



Car Culture and the Making  
of a Modern Landscape

BEN BRADLEY



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Bradley, Ben, author

British Columbia by the road : car culture and the making of a modern landscape / Ben Bradley.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3418-6 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3420-9 (PDF). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3421-6 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3422-3 (Kindle)

1. Roads – British Columbia – History – 20th century. 2. Transportation – British Columbia – History – 20th century. 3. Automobiles – British Columbia – History – 20th century. 4. Automobile travel – British Columbia – History – 20th century. 5. Landscapes – British Columbia – History – 20th century. 6. British Columbia – History – 20th century. I. Title.

FC3820.R63B73 2017

388.10971109'04

C2017-901328-9

C2017-901329-7

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Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens  
Set in Garamond by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.  
Copy editor: Deborah Kerr  
Cover designer: George Kirkpatrick

UBC Press  
The University of British Columbia  
2029 West Mall  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2  
[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)

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# Introduction

## Automobility and the Making of New Kinds of Experience

The first automobile in the BC Interior began pacing the streets of Spences Bridge in 1904. Within two years, isolated examples of the species could also be found in communities such as Lillooet, Grand Forks, Vernon, and Armstrong. Single digits soon became dozens, then dozens rapidly became hundreds. By 1914, there may have been a thousand automobiles in the Interior.<sup>1</sup> Although they were unreliable and underpowered, they exerted a considerable sway over the imagination and grabbed many a headline, with newspapers full of stories about the first adventurous motorist to navigate his or her way from one community to another in the next valley over. Nevertheless, during the automobile's first decade in the BC Interior, it generally remained a curiosity, a plaything of the rich, the eccentric, and the mechanically inclined. Motoring did little to change the landscapes of the Interior prior to the Great War. Roads were why. The region had few roads, and the few that did exist were terrible. They were inadequate for moving bulk goods and inefficient for business travel. Railroads and steamboats easily retained their role as the predominant means of conveying people and freight over long distances.<sup>2</sup>

This state of affairs might be considered a pattern of transportation infrastructure that was pragmatically related to the scattered nature of the province's settlements and to the exaggerated verticality of its topography. But even in the late 1910s, many British Columbians considered it a reproach to the province's modernity. Despite the expense and difficulty of moving amidst the mountains, they were as enthusiastic as other North



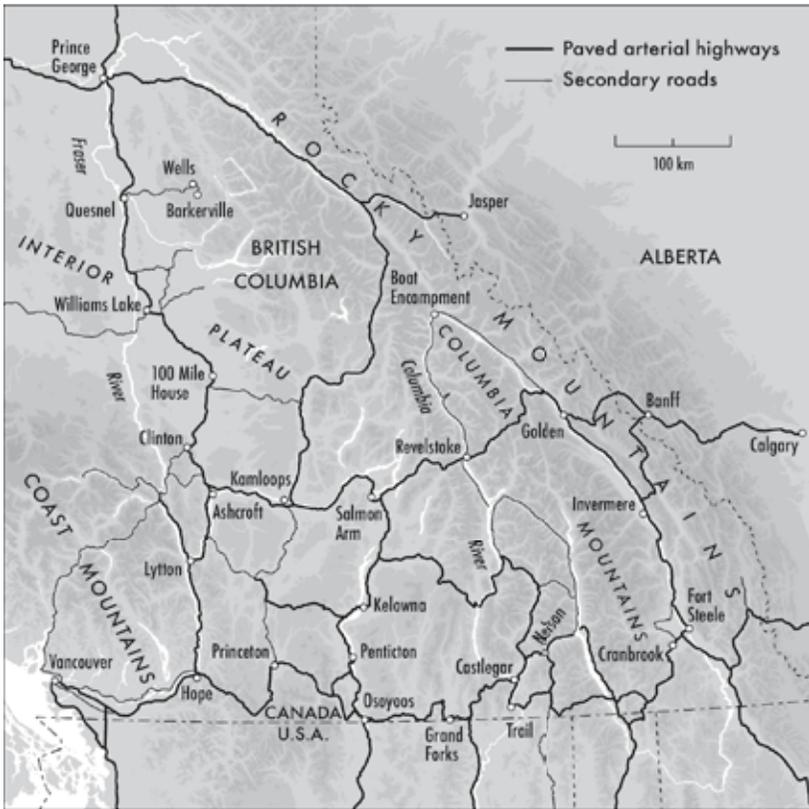
Map of BC Interior road network, c. 1925

Americans about automobiles, good roads, and motoring. They were eager to better connect the province's metropolitan centres and rural hinterlands, and sometimes as nationalistic as other Canadians about linking their province with the rest of Canada. Hence, there were cultural as well as economic and political reasons for the widespread popularity of road building during the 1920s and 1930s, followed by the even more massive program of highway development from the late 1940s through the 1960s. There were multiple compelling reasons for British Columbians to support new and improved roads, and this helps to explain why the sounds of blasting, jackhammers, and paving equipment reverberated throughout so much of the mid-twentieth century.

