Document généré le 21 avr. 2025 19:11

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association
Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

British Columbia's American Heritage

Willard E. Ireland

Volume 27, numéro 1, 1948

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300294ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/300294ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)
1712-9095 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Ireland, W. E. (1948). British Columbia's American Heritage. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, *27*(1), 67–73. https://doi.org/10.7202/300294ar

All Rights Reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1948

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

BRITISH COLUMBIA'S AMERICAN HERITAGE

By Willard E. Ireland
Provincial Library and Archives, Victoria, B.C.

One of the most interesting anomalies in the history of British Columbia arises from the fact that the strongest single impellant in the creation of what eventually became Canada's Pacific province was the fear of American expansionist tendencies west of the Rocky Mountains and yet that tendency, although established in fact by population movements, never seriously transferred itself into the arena of practical politics.

The role of American expansionism in the evolution of the physical boundaries of British Columbia is relatively easy to demonstrate. When the boundary line between British and American territory in the Pacific Northwest was defined by treaty in June, 1846, north of the forty-ninth parallel there was no organized British settlement, only a few widely dispersed parts of the fur-trading monopoly—the Hudson's Bay Company. That the Colonial Office was fully cognizant of the serious implications of this situation is demonstrated by a *minute* written by the colonial secretary, Lord Grey, on September 10, 1846. "Looking to the encroaching spirit of the U.S. I think it is of importance to strengthen the B[ritis]h hold upon the territory now assigned to us by encouraging the settlement upon it of B[ritis]h subjects. . . ."[1] Moreover, His Lordship was convinced that any colonization scheme could only be carried out effectively by the Hudson's Bay Company and, in consequence, despite tremendous opposition from "colonial reformers" and "Little Englanders" alike, the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island came into being under the terms of the royal grant of January 13, 1849. The subsequent history of the Company's trusteeship is not pertinent to this discussion, but the threat of American expansion, whether real or imagined, had resulted in more concrete efforts to safeguard British sovereignty.

Nor was this activity long to remain confined merely to Vancouver Island, for shortly thereafter rumours of gold discoveries in the Queen Charlotte archipelago aroused the interest of American adventurers who laid plans to investigate the new finds. Governor Douglas was convinced that if their gold seeking should prove successful, American colonization would follow and that they would seek "to establish an independent government until by force or fraud they became annexed to the United States.[2] While, in reality, his fears proved to be unfounded, nevertheless. they carried sufficient weight with the Colonial Office to result in his appointment as lieutenant-governor of Queen Charlotte Islands, thus bringing the region within the orbit of a regularly constituted colonial jurisdiction.

The Queen Charlotte Islands incident at least gave some forewarning of situations that were to develop when the great rush to the Fraser River developed in the spring and summer of 1858. It is not necessary here to detail the origin and progress of that rush, the effects of which were almost as serious and perturbing for San Francisco as for Victoria. According to the San Francisco *Alta California* of June 5, 1858, "throughout the entire length and breadth of the State the 'Frazer river fever'" had seized the people and threatened "to break up, or at least, seriously disarrange for the time being the entire mining business of the State."[3] Victoria itself was completely transformed and became, in effect, San Francisco in miniature. Of the thousands of persons joining the exodus from California, many had no inclination to embark on the hazards of mining on the bars of the Fraser. Artisans, clerks, professional and business men—in fact a representative cross section of society—joined in the rush and many hoped to pursue in Victoria their customary occupation. Merchants moved in "lock, stock and barrel." Indeed the old iron storefronts still to be seen on Wharf Street in Victoria bear mute testimony to the completeness of the transfer.

---

[1] Public Record Office, C. O. 305, vol. 1, Minute, Sept. 10, 1846, on Pelly to Grey, Sept. 7, 1846.

[2] C. O. 305, vol. 3, Douglas to Grey, Jan. 29, 1852, printed in *Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons,* 788 of 1853, 2.

