

# DONALD FRASER, THE *LONDON TIMES*, AND THE GOLD RUSHES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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The thirst for gold, will tempt men to leave their wives, their children, their homes, and everything that is dear to them; encounter the dangers and difficulties of a voyage to the other side of the world, and endure all the hardships, privations, and sufferings, that must either more or less attend such an undertaking. Whether it be wisdom for men under any circumstances whatever to allow themselves to be led away by gold excitements is a question I will leave to others to settle, but certain it is that in a majority of cases, the most bitter disappointment is the result.<sup>1</sup>

**I**N 1865, JOHN EMMERSON published a cautionary tale of his failure to find gold in the Cariboo goldfields of British Columbia. Leaving Liverpool, England, on 2 April 1862, he had made a round trip of more than thirty-two thousand kilometres and returned home a year later poorer than when he had left. In describing his motivations, Emmerson emphasized that he had been induced by “a strong desire to better the position” of his family and had been inspired by the “flattering accounts written by Mr. Fraser, the Victoria correspondent of the *London Times*.” And Emmerson was not alone in this complaint. In the wake of the Cariboo gold rush, which saw thousands of British goldrushers travel to one of the most isolated regions in the Empire, a series of angry letters appeared in the British press, complaining that Fraser’s correspondence had convinced them to become gold seekers but had also misrepresented the goldfields of British Columbia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Emmerson, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island: Voyages, Travels, and Adventures* (Durham: W. Ainsley, 1865), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *London Standard*, 15 April 1862; *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 18 July 1862; *Merthyr Telegraph*, 4 October 1862; *London Standard*, 30 October 1862; *Glasgow Herald*, 19 November 1862; *London Standard*, 4 December 1862; *Illustrated Usk Observer and Raglan Herald*, 14 February

This article explores Fraser's work for the *London Times*, charting his development as a journalist during the California gold rush in 1849 and then between 1858 and 1866 when he wrote about British Columbia. It considers how Fraser's reportage might have convinced his readers to become gold seekers, evaluates the nature of the charges levelled against him by disappointed goldrushers, and discusses the role of the *Times* in relaying information about the gold diggings across the British Empire. By engaging with the work of both Richard T. Stillson regarding the history of information during the California gold rush and Simon Potter's scholarship on imperial networks of communication in the mid-nineteenth century, this article seeks to throw new light on how the mechanics of news production and distribution in the mid-nineteenth century allowed Fraser to influence readers across the anglophone world.<sup>3</sup>

#### DONALD FRASER AND THE *LONDON TIMES*

Like most journalists of the mid-nineteenth century, Fraser's biography is primarily revealed through the columns he wrote. The historian James E. Hendrickson sketches an outline of his life in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. His account tells us that Fraser grew up in Inverness, Scotland. There he was a schoolmate of John Cameron Macdonald, later the manager of the *Times* and perhaps his patron at the paper.<sup>4</sup> According to Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, a fellow Scottish emigrant to British Columbia, Fraser had studied law in his youth and then "engaged in business and made money" in Chile and California.<sup>5</sup> He was about thirty-eight or thirty-nine years of age when he travelled to San Francisco in 1849 and began to cover the California gold rush for the *Times* as a special correspondent, probably being paid by the column, as was the custom for special correspondents.<sup>6</sup> In the *Times*, Fraser claimed to have worked in San Francisco as a lawyer, business advisor, landlord, and real estate speculator.

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1863; *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 April 1863; *London Standard*, 3 November 1863; *London Standard*, 12 November 1863.

<sup>3</sup> Richard T. Stillson, *Spreading the Word: A History of Information in the California Gold Rush* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Simon Potter, "Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire," *Journal of British Studies* 46, 3 (2007): 621-46.

<sup>4</sup> James Hendrickson, "Fraser, Donald," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003-, available at [http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&cid\\_nbr=6106&&PHPSESSID=86ih4dego4uoso2683ltj8act6](http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&cid_nbr=6106&&PHPSESSID=86ih4dego4uoso2683ltj8act6).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Brown et al., "Foreign Correspondent," in *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, ed. Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, 224-25 (London: Academia Press, 2009).

The California gold rush began in January 1848, gaining credibility in the eastern United States in December of the same year.<sup>7</sup> Fraser was but one of over a hundred thousand people who had clambered to California from Mexico, South America, Europe, China, and the eastern United States. This was the largest internal movement of people that the United States had seen to date, and the first of a series of significant gold rushes that swept up the anglophone world in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Many of the so-called “Argonauts” in 1849 were energized by the possibility of striking it rich, either by moiling for gold or, like Fraser, seeking to benefit from the buoyant gold rush economy that sprang up alongside the placer diggings. Indeed, San Francisco was a city propelled by vast infusions of cash and credit from the constant arrival of newcomers, which fuelled a real estate bubble that constantly tottered alongside rumours from the goldfields.<sup>9</sup> This economy featured both tremendous booms and vicious busts, a pattern that was to repeat itself later in British Columbia.

Fraser wrote at least sixty-five articles for the *Times* between July 1849 and December 1857. Most of this material was penned from San Francisco rather than the placer diggings in the interior and focused on that community’s commercial marketplace. Fraser provided detailed valuations of San Francisco’s real estate and the prices of local commodities, and he identified popular imported goods alongside colourful descriptions of the gold rush itself. Fraser seems to have imagined his audience as people like himself – interested British investors ready to exploit the booming San Francisco market. These were the dual functions of a correspondent: to provide popular news about significant current events and to infuse this reportage with pertinent commercial information. But Fraser did not canvas British readers to become goldrushers. One of his first dispatches provided a candid description of prospecting and warned readers

that gold digging is a most laborious and almost killing occupation ... After [the digger] gets, by great labour and at a considerable expense, to the scene of the operation of washing gold, his hard work really only begins. He must be constantly in the water to carry on the operation of washing gold; and the work which is performed in a stooping posture, is so hard, that while his feet are immersed in cold water the upper part of his body is streaming with profuse perspiration, with a burning sun over head. Then his living, unless he spends the best portion of

<sup>7</sup> Stillson, *Spreading the Word*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> See J.M.S. Careless, “The Lowe Brothers, 1852-70: A Study in Business Relations on the North Pacific Coast,” *BC Studies* 2 (Summer 1969): 1-18.

his earnings, is poor and very expensive, and his lodging is oftener than not on the cold ground. All are not lucky. Gold finding is like gambling – the dice may throw high, or they may beggar the player. In short, the English navigator, the Scottish ditchman, and the Irish hodman will do well at digging, if they do not overwork themselves; but to all others I would say, “Leave well alone.” It is madness in a man who cannot sleep out under a tree, eat the hardest of fare, and endure great fatigue, to turn a working gold miner.<sup>10</sup>

But Fraser was a booster, and he extolled the high wages available and opportunities for “labourers and mechanics” because of the local scarcity of working men.<sup>11</sup> As Fraser emphasizes: “The position of the labouring man is reversed in this country. In old countries he is a drug. Here he is a treasure, and is prized not according to his worth, but according to the necessities of employers.”<sup>12</sup> This correspondence reflects the changing context of the California gold rush. Initially, the rush had been characterized by the participation of individual gold seekers, attempting to garner alluvial gold through the low-tech, labour-intensive methods of panning and sluicing. But from the mid-1850s large companies took over, employing the industrialized mining practices necessary to continue extracting gold profitably, when local surface diggings became depleted.<sup>13</sup> This was the standard pattern for placer mining rushes, with a requisite shift to capital-intensive operations whereby miners became employees rather than entrepreneurs.