Between 1922 and 1972 – from the end of the sharp recession that followed the Great War to the onset of the OPEC oil crisis – automobile ownership and automobile travel were seen almost without question as

social “goods” in North America. The passenger car had shed its early reputation as the rich man’s plaything by the end of the First World War, and during the interwar years being part of the motoring public became an important marker of middle-class status. During that same period, the extent and condition of a province or state’s network of roads came to be widely interpreted as a barometer of its modernity. There were fifty-five thousand licensed drivers in British Columbia in 1925, which was fewer than one in ten of the population. Unfortunately for them, its roads remained embarrassingly primitive. Most roads outside of major centres were impassable for much of the year, and the provincial network was so fragmented that driving between many regions was impossible, most notably between the Coast and the Interior. Forty-five years later, as North America’s extended postwar boom drew to a gradual close, British Columbia had gained an extensive network of paved all-season arterial highways that facilitated year-round travel within and between every major region, as well as a larger capillary network of resource roads that reached deep into its forests and mountains. In 1970, more than a million British Columbians had a driver’s licence, and half a million automobiles were registered in the province, for a ratio of one vehicle per every four residents. Ownership was still associated with middle-class status but had gone from being a relatively exclusive option to being, effectively, a universally accessible one. Most working-class families had access to motor vehicles, and all but the poorest could afford a car or truck for work and an occasional pleasure trip.

During the intervening years, huge sums had been poured into British Columbia’s highway network. New roads and “democratized” automobile travel transformed the province’s tourism and service industries, and driving became one of the most important ways that British Columbians encountered the province beyond their home communities. Motoring was a radically new way of viewing the province. The combination of private vehicles and public roads could make the experience of travel seem free, unconstrained, even empowering. Here was an antidote to the routines of everyday life – a therapeutic way of getting in touch with oneself and with the country. Driving could make travellers feel like active explorers of the landscapes that surrounded them, rather than passive consumers, as had been the case with the predetermined routes and timetables of railway and steamboat companies. However, “seem” and “feel like” are key words here. As *British Columbia by the Road* reveals, the individualistic “freedom of the road” and the landscape experiences that were associated with it were more tightly constrained than they seemed.



Map of BC Interior road network, c. 1970

This book shows that the millions of motorists who travelled through the BC Interior during the period 1925-70 encountered both nature and history by the road, which is meant in two ways. First, “by the road” is meant in the straightforward sense of the location of the diverse features that motorists could see as they drove along the province’s arterial highways. These included landforms, flora, fauna, signs, homes, other built structures, and even entire villages and towns. More importantly, “by the road” also refers to private automobiles and public roads combining to act as a medium of landscape experience, a medium that had significant structuring effects and was one of the dominant modes of visibility in the mid-century culture of time and space associated with Fordism. Fordism was the political-economic “moment” that saw the state take an active role in regulating, stabilizing, and sometimes stimulating the economy to balance

mass production and mass consumption. By doing so, it sought to avoid crises of overproduction while also legitimating its own role and liberal capitalism more generally.<sup>3</sup>

The BC Interior is defined here as the southern half of the province, lying between the Coast Mountains and the Rockies. About the size of contemporary Germany, most of it is mountainous, forested, and lacking in arable land. It is also sparsely populated. Throughout the period covered here, approximately two-thirds of British Columbians lived in metropolitan Vancouver or Victoria – that is, they were concentrated on “the Coast.” Historian Jean Barman usefully characterizes mainland British Columbia in the early twentieth century as a fragmented archipelago of regions that were largely cut off from each other by mountain ranges and glacier fields.<sup>4</sup> Transportation played a crucial role in shaping its complex regionalism, as geographer Cole Harris emphasizes in his observation that its “lines of industrial transportation became those of social interaction.”<sup>5</sup> However, the flexibility of travelling by private automobile on public roads connected the Interior’s disparate regions to each other in new ways. It increasingly allowed motorists a way of understanding the Interior as a whole, yet at the same time it sharpened regional and local identities through the competitive imperative that many tourism promoters and roadside business operators shared – the need to stand out in the eyes of the motoring public through signature landmarks. Automobiles, roads, and roadside landscapes thus made the Interior simultaneously more integrated *and* differentiated during the mid-twentieth century.

