

# INTRODUCTION:

## *Considering the Middle Fraser*

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COLE HARRIS

**A**LTHOUGH THE FRASER is British Columbia's primary river, much of it is remarkably little known. The two transcontinental railways that follow its lower course turn eastward at Lytton. Northward, up the Fraser beyond Lytton, settlement is scattered, roads are poor, and the river difficult to approach. The west-side dirt road between Lytton and Lillooet connects isolated farmsteads, active or abandoned, on terraces well above the river. The paved east-side road follows the river valley while avoiding the river as much as possible. Beyond Lillooet, where the Fraser jogs to the east and enters an abrupt canyon at Fountain, the river becomes almost unapproachable by land. This is where, in June 1808, Simon Fraser offered his most anguished descriptions of an impossible river. Even today, its readiest access through much of its central course is by large, inflatable rafts, and it was on such a craft a couple of summers ago that plans for this issue of *BC Studies* were hatched.

We were a mixed group from UBC, variously interested in the river and its abutments, plus a few members of the rafting public brave enough to join such a crew. There was a good deal of relevant expertise aboard: Jesse Morin, PhD candidate in archaeology and someone steeped in the prehistory of Plateau cultures; John Thistle, PhD candidate in geography and then researching a doctoral thesis on the environmental consequences of grassland ranching in early British Columbia; Joanna Reid, also in the doctoral program in geography and a student of land-use conflicts along precisely the stretch of the river we were navigating; and Mike Kennedy, descendent of fur trader Peter Skene Ogden, physical geographer by training, teacher for many years in Lillooet, and student of the landscapes of placer mining along the middle Fraser. Putting our heads together, we concluded that a useful issue of *BC Studies* on the middle Fraser was feasible. The four articles that comprise this issue are the result.

All these articles are written close to the ground; their strength is their involvement with the intricacies of a place. The changing patterns of land and life along the middle Fraser are inherently fascinating, revealing, as they do, a significant slice of British Columbia and something of its immediate context. They can also be made to speak to broader, more theorized issues, but for the most part this more theoretical exegesis is not what these articles undertake. Rather, they provide basic information about a place and its various peoples, with the intention of bringing elements of that place – perhaps even elements of what it is to live in British Columbia – into slightly sharper focus.

Jesse Morin et al. consider the prehistoric village sites – some of them the largest archaeological sites in western Canada – found on terraces along the middle Fraser. Their article provides, first of all, an exceedingly useful inventory of the findings and arguments in an impressive but scattered academic literature. The economy and seasonal rounds of the peoples who inhabited these villages and the factors affecting their choice of village sites are described. All villages are located on a regional map, and site maps are provided of all large villages (those with more than thirty housepits). The points of disagreement between Brian Hayden, an archaeologist at SFU who has directed excavations at one of the largest sites (Keatley Creek) for some twenty years, and Anna-Marie Prentiss, an archaeologist at the University of Montana who has worked at Bridge River and Keatley Creek, are identified. At issue is when the large villages, and particularly the large houses within them, were occupied. Hayden holds that the large pithouses appeared about 500 BC and were abandoned about AD 1000, when a massive rockslide below Lillooet destroyed salmon runs in the Fraser. Prentiss suggests that large villages were established between AD 100 and AD 400, and disappeared about AD 1200 as their resource base was slowly undermined by climatic deterioration during the Little Ice Age. At this point, Morin et al. leave inventory aside and offer their own analysis derived from published radiocarbon dates of material from housepits. On this basis, they conclude that the highest population densities along the middle Fraser were from AD 400 to AD 800, that the population maximum was around AD 700, and that drastic population decline began in the ninth century and continued for several hundred years. By AD 1000, in their view, the population was barely half what it had been three centuries before. They provide this demographic background without committing themselves to specific dates of large pithouse and large village abandonment.

Overall, I am struck by the large number of people who, centuries before Simon Fraser, occupied this small stretch of British Columbia. Theirs was obviously a long, complex, fluctuating, and now considerably unknowable history. It has been overridden in the minds of British Columbians by a lack of information coupled with the assumption that an ageless prehistoric sameness was suddenly disrupted and brought into history when literate outsiders arrived.

The gold rushes to British Columbia have generated a large literature, but until Michael Kennedy took on the task, no one had seriously asked where precisely and by what technological means the miners worked. For a 130-kilometre stretch of the river north of Lytton, this information is now in hand, and it is summarized in the second article in this issue. All the technologies of placer mining employed along this reach of the river and the characteristic landscape each left behind are succinctly described. Virtually all placer mining sites and the ditches that commonly accompanied them are mapped at a large scale, and as much of this detail as possible has been preserved on the eight maps that are the core of Kennedy's article. Two large-scale maps of the Lillooet area, and accompanying text, give some indication of the detail that a survey extending over five years and an eye sensitized to the landscape remains of placer mining were able to capture. Kennedy's work reveals a massive and frequently sophisticated assault on the bars, banks, and terraces along the Fraser River. There are a great many placer sites, the largest occupying dozens of hectares. Miners tapped virtually every stream or spring that could provide water for their workings. Some ditches were short, other systems long and intricate. But it is the enormous volume of material the placer miners removed that is perhaps Kennedy's most impressive finding. All manner of outwash from placer mining went into the river, of course, and in volumes that can now be calculated approximately. Fines were carried away (traces of mercury used in placer mining show up in the Fraser delta), but many gravels and cobbles from placer mining probably remain in the river. Because such mining has ceased, they may not soon be replenished if removed – matters that fluvial geomorphologists are currently studying and that link Kennedy's work along the middle Fraser to salmon populations and spawning grounds along the lower river and to arguments about gravel operations there.

