

Writing British Columbia History,
1784-1958

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Chad Reimer



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on FSC-certified ancient-forest-free paper (100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Reimer, Chad

Writing British Columbia history, 1784-1958 / Chad Reimer.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7748-1644-1

1. British Columbia – Historiography. 2. British Columbia – History.
I. Title.

FC3809.R445 2009

971.1'0072

C2009-904085-9

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and of 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 Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Pitu and Minion by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Text design: Irma Rodriguez

Copy editor: Joanne Richardson

Proofreader: Jenna Newman

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca

To Evan and Jesse

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Acknowledgments

Funding for this research was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Fulbright Foundation, and the BC Heritage Trust Willard Ireland Scholarship.

Portions of Chapter 1 were published in *On Brotherly Terms: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies*, ed. Ken Coates and John Findlay. A different version of Chapter 2 was published in the *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*.

This book reflects a life-long fascination with things historical. Along the way, I have incurred many debts of gratitude. Broadly, the public education systems of Manitoba, British Columbia, and Ontario made it possible for me to chase my dream. In an age that too often misunderstands and undervalues the efficacy of learning, it is important to remember the democratic and humanizing impact of high-quality, universally accessible education. More specifically, I wish to thank Jean Wilson, Jean Barman, Marlene Shore, Susan Warwick, Ramsay Cook, George Brandak, and John Findlay.

But most of all, I want to thank my two sons, Evan and Jesse: their light led me out of the darkness.

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Introduction

It is an empty land. A European can find nothing to satisfy the hunger of the heart. He requires haunted woods, and the friendly presence of ghosts ... the decaying stuff of past seasons and generations.

– RUPERT BROOKE, 1913

Visiting Canada's westernmost province in 1913, English poet Rupert Brooke encountered a land crowded with sublime mountains, glacial lakes, and dense forests. Yet, amid this natural abundance, Brooke felt an emptiness: the absence of the ghosts of history.¹ Of course, like his compatriots, Brooke was blind to the history of the peoples who had occupied the region for millennia and who had created a land more truly spiritualized than any European newcomer could fathom. To the Englishman, humanity had yet to write its story upon the landscape of British Columbia. And, indeed, just over a century earlier, the area now encompassing British Columbia was unknown to the European world, an empty space on its maps filled in with imaginary seas and passages. But, as with other colonies, the new non-Native society forming on the western coast of North America needed a history to define its own identity and to legitimate its recent dispossession of its Native inhabitants. This book examines the efforts of historians to provide British Columbia with such a history, from the first writings on the region in the late eighteenth century through to British Columbia's centennial in 1958. Most directly, it sets out to answer the question: How and why does a society so new go about writing its history?

It was this question that drew me to the work of British Columbia's historians and suggested to me that the topic was worth doing. As one born and raised in the Canadian west, whose early academic studies focused upon European history, it was a question that gradually yet forcefully pushed its way forward. Indeed, over the years, a distinct feeling of historical inferiority in relation to the Old World was balanced by a sense that the burden of history was heavier there than in my New World home. Europeans, such as Brooke, who travelled through North America remarked upon its lack of history. By contrast, North Americans travelling through Europe felt that they were literally walking through history, the very streets and buildings being physical remnants of a long-recorded past. Brooke himself imagined as much: "So ... a Canadian would feel our woods and fields heavy with the past and the invisible, and suffer claustrophobia in an English countryside beneath the dreadful pressure of immortals."² And all the while, Canada's far west province stood out as one of the newest portions of the New World, one of the last sections of the continent to be encountered and brought within the realm of European history. Thus, British Columbia presents a fertile subject through which to study how a society goes about writing its history for we are so very close to the time when it had no written history at all.

British Columbia also represents a particularly clear example for historians of the promise and problems thrown up by new societies – or, more specifically, what Alfred Crosby has labelled "neo-Europes."³ Physically removed from the confines of the Old World and settling upon the relative tabula rasa of a new land, such societies were presented with the opportunity to invent and define new cultural forms and rules. Like the characters and settings of Vancouver Island novelist Jack Hodgins, individuals could be resurrected with new names and identities or work towards "the invention of the world" around them.⁴ At the same time, the lack of a well-established social order and accepted reference points made it difficult either to construct a stable society or to justify the particular form that society took. There existed the twin dangers of a lack of identity and the emergence of traits deemed undesirable by those who hoped to lead and shape the young society. Thus, historians of a new, immigrant society such as British Columbia had to show that it was fundamentally like the Old World from which it sprang, possessing the necessary social and political

institutions and the constituent elements of a legitimate history. They also had to establish some distinguishing aspect or element that made it different, thereby taking advantage of the promise it offered.

British Columbia's strikingly peculiar historical situation further rendered it a most difficult historical subject and set it apart from its fellow neo-European societies in North America. The continent's Northwest Coast was only recently brought into the European scheme of things. This delayed "discovery," as Europeans viewed it, was followed by a relatively late incorporation into the modern industrialized nation-state. Throughout, accelerated development and abrupt contacts with the European world have characterized the historical development of British Columbia. As Cole Harris notes, modern and premodern worlds have met with stark abruptness here. "Time seems telescoped in British Columbia," Harris writes, "and the long story of emerging modernity, extending back through European millennia, is compressed into 100 years or so." The challenge posed to its historians, then, has been the very thinness and sporadic nature of European presence and imprint upon the region; the novelty of the area made it difficult to establish a respectable historical lineage. Moreover, this novelty has been perennially renewed throughout British Columbia's history, right up to the present age. Successive waves of immigration have left its population in constant flux as different elements are added to its fluid social mix.

Meanwhile, British Columbia's overwhelming topography and landscape presented the prospect of a very unmodern dominance of geography over history, of nature over humanity. British Columbians' encounter with nature has proven to be a dominant theme in writing on the province. But the society the former struggled to create was predicated on the modern European notion of progress – of humanity's increasing control over the world around it. To legitimate this society, to place it within the realm of modern civilization, writers had to show human agency taming geography, exploiting it, using it. In short, history had to triumph over geography.