The development of a network of arterial roads in the Interior followed a trajectory that was distinctive in the broader history of North American motoring, though far from unique in the mountainous west.<sup>6</sup> It occurred significantly later and more slowly than in most other parts of Canada and the United States. The network that emerged was comparatively thin, tenuous, and slow to change in most places due to the terrain, the distance between communities, and the high cost of building and maintaining overland transport infrastructure under such circumstances. It never came to resemble the dense, complex networks in regions such as southern Ontario or America’s eastern seaboard, or even the simple but extensive ones in the grain-growing districts of the Canadian Prairies. Yet it was precisely because British Columbia’s network was so thin and rudimentary that it and the road-mindedness that developed in conjunction with it were so socially, politically, and culturally significant. The quality of the province’s few roads was an especially important reflection of its governments. Those same roads also channelled motoring residents and visitors

along a limited number of corridors, constraining their options of how to go from Point A to Point B while effectively limiting what they saw along the way. As a result, the state of modern British Columbia seemed in many cases to be plainly visible to those who experienced it by the road.

This book is first and foremost a landscape history and thus is concerned with the reciprocal relationship whereby people have continually shaped and in turn been shaped by their built and natural environments.<sup>7</sup> It examines how people's experiences of their surroundings were affected by individual and institutional actors, broader social forces, and also nature itself. To do this, it focuses on material conditions "on the ground," the very stuff of popular perceptions and common experiences, and refrains from speculating about the myriad possible meanings that automobile travellers might have taken away with them. As much as possible, the focus here is on landscape as a common artifact.

As motorists proceeded down public roads, they saw only some aspects of the places they passed through. The roadside was not just the border of a new kind of road but itself a new kind of place: ribbon-shaped, often complexly planned, and crowded with various and particular things, some occurring naturally, some predating the automobile, and some deliberately constructed to take advantage of their location. Far from being just the frame for the landscape, the roadside was a vital part of it – indeed, a place in its own right. Roads and roadsides came to play a crucial role in shaping automobile travellers' perceptions of communities, environments, and entire regions. People who lived and worked along the road also helped determine the character of the roadside, imbuing it with evidence of both the local economy and its level of prosperity. Like fishermen along a river, many hoped to lure custom, sometimes reaping large rewards and other times none at all. And of course, the state played a key role too. Often overlooked among Fordism's more famous topics – such as the state's construction of massive infrastructure projects – are initiatives to stimulate mass consumption through the development of public recreational and cultural amenities such as parks and historic sites. Parks and plaques served as ornaments for state-built highways and also as devices for modelling the views of an increasingly motorized citizenry.

For all the individualism and sense of personal autonomy associated with car travel, motoring was one of the century's most common and standardized activities, particularly after the Second World War, when automobile ownership became accessible to the working class. Whatever reason they drove for, motorists formed a kind of massive community in movement, which this book refers to as the "motoring public." Their travels

along the beaten path of arterial road networks generated very specific shared landscape experiences, which in turn shaped (and reshaped) the image of places in the popular imagination. Communities, regions, and entire provinces and states came to be known by (and for) the roads that passed through them. Some acquired reputations as places to be sought out or avoided. Sharing in these experiences was an important part of being a modern North American, an active, observant citizen who was licensed to explore places beyond the home community, or at least gain a passing knowledge of them. *British Columbia by the Road* focuses on the intertwined histories of car culture and landscape in a particular region, but this intertwining was itself a widespread phenomenon, with places all over North America (and farther afield) becoming known by the road. Indeed, it was one of the most overarching and pervasive means by which places were made similar and at the same time differentiated during the twentieth century.

Motorists made many millions of trips along British Columbia's highways and byways during those years, seeing the same things and trying to make sense of them on an active or passive level. They doubtless found a wide variety of meanings in what they saw, depending on their life experiences and subject position. No doubt, the assumed audience that the province's white, middle-class road builders and roadside landscapers had in mind when they sought to shape the views of the motoring public was also middle class and white (during the period examined here, nine of ten BC residents identified as being of British or Continental European background).<sup>8</sup> However, motorists did not necessarily ascribe the same meanings to what they saw and experienced. This interpretive diversity merits greater attention from historians, but here the focus is on driving as a way by which a large and steadily growing number of people saw and knew the country, an underlying structure that tied people together as the motoring public while also linking diverse places, things, and themes together materially and experientially, "flattening" them in the sense of putting them on a common cultural plane.

