provided by the rich collection of portraits in the British Columbia Archives and Records Service (BCARS). As several commentators have observed, photographs are, themselves, valuable historical documents that have not received enough serious study from historians.⁵ In these families, photos convey in ways that words cannot the process of acculturation, especially as experienced by the Native wives. Most of the photos have come to the archives as part of family albums and collections. Whether the originals were small cartes de visite or cabinet portraits, they illuminate social networks and family aspirations. In the second generation, the scarcity of sons' portraits may in itself be a significant indicator of social failure, while the numerous portraits of the daughters underscore their successful assimilation to British material culture.

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⁴ Margaret Ormsby, ed., *Fort Victoria Letters, 1846-1851* (Winnipeg: Hudson's Bay Records Society, 1979), vol. 32, LX.

⁵ For a useful discussion of the importance of photographs as historical documents and the challenges involved in reading them, see J. Robert Davison, "Turning a Blind Eye: the Historian's Use of Photographs," *BC Studies* 52 (Winter 1981-82): 16-38; Elizabeth Heyert, *The Glass-House Years: Victorian Portrait Photography, 1839-70* (London: George Prior, 1978); and Alan Thomas, *The Expanding Eye: Photography and the Nineteenth-Century Mind* (London: Croom Helm, 1978).

In order to appreciate the social challenges faced by these families, it is necessary to sketch their fur-trade background.⁶ Most of the husbands had spent the better part of their careers at various posts in the Columbia Department (Map 2). They had initially married according to the fur trade “custom of the country” and produced large families. Family size varied between seven and thirteen children, with the sex ratio weighted heavily in favour of daughters.

Most significant to the social hierarchy of this new British colony was the fact that the governor, James Douglas, was an HBC officer



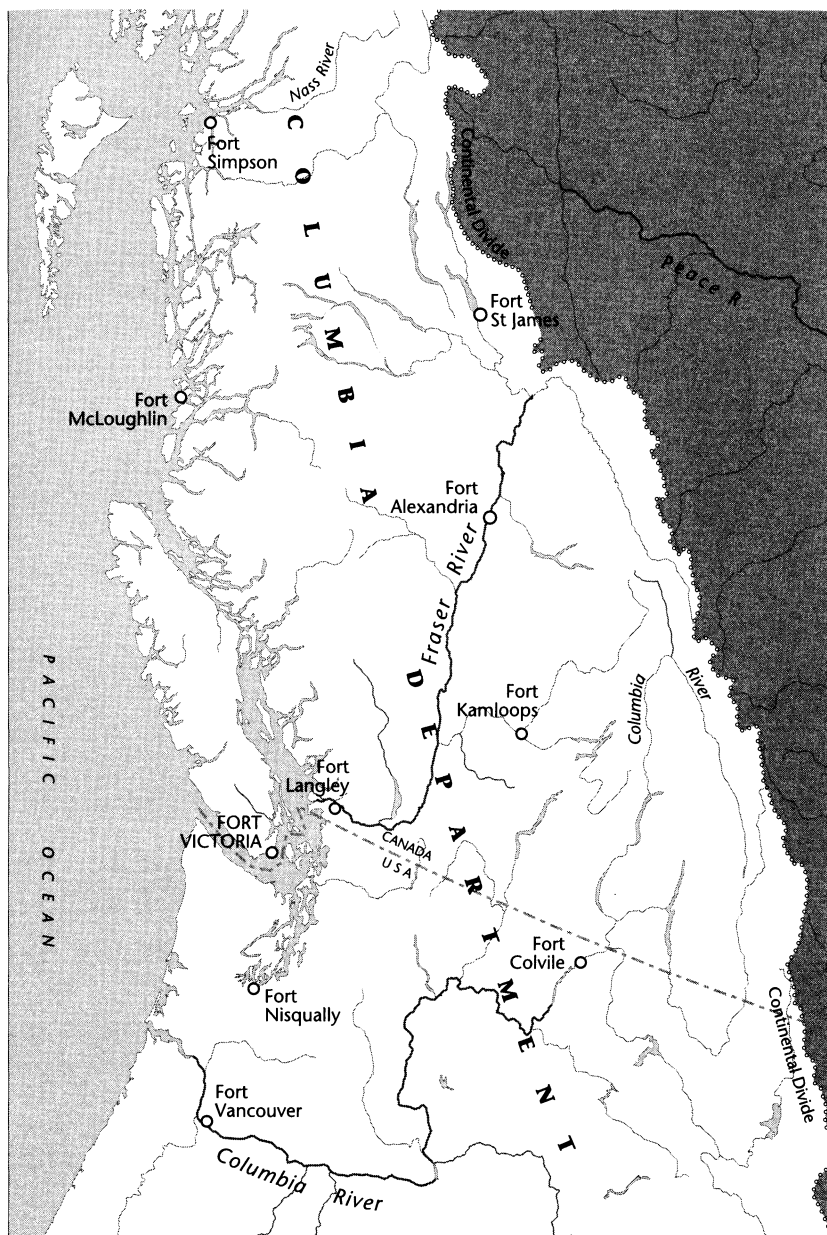
Plate 1: *BC Archives*, A-2833.



Plates 2: Portrait of Amelia, Lady Douglas. This plate and Plate 1 above show Lady Douglas's acculturation to the role of governor's wife over a decade, c. 1858 to 1872. *BC Archives*, A-01679.

who had a part-Cree wife, Amelia (Plates 1 and 2). As the daughter of Chief Factor William Connolly and Miyo Nipiy, her marriage at Fort St James in 1828 was typical of the pattern of young officers marrying the daughters of their superiors. The Douglasses soon moved to Fort Vancouver, where most of their thirteen children were born. Unlike the other families, the mortality rate in the Douglas family was high. When they moved to Fort Victoria in 1849, there were only four surviving daughters, two boys and five girls having died very young. Another son and daughter born in the early 1850s completed the family. Douglas bought up several hundred acres of choice

⁶ The following synopsis of the origins of these five families is derived mainly from Sylvia Van Kirk, *“Many Tender Ties”: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980).