Ranchers who took up grassland along the Fraser required far more space than miners and, by reorganizing the ecology around cattle, usually produced more durable economies. In so doing, however, they created

competitors for scarce grass and quickly identified them as pests. Two such pests – grasshoppers and wild horses – and the arguments, science, and politics that surrounded them, are the subject of John Thistle’s article. If entomologists concluded that grasshopper outbreaks were associated with overgrazing, their apparent remedy was not acceptable to ranchers. Poison gas was considered, as were turkeys, but the preferred weapon was arsenic and the preferred targets (the vocabulary, Thistle shows, was military) were grasshopper breeding areas. However, Native people (some of whom had been poisoned) did not cooperate in the war on grasshoppers, nor did many of the small ranchers (who thought large ranchers had caused the problem and should foot the bills). Nor, in their way, did the grasshoppers, outbreaks of which declined in the 1930s but returned with a vengeance in the 1940s. Wild horses, thought to spread disease and consume rangeland, were an easier target, principally because many of them belonged to Native people. The war on wild horses, Thistle shows, was yet another means – backed in this case as in others by the full arsenal of settler colonialism – of dispossessing Native people. Most horses were shot. Some were shipped to Russia (for the army) and others to the United States (for fertilizer or pet food). A few survived. In sum, Thistle’s article is a reflection on the ways in which grasshoppers and wild horses intersected the values and class positions of a settler society, the science and institutions of the day, the modalities of settler colonialism, and the ecology of grasslands.

Joanna Reid brings the discussion of the Fraser River grasslands to the present, and she does so by examining the values and interests of those most concerned about their use. These spectacular landscapes are the homes of different peoples and generate intense feelings and attachments. The principal groups with particular interests in them are environmentalists (for whom the grasslands are a rare and threatened ecology), ranchers (for many of whom the grasslands are the basis of their livelihood and way of life), and Native peoples (who have never relinquished title to what, for them, are their ancestral lands). Reid has spent a good deal of time with each of these groups, understands many of their views, and reports them. In an atmosphere often overcharged with emotion, she seeks to explain each to the others, a prerequisite, she thinks, to any durable resolution of the grassland debates. She describes three very different and altogether understandable positions. More than that, she suggests how these different positions might begin to accommodate each other. The issue of Native title, she holds, cannot be ignored and will have to be settled, but in ways that provide space

for others. There will be pockets of protected grassland, but environmentalists will have to accept the continuing, monitored presence of cattle on most grasslands, and special support (conservation covenants in some cases) for ranchers who are effective stewards of grassland. Ranchers will have to accept multifunctional landscapes where grassland conservation, ranching, and Native rights intersect. All stakeholders have an interest in keeping ranches intact, out of developers' hands. Such, Reid suggests, are essential elements of an inclusive politics of grassland conservation.

These articles seem to me an altogether useful product of a few days and a few conversations on the river. Something of the texture, past and present, of the middle Fraser is in them. There is magic there, as anyone who has visited the area knows, and it is now clear, judging by population numbers, that many people for many centuries have considered this a particularly precious place. It warrants the studies published here and many more.

That place and these studies are conducive, I find, to a certain British Columbian soul searching. British Columbia's long Aboriginal past comes into focus and remains so. Descendants of the people who inhabited the large pithouses and villages on the terraces along the middle Fraser live in the area today, and they speak out about title and rights to grasslands. They have not been assimilated and are part, ineluctably, of the British Columbian equation. Some introduced economies came and went, as did placer mining, but others, such as ranching, stuck, and, with them, immigrant lives. Like many other immigrants, ranchers created homes; the middle Fraser became their place too – a new home of one set of people superimposed on the far older home of another. The coming of outsiders to British Columbia was late and abrupt: along the middle Fraser a few fur trade decades, then a gold rush. Miners brought one overriding objective, the attainment of which rendered Native peoples and nature expendable. No miner fretted about the ecological effects of the millions of tons of overburden sluiced into the Fraser River. There was no other means of disposal: the river was accommodating, and that was that. The ranchers' use of arsenic embodied essentially the same attitude. For all the individual exceptions, there has been arrogance in the BC air, both with respect to Native peoples and to nature. An immigrant society has imposed itself at a time when the technological and administrative capacity to accomplish change has been enormous. In that immigrant society, most of us are like the ranchers. This place has become our home too, but we live in it with the tensions that are

inherent in the way modern British Columbia has come about. Yet values and attitudes change, and the pressures for change grow. The accommodation that Joanna Reid seeks in the grassland debate is already one that, in various ways, the larger society of British Columbia finds itself groping towards.