

Nothing to Write Home About

*British Family Correspondence
and the Settler Colonial Everyday
in British Columbia*

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UBCPress · Vancouver · Toronto

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Introduction

IN JUNE 1860, VICTORIA merchant Robert Burnaby replied to a letter from his brother Tom, a member of the clergy in their home county of Leicestershire, England. Formerly a civil servant in London, Burnaby had arrived on the northern Pacific slope of North America on Christmas Day 1858, hoping to try his hand at business in the British colonies of Vancouver Island and, recently claimed on the neighbouring mainland, British Columbia. He settled and worked there until illness compelled his return to England in 1873, two years after the colony of British Columbia – united with Vancouver Island in 1866 – joined Confederation as a province of the Dominion of Canada. During his fifteen years in North America, Burnaby wrote dozens of letters to his family in the British imperial metropole. As early as 1860, however, his relatives had already begun to complain. His recent letters were uninteresting, they protested, being neither as “lively nor [as] full of incident” as his earliest colonial correspondence. Writing to his brother Tom in June that year, Burnaby acknowledged that they were right: his letters had started to reflect what he called the “monotonous round” of his everyday life. “Although doubtless one might hourly pick up phrases and anecdotes to amuse you hugely,” he explained, “one gets deadened by the common-place and has no heart to record what comes day after day and ever the same.”¹

This book examines British family letters like Burnaby’s, sent between British Columbia and the United Kingdom between 1858 and 1914, in order to tell a new history of settler colonialism.² Although Burnaby found his letters and life sinking into banality, this was far from an uneventful time in what became Canada’s westernmost province. Rather, these were formative years for settler colonial British Columbia – a time that I call its early settler period, defined by the formation of a white British settler society from its mid-nineteenth-century tenuous aspiration and fragile nascency to its emerging confidence and dominance in the early twentieth.

In its broadest definition, settler colonialism is a distinct form of colonial power that aims for ultimate, uncontested, and indefinite settler control and belonging. A burgeoning interdisciplinary field identifies several priorities that characterize settler colonial projects. These include the arrival and long-term settlement of a significant group of non-Indigenous, historically often white, people who plan to stay permanently; their work toward the dispossession, marginalization, and intended or assumed eventual elimination of Indigenous peoples; their assertion of sovereignty over Indigenous land; and their establishment of a new political and social order that distinguishes and privileges themselves in contrast to Indigenous and other non-Indigenous people, the latter often people of colour.³

Although the parameters of settler colonialism can be more complicated in practice than in theory, British Columbia was radically reconfigured by a general shift to these priorities between 1858 and 1914. In these years, major political, social, economic, cultural, and demographic transformations combined to overlay – without entirely erasing – Indigenous and hybrid fur-trade worlds with the foundations of a settler colonial order that continues to structure the province today. A large body of scholarship investigates the historical roots of settler colonialism in Canada, including British Columbia in this period. Here, as elsewhere, the literature takes race and Indigenous-settler relations as the primary prisms through which to view settler colonialism. Reflecting the priorities of the international scholarship, this literature focuses on the connections between race, gender, sexuality, and space, and on racializing settler laws, policies, and practices, especially related to land or immigration. It examines the exercise of physical and non-physical colonial violence, the undercurrents of settler anxiety, and the actions and impact of Indigenous resistance to settler regimes.⁴ In these ways, the field has shed critical light on the historical trajectories of racialization, dispossession, and resettlement in northern North America, which endure in shaping the Canadian present.

Robert Burnaby's June 1860 letter reflects much of what this scholarship has demonstrated about colonial discourses on race and settler constructions of "the Indian." Responding to his family's "hint" about his boring correspondence, Burnaby explained to his brother that he had decided to "devote this letter to some account of the Indian tribes" – a topic that he assumed his English relatives would find interesting. He then launched into a long description of Indigenous people from the northern Pacific coast (including Haida, Tsimshian, and Tlingit people) who travelled

south annually in the mid-nineteenth century for a number of reasons, including to trade and work in the Victoria area. Burnaby's account included many tropes that characterized settler representations of Indigenous people during this period. For instance, he drew on widespread condemnations of Indigenous people's domestic spaces and on ideas of the "lazy Indian" to suggest that their "Lodges" and "huts" smelled "horrible and filthy," and that the people inside were "lying round," "basking in the sun," and "doing nothing." He emphasized violence, both in warfare and in what he framed as acts of individual savagery, and claimed that the men came south to sell "their" women, "whom they used formerly to kill as unprofitable." He commented on their use of "gaudy Blankets and showy silk handkerchiefs" as clothing. And he suggested that they had been damaged by colonialism, remarking that their "contact with white folks has taught them all the vices and positively none of the virtues of the superior race."⁵ In all of these ways, Burnaby framed Indigenous people as fundamentally different from and inferior to white people, and did so by drawing on common elements of nineteenth-century settler racism inflected with ideas about gender, class, labour, and civilization. Overall, the letter is a representative example of the explicit racializing and racist discourses that underpinned the nascent settler project, which in turn corroborates many of the emphases and insights of the existing scholarship on colonialism.⁶

However, to read this letter's thick description in isolation from the rest of Robert Burnaby's family correspondence would be to miss its exceptional nature. Burnaby himself argued that it was anomalous. As he explained, he intentionally selected its topic as an interesting and extraordinary diversion from his usual "common-place" concerns. A close reading of his other letters confirms this. Of the forty-two surviving family letters that Burnaby wrote about Vancouver Island and British Columbia between 1858 and 1863, the June 1860 letter was the first of only two that offered any extensive description of Indigenous people at all.⁷ Approximately one-third of his letters mentioned Indigenous people, and nearly all of these were very brief passing remarks. A characteristic example appears in his first letter from Victoria. Among otherwise detailed descriptions of his new surroundings, he merely noted that he had seen "Indians paddl[ing] about" as his steamer arrived.⁸ Rather than focusing on race or Indigenous-settler people, the vast majority of his correspondence concentrated instead on other aspects of his colonial experiences and his

relationships with family in England. While Burnaby's close description in June 1860 reflects scholarly discussions about settler colonialism and the discursive construction of racialized difference, in other words, it stands almost entirely alone in doing so.