Map 2: Select Posts of the Columbia District of the HBC.

land in Victoria, which he parlayed into considerable wealth, and he was among the first to build a substantial home outside the fort. In 1863, when he was knighted for his services to the colony, his wife became Lady Douglas.



Plate 3: Mrs. John Work and her two youngest children . Original: *Carte de visite*.
Photographer: S.A. Spencer. *BC Archives*, A-01825.

One of Douglas's colleagues who had high hopes for the opportunities Victoria promised his large family was Chief Factor John Work. His Métis wife, Josette Legacé, the daughter of a French-Canadian father and a Spokane mother, had grown up at posts on the Columbia River. Married in 1826, the Works spent many years much further north at Fort Simpson before retiring to Victoria in 1850 with a family of three boys and eight girls. John Work became the largest landowner in early Victoria, his Hillside Farm encompassing over 1,000 acres. Although he died in 1861, his wife survived him by thirty-five years (Plate 3).

The untimely death of a father could seriously affect the fortunes of an HBC family. Charles Ross only lived long enough to see Fort Victoria built in 1844, but he left his widow able to buy her own estate of 145 acres on Ross Bay. Like Josette Work, Isabella Ross (Plate 4) was the daughter of a French-Canadian engagé but, like



Plate 4: Isabella Ross in her widow's weeds. Photographer, probably S.A. Spencer. *BC Archives*, 7049 A-1280.

Amelia Douglas, she was born far from Victoria. Her mother was Ojibway; Isabella had grown up in the Great Lakes region and was married at Rainy Lake in 1822. Most of her children, six boys and four girls, were born west of the Rockies and all lived to adulthood.

Although often referred to as “Indian,” the wives of these men were all of mixed descent. Although these marriages cut across class and ethnicity, they are, nonetheless, representative of fur-trade endogamy. The wives’ fathers were connected to the HBC, and the women themselves grew up within or near various fur-trade posts. All these marriages were long-lasting monogamous unions, the country marriages eventually being confirmed by church rites whenever clergymen became available. The Douglasses and the Rosses had church marriages at Fort Vancouver in 1838, and the Works had one upon their arrival at Fort Victoria in 1849.

In the other two families, the McNeills and the Tods, the marriages harkened back to the long-established pattern of officers contracting alliances with high-ranking First Nations women whose connections were useful to advancing their husbands’ respective commercial positions. Captain William H. McNeill was a Bostonian who first entered the Pacific coasting trade in competition with the HBC. His first wife, known as Mathilda, was a Kaigani Haida chief, an alliance which undoubtedly helped to make him such a successful trader that the HBC went to some lengths to lure him into its service in the early 1830s. This union produced twelve children, with seven girls and three boys surviving to adulthood. Mathilda died in 1850, shortly after the birth of the youngest children (twin girls), and McNeill soon settled his motherless family in Victoria. Upon his later retirement in 1863, he brought a second wife, a high-ranking Nishga woman named Neshaki, to live on his 200-acre estate, which encompassed much of south Oak Bay.

Chief Trader John Tod had a more chequered marital experience than did most of his contemporaries. By his first short-lived country marriage to a mixed-blood woman, Tod had a son (James) who eventually settled in Victoria. Through an ill-fated marriage to an English woman in the late 1830s, he had a daughter, but his second wife, having gone mad, was placed in an asylum in England. Tod then returned to the Columbia District, where he took his last country wife around 1843. Sophia Lolo was the daughter of a prominent chief at Fort Kamloops (Jean-Baptiste Lolo dit St Paul) and his Shuswap wife (Plate 5). In 1850, Tod settled with Sophia and a growing family, ultimately five boys and two girls, on a 100-acre estate in Oak Bay.



Plate 5: Sophia Lolo, wife of John Tod. Photograph may have been taken on the occasion of the Tod's church marriage in 1863. Photographer: S.A. Spencer. *BC Archives*, A-01483.

In these families, the patriarchal role exercised by the British fathers was greater than usual because of their own cultural bias. In fur-trade society, Native wives brought their husbands valuable knowledge with regard to trade and even survival. There is also ample evidence that they were devoted mothers and exercised a strong influence within the family circle. When McNeill's Haida wife died in 1850, he took the unusual step of lamenting his loss to Governor Simpson: "My poor Wife ... had been a good and faithful partner to me for twenty years and we had twelve children together ... the deceased was a most kind mother to her children, and *no* Woman could have done her duty better, although an Indian."⁷ Moving though it is, this quotation underscores McNeill's ambivalence towards his wife's Native background. Like the other patriarchs in this study, he was to be an active agent in the colonization of his own family.

HBC officers never seem to have questioned the desirability of acculturating their families to British norms and customs. Though their private correspondence is filled with paternal concern for the welfare of their children, this was posited in terms of negating the latter's Indianness. It was never suggested that the children's First Nations heritage should be actively incorporated into their upbringing. At the fur-trade posts, fathers sought to Anglicize their wives and children, introducing them to the basics of English literacy and to Christian observances such as Bible reading and prayers. Material acculturation also started at the posts, as is illustrated in Plate 6, a fascinating 1865 portrait of Sophia Lolo's parents and two younger sisters. Here the traditional costume of the mother is contrasted to the partially Anglicized dress of the daughters. Tartan dresses and shawls, worn with First Nations leggings and moccasins, became the typical costume for women at the HBC forts in the early nineteenth century.⁸

Fathers worried about their children growing up at isolated posts without "proper education or example." In 1834, John Work wrote to his retired colleague Edward Ermatinger: "I have now here four fine little girls, had I them a little brushed up with education, and a little knowledge of the world, they would scarcely be known to be Indians."⁹

⁷ Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA), D.5/30, Simpson Correspondence Inward, McNeill to Simpson, 5 March 1851.