In general, Fraser’s California correspondence is characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, he confirmed his British readers’ long-standing crude or popular stereotypes of Yankee culture, attitudes that had been fuelled by American cries of “fifty-four forty or fight” in the lead-up to the 1846 Oregon Treaty with Great Britain. California was beset with the violence of vigilance committees and the demagoguery of “democratic” government. This portrait of American life was unflattering. On the other hand, though, Fraser described himself as an enthusiastic participant of the gold rush excitement, and he emphasized the opportunities and political rights available for working men in San Francisco. California was no panacea for the ills of British society, but Fraser understood that British emigrants could benefit from the gold rush economy without panning for gold. As we will see, Fraser’s subsequent

<sup>10</sup> *Times of London* (hereafter *Times*), 5 September 1849.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 October 1850, 19 March 1852, 30 October 1855, and 31 December 1857.

<sup>12</sup> *Times*, 31 December 1857.

<sup>13</sup> Netta Sterne, *Fraser Gold 1858: The Founding of British Columbia* (Washington: Washington State University Press, 1998), 2.

coverage of the Fraser River and Cariboo gold rushes in British Columbia shifted substantially from these mixed assessments of California. Gone would be the persona of cynical ambivalence and the candid assessment that “gold digging is under all circumstances such a perfect lottery.”<sup>14</sup>

#### DONALD FRASER AND THE GOLDFIELDS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

San Francisco newspapers began publishing rumours of gold discoveries in New Caledonia (present-day mainland British Columbia) in the spring of 1858.<sup>15</sup> Fraser himself announced the first publication of such stories in San Francisco newspapers on 15 April, with news reports from Oregon papers. Fraser’s own first despatch was dated 19 April 1858 and was republished in the *London Times* on 31 May 1858. Over the next three months, Fraser chronicled events from San Francisco, detailing how thousands of gold seekers had raced northwards. As many as thirty thousand goldrushers flooded into New Caledonia.<sup>16</sup> Most took ship to Victoria before moving inland to the goldfields, but Daniel Marshall estimates that at least eight thousand trekked overland “through northern California to Oregon, along the Columbia and Okanagan rivers of Washington Territory, and across the 49th parallel.”<sup>17</sup> Many of these American gold seekers had been displaced by industrial mining in California, and their movement northwards was part of a broader circum-Pacific movement by itinerant placer gold miners. Veteran forty-niners were adept in the technologies of placer mining and utilized pans and rockers to find alluvial gold.<sup>18</sup> The relatively low-tech devices used water to sift through alluvial sediment, separating the lighter sand and gravel from heavier flecks of gold.

Like his early missives about the California gold rush in 1849, Fraser’s first comments on the Fraser River diggings were not entirely complimentary. Prospective miners faced multiple challenges. The voyage from San Francisco to Victoria, Vancouver Island – the main port of entry for the goldfields – was expensive, and many of the vessels on the route

<sup>14</sup> *Times*, 29 August 1853.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel P. Marshall, “Claiming the Land: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to British Columbia” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2000), 3.

<sup>16</sup> John S. Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 179.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, “Claiming the Land,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Kennedy, “Fraser River Placer Mining Landscapes,” *BC Studies* 160 (Winter 2008–09): 42; Andrew D. Nelson and Michael Kennedy, “Fraser River Gold Mines and Their Place Names,” *BC Studies* 172 (Winter 2011–12): 119.

were overcrowded and barely seaworthy; in Victoria, the miner was still one hundred and sixty to four hundred kilometres from the diggings; on site, provisions and tools were expensive.<sup>19</sup> Added to all of this, the local First Nations, the Nlaka'pamux, resented the trespass of goldrushers in their traditional territory. In Fraser's words: "But worst of all the ills of the miner's life in New Caledonia are the jealousy and the audacious thieving of the Indians."<sup>20</sup> Despite such challenges, in his early reports Fraser concluded that the Fraser River and its tributaries were rich in gold.

Fraser himself travelled to Victoria in early June 1858;<sup>21</sup> later that year, he accompanied the local chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), who was also governor of Vancouver Island, James Douglas, on an expedition up the Fraser River to see the diggings first-hand.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, much of his reportage was filed from Victoria – as earlier, his California reportage had been filed from San Francisco. Up until 1858, Victoria had been a small entrepôt for the HBC and, since 1849, the capital of the British colony of Vancouver Island. On the west coast, the HBC had branched out from the fur trade into a resource-based economy. Despite this, the British colonial population was small; there were only 774 HBC settlers on Vancouver Island in 1855, two-thirds of whom were male.<sup>23</sup> Additional HBC posts were scattered at strategic locations along the coast and across the interior of New Caledonia, with supply and communications links stretching to Red River and York Factory on Hudson Bay. These fur trade posts were fortified and well-armed, but they were also lightly occupied structures planted amidst much larger First Nations populations.<sup>24</sup>

A contemporary estimate from the mid-nineteenth century suggested that there were eighty thousand First Nations people living on Vancouver Island and along the Northwest Coast of North America.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Times*, 26 June 1858 and 4 August 1858.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 August 1858.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 August 1858.

<sup>22</sup> See Douglas to Lytton, 12 October 1858, CO 60/1 no. 12721, Colonial Despatches of Vancouver Island and British Columbia 1846-1871, available at <http://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/getDoc.htm?id=B58003.scx>.

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Mackie, "The Colonization of Vancouver Island, 1849-1858," *BC Studies* 96 (Winter 1992-93): 3-40. For the 1855 population, see Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>24</sup> See Cole Harris, "Strategies of Power in the Cordilleran Fur Trade," in *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, 31-67 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Despard Pemberton, *Facts and Figures Relating to Vancouver Island and British Columbia, Showing What to Expect and How to Get There* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 132.

Thus when goldrushers inundated the Fraser River Valley and Fraser Canyon, they trespassed upon the densely populated territories of Coast Salish, Stl'atl'imx, Nlaka'pamux, Secwepemc, Okanagan, and Tsilhqot'in peoples. This invasion disrupted Indigenous lifeways and initiated considerable conflict, but it also created new economic opportunities for Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, Fraser's early characterization of First Nations as potential enemies belied the predominant reality on the ground. Ronald Genini, Daniel Marshall, and Michael Kennedy show that Secwepemc and Nlaka'pamux peoples were major participants of the Fraser River gold rush in 1858 and that they had been mining for gold for the HBC before outsiders arrived in the region.<sup>26</sup> In a recent article, reiterating this theme, Mica Jorgenson shows that a similar pattern of Aboriginal participation occurred during the Cariboo gold rush as Stl'atl'imx, Tsilhqot'in, Haida, and Coast Salish peoples all worked alongside newcomer goldrushers within the customary territory of the Dakelh people.<sup>27</sup> However, Fraser largely ignored Aboriginal work, preferring to celebrate the way in which the new emigrants transformed the landscape and economy.<sup>28</sup> While Indigenous sovereignty was ignored, the arrival of thousands of American goldrushers inspired British fears of a hostile American annexation of New Caledonia.<sup>29</sup> In response to the Fraser River gold rush, in August 1858 the British Parliament created the separate colony of British Columbia on the mainland, with Governor Douglas occupying the executive of both Pacific colonies simultaneously.<sup>30</sup>