In this respect, Burnaby's letter opens a window on a much broader pattern in the British family correspondence sent between British Columbia and the United Kingdom in this period, with consequences for how we might think about the history of British Columbia, Canada, and the British Empire. Personal letters were among the most widely produced and circulated sources on early settler British Columbia, and thousands have been preserved, archived, and made accessible in public institutions in Canada. Read individually and together, these letters shed light on the experiences and understandings of a diverse but privileged range of Britons as they and their families contributed to the making of British Columbia. Like Burnaby's correspondence, a significant majority was marked by a prevailing disregard of the topics that have dominated the scholarship on settler colonialism. (Indeed, seen in this wider context, Burnaby's letters were unusual for mentioning Indigenous people, even in passing, as often as they did.) Instead, letter writers focused on other elements of their everyday lives and on their trans-imperial families – that is, their long-distance relationships maintained across the British Empire.

So, what might historians make of these widespread sources, which reflect a pivotal period in the making of a settler colonial society but which remain largely silent on the topics that drive the scholarship? Certainly, epistolary inattention to Indigenous-settler relations should not be taken as an indication that these were unimportant. As with Burnaby's June 1860 letter, the exceptions reveal powerful, shared ideologies that drove colonial practices, while even brief references shed light on Indigenous people's lives and settlers' everyday interactions with them. At the same time, the more common silences serve as examples of settlers' discursive erasures of Indigenous people, which buttressed their claims to British Columbia as *terra nullius* (nobody's land) and their assertions of sovereignty on that basis. Extracting exceptions or reading silences against the grain can thus contribute to our understanding of Indigenous-settler relations, race, power, and knowledge in Canada and the British Empire. However, I maintain that pursuing such analyses in isolation from the primary content of family correspondence risks missing its full significance as a body of historical evidence.

This book investigates family letters sent between British Columbia and the British imperial metropole in this spirit. It is propelled by the contention that epistolary content and silence – what needed to be said, what could not be said, and what could go without saying – mattered together in the foundations of settler colonial British Columbia. To investigate this assertion, the book asks a number of questions. How did letters represent the settler everyday and the trans-imperial family? What was the relationship between these common concerns and their accompanying erasure of other topics? In the interplay between content and silence, what did correspondence render understandable or possible for British families engaged with British Columbia? And what do family letters thus reveal about how Britons built, sustained, and made sense of the settler colonial project during its foundational years? Each chapter addresses these questions by analyzing correspondence through a different approach and thematic lens. The result is a diverse reading of the content, contexts, and uses of family letters, ranging from the broad structures and generic parameters of postal communication to individual emotional descriptions of British Columbia as astonishing or boring; from epistolary expressions of love to heated conflicts over property; and from banal, detailed accounts of settlers' everyday meals to their sustained refusal to explain major facets of their lives.

Through this discussion, the book calls attention to the unexamined and interrelated significance of the everyday and the trans-imperial family in the local and global history of settler colonialism. Indigenous-settler relations, race, violence, resistance, and land and immigration policies were fundamentally important. On their own, though, these cannot explain how and why Britons actually moved in this period, or how they transformed themselves into settlers and colonizers – crucial elements in the making of settler colonial places.⁹ In British Columbia, the emergent settler project of dispossession and resettlement was premised on white British people who individually and collectively planned to stay, materially benefit, and belong into an indefinite future. Without these people's commitments to leaving former homes, living long-term familial separations, and making new homes, an enduring settler society and economy could have been neither constructed nor sustained in these years. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the personal priorities through which Britons refracted broader colonial ideologies, and came to take for granted their power, prospects, comfort, and belonging in British Columbia. As

this book demonstrates, family letters both facilitated and revealed this process.

More specifically, I argue that British family correspondence supported and reflected the personal normalization of a settler colonial order in British Columbia in two main and interconnected ways. First, letters served as the medium of ongoing family relationships for Britons separated across distances. Although not all relatives wrote, an absence of letters meant an absence of active connections, and confined families to memory and imagination. Those who did write used the post to express feelings, perform duties, negotiate conflicts, and share resources that together constituted and sustained trans-imperial families in everyday separations and moments of crisis. In so doing, they made distance an ordinary part of the family and enabled metropolitan relatives to maintain an emotional and material place in settler lives. Second, letters operated as a key vehicle through which Britons produced and circulated knowledge about British Columbia, a place otherwise at the limits of metropolitan attention and understanding. Typically silencing possible points of anxiety and vulnerability, letter writers instead constructed tenacious representations of settler lives as banal and unchallenged. In other words, Britons used the post to navigate the personal separations integral to their migration and settlement, and at the same time to produce and entrench shared understandings of British Columbia as an unremarkable settler place. As they rewrote British Columbia as a familiar and familial home, their letters formed a powerful part of the settler colonial project of dispossession, marginalization, resettlement, and erasure.

Trans-Imperial British Families and Early Settler British Columbia

This book's overall purpose, then, is to contribute to our understanding of settler colonialism by interrogating a significant body of sources that disregards or decentres Indigenous-settler relations – the main concern of the distinct but overlapping fields of settler colonial studies and Canadian colonial historiography. It takes trans-imperial British family relationships as its primary focus, entering into conversation with a rich body of scholarship that positions the family as central to imperial or colonial histories. Over the past two decades, this literature has investigated intimacy as a key site in which colonial constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and difference were defined, reproduced, and rendered powerful

in the lives of so-called colonizing and colonized peoples.¹⁰ In British Columbia, as elsewhere, related research has focused on the regulation and practice of sexual relationships (especially those crossing boundaries of race or heterosexual marital monogamy), the development and imposition of settler law related to family, and biographies of individual families. This work has traced how sex, marriage, child rearing, and other intimate relationships were subject to state regulation and social sanction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as governments and communities intervened in family lives in an attempt to craft a respectable and self-reproducing white settler society.¹¹ The resulting research has revealed much about the gendered and intimate nature of settler colonialism, as it was specific to British Columbia and as it was connected to broader histories of Canada and empire. At the same time, it has largely focused on relationships in proximity – within households, nuclear families, and British Columbia itself. Aside from a very small number of case studies, the scholarship has not yet attended to the widespread significance of family relationships lived across distances and borders.¹² Building on and expanding the scope from these case studies, this book offers a new lens into the place and significance of trans-imperial families in the making of British Columbia. Distant relatives remained materially and emotionally salient in the lives of British people who built and benefited from early settler British Columbia. As the feminist adage maintains, and the scholarship on family and empire underscores, the personal was political in the settler colonial project – and sometimes this personal was trans-imperial too.