⁸ BCARS, Edward Ermatinger Correspondence, John Work to Ermatinger, Fort Simpson, 13 December 1834. See also "Five Letters of Charles Ross, 1842-1844," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 7 (April 1943): 109.

⁹ For a discussion of Native women's evolving fashions at the fur-trade posts, see Van Kirk, "Many Tender Ties," 99-103.



Plate 6: Jean-Baptiste Lolo dit St. Paul, his wife and two daughters. Taken by Charles Gentile in 1865 at Fort Kamloops. *BC Archives*, 2007 A-950.

Thus fur-trade officers were eager to place their children at the first school established at Fort Vancouver in the 1830s; after that venture failed, Douglas and Work both placed their daughters with American missionaries in the Willamette Valley.¹⁰ To provide the requisite education for enabling sons to secure a position in the HBC or to take up some other profession was a problem. To send sons (or daughters) away to eastern Canada or Great Britain was a risky and expensive business, even if they were entrusted to the care of relatives or friends.

These concerns much occupied Charles Ross, who had kept his large family under his wing until he received a promotion upon moving to Fort Victoria. In the fall of 1843 he sent his three teenaged children (two sons and a daughter) off to England for an education. Colleagues were aghast at the expense, but Ross had hopes that his offspring would do well with his nephew in London. A touching letter written to his “honoured Father” by eighteen-year-old Walter indicates that he had found a good placement as a wool merchant’s clerk and that his brother and sister were “much improved in their

¹⁰ For the difficulties with the school at Fort Vancouver, see Thomas Jessett, ed., *Reports and Letters of Herbert Beaver*, 1836–38 (Portland: Champoege Press, 1959).

learning.” Ross never received this letter, however, having died the previous year, and relatives were soon expressing their dissatisfaction with his children, whom they found “extremely indocile and addicted to habits incompatible with a residence in this country.”¹¹ The three children were sent back to their mother in Victoria in the fall of 1845. Further light is shed on father-son relationships and on the difficulties of educating sons by looking at the efforts of Edward Ermatinger who, after retiring to St Thomas (Ontario), acted as a “surrogate father” for sons of colleagues such as John Tod. In 1841, Tod sent James, his eldest son, east to Ermatinger where, in spite of social conflict, James gained agricultural skills that helped him to manage his own property later in Victoria.¹²

In colonial Victoria, where the norms of their husbands’ culture were dominant, the role of Native mothers in socializing their children was circumscribed. The fathers’ prescriptions were now supported by new agents of colonization: the church and the school. All these families adhered to the Church of England, which helped to affirm their elite status. Their marriages were sanctioned by church rite, and the wives and children were baptized and became active members of the Anglican congregation that formed around the Reverend Edward Cridge after his arrival in 1855.¹³ Christian education was deemed of the utmost importance, and schooling specifically for the children of the elite was set up with the arrival of the first Anglican missionaries, Robert and Emma Staines. The five families in question dominated the Fort Victoria school register in the early 1850s; out of thirty pupils listed, there were four Douglasses, five Works, three McNeills, three Rosses, and two Tods.¹⁴ Boarding children at this school was expensive (fifteen pounds per annum), so it was frustrating to fathers subscribing to this school when their hopes, especially for their boys, were disappointed. By all accounts Mrs Staines and her successors were much more successful with the girls’ education than was her husband with the boys’ education. The girls were being groomed for marriage; their education emphasized dress, deportment, and lady-like accomplishments such as music, singing, drawing, and

¹¹ BCARS, Charles Ross Clipping File, Walter to Father, 1 March 1845; HBCA, A.10/19 and 20, Walter P. Ross and Mary Tait to HBC Secretary, 13 June and 7 August 1845.

¹² Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1980), 185-90.

¹³ BCARS, Reminiscences of Bishop Edward Cridge. In 1875, most of the old HBC families followed Cridge to his Reformed Episcopal Church, formed after his break with Bishop George Hills.

¹⁴ BCARS, ADD. MSS. 2774, School Register, Fort Victoria, 1850-52.

languages.¹⁵ The boys, on the other hand, did not really get the more demanding education, either practical or classical, that their role expectations demanded. Staines was evidently not up to the job and attempted to control his teenage charges by meting out severe corporal punishment.¹⁶ Life at this school stood in painful contrast to the more carefree and close familial life most of these children had previously known. Although the boys' school had improved considerably by the early 1860s, the differential impact of this early colonial education appears to have been a significant factor in shaping the next generation.

In colonial Victoria racism intensified, generating invidious comparisons. It irked some incoming settlers that Native families should rank so high in the social hierarchy. Visitors and even working-class British immigrants pronounced society in the new colony deficient because some of its leading officials were married to Native women. Shortly after her arrival from England in 1854, Annie Deans wrote home disparagingly of Douglas: a man who had spent his life among North American Indians and got one for a wife could scarcely know anything about governing an English colony.¹⁷ While there is ample evidence that the daughters of these HBC families featured in the early society of Victoria, they could be subject to unflattering evaluation. Charles Wilson, a British army officer, recounting the round of balls and other social activities he attended in the early 1860s, observed: "Most of the young ladies are half breeds & have quite as many of the propensities of the savage as of the civilized being."¹⁸ Among these families, such remarks increased attempts to hide Native backgrounds and to adopt all the trappings of British fashion and mores.

These social tensions were poignantly revealed in the Douglas family which, because of its position, was subject to particular scrutiny. Initially, Amelia Douglas kept in the social background, partly because she did not speak English very well. The social calendar was kept by her daughters and a Douglas niece from Britain, but as the contrasting portraits indicate (compare Plates 1 and 2), Lady Douglas became increasingly comfortable in her role as the governor's wife. Douglas wrote proudly of his wife after a New Year's levee in the early 1870s:

¹⁵ Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed., *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1975), 120; Dorothy B. Smith, ed., *Lady Franklin Visits the Pacific Northwest* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1974), 11, 34-35.

