

Hardy Backwoodsmen, Wholesome Women, and Steady Families: Immigration and the Construction of a White Society in Colonial British Columbia, 1849–1871

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Immigration was central to nineteenth-century colony-building, as is evident from an examination of mid-nineteenth-century British Columbia. This colony's overwhelmingly male and racially plural settler society inevitably disappointed those who hoped to find a stable white settler colony, and the discrepancy helped to generate a spate of reformatory schemes in which immigration played a key and constant role. Colonial promoters' discussions of desirable immigrants centred around three images — the “hardy backwoodsman”, the “steady family”, and the “wholesome woman” — that reveal overlapping concerns with gender, class, and race. Together, these images were constructed as the immigrants able to transform British Columbia into the stable settler society of imperialists' dreams. That they failed to do so in practice confirms that immigration functioned as a mechanism for inclusion and exclusion, but not always in predictable ways.

Au XIX^e siècle, la colonisation s'est faite autour de l'immigration, comme en témoigne la situation qui prévalait en Colombie-Britannique au milieu des années 1800. Cette société de colons à forte prédominance masculine et à pluralité raciale a inévitablement déçu ceux qui espéraient trouver une colonie blanche stable, et l'écart entre la réalité et les attentes a contribué à la création d'une avalanche de programmes de réforme constamment articulés autour de l'immigration. Les promoteurs de la colonisation souhaitaient trois types d'immigrants avant tout — le « brave pionnier », la « famille stable » et la « femme de bonne constitution » — ce qui témoigne de préoccupations chevauchantes pour le sexe, la classe et la race. On dépeignait ainsi les immigrants capables de transformer la Colombie-Britannique en la colonie stable des rêves impérialistes. Qu'ils aient échoué dans les faits confirme que l'immigration est un mécanisme d'inclusion et d'exclusion parfois imprévisible.

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WHO WAS IN and who was out? One of the primary ways in which mid-nineteenth-century British Columbians negotiated inclusions and exclusions was through the practice and discourse of immigration. Immigration derived its social and political significance from its double ability to dispossess local peoples and establish a settler-society in their stead. The settler society this process sought to build was explicitly racialized and deeply gendered. In seeking “hardy backwoodsmen”, colonial promoters encouraged men committed to hard work, steadiness, and rural life; in demanding “wholesome women”, they sought women who would simultaneously serve as beacons of imperial society and constrain the excesses of white men; in courting “steady families”, they pursued stable units that would exemplify the virtues of the same-race, nuclear family. Together, “hardy backwoodsmen, wholesome women and steady families” were constructed as the immigrants able to transform British Columbia into the stable settler society of imperialists’ dreams.

Studies of the flow of people between Europe and the Americas in the “Great Migration Era” have tended to leave a blind spot, namely their disinterest in interrogating the politicized character of nineteenth-century “new world” migration.¹ When people left Europe for the Americas or Australia, they did not simply move into large, empty spaces. Instead, they participated in a process of colonization in which Aboriginal dispossession and settler migration were irreparably linked. As Daiva Staisulis and Nira Yuval-Davis argue, migration is one of the chief ways in which settler societies constitute themselves.² For individuals and families, migration was probably motivated primarily by straightforward social and economic needs, but the overarching structure of imperialism transformed these needs into imperial acts.³ Immigration sometimes troubled and sometimes nourished the politics of empire. In either case, it cannot be separated from them.

A better acknowledgement of the connections between migration and imperialism necessitates a return to an older phase in the writing of Canadian history, albeit with newly critical eyes. The past two decades have witnessed an increasing emphasis on the social experience of immigrant peoples to Canada. Historians have rejected earlier studies in which “immi-

1 See, for instance, Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction* (New York: Knopf, 1986). For a revealing example, see the explicit definition of Ontario’s Leeds and Landsdowne townships as “empty” in Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1984), p. 55.

2 Daiva Staisulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Introduction: Beyond Dichotomies — Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class in Settler Societies”, in Staisulis and Yuval-Davis, eds., *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Sage, 1995).