In his California correspondence, Fraser repeatedly deprecated the HBC's administration of Vancouver Island, arguing that the colony was "languishing."<sup>31</sup> The HBC, Fraser contended in 1852, discouraged settlement because its primary interest lay in "rearing and fostering wild beasts."<sup>32</sup> Here Fraser reiterated a popular view that had been expressed during debates over the creation of the colony of Vancouver Island: that

<sup>26</sup> See Ronald Genini, "The Fraser-Cariboo Gold Rushes: Comparisons and Contrasts with the California Gold Rush," *Journal of the West* 2, 3 (1972): 470-87; Marshall, "Claiming the Land," 18-19; Daniel Marshall, "Rickard Revisited: Native 'Participation' in the Gold Discoveries of British Columbia," *Native Studies Review* 2, 1 (1996-97): 91-108; Michael Kennedy, "Fraser River Placer Mining Landscapes," 44.

<sup>27</sup> Mica Jorgenson, "Into That Country to Work': Aboriginal Economic Activities during Barkerville's Gold Rush," *BC Studies* 185 (Spring 2015): 109-36.

<sup>28</sup> *Times*, 5 February 1862. Fraser described First Nations at the Cariboo thus: "The native Indians very quiet, civil, and industrious; very useful as carriers of provision, &c."

<sup>29</sup> Marshall, "Claiming the Land," 151-53, 160-63.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret A. Ormsby, "Douglas, Sir James," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003-, available at [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/douglas\\_james\\_10E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/douglas_james_10E.html).

<sup>31</sup> *Times*, 4 July 1850, 20 November 1851, and 12 November 1852.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 November 1852.

the HBC acted as a sort of gamekeeper on its vast estates and was unfit to oversee colonization.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, throughout the early colonial era, Vancouver Island had struggled to attract immigrants because of the high cost of local land. The Colonial Office set a high price on Vancouver Island land in the hope that colonists would be compelled to participate in the local labour market and that monied capitalists would be guaranteed labour to work their estates.<sup>34</sup> As Richard Mackie observes, this “system worked in the sense that it resulted in the creation of a stratified colonial society where political power was vested, as in Britain, in the ownership of land.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, the local settler elite was composed of the resident officer class of the HBC who reinvested their capital in the pricy local real estate. This settler community, though numerically small, founded a commercial hub on southern Vancouver Island, rather than an agricultural hamlet, to exploit both abundant natural resources and cheap Aboriginal sources of trade and labour.

Once in Victoria, Fraser’s attitude quickly shifted to admiration for the community’s power brokers.<sup>36</sup> In situ, Fraser reported that the HBC dealt with local First Nations in the best British humanitarian spirit, which contrasted markedly with the American policy of “extermination.”<sup>37</sup> The clear implication was that gold seekers had little to fear from Indigenous resistance.<sup>38</sup> Fraser’s about-face stemmed, in part, from his new affinity for Douglas, a fellow Scotsman who described Fraser to the Colonial Office as “a gentleman of high legal attainments” and who, in October 1858, promptly appointed him to the Council of Vancouver Island.<sup>39</sup> Fraser’s swift rise to local prominence suggests that his role as a correspondent met with Douglas’s approval. Indeed, Hendrickson argues that “Fraser quickly emerged as the governor’s trusted confidant and unofficial advisor, and as a leading booster of Vancouver Island.”<sup>40</sup> There

<sup>33</sup> James Edward Fitzgerald, *An Examination of the Charter and Proceedings of the Hudson Bay Company, with Reference to the Grant of Vancouver Island* (London: Edward Trelawney, 1849); R.M. Martin, *The Hudson’s Bay Territories and Vancouver’s Island* (London: T. and W. Boone, 1849).

<sup>34</sup> Mackie, “Colonization of Vancouver Island,” 9–10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> For the history of Victoria, see Derek Pethick, *Victoria: The Fort* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1968); Harry Gregson, *A History of Victoria, 1842–1970* (Victoria: Victoria Observer Publishing Co. Ltd., 1970).

<sup>37</sup> *Times*, 27 August 1858. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>38</sup> See Barry M. Gough, “The Indian Policies of Great Britain and the United States in the Pacific Northwest in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 2, 2 (1982): 321–37.

<sup>39</sup> See Douglas to Lytton, 12 October 1858, CO 60/1, no. 12721, Colonial Despatches of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, 1846–1871.

<sup>40</sup> Hendrickson, “Fraser, Donald.”



were even rumours that Fraser was wooing one of Douglas's daughters.<sup>41</sup> In short, following Fraser's relocation to Victoria, he became more appreciative of the HBC's "Indian Policy," more involved in local politics and society, and more positive about the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.

Throughout his gold rush correspondence, Fraser encouraged the emigration of British goldrushers from the United Kingdom to Vancouver Island and British Columbia by highlighting opportunities to find gold, to work for excellent wages, and to settle on good land. First, he argued that the gold mines offered excellent returns for unskilled labour. In numerous colourful anecdotes, Fraser described meeting gold seekers all along the Fraser River during the journey he had undertaken with Douglas, noting their daily takings and the relative costs of provisions. Of key importance was his repeated claim that gold prospecting was suited to unskilled labour: "a person of sedentary habits, who never worked at rude outdoors occupations, can improve his pecuniary condition by taking a spell at mining."<sup>42</sup> Fraser also detailed that gold mining was profitable. Some miners were finding an ounce of gold a day and one hundred dollars per day between two men – literally fabulous wages for the time.<sup>43</sup> The average annual wage of a labourer for the HBC in the 1850s was twenty pounds a year, or one hundred dollars.<sup>44</sup>

The key point was that "there [was] plenty of gold in British Columbia, and that population alone [was] wanting to get it out."<sup>45</sup> For Fraser, the competition of other gold seekers or a lack of specialized mining skills were not impediments to success. The historian Brian Roberts argues that middle-class eastern Americans were attracted to the California gold rush in 1849 precisely because the promise of riches for all represented an escape from the incessant competition within the United States's rapidly industrializing economy.<sup>46</sup> Here we see how Fraser's correspondence depicted a similar idealized marketplace in British Columbia. Prospecting on the Fraser River offered a new beginning, or El Dorado, to those who would come. In Fraser's view, British Columbia's geographical isolation was a more significant challenge than was the actual task of wrestling gold from the earth. Yet while travelling to British Columbia was both

<sup>41</sup> Emerson, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 96: "I cannot vouch for the truth of this; it was the gossip of the place and must be taken for what it is worth."

<sup>42</sup> *Times*, 25 December 1858.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 December 1858.

<sup>44</sup> Mackie, "Colonization of Vancouver Island," 25.

<sup>45</sup> *Times*, 28 June 1859.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 65-66.

expensive and a long journey, this voyage was not insurmountable in the increasingly mobile world of the mid-nineteenth century.