Needless to say numerous indications of the so-called Americanization of Victoria could be cited but only a few will be mentioned in passing. On June 25, 1858, the first issue of the *Victoria Gazette* made its appearance. This newspaper, the first to be published in British territory west of the Great Lakes, was owned by James Towne and Company of San Francisco and edited by H. C. Williston and C. Bartlett, prominent San Franciscan newspaper men. It was an excellent publication and not until the establishment of the *British Colonist* in December, 1858, by the former Nova Scotian, Amor de Cosmos, did it encounter any real competition and even this did not in any way impair its popularity. The sudden demise of this newspaper in November, 1859, is significant to this discussion. Despite the heavy preponderance of the newer elements in the population of Victoria in dealing with local political issues, this newspaper, though not averse to criticism of Governor Douglas, had, on the whole, maintained a scrupulously neutral position. Its collapse was swift and complete when it abandoned that policy and began to express what might be called the American point of view. Apparently in Victoria at this time American sentiment was neither sufficiently strong nor interested to sustain a well-established mouthpiece. Throughout the gold-rush period, however, it is important to remember that although the original British population was submerged by the great immigration of 1858, the administration of the government continued to remain firmly in the control of pre-gold-rush British officials.

It is perfectly true that key American public holidays were usually celebrated with as complete gusto in Victoria as in communities down the Sound but British holidays were also commemorated with equal fervour by all elements of the community. The establishment and development of the fire companies in Victoria is perhaps one of the best illustrations of the imprinting of the American pattern upon a British base. Governor Douglas had planned a fire brigade acting under the jurisdiction of the police, but public sentiment swept this aside and brought into being independent volunteer brigades, manned more often than not by men with long experience in the fire companies of San Francisco and using equipment procured from that city. So firmly entrenched did this system become that in 1879 when the city contemplated taking over the companies they refused to consider such a transfer of their equipment and it was not until 1886 that a civic-paid fire department came into existence.[4]

---

[3] San Francisco *Alta California*, June 5, 1858.

[4] For details see F. W. Laing and W. Kaye Lamb, "The Fire Companies of Old Victoria" (*British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, X, 1946, 43-75).

Still another indication of the infiltration of American sentiment into the structure of colonial life is to be found in the history of the Masonic order. The first lodges were organized under warrant of the Grand Lodge of England but the work practised by these lodges was unfamiliar to the many Masons arriving in the colony. In consequence an agitation arose for the organization of a lodge using American work and a dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Washington was sought. This plan was abandoned and in the end warrants were secured under the Grand Lodge of Scotland the work of which was more similar to that of American lodges. Indeed by 1871 there were five lodges operating under the Scottish and only four under the English constitution.[5]

In the main such examples of Americanization are probably more obvious and superficial than significant. There is one aspect of the gold-rush, however, that is all too frequently ignored. It is true that Governor Douglas was overwhelmed by the rush of newcomers and wrote to the Colonial Office in May, 1858:

> . . . if the country be thrown open to indiscriminate immigration the interests of the Empire may suffer from the introduction of a foreign population, whose sympathies may be decidedly anti-British.
>
> Taking that view of the question it assumes an alarming aspect, and suggests a doubt as to the policy of permitting the free entrance of foreigners into the British territory for residence without in the first place requiring them to take the oath of allegiance and otherwise to give such security for their conduct as the Government of the country may deem it proper and necessary to require at their hands.[6]

But in that same despatch Douglas took some pains to analyse the passenger list of the American steamer *Commodore* which had arrived on April 25 with 450 on board, 400 of whom went to the gold fields. Douglas reported: "About 60 British subjects, with an equal number of native born Americans, the rest being chiefly Germans, with a smaller proportion of Frenchmen and Italians, composed this body of adventurers."[7] Whether or not this particular group can be considered representative of the whole gold-rush immigration, it is impossible to say, but at least it gives some foundation to the contention that the British element in the population of the colony was strengthened at least to a degree by the rush. In addition many individual cases could be cited of British subjects having followed the lure of gold through California and Australia only to seek and find permanent residence in British Columbia and Vancouver Island.

In addition it is obvious that Douglas realized the essential difference between previous population pressure from the south and that resulting from the gold-rush. He had witnessed at first hand the flood of immigration that burst through the Rocky Mountains in the early eighteen-forties to populate Old Oregon and put an end to the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company. This immigration was composed mainly of families whose roots ran deep into the soil of American civilization as found on the Atlantic seaboard. It was but a part of the amazing westward advance of the agricultural frontier which was at once dangerous because of its tremendous driving power and its deep-rooted appreciation of the pattern of American life. In 1858, however, Douglas realized that the gold-rush was not a repetition, and consequently he took care to differentiate between "native born Americans" and that complex mass that seems inevitably to form the population of a gold camp. No longer does he stress the fear of a pro-American sentiment but rather of the "anti-British."

---

[5] For details see Willard E. Ireland, "A Further Note on the Annexation Petition of 1869" (*British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, V, 1941, 69-72).