3 On this point in a later period, see Stephen Constantine, “Introduction: Empire Migration and Imperial Harmony”, in Constantine, ed., *Emigrants and Empire: British Settlement in the Dominions Between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990). See also Rita S. Kranidis, ed., *Imperial Objects: Essays on Victorian Women’s Emigration and the Unauthorized Imperial Experience* (New York: Twayne, 1998).

gration was acknowledged as a key ingredient in transcontinental nation-building but the immigrants were largely ignored or relegated to cameo appearances".⁴ They have embraced the vantage point of the immigrant instead of the policy-maker and analysed how these people, like women and the working class, were active agents who shaped their own history. This historiographic shift is premised on a needed critique of histories that artificially isolate the powerful from both the cause and effect of their authority. An unintended and less useful consequence of changing historiographic imperatives has been to detach the process of migration from its larger political context. Instead of treating the political and social history of immigration as distinct processes, historians need to reckon with the profound ties that connect the politician with the peasant and the policy-maker with the people.

Acknowledging these ties is crucial to understanding white settler colonies like British Columbia. The significance of immigration in colonial contexts derives from its central position in the very business of imperialism. Settler societies aim simultaneously to dispossess Aboriginal peoples and to replace them with relatively homogeneous settler populations, and immigration is one of the tools that has allowed them to do so. Colonies of settlement are distinguished from other kinds of colonies chiefly by their reproductive and gendered character. That colonizers *settle* implies more than residence. It denotes a reproductive regime dependent on the presence of settler women who literally reproduce the colony. Immigration must therefore provide more than non-Aboriginal bodies. Ideally, it must provide the right kind of bodies, those suited to building a white settler colony.

These connections between immigration, empire, and gender came together in mid-nineteenth-century British Columbia in an especially revealing way. Its society was the product of three sometimes conflicting imperial intentions: the fur trade, the gold rush, and the British tradition of settler colonies. North America's northern Pacific coast and the Columbia Plateau were densely populated by linguistically, culturally, and politically diverse First Nations people reliant on foraging, hunting, and fishing. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) began trading with local peoples in the late eighteenth century, and formal colonial authority was established in 1849 when Vancouver Island was made a British colony.

The discovery of gold on the mainland's Fraser River in 1858 precipitated the creation of a mainland colony called British Columbia. It was, according to imperial opinion, destined to be a major colony of settlement. "[N]ever did a colony in its infancy present a more satisfactory appearance," remarked one

4 On this shift, see Franca Iacovetta, "Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestics: Writing about Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship", *Labour/ Le Travail*, vol. 36 (Fall 1995), p. 221. Also see Iacovetta with Paula Draper and Robert Vantresca, "Preface", in Iacovetta, Draper, and Vantresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s–1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

Anglican cleric. By 1866 and 1867, however, “those who once entertained most extravagant expectations began to despond.”⁵ Imperial downsizing followed despondency. In 1866 the two colonies were merged, retaining the name of British Columbia, and in July 1871 British Columbia joined Canada as a province, bringing the colonial period to a close.

These shifts in political form reflected widespread disappointment in British Columbia’s performance as a settler colony. “The high tide of immigration expected never reached the Colony,” explained Governor Frederick Seymour, “and the ebb proved much stronger than anticipated.”⁶ To be sure, the population expanded: there were fewer than 1,000 settlers in 1855 and over 10,000 in 1871. But the settler population never rivalled the Aboriginal one, which, despite massive depopulation wrought by smallpox, likely hovered around the 45,000 mark in the early 1870s.⁷

Settler British Columbia did not grow as quickly as imperial observers hoped it would, nor did it grow in the way they had hoped. The periphery, like the metropole, defied pretences of ethnic and racial homogeneity.⁸ For a supposed white settler colony, British Columbia was not very white: Chinese, African-American, Latino, and Kanaka (Hawaiian) settlers were a significant presence. Jews and continental Europeans pressed operative definitions of whiteness, and Americans unsettled the colony’s claims to Britishness. In 1861 the local official for Douglas, a small gold-rush town on the mainland, enumerated 97 Chinese, 40 Americans, 20 Mexicans, 17 Europeans, and 6 “coloured” people. They dwelled amongst “About 700 Natives.”⁹ “It would have been difficult to find in one place a greater mixture of different nationalities,” wrote German mathematician Carl Friesach after visiting Yale, another small mining town. “Americans were undoubtedly [*sic*] in the majority — California, especially had sent a large contingent. Then followed Germans, French, and Chinese. Next came Italians, Spaniards, Poles, etc,” he noted.¹⁰

5 Henry Wright, *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Missions of the Church of England in British Columbia for the Year 1877* (London: Rivingtons, 1878), pp. 16–17.