Also facing BC historians was the more immediate challenge posed by the profound and rapid changes that, while sweeping across all North America, were telescoped into a few decades in British Columbia. Through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social relations and the economy were remade by the troika of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and

immigration. The rise of Darwinian science and a spirit of scepticism unsettled the premises that had held together the mid-Victorian intellectual world. Certainly, there was a strong faith that this era of progress would bring unprecedented benefits, both moral and material. Yet many were unnerved as change rather than continuity now seemed to lie at the root of their world. The popularity of history through the late Victorian era and into this century was a nostalgic reaction against such rapid change, a yearning for seemingly simpler times, when values were clearer and social order more assured.

This book's central argument is that the writing of history was an essential tool in the construction of a neo-European society – and, more particularly, an Anglo- or British-derived society – on the Northwest Coast of North America. It thus examines the role played by historical literature and the historian within society as well as the impact of social context on shaping the history that is written. As with their counterparts elsewhere, BC historians were conscious of the social role played by written history. For them, the latter was one of the necessary elements of any new society. The writing of history, then, has stood as a fundamentally meaning-giving activity: it is one of the most prevalent and powerful ways in which individuals and societies define their place and identity in the world. Indeed, rather than passively reflecting a ready-made history, historians actively shape the narratives they write in order to meet social and personal goals. As one historiographer has noted: “Critics adhering to diverse ideological persuasions have suggested that societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and that they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mold the present.”⁶ Historians, then, bring their own abilities, motivations, and intellectual filters to the task of writing history. By studying these, and their interplay with the material handed down from the past, we can see why and how history was written.

More globally, historical writing worked to incorporate the Northwest Coast within Western European (more broadly) and British (more specifically) civilization. No doubt, this task was a tall one for, as Australian historian Paul Carter asks, “who are more liable to charges of unlawful usurpation and constitutional illegitimacy than the founders of colonies?”⁷ Paradoxically, such new societies responded to this challenge by adopting

a strategy of “indigenization,” whereby they claimed that they belonged in their newly colonized land and that that land belonged to them.⁸ The writing of historical narratives was an indispensable tool in this strategy for written history was seen as a fundamental component of civilization – that which distinguished European newcomers from non-civilized Native peoples. Historians worked to justify the dispossession of the region’s Native inhabitants by describing the latter as savages – part animal, part child – and perhaps more significantly, as people without history. Native peoples literally disappeared, and the newcomers moved in to claim the now vacated land as their own.

Not only did history “become complicitous in imperial expansion,” but it was actively wielded to bring about this colonization.⁹ Since the publication of Edward Said’s groundbreaking *Orientalism*, a growing body of scholars has revealed how diverse disciplines, or ways of knowing, have contributed to and benefited from the emergence of European empires. Building new disciplines upon the Enlightenment premise that knowledge meant power, the modern European colonial project set out to gain knowledge about far-flung lands in order to manipulate both them and their people for European advantage. Such “technologies of power” ranged from military hardware and strategy to political institutions to cultural forms such as literature and history.¹⁰ For, as Said writes in his more recent *Culture and Imperialism*: “The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.”¹¹ From the time of the Northwest Coast’s first encounter with Enlightenment Europe late in the eighteenth century, through the two centuries that followed, the production of historical knowledge about what would become British Columbia would contribute to the unfolding of the European imperial project there.

While British Columbia’s historical literature was political in this global sense, it also engaged the more immediate political issues of its day. The province’s historical writers were relatively privileged members of the Anglo immigrant society, which was working to construct and assert its hegemony over the province. To this latter end, these writers helped define and enunciate a broader immigrant-settler ideology – one that was as

profound in the breadth and depth of its claims as it was in its succinctness. First, it defined residents and immigrants of British descent as “settlers”; they, with their British-derived institutions and culture, were there to stay in ways that the province’s other two major groups (Natives and Asians) were not. Second, it asserted that British Columbia properly and legitimately belonged to this Anglo settler society for reasons legal, political, historical, economic, and cultural – in effect, for all reasons. Thus, the region’s Native peoples could be made virtual outsiders in their own homeland. Seen as a dying people (due, in large part, to their precipitous depopulation in the decades after the arrival of Europeans), they were denied the vote, banned from preempting and settling Crown land, and pressed to give up ever more of their sparse reserve lands on the grounds that they were not properly exploiting them. Meanwhile, Asian residents and immigrants were defined as aliens and sojourners, their presence a distasteful but, in the end, fleeting reality. Like Natives, Asians were denied the vote and the right to settle on Crown land; unlike Natives, who had no other home to go to, Asians were largely excluded and sometimes even ousted. Exclusion laws, head taxes, physical evacuation: the province agitated for these at different times in its campaign for a “white man’s country.” On each of these issues, British Columbia’s historians gave voice to the arguments of their own dominant society, providing historical narratives in support of them.

Over the course of nearly two centuries, historical writers wrestled with the challenge of constructing a past for the problematic new society that British Columbia represented. The results of their efforts can be divided into three broad genres – promotional history, pioneer history, and professional history – each of which loosely characterizes successive phases. The first genre, promotional history, sought to write the region into history itself for it was through this literature that the Northwest Coast became known to the European world. Possessing little or no first-hand knowledge of the region, these writers were more concerned with the future than the past, with promoting the region as a promising field for settlement, economic opportunities, and imperial expansion. Chapter 1 examines this literature.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the second genre, pioneer history, which emerged from the more settled and industrialized British Columbia of late

Victorian and Edwardian eras. Pioneer history extolled the efforts of newly arrived Europeans, depicting them as the people responsible for building the province's foundations. This literature also marked the heyday of British imperialist and racist thinking as writers worked to shape their narratives according to the trinity of civilization, empire, and race. While the community of amateur historians of this time adopted a celebratory view of British Columbia's past, and echoed contemporary prejudices, it did produce one scholar who stood out. Chapter 4 takes up the historical work of Judge Frederic Howay, who was able to free himself from the intellectual constraints of his fellow amateur writers and leave behind a significant body of research. His work provided the example and basis for a more critical, scholarly history of the province.

Finally, the opening of a provincial university made possible the emergence of the third genre, professional history, which is examined in Chapters 5 and 6. Graduates of standardized academic programs, and employed full-time as university professors, these professional historians brought the standards, themes, and conceptual frameworks of their discipline to the writing of provincial history. All too often, those frameworks did not fit the realities of British Columbia's past, and scholars like Walter Sage struggled to construct a satisfactory historical narrative of his adopted home. But the University of British Columbia did produce a first generation of locally trained historians who could draw upon personal experience in their study of the province's past. W. Kaye Lamb and Margaret Ormsby were the most notable members of this generation.

