

# “VICTORIA’S OWN OAK TREE”: *A Brief Cultural History of Victoria’s Garry Oaks after 1843*<sup>1</sup>

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“VICTORIA’S OWN OAK TREE,” according to a 1959 article in the *Victoria Daily Colonist*, is the native Garry oak, *Quercus garryana*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the trees are a familiar sight throughout the city. Easily identified by their twisting limbs, rough greyish bark, and glossy green leaves, Garry oaks are icons of the capital’s unique landscape. And well they might be as, despite their relative abundance in Greater Victoria, Garry oaks are found in few other places in Canada. Scattered patches exist on the east coast of Vancouver Island and on some of the Gulf Islands as far north as Savary Island, two isolated groves exist in the Fraser Valley, and a few Garry oaks grow as street trees in Vancouver.<sup>3</sup>

During the last two decades, conservationists have won both social prominence and a fair degree of legal protection for the Garry oak in Victoria. Most conservation groups, in fact, hope not just to save oak trees but also to protect and restore representative patches of the ecosystem in which oaks existed before waves of settlement irreversibly altered Victoria’s natural environment from 1843 onward. “Garry oak ecosystems,” as these historic landscapes are known, are now found in less than 5 percent of the area that they are supposed to have covered prior to nineteenth-century colonization.<sup>4</sup> Through these groups’ dedicated outreach, the Garry oak has become familiar to people in Victoria as a

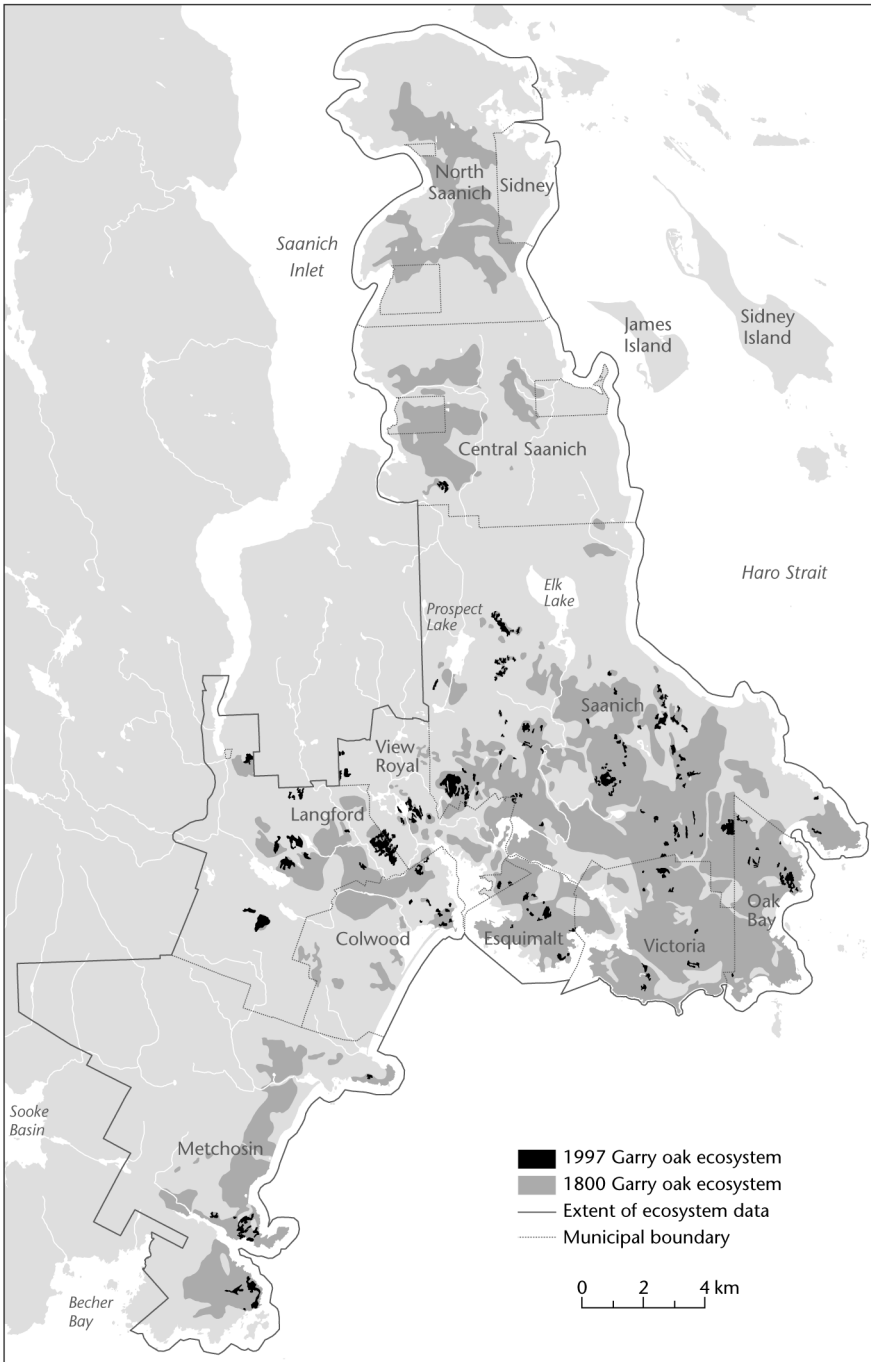
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<sup>1</sup> This article is largely based on research conducted for my master’s thesis. See Matt Cavers, “*Sub Quercu Felicitas*: Place, Knowledge, and Victoria’s Garry Oaks, 1843–2008” (MA thesis, Queen’s University, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Freeman King, “Extinction Threatening Garry Oaks?” *Victoria Daily Colonist*, mag. sec., 24 May 1959. The specific and common names refer to Nicholas Garry, who was deputy governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company from 1822 to 1835.

<sup>3</sup> According to Gerald Bane Straley, *Trees of Vancouver* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1992), 120, Garry oaks can be found “on the west side of Dunbar St. between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Ave ... on the north side of 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. west of Granville St. ... on the north side of 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. between Alma St. and Dunbar St. ... on the north side of Point Grey Rd. at the foot of Collingwood St. ... and along a path on the northeast side of Queen Elizabeth Park.”