6 British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), GR 1486, mflm B–1442, Great Britain, Colonial Office, British Columbia Original Correspondence (hereafter CO 60), CO 60/32, Frederick Seymour to Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, March 17, 1868.

7 All population figures from colonial British Columbia are at best guesses. These are from British Columbia, *Report of the Hon. H. L. Langevin, C.B., Minister of Public Works* (Ottawa: I. B. Taylor, 1872), p. 22; and Edward Mallandaine, *First Victoria Directory, Third [Fourth] Issues, and British Columbia Guide* (Victoria: Mallandaine, 1871), pp. 94–95. Also see R. Cole Harris and John Warkentin, *Canada Before Confederation: A Study in Historical Geography* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), chap. 7.

8 Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

9 BCA, “Colonial Correspondence”, GR 1372, mflm B–1330, file 620/16, John Bowles Gaggin to W. A. G. Young, April 3, 1861.

10 Carl Friesach, “Extracts from *Ein Ausflug nach Britisch-Columbien im Jahre 1858*”, in E. E. Delavault and Isabel McInnes, trans., “Two Narratives of the Fraser River Gold Rush”, *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 1 (July 1941), p. 227.

The special plurality that characterized resource towns helped shape the entire colony. American missionary Matthew Macfie found Victoria, the capital city, a small and alarmingly cosmopolitan place in the early 1860s:

Though containing at present an average of only 5,000 or 6,000 inhabitants, one cannot pass along the principal thoroughfares without meeting representatives of almost every tribe and nationality under heaven. Within a limited space may be seen — of Europeans, Russians, Austrians, Poles, Hungarians, Italians, Danes, Swedes, French, Germans, Spaniards, Swiss, Scotch, English and Irish; of Africans, Negroes from the United States and the West Indies; of Asiatics, Lascars and Chinamen; of Americans, Indians, Mexicans, Chilanoes, and citizens of the North American Republic; and of Polynesians, Malays from the Sandwich Islands [Hawaii].¹¹

Macfie's fevered attempt to classify this population perhaps speaks more to his own discomfort with the mutability of racial boundaries, but it is not surprising that this discomfort was triggered in British Columbia. The diversity fostered by the gold rushes of the early colonial days diminished but never disappeared. When British Columbia entered Canadian confederation in 1871, its settler society was constituted, according to one probably conservative count, by 8,576 whites, 1,548 Chinese, and 462 Africans.¹²

That British Columbia's settlers were overwhelmingly male further suggested its failure to fit the norms of a white settler colony. While the female proportion ebbed and flowed over the colonial period, it never exceeded a high of 35 per cent of the white society and reached lows of 5 per cent.¹³ Imperial discourse that accorded white women a special role as harbingers of empire rendered this demographic problem a political one. A popular emigration guide by "A Returned Digger", like so many others, despaired of what to do with a society so lacking in women. "The great curse of the colony", he explained, "is the absence of women. I doubt if there was one woman to a hundred men twelve months ago. I am quite sure that now, when I am writing, there must be at least two hundred men to every woman."¹⁴ In colonial discourse, the continuing demographic dominance of First Nations people, the plurality of settler society, and its prevailing masculinity became irreparably intertwined, a three-part symbol of British Columbia's departure from dominant social norms and expectations.

Colonial promoters — a term I apply to a loose collection of journalists,

11 Matthew Macfie, *Vancouver Island and British Columbia: Their History, Resources and Prospects* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1865), pp. 378–379.