This book ends in 1958, which, at first blush, might seem curious. After all, the following decades produced an explosion of literature on the province as historians took up the same conceptual tools and interpretations that were revolutionizing historical writing in the Western world. Historians now examined how the forces of class, ethnicity, and gender shaped particular aspects of the province's history. More recently, a fresh perspective has been added: drawing on the burgeoning field of postcolonial studies, historians have conceptualized BC history as part of the centuries-long global spread of European colonialism. This book is intended to be a contribution to, rather than a survey of, this growing body of literature. By delimiting its subject, it can focus on the role played by historical writers in the process of colonization. It can also shed light on the process by

which individual historians struggled to construct meaning out of the messy reality of the past. And, as has already been suggested, British Columbia's past was particularly messy – or, rather, it proved to be a particularly challenging subject for historians. For this reason, it presents us with a particularly enlightening case study of how historical knowledge is produced. Finally, the writings of British Columbia's historians during this time provide a rich and readily accessible source through which we can study the intellectual and cultural development of the province as it struggled to define its own identity.

1

The Earliest Pages of History

For those in search of a starting point for BC history, the first European explorations have proven to be stubbornly unsatisfactory. Juan Perez espied but never touched land in his 1774 cruise northward, while Captain James Cook's survey of the Northwest Coast four years later was a brief, perfunctory interlude in his third global voyage. Yet these events have long borne the weight of a founding myth. The province's historical writers have routinely presented the activities of European explorers as the "earliest pages" of British Columbia's history.¹ Even decades after these early explorations, the region could be seen only "as through a glass darkly": just as mists and fog shrouded the coast and mountains for much of the year, so the "mists of time" obscured North America's Northwest Coast from the European gaze.²

But the inconvenient truth is that the region had been occupied for some twelve thousand years before Europeans stumbled upon it. While lacking written languages and, thus, historical literature, these societies developed complex methods of recording and recounting the area's past. As we shall see, the largely oral histories of British Columbia's First Nations would be ignored by the historical writers studied here. Nevertheless, the former histories would survive and finally break through into the mainstream discussion of British Columbia's past. This happened first in the work of academic historians, who, in the last decades of the twentieth century, incorporated the methods of modern anthropology into their own "ethnohistories."³

Even more recently, a tectonic shift occurred in the legal world when the Gitksan Wet'suwet'en nation of central British Columbia pressed a

land claim suit against the provincial government. To prove that they represented an organized society that had occupied and used a specifically delineated territory since “time immemorial,” Gitksan elders employed the methods of historical recording that were indigenous to them – the songs and oral accounts that narrated individual and collective lineages, along with specific and general events in their people’s past. The 1991 decision by BC chief justice Allan McEachern represented the apex of the centuries-long position of British Columbia’s immigrant society: in the absence of written verification, oral evidence was not a legitimate legal or historical source; moreover, any rights the Gitksan might have possessed were extinguished well before British Columbia became a province.⁴ An appeal court chipped away at parts of McEachern’s decision;⁵ however, the Supreme Court of Canada went further in 1997, summarily overturning it. The Supreme Court ruled that Gitksan rights to their traditional land had not been extinguished and that McEachern had erred in dismissing the oral evidence that could corroborate these rights. In an astonishing passage, the Court wrote: “Had the oral histories been correctly assessed, the conclusions on these issues of fact might have been very different.”⁶

For us, the full significance of this ruling lay in the fact that it rejected some of the basic premises of the European historical tradition that had arrived in the region with the coming of James Cook – premises upon which the region’s historical literature would be based for over two centuries. Beginning in the sixteenth century, when Europeans first encountered the western hemisphere, through the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and into much of the twentieth century, Native peoples of the Americas were seen as people without history. This profound and pervasive belief was itself based on two underlying premises. First, Native peoples lacked a history because they produced no written “historical” records as their societies were without written languages. Beginning in Renaissance Europe, but crystallizing as a dominant idea during the Enlightenment, the possession of “alphabetical writing” was seen as an essential component of both civilization and history. As Renaissance historian Walter Mignolo writes, the European conviction that their societies were superior to those of other continents emerged from their belief “that people without writing were people without history and that people without history were inferior human beings.”⁷

Second, a “developmental myth” took hold in European thought, profoundly influencing intellectual currents then and in the following centuries.⁸ In this model, societies developed through various natural stages: from primitive hunter-gatherer to agriculturalist to commercial (and, eventually, industrial) capitalist. Europe had led the way in this evolution, and it was seen as the universal epitome of a high civilization. The Native peoples of the Americas, including those in British Columbia, were placed at the primitive stage. They were seen as bystanders rather than as active participants in the march of civilization; their most useful role was to act as a foil for civilization’s protagonists. The result, ethnohistorian Bruce Trigger writes, was that “native people were treated as part of a vanishing past ... seen as more akin to the forests in which they lived and the animals they hunted than as competitors for control of North America.”⁹

The oral narratives and historical traditions of British Columbia’s first inhabitants, then, had no influence upon the area’s earliest historical writers because the latter did not consider them, or the people who produced them, to be historical. From the European perspective, the late eighteenth-century explorations brought the region into history by pulling it out of the realm of imagination and placing it onto the maps of Europe. Prior to the 1770s, the Northwest Coast had been an empty space on these maps, providing ample room for the imagination. Mythical Northwest Passages and other fanciful cartography, along with fictional creations such as Jonathan Swift’s *Brobdingnag*, all found their home on these distant shores.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Spain refused to publish the accounts of early explorers such as Perez for fear that the information might bring other nations into a region over which they held a tenuous claim. British authorities were less secretive: the records of Cook’s third voyage, published between 1781 and 1784, provided European readers with the first dependable information on the Northwest Coast. These journals consisted primarily of the record of the expedition’s activities, along with the captain’s impressions of the Native inhabitants of these new regions. The official publication also provided a historical introduction to the voyages in order to underline the significance of the discoveries made.¹¹ Accounts subsequent to Cook’s presented historical information as well, scant as it was, and in the following decades some attempts were made to tie together the various explorations of the northern Pacific into something resembling a chronological survey.¹²