<sup>4</sup> Several good maps detailing the historic and present extent of these ecosystems can be found in Ted Lea, “Historical Garry Oak Ecosystems of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Pre-European Contact to the Present,” *Davidsonia* 17 (2006): 34–50.



Recent and pre-contact distributions of Garry oak ecosystems around Victoria, British Columbia. Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

charismatic victim of environmental change. This is the guise in which Garry oaks are now most often found in Victoria's public life.<sup>5</sup>

This role is obviously a recent development in the Garry oak's history as the modern environmental movement, which gives us the ecological Garry oak, is less than half a century old. But since Garry oaks do not tell their own stories, and no enterprising human has attempted to do it for them,<sup>6</sup> we are left wondering what the trees meant to people in Victoria before they became environmental icons. In this article I offer a partial – and preliminary – account. My goal is to identify some major themes in the cultural history of Victoria's Garry oaks that might help us to think about how people in Victoria relate to nature and place on a broader level. Trees can help us in this as they are more than just mute objects, meaningless accumulations of wood and leaf; rather, they are symbols,<sup>7</sup> sites of power and meaning,<sup>8</sup> participants in narrative,<sup>9</sup> and co-inhabitants of our complex world.<sup>10</sup> Our interactions with trees, as recent works in the social sciences and history have argued, are historically contingent and laden with meaning. "Trees," writes Maurice Bloch, "are good to think with."<sup>11</sup>

Three major themes of the Garry oak's cultural history appear in this article: the first is that Garry oaks have been seen as symbolic of British identity; the second, related to the first, is that Garry oaks were made to fit within a Euro-American tradition of aesthetic appreciation that valued the oaks as street and park trees; and the third is that, from the early twentieth century until the present, people called for the preservation of the city's Garry oaks because they were native to the region. These calls, which frequently came from amateur natural

<sup>5</sup> For a good example of how Garry oaks are represented in current conservationist discourse, see the website of the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, available at <http://www.goert.ca>.

<sup>6</sup> As has been done, for instance, with its British cousin, *Quercus robur*, by Esmond Harris, Jeanette Harris, and N.D.G. James in their *Oak: A British History* (Bollington, UK: Windgather Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Laura M. Rival, ed., *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture, and Power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Henry W. Lawrence, *City Trees: A Historical Geography from the Renaissance through the Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Kit Anderson, *Nature, Culture, and Big Old Trees: Live Oaks and Ceibas in the Landscapes of Louisiana and Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004); Michael P. Cohen, *A Garden of Bristlecones: Tales of Change in the Great Basin* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (London, UK: Berg, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Bloch, "Why Trees, Too, Are Good to Think With," in Rival, *The Social Life of Trees*.



A mature Garry oak on Heron Street, Oak Bay. Photograph by author.

historians, went largely unheeded until the 1990s, when a confluence of factors led to a sharp rise in the popularity and effectiveness of Garry oak conservation. I conclude that a current of anxiety about the tree's future has run throughout much of the Garry oak's modern cultural history in Victoria. Whatever else Garry oaks have been, I suggest that they have been best known because they are disappearing.

As this article is a survey of cultural attitudes, I draw exclusively upon textual sources. Of these, Victoria's daily newspapers have been the most valuable, simply because there are few other places where public engagement with Garry oak trees – controversy over tree cutting, discussion among amateur naturalists, pleas for conservation – is publicly recorded. Newspapers, of course, are not perfect sources for understanding public attitudes towards trees. Typically, they simplify complex issues in order to conserve space and to ensure readability. Furthermore, newspapers are no more registers of public feeling than any other partial, authored document. Yet they cannot be ignored. Though they may lack subtlety, the Victoria newspapers identify and entrench dominant narratives of the Garry oak's public life in that city. I refer to the *Victoria Daily Times*, the *Victoria Daily Colonist*, and the *Victoria Times Colonist*, the latter being the newspaper that was formed when the *Colonist* and the *Times* merged in 1980. The *Victoria Naturalist*, the bimonthly magazine of the Victoria Natural History Society, was another rewarding source in this research. In addition, a variety of other texts, including floras and other botanical publications, travel accounts, and colonial promotional literature, offered information relevant to the project.

An oft-quoted remark made by James Douglas provides a starting point for this narrative. "It appears to be a perfect 'Eden,'" wrote Douglas after visiting the future site of Victoria, "in the midst of the dreary wilderness of the Northwest coast, and so different is its general aspect, from the wooded rugged regions around, that one might be pardoned for supposing it had dropped from the clouds into its present location."<sup>12</sup> Douglas's remarks were inspired by the open, mixed-forest landscape around the future Victoria, which, with its oaks, meadows, and rocky uplands, stood in stark contrast to the much darker coniferous forest common through most of the Northwest. More than simply being an expression of personal preference for thickets and clearings over tenebrous rainforests, Douglas's remarks drew upon contemporary English landscape taste, in which pastoral, park-like settings were highly valued. Those English

<sup>12</sup> G.P. de T. Glazebrook, ed., *The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821–1843* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), 420.



landscapes, which often featured British oak trees (*Quercus robur*), were generally the careful work of landscape architects. That the new settlement's landscape appeared not to be anthropogenic – that it “dropped from the clouds” – only heightened Douglas's wonder.

We are used to hearing Victoria compared to both England and Britain, a comparison that has proven enduringly popular with the city's tourist industry and that sometimes leans towards tired cliché.<sup>13</sup> Yet British identity played a major role in Victoria's colonial history. The town that grew from the Hudson's Bay Company fort on James Bay was an island of British institutions and ways in the midst of the mostly unassimilated expanse of the Pacific Northwest. The administrative centre of the Colony of Vancouver Island, Victoria had Anglican churches, British government, a largely British population, and, thanks to the application of Wakefieldian principles of colonization, British social stratification.<sup>14</sup> This civic atmosphere of Britishness would certainly have encouraged settlers and visitors to take note of the apparent Britishness of the landscape. Several early commentators remarked upon this resemblance, drawing particular attention to Victoria's oaks as they did so. One, an early newspaper correspondent, suggested that Victoria contained a mix of English and Scottish scenery. The Scottish parts were the ones covered in coniferous trees. “Then,” he wrote, “you come to the oak region; and here you have clumps, open glades, rows, single trees of umbrageous form, presenting an exact copy of English park scenery.”<sup>15</sup> Another description of this sort can be found in naturalist Berthold Seeman's description of Victoria in his *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Herald*:

