

The Fort Langley Journals, 1827-30

Edited by Morag McLachlan
with contributions by Wayne Suttles

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MUCH OF WHAT we know about early intercultural contact in Canada is derived from the records produced by the employees of fur-trade companies, in particular those of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). However, the HBC documentary record for British Columbia presents a fractured glimpse of a tumultuous time. First, there is the intent of the records; individual writers determined content and style, but the corporate mandate of the HBC ensured that the primary concern was the balance between expenditures and returns. Interest in indigenous cultures focused on how Native people supported the commercial goals of the company. Within this context, the records were class-, gender-, and race-influenced, produced by HBC "gentlemen" of the literate management cadre, generally of Euro-North American stock and educated in the Anglo-North American tradition. Even the complete corporate records gave merely a glimpse of fur-trade and Native societies.

For some districts, there is essentially a complete run of these already-circumscribed records, but the posts of British Columbia, in the old Columbia Department, have not been so lucky. For most, there is a fragmentary assortment of post journals, correspondence, and miscellaneous records. Perhaps the most intact surviving assemblage is the departmental

accounts, which do not provide as immediate a view of fur-trade life as the daily narrative post journals (the format prescribed by HBC management). The surviving journals from Fort Langley, which cover only a brief period of its existence, have fortunately now been published through the efforts of editor Morag Maclachlan and UBC Press as *The Fort Langley Journals, 1827-30*.

We have for the first time an accessible, annotated, and indexed transcription of the Fort Langley journals, augmented by a substantial essay by Wayne Suttles discussing the ethnographic significance of the journals. The transcription is based on the 1827-30 post journal held by the British Columbia Archives, supplemented with excerpts from the three copy journals and one letter book from the same period in the HBC Archives. A brief historical introduction provides context for the establishment of Fort Langley and the creation of the journals. Related documents and information are included as appendices to provide further perspective on the journals. The quality of the transcription reflects its preparation as a labour of love by Morag Maclachlan over a period of more than fifteen years. The annotation clarifies the narrative appropriately, and the editor's enthusiasm for the people of the fur trade comes through in her biographies of the journalists and other individuals.

The essay, "The Ethnographic Significance of the Journals," by Wayne

Suttles, draws from his half-century of study among the indigenous cultures of the Lower Mainland. Professor Suttles brings a unique depth of knowledge to bear on how the journals inform and enhance our perspective on First Nations history and how ethnological evidence allows us to interpret and understand some of the events described in the journals. The essay provides a good example of how documentary and anthropological research techniques may be used in a complementary fashion – ethno-history in the true sense.

Adding weight to this book is the significance the journals have acquired since the primary copy found its way into public collections in Victoria long ago. Being easily accessible to BC researchers, rather than in London with the HNC Archives, the copy served for over a century as the primary historical resource for the study of the fur trade and contact period on the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Beginning with Hubert Howe Bancroft in the 1870s, when the journal was less than fifty years old, it has been the documentary “snapshot” always cited by historians, geographers, ethnographers, resource scientists, and First Nations (among others). It has had a profound impact on shaping our ideas

about the early period of the reconceptualization and resettlement of British Columbia. This impact was enhanced with the 1923 designation of Fort Langley as a National Historic Site, a shrine to this resettlement and to the conceptual shift into the political structures of British Columbia and Canada. Fort Langley has become a symbol of regional “development” and change, and its journals document the beginning of that process.

As published, *The Fort Langley Journals, 1827–30*, is a useful and enjoyable book. The editing and writing is well done and the resulting text eminently readable. It presents a preview of some of the constant elements in BC history, such as a commodity-exporting economy and an often uneasy relationship between established and immigrant social systems. The journals are rich in historical detail and provide an often fascinating narrative of life during the fur trade. The only caveat in enjoying and using this book is to remember that it remains a glimpse of a brief period in a time of rapid demographic and social upheaval in British Columbia. While the journals’ survival and publication gives them a powerful voice, it is a voice that tells principally of their own fragment of time and place.