

“PIONEERING” WOMEN:
TALES OF FEMALE SETTLER
COLONIALISM IN BC

A Review Essay

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Henry and Self

Kathryn Bridge

Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2019. 264 pp. \$22.95 paper.

By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer

Kathryn Bridge

Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2019. 232 pp. \$19.95 paper.

Boom and Bust: The Resilient Women of Historic Telegraph Cove

Jennifer L. Butler

Victoria: TouchWood Editions, 2019. 288 pp. \$26.00 paper.

Against the Current: The Remarkable Life of Agnes Deans Cameron

Cathy Converse

Victoria: TouchWood Editions, 2018. 328 pp. \$30.00 hardcover.

IN 2018 AND 2019 a handful of popular histories telling the stories of women settlers in early British Columbia were published. Composed by authors of varying persuasions and motivations and published by TouchWood Editions and the Royal BC Museum, these texts trace the experiences of a variety of women who, at the behest of their family members, came to British Columbia seeking a new life and adventure in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth. These books, which highlight and bring to light some of the extraordinary adventures of early BC settler women, reify the tropes of settler colonialism in their lack of critical engagement with their subjects' racism. Each author, with the explicitly feminist agenda of highlighting female "pioneer" experiences, chronicles the travels, domestic management, and waged work of one or

a series of settlers. Many of the stories show innovation, courage, intelligence, and an adventurous spirit and, in the process, bring to light the specifically female experience of colonizing British Columbia. None of these books, however, draws sufficient attention to the impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous populations and individuals.

Kathryn Bridge – *Henry and Self* and *By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer*

These two works are clearly the result of a labour of love on the part of a seasoned archivist. Rich in primary source content, the two books chronicle the lives of five white women who travelled to and within British Columbia with their colonist husbands in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Kathryn Bridge offers a dynamic impression of all five women – Sarah Crease (*Henry and Self*), Florence Agassiz, Eleanor Fellows, Kate Woods, and Violet Sillitoe (*By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer*) – featuring significant content from their own journals, letters, and other written work. These primary sources offer much scope for understanding white women’s experiences in nineteenth-century British Columbia and are just as important now as they were when they were originally published in 1996 and 1998, respectively. It is puzzling, however, that these two books were republished as revised editions when there are no substantive changes to either. The content is fascinating, but neither the analysis nor the sources have been updated, which is a rather glaring oversight in this era of truth and reconciliation. Rather than republish books that document the work of white women in dominating the BC landscape, it would benefit readers to offer them the stories of those women whose voices were left out of the original works. Indeed, as Adele Perry states in her 1999 review of the first editions of these two pieces, Bridge tends “to cast women in the mould of one of two prototypes: the hardy pioneer or the province builders.”¹ This remains the case, despite decades of scholarship in gender and women’s history that suggest the need for a more nuanced approach, including the voices and experiences of women of colour and Indigenous Peoples. More than twenty years ago Perry called for a reconsideration of the pioneer narrative in BC history,² and yet no attempt to do so has been made here. Perry’s own publications in the ensuing era as well as those of many of her colleagues

¹ Adele Perry, “Writing Women into British Columbia History: A Review Essay,” *BC Studies* 122 (Summer 1999): 87.

² Perry, 88.

have made remarkable inroads into elevating the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality in the reconsideration of British Columbia's colonial narrative. A revised edition of these two works would benefit from a consultation with such work. Elevating the narratives of settler women in an era when the stories of white men were being told was a noble task in the twentieth century, but now we need to offer a more nuanced, intersectional approach to considering British Columbia's past. In 1999 Perry suggested the need to critically analyze how gender works to structure and shape society. Even more, an awareness of the impact of the settler experience on Indigenous communities and individuals is needed to bring these works into the twenty-first century.