In walking from Ogden Point round to Fort Victoria, a distance of little more than a mile, we thought we had never seen a more beautiful country; it quite exceeded our expectation; and yet Vancouver's descriptions made us look for something beyond common scenery. It is a natural park; noble oaks and ferns are seen in the greatest luxuriance, thickets of the hazel and the willow, shrubberies of the poplar and the alder, are dotted about. One could hardly believe this was not the work of art.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Lines, “A Bit of Old England: The Selling of Tourist Victoria” (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Mackie, “The Colonization of Vancouver Island, 1849–1858,” *BC Studies* 96 (1992–93): 3–40.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous correspondent, quoted in William Carew Hazlitt, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island; Comprising a Historical Sketch of the British Settlements in the North-West Coast of America* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1858), 217.

<sup>16</sup> Berthold Seeman, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Herald During the Years 1845–1851*, vol. 1 (London, UK: Reeve and Co., 1853), 102. “Vancouver's descriptions,” to which Seeman refers, did not directly pertain to the Victoria area. Nonetheless, they treat Garry oak landscapes in

Or, similarly, in an 1862 essay trumpeting Victoria's suitability for potential emigrants:

Before the observer stretches an undulating, park-like country, backed by wooded hills of moderate height ... From Fisguard light ... past Victoria Harbor, Beacon Hill, and, sweeping on by Cadborough Bay, this same character of country obtains, its sloping pastures, studded with oak and maple giving, from their general appearance, the idea of a country long occupied by civilized man and covered by flocks and herds.<sup>17</sup>

We see here that, in these early brushes between Victoria's native oaks and European settlers, the oaks were seen to be part of a landscape reminiscent of England. In the above quotations, they appear as symbols of civilization, a role consistent with the oak's venerated station in British culture.<sup>18</sup> Yet, some colonists found the Victoria oak trees unequal to their counterparts in the British Isles. British oak timber, for instance, was highly valued by the Royal Navy. However, despite early settler Colquhoun Grant's guess that the Victoria oaks would turn out to be useful in shipbuilding,<sup>19</sup> the tree failed to impress the Admiralty as a replacement for *Q. robur*. A trial shipment of the wood was tested for its strength at Portsmouth Yard in 1847, and a subsequent report concluded: "Now, as English Oak of similar dimensions would bear [a greater weight than would Garry oak], we conclude that in comparison as to strength with English Oak, the specimens sent us from Vancouver's Island, are very inferior."<sup>20</sup> It seems that the Royal Navy was much less interested in Garry oak than it was in the large pieces of straight-grained softwood

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the nearby San Juan Islands and Puget Sound in a similar way, emphasizing their similarity to English parkland. See George Vancouver, *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World, 1791-1795*, vol. 2, ed. W. Kaye Lamb (London, UK: Hakluyt Society, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Charles Forbes, *Vancouver Island, Its Resources and Capabilities as a Colony* (Victoria, BC: The Colonial Government, 1862), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Harris, Harris, and James, *Oak*.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Colquhoun Grant, "Description of Vancouver Island," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 27 (1857): 268-320, quoted in Hazlitt, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 185. Grant was preceded in this suspicion by botanical collector David Douglas, who wrote of the oak: "for various domestic purposes the wood of the tree will be of great advantage, more especially in shipbuilding." Douglas introduced the name *Quercus garryana* after his early nineteenth-century travels around the Columbia River. See David Douglas, *Journal Kept by David Douglas During His Travels in North America, 1823-1827* (London, UK: W. Wesley and Son, 1914 [reprint, New York: Antiquarian Press, 1959]), 49 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, Report on Vancouver Island timber to Admiralty, Portsmouth Yard, 27 December 1847, Admiralty Fonds, British Columbia Archives.

that could be taken from the forests around their Pacific Station in Esquimalt.<sup>21</sup>

The Garry oak was not a timber tree, and, furthermore, it could hardly measure up to the British oak in mythic stature. Whereas the British oak had grown into British culture through centuries of association,<sup>22</sup> the Garry oak's cultural history was Aboriginal and foreign to the new settlers. Despite their superficial Britishness, Garry oaks had existed in an Aboriginal landscape until the extension of British imperial power to Victoria. Even the seemingly English oak meadow landscape owed its existence to the agricultural techniques of local First Nations, who periodically cleared land by setting fires and thus prevented the oaks from being shaded out by conifers.<sup>23</sup> Though they would appear occasionally in later years, statements explicitly linking Garry oaks to British identity were less common after the first few years of European settlement. Early statements that associate the oaks with civilization are possibly best interpreted as signs of unease over the precariousness of the new colony's Britishness: by dressing the native oaks up in familiar language, early settlers and visitors attempted to assimilate a genuinely foreign landscape.<sup>24</sup>

Neither timber trees nor purebred British, Garry oaks nonetheless attracted public notice in Victoria's early history for being visually beautiful. Tree-lined streets and green cities grew fashionable throughout Europe and North America through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>25</sup> and, in these years, people in Victoria came to admire the Garry oak for the picturesque qualities – its rugged and austere beauty, its perceived age, its wildness – that it contributed to Victoria's urban environment. Yet, Garry oaks did not “[yield] to domestication with grace and dignity” like Campanella's American elm;<sup>26</sup> rather, they fre-

<sup>21</sup> Barry M. Gough, “Forests and Sea Power: A Vancouver Island Economy, 1778–1875,” *Journal of Forest History* 32 (1988): 117–24. Nevertheless, in 1976, a monument was erected adjacent to a large Garry oak in Beacon Hill Park, upon which was engraved a poem entitled “The Garry Oak,” which merrily recalled: “From hearts of oak great ships were built / They sailed the seven seas.” Janis Ringuette, *Beacon Hill Park History 1842–2008*, online book, 2008, available from <http://www.beaconhillparkhistory.org> (viewed 25 February 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Harris, Harris, and James, *Oak*.