But the excitement of the region's boom was followed by a rapid bust. Most American gold seekers left British Columbia after only a single season.<sup>47</sup> They were driven away by the high cost of provisions, isolation, and the challenges associated with prospecting only a few months of the year when river sandbars were accessible. Miners were also scared off by the Fraser River War – a violent conflict that had occurred between American goldrushers and the Nlaka'pamux people of the Fraser River corridor.<sup>48</sup> But while the California press pronounced the Fraser River gold rush to be a “humbug,” Fraser continued to describe the diggings enthusiastically.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, he decried the ignorance of those who left, insisting that mining could continue in the winter months and that new roads would soon be constructed by the colonial administration to facilitate access to the gold diggings. It did and they were. Mining continued between 1859 and 1861 but on a smaller scale and at new locations further along the Fraser and Thompson rivers as gold seekers continued to move into new territory.

Then, in June 1861, Fraser announced the “discovery of new and very rich diggings” in the Cariboo region, located in the central interior of British Columbia, in the Cariboo Mountains and accessible by the gold-bearing Quesnel and Cottonwood Rivers – tributaries of the Fraser River.<sup>50</sup> His descriptions of the successes experienced by miners was incredible: “It is common to meet men who have sums varying from \$5,000 to \$10,000 ... The amount of gold taken out of a single district, named Cariboo, appears really fabulous.”<sup>51</sup> Later, Fraser stressed the profits that inexperienced miners were realizing: gold seekers who were “new hands – raw at work” had made \$200/day ... “Men who had never mined before, tradesmen, mechanics, and labourers new to the work, did just as well as the old practiced miner”; “Few claims yielded less than \$50 to \$100 a day to the hand.”<sup>52</sup> These were astonishing amounts when the salary of a police officer in Victoria was twenty dollars per month.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> George Fetherling, *The Gold Crusades. A Social History of Gold Rushes, 1849–1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 60.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Marshall, “No Parallel: American Miners-Soldiers at War with the Nlaka'pamux of the Canadian West,” in *Parallel Destinies: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies*, ed. John M. Findlay and Ken S. Coates, 31–79 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Fetherling, *River of Gold: The Fraser & Cariboo Gold Rushes* (Heritage House Publishing: Victoria, 2008), 37.

<sup>50</sup> *Times*, 8 August 1861. Original article dated 10 June 1861.

<sup>51</sup> *Times*, 11 December 1861.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 February 1862.

<sup>53</sup> *British Colonist*, 22 September 1860.

Earlier, in California, Fraser had regarded/described returns of five to sixteen dollars per day as lucrative enough to encourage mechanics to migrate from the United Kingdom to California.<sup>54</sup> In the Cariboo, Fraser asserted, “*Every able man who chooses to work will make money.*”<sup>55</sup>

Alongside the diggings, Fraser encouraged his readers to take advantage of not only the excellent conditions for settlement on Vancouver Island but also the high wages available in both Victoria and British Columbia. By his account, Vancouver Island was “England reproduced at the Antipodes, with a vastly improved climate.”<sup>56</sup> He predicted there would soon be a “mania” for land on Vancouver Island, given its agricultural productivity and the fact that “all who come here like the place and desire to remain permanently.” And just as he had described the labour market of San Francisco positively, Fraser guaranteed that “all who will come will find ready employment at high wages.”<sup>57</sup> It was all quite fabulous. There was gold for the panning, land for the settling,<sup>58</sup> and jobs for the taking.

#### FRASER’S CRITICS

Although American prospectors led the way in the Fraser River excitement, most of those who came later were of British origin, men who had travelled to the region from both the United Kingdom and across the British Empire. It is estimated that six thousand goldrushers travelled to the Cariboo region in 1862.<sup>59</sup> They soon discovered that conditions in the Pacific colonies were not exactly as they had expected. The story of John Emmerson, which provides the opening vignette for this article, was published in 1865, but already in mid-1862 letters began to appear in the British press accusing the *London Times*’s correspondent of deception. In a letter to the editor of the *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, published on 18 July 1862, the writer states: “much of the newspaper correspondence from here [Victoria, VI], and found in English journals, is unreliable, not because of its positive untruthfulness but from its concealment of the

<sup>54</sup> *Times*, 19 March 1852.

<sup>55</sup> *Times*, 6 February 1862. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 December 1861.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 June 1859.

<sup>58</sup> For more realistic views of the process and challenges of agricultural settlement on colonial Vancouver Island, see Richard Mackie, *The Wilderness Profound: Victorian Life on the Gulf of Georgia* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 2002 [1995]), 56–99; and Ruth Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and the Practices of Settlement, Saltspring Island, British Columbia, 1859–91* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> F.W. Howay and E.O.S. Scholefield, eds., *Cariboo Gold Rush* (Vancouver: Heritage House, 1987), 25.

whole truth.” The writer then adds that the correspondent for the *Times* was Donald Fraser and that he was “a considerable proprietor” in Victoria. These themes – the personal identification of Fraser, the exposition of his real estate holdings in Victoria, and allegations of his concealment of the true situation in British Columbia – would be repeated by other letter writers.<sup>60</sup>

The mid-nineteenth century was the heyday of anonymous journalism; while readers might have been informally aware of a local editor or newspaper proprietor’s identity, journalists and correspondents did not sign their bylines. By naming Fraser as the correspondent for the *Times*, letter writers were providing confidential information that unmasked part of the *Times*’s corporate identity.

One of the most serious, and true, allegations was that Fraser owned a great deal of property in Victoria when the Cariboo gold rush occurred. Indeed, very shortly after his arrival on or around 10 June 1858,<sup>61</sup> Fraser began accumulating an extensive portfolio of local real estate. On 1 July 1858, he paid the initial instalments to purchase 275 hectares in the Cowichan district and 243 hectares in the North Saanich district for £256 5s.<sup>62</sup> Then, on 1 September 1858, he paid the initial instalments of fifty-one pounds on 162 hectares in the South Saanich district.<sup>63</sup> And during his first several months residence, Fraser purchased thirty town lots worth approximately £708 4s 36d.<sup>64</sup> Tax assessments published in the *Government Gazette* from 1861 reveal that, by then, Fraser owned over one hundred town lots in Victoria and 276 hectares in the neighbouring districts of North and South Saanich.<sup>65</sup> Worth noting is that, while Fraser did briefly describe the mania for real estate in Victoria, he did not disclose the extent of his business activities. In one column dated 15 July 1858, Fraser mentioned his purchase of land in the Cowichan district and three town lots in Victoria, but he emphasized that his purchases incurred a financial loss. “So much for gambling in land” was his con-

<sup>60</sup> *London Evening Standard*, 3 April 1862, 15 April 1862; *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 18 July 1862; *Merthyr Telegraph*, 4 October 1862; *London Evening Standard*, 30 October 1862; *Glasgow Herald*, 19 November 1862; *London Evening Standard*, 4 December 1862; 26 December 1862; *Illustrated Usk Observer and Raglan Herald*, 14 February 1863; *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 April 1863; *London Evening Standard*, 3 November 1863, 12 November 1863.

<sup>61</sup> *Times*, 10 August 1858.

<sup>62</sup> “Vancouver Island Colony. Abstract of Land Sales in the different Districts from the Commencement of the Colony to March 31<sup>st</sup> 1860,” Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA), miscellaneous papers, H.1/9.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> “Vancouver Island Colony. Sales of Town Lots in Victoria to November 4<sup>th</sup> 1858 (Fur Trade Property), Statement No. 10,” HBCA, miscellaneous papers, H.1/9.