So, what exactly do I mean by trans-imperial British families? I understand the family as a varied and flexible category, broadly constituted of interlinked relationships rooted in blood and marriage, or alternative connections like adoption. A wide range of people called themselves family, including spouses, children and parents, grandchildren and grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, step-relatives, and in-laws. In general, these were relations defined by a combination of what historians Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink, and Katherine Holden explain as “blood, contract, and intimacy,” within an institution that historian Adele Perry points out was assumed to be both “hierarchical and communal.”¹³ Specific relationships differed according to the contexts and individuals involved, marked variously by expressions of affection, demonstrations of familiarity, expectations of

material or emotional support, efforts to control or influence others, stiff formality, or overt hostility. By encompassing extended as well as nuclear relatives, and non-sexual as well as conjugal connections, my framing of family includes a wider range of relations than the scholarship on British or colonial families usually considers. It also recognizes that families of origin remained significant for many people into adulthood and after marriage – a point that can be obscured by a focus on nuclear families or households, and by women’s practice of changing surnames after marriage. To acknowledge the latter point, I follow Adele Perry’s choice in her work on the Douglas-Connolly family by using women’s surnames of both birth and marriage when known. This is a convention that some members of the Douglas-Connolly family used, but it is not authentic to the naming practices in the families that I investigate. However, it does allow me similarly to recognize and underscore married women’s multiple and enduring family connections.¹⁴

In addition to their claim to family, the subjects of this book shared several defining points, including a general identification as British. I focus primarily on English, Scottish, and Welsh letter writers. I also briefly discuss one settler with familial connections to Ireland and explore a case study linked to the Isle of Man, which is part of the British Isles but not the United Kingdom; in the latter case, I examine letters that span a period of transition from direct British rule on the island to its self-governance as a British Crown Dependency. As a whole, the people in this book may or may not have understood themselves as British. Sometimes they defined themselves with this term, sometimes prioritized local or regional belonging, sometimes associated with nations either within or independent of Britain, and most often did not articulate how they positioned themselves within these layered categories of identity. While acknowledging this complexity, I use the term “British” here to refer broadly to those who claimed the British Isles as their home or homeland, and who were generally racialized as white (while recognizing that not all people in Britain were white). Critical for this book, they or their relatives were also seen as British in British Columbia where they contributed to and were particularly empowered by the emerging settler political, legal, and social structures on that basis. This is a capacious definition of Britishness, which risks flattening distinctions within it. However, for these people and the British Columbia with which they were engaged, Britain

did particularly matter – a major and desired source of white settler migration, a political centre, a cultural point of reference, and a personal and familial home. In a period when the majority of British settlers were migrants, their place in British Columbia cannot be fully understood in isolation from their continued connections with the metropole. In this sense, even as it was not a natural, uniform, or simple category, I maintain that Britishness serves as a meaningful marker of identification for these families, invested with particular power in British Columbia and the imperial world with which they were involved.¹⁵

In Britain, these families came from a range of backgrounds, mostly from the middle classes. Over this period, the middle classes grew in size and influence and came to encompass two main groups: the upper middle class (including physicians, lawyers, clergy, leading civil servants, bankers, and industrialists) and the lower middle class (including lower-ranking civil servants, retailers, managers, and clerks). In general, they shared access to improved living standards, increased leisure time, and more disposable income, and tended to be defined by lower birth rates.¹⁶ A smaller number of families in this book came from the working classes. In rural areas, the expansion of large-scale agriculture and other changes contributed to the decline of the family farm; in the Scottish Highlands, this period was also marked by the clearances, or forced displacement of tenant farmers. In the final three decades of the nineteenth century, British agriculture also suffered a major depression. With these regional rural struggles and the increasing availability of urban industrial factory work, large numbers of working-class people moved to cities. Though there was a significant rise in real wages for many working-class Britons by late century, they often continued to work for an income that barely covered subsistence needs and, despite expanding attention to public health, still experienced poor living and working conditions and high rates of disease.¹⁷ Finally, this book also includes several members of the gentry. By the turn of the twentieth century, many of these families found their estates and wealth in relative decline, while *nouveau-riche* industrialists began to press into their exclusive world. Despite these shifting conditions, though, the gentry retained much of their extensive political, social, and economic power in this period.¹⁸

Over the past three decades, the scholarly study of nineteenth-century British families has shed light on the intimate relationships that rested at

the heart of a changing country. This work has developed rich analyses focused on metropolitan nuclear families and households. It has less often offered substantial considerations of empire as influencing either the broad cultural ideas or the individual experiences of these families.¹⁹ However, family life was far from necessarily proximate in this period. Industrialization, urbanization, new transportation technologies, and imperial expansion meant that Britons of all classes were more mobile than ever, both within and beyond the country's borders. Between 1815 and 1914, approximately 22 million emigrants left the British Isles. A significant proportion went to the United States or settler colonies and dominions such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Many others moved back and forth between the metropole and imperial sites like India without formal or permanent emigration.²⁰