This book pays particular attention to two of the most prominent and popular types of roadside feature – "nature" and "the past" – as they took form in parks and historic sites. The concept of automobility is particularly helpful for exploring how automobiles and roads could shape such broad categories of landscape, both materially and in terms of perception, for it insists that automobiles and roads are merely the central points in a constellation of related objects, spaces, images, discourses, habits, and practices. Automobility is a complex, diffuse, and non-linear system that

embodies many contradictions and has wide-ranging and often unintended consequences.<sup>9</sup> Its central importance to experiences of modernity in twentieth-century North America can hardly be overstated. The passenger car was at once the century's quintessential *object* – the consumer durable par excellence – and its *subject*, carrier of symbolic and even political freight. It mattered enormously what sort of automobile one drove, and if one drove at all. Cars became avatars of social distinction, paradoxically as they were also symbols of egalitarianism and “democracy.” It also mattered what sorts of roads were available to drive on, with the condition of arterial routes testifying to the prowess and competence of governments or, in instances where they incurred heavier-than-expected costs or ran into practical difficulties, their unfitness for office. Automobility came to dominate urban and rural space by its presence and, eventually, also by its absence. It both obscured and established boundaries between locales and between the private and public spheres. It allowed people to commune with nature and the countryside, while contributing to massive environmental degradation. Perhaps above all, the system of automobility was a key engine of twentieth-century capitalism, not only in terms of automobile production and road construction, but also in terms of how those vehicles and paths were subsequently used over the span of many years.

The flexibility of travelling in a private automobile could provide motorists with a sense of freedom and discovery, yet it paradoxically had coercive effects through innumerable laws and commonsense habits, and also because it required the use of a fixed infrastructure built and maintained by the state, often working in the interests of capital. In British Columbia, as elsewhere in North America, the automobile was a profoundly political vehicle, closely bound up with liberalism. Automobile travel simultaneously affirmed a host of liberal values, including individualism, social hierarchy, physical and social mobility, privacy, private property, consumerism, the normativity of the nuclear family, and, during the post–Second World War years, Western Cold War notions of freedom.<sup>10</sup> By extension, everything visible from arterial highways constituted political theatre, or a public facade, through which a growing number of residents and visitors learned about and evaluated a province's communities, environments, and overall level of development. Roadside landscapes were recognized as a means to communicate with a citizenry as well as a market. It was widely understood that the motoring public picked up “lessons” as they viewed their surroundings while driving along highways – lessons that were sometimes explicit but more often vague or implicit because they were delivered unintentionally or else intentionally through aesthetic display.

These landscape lessons – how drivers looked at things, and how things looked to them – emerged as a matter of pressing concern for many different parties, including businesses, boosters, conservationists, outdoor recreationalists, historical societies, politicians, and agencies of the state. These parties generally agreed that automobile travellers should feel that they were free to experience landscapes for themselves, without heavy-handed restrictions on where they could go or what they could look at. Middlebrow critiques of roadside commercial aesthetics notwithstanding, it was also generally agreed that property owners whose land bordered on a public right-of-way had a right to sell things to passersby and to advertise their goods and services. However, as the following chapters show, the state sometimes stepped in to manage the appearance of landscapes that were visible along the roads it had constructed. Sometimes it restricted certain industrial and commercial activities. More often it employed experts to manipulate landscapes “behind the scenery” in an effort to draw motorists’ attention toward certain features and divert it away from others. And in still other instances, the Fordist state took a direct role in developing roadside amenities and attractions.

Frequently, the goal of these landscaping projects was to make a profit, as when motel and gas station owners lobbied the state to preserve appealing features (such as large trees or old buildings) that stood within view of a road that led to their community. These would attract motorists, who would then patronize their establishments. Sometimes the goal was to project a certain image around an entire community, as when boards of trade, conservationists, and historical societies co-operated to establish a park or museum. Many such efforts to differentiate a place in the eyes of the motoring public were indirectly related to the profit motive, in that cultivating distinctive attractions – even ones that did not charge an entry fee – could help lure travellers into town, where they were likely to purchase food, gas, lodging, and more. In still other cases, the goal of manipulating a roadside landscape was to deliver a pedagogical lesson, as when the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada erected a monument to commemorate a person, place, or event that it deemed significant, or to divert attention away from potentially troubling features, as when the BC Parks Branch tried to hide evidence of logging or mining inside a park. These lessons about nature by the road and history by the road were often imprecise or ambiguous, for they were intended more to generate an affect than to convey specific information – for example, to encourage appreciation of natural beauty or enthusiasm for a frontier past. Nevertheless, whether their goal was to sell, promote, or instruct, these landscape

cultivators ultimately sought to make British Columbia look good to a massive, amorphous, capricious, and internally diverse audience: North America's fast-growing motoring public.