12 British Columbia, *Report of the Hon. H. L. Langevin*, p. 22.

13 On this, see Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), chap. 1.

14 A Returned Digger, *The Newly Discovered Gold Fields of British Columbia* (London: Darton and Hodge, 1862, 8th ed.), p. 7.

politicians, officials, missionaries, and self-appointed do-gooders — looked to immigration to address the smallness, diversity, and masculinity of settler British Columbia and to render it a prosperous and respectable settler colony. They attributed the colony's lamentable imperial performance to the sparseness of its settler society. The *British Columbian* newspaper argued that the colony's poor showing stemmed from its underpopulation, "because we have only a mere handful of population, a few thousand people living upon one another".¹⁵ The colony lacked white population of nearly every description. The Victoria press noted,

If we enter our churches, they want worshippers; our school houses want scholars; our streets and highways want pedestrians and vehicles; our merchants want trade; our traders want customers; our steamboats want passengers and freight; our workshops want workmen; our fertile valleys want farmers; our gold and silver mines want miners; in short, the two Colonies want population.¹⁶

While the colony had resources, wrote the *Cariboo Sentinel*, "without a population a country may remain forever a barren wilderness, dotted here and there with a few fisherman's huts and a few miners' and lumberman's cabins, and known only to the world as an inhospitable and poverty-stricken place."¹⁷

If colonial promoters suggested that British Columbia's ills stemmed from the sparseness of the white population, they had a related and almost boundless faith in the political potential of white bodies to make it a successful colonial enterprise. Even the most shameless boosters, however, recognized that British Columbia's distance from centres of white population meant that active state intervention was required for mass immigration to occur. If they wanted a white population, they would have to work for it, bidding it to come hither, assisting its passage, and supporting it on arrival. "To have our country filled up we must not only assist people to reach our shores, but we must show them the way to earn a living after they get here," wrote the *Colonist* in 1866.¹⁸ The intervention of both the local and colonial state was required. "What right has the most remote of the British Colonies to expect immigration without even *asking for it*," agreed the New Westminster press, "to say nothing of *assisting it*?"¹⁹

Colonial promoters' demands for immigration were part and parcel of a programme of asserting white supremacy in British Columbia. Himani Bannerji has recently dubbed immigration a "euphemistic expression for racist

15 "Our Great Want", *British Columbian*, January 9, 1869.

16 "Our Wants", *British Colonist*, June 5, 1861.

17 "Emigration", *Cariboo Sentinel*, June 18, 1868.

18 "Assisted Immigration", *British Colonist*, December 11, 1866.

19 "Population, Population", *British Columbian*, May 29, 1869.

labour and citizenship policies”.²⁰ In colonial British Columbia the process worked to exclude First Nations migrants and to minimize non-white settlers. It was difficult, although hardly impossible, to argue for the removal of First Nations with local and obvious territorial claims. Those from distant territories were easy targets for settlers committed to visions of racial segregation. The city of Victoria worked hard to control and limit the presence of the so-called Northern Tribes — people from the coastal societies of the Nisga’a, Hieltsuk, Nexalk, Kwakwaka’wakw, Tlingit, and especially the wealthy and politically powerful Haida and Tsimshian — who made annual spring visits to Victoria for trade, wage work, and festivity. In 1859 a police constable found 2,235 Northern peoples, the bulk of them probably Haida and Tsimshian, living on the outskirts of Victoria.²¹ As annually as they arrived, local burghers demanded their eviction. The language they used to stigmatize Northern peoples invoked the overlapping discourses of morality, criminality, and gender that have often been used to identify and marginalize immigrant groups. “Vagrancy, filth, disease, drunkenness, larceny, maiming, murder, prostitution, in a multiplied form, are the invariable results of an annual visit from the Northern Tribes,” raged the *Colonist*. “We unhesitatingly declare for stopping the immigration.”²²

Those who defended the rights of Northern peoples to visit Victoria — and, by implication, their status as legitimate immigrants and thus colonial citizens — relied on another staple of immigration discourse, namely the argument that the Northern peoples’ presence, however unpalatable, was sweetened by their cheap labour. When settlers demanded that Northern peoples be forcibly evicted, missionary William Duncan argued that “the driving-away policy is contrary to the interests of our Colony, which needs at least the labor of the Indians”. He referred those who doubted the local need for Aboriginal labour to “the kitchens and nurseries, the fields and gardens around Victoria”.²³ Governor James Douglas proposed schemes of moral and social regulation as an alternative to eviction, arguing that Northern peoples’ willingness to serve as a colonial labour force made them valuable to whites. “[I]t is hardly creditable to the civilization of the nineteenth century, that so especial an element of health, as labour of the cheapest description, should be, in a manner, banished from the Colony,” he explained.²⁴

The sweat and toil of the Northern peoples ultimately failed to buy them a

20 Himani Bannerji, *On the Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2000), p. 4.

21 “Our Indian Population”, *Weekly Victoria Gazette*, April 28, 1859.

