

# PATRICIA E. ROY AND THE ORIENT

## *A Review Essay*

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Patricia E. Roy

*A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians  
and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914.*

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989. 345 pp. Illus. \$32.95 paper.

*The Oriental Question: Consolidating a  
White Man's Province, 1914-1941.*

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003. 344 pp. Illus. \$95.00 cloth, \$32.95 paper.

*The Triumph of Citizenship: The Japanese and  
Chinese in Canada, 1941-67.*

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007. 400 pp. Illus. \$85.00 cloth, \$32.95 paper.

THE 2007 PUBLICATION of the third volume of Patricia E. Roy's trilogy on British Columbia's conflicted relationship with its East Asian immigrants and their descendents completes not only a landmark in Canadian and British Columbian historiography but also the fullest single account of such a relationship existing anywhere in the rather large literature devoted to the East Asian diaspora for a given locality anywhere in the New World. Roy, who was in graduate school in the 1960s, was not trained to do anything like the history of ethnicity; in fact, I am not aware of any specially trained ethnic history scholars in Canada prior to the late Howard Palmer, whose dissertation under Donald Avery at York was in 1974.

Roy tells us that she came to her topic obliquely. Sometime before 1972,

a student asked her why, after resisting for years, did Ottawa capitulate to British Columbia on the question of Chinese immigration in 1923. Her answer satisfied the student but not herself. So the "young and naive historian ... was sure that a little work in the National Archives and some digging into the Mackenzie King papers would provide [her] with the answer."<sup>1</sup> That research provided her with a paper, later published, and a project that would occupy her for some thirty-five years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-41*, 1. (hereafter Roy, *Oriental*.)

<sup>2</sup> Roy, "The Oriental 'Menace' to British Columbia," in *The Twenties in Western Canada*, ed. S.M. Trofimenkoff (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1972), 243-58.

In 1989, describing her first volume, she speaks of work “done over a very long period of time” and of an original intent to study and compare “the exclusionary Chinese Immigration Act, 1923, and the evacuation of the Japanese from the British Columbia Coast in 1942.”<sup>3</sup> Well into her research and with several chapters drafted for a book beginning with the outbreak of war in 1914, she came to realize that “the logical starting date was 1858, the year the colony of British Columbia was created and Chinese residents first arrived.” Thus her first volume ends in 1914 rather than beginning there. At that point she planned a sequel volume, but at some unspecified date “two volumes became three.”<sup>4</sup>

I first became aware of her work in 1976 when I taught summer school at Calgary, and a superior graduate student, Ann Sunahara, directed me to it. During the ensuing thirteen years, Roy established herself as an authority on race relations with numerous articles, essays, and conference papers.<sup>5</sup> Although there had been no book-length historical studies of East Asians in British Columbia when she began her research, several such studies were

in print by the time her first volume appeared, the most significant of which was W. Peter Ward’s *White Canada Forever* (1978).<sup>6</sup>

The appearance of Roy’s first volume with promise of more to come cemented her position in the field. The methodology and the parameters of what would and what would not be included, established for *A White Man’s Province*, continued to govern what Roy did in the subsequent volumes and are crucial to any analysis of her work. Her work is characterized by a close, often almost microscopic analysis of the evidence, with an emphasis on government archives and contemporary newspapers, which is to say politics and public opinion. She stresses the multiple and complex causes of the mistreatment of East Asians, but the emphases are largely on white fears of being undercut economically and overrun physically by alien, culturally indigestible yellow hordes. She meticulously traces the evolution of increasingly discriminatory laws and parses how they came to be enacted.

Like all methodologies, Roy’s have distinct limits. She is not writing a general account of race relations because relations between Native peoples and what became the dominant group in British Columbia are knowingly ignored, as are attitudes towards other immigrant groups, including, most strikingly, those from India. They, and work about them, get only glancing references, only one of which mentions the dramatic *Komagata Maru*

<sup>3</sup> Roy, *A White Man’s Province: British Columbia Politicians and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (hereafter Roy, *White Man’s.*), xviii, vii.

<sup>4</sup> Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship: The Japanese and Chinese in Canada, 1941-1967* (hereafter Roy, *Triumph.*), viii.