The journals of other visitors, including maritime fur traders and Royal Navy officers such as George Vancouver, left a more poignant historiographical legacy: the image of the Northwest Coast as an empty, or rather emptied, land. Repeatedly, these writers described a land haunted by the dead, littered with decaying villages and lonesome grave markers. These writers often differed over the purported cause of this depopulation (war, famine, disease), but the overriding image was of a “Country nearly deserted,” as Vancouver’s journals stated.¹³ We now know that the region surveyed by Vancouver lagged behind only the Incan and Aztec civilizations in terms of complexity and population density prior to the arrival of Europeans. Like the latter two, Northwest Coast First Nations were “virgin” populations lacking immunities to Old World diseases; the results were death rates that could reach 95 percent in the decades after coming into direct or indirect contact with their pathogen-riddled European visitors.¹⁴ Unlike the Spanish experience with the Incan and Aztec cultures, though, the first Europeans to arrive on the Northwest Coast did not encounter Native societies at their peak but, rather, populations that had already been decimated by disease. The image of the region’s Natives as a dying race, and of the land as empty, was firmly entrenched from the start.

One remarkable fact about the exploration accounts is just how recently they were written as Europe encountered the region at a singularly late date. While the earliest literature on the eastern coast of North America emerged from a Renaissance Europe still shaking off the shackles of the Middle Ages, the continent’s western coast first came into contact with a worldview that had been fundamentally altered by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Renaissance humanists had begun freeing history from its medieval subordination to theology, but they could not liberate human reason from its subordination to the passions. A truly progressive history, a hallmark of the modern mind, was still hard to achieve. The ensuing Enlightenment effected a revolution in history by more fully secularizing it, looking for human and profane causes rather than divine. Enlightenment history was founded upon a fundamental belief in civilization’s progress: history was to be the tale of the progressive triumph of reason over unreason, of civilization over barbarism. This paradoxically future-oriented history saw the past as a realm of superstition and vice that must be overcome, the present as dominated by the conflict of reason and unreason, and the future as the time when humanity would reach its

true potential. Humanity's past and future, its history, could be known and controlled; as such, history emerged as one of the Enlightenment's "sciences of man," through which humanity reached out to control itself and the environment around it, ordering that environment and infusing it with human intent and meaning. In the words of Peter Gay, this confidence in humanity's power represented a "recovery of nerve," which was responsible for establishing the fundamental premises of the modern age, most notably the belief in humanity's progressive control over nature and its own destiny.¹⁵

While Europe's late eighteenth-century explorers shared the fundamental premises of this intellectual heritage, their focus was not primarily on the Northwest Coast's past. Their intent and legacy was cartographical rather than historical, and their journals were more annals than histories. Through this literature, North America's far northwest was plotted onto space, fragments of it named and claimed; but the region had yet to be plotted in time. Indeed, as Paul Carter notes in his study of contemporaneous developments in Australia, what the Northwest Coast explorations created was not so much history as the initial paths along which subsequent history would tread.¹⁶

Europeans did follow these word tracks into the area. James Cook's journal, posthumously published in 1784, noted in passing that the otter skins acquired on the Northwest Coast fetched high prices in the Chinese market. Cook's remark immediately sparked a flourishing maritime fur trade, involving several nations. The trade came to a sudden end in the 1820s, with the virtual extinction of the sea otter. By this time, land-based fur companies had moved west of the Rocky Mountains, with the British Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) soon dominating trade north of the Columbia River.

Which nation could claim sovereignty over the Oregon Country, as it was then called, was still contested. In 1818, Britain and the United States agreed to leave the region open to joint use and occupation. The issue became ever more heated through the 1830s and 1840s, as American settlers streamed into Oregon and the United States embarked on the most aggressive expansionist movement in its history.¹⁷ In 1844, James Polk was elected US president on a platform that called for American annexation of the entire Oregon Country; Britain saw its imperial interests threatened, and war seemed imminent. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and the

1846 Oregon Treaty delineated the present boundary, running along the 49th parallel west of the Rocky Mountains and jutting south around Vancouver Island.¹⁸

The Oregon dispute is of interest here because citizens of each country, often with their government's assistance, took up pens to assert their nation's right to the Northwest Coast. And a question of history was at the heart of the ensuing debate: which power could claim priority of exploration and occupation and, thus (based on European-derived international law), sovereignty? In answering this question, American and British writers provided the first historical surveys of the Oregon Country, constructing competing chronologies in support of contrasting claims.

American writers made the first and most substantial contribution to this literature. On the orders of the US secretary of state, Robert Greenhow (a translator and librarian at the State Department) drafted a historical brief in support of his government's claims. The subsequent report was then published in 1840 by the US Senate under the title *Memoir, Historical and Political, on the Northwest Coast of North America*. Four years later, with James Polk recently elected as president on a platform calling for the annexation of the entire region up to 54'40", Greenhow released an expanded version of his earlier history entitled *The History of Oregon, California, and the Other Territories on the North-West Coast of North America*.¹⁹ Together, these two works presented the first continuous narrative histories of the Northwest Coast. While the later *History* was more scholarly and decidedly less polemical, both books were firmly based upon primary material (most notably exploration accounts and government records) and reprinted crucial documents in appendices.

The historical narratives that emerged constructed the story of the Oregon Country as an American drama. Even though the United States had come into existence only in the 1770s, Greenhow argued that its historical lineage in the region dated back two centuries because Spain had ceded all of its historical claims to the Americans in the 1819 Treaty of Florida. The more recent presence of American explorers, fur traders, and settlers represented a continued US presence; these and earlier Spanish activities were given prominence in Greenhow's works, while British actions were noted but downplayed.

Greenhow's arguments in support of the US claim to Oregon were echoed in other American works of the time. Three authors – Oregon

settlers Thomas Farnham and George Wilkes, and twenty-six-year-old evangelist Ephraim Tucker – penned books that were largely derivative of Greenhow's work, at points simply paraphrasing his writing and research.²⁰ The books were decidedly polemical and partisan, and they failed to meet the standards of scholarship seen in Greenhow's *Memoir* and *History*. Nevertheless, the works of this trio echoed the central themes first presented by Greenhow, thereby establishing the beginnings of an American historiography on the Oregon Country.