22 “Invasion of the Northern Indians”, *British Colonist*, April 18, 1861.

23 Wm. Duncan, “The Indian Question”, *British Colonist*, July 4, 1861. On Aboriginal wage labour, see John Lutz, “After the Fur Trade: Aboriginal Wage Labour in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (1992), pp. 69–94.

24 National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Great Britain, Colonial Office Correspondence, Vancouver Island (hereafter CO 305), CO 305/10, mflm B–238, James Douglas to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, May 25, 1859.

legitimate role in settler Victoria. Those who wanted racial segregation of colonial space were bolstered and legitimated by the apocalyptic smallpox epidemic of 1862, when Northern peoples were repeatedly and forcibly evicted from Victoria, a process later condoned and organized by public health legislation.²⁵ A brand of settler imperialism premised on the removal and containment of local peoples ultimately won out over the version that positioned them as subservient labourers for the ruling minority. Historians need to broaden our understanding of migration to account for the plurality and movement of the so-called old world and to make room for the migrations of Aboriginal North America. Doing so complicates our analysis of migration and lays bare the extent to which immigration functioned as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion.

That this process worked to include whites and exclude others is confirmed by the experience of settlers of Asian and African extraction. Douglas — himself an archetypal hybrid figure, hailing from a “creole” mother and a Scottish father and having married the half-Cree Amelia Connolly — encouraged the migration of mainly middle-class African Americans associated with the Pioneer Society of San Francisco in 1858. Other settlers did not share his enthusiasm. Despite the African Americans’ apparent fit with the colony’s putative values of hard work, Protestantism, and respectability, their sizable presence in Victoria was regarded by many white people as a problem. Whether Victoria would replicate or challenge American-style segregation in her churches, theatres, and saloons was a significant item of debate until the black population began to disperse in the mid-1860s.²⁶

It was Chinese immigration that created the most ambivalence among British Columbia’s white commentators. Representations of Chinese men celebrated industriousness and sometimes located them on the colonists’ side of the local imperial divide. The Grand Jury of Cayoosh (later Lillooet) told the Governor in 1860 that Chinese settlers were a benefit to white traders and the government alike. The jury further requested that the state acknowledge the Chinese as settlers, asking that they “afford them every due protection to prevent their being driven away, wither by attacks from Indians or otherwise”.²⁷

More often Chinese men were positioned as undesirable immigrants who would imperil rather than bolster colonialism. The *Cariboo Sentinel* argued

25 See Perry, *On the Edge*, chap. 5.

26 For an argument for black migration to Vancouver Island, see Mary A. Shadd, *A Plea for Emigration; or, Notes of Canada West, in its Moral, Social, and Political Aspect With Suggestions Respecting Mexico, West Indies, and Vancouver’s Island, for the Information of Colored Emigrants* (Detroit: George W. Pattison, 1842), pp. 43–44. On black people in Victoria society, see Irene Genevieve Marie Zaffaroni, “The Great Chain of Being: Racism and Imperialism in Colonial Victoria, 1858–1871” (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1987), chap. 4; Crawford Killian, *Go Do Some Great Thing: The Black Pioneers of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978).

27 NAC, CO 60/8, MG 11, mflm B–83, “Address of the Grand Jury at Cayoosh to Governor Douglas”, in James Douglas to Duke of Newcastle, October 9, 1860.

that Chinese men should not be colonists for a variety of reasons, all indicating their fundamental difference and many invoking explicitly gendered images. The Chinese, the newspaper argued, were “aliens not merely in nationality, but in habits, religion”; they never became “good citizens” or served on juries or fire companies; they never married or settled outside China and were “more apt to create immorality than otherwise”; they dealt “entirely with their own countrymen”; they hoarded their money and evaded taxes; and, lastly, they were, ironically for immigrants, “inimical to immigration”.²⁸ No restrictions were imposed on Chinese immigration, although colonists debated ways — prominent among them being a miner’s licence fee levied on Chinese men alone — designed to regulate their place within settler society.²⁹ Such discussions anticipated the highly organized, pervasive, and vociferous attacks on Chinese people that began later in the nineteenth century and continue to shape contemporary life and politics.³⁰