There were many personal reasons for such mobility, but generally potential migrants were attracted to places that promised opportunities that seemed unavailable to them in the metropole. For middle-class Britons, for instance, migration could hold the promise of economic gain and security, as well as land ownership, political power, and social status beyond their aspirational reach in a metropole still rooted in class exclusivity. For working-class Britons, a move could offer the possibility of economic and social mobility, and an escape from rural clearances, dangerous and underpaid factory work, poverty, and overcrowded cities. For the gentry, migration could provide opportunities to sustain families' declining fortunes, lifestyles, and status, as well as personal advancement that might be less accessible at home, especially for younger sons.²¹ Whatever the specific motivation, virtually all families had at least one relative who left Britain in this period.²²

As a result, by the second half of the nineteenth century, British families could no longer be (if they ever had been) imagined as defined by proximity, confined by the borders of the nation, or uninfluenced by the wider empire. Instead, a large number of Britons forged trans-imperial relationships that remained active long after migration, weaving distances into the fabric of their family life. In turn, these people – both powerful and so-called ordinary Britons – played an active role in building and sustaining a global empire. The people in this book were among them. While many of these families had more extensive experiences with migration around the world, British Columbia was one node in their larger imperial and extra-imperial networks. Although their connections to other

places were significant too, I concentrate here on the ties that connected British Columbia and the United Kingdom as one focused lens into the wider history of trans-imperial families.

In British Columbia, these Britons encountered and contributed to a place in flux. The northern Pacific slope of North America had been Indigenous territory since time immemorial. Non-Indigenous people first arrived by water in the late eighteenth century, in diverse crews including white, Black, Asian, and Indigenous people from around the world, largely headed by white European and American men intending to explore, trade, and profit in the region.²³ Until the mid-nineteenth century, Indigenous-newcomer relations were primarily defined by the fur economy. In 1843, the fur-trading Hudson's Bay Company moved its regional centre of operations from the Columbia River (now in the northwestern United States) to a new fort, Victoria, on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Six years later, the British government asserted formal colonial claims to the island. Hoping to maintain a strategic foothold in the north Pacific without much investment of money or effort, the Colonial Office then granted the company proprietary rights to the colony in exchange for its promised encouragement of white settlement. However, the numbers of non-Indigenous people remained low in the 1840s and early 1850s, and company interests dominated the island colony for nearly a decade. Chief factor and colonial governor James Douglas pursued fourteen treaties with Indigenous people in the early 1850s, but only in key areas of white settlement and company activity around Victoria, Nanaimo, and Fort Rupert (now Port Hardy). Otherwise, Vancouver Island and the neighbouring mainland remained in practice largely uncontested Indigenous territory, and mostly beyond the knowledge, control, or active intervention of the Colonial Office and its agents.²⁴

A major turning point in the area's history came in 1858 – the opening point of this book – with rumours of the discovery of gold on the Fraser River on the mainland. The news soon reached discontented prospectors in California and a diverse range of others around the world. Fort Victoria was quickly overwhelmed. The arrival of 450 prospectors on one ship in April 1858 increased its non-Indigenous population by more than half in a single day, while the ensuing months brought tens of thousands more. Responding to this major demographic change and the Hudson's Bay Company's corresponding assertion of British interests in the mainland territory, the Colonial Office declared it a colony, British Columbia, on

2 August 1858. The island and mainland colonies were not especially well understood by the metropolitan government, nor were they priorities in a period dominated by British concerns with more lucrative or volatile areas of the empire. As the colonies became more economically precarious, the Colonial Office first united them in 1866, then urged British Columbia to join the new Dominion of Canada, which it did in 1871. The western province was connected to the rest of the dominion by the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway after the mid-1880s, and to the Pacific and Atlantic worlds beyond Canada's borders by rail connections to steamship lines. Among various significant effects of the advent of rail, the decision to end the Canadian Pacific Railway on Burrard Inlet provided the stimulus for a new city, Vancouver, which overtook the provincial capital of Victoria in size and economic power by the turn of the century.²⁵

It was not merely the arrival of many new people that reconfigured British Columbia in these years. Rather, between the Fraser River gold rush in 1858 and the outbreak of global war in 1914, this place was fundamentally remade by a series of transformations that together laid the foundations of a colonial order rooted in Indigenous dispossession and marginalization, and non-Indigenous resettlement and white supremacy. During these years, British imperial and Canadian dominion claims to sovereignty were overlaid onto diverse Indigenous territory, though on the ground, Indigenous and fur-trade orders continued in influence and practice too. Settler governments grew significantly in power as they imposed new political and legal systems that distinguished among Indigenous people, non-Indigenous people of colour, and white people, and institutionalized the most privileges for the latter. New British and Canadian laws denied Indigenous title to the land, prioritized private ownership, and enabled individual settlers to acquire property through pre-emption or purchase. At the same time, colonial, provincial, and dominion governments worked to restrict Indigenous people to smaller and smaller reserves on land that did not impinge on settlers' economic interests. After the early 1850s, settler governments pursued no further treaties in British Columbia except for Treaty Eight (1899), which included the northeastern corner of the province. In the dominion era, the Indian Act (1876) defined Indians and their relationships to the state under Canadian law, while new assimilatory policies in this period included the introduction of a residential school system and bans on significant ceremonies like the potlatch.

