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Edge of Empire: The Civilizing Mission of Adult Education in Vancouver and Early British Columbia, 1858-1918

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Abstract: *Throughout the British Empire, an educational mission was established under imperialism's patronage, to study and categorize the new world, and to bring civilization and culture to the colonies. Nineteenth and early 20th century British Columbia was no exception. The civilizing mission of colonizers was to bring to British Columbia some of the finest of British and European cultural sensibilities – to make British Columbia British.*

British Columbia may be said to have a standard comparable, at least in essential features, with the most highly developed social organization elsewhere. Its communal characteristics are not, it is needless to say, evolved from local and primitive conditions, but transplanted from the most highly civilized parts of the British Empire. . . . With . . . churches, schools, lodges, social forms, old-time recreations— all re-established on former lines[—]it is often a surprise to newcomers, who have associated life in the “wild and woolly West” with bears, cowboys, Indians, bowie-knives and desperadoes [sic], to find that they are still far away from the danger of being eaten up by wild beasts, tomahawked and scalped, or shot at sight. They find a state of society almost identical with that which they left. (R. E. Gosnell, *Year Book of British Columbia*, 1897)

R. Edward Gosnell, Provincial Librarian and Archivist, and Secretary to the Premier of British Columbia, wrote the *Yearbook* as his part of the campaign to establish British Columbia as a place of note on the map of the still expanding British Empire. A well-known British Columbian, he was altogether a newspaperman, a civil servant, and founder of the Provincial Bureau of Information. He was also an historian, an ardent imperialist, and a founding member of Vancouver's premier amateur learned society, the Art, Historical and Scientific Association (AHSA). Like many others, he firmly believed that British Columbia's destiny lay as a greater Britain on the Pacific, where British arts and institutions will expand under fresh impetus, “where the

British flag will forever fly” (Gosnell, 1897, pp. 413-414).

This idea of a British destiny, needs to be placed squarely into the geopolitical context of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Barman, 1996). For nearly four hundred years, Europeans had been colonizing huge parts of the world. By the mid 19th century, the British were pre-eminent among the imperialists. British colonies were established in all regions, on all continents of the planet. British Columbia was one such colonial outpost.

During this period, with its Manifest Destiny re-awakened, the United States also began to build its empire. By mid-century, it was expanding north and west. In 1846, the Americans annexed British territory to the south of modern British Columbia, down to the Columbia River in Oregon. Later, in 1867, on the day after Canadian confederation, the United States purchased Alaska from the Russians. British Columbia found itself flanked by the United States on two sides. Moreover, in 1858, upwards of 20,000 prospectors had shipped out of San Francisco for the Cariboo gold fields, swamping the small non-aboriginal population of British settlers. Few of these prospectors were British. Aside from the colonial government, the Royal Navy in Victoria, the Royal Engineers in New Westminster, and a few British settlers, there was little to forestall eventual annexation. With British Columbia as the land bridge between the abundance of the new Alaskan frontier and a rapacious American empire to the south, the question at the time, in many minds, was, will – and can – British Columbia remain British?

Central to the imperialist project was the role of education, and particularly of adult education, in the

process of colonization. Throughout the colonized world, a

wonderful spectacle . . . of learning, from arboretums to zoos . . . were established under imperialism's patronage, it [being] not difficult to argue that the whole venture had about it something of a great public education project intent on bringing the world together under the roof of European learning (Willinsky, 1998, p. 4).

According to Willinsky (pp. 26-27),

the intellectual interests of imperialism could be characterized as reflecting a particular 'will to know.' At its root was a desire to take hold of the world, and it was the equal, in its acquisitiveness, to any financial interest in empire . . . This will to know became an integral part of the economic and administrative apparatus of imperialism, and in the process I was too often dedicated to defining and extending the privileges of the West.

The imperialist agenda, according to Edward Said (1995), was about "power using knowledge to advance itself" (p. 4). Learning and education would serve in the Europeanization of the world.

Educated European and especially British immigrants, on foreign shores, would bring with them what Said (1978) has called their "imaginative geography" of the world. In that geography, Europe was the centre of civilization. The rest of the world, in contrast, was less civilized--or uncivilized; it was mysterious, barbarous and savage. Arriving with their imaginative geography, and their dreams of economic gain, these immigrants came to civilize this alien world, this distant other. In the face of backwoods brutishness, despondency, and Canadian whisky, there was among them an educated contingent who came with their middle-class and upper-class tastes and sensibilities. They worked, often tirelessly, in the new colonial homes to reinstate the literary, athletic and scholarly pursuits of the "old country." In short, they tried to recreate best of "Home" in their new environment (Cole, 1996; Harris, 1997).