<sup>65</sup> *Government Gazette*, 30 September 1861.

clusion.<sup>66</sup> These self-deprecating remarks imply that Fraser had arrived too late to benefit from the gold rush excitement.

To his critics, though, Fraser's extensive local real estate holdings were evidence of his own participation in the gold rush economy of the region and a strong circumstantial proof that he had been promoting the BC goldfields for his own benefit. By encouraging emigration to the region, Fraser stood to benefit from the increased valuation of real estate on Vancouver Island. In real terms, Fraser was acting as a booster for the region, not unlike the editors of the Victoria press and guidebook writers. Of course, Fraser was not the only one trying to get rich by investing in property: almost all of Victoria's leading citizens were in on the game. Nor was he the only local writer attempting to popularize the local goldfields.<sup>67</sup> Editors of the Victoria press uniformly described the local diggings in positive terms but agreed about almost nothing else. Yet what differentiated Fraser from his peers in Victoria was that he had a far more powerful platform from which to promote British Columbia.

In response to accusations that he had concealed his business interests, Fraser responded in October 1862 that British Columbia was "a country in which he ha[d] no pecuniary interest, in which he [did] not own and [did] not wish to own one inch of land, and in which he has not one farthing invested in any way, shape, or manner."<sup>68</sup> Now this was technically true: Fraser did not own land in British Columbia, the site of the gold diggings. But, as the irate writer C.F. Dowsett noted in the *London Evening Standard* on 4 December 1862, Victoria was the principal destination for all emigrants en route to British Columbia and local real estate there had increased in value enormously with the booming gold rush economy. Victoria was not only the gateway to the goldfields but also the provisioning centre for trade and commerce to and from the mines. In addition, Fraser's complainants alleged that he had deceived his readers on four counts: he had misrepresented (1) the ease of travel in the region, (2) the presence of accessible gold in the Cariboo goldfields, (3) opportunities for alternative employment, and (4) the availability of land for settlement.

<sup>66</sup> *Times*, 27 August 1858.

<sup>67</sup> For example, A.C. Anderson, *Handbook and Map to the Gold Region of Frazer's and Thompson Rivers* (San Francisco: J.J. Le Count, 1858); Alfred Waddington, *The Fraser Mines Vindicated, or The History of Four Months* (Victoria: De Garro, 1858); Joseph Despard Pemberton, *Facts and Figures Relating to Vancouver Island and British Columbia Showing What to Expect and How to Get There* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860); Charles Forbes, *Vancouver Island, Its Resources and Capabilities as a nNew Colony* (Victoria: The Colonial Government, 1862.

<sup>68</sup> *Times*, 21 October 1862.

The first surprise for goldrushers who had been reliant on the *Times* was that, upon reaching Victoria, they still faced a difficult journey to reach the Cariboo diggings. Much of that distance had to be travelled on foot or by pack horse, laden with all the supplies necessary for the season of gold digging ahead. In his book, Emmerson notes that he and others had expected the forty pounds, which was the cost of the voyage to reach Victoria from Great Britain, to be the most expensive part of their journey. But in Victoria they learned that five times that amount of money was necessary to pay for the remaining journey and provisions at the mines.<sup>69</sup> This news came as a heavy blow to those with limited means. As the writer “Veritas” notes in his letter to the *London Evening Telegraph*, thirty-nine men out every one hundred lost their lives as they travelled to and from the Cariboo because of “hunger and want,” travelling unshod and unclothed, subsisting on pine bark, and being beset by the “pitiless climate.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps Emmerson and “Veritas” answered Fraser with their own exaggerations, but it is undeniable that Fraser did not elaborate the difficulties inherent in reaching, and then subsisting in, the Cariboo.

When the goldrushers reached the Cariboo, another letter writer complained that he found the gold to be five to eighteen metres deep instead of less than two metres deep as Fraser had described.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, mining conditions in the Cariboo were very different from those by the Fraser River, where surface diggings had been the norm. In the Cariboo, miners had to dig deep shafts to gain access to the gold. As the historian George Fetherling comments, “Once beyond the early prospecting stage, Cariboo mining required capital investment in technology.”<sup>72</sup> With the influx of goldrushers to the Cariboo, the prices of provisions also skyrocketed, forcing many unsuccessful gold seekers to leave. But men who could not mine for gold also could not find relief in Victoria. For example, at a public meeting in Victoria held on 5 August 1862 to establish an immigrant board, a Mr. Bishop “pitched right and left into Donald Fraser,” stating that, “on the subject of facilities for obtaining farm-land and the chances of employment, there had been many wrong statements.”<sup>73</sup>

As I explore elsewhere, Fraser was strategically silent regarding the presence of First Nations peoples in Victoria and their role in the com-

<sup>69</sup> Emmerson, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 92–96.

<sup>70</sup> *London Evening Standard*, 3 November 1863.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 October 1862.

<sup>72</sup> Fetherling, *River of Gold*, 106.

<sup>73</sup> *British Colonist*, 5 August 1862.

munity's labour market.<sup>74</sup> As the historian Penelope Edmonds shows, since before Victoria's foundation in 1843 as a fur trade post, the area had always been an Indigenous space, the site of Lekwungen settlement.<sup>75</sup> Throughout the gold rush period, First Nations peoples represented a sizable element of Victoria's population and played significant roles, selling and growing foodstuffs for the community and working in the local economy. Indeed, from the early 1850s on the community was annually visited by up to several thousand First Nations people from the northern Northwest Coast, including Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuxalk, Heiltsuk, Haisla, Ts'msyen, Tlingit, and Haida peoples who came to work and trade. In his correspondence, though, Fraser described a racialized labour market in Victoria in which Euro-Americans could garner high wages while at the same time employing cheap Aboriginal workers on their new farms. This alleged ideal situation did not exist. As C.F. Dowsett noted when he left Victoria in September 1862, "the only employment offering was harvesting and wood splitting, the former at \$15 per month and food, and the latter \$30 per month without food, and only a very limited demand at that."<sup>76</sup> This was a far cry from the promised wages of three dollars per day that Fraser had cited as the minimum wage for unskilled labourers in Victoria. Likewise, regarding opportunities for settlement, land on Vancouver Island was both limited in its availability and expensive. Douglas's decision not to pay the Cowichan First Nation for its land in 1860 prior to opening its territory northwest of Victoria to pre-emption claims hampered settlement, as prospective Euro-American settlers were often too afraid to occupy the unextinguished territory.<sup>77</sup> Controversy over the pressing issue of Indian title was another subject Fraser avoided.

By September 1862, Fraser himself acknowledged that many miners were leaving the Cariboo region, "dissatisfied, disappointed, and unsuccessful."<sup>78</sup> According to Fraser, these goldrushers "blame everybody and everything – the Press, the country, the mines, the climate, the mosquitoes, the roads, and the want of roads, the provisions, the wages, the Government, the high prices of all things, the steamers, and their fares." Quoting his friend the local chief justice Matthew Begbie, Fraser ridiculed these failed goldrushers: "they actually alleged that

<sup>74</sup> See Kenton Storey, *Settler Anxiety at the Outposts of Empire: Colonial Relations, Humanitarian Discourses, and the Imperial Press* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

<sup>75</sup> Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).