Bridge shows an awareness of the racism inherent in settler colonialism in both works. The words and images of Sarah Crease featured in *Henry and Self* indicate a racialized perspective typical of nineteenth-century colonists, a factor to which Bridge draws attention when she notes that "it was clear for Sarah, as for most settlers, human habitation in the colony was very much 'us and them.'"³ And yet throughout the book she continues to opt into colonialist tropes such as portraying a vast and empty land and chronicling the names of only white characters. Crease regularly engaged with Indigenous travellers and often hired Chinese servants, yet they are rarely referred to by name and no mention is made of this oversight when the names cannot be found. While the archives from which Bridge obtained her sources may not have offered information clarifying these details, it is worth noting the namelessness of people of colour throughout Crease's writing.

In *By Snowshoe, Buckboard and Steamer*, a book specifically about the acts of colonization on the part of four white women, some very basic acts of colonialism are apparent: only white women are ever referred to as "women," while all racialized people are qualified as "Indigenous" or "Chinese." Again, very few racialized women are ever referred to with proper names. It is disappointing that so much more scope for analysis is available in these primary sources, and yet the opportunity to provide it is passed over. With the exception of Kate Woods, the women whose writing and journeys are featured here all treat racialized people with varying levels of disdain. On her journey to the Nass River, Kate Woods offers unique perspectives on her interactions with named Indigenous guides and villagers – this collegiality and respect could have been more carefully highlighted or explored in the revised edition. While Eleanor Fellows took a more traditional attitude of condescension towards her

³ Bridge, *Henry and Self*, 78.

Indigenous neighbours, her writing does indicate collegiality and mutual respect. In spite of these hints at some positive relationships among the white explorers and the Indigenous people they encountered, Bridge chooses to further the idea that white women existed on a separate plane. She refers to “the newness of the land,”⁴ and she suggests that these women were “trailblazers” – even though they were traversing trails that Indigenous Peoples had used for hundreds of years. Surely these elements of analysis were worthy of update.

Jennifer L. Butler – *Boom and Bust*

Another popular history rich in primary source content is Jennifer Butler’s chronicle of female settlers in Telegraph Cove. A descendant of Telegraph Cove settlers herself, Butler interviewed generations of women from this town to capture a multifaceted portrayal of the community from the time of its inception in the early years of the twentieth century to the early years of the twenty-first century. She traces their arrivals, departures, and interrelationships to offer a glimpse of the unique life that settler families built in this resource town.

Much like Kathryn Bridge, Butler takes an explicitly feminist approach, arguing that “women’s lives throughout history have rarely been accorded the same attention as those of men,”⁵ and aims to help redress this imbalance. She also highlights components of family and childhood history that enhance a gendered understanding of how settler towns functioned. Butler departs from the work of other authors in this review by including the voices of people of colour. Specifically, she highlights the experiences of some Japanese Canadian settlers in Telegraph Cove in the early decades of the twentieth century, lamenting their departure during the Second World War and noting their inability to return. It is unfortunate that the impact of settler colonialism on the Indigenous Peoples of the area, primarily the Kwakwaka’wakw, is not discussed in any detail. While the book acknowledges that First Nations live nearby, any discussion of their livelihood is in the service of highlighting the experiences of white women. Chapter 2, centred around Emma Wastell, pays heed to the relationships between the Kwakwaka’wakw in Alert Bay and the settlers who increasingly governed their choices. Butler points out the relationship between an Alert Bay merchant, Dong Chong, and the ability of the Kwakwaka’wakw to hold secret potlatches after these

⁴ Bridge, *By Snowshoe*, 4.

⁵ Butler, *Boom and Bust*, 1

ceremonies were banned. Unfortunately, this is only tangentially related to Emma's work as a nurse at the Indian Hospital in Alert Bay, and the story quickly moves on to her meeting her husband and moving to Telegraph Cove. On page 194, Butler claims that the Cove was a "mini United Nations," but her failure to include Indigenous people in her narrative refutes this romanticized idea. The intersections of race and gender are not afforded adequate attention in an otherwise compelling chronicle of settlement in coastal Vancouver Island.