¹⁶ BCARS, ADD. MSS. 1912, *Memoirs of James Anderson*, vol. 9, 158-76.

¹⁷ BCARS, E/B/D343, Annie Deans Correspondence, 29 February 1854.

¹⁸ George Stanley, ed., *Mapping the Frontier; Charles Wilson's Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel, 1858-1862* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), 28, 45, 87-88.

“Darling good Mamma was nicely got up and won all hearts with her kindness and geniality.”¹⁹ When Lady Franklin visited Victoria in 1861, she was curious to meet the “Indian” wife of the governor. She found Amelia to have “a gentle, simple & kindly manner” and was fascinated that her Native features were less pronounced than were those in some of her daughters.²⁰

Plate 7, the earliest known picture of the Douglas daughters, shows them in completely Anglicized, if modest, daytime apparel; other portraits reveal that their costumes soon reflected the latest European styles. The weddings of the four Douglas daughters, which occurred between 1852 and 1862, became increasingly elaborate affairs. When Agnes married Arthur Bushby, a well-born young British civil servant, a guest observed that it was a gorgeous wedding, “the ladies coming



Plate 7: An early 1950s photograph of the Miss Douglasses. Left to Right are Agnes, Jane, and Alice. Taken outside at Fort Victoria. *BC Archives*, A-02836.

¹⁹ Marion B. Smith, “The Lady Nobody Knows,” *British Columbia: A Centennial Anthology* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1958), 479.

²⁰ Smith, *Lady Franklin Visits*, 12, 22-23.

²¹ Wilson, *Mapping the Frontier*, 175.



Plate 8: The wedding of Martha Douglas to Dennis Harris, 1878. Taken on the veranda of the Douglas home by Hannah Maynard. *BC Archives*, A-01236. Below, detail of wedding party.

out in style.”²¹ But nothing in early Victoria capped the wedding of the youngest daughter, Martha, who, after being “finished in England,” married another colonial official, Dennis Harris, in 1878. Plate 8 features the bride and numerous attendants in elaborate imported gowns; many of Victoria’s notables are among the guests. The now widowed Lady Douglas is prominent at the right edge of the photo, while the Douglas heir, James Jr, is cavalierly reclining at his sister’s feet.

In the mid-1860s Governor Douglas had decided to send his teenaged son to England for further education (Plate 9). Douglas’s ensuing correspondence provides detailed insight into his aspirations for his son:





Plate 9: A formal portrait of the Governor's son, James Douglas, Jr. *BC Archives*, A-01240.

I had one main object in sending [James] to England which was, to give him a sound and good education, that he might ... be qualified, through his own exertions to occupy a respectable position in society, and perhaps take a distinguished part, in the legislation of his Native country ... he was to come here, and assist in the management of my property which with his political avocations, would furnish employment enough, and emolument greater than any other profession he might engage in.²²

But young James was to cause his father much anguish — from disappointment when he displayed little intellectual progress to mortification when he appeared about to fall into bad company and pawned the farewell gifts from his parents. James Jr eventually returned to the colony to do his father's bidding, and in 1878 he married a White woman, Mary Elliott, daughter of a colonial politician. But contemporary observers emphasized that young Douglas was not a patch on his father.²³ Whatever promise he had was cut short by his death in 1883 at the age of thirty-two. Family affairs in the second generation of the Douglas family were largely managed by the prominent White sons-in-law, especially Dr J.S. Helmcken, who had married the eldest daughter, Cecilia.

Among the most socially successful families in early Victoria were the Works. Hillside House (Plate 10), renowned for its hospitality, was much frequented by military officers and prominent settlers. Charles Wilson's description of a New Year's celebration in 1861 appears to have been typical: "There were about 30 at dinner — such a display of fish, flesh and fowl and pastry as is seldom seen. We danced until 12 & then all hands sat down to a sumptuous supper and then set to work dancing again until a very late hour." "The Works," this young officer enthused, "are about the kindest people I ever came across."²⁴ Mrs Work seems to have been very much part of this scene and earned the admiration of all who met her. Even the American historian Hubert H. Bancroft acknowledged that "the Indian wife, in body and mind, was strong and elastic as steel."²⁵ By the time Bancroft met her in 1878, Josette had been a widow for over fifteen years, but as her portrait (Plate 11) indicates, she had become the epitome of the Victorian matron. At a glance, she could be taken for Queen Victoria herself! When she died at an advanced age in

²² BCARS, B/40/2A, Douglas Private Letter-Book, 1867-79, to A.G. Dallas, 23 July 1867.

²³ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Literary Industries* (San Francisco: History Co., 1890), 534.

²⁴ Wilson, *Mapping the Frontier*, 135.

²⁵ Bancroft, *Literary Industries*, 534.

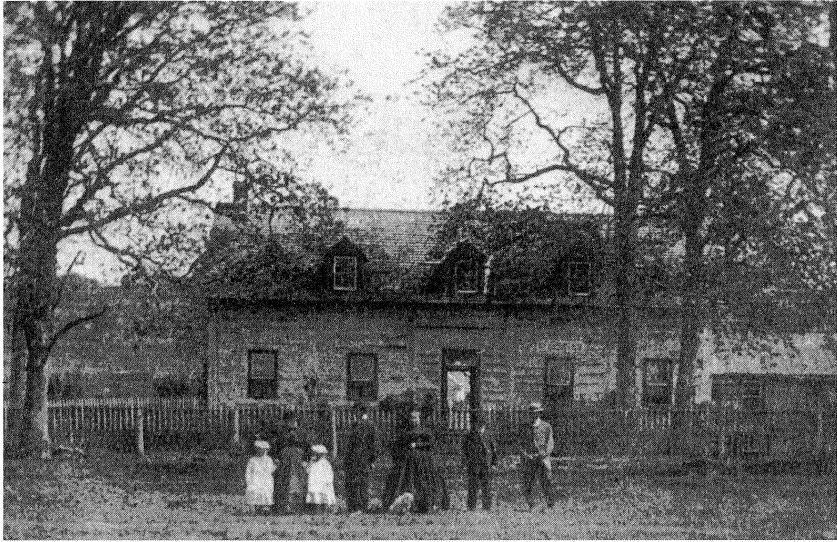


Plate 10: The Work family home, Hillside house, built in the HBC style in the early 1850s. Note Mrs. Work, now widowed, is in the centre of the family group. *BC Archives*, A-05578.