The competition between political, economic and cultural ideals has been captured by Cole (1996), Harris (1997), and MacDonald (1996) in

their analyses of immigrant life in the early life of the province. British Columbia's rich yet rugged geography drew the vast majority of settlers, hell-bent on establishing themselves economically. Old world skills meant little; there was only limited agricultural land and there were few factories. New yet more rudimentary skills were all that were necessary in the extraction and primary processing of timber, fish and ore. Home ties, including regional culture and class position, were difficult to maintain in a polyglot population. Capital was king, and labour was its consort. Conflict -- both labour and racial -- was the norm. In contrast, in some special "Edenic" places in the province, notably Victoria and the Saanich Peninsula, the Gulf Islands, and the Cowichan, Comox and Okanagan Valleys, British Columbia offered something akin to the setting and climate of Home, in the British Isles. Immigrants of more refined tastes and ideals found in these places, and in Vancouver, a more suitable environment in which to promote the high standards of British culture and civilization. Vancouver's place is especially important as it was here that capital and culture met.

My research focuses particularly on Vancouver. As the province's new metropolis, the situation in Vancouver echoed the competition of ideals found throughout the province. Born in the 1860s, of continental North American (as opposed to British) business interests (MacDonald, 1996), the nascent metropolis of the new Canadian province became the proving ground for the establishment of a civilization at the far edge of the British Empire. During the period until World War I, tens of thousands of newcomers streamed into the city, seeking adventure, prosperity, and new lives. The settlers were predominantly British (from the United Kingdom and from central and eastern Canada). Many certainly came from the British middle classes that Gosnell had hoped to attract. The majority of residents, before the Great War, were male, although the numbers of women and families were increasing rapidly, pushing the demand for a more civilized environment. A few Americans also continued to migrate north into British Columbia, after the initial influx during the Cariboo gold rush. Several thousand Asians, particularly from China and Japan, added to the city's makeup, in addition to the aboriginal Coastal Salish inhabitants. In fact, the Asian and aboriginal inhabitants were set outside the city's social boundaries. For most European resi-

dents they were beyond the pale of civilization. They were “other.”

Adult education in the early life of Vancouver and British Columbia took on a primary mission of cultivating British literary, aesthetic and scientific tastes and skills amongst the immigrant population. In the years before World War I, such adult education was primarily of the nonformal variety, involving mutual learning in private associations and organizations. For example, in addition to the earliest literary and mechanics’ institutes, there were Gosnell’s Art, Historical and Scientific Association (AHSA), the Burrard Literary Club, the Arts and Crafts Association, the Women’s Musical Club, the Men’s and the Women’s Canadian Clubs, the Naturalists’ Field Club, the British Columbia Mountaineering Club, and the YMCA and YWCA. With its lectures and conversaciones, and its public museum, the AHSA was one of the earliest, and was the leading, of such organizations, in the development of Vancouver.

In the upheaval of transplanted lives, ideas were discussed, debated and tested in their new environment. Here, individuals in mutual association, worked to inform, indeed to form, the semblance of an aesthetic, historical, scientific, and civic culture in their new towns and cities. In some cases, “English for Foreigners” and job skills were taught as part of both cultural and Christian missionary work. Socially fragmented and isolated, far from home, these educational missionaries, these “devoted few” (Gertrude Mellon, AHSA, 1909) stood and advanced their beachhead of British civilization and culture. They worked together, through their intellectual, scientific and cultural organizations to make and to keep British Columbia British. This study examines the values and interests that drove the formation of this variant of British civilization.

Culture, however valiant its mission, faced formidable foes. Indeed, as early as the beginnings of the City of Vancouver, after the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1887, the missionaries of culture and civilization stated quite clearly who their foes were and what was needed. For Gertrude Mellon, prominent social activist and “mother” of the Art, Historical and Scientific Association, it was the “usual concomitants of all the nationalities.” For Mellon, they were “all bent on one goal, the participation in the wealth and natural advantages of a glorious heritage not yet encroached upon by the hand of man.” If not restrained, she said, “a harvest

of corruption and unhealthy surroundings” would be the natural consequence (Gertrude Mellon, AHSA, 1909). Restraint for Mellon, as for others, meant civilizing and refining, for inspiring taste and a spirit of inquiry, and for providing rational (i.e., healthy) forms of recreation. Restraint also meant consciously including as members both socially active women and the more prominent of one of the city’s “barbarian” groups, the Japanese. In recognition of the role of women in the formation and management of the association, the AHSA elected women to both the vice-presidency and presidency. And significantly, until the City built a public museum for the AHSA collection, in 1905, the association counted a few Japanese diplomats and clergymen among its executive membership.