<sup>23</sup> John Lutz, “Preparing Eden: Aboriginal Land Use and European Settlement,” paper presented at the 1995 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Montreal, Quebec.

<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, Victoria's elites were attempting to paint themselves as impeccably British, though many had intermarried with First Nations, in keeping with common fur trade practice. See Sylvia Van Kirk, “Tracing the Fortunes of Five Founding Families of Victoria,” *BC Studies* 115/16 (1997/98): 148–79.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence, *City Trees*.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas J. Campanella, *Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 1.



quently resisted it by standing in the way of municipal infrastructure or encroaching on city streets.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, the most frequent and strongly worded encomia for Garry oaks appeared in the city's daily newspapers when the trees were destroyed. Examining some of these controversies gives an impression of how the ideal of the green city and the language of the picturesque entered the cultural history of the Garry oak.

In August of 1898, municipal employees cut down an oak tree on Belcher Avenue east of Cook Street, apparently to make way for a power line. For several days afterward, the editorial page of the *Colonist* ran furious denunciations of the act. An editorial, carrying the header "Legalized Vandalism," screamed that "it appears that the city administration is hostile to shade trees ... and everything else which makes the town beautiful. The civic idea of beauty is a dreary street without a bit of foliage, flanked by sidewalks three feet wide and out of repair."<sup>28</sup> A letter to the editor, printed on the same day, appealed to Victorians' competitiveness to prevent similar cuttings: "[Vancouver] has no such beautiful tree as the oak, in many places already planted for us, but is making up for this deficiency by planting her avenues."<sup>29</sup> And another letter, appearing a few days later, asked: "What would the apostle of the beautiful, John Ruskin, say that after having preached his doctrines over half a century there are still those who would destroy a luxuriant oak tree for the sake of a hideous post?"<sup>30</sup> The fallen Garry oak had become a lightning rod for condemnations of improper urban development.

A similar situation arose ten years later, when several oak trees on Rockland Avenue were felled, again to make way for public works. This time, however, the conflict generated considerably more heat. As in 1898, a newspaper declared it an act of vandalism and lauded the oaks' beauty. An unsigned article in the *Times* lamented that "the ... giant oaks which are the glory of the city, are being sacrificed right and left, and for what purpose? Simply that a gutter might run in an unsightly straight line." The author pronounced the problem "a matter of artistic sense and common sense," arguing that "the artist would not dare lay a hand on these veterans which stood there almost as they did yesterday when Cook was circling the world and Vancouver gave his name to this island."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In this way, Garry oaks were like Ottawa's original street trees – naturally occurring, tragically awkward. See Joanna Dean, "Said Tree Is a Veritable Nuisance: Ottawa's Street Trees, 1869-1939," *Urban History Review* 34 (2005): 46-57.

<sup>28</sup> "Legalized Vandalism," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 24 August 1898.

<sup>29</sup> F.B. Pemberton, "Destruction of Our Shade Trees," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 24 August 1898.

<sup>30</sup> F.B. Kitto, "Vandalism," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28 August 1898.

<sup>31</sup> "Giant Trees Are Destroyed," *Victoria Daily Times*, 13 April 1908.

A letter to the editor agreed that the trees' age made them worthy of protection, estimating that the oldest had lived "since the time of William the Conqueror."<sup>32</sup> A few days later, a Rockland Avenue resident named Fred M. Jones posted a notice on an oak near his property, warning that "this tree belongs to and adds value to the adjoining property. The owner will protect it with firearms, if necessary."<sup>33</sup> Though police later removed the notice, its author attracted the sympathy of both Victoria dailies, and each newspaper published articles favourable to him. The *Colonist* reported that

Mr. Jones does not wish it to appear that he is trying to hinder the officers of the municipality in their endeavors to beautify the city ... In his opinion, however, the cutting down of the oak trees surely could not be considered a step in the direction of improvement. He thought they formed one of Victoria's principal attractions. Without them the greater part of the charm of the residential sections of the city would depart.<sup>34</sup>

Mr. Jones may have threatened to shoot municipal workers, but the newspapers' responses suggest that they considered the city's crimes less forgivable.

Incidents such as these occurred frequently in the early twentieth century, and appeals to beauty and love of wild nature continued to carry moral weight. When a man drove his car into an oak tree at night and threatened to sue, city engineers responded by making plans to cut from city streets eleven trees that might impede motorists. The *Colonist* reported that several letters of protest from civic organizations had been sent to the city, arguing that the trees "enhanced [Victoria's] beauty," that they were a "gift of nature," that "Vancouver would give thousands for a few ... magnificent oaks," and that the trees gave Victoria "great value from the aesthetic point of view."<sup>35</sup> A year later, when a large oak was felled on Collinson Avenue, it was eulogized in an editorial as a "reminder of Victoria's virgin state," and the editor asked: "Does it occur to those responsible for this drastic process that our oaks are among our finest assets and perennial objects of admiration to visitors?"<sup>36</sup> Most memorable as an example of the picturesque Garry oak, though, is an admonition a Joseph Turner made to a Victoria alderman who had called one of

<sup>32</sup> F.B. Pemberton, "Wanton Destruction," *Victoria Daily Times*, 14 April 1908.

<sup>33</sup> "Will Protect Tree by Using Firearms," *Victoria Daily Times*, 16 April 1908.

<sup>34</sup> "Oak Trees One of Victoria's Charms," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 24 April 1908.

<sup>35</sup> "Stop Cutting Oaks in View of Protest," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 12 January 1921.

<sup>36</sup> "The Fallen Oak," *Victoria Daily Times*, 30 May 1922.