Although this book focuses on British Columbia, it contributes to our understanding of the broader history of North American automobility. More than a century after Model Ts started rolling off of Henry Ford's Highland Park assembly line, historians have written far more about automobile production and road construction than about how people used those cars to drive on those roads. We know relatively little about distinctive regional histories of automobility, about the automobile as a vehicle for encountering the world, or about the culture of time and space inextricably linked with it.<sup>11</sup> Just as railways played a central role in what cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls the "industrialization of time and space" in the West during the nineteenth century, automobility, as a leading instance of Fordism, did generate a new way for travellers to relate to their surroundings. The railway, as a closed system, was (and is) necessarily characterized by standardized time and hierarchical space, by rigidity and closed, top-down management. The route and means of travel were firmly conjoined, and as a result passengers' views of the places they traversed were tightly structured.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, automobility, as a system, was characterized by flexible time, "public" space, dispersal, diffuseness, and a general lack of top-down management, except for a loosely enforced traffic code. The ability to travel on a timetable, pace, and route of one's own choosing was a huge part of motoring's appeal, for work and for play. The exhilaration of high speeds receives a great deal of attention from scholars of mobility (and of modernity), but the fact that motorists had the option to drive slowly, stop frequently, change route, and double back on their tracks was just as important, for it allowed them to recuperate the sense of foreground and connection to their built and natural surroundings that had seemingly been annihilated by railway travel.<sup>13</sup> Free to go slow or fast, to select whether to pause or go past, motorists felt themselves active participants in the landscapes they passed through, rather than passive consumers of standardized travel experiences. They could rediscover places that had been off the beaten path or mere in-between space within the rigid hierarchies of continental rail networks.

Automobile travel also offered a fuller, more sensuous experience of landscape. Railway travellers were more removed, even insulated from their surroundings, than motorists. For both, the travel experience was primarily visual, but motorists could smell a field or a forest, hear birds or a waterfall, and feel smooth and rough sections of the road. This was

especially true prior to the 1930s, when open- and soft-topped passenger cars were most common. Access by automobile was a new way of getting closer to natural environments by camping, visiting parks, Sunday drives in the country, and so forth.<sup>14</sup> The automobile was also something of a time machine. It allowed motorists to recuperate some of the time that was seemingly annihilated in railway travel, making it possible to discern and contemplate historical features such as old buildings, trails, mines, mills, graveyards, and ghost towns. Furthermore, exposure to the elements and the unpredictability of travelling along bumpy, muddy, haphazardly maintained roads caused motorists to believe that they had a better sense of what travel had “really” been like in the past, before the advent of locomotives and steamboats. Here it is important not to exaggerate the actual degree of control in the hands of the motoring public: even so-called off-road vehicles such as jeeps and today’s sport-utilities are really only bad-road vehicles, incapable of going very far without a path that has been prepared and maintained for them at someone’s considerable expense. Thus, though automobile travel has been perceived by most motorists as liberating and relatively free because it was so much more flexible than travel by railway (or steamboat or stagecoach), the closer look undertaken here reveals that the practice of driving and the experience of landscapes by the road were more firmly constrained than commonly recognized. Everyone saw more or less the same thing, regardless of what kind of vehicle they were in. They were all seeing the same landscapes, even if their readings of such shared experiences might be various.

Historians and other scholars show that motorists in America and other Western countries formed communities of highly mobile subjects tied together by the flexibility of private automobiles and, ironically, the sense of individual agency and freedom engendered by driving them over public roads.<sup>15</sup> Their shared experiences of landscapes iconic and mundane forged deep connections between automobility and group identity. Some governments even made concerted efforts to shape drivers’ ideologies through their experiences of the places they passed through.<sup>16</sup> Commercial activity was also an inescapable part of the motoring landscape experience, and historians have traced how the roadside economy became both big business and part of popular culture.<sup>17</sup> By 1920, roadside landscape features were intentionally used in many ways to communicate to the motoring public – as consumers and as citizens – including through eye-catching signs and distinctive oversize mascots.<sup>18</sup> In just two decades, then, automobile travel had become central to both perceptions of place and processes of place making in America.<sup>19</sup>