<sup>5</sup> Two important examples of the former are Roy, “Educating the East: British Columbia and the Oriental Question in the Interwar Years,” *BC Studies* 18 (1972): 50-69 and “British Columbia’s Fear of Asians, 1900-1950,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 13 (1980): 161-72. Roy also published significantly on other aspects of BC and Canadian history, but those works are not considered here and are largely beyond my competence.

<sup>6</sup> W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978). Roy commented on this historiography in Roy, *White Man’s*, vii-ix, and in “‘White Canada Forever’: Two Generations of Studies,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 11 (1979): 97-109.

affair in 1914.<sup>7</sup> Nor is the word “Sikh” mentioned, although in one of the illustrations that effectively supplement the text, two turbaned Sikhs dominate the foreground.<sup>8</sup> Nor is there an attempt to delineate the histories of Chinese and Japanese British Columbians. Roy refers to work by “outsiders,” including herself, as opposed to work with which she is thoroughly familiar written primarily by “insiders” – East Asian Canadians. (Focusing on content rather than authorship, I observed a similar dichotomy in the historiography of writing about Asians in the United States and spoke about writing that focused on the “excluders” rather than the “excluded.”)

But what Roy does do is more important than what is omitted, and it is clear that these and other omissions are deliberate. As she reminds us, her work is, first and foremost, about “how white British Columbians acted towards Asians and why they acted as they did.”<sup>9</sup> She demonstrates superbly and in great detail the ways in which most BC politicians – and the journalists who chronicled them – responded to and manipulated their constituents’ fears about the competition of first Chinese and then Japanese settlers. She notes that in the nineteenth century there were some BC politicians who, without championing East Asian immigrants, refrained from supporting anti-Asian legislation, or, in a few cases, opposed it. By the beginning of the twentieth century, such minority opposition had withered away in the face of overwhelming popular support. That change occurred when the Asian question that had been, in Roy’s words,

“primarily an economic one with racial overtones” became “one that was mainly racial with economic overtones.”<sup>10</sup> The province was, even more than the rest of the country, a self-proclaimed White Man’s Country and would remain so until after the Second World War.

*The Oriental Question* takes up the story at the beginning of the First World War and carries it to just before Japan went to war against the United States and the British Empire. Roy puts it nicely: “This volume, as a prelude to the events following Pearl Harbor that led to the removal of all Japanese from the coast in 1942, shows how politicians, by exploiting fears of an ‘Oriental Menace,’ kept racial prejudices alive even after they had seemingly consolidated the whiteness of their province.”<sup>11</sup>

Since the question had become, in Roy’s view, largely racial, she devotes analytic chapters to extensive arguments made about “inassimilability,” “halting immigration,” “checking economic competition,” “apparent toleration,” and two climactic chapters, the first on the well-founded if exaggerated fears of the military power of Japan, the second on the unfounded fears of sabotage and other treachery from the province’s citizens of Japanese birth or ancestry. I say the first fears were exaggerated because we now know that the Japanese military had neither the ability nor developed plans to invade North America, although it is still impossible to convince many of the generations of North Americans who were alive during the Second World War of this.

The third volume, *The Triumph of Citizenship*, is in almost every respect a worthy companion to its predecessors and not at all an anti-climax

<sup>7</sup> In the first and second volumes, the index reference is to “India, immigrants from”; in the third it refers to “Indians ‘East.’”

<sup>8</sup> Roy, *Oriental*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

as final volumes often are. But on one important matter, the causes of the uprooting of the considerable Japanese-Canadian community, I must render a dissenting opinion. Roy now believes, perhaps influenced by her sometime collaborator, historian J.L. Granatstein, that “the fear of physical attacks on the Japanese in Canada might have given the Japanese military an excuse to take reprisals against Canadian and British prisoners of war and, that this concern, rather than doubts about the loyalty of Japanese Canadians, explains the removal of the Japanese from the coast.”<sup>12</sup>

Although I cannot pretend to have studied the question of the exile of the Japanese Canadians as intensely as Roy, I have studied it enough to believe that her current view is erroneous.<sup>13</sup> Her own text describing the period between Pearl Harbor and the decision for exile, called “A Civil Necessity,” is thoroughly done. It notes that “the prime minister, who eighteen months earlier had viewed the real problem with the Japanese in Canada as making them and especially the Canadian-born ‘good and loyal citizens,’ now yielded to pressure from the West Coast and his own fear that hostility to the Japanese could lead to outbursts against them.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite the strong introductory causal statement quoted above, at this point in her narrative the judgment is more tentative: “If all Japanese were removed in order to prevent riots and disturbances, that policy succeeded.”