Among other such foes, targeted for the civilizing mission, were professionals, businessmen, and skilled workers – “all sorts and conditions of men and women who regard their daily vocations as something higher than mere wage earning drudgery” (Robert Mackay Fripp, AHSA and Arts & Crafts Association, 1900). At risk of the seamier parts of boomtown life, the YMCA and YWCA targeted those “Young men [and women]... way from home and moral restraint . . . on the downward road to destruction” (Vigilant, author of a letter-to-the-editor in support of a YMCA, 1886). For young adults, a “social resort” was required for protection; rational recreation; moral, intellectual and vocational training; and spiritual uplifting. Businessmen and corporate leaders, so moved by “that American spirit which keeps us all moving under high pressure” (H. J. deForest, AHSA curator, 1906) were another object of attention. So were professionals whose tastes ought to be more refined– “a people apparently so devoid of excellence in the practice of the Art [Architecture]” (Robert Mackay Fripp, AHSA/Arts & Crafts, 1899). All were targets of the civilizing mission. Even the oft-feared “great masses of people” were to be included. For the “great masses,” the AHSA created a public museum – a necessity of every highly civilized community,” designed to provide them with a place for “recreation and happiness . . . to think and study and from such casual visits [to] carry away a desire and intention to further investigate and receive educational benefits from” (Will Ferris, “HSA curator, 1911). What sort of education depends on how one understands and values the artifacts and curios on display, the “spoils of the empire,” as Willinsky

(1998) would say. Finally there were those in the environment who as “savage and uncivilized peoples [local First Nations peoples]” (Charles Hill-Tout, AHSA, 1917) were not to be included, except as objects of study. As Hill-Tout said, in his address to the AHSA, and particularly to the business community, these savages “reveal to us the steps and stages by which the advanced races of the world have reached their present intellectual position and attainments, and because they show us the origins and meaning of many of our own customs and beliefs.”

Now it must be pointed out that these educational missionaries were not of a single group; they represented separate, though often overlapping constituencies, and they conveyed somewhat different messages. The AHSA held the premier position in the local society, and its membership reflected that of the most educated and the most prestigious citizens, including executive members of the CPR. Similar memberships could be found in the Women’s Musical Club, drawing especially from the new Tudor Revival mansions of Shaughnessy, and to a lesser extent, the Canadian Clubs with their businessmen and wives. The Arts and Crafts Association, on the other hand, incorporated the more Romantic and communitarian philosophies of John Ruskin and William Morris. It included as members anyone skilled in the arts and crafts, from architects and photographers to bakers and cabinet makers. A contingent of women artists, supported by a constitutionally guaranteed vice-presidency, rounded out this daring group. The natural history associations also reflected more cosmopolitan memberships, including stenographers and school teachers. The membership of these clubs and societies generally reflected the dominant English and Anglican elements of the local population. Finally, and in contrast, an even more modest and inclusive membership filled the ranks of the YMCA and YWCA, as well as the Burrard Literary Club (BLC). While their leadership represented the business community, the Y’s and the BLC general membership were more Canadian, Scottish, Irish and Welsh, and more middle-brow Protestant (Presbyterian, Methodist). Their members included a preponderance of skilled tradesmen and apprentices, clerks, and in the case of the BLC, at least one Japanese diplomat. The popularity of the ‘Y’ idea is such that other ‘YMCAs’ also existed in Vancouver: the Chinese YMCA, the YMCA (Japanese

Branch), and the Jewish Young Men’s Christian Association [sic]. The leading clubs and societies, such as the AHSA, were quite English and Anglican. Regardless of social position and organizational goals and programs, the message of all the associations always pointed towards the value of mutual learning and enlightenment, art and nature, culture and civilization.

Hear, for example, the inspirational words of Reverend Norman Tucker, rector of Vancouver’s Christ Church (Anglican) Cathedral. He is addressing the Earl of Aberdeen, Governor-General of Canada, at the opening of the 1894 Exhibition of the Art, Historical and Scientific Association. Note his references to the issues of both race and greed. His words are Romantic and a touch Utilitarian. As Tucker tells his audience, the AHSA aims

to cultivate a taste for the beauties and refinements of life; to pursue studies that raise the mind above the materialising struggle for existence; to surround our community with the works of taste and beauty; to inspire our minds with the great deeds of our fellow-men and especially of our Yellow-countrymen; to explore the mysterious treasure house of nature and to admire and to utilize the marvellous forces concealed in her bosom – In one word, to appeal to our higher instincts and to develop our higher powers.