Cathy Converse – *Against the Current*

Cathy Converse's biography of Agnes Deans Cameron is polished and attentive to Cameron's position as out of the ordinary in relation to the gender expectations of her time. Building on earlier fascinations with white female settlers in British Columbia, Converse offers a detailed vision of Cameron as a "pioneer" in the areas of education, journalism, and travel. Cameron was the first female high school teacher in British Columbia and went on to become the first female principal as well. Her story is one of intrigue, which is captured by Converse, albeit with significant bias. Cameron's story of being removed from her position as principal belongs among the great chronicles of late nineteenth-century equal rights feminists who, at great personal sacrifice, challenged gender norms. Undaunted, as were many of her contemporaries, Cameron went on to achieve fame as a journalist and explorer.

This fourth book on white female settlers in British Columbia offers the most nuance when it comes to Indigenous Peoples. Converse chronicles Cameron's 1908 journey from Chicago to the Mackenzie Delta and Herschel Island, offering first and foremost the perspective that Cameron was a fearless heroine of Arctic colonization. Many moments of advocacy for Indigenous Peoples of the North appear in this chapter, including empathy for a way of life that is widely misunderstood by southern Canadians. Cameron attended treaty days on more than one occasion during her journey, stepping in at one point to ensure that a single mother at Fort McMurray could obtain treaty payment for her child, whose father was not listed on the birth certificate. However, there are several points at which both Cameron and Converse reify the colonial project. Converse refers to the western Arctic as "a land that, until the arrival of Alexander Mackenzie in 1789, had been the home and the sole domain of Indigenous people for over fourteen thousand years,"⁶ as though Cameron's arrival

⁶ Converse, *Against the Current*, 184.

was a positive turn in this supposedly desolate history. Converse further points out that: “entering the traditional territory of the Dene, Cree, Gwich’in, and Inuvialuit peoples of the Western Arctic, they would be travelling through a harsh and unbroken wilderness known only to a scattering of trappers, miners, RCMP officers, and missionaries.”⁷ It is hard to imagine that the Dene, Cree, Gwich’in, and Inuvialuit peoples could not be included among those who have knowledge of the “harsh and unbroken wilderness” of their traditional territories. Portraying the North as harsh and empty helps Converse to achieve her image of Cameron as a colonizer in her own right.

As for Cameron, quotations from her 1910 chronicle of the journey also glorify exploits of past explorers and colonial efforts, praising the Franklin expedition and romanticizing the “unspoiled” Dene people of Fond du Lac, Saskatchewan. Converse points to Cameron’s praise of the Grey Nuns, who worked in Hay River to make “reputable citizens” of the children of the Doné (referred to by Cameron as Dogrib) and T’atsaot’ine (referred to by Cameron as Yellow-Knife) nations.⁸ Indeed both Converse and Cameron seem to have an affinity for missionaries: In relation to the presence of Christianity in the North, Converse notes: “it was only when Indigenous cultures were shattered by disease and starvation that the missionaries begin to gain a foothold into [*sic*] the lives of the people of the north.”⁹ Language such as this perpetuates the problem of settler colonialism in how we discuss BC history. It is true that Indigenous cultures were shattered by disease and starvation, but the implication that missionaries ought to have gained a foothold in anything is unwarranted here (and everywhere).

The glossing over of the impact of settler colonialism is the unfortunate tie that binds these four books. Their stories of courage, adventure, and overcoming the constraints of prescribed gender roles are well documented and are a welcome addition to our understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century settler women in British Columbia. However, as the work of Adele Perry, Laura Ishiguro, Sarah Nickel, and many others has recently indicated, we can interpret the stories of settler women not only by demonstrating the extraordinary lives they led despite oppressive gender norms but also by paying attention to their humanity and their oversights. In this era of reconciliation, when the bodies of Indigenous children are being found on the grounds of

⁷ Converse, 193.

⁸ Converse, 216.

⁹ Converse, 220.

residential schools, when numerous First Nations across the country have no access to clean drinking water, and when we have all committed (or should have committed) to listening to Indigenous truths and elevating Indigenous voices, we must introduce nuance into these stories of white women and their settler-colonial exploits.