Turner's oaks a "disreputable stump." Taking the matter to a romantic extreme, Turner asked: "Might he not reflect, in his softer mood, that [the oak] has withstood for ages the shock and fury of Heaven's thunder and tempest, and often, mayhap, sheltered under its kindly spreading arms and listened to the soft nothings of Indian brave and maiden, centuries before the white man had here a habitation or a name?"<sup>37</sup>

Such appeals to love of beauty and wildness were not the only techniques people in Victoria used to defend threatened Garry oaks. Victoria's amateur naturalists, from early in the twentieth century onward, used ostensibly scientific justifications to call for the trees' preservation. Their arguments often focused on the fact that the trees were native to the area, making them inherently worthy of protection. These naturalists, who often wrote for a general readership through the city's daily newspapers, played an important role in popularizing the idea of Garry oak conservation. The Victoria naturalist who was perhaps the earliest to speak out on behalf of Garry oaks was C.C. (Chartres Cecil) Pemberton. Pemberton (1864-1943) worked in law and real estate but avidly pursued natural history in his spare time. David Brownstein, who has written on the contribution of amateur natural history to forest conservation in British Columbia, points out that Pemberton was unconventional for an amateur: instead of concentrating his efforts on taxonomy and the identification of local plants, he took an active interest in tree physiology. Pemberton's work, as Brownstein puts it, "sought to understand the biographies of individual trees."<sup>38</sup>

The trees that appealed most to Pemberton's curiosity were the trees that behaved in unexpected ways. His career as an amateur botanist, for instance, began when he encountered conifer stumps in the Victoria area that had inexplicably developed calluses of bark over their cut surfaces. Later, he turned his attention to a peculiarity of the Garry oak's growth, which so intrigued him that he devoted three articles to the topic in the Saturday edition of the *Victoria Daily Colonist* in addition to two papers in the *Canadian Field-Naturalist*.

In the first of his *Colonist* articles, Pemberton described the question thus:

Our grand old oaks exhibit a characteristic which has proved a puzzle to all visiting botanists who have sojourned in our city. The gigantic limbs often twist, turn, writhe and wriggle and finally make a dive

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Hunter, "From the Sentimental to the Practical," *Victoria Daily Times*, 10 May 1909.

<sup>38</sup> David Brownstein, "Sunday Walks and Seed Traps: The Many Natural Histories of British Columbia Forest Conservation, 1890-1925" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2006), 151.

at some part of the ground or rock close at hand and then fly off at a tangent. At other times the wood of the stems and branches makes a pancake-like spread over the rock, which it touches, and this spread may be downward, upward, or sideways and the wood becomes firmly attached to the rock.<sup>39</sup>

He was adamant that this peculiarity warranted close attention:

Some people think an occurrence of this sort is just a freak of nature, and pass it off with the remark: "oh, it just happened." Others believe that the phenomenon indicates some principle in vegetable vitality and that the subject should be looked into and studied and the trees themselves taken care of and preserved. There are even those who think that if Victoria were a place like New Zealand or any other part of the world where citizens valued the natural features then these curiosities would be made much of as attractions to tourists.<sup>40</sup>

Pemberton authored two similar pieces in the *Colonist* some sixteen years later in 1940.<sup>41</sup> Then, as in 1924, the question of the oak's "tropic movements" had not been answered. The two articles addressed different types of movement: the first dealt with the oak limbs' radial movements over rock, and the second discussed instances of "apical elongation," where the branches appeared to grow in inexplicable directions. Pemberton gave no explanation for either phenomenon: he simply mused about the limbs finding "points of stimulation" in the rocks beneath. He did, however, end the first article with a quiet warning: "I note that with building up of the district north of Hillside Avenue, etc., many fine and interesting phases and examples of these tropic reactions of the Garry oaks are being destroyed."<sup>42</sup> In other words, lost Garry oaks could be science's lost opportunities.

Pemberton's advocacy for the Garry oak went deeper than an interest in its tropic movements: the naturalist was an early advocate for the preservation of native species. Brownstein writes that Pemberton, in 1913, commissioned photographers to capture images of Garry oak parkland slated for clearing so as to create a record of a landscape

<sup>39</sup> C.C. Pemberton, "Garry Oaks Exhibit Puzzle to Botanists," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 20 August 1924.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> C.C. Pemberton, "Tropisms of the Garry Oak," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 30 June 1940, mag. sec.; C.C. Pemberton, "Tropisms of the Garry Oak," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 18 August 1940, mag. sec.

<sup>42</sup> Pemberton, "Tropisms of the Garry Oak."

type threatened by settler farming and development.<sup>43</sup> In the 1920s, Pemberton petitioned Victoria's city council several times to take better care of the city's oaks, protesting vociferously when council ordered trees down.<sup>44</sup> Pemberton addressed a long article in the *Colonist* on 4 June 1922 to Victoria's city council. Entitled "Victoria Should Conserve Her Pioneering Landmarks," the article is a passionate defence of native vegetation in the face of the prevailing climate of "topiarism." Using rhetoric similar to that heard in other contemporary tree-felling controversies, Pemberton accused city councillors of "ignorance" and "neglect." Yet, his defence of the native over the introduced was new:

In artificial topiarism, commonplace grass lawns and boulevards, etc., Victoria can probably be easily outdistanced by centres possessing more money. But in the natural features, rockland types, and in the specimens of native trees we have something unique and which cannot be obtained elsewhere ... we still have some fine specimens of native oaks, maples, arbutus, etc. These are in danger of extermination through ignorance or because they do not conform to conventional ideas or because they have through neglect and lack of intelligent management become decadent. It is to be hoped, however, that the aldermen will awake to the realization of the value of the wonderful natural parkland with which this locality was originally endowed by nature and instead of wasting money on excessive pruning of the exotic trees of the boulevards that they will devote some of the funds to the conservation ... of the remnant of the superb pioneer trees which were so great a wonder to the first arrivals on the Coast.<sup>45</sup>

Whether Garry oaks were indeed native was debated in Pemberton's time and afterward. Into the mid-twentieth century at least, many people suspected that Garry oaks had been introduced from Britain. Early evidence for this can be seen in 1921, when, after a large oak tree was felled, Pemberton counted its rings to measure its age. He then wrote in the *Colonist*: "As such extravagant statements made by visitors in reference to reason for these unique oaks being found here have been published in outside papers, it is well to try and obtain a record of some of the ages of big trees when cut down."<sup>46</sup> In other words, Garry oaks

<sup>43</sup> Brownstein, "Sunday Walks and Seed Traps," 146.

<sup>44</sup> "Stop Cutting Oaks in View of Protest," "Collinson Oak Tree Falls to City Axe," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 27 May 1922.

<sup>45</sup> C.C. Pemberton, "Victoria Should Conserve Her Pioneering Landmarks," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 4 June 1922.