These changes were bolstered by widely shared settler discourses on culture, race, and civilization, as well as physical, non-physical, and threatened state and individual violence.²⁶

In concert with these transformations, an embryonic settler economy and society emerged in British Columbia between 1858 and 1914. In this early settler period, successive gold rushes and other resource booms sparked waves of immigration and sudden incursions of non-Indigenous people into new areas. The rapid extension of settler capitalism and resource extractive industries refashioned the environment and economy, and entrenched forms of labour and wealth that defined people's identities and everyday lives. Immigration promotion campaigns, perceived economic opportunities, and evolving transportation infrastructure (especially the Canadian Pacific Railway) facilitated the significant growth of a non-Indigenous population in British Columbia. Indeed, there was a demographic transformation in these years, as the number of non-Indigenous people exploded from a few hundred in 1858 to nearly half a million in 1914. By the end of the nineteenth century, non-Indigenous – and especially white British – people dominated the population due to immigration and, to a lesser extent, childbirth, as well as colonial practices and new pathogens that contributed to high death rates in Indigenous communities. Broadly speaking, by 1914 these points contributed to the foundation of a confident settler colonial project in British Columbia that was propelled by white Britons and connected to the wider process of settler nation building in Canada, with deep ramifications for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.²⁷

Even as they had significant impacts, however, widespread aspirations to an exclusionary and ongoing white society also remained far from achieved in early settler British Columbia. Although government officials and colonial commentators hoped for a stable population of white British settler families engaged in long-term agricultural work, for example, much of the land was inappropriate for farming, and resource extractive industries predominated instead. This led to uneven regional colonization, with isolated clusters of transient non-Indigenous settlement driven by industrial booms and busts. This in turn attracted (and disappointed) a diverse range of migrants who were mostly men, often single, and not necessarily white or British. Many sought short-term opportunities rather than long-term settlement. As early as 1859, an Emigration Office staffer in London suggested that the goal of attracting “a population firmly

attached to the British Crown” made up of “married men of steady habits” might be entirely impossible on Vancouver Island.²⁸ Governments, churches, and charitable organizations tried to counter the low numbers of white women with assisted emigration schemes, but despite these efforts a marked settler gender imbalance continued.²⁹

More broadly, the white settler population remained a minority through almost all of this time frame. Records vary, but most historians draw from evidence suggesting that in 1871 there were about 8,500 white people, 1,500 Chinese people, 500 Black people, and more than 25,000 Indigenous people in the new province. By 1881, the number of white settlers had grown to approximately 17,000 out of 53,000.³⁰ Still, despite devastating epidemics, colonial policies, and mass immigration, Indigenous people outnumbered white settlers until the end of the century, and the new economy fundamentally depended on their labour and knowledge.³¹ In addition, as suggested by the 1871 data, newcomers of colour arrived in significant numbers in this period. They included but were not limited to Chinese, African American, Japanese, and South Asian people, all of whom played a critical role in British Columbia even as they encountered racism, labour exploitation, and exclusionary policies aimed at the making of a white settler society.³² Taken together, all of these factors posed significant challenges to British aspirations to an affluent, enduring, and exclusive white settler colonial society rooted in heterosexual nuclear families, small-scale agriculture, and the dispossession and disappearance of Indigenous people.

Given these points, the British Columbian relatives in this book played an important role in the settler colonial project during its foundational years between 1858 and 1914. In the absence of an established, stable, and self-reproducing white population, they were individually and collectively regarded as essential to the future of British Columbia, whether as long-term settlers or as short-term workers and administrators. Political, legal, and social structures made it easier for white Britons like themselves to cross borders into British Columbia or Canada, and (for men especially) to acquire land, participate in the political system, and engage in a range of jobs with comparatively strong remuneration once there. On the ground, they served as symbolic and embodied markers of British or Canadian sovereignty. They were reproductive sources of future generations of settlers, and white British women were particularly and anxiously imagined as such. And they performed the labour of dispossession and

resettlement in a range of other ways too, from enforcing settler laws to building fences on land they had pre-empted. Broadly, while these individuals differed in their explicit support for colonialism, the state, and white supremacy, British Columbia's developing settler structures enabled and encouraged their lives there.

Within these general parameters, the British Columbian correspondents in this book varied in their circumstances, intentions, and experiences. Nearly all were immigrants rather than British Columbia-born. Many moved directly from the British Isles, while others arrived by more circuitous routes, especially through the United States or other imperial sites like Australia, India, and New Zealand – personal histories that could shape their expectations and lives in British Columbia in a range of ways. Most were young men who arrived alone, either because they were single and had left their families of origin, or because they had left their families of marriage, often intending to reunite later in British Columbia or the United Kingdom. Still others arrived with family members, including spouses, children, adult siblings, or aging parents. Some but not all intended to stay as long-term settlers. Many planned to exploit short-term opportunities such as gold mining, or to complete specific government or military assignments. Their plans could differ from results, of course; some intended sojourners settled for life, and some supposedly permanent settlers left. In addition, many remained mobile within British Columbia as employment opportunities and personal circumstances changed. Their families and backgrounds tended to be broadly middle class, but this could look very different in British Columbia, where there were new possibilities for social and economic mobility (both upward and downward) and for remaking oneself, albeit within limits. In this sense, settlers' class identities could be particularly precarious and multiple, as their cultural ideas and personal pasts diverged from their lived, material circumstances in a new place. In British Columbia, these Britons became ranchers and mothers, missionaries and loggers, powerful policy-makers and failed prospectors – and at the same time, they continued to be relatives to distant family. In sum, they were diverse individuals connected by their comparative privilege as white Britons in an incipient settler society, their trans-imperial family relationships, and their simultaneous engagement with multiple places, especially the United Kingdom and British Columbia. While these settlers have long been the traditional

subjects of historical studies, I contend that we have not yet grappled with the everyday, affective, and trans-imperial familial foundations of their power in western Canada – work that I undertake here.