As uplifting and inspiring as Tucker’s words are, the link to the Empire is clear. He was speaking to the Governor-General of Canada, Queen Victoria’s official representative. Thirteen years later (1907), in his inaugural address at the formation of Vancouver’s Canadian Club, the next Governor-General, Earl Grey, directly links the ideals of Empire with the goals of learning and civic enlightenment. Earl Grey also points to the need for reorientation away from London, towards Canada: “Use your Club as a window through which the best and the purest light of the United States, of the Old World and of the New, can shine upon the life of your town, and by the warmth and brightness of their rays contribute to the enlightenment of your city.” By 1913, however, President Elizabeth Rogers (Women’s Canadian Club) strongly reasserts the link between learning, Empire and the highest of civilization:

[T]he splendid vision grows and unfolds an ideal such as no people, from the earliest dawn of time have beheld, the ideal of a great and multiplied and extended British civilization, which we here, and men abroad may unite in declaring to be one of the most beneficent instrumentalities ever given to the world.

Behind these statements is the noteworthy fact of overlapping memberships between the AHSA and the two Canadian Clubs, and the struggle over patriotism and allegiance.

The link between learning and Empire was not just at the most obvious geopolitical level. It was also apparent in the origins and actual programs of learning within the whole array of mutual enlightenment associations. All of the associations, except possibly the Canadian Clubs, exemplified British models. They were founded largely by British immigrants. And they concerned topics and issues in common with British and colonial needs and activities.

Willinsky (1998) points out the Imperial goals of collecting, classifying, displaying and educating others about the natural order of the world. In addition to the public exhibitions of the AHSA and the Arts & Crafts Association, it was also important to bring to Vancouver an understanding of the world. To wit, the AHSA program in 1909, for example, ranged widely, from "The Early Bibliography of the N.W. Coast," "Huxley's Life Work," "Ancient Cities of the Euphrates Valley," "Moral Significance of the Fine Arts," "A Trip through West Africa" and "Wireless Telegraphy." And at home, there was a need to acquire a knowledge...of the fauna, flora and geological formations of this neighborhood [sic]" (Naturalists' Field Club, 1906). Put more eloquently in his 1912 lecture before the B.C. Mountaineering Club, Provincial Biologist and member John Davidson intoned:

Keep on! And show us that your mental faculties are equal to your physical powers, that you are able to force your way through the dense bush of elementary botany, ascend to the summit and obtain the wider view which results from your overcoming obstacles, and rising to a higher level than that which you started.

Similarly, in a plea for literary societies, W. R. Dunlop in 1914 argues that:

The Literary Society . . . apart from the social function it may fulfil, has too often been regarded with a passive complacency by the majority.... Yet it deserves practical recognition. If not a brilliant electric light it is at least a lamp; and its members, like [R. L.] Stevenson's lamplighter, are helping to 'knock a luminous hole in the dusk.'

In all the associations, questions arose over the utility of intellectual and aesthetic cultivation in the rugged, undeveloped, capitalistic West. Each association addressed the issue in its own way, with lessons provided in arts and crafts, scientific research, historical study, music, and debate and public speaking. It was not an easy balance, but a necessary one, particularly if the more noble ideas were to survive rather lean support and to find expression. In the most practical and commercial of the mutual learning associations, the YMCA, with its emphases on sport and spiritual development, the question was answered this way: "The higher purpose of the work is to make possible a larger life, a broader mental horizon and the development of a manly, Christian character. It is at the same time specially adapted to increase the immediate efficiency and earning capacity of the students" (*Annual Prospectus*, 1909). Vancouver's YMCA started the city's first public program of adult vocational education in 1906. So successful was this experiment that, in 1910, the Vancouver Board of Education took it over.

In conclusion, associations for adult education in British Columbia were formed and worked diligently to place their stamp on the formation of the new colonial civilization. While they could not fully recreate Gosnell's British life on Canada's North Pacific coast, they did play a prominent role in articulating and shaping the social actions of many elements of the city's population. And while the press always seemed to be towards utility and American-style "efficiency," there was modest success in creating local exemplars of what may be seen as the 'light' of British civilization, in the 'darkness' of rainforest and rough streets. Sadly, the boundaries of class and racial distinction were also re-asserted. Indeed, the cultivation of the higher elements of British civilization served to legitimate

the link between cultural competence, status and social distinction, and to distance in the public's mind the links to business and power.

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