In broad terms, this pattern prevailed north of the 49th parallel. In many regions of Canada, however, automobility developed at a slower, more halting pace and on a more modest scale due to economical governments and a preponderance of undercapitalized roadside entrepreneurs.<sup>20</sup> As this book shows, this was particularly true for rural and hinterland areas. Precisely how automobility, landscape, and modernity became intertwined remains unexamined for most parts of Canada, even though many of the routes and landmarks popularized during the mid-twentieth century remain familiar today. In British Columbia, as in most provinces, the history of automobiles and highways has been penned mainly by retired professional drivers and engineers.<sup>21</sup> However, several recent scholarly studies have drawn attention to how roadsides and banal fixtures such as licence plates were made into communicative sites of memory and identity in British Columbia.<sup>22</sup> Historians have also traced how the province's tourism industry used roadside landscapes in its promotional campaigns.<sup>23</sup>

All of these writings inform *British Columbia by the Road's* proposition that what happened in the Interior, structured as it was by the Fordist state and its infrastructure-building programs, the motoring public's unpredictable tastes and preferences, and the region's specific social and physical geography, was a more open-ended, contingent, and uncertain process than accounted for by studies of the top-down construction of automobiles, highways, and place images. By looking closely at the familiar yet unexplored terrain of the open road, by showing how an array of interested parties responded thoughtfully to what they recognized as the flexible-yet-structured pattern of automobile travel, and by situating a distinctive regional history within a larger continental or even global trajectory, this book allows us to grasp in a new way the long revolution in political economy *and* sensibility constituted by automobility, and to appreciate how it contributed to the making of modern landscapes.

*British Columbia by the Road* is organized as two parts or paths, both of which promise to drive readers beyond Hope. You may begin with whichever part most interests you, for they are intended to be read in any order. Route A focuses on perceptions of nature. If you would like to know how roadside landscapes inside parks were managed so as to shape the motoring public's experiences of the environment, begin with it and set out across the Cascade Mountains bound for Princeton. Route B considers perceptions of the past. If you prefer to learn how the roadsides of the Interior were used to communicate history lessons to motorists, follow the Fraser Canyon northward toward Yale.

However, before you begin for Princeton or Yale, a little context regarding transportation in the southwesternmost Interior will help set the stage while also illustrating the important effects of state-built infrastructure that channelled the motoring public along certain routes. Route A and Route B both start at the same time and place, the sleepy village of Hope in the early 1920s. Hope has long been the gateway between Coast and Interior and a junction where eastbound travellers select a route through the mountains. It sits at the foot of the Fraser Canyon, through which the river of the same name drains a basin of eighty-five thousand square miles. Hope has long been well served by modern transportation routes. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was built beside that stretch of the Fraser in the 1880s, as was the Canadian Northern Railway in the 1910s.<sup>24</sup> After the end of the Great War, politicians in Victoria faced intense pressure to expand and improve the provincial road network, including from boosters, boards of trade, merchants, farmers, tourism promoters, and the automobile owners who comprised the fast-growing motoring public.<sup>25</sup> A road that would go beyond Hope to link the Coast and the Interior was deemed essential, for the province had lacked such a connection since the 1880s, when railroad construction had destroyed much of the colonial-era Cariboo Wagon Road. Victoria acknowledged this as a priority in 1919, when it announced its intention to build a network of roads that would allow motorists to travel “from the Coast through the whole central part of British Columbia.”<sup>26</sup>

There were only two feasible routes for such a road: one that climbed through the rugged Cascade Mountains between Hope and Princeton, and one that skirted the Cascades via the tortuous Fraser and Thompson Canyons between Hope and Ashcroft. Powerful regional interests lined up to support each option, for the former was sure to benefit the southern Interior, whereas the latter would benefit the northern and especially the central Interior. The provincial government did not make a firm commitment until 1923, by which time key components of a transprovincial highway that would span the central Interior had fallen into place. The Department of Public Works had stitched together two hundred miles of passable road between Ashcroft (on the Thompson River) and Revelstoke (on the Columbia), running parallel to the route of the CPR and thus through a number of well-established communities, including the city of Kamloops. Also in 1923, the federal government agreed to build most of a touring road between Golden, British Columbia, and Banff, Alberta. Once this was completed, only two gaps would remain in a road linking Vancouver and Calgary: one between the mountain towns of Revelstoke