In its trans-imperial framing, this book also speaks to scholarly conversations about Britain, British Columbia, migration, and empire in three additional ways. For one, it suggests that family correspondence was a powerful and widespread, if thus far under-examined, way in which the empire penetrated metropolitan Britons' daily lives, fashioned their knowledge and consciousness of distant colonial places, and configured their personal relationships. In this, I engage with a field termed the “new” imperial history. This is now a large and diverse body of scholarship that generally centres race, gender, and sexuality, and considers culture, emotion, intimacy, and the everyday as critical sites of imperial power and resistance. It examines networks or webs among imperial metropolises and colonies, tracing how these not only connected places but also came to constitute the empire itself. Many scholars in this field have argued that there is not a distinct division between domestic and imperial histories; rather, the empire made Britain as it permeated all aspects of metropolitan life. This has been a contentious position, with other British historians maintaining that the empire did not have as significant an impact on metropolitan society or consciousness as the new imperial history has suggested.³³

Like other work associated with the field, this book underscores the significance of family, affect, and the everyday. I understand the post as a global and imperial network, and trace how correspondence produced a configuration of family that cannot be reduced to colony, province, or nation. And, positioning Britain and British Columbia in the same frame, I maintain that correspondence reflected and helped to make the two sites in relation to one another (in addition to places beyond this dyad). From the British perspective, letters were common routes through which metropolitan residents came to understand and connect with lesser-known colonial sites like British Columbia, which did not often feature in novels, newspapers, major political debates, or other sources of information about the empire. For these relatives, empire was not merely something that happened “out there” beyond their attention and familiarity. Rather, through migration and the post, empire came home into the personal lives and everyday knowledge of metropolitan Britons.

At the same time, by arguing that early settler British Columbia cannot be fully understood without attention to its wider British imperial context, this book also joins a small body of work that connects the often distinct historiographies of Canada, Britain, and empire.³⁴ As a colony and province, British Columbia was a comparatively minor player in the British Empire – economically precarious and politically marginal and located far from centres of imperial and dominion power. Reflecting this, it has also played a comparatively minor role in the wider scholarship on the British Empire. At the same time that it was on the empire’s largely forgotten fringes, however, British Columbia was also in the middle of an important pattern of imperial expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From its founding as a colony, it joined other nascent white settler societies on the Pacific Rim identified with Anglo-Saxonism and connected by shared aspirations to exclusionary, enduring whiteness. In this, its early settler period was part of an intensifying transnational project to make “white men’s countries.”³⁵ As such, British Columbia’s history not only reveals how colonialism worked on what Adele Perry calls the “ragged margins” of the British Empire but also elucidates the trajectories and limits of a particular form of imperialism that expanded and flourished in these years.³⁶

This has significant implications for how we approach the study of settler colonialism too. By its very definition, settler colonialism requires settlers who “come to stay,” in anthropologist Patrick Wolfe’s phrasing.³⁷ Existing studies of settler colonialism have generally focused on the logics, policies, and practices that enabled settlers to stay in a given colonial site, and their consequences for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. But for settlers themselves, staying also necessarily meant leaving elsewhere. For white Britons in early settler British Columbia, this “elsewhere” was often the imperial metropole, which retained salience not only as a site of political power but also as a personal and familial home. In this sense, this book’s trans-imperial framing reveals that migration and settlement – at the very heart of the colonial project in early settler British Columbia – was a fundamentally multi-sited, personal process.

Overall, then, this is a study of British families as they engaged with the imperial metropole and early settler colonial British Columbia. Through their mobility and epistolary networks of communication, these families helped to connect and remake both places, while turning themselves into settlers in a nascent settler society. In this focus, this book is situated at

the intersections of several fields, and intervenes in numerous scholarly conversations. It traces diverse forms of long-distance family, underscoring their critical significance to colonial processes. In the spirit of the new imperial history, it highlights the importance of intimate networks between the metropole and colonial places. It suggests that metropolitan Britons understood, normalized, and engaged with the wider imperial world in part through epistolary family relationships. At the same time, it demonstrates that the migration on which local settler projects depended must be understood as both trans-imperial and personal. And by investigating British Columbia's particular place in the expansion of white settler colonialism in this period, it traces the affective, everyday, and trans-imperial workings of this formation of power as it developed in one site. In all of these ways, this book argues for the entwined significance of family and empire, Britain and British Columbia, settler colonialism and the post.

Letters

By focusing on families that were sustained through the imperial mail, this book takes letters as its main source as well as a key subject of analysis. It draws on research investigating thousands of family letters that are now located in Canadian and British repositories (including the British Columbia Archives, the British Library, the City of Vancouver Archives, the City of Victoria Archives, Library and Archives Canada, the New Westminster Archives, and the University of British Columbia's Rare Books and Special Collections) or that have been published in transcribed form. Specifically, it focuses on the correspondence of just over fifty families – approximately two thousand letters in total, now primarily archived in British Columbia. Some of these family collections are vast, spanning decades and comprising hundreds of letters between multiple relatives. Others are small or fragmented, in some cases containing only one or two letters, which might have been the only ones ever written or the only ones preserved and archived. Most consist of correspondence written in one direction rather than two-way conversations; it is sometimes but not always possible to reconstruct the other side of the communication, at least in terms of general content. To place these letters in context, I draw on myriad other sources, including diaries, memoirs, newspapers, court records, etiquette manuals, and government papers. In addition, my analysis is informed by some comparative engagement with British family letters written beyond the British Columbian context in the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries. This research includes published collections of correspondence between the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as archived letters sent to and from South Asia, now held in the British Library's India Office Private Papers.³⁸ Taken together, these sources and research strategies enable a focused analysis of family letters written between Britain and British Columbia that recognizes both their specificity and their connections to wider contexts, patterns, and issues.

These collections of correspondence represent an important cluster of settlers, but they do not reflect a full cross-section of British families engaged with early settler British Columbia. Most obviously, families who did not write any letters are left out. An inability to read and write may have impeded some families' epistolary communication; these would have been disproportionately members of the working classes. However, literacy rates were rising rapidly by the second half of the nineteenth century, and archived letters do indicate that Britons with diverse capabilities were able to communicate by post.³⁹ Other relatives may have chosen not to write out of hostility, disinterest, or diverging lives. Such a group likely came from as broad a range of backgrounds as those who did write. Although this book focuses on families who maintained trans-imperial connections by post, and can say less about those who did not do so, the final two chapters flesh out some of the forms and consequences of epistolary silence.