1896, she was eulogized for “her usefulness in pioneer work and many good deeds.”²⁶

In no family were the fortunes of sons and daughters so sharply contrasted as they were in the Work family. John Tod, who was much interested in the welfare of his colleague’s family, observed in 1864: “It is rather remarkable that so numerous a family of daughters should have turned out so well, their exemplary good conduct having gained the universal esteem and respect of their neighbours, and the only two Sons, who survived their father, should have displayed characters the very reverse!”²⁷ At the time of their father’s death in 1861, most of the daughters had already married, the two eldest long since to HBC officers Roderick Finlayson and W.F. Tolmie, respectively, both of whom were to number among Victoria’s most prominent citizens. The sons, however, were still young. At age twenty-two, John Jr proved quite incapable of taking on the role of head of household; friends worried that he would bring ruin on the family with his intemperate and extravagant habits.²⁸ Whatever his faults, his mother

²⁶ Nellie de Bertrand Lugin, *The Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island, 1843-1866* (Victoria: Women’s Canadian Club of Victoria, 1928), 64.

²⁷ BCARS, Ermatinger Correspondence, John Tod to Ermatinger, 1 June 1864.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1864 and 12 November 1868.



Plate II: Josette Work as "Queen Victoria." Cabinet Portrait. Photographer S.A. Spencer. *BC Archives*, A-01836.

was prepared to overlook her son's failings and he lived out his life with her, helping to manage a diminished Hillside Farm. David, the younger son (Plate 3), eventually secured employment as a clerk in the HBC store in Victoria, but for some reason Tod thought him a despicable character. Neither David nor John Jr married, dying at the ages of forty-nine and thirty-two, respectively. Again leadership in this family passed to the British sons-in-law. The opulent lifestyle enjoyed by several of the Work daughters in the late nineteenth century is seen in Plate 12. In building his mansion at Rock Bay, Roderick Finlayson was the first person to import California redwood; his wife Sarah developed an active interest in gardening, becoming renowned for her Oriental poppies.²⁹

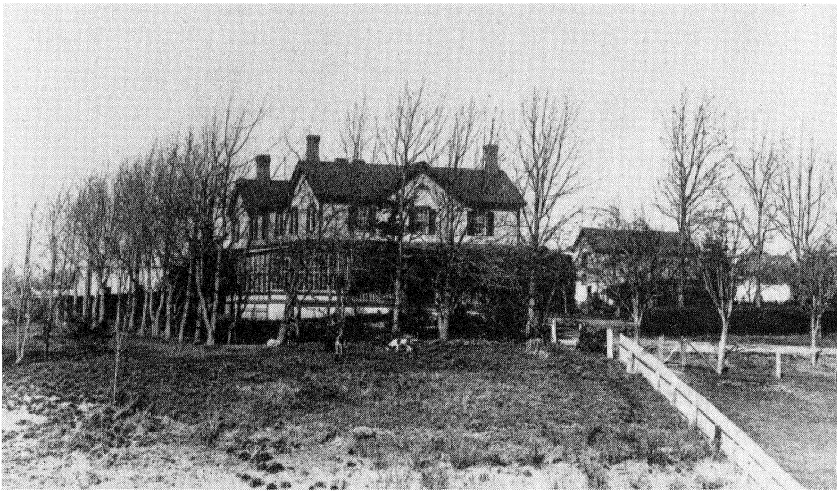


Plate 12: "Rock Bay," the home of Roderick and Sarah (Work) Finlayson. *BC Archives*, 31163 B-2262.

It is interesting to speculate what would have happened to the Ross family had the father lived to preside over the Victoria years. Charles Ross's eldest sons had come of age before the settlement period, and he had sought to prepare them for placement in the HBC. Governor Simpson had apparently assisted in securing a position for John, the eldest son. After his father's death, John continued in the HBC service at Fort Victoria and tried to assume the role of head of the family. His brothers, who had been returned from England, were taken into the HBC's farming operations at Fort Nisqually, leaving

²⁹ Reksten, "*More English than the English*," 82-84.

the younger sons to continue their education in Victoria and to help their mother develop her estate. In 1858 John Ross had expanded the family holdings in Victoria by purchasing a 200-acre farm called Oaklands, but with his premature death several years later this asset was quickly liquidated.³⁰ By this time, unfortunately, the younger sons had gained a reputation as “bad boys,” running into debt and being in trouble with the law for disorderly conduct.³¹

Family problems were compounded when the widow herself married again in 1863 to a young fortune hunter from Canada, Lucius Simon O'Brien.³² The new stepfather was soon at odds with the sons, going so far as to charge Alexander several times with assault. Ross was never convicted, but relations deteriorated so badly that his mother wanted to separate from her new husband. While O'Brien had been prepared to overlook race in marrying the landed widow, once his plans went awry, he played to racist stereotypes in a vicious manner, publishing the following notice in the *Victoria Daily Chronicle* in April 1864:

“Whereas My Wife, Isabella, has left my bed and board because I will not support her drunken sons, nor allow her to keep drunk herself, and have a lot of drunken squaws about her, this is to forbid all persons, harbouring her, or trusting her on my account, as I will pay no debts she may contract.”³³

A few days later, the youngest son, William, attempted to come to his mother's defence and charged that O'Brien was trying to swindle the family:

His every act since his marriage has been to try to get everything from my mother, and turn us (the children) out of the house; selling all he could lay his hands on, and by his conduct, turn my mother out of her own house. Will you do me and my mother the simple justice to publish this, as such a statement as O'Brien has made is calculated to injure both her and myself.³⁴

When the family then began proceedings against O'Brien to prove that he was actually a bigamist, he apparently decided to seek his

³⁰ *British Colonist*, 14 December 1863 and 8 February 1864.