The role of immigration to colonial British Columbia was thus an explicitly racial one. The “‘bone, muscle, and intellect,’ that is required here”, explained the Victoria press plainly, “differs materially from the Indian or the African. It is Caucasian — Anglo-Saxon bone, muscle, and intellect we want.”³¹ Class, and the politics of respectability that so often went with it, also helped determine who would be included and who excluded. Not all white people were created equal. British Columbia’s colonial promoters did not want convicts, although one, tellingly, was willing to tolerate juvenile offenders as long as they were placed on First Nations settlements.³² When the Colonial Office inquired about the emigration of distressed Lancashire mill operatives, local officials were similarly unreceptive. Douglas replied that “this Colony offers but a poor field for destitute immigrants”, warning that “instead of improving their condition, it is to be feared, that by emigrating in great numbers to this Colony, they would only be involved in a more hopeless state of distress and poverty”.³³ British Columbia’s officials were ultimately as fearful of organized immigration’s class implications — of the shovelling out of paupers — as were others in British North America.

Immigration to this settler colony was an issue of race and class, and also

28 “Our Chinese Population”, *Cariboo Sentinel*, May 16, 1867.

29 See, for an explanation of why they were impracticable, NAC, CO 63/3, mflm B-1489, “Speech of His Honor the Officer Administering the Government at the Opening of the Legislative Council”, *British Columbia Government Gazette*.

30 On this, see Kay Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991); Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man’s Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858–1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989).

31 “Indian vs. White Labor”, *British Colonist*, February 19, 1861.

32 “Convict Labor”, *British Columbian*, January 11, 1865; “Juvenile Offenders — Colonization”, *British Columbian*, May 30, 1869.

33 NAC, CO 305/20, MG 11, mflm B-244, and CO 60/16, MG 11, mflm B-89, James Douglas to the Duke of Newcastle, July 14, 1863.

very much one of gender. British Columbia's colonial failure was linked, in critics' minds, not only to the smallness and diversity of the settler society but also to the failure of increasingly hegemonic gender norms to take root there. British Columbia was home to a small, highly mobile handful of settler men living amongst a large Aboriginal society. This particular demography fostered a rough, vibrant homosocial culture created by and for young men and the widespread practice of white-Aboriginal domestic and conjugal relationships. Immigration was sought as a corrective for both. When promoters called for immigration, they called for a process that would address the society's perceived gendered deficiencies as well as its racial peculiarities.

Three gendered images dominated discussions of immigration. First, the hardy backwoodsman — a steady, hard-working man willing to meet the difficulties of colonial life and permanently settle in British Columbia — shaped discussions of men and migration. The hypothetical hardy backwoodsman was constructed in contrast to the rough gold miners who so pervaded the colony. British Columbia had two major gold rushes — the Fraser River Gold Rush of 1858 and the Cariboo Gold Rush of 1862–1863 — and a host of smaller ones. Waves of young, footloose men disillusioned with the false promises of capitalist, industrial society were attracted by each strike of gold. Prevailing discourse understood these men as wandering, immoral, and anti-social. George Grant, secretary of a surveying party, argued that the gold rushes brought “not an emigration of sober, steady householders, whose aim was to establish homes, and live by their own industry, but of fever-hearted adventurers from all parts of the world, — men without a country and without a home”.³⁴

Miners' inadequacies as colonists became axiomatic in popular colonial discourse. “It must be admitted that a very considerable section of our population is composed of adventurers, who, having been attracted to our shores by our gold, feel little or no interest in the permanent success of the Colony,” wrote the *British Columbian*.³⁵ For British Columbia to fulfil its imperial potential, hardy backwoodsmen would have to replace the wandering miners. In 1859 Douglas told the Colonial Office, “The mining population are proverbially migratory and unsettled in their habits, seldom engaging in any other than their own absorbing pursuits, and therefore, it is he who tills the soil, the industrious farmer, who must clear the forest, bring the land into cultivation, and build up the permanent interests and prosperity of the Colony.”³⁶

The hardy backwoodsman stood in contrast not only to the wandering

34 George M. Grant, *Ocean to Ocean: Sandford Fleming's Expedition Through Canada in 1872* (Toronto: James Campbell & Son, 1873), p. 308. Also see Adele Perry, “Bachelors in the Backwoods: White Men and Homosocial Culture in Up-Country British Columbia, 1858–1871”, in R. W. Sandwell, ed., *Beyond City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998).