<sup>76</sup> *London Evening Standard*, 4 December 1862.

<sup>77</sup> Storey, "Aboriginal Title and the Victoria Press," in Storey, *Settler Anxiety*, 102–28.

<sup>78</sup> *Times*, 25 September 1862.

they had expected to see the lumps of gold lying about on the grass, bright and shining, like turnips or cabbages in a field, or mushrooms on the hillside.”<sup>79</sup> Perhaps these gold seekers had been credulous, but the *Times*’s own editor had jumped to the same conclusions based on Fraser’s descriptions, writing: “but in every case the metal seems to lie near the surface, and to be found in solid masses ... Very little skill is required in collecting it.”<sup>80</sup> In his own defence, Fraser emphasized: “I invariably wrote the truth, and that I did not write for *children*” (emphasis in the original). In this way, Fraser deprecated the complaints made by failed gold seekers by alleging that these men “were unfitted physically and from previous habits of life for the necessary labour.”

In this critical assessment of the masculinity of failed gold seekers, Fraser tapped into a rich stereotype that is explored by the historian Brian Roberts in his research on the California gold rush. Indeed, Roberts observes how middle-class eastern American goldrushers were characterized in the popular press as “dandies,” wholly unsuited to the rough and tough prospecting life.<sup>81</sup> The irony of this stereotype is that it was predominantly middle-class men – clerks and professionals – who could actually afford to pay the travel costs associated with reaching the gold rush from afar. As Robert Hogg also recently observes in his comparative study of Queensland and British Columbia, the colonial frontier was characterized by Victorian men as a testing ground for their masculinity.<sup>82</sup> According to this discourse, failed gold seekers were lesser men. Thus, in their complaints, Fraser’s critics reclaimed their manhood by stressing how they had survived adversity in the wilderness.

It is fair to say that Fraser’s critics were partially justified. They found conditions more difficult than advertised. Local opportunities for employment and settlement were limited, placer mining demanded skilled labour, and, finally, simply reaching the Cariboo region was difficult. Disappointed miners paid a high cost in time lost, money wasted, and sheer hardship. For example, the journey from Great Britain to Vancouver Island cost the equivalent of more than a year’s wages for a working man. It is no surprise that the failed gold seeker William Mark fantasized about blowing Fraser’s brains out with a pistol or that rumours swirled about his being lynched in Victoria by a mob of disappointed

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 October 1862.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 February 1862.

<sup>81</sup> Roberts, *American Alchemy*.

<sup>82</sup> See Robert Hogg, *Men and Manliness on the Frontier: Queensland and British Columbia in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).



gold seekers.<sup>83</sup> Fraser's buoyant reportage made him an easy scapegoat. Deeper questions remain, though, regarding how the structure and shape of communications networks during in this period contributed to the credibility of Fraser's correspondence.

#### COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS AND JOURNALISTIC CREDIBILITY

Fraser's critics alleged that he had betrayed the principles of journalistic integrity. It is essential, then, to consider the role of the press in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1850, the journalist and historian F. Knight Hunt described newspapers as "a positive necessity of civilized existence – a portion, indeed, of modern civilization."<sup>84</sup> In this period the press occupied an iconic status across the anglophone world. Its idealized role as the Fourth Estate was to reflect public opinion and mediate relations between the ruling and ruled classes.<sup>85</sup> The press had gained this responsibility slowly with the emergence of the public sphere in the eighteenth century.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the press was considered to be a quintessentially British institution, the enemy of tyranny, and an agent of the moral, social, and political transformation of the world.<sup>87</sup>

Yet newspapers were also widely understood to reflect the specific interests of their owners and editors. They were often consumed with party politics and advocated particular political platforms to a popular audience. Less purely political than the journals of decades earlier, yet not the more fully commercialized papers of the late nineteenth century, they were hybrids,<sup>88</sup> and they were vital forums for the exchange of ideas and information in all areas of new world settlement. Nine newspapers were published (at least ephemerally) in Victoria, a community of a few

<sup>83</sup> Emerson, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 53-54; D.G.F. Macdonald, *Lecture on British Columbia and Vancouver's Island* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1863), 46.

<sup>84</sup> F. Knight Hunt, *The Fourth Estate: Contributions towards a History of Newspapers and the Liberty of the Press*, vol. 1 (London: David Bogue, 1850), 1.

<sup>85</sup> Alexander Andrews, *The History of British Journalism from the Foundation of the Newspaper Press in England to the Repeal of the Stamp Act in 1855, with Sketches of Press Celebrities*, vol. 2 (London: Richard Bentley, 1859), 266, 347; Hunt, *Fourth Estate*, 7-8.

<sup>86</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 57-67, 89-95.

<sup>87</sup> James Grant, *The Newspaper Press: Its Origin—Its Progress—and Present Position*, vol. 2 (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1871), 459-60.

<sup>88</sup> See Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

thousand, in the five years after 1858.<sup>89</sup> San Francisco had 132 newspapers between 1846 and 1858, a testament to both the volatility of newspapers as business enterprises and the vibrant print culture of gold rush society. But the high volumes of both the production and consumption of news in this period did not necessarily equate to its accuracy or timely transmission. While readers expected the press to provide factual information, the system of checks and balances to ensure the veracity of the news was hobbled by both the slow speed of news transmission and the prevalence of passive methods of news acquisition.

Most newspapers operated with small staffs of editors and printers, and had very limited capacity for what would now be called investigative journalism. Much “news” came from informal and non-professional correspondents or was republished from other papers. Sometimes material cut and pasted from papers with different editorial perspectives would provide contrasting views of a story, but news monopolies could also occur in this environment when editors of a given press community agreed about a particular news narrative or when one editorial perspective dominated in the absence of opposing voices.<sup>90</sup>

News from British Columbia in the 1850s and early 1860s travelled across the British Empire by mail via maritime shipping. Fraser’s despatches from California and Vancouver Island were generally published in the *Times* two to three months after they were written, and there was little change in this delay between 1849 and 1863. Although telegraphic technology developed in the 1840s, heralded by what Roland Wenzlhuemer calls the “dematerialization” of information transmission from tangible carriers to electric impulses capable of near instantaneous transmission across time and space,<sup>91</sup> the first telegraph connections to Vancouver Island came from the United States in 1866.<sup>92</sup> Initially, telegraphic networks carried mainly market prices, shipping information, and brief

<sup>89</sup> First *Victoria Gazette* (June 1858–November 1859), *Vancouver Island Gazette* (July–September 1858), *Newsletter for Vancouver Island and New Caledonia* (September 1858), *Le Courier de la Nouvelle Calédonie* (September–October 1858), *British Colonist* (December 1858–1980), *New Westminster Times and Vancouver Island Guardian* (September 1859–March 1860), second *Victoria Gazette* (December 1859–September 1860), *The Press* (March 1861–October 1862), and *Victoria Daily Chronicle* (October 1862–June 1866).

<sup>90</sup> See Peter Putnis for a discussion of how press responses to the Indian Rebellion across the globe were shaped by Anglo-Indian papers’ unified portrait of the conflict as a struggle between “civilization vs. barbarism,” “The Indian Insurgency of 1857 as a Global Media Event,” in *International Association for Mass Communication Research* (The American University in Cairo: University of Canberra, 2007), 10.