Most centrally, Britain was depicted as an arrogant, grasping, monarchical power bent on thwarting the just claims of the American people. Of course, this image dated back to the American Revolution; a nagging Anglophobia persisted into the nineteenth century and was stoked to fever pitch by the Oregon dispute.²¹ Wilkes spotted Britain's "calculating monarchists" working to impose their "tyranny" on Oregon.²² Farnham wrote of the "insolent selfishness of Great Britain, her [sic] grasping injustice, her destitution of political honesty," while Tucker darkly warned of English plans to incite Native peoples to attack the United States' western frontier.²³ Likewise, the Hudson's Bay Company was demonized as an agent of Britain's imperial designs. It, too, was an autocratic power, inimical to the settlement of a "free population" in Oregon; neither it nor its government had any rightful claim to Oregon – tellingly, they were dismissed as "foreign."²⁴ Thus, compromise with Britain was rejected and the annexation of the entire Oregon Country demanded for, as Tucker cried, "Oregon is ours."²⁵

The immediate goal of the American writers in the Oregon dispute was to debunk any claim that Britain possessed historical rights to the region; yet even more profound was the dismissal of Oregon's Native peoples. Greenhow had initially questioned whether the history of Oregon could be written since it was "almost entirely in a state of nature," occupied only by "savages incapable of civilization."²⁶ On the rare occasion that Natives appeared in *Memoir* or *History*, they did not take human form; rather, they posed as darkly mysterious threats, treacherous and violent, willing to rob and murder visiting Americans.²⁷ Other American historians also alternated between the dismissal and vilification of Oregon's Native peoples. Voicing the theme of the vanishing Indian, a motif that would only become more pervasive as the nineteenth century went on, Wilkes argued that Natives were "rapidly passing away before ... [a] superior race."²⁸ Meanwhile,

Tucker suggested the danger of the British inciting an Indian uprising on the western boundaries of the United States, a time-worn spectre that depicted Native peoples as easily manipulated pawns, incapable of acting on their own.²⁹ Natives had no rightful place in this American history of Oregon; they could be pushed aside in the face of American settlers, commerce, and political institutions.

Yet other Americans hoped for a different destiny. Albert Gallatin and William Sturgis had been involved previously with the Oregon Country, the former as an American diplomat at various international conferences, the latter as a naval captain who had visited the region at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Both sought compromise on the issue, eschewing war and arguing that the United States and Britain were “kindred nations” whose people together would settle the Northwest Coast. Their preference was a unified Oregon, perhaps even independent of Britain and the United States; failing that, they sought a peaceful division of the territory.³⁰ Sturgis pursued his critique even further; he rejected the effectively universal presumption that the region’s Native peoples had no claim to land over which they had “actual, undisturbed, undisputed possession ... from a period to which the history of this continent does not reach.” He also accused his “covetous” compatriots of neglecting and mistreating Oregon’s Natives, prophesying a judgment day “when equal justice will be meted out to Christian destroyer and his heathen victim – and that will be a woe-ful day for the white man.”³¹

Sturgis’s was a voice crying in the wilderness. It was Greenhow’s narratives, supplemented by Farnham, Tucker, and Wilkes, that formed the basis for an American history of Oregon. The State Department official’s works also affected the response from British writers, who recognized the need to counter his solid research and forceful claims. The British government’s historical case was laid out in a pair of anonymously written pamphlets, which provided contrasting timelines of the two nations’ activities in the region.³² The government also supported more substantial works by barrister Thomas Falconer and Oxford professor Travers Twiss.³³ Independently, clergyman and King’s College lecturer Charles Nicolay, and HBC employee John Dunn, entered the fray with their own historical narratives.³⁴

These writers set out to refute the American histories of Oregon – which Falconer dismissed as “very ridiculous trash” – and to construct a British

counter-narrative in their place.³⁵ The British historians rejected the crucial claim that the United States had inherited two centuries' worth of Spanish rights to the region; rather, they argued that, "if Spain had any rights, Great Britain had [already] acquired them," either through international treaties such as the 1794 Nootka Convention or by priority of exploration and occupation.³⁶ Spanish activities thus receded into the background or were ignored altogether, while subsequent American efforts were derided as "trivial."³⁷ Instead, in the British narrative, Francis Drake was the first to discover North America's Northwest Coast in 1579; and, two centuries later, James Cook and George Vancouver inaugurated the region's first "continuous occupation," which was carried on by British fur-trading companies.³⁸

British writers also sought to counter their American counterparts' demonization of the HBC for they knew that the Company represented their only effective presence in the Oregon Country. Not surprisingly, Dunn proffered the most fulsome praise of his former employer: "[The HBC was] the greatest commercial association that ever appeared in England, next to the East India Company," acting as a determined agent of the British Empire and civilization.³⁹

And yet, even in the first British writings on the Northwest Coast, the Company's shortcomings as a founding figure were recognized. Anglican missionary Charles Nicolay acknowledged that the HBC pursued its own economic self-interest as much as, if not more than, the cause of Empire. Echoing some of the American literature on Oregon, Nicolay acknowledged that the Company had used alcohol as a trading item, with devastating effects for Natives, and, more recently, had been at best half-hearted in its efforts at bringing Christian civilization to them.⁴⁰ Certainly, the argument that the HBC had saved the region for Britain (and thus Canada) would persist as a central theme in BC historiography; but a nagging ambivalence towards the Company as a less-than-satisfactory founding agent would also persist.