<sup>46</sup> "Warns City about Removing Oak Trees," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 11 February 1921.

could not have been introduced if they pre-existed the earliest European visitors. Two decades later, the same misapprehension appeared in a news story published in the *Times*:

Suggested historical connections between Sir Francis Drake's trip up the Pacific Coast and Victoria's aged oaks, [sic] were shaken by material evidence presented by H.W. Warren, city parks superintendent, today. The connection was suggested by J.B. Munro, Deputy Minister of Agriculture. He advanced the possibility that Drake might have reached this territory and scattered some acorns. Today Mr. Warren placed Drake's visit to the Pacific coast at 1569. Last week one of the Beacon Hill Park oaks which had developed dry rot was cut down. By counting the rings, city officials fixed its age at 420 years, about 50 years before the Drake excursion.<sup>47</sup>

A year later, Victoria Natural History Society (VNHS) president Robert Connell published a general interest piece on oak trees in the *Colonist* and declared that "there is a popular myth that the Garry oak is the English oak brought to this coast by Sir Francis Drake."<sup>48</sup> Connell appealed to botanical common sense, pointing out that "it is entirely different from the English oak as a comparison of the two shows," not to mention that "it would be nothing short of a miracle" if Drake's plantings had spread so widely in such a relatively short period.<sup>49</sup> A few years later, Connell found himself misquoted, and he set the record straight:

I was rather surprised the other day to find myself quoted as supporting the fantastic legend that our familiar Garry oak is an introduced species, and of European origin. In one form the introduction is credited to Sir Francis Drake! A comparison of the leaves, bark, and acorns of our oak with those of the English or any other oak ought to convince anyone of the specific difference between it and ours.<sup>50</sup>

Though easily disproved, this misapprehension shows that Garry oaks retained a flavour of Britishness well into the twentieth century.<sup>51</sup>

For a few years in the mid-1960s, Garry oaks became a popular topic of discussion among members of the VNHS. The naturalists, speaking to

<sup>47</sup> "Not Drake Oaks in City Parks," *Victoria Daily Times*, 30 January 1941.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Connell, "Our Native Oak and its Ancestry," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 20 December 1942, mag. sec.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Robert Connell, "Nature Talks," *Victoria Daily Times*, 26 August 1946.

<sup>51</sup> And beyond. Not surprisingly, I often find myself in conversations about Garry oak trees, and, many times, people of my acquaintance have expressed surprise that the trees were not planted in the colonial period.



each other through their bimonthly newsletter and to the public through the daily newspapers, expressed uncertainty over the trees' future and made calls for their preservation. Yorke Edwards, in 1965, was among the first to sound the alarm with an article entitled "The City of Oaks," published in the *Victoria Naturalist*. Edwards opened the article in a familiar way, portraying Garry oaks as victims of modernity:

When I answered my phone one day in August, there was a man I had never talked to before, and he wanted to talk about oaks. He was worried. Everywhere he looked the oaks were coming down, and no one seemed to be growing new ones ... All over town, engineers were busy looking after the needs of cars, and forgetting to look after the needs of people, and the trees were coming down to make room for blacktop.

Then Edwards made his case for why this should not be so:

Victoria is a distinctive city. Not many cities are distinctive these days, for they all look much alike in spite of desperate superficial attempts to be different. A number of things make Victoria different, and one of the most important is its oaks. These native trees, most of them older than the city about them, have unusually graceful and interesting forms, and they bring into our city streets an informality and a pleasant softening of the urban scene that does much of the doing to make Victoria Canada's most beautiful city.<sup>52</sup>

It should be clear that Edwards' argument is hardly based on pure science; rather, his concern for the oaks' survival blends into an expression of civic pride and aesthetic appreciation. Similarly, Freeman King addressed the oaks' disappearance in 1966: "[The Garry oak] is slowly disappearing from the landscape through indiscriminate cutting where buildings are being erected. This surely is a crime when with some thought and planning of an area this beautiful native oak can be saved. No matter where you see it it is rugged, strong, and fascinating."<sup>53</sup>

For a few years the *Victoria Naturalist* sporadically included articles dealing with the oaks' plight. The *Colonist* reported on a plan by the VNHs to develop a nursery to grow Garry oaks for propagation throughout the region.<sup>54</sup> Yet, it would appear that little happened. Two months after the *Colonist* reported on the nursery plan, Yorke Edwards wrote in the *Naturalist*, apparently after some reflection: "It seems that the idea of

<sup>52</sup> Yorke Edwards, "The City of Oaks," *Victoria Naturalist* 22 (November 1965): 33.

<sup>53</sup> Freeman King, "Garry Oaks," *Victoria Naturalist* 22 (August 1966): 93.

<sup>54</sup> "Oak Savers Plant Idea." *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 14 October 1966.

an oak nursery is one that the oaks may object to ... our Garry oak is difficult to transplant.”<sup>55</sup> By the late 1960s, the Garry oak had left the spotlight again.

When Garry oaks began to appear again in the pages of the *Victoria Naturalist*, nearly three decades had passed and they had once more undergone a change of role in the public imagination. Environmental consciousness, building in force from the 1960s onward, reached a high point in the early 1990s, embodied in such historical moments as the 1992 Earth Summit and, more locally, the tumultuous 1993 protests against old-growth logging in Clayoquot Sound. In Victoria, a grassroots environmental group called the Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society (GOMPS) formed in 1992 to preserve the vestiges of the precolonial Garry oak meadow landscape. GOMPS concentrated on public outreach, attracting early attention from the *Victoria Times-Colonist* for its oak-planting campaigns in 1992 and 1993.<sup>56</sup> GOMPS also contributed articles to the *Victoria Naturalist*, and, in a September 1992 article, founding GOMPS member Joyce Lee introduced the group and its mission:

Garry oaks (*Quercus carnyana*) [*sic*], with their associated flowers, ferns, grasses, shrubs, lichens and mosses, are fast moving towards extinction. In fact, this ecosystem is the most threatened in Canada. Ninety-five percent of its habitat has been lost and the remaining five percent is threatened by urbanization. Recently, 22 concerned individuals met to plot the course of a new group, the Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society, specifically devoted to conservation and education of [*sic*] Garry oak meadows.<sup>57</sup>

Here the Garry oak exists in an ecological network. Though GOMPS organized acorn collecting and planting efforts in the early 1990s, and early media coverage focused mostly on its advocacy for the threatened trees,<sup>58</sup> the group was dedicated to preserving something broader – the Garry oak meadow, or, elsewhere, the Garry oak ecosystem. The concept of a Garry oak ecosystem had been reified through work in conservation biology in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>59</sup> The relative success of GOMPS, and the

<sup>55</sup> Yorke Edwards, “More on Oaks,” *Victoria Naturalist* 23 (December 1966): 40.