But there were no riots or disturbances for more than two months after Pearl Harbor: what policy prevented

them? It is, alas, the same kind of argument the American Department of Homeland Security and assorted presidential aspirants use – “It has kept us safe” – to support all sorts of violations of human rights, including sending a Canadian citizen to a torture chamber in the Middle East.

Nor do I think that Roy pays enough attention to the pernicious influence of the American government decision for mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, which was agreed to days before the government in Ottawa acted. Honest historian that she is, Roy does quote H.F. Angus, “who was close to the decision making process in Ottawa,” to the effect that the fate of Japanese Canadians “was sealed by the panic action taken by the United States.”<sup>15</sup>

A second chapter shows how much of the rest of Canada began to echo British Columbia, while a third analyzes the government’s determination to ship large numbers of Japanese to Japan while preventing them and others from returning to coastal British Columbia until well into 1949. Again edging slightly away from her initial certainty, she concludes:

If moving all Japanese from the coast was a necessary evil, much of their subsequent treatment was an unnecessary one. The inadequate handling of their personal and real property and the hardships of camp conditions can be explained, but not excused, by wartime conditions. The long postwar delays in permitting their return to the coast and letting “repatriates” change their minds about going to Japan were unnecessary

<sup>12</sup> Roy, *Triumph*, II.

<sup>13</sup> Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America: Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II*, 2nd ed. (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Roy, *Triumph*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, citing an Angus mss. memoir ca. 1966.

evils arising mainly from the atavistic attitudes of politicians who were more racist than their constituents.<sup>16</sup>

As a kind of counterpoint, the next chapter shows the effect of war on Chinese Canadians, who benefited from the ancestral homeland's heroic image and, as in the United States, some of their unique legal disabilities were removed, most significantly by the repeal of the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act. Happily for Chinese Canadians, they did not suffer a fall in status because of the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic, as did their fellows below the 49th parallel.<sup>17</sup>

The next two chapters deal with the rehabilitation and eventual improvement of the legal status of Japanese Canadians who, like the Chinese, could be Canadian citizens and still not be able to vote in British Columbia and some other provinces. How this state of affairs ended is described in a chapter that talks about "first-class citizenship," which is certainly appropriate terminology.

The second chapter on the postwar situation speaks of "seeking full justice." An old legal aphorism insists that "justice delayed is justice denied." Even the 1988 granting of redress, which Roy touches on briefly in her epilogue, was not and could not be "full justice." But Roy is speaking largely about immigration, which remained all but closed to Japanese, even to Nisei who had been stranded in Japan by the war, until the 1960s when Canadian immigration policy began to approach colour blindness. Had such a policy been installed just after the war, surely many Japanese would have left their devastated land, but, except for

family reunification, postwar Japanese emigration has not been statistically significant.

For Chinese Canadians whose communities had been shrinking for decades, the eventual reestablishment of large-scale immigration has meant a renewal and eventual growth well beyond the numbers that previously existed. Between 1947 and 1967 some forty thousand Chinese immigrants were admitted, some two thousand a year.

Using the centennial year of 1967 as a terminus, Roy's brief conclusion seeks to demonstrate, successfully I think, her titular assertion that by that time the condition of Chinese and Japanese – full legal equality – was in fact a triumph of citizenship. She should have the last words here:

When the Pacific War began long-held but unfounded fears that the ethnicity of the Japanese in Canada would trump their Canadian citizenship came to the fore with calamitous consequences for them ... Canadians gradually accepted the full inclusion of people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry in the Canadian polity ... The persistent campaigning of Japanese and especially Chinese Canadians for equality in treatment paid off ... For both the Japanese and Chinese, citizenship had trumped ethnic or "racial" origin.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Roy, *Triumph*, 146–47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 148–85, 308.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.