³¹ *British Colonist*, 30 April 1859, 2 and 20, and 21 May 1862, 3. See also several entries in the charge books of the Victoria Police Department from 1858 to 1860 in BCARS.

³² BCARS, Records of Christ Church Cathedral, Marriage Register, 29 June 1863. O'Brien is identified as the eldest son of Dr Lucius O'Brien of Quebec, C.E.

³³ *Daily Chronicle*, 30 April 1864. See also *British Colonist*, 26 August 1863, 3; 1 September 1863, 3; 27 September 1864, 3; and *Daily Chronicle*, 1 September 1863.

³⁴ *Daily Chronicle*, 4 May 1864.

fortune up-island, where he came to an untimely end a few years later.³⁵

This was not the end of Ross family trials, however. In 1866, after numerous brushes with the law, sons Francis and William were convicted of robbing a Chinese man and were sentenced to five years at hard labour. This harsh fate aroused public sympathy and a widely supported petition to the governor asked for their release, claiming that their health was suffering. Sir James Douglas testified that he had known their “most respectable parents” and that these young men were not the blackguards they were made out to be.³⁶ After serving about two years, the Ross boys were released on condition of their banishment from the colony.

Although the younger Ross daughters attended the balls given by the officers of the British navy in the 1850s, they never attained the status they desired. Thomas Hankin observed that although they were very fine-looking girls, “they had a great deal of Indian blood in them and were supposed to be only on the edge of society.”³⁷ Of all the daughters in the five families under discussion, the Ross daughters were the only ones who married mixed-bloods. The eldest married Charles Wren, a Métis who had emigrated from Red River to Oregon; after her death in 1859, he married her younger sister.³⁸ Flora, the youngest Ross daughter, married Paul K. Hubbs in 1859, an American settler who was described as “a white Indian,” but within a decade this marriage had dissolved.³⁹ Flora Ross went on to become the only woman in this study to have her own occupation, becoming Matron of the Asylum at New Westminster. Plate 13, a portrait of Flora Ross taken in the 1890s, makes a statement about the social respectability she had achieved in her own right.

By the early 1870s, the Victoria Rosses had had to sell off a good deal of their property. The remaining son, Alexander, settled down and married in 1868 but was reduced to being a labourer on the neighbouring Pemberton estate where he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1876.⁴⁰ The widow Ross, until her death in 1885, was maintained by her daughter Flora in a small house on the grounds of the convent

³⁵ BCARS, Vancouver Island, Supreme Court, Cause Books, 616–17; Colonial Correspondence, John Morley, file 1,170, Inquest into the Death of Lucius O’Brien, 1866.

³⁶ BCARS, Colonial Correspondence, file 1,352, petitions (1866).

³⁷ BCARS, Philip Hankin Reminiscences, 166.

³⁸ BCARS, Wren Family Papers, Will of Charles Wren, 6 February 1864.

³⁹ BCARS, Christ Church Cathedral, Marriage Register, 6 December 1859; Gordon Keith, ed., *The James Francis Tullock Diary, 1875–1910* (Portland: Binford and Mort, 1978), 16.

⁴⁰ *British Colonist*, 23 September 1876, 3.



Plate 13: Flora, the youngest daughter of Charles and Isabella Ross. Taken in New Westminster in 1896. Note the 1890s fashions. *BC Archives*, 7052 A-02445.



Plate 14: A Highland Chieftain? Charles Ross Jr with his native wife and family. The origin of this picture is not known, but it was given to the BCARS by a decedent. Note the fur rug on the floor. *BC Archives*, 97185 H-4646.

of the Sisters of St Ann.⁴¹ A desire for respectability and a disavowal of any Native heritage is manifest in Plate 14, an astonishing family portrait of the one surviving Ross son who, after some years in Victoria, settled in Washington State. While this picture strikes contemporary viewers as amusing, this was not its intent. It symbolizes Charles Jr's ethnic identification with his Highland Scots father. The

⁴¹ *Daily Chronicle*, 24 April 1885; BCARS, Wren Family Papers, Carrie to Isabella, 17 August 1880.

poignancy of this picture becomes apparent when one knows the family history and realizes that Charles Jr's wife, Catherine Toma, was a Nisqually from the Puget Sound Region.⁴²

Scottish affectations are also evident in the McNeill family. Like his contemporaries, the elder McNeill tried to place his sons in the HBC, but the 1850s was a time of hardening attitudes towards taking sons into junior officer ranks. One son, Harry, was apparently an efficient trader at Fort Simpson but resented not being given the rank of clerk. He went on to disobey his father over a romantic entanglement with a Native woman and quit the service, joining his brothers in Victoria in the mid-1850s.⁴³ While the younger McNeill boys did not gain the notoriety of the Rosses, they did seem to have trouble settling down in Victoria, appearing in police records as having been charged with disorderly conduct. Sons Harry and Alfred apparently sought better prospects on the mainland. Harry was an effective overseer of Native work crews that were clearing the way for the Collins Overland Telegraph in the mid-1860s, but he returned to Victoria where he died in 1872 at the age of thirty-eight.⁴⁴ Alfred is listed as a farmer in the Yale District in the 1881 census, but, curiously, he is omitted from his father's will of 1875. Only Captain McNeill's eldest son and namesake seems to have given him any satisfaction.