[6] Douglas to Labouchere, May 8, 1858, MS, Archives of British Columbia, printed in cmd 2398, *Correspondence Relative to the Discovery of Gold in the Fraser's River District, in British North America* (London, 1858), 13.

[7] *Ibid.*

Up to this point attention has been concentrated mainly on conditions in Victoria, but what of the situation on the mainland where the gold fields were located. If there has been a "critical period" in the history of British Columbia it surely must have been during the greater part of 1858 when large numbers of foreign miners and others were located on the bars of the Fraser River at a time when no legally constituted authority existed on the mainland. The original regulatory "proclamation" issued by Governor Douglas had, in effect, no validity for his commission as Governor did not run on the mainland. How then did it come to pass that the mob violence which disgraced the California gold regions finds no repetition in British territory although often even the same personnel were present?

For one thing mining on the bars of the Fraser was a more hazardous undertaking and the delay involved in waiting for the high water to recede discouraged many of the "hangers on" who never did reach the gold fields. It is true that in American newspapers "Manifest Destiny" propaganda was rampant. The sentiment expressed in the following jingle printed in the Washington *Pioneer and Democrat* is typical.

Up above, among the mountains,
Men have found the golden fountains;
Seen where they flow! Oh joy transcendent!
Down, down, in noiseless streams transplendent,
    Then, hurrah, and set your riggings—
    Sail above, to richer diggings.

When news gets where Buch and Cass is,
Johnny Bull can go where grass is,—
He may rave and rant to foaming,
It will never stop our coming.
    Then, hurrah, nor wait for papers,
    The license men may cut their capers.

Soon our banner will be streaming,
Soon the eagle will be screaming,
And the lion—see it cowers,
Hurrah, bosy, the river's ours.
    Then, hurrah, nor wait for calling,
    For the Frazer's river's falling.[8]

But in the mines the situation was different. It was generally recognized that the regulations laid down by Douglas were restrictive but not discriminatory. There was no foreign licence fee such as had been required in California. Everyone came under the same licensing system and in consequence the many foreigners involved in the rush soon came to realize in practice the meaning of fair play, and as a result there was less unrest and agitation. Likewise, Douglas never allowed a situation to get out of hand, nor did he allow the law to be overridden. This is possibly best indicated in his method of dealing with the attempt of local groups of miners to set up their own regulations sometimes in conflict with the general law. Douglas was willing to compromise within certain limits, as for example by increasing the size of claims. Moreover, he recognized the latent desire and ability for some local government in his creation of local mining boards under a gold commissioner but he firmly insisted that their activities be confined to improving conditions in the gold fields and not maintaining law and order. Once constitutional authority was established in November, 1858, and with the advent of a judge like Matthew Baillie Begbie, all elements in the population came to have a healthy respect for British justice and realized that there was no necessity for the "six shooter," the bowie knife, the vigilantes, or the posse in British Columbia.

---

[8] Olympia *Pioneer and Democrat*, Nov. 5, 1858.

With the decline of the gold excitement and the accompanying trade depression there was naturally much heart searching as to the future prospects of the colonies. Consolidation might be carried out; but would a united colony of British Columbia be in any relatively stronger condition? Subsequent history of the union did not engender much optimism. Canadian Confederation was being consummated in the East. What was the prospect of British Columbia's participation therein? Was annexation to the United States either feasible or desirable? Much has been written on the annexation movement in British Columbia and in the main its significance has been overplayed.[9] It was primarily an expression of economic discontent and in that respect merits much the same interpretation as the parallel agitation in Montreal twenty years earlier. Within the colony it had a very precarious base for the leaders were for the most part not Americans but foreign born, and it was confined almost entirely to Victoria for there is no evidence of a parallel movement on the mainland nor even elsewhere on the island.