Most of the British writers in the Oregon dispute, though, argued that the HBC had been uniquely benevolent in its treatment of Native peoples and had "point[ed] out to the benighted savage the means of improvement, comfort and happiness."⁴¹ They drew a stark contrast between this treatment and the virtual "war of extermination" undertaken by American agents; Nicolay, for one, concluded that Britain had a moral responsibility to hold on to Oregon to save the region's Native peoples from such a fate.⁴²

The greater attention paid to Natives, along with a less harsh portrayal of them, differentiated the British writers from the more mean-spirited American writers. In the British histories, Natives did not assume the role of violent and treacherous threat but, rather, appeared as a population of wards destined to be led by either HBC officials or Christian missionaries. Indeed, Oregon's First Nations provided the means by which British writers could discredit the United States and justify their nation's hold on the region. In this, British historians of Oregon anticipated the myth of "benevolent conquest," which would become a fundamental tenet of BC and Canadian historical writing.⁴³ As Bruce Trigger notes, British writers on North America and their Canadian heirs "relished comparing the brutal treatment of native people by the Americans with the 'generous' treatment they received from Euro-Canadians" – an interpretation requiring "great self-deception, or hypocrisy" in the face of British and Canadian government policy, the goal of which was the eradication of Native identity and culture.⁴⁴

Paradoxically, British writers in the 1840s could make room for Native peoples because they were more willing than were their American counterparts to see Oregon within a colonial framework. They believed that Britain could exert a firm yet benevolent hand over the region's less civilized peoples because, unlike the United States, their nation possessed centuries of experience in colonizing new lands. Indeed, since its Empire spanned the globe, Britain viewed the entire world through an imperial filter. Accordingly, British writers presented typically colonial arguments for the acquisition of Oregon: it would open up new opportunities for British emigrants, while solving the problem of the home country's surplus population; it would provide new markets and avenues for commerce; it would further Britain's strategic military interests; and it would result in the "spread of our free institutions, equal laws and holy religion."⁴⁵

Meanwhile, American writers on Oregon did not view their own people as colonizers. As Frederick Merk notes, at the heart of the American national ideology was the view of the United States as an anti-colonial power.⁴⁶ It had thrown off its own colonial master and, through the Monroe Doctrine, asserted the right to stop European powers from recolonizing the western hemisphere. Even the expansionist creed expressed in the 1840s phrase "Manifest Destiny" was not imperialistic at its ideological core; rather, it was premised upon the notion of consensual, contract

government. Americans moving westward would set up their own governments and, in due course, apply to join a federated United States. Native peoples could not be incorporated into this vision because they were “unenlightened” peoples who were incapable of self-government.⁴⁷ They thus had to give way to the American settlers then moving into the region, who would seal Oregon’s fate as part of the United States. This was not a matter of colonization but of the inexorable march of history.

It had taken an international crisis, with two powerful nations drawn dangerously close to war, to produce the first properly historical literature on the Northwest Coast. Not surprisingly, given the overheated atmosphere, this literature proffered divergent historical narratives for the Oregon Country, introducing themes subsequent historians north and south of the border would inherit. Meanwhile, in the immediate aftermath of the 1846 Oregon Treaty, the British government recognized that it had to strengthen its tenuous hold north of the new boundary if it were to maintain an outlet on the east Pacific. In 1849, it created Vancouver Island as its first colony in western North America.

The fact that the HBC was granted effective power over the new colony meant that, once again, controversy was the source of literature on the region. In the two years preceding Vancouver Island’s creation, James Edward Fitzgerald launched a concerted campaign against the plan to grant the island to the Company. An emigration agent and English member of Parliament interested in colonial reform, Fitzgerald felt the new colony was too important to be entrusted to the policies of the fur trade monopoly. The criticisms made by this future prime minister of New Zealand were echoed in the British House of Commons in an 1848 speech by Lord Monteaule.⁴⁸ British policy continued unchanged, and efforts got under way to promote settlement on Vancouver Island under the HBC’s auspices. But the issue of the HBC’s anomalous position in the colony persisted, and this time the Company’s critics were more successful. In 1857, after hearings and debate, a House of Commons select committee concluded that the Company’s connection with Vancouver Island should be terminated and that the colony should be extended to encompass the mainland west of the Rocky Mountains.⁴⁹

The controversies sparked by the HBC’s privileged position on the Northwest Coast were significant for two reasons. First, the debates left a negative image among the British public, who now saw the region as an

inhospitable, “howling wilderness,” an image that later promotional literature had to confront.⁵⁰ Second, the Company’s critics raised doubts about whether it was acting as an agent of imperial power and even suggested that it might be a hindrance to the British Empire’s interests. The HBC’s shortcomings were thereby kept in full view, adding to the Company’s reputation as a flawed founding figure of a British Northwest Coast.

Yet, well into the 1840s, the HBC was effectively the sole source of first-hand information on the region.⁵¹ This changed in the following decade; in the aftermath of the Oregon Treaty, a British-American surveying team was sent to mark out the 49th parallel on the ground. Meanwhile, British naval captain George Richards was given the task of accurately surveying the coast north of the border. With naval officers, hydrographers, botanists, and astronomers in tow, these surveying teams were a melding of scientific and imperial motives. Their systematic survey work produced an accurate, first-hand picture of the Northwest Coast above the new international boundary. This, in turn, provided colonial officials with a better idea of the new realm over which Britain was to exercise its sovereignty and power.

Indeed, in mid-nineteenth century Britain and British North America alike, the acquisition of scientific and geographic knowledge became ever more intimately linked to the acquisition of new colonial and national possessions.⁵² The clearest embodiment of this scientific imperialism was the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) of London. Through the 1850s, the RGS actively promoted a transcontinental railroad line that would unite all of British North America; it also sponsored the Palliser Expedition, which spent three years surveying the Prairies and Rocky Mountains. Along with Palliser’s extensive findings, the reports of Captain Richards, Lieutenant Richard Mayne, Judge Matthew Begbie, and other British officers and colonial officials were read and discussed at the RGS. The RGS also heard from Charles Nicolay and Thomas Falconer, who had contributed historical texts to the Oregon boundary dispute.⁵³ Taken as a whole, these reports were optimistic about Britain’s far west possessions. However, this positive picture did not go unqualified: the long shadow of the HBC dampened the enthusiasm of some towards the region. Captain W.C. Grant arrived in 1849 as Vancouver Island’s first independent settler, but he soon returned to England after his settlement efforts failed. Speaking before the RGS in 1857 and 1861, Grant was critical of the Island’s prospects and harshly

attacked the position and policies of the HBC.⁵⁴ Once again, the issue was raised whether the Company hindered or helped British imperial interests.