Plate 15, one of the few portraits of second-generation males that has survived, conveys the younger McNeill's gentlemanly aspirations. His wedding in June 1853 to Mary Macauley, the mixed-blood daughter of the bailiff of one of the HBC farms, underscores this couple's ethnic orientation. It was a "proper and grand wedding," which included a procession around the village led by a piper in full Scottish regalia.⁴⁵ The younger McNeill had been employed as master of the mail boat (which ran a regular route between Victoria and the Puget Sound in the 1840s) and as part of several exploratory expeditions to the mainland before he settled down to farm his father's estate. He died in 1889 at the age of fifty-seven as a result of injuries suffered in a buggy accident.⁴⁶

⁴² BCARS, Charles Ross Clipping File, Biographical Notes. For further discussion on the Ross family in Washington State, see Cecelia Svinth Carpenter, *Fort Nisqually: A Documented History of Indian and British Interaction*. (Tacoma: Tahoma Research Service, 1986). Carpenter is a descendant of Charles and Catherine Ross.

⁴³ BCARS, McNeill Letterbook, 18 October 1855; Helen Meilleur, *A Pour of Rain: Stories from a West Coast Fort* (Victoria: Sono Nis, 1980), 207.

⁴⁴ Meilleur, *A Pour of Rain*, 208; British Columbia, Division of Vital Statistics, Death Certificate of Henry McNeill.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Helmcken Reminiscences*, 153-54.

⁴⁶ BCARS, Donald McNeill, Personal Record, 1924; *British Colonist*, 31 October 1889.

Although he maintained a certain respectability, it appears that William Jr did not achieve the social status of his sisters. Plate 16 is most intriguing, for it reflects the surviving McNeill sisters' acculturation and also makes a significant statement about kin ties. All the sisters are dressed in elaborate but sombre Victorian gowns, which indicates that this photo may have been taken around the time of their father's death in 1875. Standing at the back are the youngest and still unmarried twins Rebecca and Harriet; dominant on the right is the matriarchal eldest sister

Lucy. Her marriage to HBC officer Hamilton Moffat in 1856 underscored the social networking among the women in these families, for her bridesmaids were Jane Douglas and Mary Work.⁴⁷ The other McNeill sisters were all considered to have married well. In 1864, Fanny married bank clerk James Judson Young, who became provincial secretary. Both the twins married Englishmen; in 1879 Rebecca married Thomas Elwyn, who had served as gold commissioner, and in 1889 Harriett married John Jane, who had been a Royal Engineer.

Of all members of these five families, the record is most sparse with regard to John Tod's Shuswap wife

and their children. Apart from vital statistics, Plate 5 is the most informative surviving clue about Sophia Lolo and how she adapted to life in Victoria. This picture, which may have been taken at the time of her church marriage in 1863, invites various readings, but it seems to indicate an ambivalence about the constraints of Victorian



Plate 15: William Henry McNeill, Jr, eldest son of Captain McNeill and his Haida wife, known as Mathilda. Note velvet lapels on his coat and plaid tie. *BC Archives*, G-03236.

⁴⁷ BCARS, Lucy Moffatt Clipping File.



Plate 16: Five surviving daughters of Captain W.H. McNeill and his Haida wife, c. 1875. Standing are the twins, Rebecca (L) and Harriet (R); seated (L to R) are Fanny, Mathilda (holding a family photograph album now in the BCARS), and Lucy. Photographer: Hannah Maynard. *BC Archives*, F-09960.

dress and customs. Unlike their mother, the Tod daughters mixed with other fur traders' families in Victoria society. Mary, the eldest, married American settler J.S. Bowker in 1864, while the younger sister married a successful merchant, J.S. Drummond.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ James K. Nesbitt, "The Diary of Martha Cheney Ella, 1853-56," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 13, Pt. 1 (April 1949): 91-112; and Part 2 (July-October 1949): passim.

The Tod sons did not find suitable wives, and the 1881 census finds all five, ranging in ages from thirty-six to twenty-four, still under the family roof working the farm. The eldest son and namesake, John Jr, failed to secure the family estate; after an ill-fated venture as a saloon-keeper, he left for the States. The second son, Alexander, showed promise as a farmer and stock raiser but died of consumption in 1889, as had a younger brother before him. A good deal of the Tod estate passed into the hands of the Bowker son-in-law, but by the 1890s the original family home had been purchased by strangers. Only James, Tod's eldest son by his first marriage, enjoyed any real success as a farmer. Tod had bought James his own farm when he arrived from the east; reputedly a man of prodigious strength, the younger Tod developed an extensive property known as Spring Bank Farm, which he passed on to two of his sons.⁴⁹ In 1857 James married one of the Macauley daughters, making him a brother-in-law of William McNeill Jr.

The wives and children in these elite HBC/Native families were subject to a process of acculturation designed to negate their Native heritage. To a considerable degree this was successful. Generally, the Native wives adapted remarkably well to being mistresses of substantial colonial households. The second generation, having the benefits of considerable education, was far removed from its Aboriginal roots. Yet there was no guarantee that the stigma of Native blood could truly be transcended. Indeed, racist attitudes intensified in the late nineteenth century, and miscegenation was held to be undesirable. These attitudes are painfully underscored in the public denunciation of some of Victoria's founding families by the American historian, Hubert Howe Bancroft.

In the late spring of 1878, Bancroft spent a month in Victoria collecting reminiscences and records for his mammoth history of the Pacific Northwest. Anxious to meet the retired HBC officers who had played such an important role in the development of the region, he was gratified by the hospitality and generous assistance of former traders and/or their descendants.⁵⁰ One can only imagine, then, the dismay that these families must have felt to find their Native heritage so excoriated in the pages of the awaited *History of the Northwest Coast* when it appeared in 1886. In a highly personal passage, in which some of Victoria's leading citizens were named, Bancroft ruminates on "the fur trader's curse":

⁴⁹ For biographical information on the Tod family, see Robert Belyk, *John Tod: Rebel in the Ranks* (Victoria: Horsdal & Schubart, 1995).