35 “Arterial Highways”, *British Columbian*, January 2, 1862.

36 NAC, CO 60/4, MG 11, mflm B–80, James Douglas to Edward Bulwer Lytton, July 11, 1859.

miner, but to another masculine drain on the colonial enterprise, the “croaker”. This term, along with grumbler, was applied to men deemed unable to weather the difficulties of colonial life. Whether an erstwhile son of wealth or an urban loafer, the croaker was flummoxed by the realities of pioneering and proceeded to complain instead of work. Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, a saw-mill owner, magistrate, amateur anthropologist, and promoter of immigration, described the croakers:

[C]ertain persons came into the country who had a strong desire to make a living without taking off their coats — a desire which could not be gratified. The friends of these persons at home sent them money, which they put into silly investments. They rode to the diggings, and road [*sic*] back again. They hung, like mendicants, round the doors of the Government offices. They croaked in the streets, spent their time idly in bar-rooms, and finally disappeared.³⁷

Here, the language of class is put to work in the service of gender and race: the croaker is idle and delicate, bearing the mark of both femininity and bourgeois laxity. The local press argued a similar position. Some settlers, one paper argued, “only remain to croak and whine for a season, and eventually, like sickly lambs or untimely fruit, unequal to the task of combatting [*sic*] and overcoming the hardships and privations incident to all new countries, drop off to their native land”.³⁸ The test of manliness these “sickly lambs” fail is thus generated by the specificities of the colonial context.

This was a test that the hardy backwoodsman passed. Just as they repelled the weak, colonies were thought to attract the most manly of British men who stood in contrast not only to their less rugged fellows, but to the indigenous men they alternately feminized or feared.³⁹ “As a rule,” commented the local press, “it is the most energetic, hardy, manly, self reliant of her sons who first people her Colonies.”⁴⁰ Ideal male immigrants were hard-working, disciplined, and predisposed to rural life. The new colony, argued a supporter in 1860, “does not want the idle, the profligate, and sickly”.⁴¹ The hardy backwoodsman embraced diligent labour, especially agricultural labour, just as the gold miner rejected it. His single state meant that he was able to devote himself fully to labour, to define himself as an entirely economic being. One much-reprinted emigration guide advised, “A family is a burden till a man is established.”⁴²

37 Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, *British Columbia: Information for Emigrants* (London: Agent General for the Province, 1873), p. 4.

38 “The Soil of British Columbia”, *British Columbian*, February 3, 1863.

39 On masculinity and colonization, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders’ Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters on the Plateau, 1807–1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

40 “The Colonial Policy of Great Britain”, *British Colonist*, May 2, 1863.

41 “Testimonial to D. G. F. MacDonald, Esq., C.E.”, *Weekly Victoria Gazette*, January 30, 1860.

42 A Returned Digger, *The Newly Discovered Gold Fields*, p. 8.

The discourse of the hardy backwoodsman both reflected and masked single men's economic significance to a colony materially tied to resource extraction. Despite the significance of Aboriginal people to British Columbia's wage-labour force, employers persisted in seeking non-Native miners and farmers and believed, in keeping with the Anglo-American world, that only men could fulfil these roles. That a work force of single men was literally reproduced elsewhere spared the colony the costs of maintaining and creating labour in the next generation.⁴³ Labour-force politics reinforced the prevailing gendered patterns of immigration and ensured that single men formed the overwhelming majority of independent immigrants. They also comprised a surprising percentage of assisted ones. Between 1849 and 1852 the HBC imported over 400 people, 250 of whom were adult men mainly destined to labour on Island farms.⁴⁴ The search for hardy backwoodsmen persisted throughout the colonial period. A proposed 1864 Vancouver Island scheme put "farm labourers" alongside "unmarried female domestic servants" and "married couples" as people whose passages should be subsidized.⁴⁵

Yet single men, hardy or otherwise, constituted an ambivalent force for colonial promoters. Sproat thought that their tendency to wander made them a waste of public funds.⁴⁶ More fundamentally, imperial regimes were consistently troubled by the large numbers of working-class men assigned responsibility for practically enforcing them.⁴⁷ White soldiers, miners, and farmers frequently failed to meet standards of racial distance and superiority set by imperial masters. Racial concerns about young, footloose men in colonial contexts were also gendered concerns. Colonial promoters were disturbed by how regularly white men formed relationships and families with local women. Settler men who opted to remain single were also a worry. Increasingly in the mid-nineteenth century the domestic family was constructed as a necessary component of adult life. To be rendered a responsible colonial citizen who was appropriately distanced from local peoples, the hardy backwoodsman needed a wholesome woman.

