

*The Resettlement of British Columbia:  
Essays on Colonialism and Geographic Change*

Cole Harris

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A little more than thirty years ago, a book called *The Seigneurial System in Early Canada* (1966) appeared that set the terms for the debate over the nature of New World societies in this country. Last year, the same author produced another book that will do the same thing. The author is Cole Harris, and his latest book is *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographic Change*. These two volumes, not to mention his work on the *Historical Atlas of Canada*, are testimony to Harris's distinguished scholarly career and his contribution to our understanding of early Canada. Though they are about two distinct places, both *The Seigneurial System* and *The Resettlement of British Columbia* are animated by Harris's ongoing interest in the relationship between land and power in the New World and the social relations that grew out of it.

Harris's work has always been notable for its eloquent argument. While he has always been able to go beyond the empirical to the broadly conceptual, this new book does so in a different way, for it is shaped by his reading of a diverse and complex international theoretical literature on power. Unlike his early work on New France and Lower Canada, his latest contribution locates the non-Native settlement of British Columbia explicitly in the context of the expansion of European imperial and commercial power,

a process that was at once brutal and subtle. Harris seeks to understand the process and meanings of colonization, which he sees as the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the remaking of space that was formerly theirs into an immigrant society. The specificities of place are not lost amidst the theorizing, however. Indeed, Harris contends that the very factors that made the European settlement of British Columbia different from that in other North American places are what make study of British Columbia so useful to understanding a process like colonization. Work like this, which uses the local to illuminate a global phenomenon, exemplifies the potential of regional history.

Read together, the essays that comprise this book (most of which were published before and appear here in somewhat modified form) make the argument that geographical change was both coincident to colonization and the means by which it was achieved. For Harris, the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the subsequent resettlement of British Columbia did not have to wait until colonies were formally established, nor was it a matter of armies, battles, or treaties. Colonization was certainly violent, but it was not just a matter of physical violence and force. The "ecological imperialism" of disease (Chapter 1), to use Alfred Crosby's term, paved the way for fur trade concerns

not simply to set up shop, but also to govern. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was a particularly important "proto-colonial presence" (34), establishing a form of European rule over both Natives and non-Natives which, though founded on fear and violence, relied on symbolic gesture and theatre (Chapter 2). This was what Harris, following Michel Foucault, calls "sovereign power," power that hinged on ability to take away life. Unlike Europe, "sovereign power" in British Columbia existed without a sovereign and the accompanying discourse of rights. Nevertheless, backed by commercial interest and a discourse of efficiency and secure profit, it worked to produce the same result: control over a subject population.

As important as sovereign power was to establishing European control, the resettlement of British Columbia turned on "disciplinary power," the power to manage life, to create a way of seeing and acting in the world. For Foucault, disciplinary power was exemplified and achieved by the asylum, penitentiary, and hospital; and, for those who have applied his insights, by the school as well.

According to Harris, in British Columbia disciplinary power rested on the land system (Chapters 3 and 4). To me, this is the heart of Harris's argument, the core of his contribution, for it is the part of the book in which the links between colonization and geographical change are most visible and clearly articulated. Colonial power, as exemplified by the land system, worked by remaking the landscape, turning it into a tangle of survey lines, water rights, pre-emptions, townsites, and railway reserves – transforming it into a commodity to produce other commodities, particularly agricultural ones (Chapter 8).

The land system should not, however, be thought of simply as a set of rules that facilitated agriculture, but as a form of cultural practice. It was a whole way of thinking about land as a commodity that was centred on the idea and ideal of individual ownership. This in turn shaped how people related to each other, what their rights and obligations were, how freely they could move about the landscape, where they could live, and how they should live. Such a system had particularly important implications for Aboriginal peoples, "impos[ing] a spatial discipline with a profound capacity to modify Native life" (101). Indeed, by 1881, Harris argues, "Native power over the Lower Mainland and, to a considerable extent, earlier Native lifeworlds had collapsed" (102).

As the 1881 census shows (Chapter 5), however, the Lower Mainland was not British Columbia. The resettlement of the province was uneven: in certain parts of British Columbia – particularly in the north – Aboriginals remained visible and vital. Their presence, along with that of a small but significant population of Asian peoples, created the context in which European settlers forged an identity as Whites, thus ensuring that cultural diversity in the province would be defined racially (a theme elaborated on in Chapter 9).