The nature of the correspondence analyzed here is also a product of the racialized, gendered, classed, and partial colonial archive.⁴⁰ Its depth and density – that so many personal records of white British settlers have been archived at all – reflects the writers' comparative social and cultural power. With some notable exceptions, men produced most of the letters from British Columbia. Rather than indicating a gendered letter-writing practice per se, this results from the disproportionate number of settler men and the markedly gendered nature of the archive. Class and status also matter. The metropolitan branches of these families tended to cluster in the middle classes, while the British Columbian relatives were often important figures in local or provincial politics, business, or society. Again with some significant exceptions, many sources in this book have been publicly archived because of the settlers' diverse but comparative influence in British Columbia. Finally, the vast majority of archived collections have been donated by descendants to Canadian rather than British

repositories. This regional asymmetry reflects a particular postcolonial production of imperial archives, in which the colonial histories of former settler dominions have been largely unmoored from a sense of ongoing relevance in the metropole. The records of settlers and their families are now seen as more at home in Canada, important or interesting as stories of province and nation building rather than of empire or Britain – the latter being the primary focus of acquisitions for repositories in the United Kingdom. In this sense, settler records, as well as settlers themselves, have come to claim primary belonging in British Columbia.

These archival parameters matter because they reflect configurations of colonial power in past and present, and shape the possibilities and emphases of research. By using existing archival collections, this book prioritizes families who maintained connections by post, and focuses on the personal records of a comparatively privileged segment of the settler and metropolitan populations. At the same time, I also look to push beyond a common scholarly emphasis on prominent families, intentionally seeking out a range of Britons whose letters have been archived. By considering the records of less influential or so-called ordinary settlers, as well as the correspondence of powerful members of the political and social elite, I underscore the fact that the settler colonial project was not only a matter of policymaking and governance; it was also built on the everyday, affective lives of a larger, more varied, but still privileged group of white British settlers and their families.

To analyze these sources, the book builds from the insights and approaches of a large scholarship on letter writing. Like this body of work, I understand letters as texts and material objects that reflected, shaped, and reveal their wider historical contexts. As correspondents consciously and unconsciously decided what to write and how, they crafted senses of self, performed identities and relationships, and articulated individual and shared ideas about the world.⁴¹ Historians have used family letters in many ways. While a significant number have considered letters together with various other kinds of sources, some have focused specifically on correspondence as a particular genre or form of relationship.⁴² In Western Canada, historians Jean Barman and Ryan Eyford have examined epistolary case studies that point to the rich potential of family letters for casting new light on the region's history of migration and colonialism.⁴³ Picking up these threads here, I expand the scope to investigate a broader range of people, relationships, and letter-writing practices that contributed to

the foundations of British Columbia, as well as to the United Kingdom and the wider British imperial world. The result is the first substantial study of letters as a widespread and influential body of sources in this context.

Undertaking this work, I examine family correspondence as a distinct and significant form in its own right. Broadly, I consider the content, style, function, materiality, and symbolism of correspondence for these families and the colonial project with which they were engaged. Within this general scope, I focus especially on letters' textual context, interrogating what correspondents wrote, how, and why. In this, I draw inspiration from anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler's discussion of reading "along the grain" and literary scholar Sharon Marcus's methodology of "just reading." Both respond to analytical trends in their fields (critical colonial and Victorian literary studies, respectively) that read into sources' silences and against authors' intentions. Interrogating and reconstructing silences, as well as seeking traces of suppressed voices, scholars have used these strategies while working with the partial and powerful colonial archive. Stoler suggests, however, that reading only against the grain risks assuming that we already know the dispositions and concerns of the authors, and the particular configurations of power they enacted. Similarly, Marcus highlights the importance of attending to sources' content and intentions as well as, or before, reading into their silences. In a similar spirit, I embark on a commitment here to take seriously "what texts make manifest on their surface," in Marcus's framing.⁴⁴ In my research, I have not approached letters with the intention of extracting specific topics that I have assumed will be present and significant, but rather have sought to understand first what characterizes this correspondence. Recognizing that the majority of letters ignore topics that populate the scholarship on colonialism, I have worked to identify common epistolary concerns and forms, and then to investigate patterns and variations in their representations, before finally interrogating the silences embedded in them.

The result is a wide-ranging exploration of the contours, intentions, limitations, and significance of epistolary content. By concentrating on what the majority of letters did say, this book centres on what historian Alan Conway once called the "dross" that dominates family correspondence.⁴⁵ I probe the very qualities in letters – generic conventions, expressions of affect, and prevailing banality – that might seem most unremarkable or

familiar to contemporary readers. For instance, anyone who has lived far from places they call “home” might recognize themselves in settlers’ letters that long for familiar comforts, even as technologies of communication, common attitudes, and wider contexts have changed dramatically in the intervening century and a half. This is certainly true for me, living between British Columbia and Britain over the course of this project, stretching and sometimes breaking my own personal relationships across this same distance. At the same time, I write with a sense of a different intimate familiarity too, as a settler raised on Vancouver Island on *W̱SÁNEĆ* (Saanich) territory, and now living in Vancouver on *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam) territory. Both surrounded by and embedded in the legacies of the history in this book, I am conscious of the enduring power of the settler everyday that remains built into Canada’s very foundations. From this position, it seems unsurprising that so many Britons looked away from the human consequences of the colonial structures from which they benefited, and looked toward other aspects of their lives. This is, after all, an impulse of disregard that sustains many structures of inequality and violence, both then and now.

This familiarity matters. For one, it makes impossible any oversimplification of colonizers as mere “avatars of ideas and ideologies,” in geographers David Lambert and Alan Lester’s phrase.⁴⁶ Instead, these letters call attention to the complicated humanity of the people who drove, sustained, and profited from settler projects. In making this point, my intention is not to evoke sympathy or disgust for Britons as colonial agents and settlers, but rather to understand better their roles in British Columbia and in a wider imperial world. More specifically, I take this approach in order to explicate the powerful politics of affect and the everyday that are complicit in settler colonialism at its roots. Embedded in these sources is the familiarity through which settlers came to be at home with the colonial order in British Columbia. In historians Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose’s framing, being “at home with the empire” was to wield a form of power, as Britons took for granted their place and role in an imperial world. While Hall and Rose develop this idea in a collection that focuses on how the British Empire was “infused” and made comfortable in metropolitan lives, this also mattered in other colonial places.⁴⁷ Settler contexts were built on the normalization of the colonial order, as white Britons both claimed these places as home and came to feel at home with them. The affective

and banal concerns of family letters reveal this process at work, as white settlers and their families learned to take for granted British Columbia as a comfortable home.