The RGS's activities had increased British knowledge of and interest in the far distant colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia; the discovery of gold in the Fraser River further heightened that interest. It also caught the attention of William Carew Hazlitt, a twenty-four-year-old British War Office clerk who would later become a highly respected historian. In 1858, the year of the Fraser River gold rush, Hazlitt published *British Columbia and Vancouver Island: A Historical Sketch of the British Settlements in the North-West Coast of America*. It is an obvious but significant point that this was the first text to use the term "British Columbia," for the colony had been created and named only weeks before. British Columbia was now a defined, concrete subject, its existence no longer contested. Hazlitt and subsequent authors could now focus on providing a historical lineage for it and on promoting its development. Working from previous histories (most notably those of Greenhow and Nicolay), RGS papers, government documents, and newspaper reports, Hazlitt constructed a scholarly British narrative for this new entity. As with previous English writers, he stressed the priority of British exploration and occupation, from Drake through Cook to Alexander Mackenzie; and, like some of the earlier writers, he displayed a distinct ambivalence towards the HBC. Hazlitt also provided an extended ethnological description of British Columbia's Native peoples, arguing that they were not doomed to extinction: rather, they could adapt if properly converted to the verities of Christian civilization. Of course, the book's overriding goal was to attract British emigrants to the region, and it informed prospective settlers of the various transportation routes to this "New Eldorado." Because of their resources, climate, and agricultural potential, Hazlitt concluded, British Columbia and Vancouver Island could become a "Britain on the Northern Pacific."⁵⁵ In this, the text was more concerned with the future than with the past, conscious as it was of the relatively light imprint of Europeans upon the region. The colonies' true history had yet to arrive.

Hazlitt's *British Columbia and Vancouver Island* was part imperial history, part promotional literature. Meanwhile, the events that had helped inspire it (the Fraser River and subsequent Cariboo gold rushes) also produced a spate of practical handbooks, all advertising the promise of gold-related wealth to be found in British Columbia. Some of these were

prefaced with brief historical sections; all were primarily concerned with giving practical information on how to get to British Columbia's goldfields and how to go about mining gold once there. While some handbooks adopted a typically Victorian equation between material and moral progress, depicting the "thirst for Gold" as a force bringing British civilization to this wilderness, others expressed doubts about the kind of population attracted by such a materialistic motive. A Chinook-language dictionary was often appended to these works or published separately. The popularity of these dictionaries represented a pragmatic, if implicit, recognition of the fact that Native peoples vastly outnumbered British Columbia's non-Native population at the time.⁵⁶ Thus, these works eschewed the often dogmatic and stereotypical treatment afforded Native peoples in other early writings on British Columbia. That being said, the primary purpose of the handbook literature was to aid those who wished to exploit the region's natural resources or take up settlement there; that is, they set out to incite and assist events that would lead to the dispossession of the region's original inhabitants.⁵⁷

A second form of promotional literature, the directory, emerged in the 1860s as the population of British Columbia and Vancouver Island rose with the Fraser and Cariboo gold rushes. Unlike previous writings on the colonies published in distant imperial centres, much of this genre was produced by Northwest Coast merchant interests. San Francisco publishers had a strong, early presence, demonstrating the extensive economic ties between the city and Britain's Pacific colonies. But with the growth of Victoria through the 1870s, the new provincial capital produced its own series of directories. The main purpose of the directory genre was to advertise the commercial possibilities of the area, providing readers with lists of citizens' addresses and vocations as well as information on various local businesses. They were "handbooks of merchant capital," practical guides for the profit-oriented, which saw little need to delve deeply into the scarce history the region had so far acquired.⁵⁸ This no-nonsense approach was taken by others as well. For instance, colonial surveyor-general and engineer J. Despard Pemberton published the *Facts and Figures Relating to Vancouver Island and British Columbia* in 1860. Pemberton argued that previous books on the region had not been useful because they spent too much time discussing the colonies' early history, an error the engineer did not repeat.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, the colonial governments of British Columbia and Vancouver Island contributed to promoting the colonies, determined as they were to attract permanent, preferably British, settlers to replace the shifting and largely American population of gold seekers. The colonies' promotional efforts of the early 1860s also sought to repair the negative portrayal of the region that had emerged in previous decades. Accordingly, officials organized a coordinated exhibit shown at the London International Exhibition in 1862. In echoes of William Hazlitt's earlier history, the display and accompanying *Catalogue* extolled the "industrial resources" of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, stressing the region's England-like climate and agricultural potential.⁶⁰

The two colonies also held separate prize-essay contests, with £50 rewarded to the author who best "set forth in the clearest and most comprehensive manner the capabilities, resources and advantages of Vancouver's Island [and British Columbia] as a colony for settlement."⁶¹ The winning essayists, a Royal Navy doctor and an Anglican clergyman, admitted that Europeans had only briefly and lightly occupied the region. To both, hope lay in the future: rich with resources and capabilities, the two colonies promised to become outposts of Empire and Christian civilization as well as commercial centres on the Northwest Coast. In these government-sponsored works, the imperial motif was more prominent than the capitalistic. Meanwhile, history was harnessed to promotional purposes; it provided a brief, obligatory introduction to define the colonies in time, just as descriptions of political and geographic boundaries defined them in space. With the subject thus firmly in grasp, the author and reader could then look forward to a promising future.

The gold rush did not produce a lasting, systematic body of literature on the region, although it did place distinctly materialistic and fickle forces at the centre of British Columbia's early historiography. Promotional efforts and renewed interest in the region were linked as much to imperial and scientific motives as they were to the discovery of precious metals. A more significant literary legacy emerged from the naval officers, missionaries, and settlers who came to the area in the late 1850s and 1860s as part of the new British presence there. Though still sojourners, these men gained extensive personal knowledge of the Northwest Coast and from that experience produced systematic accounts of the region in properly Victorian tomes.

The first of these, Richard Mayne's *Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island* and Alexander Rattray's *Vancouver Island and British Columbia*, were published by London houses in 1862.⁶² Mayne served under Captain George Richards, completing survey work that arose out of the Oregon boundary settlement. Several of his reports had been read at RGS meetings, and he was one of three commanders to accompany the 1862 exhibit to London. Meanwhile, Rattray worked as a naval surgeon stationed in Esquimalt during the 1859 San Juan Island dispute, when the shooting of a pig sparked a crisis between Britain and the United States over ownership of these Georgia Strait islands.

The accounts of these two Royal Navy officers, while dependable and relatively moderate, were written from a decidedly imperial perspective, with a maritime orientation and an underlying anti-Americanism. Both also spent little time dwelling on the past, though enough to establish the plot of British exploration and sovereignty of the Pacific colonies. Rattray was clearest in his imperial vision of British Columbia's and Vancouver Island's future as a united colony, the physician in him arguing that the region was ideally suited as a health sanatorium for the Royal Navy.⁶³ He was equally optimistic about the colonies' economic prospects and suitability as destinations for British emigrants. While Rattray largely ignored the United States, Mayne expressed strong anti-American opinions. The latter's attitudes no doubt were coloured by the San Juan dispute then raging; to this were added an aristocratic disdain for democratic institutions and a suspicion of that portion of the American population that had been attracted by gold fever. As with other British writers, past and future, Mayne drew a stark contrast between an anarchic, violent American far west and the peaceful, orderly colonies north of the border.⁶⁴

Others were less sanguine about the prospects of Britain's Pacific colonies. Duncan MacDonald was a civil and agricultural engineer who visited British Columbia and Vancouver Island from 1858 to 1862, working there with the Government Survey Staff and the Royal Engineers. Like W.C. Grant before him, MacDonald's plans to settle in the colonies came to naught, and he left the region bitterly prejudiced against its prospects. Upon returning to London, he published the 524-page *British Columbia and Vancouver's Island* and delivered lectures discouraging prospective emigration. In these, MacDonald was unremittingly negative about the climate and prospects of the region, labelling it an "inhospitable wilder-

ness” and dismissing it as “England’s Siberia.”⁶⁵ He also depicted the colonies’ officials as an “irresponsible autocracy” whose land policy was a disaster, and he took issue with the emerging view of the colonies as a peaceful realm in contrast to the violent American west.⁶⁶ Possessing better qualifications than others in the field, MacDonald might have produced a scientific assessment of the region’s agricultural and settlement prospects; instead, his *British Columbia and Vancouver Island* presented a disjointed, unsystematic analysis, stronger on unqualified opinions than on reasoned arguments.

A more even-handed and dependable account of Britain’s new Pacific colonies was presented in 1865, with the publication of Reverend Matthew Macfie’s *Vancouver Island and British Columbia*. Macfie served five years ministering in the colonies, and, with the assistance of the two colonial governments, he embarked upon an 1864 speaking tour of Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Britain to promote emigration to the far west. These promotional efforts inspired him to write *Vancouver Island and British Columbia*, perhaps the most useful and balanced of the volumes to emerge during this time. The text was critical of the HBC and colonial governments headed by James Douglas. In the first such survey of the colonies’ political development, Macfie introduced the notion of an autocratic “family compact” that existed between the Company and local governments.⁶⁷ Despite these criticisms, Macfie argued that the colonies’ resources and climate promised a bright future, and he foresaw the completion of a transcontinental railroad. For the reverend, the latter represented the westward-moving tide of empire, race, and Christianity – all intimately linked to capitalism and civilization – which were in the midst of overtaking the region and providing it with its true destiny as the “England of the Pacific.”⁶⁸ The materialist impulse of gold had played its role in initiating these forces but would be replaced by more solid agricultural and industrial settlement.

The promotional literature that emerged in the decade after the Fraser River gold rush was often overwhelmingly positive in its portrayal of British Columbia and its potential, and its treatment of the region’s Native peoples was similarly optimistic. While earlier histories had largely ignored Natives, Hazlitt, Macfie, and Mayne in particular devoted considerable attention to them.⁶⁹ Unlike so many others, these British writers did not feel that the Natives were inevitably doomed to extinction; rather, they

largely agreed that Native peoples could adapt to British civilization and thus survive, although they asserted that this was possible only if Natives converted to Christianity and European ways.⁷⁰ They also argued that the Northwest Coast's First Nations were not a violent threat and that most of the violence that had occurred was due to European, and most specifically American, provocation.⁷¹ Here, of course, they resurrected the by now routine contrast between the purported US policy of virtual extermination of Native peoples and Britain's policy of benevolent conquest. Duncan MacDonald provided a dissenting view. In keeping with his efforts to discourage emigration from Britain to the region, he portrayed the Natives as a "murderous" and "bloodthirsty" threat.⁷² Overall, though, in their desire to jump-start a flow of British immigrants that had yet to materialize, British writers during this time sought to portray British Columbia as an inviting field for settlement and missionary activities. It was in their interest to downplay any suggestion that the region's original inhabitants might have been hostile to such efforts.

Taken as a whole, those who produced the earliest writings on British Columbia were promoters of Empire and civilization. As Brook Taylor notes in his study of early historical writing in eastern Canada, writers of the promotional genre sought to order and civilize what so recently had been wilderness. With such a short tale of civilization's unfolding, the focus tended to be upon the future rather than the past. Indeed, a prehistoric past of wild nature and savage Natives only served to highlight the inroads civilization had already made, and it pointed to the promise of future development.⁷³ Over the course of the nineteenth century, writers on British Columbia gained more personal knowledge of the Northwest Coast; yet they remained sojourners rather than permanent settlers and viewed the region from the outside through global filters. Moreover, unlike Taylor's promoter-historians in eastern Canada, these writers' personal fortunes were not linked directly to the success of the colonies. Aside from the gold rush and directory literature, the English man-of-letters or Royal Navy officer who took to writing the more substantial work of this period had only a temporary and imperial interest in the region, further frustrating attempts to establish a continuous literary tradition.

From the start the writing of BC history proved to be a problematic task and British Columbia itself a difficult historical subject. The European writers who first turned their attention to the region were acutely aware

that there was very little history upon which to build a founding myth. American writers on Oregon could work from motifs such as the Exodus-like trek of settlers along the Oregon trail, the martyrdom of the Whitman massacre, and notions of nationalist expansion that were an expression of the United States' doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Meanwhile, British writers were frustrated by the fact that their portion of the Northwest Coast had attracted only sporadic interest – and that that interest was marked by controversy and was largely speculative in nature. Even the theme of an expanding British Empire could not be applied without difficulties as the first permanent British presence in the region, the HBC, was not an unequivocal agent of Empire. The Oregon boundary question, the HBC's peculiar status in the colonies, the gold rush: none of these provided a dependable, unchallenged base upon which to build the history of British Columbia.