If British Columbia was a "segmented society," it was also one where life was lived locally. Capitalism remade the landscape, giving birth to work camps, resource towns, and service centres like those around Idaho Peak in southeastern British Columbia (Chapter 7). While it linked those scattered settlements to distant markets, capitalism did so without creating very much in the way of internal cohesion. A staple economy combined

with British Columbia's relative isolation and rugged geography created attenuated societies emblematic not only of British Columbia, but also of the Canadian experience.

If the lack of internal cohesion in British Columbia had social implications, it also had political ones. "This ragged place," to borrow Terry Glavin's phrase, made governance exceedingly difficult; however, what is striking about British Columbia is just how quickly distances were surmounted by developments in transportation and communication, which facilitated the exercise of power (Chapter 6). Nonetheless, though many parts of the province were linked, British Columbia didn't really emerge as a reasonably well-articulated provincial society until the mid-twentieth century.

This is an important book, characterized by its broad, sometimes breath-taking, intellectual and empirical sweep. As is the case when covering lots of ground quickly, however, the ride is sometimes a bit bumpy. As the subtitle indicates, this is a book about colonial power and colonization and the centrality of geography to both. For Harris, colonization is fundamentally a relationship between Natives and newcomers, which is about land, and which is mediated by the land system.

Of course, it was not a relationship of equals; and Harris, like so many of us who have written about Native-White relations, has been forced to grapple with two countervailing pressures: the need, on the one hand, to acknowledge Aboriginal resistance and agency, and the need, on the other, to recognize their subjugation. The results, not surprisingly, are somewhat mixed. Though the book claims to explore colonization using post-

colonial theory, there are very few "Native voices" in it – something Harris himself admits. The essays are not concerned with unsettling the discourse of colonialism using the different "subject positions" of Aboriginal peoples, nor is there any exploration of how Aboriginal peoples might have appropriated, transformed, or subverted the culture of the colonizers for their own purposes – two hallmarks of post-colonial literature. In fact, this is a book largely centred on the European colonizers and one in which Native peoples, despite a few examples to the contrary, emerge as victims, peoples pushed relatively quickly to the margins of BC society.

Despite this, Harris still has much to tell us about the relationship between Natives and newcomers, as he does in the first half of the book. But when he moves to discussing the newcomers alone, to exploring the "immigrant society" that supplanted the Indigenous one, he is less convincing. While geographical change remains foregrounded, the connections to colonization, which are so clearly and forcefully developed in the first four chapters of the book, increasingly fade away.

Three examples make my point. In "The Struggle with Distance" (Chapter 6), which is in many ways one of the best pieces in the book because of its integration of theory and empirical data, Harris outlines how developments in transportation and communication from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century knit British Columbia together and, in so doing, created both the opportunity and the means for state surveillance and control. Though he suggests that this "time-space compression" must have transformed the lifeworlds of the province's Indigenous peoples and

effected their further colonization, the idea remains unexplored. In the chapter on Idaho Peak (Chapter 7), Native peoples fade even further into the background. That essay, while wonderfully evocative and insightful, presents us with a typology of the kinds of societies created by a staples economy – something that is only tenuously linked to the issue of Native dispossession. Finally, though the piece on farming and rural life (Chapter 8) begins with the assertion that “agriculture was a culmination of processes of imperialism and colonialism that began with the first explorers, continued through the fur trade years, and reached a conclusion when ordinary people came into the province, took up land, made it into farms, and considered them home” (219–20), that assertion is not developed. Instead, Harris and his co-author describe the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture in the province from 1881 to 1941 with almost no reference to its impact on Aboriginal peoples.

Focusing on the relationship between Natives and Whites, as Harris did in the first part of the book, kept the issue of power in the foreground. However, as Natives fade from the

discussion in the latter part of the book, the analysis of power also becomes somewhat diffuse and diminished. From a fairly sharply drawn portrait of the HBC’s sovereign power and the disciplinary power imposed by the colonial and early provincial state’s land system, Harris moves to a much more impressionistic rendering of “capital” and its transformative effects on both the landscape and its peoples, and its role in creating an immigrant society. Though he acknowledges that capitalism created new relationships with the land and forged new relationships among people, those relationships are not discussed with reference to class, nor is the relationship of class to colonization explored. In addition, though the state and its role in colonization (through the land system) is clearly drawn out in the first part of the book, its subsequent role in the twentieth century – in the resettlement period – is unclear.

Despite all of this, *The Resettlement of British Columbia* is, as I said, a provocative and important book by someone who has given a great deal of thought to the relationship between land and power in Canada and, in so doing, has also given us all a great deal to work with and think about.