Weaving together these points, this book positions correspondence as a subject, a source, and a methodological device through which to investigate the relationship between trans-imperial British families and the foundations of settler colonialism in British Columbia. Moving from general to particular, it first develops broadly scoped analyses of epistolary themes, with the early chapters considering examples from a wide range of families. It then progressively deepens its focus, with the later chapters fleshing out magnified case studies of family stories, playing with a more personal analytical voice, and conducting closer readings of individual letters that nuance the wider argument. Each chapter ends with what I call a coda, which – like its musical counterpart – serves as a longer closing section with an additional, climactic element and personal reflection to complete the argument, as well as doing the work of a conventional conclusion. Taken together, the range of approaches draws on both the breadth and depth of my research, balances a diversity of examples and detailed cases, and engages with the representative and the exceptional in archived correspondence. By employing this shifting analytical and vocal style, I also seek to demonstrate multiple registers on which historians might approach letters as telling sources and subjects, not only examining different epistolary themes but also modelling different ways to investigate the content, voice, form, purpose, and context of correspondence.

Part 1 focuses on broad structures and uses of the post. Chapter 1 outlines the postal systems that connected Britain and British Columbia, and introduces the general contours of the letters that moved through them. It shows that these postal structures and letters worked together to fashion settler British Columbia as part of the infrastructure of empire and a tool of white British migration. Turning to focus on the familial uses of letters in more detail, Chapter 2 then explores how relatives used letters to develop, maintain, and define long-distance relationships. Through the post, Britons navigated the personal impacts of distance, enabled the ongoing salience of metropolitan relatives in settler lives, and rendered letter writing and the trans-imperial family mutually constitutive.

Part 2 examines patterns and variations in the specific content of letters, considering their role in crafting trans-imperial family understandings of British Columbia as everyday or normal. Chapter 3 focuses on emotional

description as a site for colonial knowledge production and circulation, tracing how settlers' letters moved from initial declarations of astonishment to prevailing representations of tedium. This was an affective move that reflected their growing ability to represent and sustain British Columbian lives as unremarkable, and their power to disregard settler violence, anxiety, or vulnerability. Chapter 4 then zooms in on one common, concrete epistolary topic. In discussions about food, correspondents produced meanings for the settler everyday that normalized their experiences, made them relatable across imperial distances by defining them in comparison with metropolitan norms, and ultimately claimed settler comfort and belonging while erasing Indigenous people's presence, practices, and competing claims.

Turning from the earlier chapters' emphasis on familial connection, Part 3 fleshes out the contours of epistolary rupture, conflict, or secrecy, and their significance for trans-imperial relationships and colonial knowledge. Chapter 5 focuses on letters about death, investigating how relatives performed collective grief and redistributed (or argued about) property in its wake. Several case studies reveal how relatives delineated the emotions, responsibilities, and relationships that constituted trans-imperial families in crisis. They show that families were defined by fracture as well as the everyday, hostility as well as affection, and individual material interests in imperial places as well as emotional claims to connection between them. Finally, Chapter 6 delves into a single case of epistolary silence, investigating a secret that was maintained among relatives but shared as gossip outside the family. It reveals that gossip and silence were strategies for maintaining relationships in circumstances when colonial and metropolitan lives, and families of origin and marriage, seemed otherwise irreconcilable. Correspondents managed information in order to shape knowledge and relationships, and in the process revealed divergent ideas about race, gender, and intimacy in a critical colonial moment.

Taken together, the chapters trace general postal structures and uses, emotional tones, and common topics, as well as particular cases of trouble, change, and silence in long-distance family lives. Through a range of approaches, they uncover comparatively consistent discursive strategies and family forms that underpinned a period of change in British Columbia, the United Kingdom, and the British imperial world. They demonstrate how Britons maintained trans-imperial relationships in everyday separations and times of crisis, and made sense of the personal distances

necessary to migration and settlement. They also reveal how British settlers produced and circulated family forms of knowledge about British Columbia, while almost entirely disregarding topics that preoccupy the scholarship on colonialism. Individually and together, the chapters argue that family letters both explained and facilitated the foundations of settler colonialism as Britons rewrote British Columbia into a banal, livable, and sustainable home. Recognizing that this colonial logic has enduring power and resonance in the present – a point to which the Conclusion returns in more detail – this book ultimately seeks to explicate its historical roots in what Robert Burnaby’s June 1860 family letter called the “common-place” of settler life, and, in so doing, unsettle its ongoing, normalized familiarity today.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

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Nothing to write home about : British family correspondence and the settler colonial everyday in British Columbia / Laura Ishiguro.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3843-6 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3845-0 (PDF). –

ISBN 978-0-7748-3846-7 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3847-4 (Kindle)

1. British – British Columbia – Correspondence. 2. Colonists – British Columbia – Correspondence. 3. Immigrants – British Columbia – Correspondence. 4. Letter writing – British Columbia – History – 19th century. 5. Letter writing – British Columbia – History – 20th century. 6. Families – British Columbia – Sources. 7. British Columbia – Emigration and immigration – History – 19th century – Sources. 8. British Columbia – Emigration and immigration – History – 20th century – Sources. 9. British Columbia – Biography – Sources. I. Title.

FC3850.B7I84 2019

971.100441

C2018-906460-9

C2018-906461-7

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, and with the help of the University of British Columbia through the K.D. Srivastava Fund.

Set in Galliard and New Baskerville by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Frank Chow

Proofreader: Lauren Cross

Indexer: Cheryl Lemmens

Cover designer: George Kirkpatrick

Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca