

BOOK REVIEWS

On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871

Adele Perry

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. 320 pp. Illus.
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In this lively history, Adele Perry demonstrates that, despite protracted efforts to create an orderly White settler colony anchored in “respectable” gender and racial behaviours, during the years between 1849 and 1871 British Columbia was a “racially plural, rough and turbulent” place, where the inhabitants challenged the norms and values of mainstream nineteenth-century Anglo-American society. British Columbia failed to live up to imperial expectations, Perry argues, because of the persistence and resistance of First Nations and the unwillingness of White settlers. Perry contends that many British Columbians today cherish an idealized image of a “White man’s province” that never was: “In contemporary newspapers and conversations, White British Columbians often long for the days when our society was unquestionably British, when our tea and crumpets were not disrupted by Asian neighbours or First Nations demands for land and recognition. When we do so we long for a fiction of our own invention” (201).

A recognition of the significance of colonialism to BC history is central to Perry’s approach, and her study draws

on and contributes to an international body of literature that examines connections between imperialism, gender, and race. British Columbia fits within a broader context of European colonialism in that it was a settler colony where dispossession of the indigenous societies and resettlement by a newcomer population were intertwined. While this is imperial history, it is not an example of the triumph of imperialism as in this era Aboriginal peoples remained demographically dominant and socially central. Perry provides compelling evidence for the importance of gender in understanding the formation of this unique variant of colonial society. Gender figured prominently in colonial critiques of Aboriginal societies and in the efforts to remake British Columbia as a White society. The gender roles and identities in this setting departed from and challenged imperial plans and ideals. This book also makes a valuable Canadian contribution to “Whiteness” studies. These studies have blossomed over the past decade and critically examine the social construction of Whiteness, which gained its meaning from encounters with non-Whiteness.

this edge of empire: British Columbia would finally fulfill its destiny as a stable, respectable White society. The presence of White women would compel White men to reject their rough ways and would ensure compliance with proper European gender roles. There were four assisted immigration schemes to bring White women to British Columbia, and each boatload of women was eagerly anticipated and celebrated. But these schemes too faltered as Perry argues that many of these women, like their male counterparts, frequently failed to live up to the elevated standards expected of them. Once again there was a sharp disjuncture between colonial discourse and colonial practice. Introducing large numbers of single unmarried women into British Columbia posed delicate and difficult questions, particularly as the women threatened to acquire a degree of independence. By the early 1870s, single White women were no longer seen as an "unspeakable benefit" to the colonial project: family migration was seen as a better bet.

Some themes and topics could have been further developed. While the British imperial framework is apt, one should not lose sight of the North American setting. This edge of empire had much in common with California,

for example, where there were similar reshapings of gender roles and identities, along with reformers who abhorred such behaviour and attempted to impose stabilizing customs and to import White women. The theme of the "social centrality and political agency" of the Aboriginal peoples of British Columbia could have been further developed. This is important to the central argument, and more evidence of their initiatives and responses would have permitted a richer account of cultural exchange and an enhanced sense of how the Aboriginal foundations of British Columbia helped to create this unique colonial variant. Efforts to alter gender relations within Aboriginal societies must also have been an important component of colonial plans for British Columbia.

Perry weaves together the many threads of her argument into a superb conclusion that reinforces the centrality of imperialism to BC society but that also stresses the need to appreciate the fragility of this colonial project. The book is skilfully written and nicely illustrated, and it should enjoy wide readership not only in Canada but also among scholars of the American West and those elsewhere engaged in the study of gender, race, and empire.