Annexation was from the beginning a forlorn hope. The British government had endorsed the federation plan and was astute enough to recognize that an annexation movement had high propaganda value as a means of plundering the imperial treasury. Canada was willing, if not able, to see Confederation extended, and within the colony there was a considerable and active group supporting Confederation, although admittedly from a variety of motives. The Victoria *British Colonist* summed up the situation tersely. as follows: "Knowing, as we do, that annexation is impossible, even if it were desirable, and that Confederation is inevitable, even if it were undesirable would not all of us be more profitably employed in seeking to secure the best possible terms for the Colony as a province of the Dominion."[10] It is curious that despite the large American and foreign element in the population of British Columbia in the late sixties and seventies, politically it was neither active nor vocal. In consequence there has been no political heritage. Even events such as the purchase of Alaska and the Alabama claims failed to arouse any great attention in the colony. The only newspaper to advocate annexation was short-lived.[11] There was no semblance of a party or group nor any leadership, which was certainly not the case for the supporters of Confederation or its opponents. Few, if any, references to annexation are to be found in the Confederation debate of 1870. Anti-confederation sentiment there was in abundance, but annexation was never the alternative. J. S. Helmcken forthrightly stated the province's case:

---

[9] On this point see W. N. Sage, "The Annexationist Movement in British Columbia" (*Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3rd series, XXI, sec. ii, 1927, 97-110); Hugh L. Keenleyside, "British Columbia—Annexation or Confederation" (*Canadian Historical Association Report*, 1928, 34-40); and Willard E. Ireland, "The Annexation Petition of 1869" (*British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, IV, 1940, 267-87).

[10] *British Colonist*, Nov. 20, 1869.

> The sum of the interests of the inhabitants is the interest of the Colony. The people of this Colony have, generally speaking, no love for Canada; they care, as a rule, little or nothing about the creation of another Empire, Kingdom, or Republic; they have but little sentimentality, and care little about the distinction between the form of Government of Canada and the United States.
>
> Therefore no union on account of love need be looked for. The only bond of union outside of force—and force the Dominion has not—will be material advantage of the country and the pecuniary benefit of the inhabitants. Love for Canada has to be acquired by the prosperity of the country, and from our children.[12]

Confederation was a question of terms, and the price Canada was prepared to pay was acceptable to the people of British Columbia. The fulfilment of the terms of union proved to be another story. On many occasions preceding the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway the situation was often difficult and occasionally critical. But as a further indication of the absence of American political sentiment, in the numerous arguments and resolutions regarding fulfilment of the terms of union the right of secession was often discussed and once formally requested, but, as in colonial days, annexation was never put forward as the alternative. Newspapers in the United States might frequently misinterpret this state of affairs and indeed the imminent annexation of British Columbia was as widely heralded in 1883[13] as it had been in 1869. But the true state of affairs was summed up editorially by the Victoria *Colonist*:

> For many years, at stated periods, and generally during the tourist season, when the town is filled with strangers, principally citizens of the United States, the residents of Victoria have been met with the enquiry, "Is there any desire for annexation in this province?" Nine men out of every ten thus addressed, if they spoke the truth, have answered, "Scarcely any." The large majority of the people are not satisfied with Canadian rule. They feel that they have been treated badly; but however disaffected they may be towards the Dominion they would not consent to sever the connection with Great Britain.[14]

---

[11] This was the Victoria *Evening News* which suspended publication in June, 1870 after a precarious existence of fourteen months.

[12] British Columbia, Legislative Council, *Debate on the Subject of Confederation with Canada* (Victoria, 1870), 5 (Mar. 9, 1870).

[13] As, for example, the dispatch of August 14, 1883 of a correspondent of the Chicago *Tribune* reprinted in the Victoria *Colonist*, Aug. 29, 1883. See also New Westminster *Mainland Guardian*, Sept. 12, 1883.

[14] *British Colonist*, Sept. 25, 1883.

Indeed on this particular occasion annexation sentiment may be said to have swung full circle. The premier, Mr. William Smithe, availed himself of the opportunity presented by an after-luncheon speech to the journalists touring with the Villard Northern Pacific Railway party, not only to deny flatly the existence within the province of annexationist sentiment but went on to suggest that the United States might not long remain united and that part of the State of Washington might become annexed to British Columbia.[15]

Of the three main strands in British Columbia's heritage—British, Canadian, and American—the American has been politically the least vocal and significant and yet perhaps in other ways it has left its impression.[16]

---

[15] *Ibid.*, Sept. 25, 1883, Oct. 10, 1883.
For the reaction of various American newspapers to this proposal see *Victoria Standard*, Oct. 1, 3, 8, 10, 1883.

[16] The standard history of British Columbia is E. O. S. Scholefield and F. W. Howay, *British Columbia* (4 vols., Vancouver, 1914). The more recent study, dealing more specifically with American inter-relations, is F. W. Howay, W. N. Sage, and H. F. Angus, *British Columbia and the United States* (Toronto and New Haven, 1942).