<sup>56</sup> “Acorn Effort Rapidly Taking Root,” *Victoria Times-Colonist*, 26 September 1992; Patrick Murphy and Peter Salmon, “Seedlings First Step in Fight for Oaks,” *Victoria Times-Colonist*, 23 September 1993.

<sup>57</sup> Joyce Lee, “Garry Oak Meadows,” *Victoria Naturalist* 49 (September 1992): 17.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Watts, “Developers, Pests Laying Siege to Our Unique Garry Oaks,” *Victoria Times Colonist*, 22 April 1992.

<sup>59</sup> For example, Jim Pojar, “Threatened Forest Ecosystems of British Columbia,” in *Threatened and Endangered Species and Habitats in British Columbia and the Yukon: Proceedings*, ed. Richard

sharp rise in public awareness of Garry oaks and their ecologically related species, attests to the success of the Garry oak ecosystem concept.

The popularity of the idea of the Garry oak ecosystem might be understood by comparing it with earlier expressions of the Garry oak's place in Victoria. Naturalist Freeman King, writing in the *Colonist* in 1959, claimed that "the lower part of Vancouver Island is the Garry Oak's real habitat and Victoria its home,"<sup>60</sup> and Yorke Edwards, quoted above, wrote of Victoria as "The City of Oaks."<sup>61</sup> The idea that Garry oaks somehow belonged to Victoria had already been articulated; however, in the Garry oak ecosystem concept, it found scientific legitimacy. Biogeoclimatic zone mapping, which spatially identifies zones of similar vegetation, geology, and climate, legitimized the territorial claims of Garry oak and related species.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the idea of the Garry oak ecosystem could be used as a filter to discern what belonged in given spaces in Victoria and what did not. One of its effects was to energize efforts to remove invasive species, especially the vilified Scotch broom (*Cytisus scoparius*), once treasured for its flowers. A 1995 *Times-Colonist* article entitled "Broom-Pull Party Aims to Restore Garry Oak Glades" began with the ominous words: "Don't be deceived by the pretty yellow flowers, prolific Scotch broom is smothering native plants and shrubs."<sup>63</sup> The article explained that a volunteer work party made up of members of GOMPS and the Sierra Club was attempting to eradicate broom in Mount Tolmie Park. Two months later, the newspaper reported that the Swan Lake Nature Sanctuary had begun using helicopters to remove large quantities of broom cut from Christmas Hill, aided by \$700 from GOMPS.<sup>64</sup> Another piece, some years later, lauded the "Boss of the Broom Bash," Girl Guide leader Margaret Lidkea, who, at the time of writing, was recovering from the "mustering of the troops for Victoria's annual standoff against the botanical terrorist movement – Scotch Broom."<sup>65</sup> Lidkea's Girl Guides had recently achieved local fame by removing

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Stace-Smith, Lois Johns, and Paul Joslin, 28-39 (Victoria: Ministry of Environment, 1980); Jim Pojar, "Threatened Habitats of Rare Vascular Plants in British Columbia," in Stace-Smith, Johns, and Joslin, *Threatened and Endangered Species*, 40-48.

<sup>60</sup> Freeman King, "Extinction Threatening Garry Oaks?"

<sup>61</sup> Yorke Edwards, "City of Oaks."

<sup>62</sup> Karel Klinka, F.C. Nuszdorfer, and L. Skoda, *Biogeoclimatic Units of Central and Southern Vancouver Island* (Victoria: Ministry of Forests, 1979).

<sup>63</sup> Judith Lavoie, "Broom-Pull Party Aims to Restore Garry Oak Glades," *Victoria Times-Colonist*, 5 January 1995.

<sup>64</sup> "It's Up, Up, and Away for Sweep of Hay-Fever Nightmare on Hill," *Victoria Times-Colonist*, 11 March 1995.

<sup>65</sup> Jim Gibson, "Margaret Lidkea: Boss of the Broom Bash," *Victoria Times Colonist*, 4 November 2001.

fantastic quantities of the hated plant from a meadow near Cattle Point in Oak Bay.

But Scotch broom was not without its admirers in 1996. A letter in the *Times Colonist* voiced concerns, noting that broom was more attractive than some of the plants it allegedly threatened:

I cannot feel ... that the broom is being eradicated on the grounds that something bad and unattractive is crowding out something good and attractive, and I can only conclude that the broom eradication program is “justified” on the grounds that the “imported” broom is crowding out “native species.” This in turn implies a simple discrimination on the grounds of national origin, which is hardly a sentiment one would wish to encourage.<sup>66</sup>

This letter received a sharply worded rebuttal a few days later. In response to the statement that Scotch broom “gives us a very welcome first splash of yellow color in spring,”<sup>67</sup> another letter retorted:

From my personal perspective, “first splash of yellow” broom represents the curse of sentimental nationalism and western ethnocentrism, since the color and fragrance of native shrubs such as Indian plum and red-flowering currant actually precede those of broom by as much as four months. While arbitrary cultural-aesthetics may be at home in the garden, in natural parks they must yield to those of nature.<sup>68</sup>

The latter correspondent, by invoking “nature” to justify removing broom, might call to mind one of geographer Franklin Ginn’s cautions about “eco-nationalism,” namely, that nature, which is always ideological, can be made to appear as an apolitical space in which modern settler peoples can pretend to distance themselves from the messy events of colonialism.<sup>69</sup> This takes on greater significance if we accept that people often express group identity through plant cultivation – or, in this case,

<sup>66</sup> Michael Hamilton, “Killing Broom Discrimination,” *Victoria Times Colonist*, 18 November 1996. Peter Coates, studying attitudes towards invasive species in the United States, finds that this implied comparison – between the exclusion of invasive species and the exclusion of unwanted human groups – is one that is frequently made yet little justified in the present. There is such a thing as “biological nativism,” yet, it comes at a time when the United States is remarkably open towards human immigrants. See Peter Coates, *American Perceptions of Immigrant and Invasive Species: Strangers on the Land* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> Hamilton, “Killing Broom Discrimination.”