<sup>91</sup> Roland Wenzlhuemer, “The Dematerialization of Telecommunication,” *Journal of Global History* 2, 3 (2007): 349.

<sup>92</sup> See Cole Harris, “The Struggle of Distance,” in Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, 161–93 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997).

headlines – news that was concise, time sensitive, and economically valuable.<sup>93</sup> Thus, networks of information transmission in the late 1850s and early 1860s continued to be informal and relatively unstructured rather than defined by press “systems,” which took shape in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>94</sup>

News transmission during the BC gold rushes followed an established precedent. Newspapers had played a key role in popularizing the California gold rush but were also subsequently targets of derision for their publication of false or biased initial reports that had allegedly misled goldrushers. The historian Richard T. Stillson shows how newspaper proprietors were among the first to take advantage of popular interest in the gold diggings through their provision of available information.<sup>95</sup> Much of the initial news about the California gold rush, however, was both fantastical and difficult to corroborate. Misinformation about the gold diggings in 1849 was rife because of the spatial distance and transmission lag between California and the eastern United States and the absence of established communications infrastructure.

For example, one of the most popular guidebooks published in 1849 was the *Emigrant's Guide to the Gold Mines*, supposedly written by an American soldier stationed in California. This guidebook was “a blend of imagination and information culled from newspaper accounts geared toward the gold fever dreams of easterners and peppered with a few legitimate names in an attempt to secure credibility.”<sup>96</sup> Books like this were produced to make money and were taken seriously because of the intense demand for relevant information as goldrushers prepared for their journey to the west. In the context of general ignorance about California, writers with no actual experience of life in California or gold digging could compile saleable guidebooks. Ten years later, metropolitan authors in Great Britain with no first-hand experience of British Columbia also wrote guidebooks for prospective goldrushers in the United Kingdom, often drawing on Fraser’s correspondence as a reputable source.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> See Roger Neil Barton, “New Media: The Birth of Telegraphic News in Britain, 1847–68,” *Media History* 16, 4 (2010): 379–406.

<sup>94</sup> See Simon Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System, 1876–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>95</sup> Stillson, *Spreading the Word*, 13.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>97</sup> See Robert Michael Ballantyne, *Handbook to the New Gold Fields* (Edinburgh: A. Strahan, 1858); John Domer, *New British Gold-Fields: A Guide to British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London: William Henry Angel, 1858); William Carew Hazlitt, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1858); W. Parker Snow, *British Columbia, Emigration and Our Colonies Considered Practically* (London: Piper, Stephenson, and Spence, 1858); William Carew Hazlitt, *The Great Gold Fields of Caribou* (London: Routledge, Wanre and Routledge,

Fraser's correspondence for the *Times* gained credibility from two sources. First, the *Times* was one of the most important newspapers within the United Kingdom.<sup>98</sup> Regarded by British contemporaries as the "Monarch of the Press," it was "read in England [and beyond] by high and low, rich and poor, and what it contain[ed] regarded as truth."<sup>99</sup> The extensive circulation and strong reputation of the *Times* meant that Fraser's columns were both widely read and regarded as authoritative.

Two examples of these features may be cited. The historian Gethin Matthews, in his study of Welsh migration to the Cariboo region, argues that there was a "deluge" of information regarding the gold diggings circulated in Welsh newspapers from 1858, but that "such reports were all taken from English newspapers, principally from *The Times*."<sup>100</sup> Here we see how the practice of cut-and-paste journalism greatly amplified the circulation of Fraser's correspondence far beyond the *Times*. Thus, readers encountered Fraser's reports in multiple papers, adding to its seeming credibility. Also, because of Fraser's anonymity, it would not always have been clear to readers that this extracted material came from only one source.

Another example from Victoria, Vancouver Island, illustrates the *Times*'s reach across the Empire. In 1862, the *British Colonist* reported the arrival of several shiploads of gold seekers from New Zealand and the "considerable excitement" regarding the Cariboo gold rush there. These miners had left the goldfields of Otago because of that region's lack of timber and then had cancelled their plans to winter in Australia when they had learned of the Cariboo goldfields from "London papers."<sup>101</sup> In 1861 and 1862, Dunedin's *Otago Daily Times* had published some of Fraser's correspondence and a series of articles condemning the Cariboo goldfields in an attempt to dissuade gold seekers from leaving Otago.<sup>102</sup> These narratives underline the important role that metropolitan newspapers like the *Times* played in shaping the mobility of miners both at home and across the Empire.

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1862); Edward Graham Alston, *Handbook to Vancouver Island and British Columbia* (London: F. Alger, 1862); Anonymous, *The Handbook of British Columbia and Emigrant's Guide to the Gold Fields* (London: W. Oliver, 1862); J.D. Churchill and J. Cooper, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island Considered as a Field for Commercial Enterprise* (London: Rees and Collin, 1866).

<sup>98</sup> In 1860, for example, the *Times* published sixty thousand copies per edition; Grant, *Newspaper Press*, 26.

<sup>99</sup> *British Colonist*, 11 March 1862; Grant, *Newspaper Press*, 53-54.

<sup>100</sup> Gethin Matthews, "Gold Fever: The Stampede from South Wales to British Columbia in 1862," *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 5, 2 (2005): 57.

<sup>101</sup> *British Colonist*, 26 June 1862.

<sup>102</sup> *Otago Daily Times*, 18 December 1861, 2 June 1862, 28 June 1862, 14 August 1862, 25 August 1862, 24 September 1862, 17 October 1862, 10 November 1862, and 15 December 1862.

Fraser also gained credibility from his location on the scene. Although some American papers sent correspondents to British Columbia, Fraser was one of the few British correspondents in the region. He was also very careful to characterize himself as a neutral observer, relying on testimony from the many goldfield officials and miners he encountered to substantiate the bold claims he made regarding the potential of both the Fraser and Cariboo goldfields. As Fraser emphasized regarding the reports he related, “every reader must judge of their value for himself.”<sup>103</sup> Of course, an accusation against Fraser was that he never visited the Cariboo region himself to view the diggings; instead, he relied on the testimony of returned miners in 1861 and 1862 to pen his narratives. What I would suggest, though, is that Fraser’s actual distance from the diggings would not have been clear to his readers.

Another way that Fraser drew upon his local experience was by comparing the events in British Columbia with those of the California gold rush. Indeed, he suggested that Victoria might rival San Francisco’s prominence on the west coast of North America and that the northern mines were richer than those found in the United States. Given the rapid migration of up to thirty thousand gold seekers from the United States to British Columbia in 1858 and the prospect of thousands more arriving from across the anglophone world, at least initially it seemed as if Vancouver Island and British Columbia might experience a rush on the same scale as that experienced by California. Certainly Fraser’s own early and substantial real estate investments indicate that he expected the same. We can imagine that potential goldrushers would have interpreted Fraser’s reportage from British Columbia according to their knowledge of the well-publicized rushes to both California and Victoria, Australia. Though all three of these gold rush sites were distant from Great Britain, Fraser’s comparison of British Columbia with California elided key differences between the two places, especially the isolation of the Cariboo goldfields.