⁵⁰ Bancroft, *Literary Industries*, 530-39.

It has always seemed to me that the heaviest penalty the servants of the Hudson's Bay Company were obliged to pay for the wealth and authority advancement gave them, was the wives they were expected to marry and the progeny they should rear ... I could never understand how such men as John McLoughlin, *James Douglas*, Ogden, *Finlayson*, *Work* and *Tolmie* and the rest could endure the thought of having their name and honors descend to a degenerate posterity. Surely they were possessed of sufficient intelligence to know that by giving their children Indian or half-breed mothers, their own old Scotch, Irish or English blood would in them be greatly debased, and hence they were doing all concerned a great wrong. Perish all the Hudson's Bay Company thrice over, I would say, ... sooner than bring into being offspring subject to such a curse.⁵¹

Bancroft's lament was implicitly gendered. He was decrying the sons: those who had failed to carry on the family name with any success. But, as we have seen, miscegenation was not the problem — the differing experience of sons and daughters gives the lie to Bancroft's assertion. The dynamics of class and race, it should be emphasized, have a gendered impact. Males were required to move in a more public occupational and social world than were their female counterparts, and racial stereotyping, which emphasized deficiencies as inherent, worked strongly against them. Among the boys, what might have passed as rowdy youthful behaviour among other elite males was associated with dissolute Native character and resulted in their being subjected to harsh discipline. Many were not well trained to play the roles that their fathers had hoped for them. Indeed, their fathers themselves may have colluded in racist stereotyping, expressing doubts about their sons' ability to succeed and favouring White suitors for their daughters.⁵² Given the gender demographics of colonial Victoria, the sons in these families were soon outnumbered by well-educated, ambitious young Englishmen with whom they had to com-

⁵¹ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of the Northwest Coast* (San Francisco: History Co., 1886), vol. 2, 650-51. I have italicized all the officers who settled in Victoria. My attention was first drawn to this quote when reading Janet Campbell Hale's fascinating autobiography, *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter* (New York: Random House, 1993). Bancroft's thoughts on miscegenation reflect the growing prejudice in the United States, especially after the American Civil War, as discussed in Young, *Colonial Desire*.

⁵² For further discussion of fathers' ruminations on the failings of their mixed-blood sons, see Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 188-89: John Tod wrote to Ermatinger, "Well have you observed that all attempts to make gentlemen of them have hitherto proved a failure. The fact is there is something radically wrong about them all."

pete both occupationally and socially. In early Victoria, these sons are conspicuous by their almost complete absence from the social record. They must have resented the competition from the young British gentlemen who monopolized the affections of their sisters. Significantly, in the second generation there was no inter-marriage among these families.

Unlike their brothers, whose success and failures would be judged in the public sphere, the daughters' successes and failures would occur in the private sphere of marriage. Here colonial demographics worked to the advantage of the daughters; in the early decades there were few marriageable immigrant women who could compete with these elite "daughters of the country." For the most part, the fathers' wealth and position and the daughters' personal success in equipping themselves to play the roles expected of British middle-class wives and mothers were sufficient to overcome racial prejudice. This fact accounts for the astonishing marriage rate of 100 per cent for the daughters of the second generation. Their marriages to incoming White colonists served, of course, to dilute Native ancestry even further.⁵³

The spread of attitudes such as Bancroft's contributed to the process of distancing and denial experienced by many descendants of the five founding families of Victoria. Family narratives and obituaries increasingly highlighted the pioneering role of these fathers; if the mothers were mentioned at all, there was no reference to their being Native. When Simon Fraser Tolmie, who became premier of the province, fondly reminisced about growing up at Cloverdale (Plate 17), the family estate, he hardly mentioned his mother and omitted all reference to his remarkable Work grandmother.⁵⁴ In his family narrative of 1924, Donald H. McNeill was at pains to emphasize that his grandfather had been the first White settler of south Oak Bay but did not acknowledge that he was descended from high-ranking Haida and Tongass women.⁵⁵ Popular writers also ignored the Native heritage of these families. A 1928 volume about the early women of

⁵³ Although a detailed analysis of the third generation of these families is beyond the scope of this study, it should be observed that the sharply divergent patterns of the second generation do not hold into the third generation. Sons in the female lines of such families as the Helmckens, the Finlaysons, and the Tolmies did distinguish themselves in various branches of Victoria's professional and political life in the later nineteenth century. However, by this time, both in terms of blood and socialization, there was little of their Native ancestry left. On the other hand, the marriage rate of the daughters was not nearly as high as it was during the previous generation — a trend that requires further investigation.

⁵⁴ See S.F. Tolmie, "My Father: William Fraser Tolmie, 1812-1886," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 1 (October 1937): 227-40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 46, Donald McNeill, Personal Record, 1924.



Plate 17: Tolmie family group, taken in front of their veranda at Cloverdale in 1878. Mother and father are seated, flanked by three sons, standing, and enclosing the youngest children, symbolizing family solidarity. (Man seated apart left is a family friend). 16040 BC Archives, G-4990.

Vancouver Island includes a whole chapter entitled “The Wives of the First Landowners”; although it focuses on the Work women, the reader would be hard pressed to know that they were of Native descent.⁵⁶

And so the Native origin of some of Victoria’s founding families was obscured for decades. The reclamation of this part of these family histories not only adds to the richness of the city’s history, but also illuminates the complex intersection of the dynamics of race, class, and gender.

⁵⁶ Lugin, *Pioneer Women of Vancouver Island*, ch. 5.



Plate 1: Peter O'Reilly on the lawn at Point Ellice House, circa 1900. Of his visit to the Nass in 1888 he wrote: "Were it not for the fact, that an idea has been instilled into the minds of these Indians that the country is theirs, and that they should be paid for it, the constant irritation you hear so much of in regard to their land would soon die out"² (British Columbia Archives [hereafter abbreviated as BCA] photo 50100, box 120, n.d.).