<sup>68</sup> Eric Redekop, “Why Native Plants Deserve Protection,” *Victoria Times-Colonist*, 13 September 1997.

<sup>69</sup> Franklin Ginn, “Extension, Subversion, Containment: Eco-Nationalism and (Post)Colonial Nature in Aotearoa New Zealand,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s., 33 (2008): 335–53.

plant removal.<sup>70</sup> I am not sure, though, to what extent this hypothetical criticism would be warranted. It is certainly the case that many settler people in Victoria have shown great interest in understanding local native ecosystems. To my mind, this does suggest that people may desire a more authentic connection to the local, and perhaps some caution is required to ensure that people do not confuse native plant gardening with Aboriginality. On the other hand, Scotch broom has a very real capacity to propagate itself and to wreak ecological havoc, and its removal can hardly be seen as imprudent.

The Garry oak ecosystem concept affected Garry oaks growing beyond natural parks. Several municipalities in Greater Victoria tabled tree preservation bylaws after circa 2000.<sup>71</sup> Each bylaw prohibits the cutting of certain native tree species, and though the species protected differ somewhat from municipality to municipality, Garry oaks are protected, at least to some degree, in each one. These bylaws, coming as they have after long years of conflict over urban oaks, perhaps represent the Garry oak's transition from awkward street tree to component of the urban forest.<sup>72</sup> That said, only the passage of time will demonstrate whether these bylaws make life on the streets any easier for the Garry oak.

In 2009, Garry oaks have an array of advocates. The Garry Oak Ecosystem Recovery Team (GOERT), for example, is a large, non-profit organization with links to government, academia, First Nations, and the public. GOERT's website gives visitors a wealth of information about Garry oak ecosystems – where they can be found, what they are, how to garden so as not to disturb them, and more. Furthermore, the group has been involved in facilitating scientific research about Garry oak ecosystems and restoring those Garry oak ecosystems that still exist. GOERT has done much to raise Garry oaks out of obscurity in Victoria, and it has legitimized and even, to some extent, professionalized Garry oak ecosystem conservation. Nevertheless, the Garry oak with which GOERT deals is the ecological Garry oak, and it is but one of many Garry oaks that have grown in Victoria in the city's modern history. Victoria's

<sup>70</sup> Isis Brook, "Making Here Like There: Place Attachment, Displacement and the Urge to Garden," *Ethics, Place and Environment* 6 (2003): 227–34; Lesley Head and Pat Muir, "Nativeness, Invasiveness and Nation in Australian Plants," *Geographical Review* 94 (2004): 199–217.

<sup>71</sup> These municipalities are the City of Victoria, the Township of Esquimalt, the District of Oak Bay, the District of Saanich, the District of Central Saanich, the District of North Saanich, the Town of Sidney, the District of Highlands, and the Town of View Royal.

<sup>72</sup> At the time of writing, the City of Victoria is preparing an urban forest master plan. See City of Victoria, "City of Victoria – Parks Division," website, available at [http://www.victoria.ca/cityhall/departments\\_compar\\_rbnfrs.shtml](http://www.victoria.ca/cityhall/departments_compar_rbnfrs.shtml) (viewed 1 July 2009).

Garry oaks may finally have achieved some social prominence, but in some ways the trees are as obscure as ever. That, in short, is why I have written this article.

A common thread running through a great many of these oak stories is that Garry oaks are disappearing. This has been the case for a century or more. Today, they demand our attention as some of the last vegetative holdouts from precolonial Victoria and as tenuous links in a nearly compromised ecological network. For amateur naturalists in the mid-1960s, Garry oaks were a symbol of civic botanical pride threatened by development: Victoria was “The City of Oaks,”<sup>73</sup> and Garry oaks were “Victoria’s own oak tree.”<sup>74</sup> For C.C. Pemberton in the 1940s, Garry oaks were embattled native trees in need of protection. For the *Colonist’s* editor in 1898, fallen trees were tragic beauties, the victims of vandalism. This is an oversimplification, but there is something important in it: in Victoria’s oak lore, the *vanishing* Garry oak looms large. Garry oaks constantly threaten to disappear, and the tree itself stands enigmatic, intriguing, out of reach, a symbol of all that people in Victoria do not yet understand about the land they inhabit.

I began this article with the caution that what followed would be a survey of some of the dominant themes in the Garry oak’s cultural history after 1843. Implicit in this is the possibility that there is much left to discover. If partial obscurity characterizes Victoria’s modern relationship with its Garry oaks, then we would do well to give our attention to those instances in which humans and Garry oaks cross paths. I have given my attention to the textual record of these instances, but this record necessarily omits much of what transpires between people and the trees. For one thing, as I mentioned earlier, those places where Garry oaks appear in print were very often the city’s daily newspapers, which are hardly the places for the acknowledgment of alternative or less privileged perspectives. I found virtually no indication of contemporary Aboriginal perspectives on Garry oaks, for instance. Furthermore, print is necessarily devoid of the spontaneity that causes people to climb trees, paint trees, and so on. In short, different sources and new research methods could help us to better understand how people in Victoria relate to the trees around them and could enrich our study of the cultural history of nature in British Columbia.

Lest my call for further musing on an obscure and geographically limited tree appear trivial in a time of climate change and economic

<sup>73</sup> Edwards, “City of Oaks.”

<sup>74</sup> Freeman King, “Extinction Threatening Garry Oaks?”



crisis, I remind readers that Thomas J. Campanella, in his cultural history of the American elm, reflected that “smaller plants may feed and sustain us, but in trees we see ourselves.”<sup>75</sup> The Garry oak, longed for and fought for over decades of Victoria’s history, and now threatening to vanish before it is well understood, might tell us much about the hardly trivial matter of the relationship between society and nature in Victoria. We have but to listen.

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<sup>75</sup> Campanella, *Republic of Shade*, 4.