Yet Fraser and the *Times* were not the only sources of information about British Columbia in the United Kingdom. On 14 February 1862, the *Glasgow Herald* published an acerbic commentary on the *Times*’s coverage of the Cariboo gold rush, noting that the majority of Americans who came to the Fraser River in 1858 had left the region disappointed due to the “tyrannous heat of summer, the periodic flooding of the streams, the severity of the winter, the absence of roads, and the consequent dearth of provisions.” The writer concluded that something was fishy about Fraser’s enthusiasm:

<sup>103</sup> *Times*, 1 December 1858.

These are certainly wonderful stories, if one could believe them; but the whole communication from the Far West smacks so much of the marvellous that sober people will be apt to think that self-interest or credulity has something to do with it. The writer evidently looks at the gold diggings through a pair of gold magnifying spectacles, for everything appears in his eyes of a golden hue, from the dust of the earth to the depth of a Columbian winter ... We have little doubt that success awaits the lucky few at the gold diggings in British Columbia, as it did in Australia and California; but the difficulties to be encountered, and the hardships to be endured, in the latter two countries, are trifling in comparison with those in store for gold hunters near the sources of the Frazer river.

Not everyone was taken in or unaware of the actual situation in British Columbia. Yes, several thousand goldrushers journeyed from the United Kingdom and across the British Empire to the Cariboo, but this was a relatively small number of participants in comparison with the California gold rush of 1849, the Victoria gold rush of 1851, or the Fraser River rush of 1858. What I would suggest, though, is that Fraser's correspondence achieved far greater circulation than did the *Glasgow Herald* and other negative reports that had emerged within California. In the cacophony of the metropolitan press, the *Times* had a louder voice than most other papers. It was both the relative prominence of the *Times* and its reputation as an instrument for the public good that made the paper a ready target for disappointed miners.

What happened in 1862 was not unique. The experience of goldrushers to the Cariboo followed a familiar arc, evident in earlier gold rushes and simultaneously in Otago, New Zealand.<sup>104</sup> The argonauts who had rushed to California in 1849 wrote angry letters to newspapers in the eastern United States in 1850, describing how they had been "taken in" by false press reports, just as disappointed British gold seekers railed against Fraser for failing to provide truthful and accurate information. Given the fact that Fraser's identity as a correspondent of the *Times* was well known in Victoria, it is relevant to briefly comment on how local editors characterized Fraser.

Most striking is how the Victoria press avoided commenting on Fraser's reportage. In general, editors in Victoria were divided in their political allegiances, as either critics or supporters of Douglas's administration of Vancouver Island and British Columbia. Although Fraser was a political

<sup>104</sup> Dan Davy, "Lost Tailings: Gold Rush Societies and Cultures in Colonial Otago, New Zealand, 1861-1911" (PhD diss., University of Otago, 2013).

ally of Douglas and was accused of corrupt practices relating to supply contracts for the local British navy garrison, reform-minded editors such as Amor de Cosmos of the *British Colonist* did not accuse Fraser of misleading readers of the *Times* for personal gain. When editors did malign Fraser, their comments were brief. For example, on 7 March 1862, Leonard McClure, the editor of the *Press*, described Fraser as “the illiterate and slanderous Munchausen of newspaper correspondence, and the King of Vancouver Island land speculators.” Likewise, John Robson, in the *British Columbian*, once alluded to Fraser’s misrepresentations:

The Hon. Donald Fraser, of London *Times* celebrity, passed through this city on Wednesday last, on his way to the interior. We presume his object is to obtain, by personal observation, data for some more letters to the *Times*. If so, let us hope he will try and keep [*sic*] a little nearer the truth than has hitherto been his habit in his correspondence respecting this country.<sup>105</sup>

These two brief examples suggest that the controversy surrounding Fraser was well known in situ even if it was not publicly written about in detail. Worth emphasizing here, though, is that the Victoria press paid close attention to everything that was written about the region in the metropolitan news. Much more common was the republication of Fraser’s articles within the Victoria press. So why did editors of the Victoria press not call attention to Fraser’s exaggerations? One theory is that they were not keen to author conflicting accounts about the goldfields and potentially alienate immigrants to the region. Better to leave well enough alone.

## CONCLUSIONS

We will never know how many Britons rushed to the Cariboo in direct response to Fraser’s columns, although some disillusioned gold seekers and the authors of a couple of emigrant handbooks made much of their potential influence. According to D.G.F. Macdonald in an 1863 guidebook, “hundreds of deluded individuals curse Mr. Donald Fraser of the London Times for his entirely false statements.”<sup>106</sup> Two years later, local Victoria resident Matthew Macfie noted: “The letters of the ‘Times’ correspondent, published in 1862, excited great attention, and in that year several thousands were induced to visit the country from England,

<sup>105</sup> *British Columbian*, 8 August 1863.

<sup>106</sup> Macdonald, *Lecture on British Columbia and Vancouver’s Island*, 46.

Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.”<sup>107</sup> In 1887, the historian Hubert Bancroft echoed Macfie in his comment that Fraser’s correspondence prompted several thousand British subjects to travel to British Columbia in the spring of 1862.<sup>108</sup> Others have acknowledged Fraser’s role.<sup>109</sup> But, with the exception of Gethin Matthews’s recent article on emigration from Wales to the Cariboo, no one has investigated Fraser’s alleged deception and the mechanics of its operation.<sup>110</sup>

In California, Fraser neither concealed his activities as a local businessman nor provided an unvarnished portrait of the local diggings; rather, he defined himself primarily as a disinterested newspaper correspondent in British Columbia. Perhaps his substantial real estate portfolio in Victoria encouraged him to describe the local gold diggings more positively than was warranted and to downplay the exhausting toil, the social discord, and the extreme hardship that awaited all who laboured for gold. Had the readers of the *London Times* been aware that Fraser was a real estate magnate in Victoria, they might have been more sceptical of his promises.

Fraser’s correspondence garnered credibility through the specific structure of communications networks in the mid-nineteenth century. The prevalence of anonymous journalism, and the lack of rapid communications links between British Columbia and the United Kingdom, contributed to Fraser’s credibility and delayed the publication of critical reports on the Cariboo region by those who ventured there.

Fraser never admitted any wrongdoing, but his output for the *Times* declined after 1863. In his last article, published in 1866, Fraser acknowledged that Victoria was in a funk, its “population reduced ... Nothing flourishing or buoyant but taxation and Government expenditure.” Later, he returned to the United Kingdom and played a role as a lobbyist on the London Committee for Watching the Affairs of British Columbia, which, in 1868, successfully secured the relocation of British Columbia’s capital from New Westminster to Victoria.<sup>111</sup> Even then Fraser was still protecting his real estate portfolio.

<sup>107</sup> Matthew Macfie, *Vancouver Island and British Columbia: Their History, Resources, and Prospects* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865), 75.

<sup>108</sup> Hubert Howe Bancroft, “History of British Columbia, 1792–1887,” in *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, vol. 32 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1887), 482.

<sup>109</sup> Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 65–66; Fetherling, *River of Gold*, 29–30; Hogg, *Men and Manliness on the Frontier*, 61.

<sup>110</sup> Matthews, “Gold Fever,” 54–83.

<sup>111</sup> Hendrickson, “Fraser, Donald.”