The scarcity of white women in British Columbia became, along with the smallness of the settler population, axiomatic for the colony's condition. As I have argued elsewhere, white women were constructed as "fair ones of a

43 This is dealt with, to some extent, in Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

Muszynski, however, discusses the economics of the single male immigrant as unique to Chinese men, when in fact most non-Natives lacked co-resident families.

44 University of British Columbia Library (hereafter UBCL), CO 305/3, mflm R288, A. Colville to John Packington, November 24, 1852, p. 1.

45 British Library, BS 72/1, "England, Emigration Commissioners", *Colonization Circular*, no. 25, 1866 (London, Groombridge and Sons), p. 8.

46 BCA, Add Mss 257, file 3, Gilbert Malcolm Sproat to Lieutenant Governor, "Memo re European Immigration into B.C.", November 3, 1871.

47 See, for instance, Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1783–1905* (London: Werdenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), chap. 5.

purier caste”⁴⁸ with three related roles in the local colonial project. White women would first compel white men to reject the rough homosocial culture of the backwoods in favour of normative standards of masculinity, respectability, and permanence. “Women! women! women! are the great want,” wrote aristocrat Harry Verney from London. “The normal state is man with a help meet for him, and if something is not soon done, either by the Imperial or Colonial Government, or by some philanthropists at home, I know not what will become of us. Poor man goes sadly down hill if he remains long without the supporting influence of women.”⁴⁹ White women were considered to be men’s collective better half, as the only force capable of ensuring their proper behaviour. Such a discourse accorded them a role, albeit a limited one, as agents in both imperialism and immigration.

White women would secondly address shortages in the local labour market and relieve overpopulation in Britain. That the supposed need for domestic servants and wives in British Columbia neatly matched fears of “surplus women” in Britain gave calls for female immigration a special efficacy. A female immigration to British Columbia, wrote one observer, “would be as great a boon to the colony as I am sure it would be to many of the underpaid, under-fed, and over-worked women who drag out a weary existence in the dismal back streets and alleys of the metropolis”.⁵⁰ Immigration was thus invoked as a mechanism for simultaneously resolving the different crises of gender that troubled the metropole and the periphery.

White women’s third service to the colonial project was the explicitly racial one of discouraging mixed-race sexual, domestic, and conjugal relationships. As white men’s “natural” objects of desire, they would draw men away from the temptations of Aboriginal women and, in doing so, shore up the colonial project as a whole. “That many of the native women are cleanly, industrious, and faithful, we do not pretend to deny,” wrote New Westminster’s *Mainland Guardian*, “but, we regret to to [*sic*] say, they are the exceptions. With the increase of our white female population, we look for new life in our agricultural pursuits and we hope that every inducement will be offered to healthy industrious women, who are desirous of finding good husbands and comfortable homes, in this province, to come out to us.”⁵¹ This discourse was premised on the construction of white women as uplifting and on the representation of First Nations women as base and threatening that circulated throughout colonial British Columbia.

In these ways, the discourse of wholesome women emphasized the political utility of ordinary, working-class women above those who held an official

48 One of the Disappointed, untitled piece in the *British Columbian*, June 7, 1862; Adele Perry, “‘Fair Ones of a Purer Caste’: White Women and Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia”, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Fall 1997), pp. 501–524.

49 “Sir Harry Verney Upon British Columbia”, *British Columbian*, August 20, 1862.

50 A. D. G., “British Columbia: To the Editor of the Times”, *London Times*, January 1, 1862.

51 “Immigration”, *Mainland Guardian*, February 9, 1871.

role in the colonial project like missionaries' or officials' wives. Their contribution lay not in independent action, but rather in their ability to transform plebeian men. Such a discourse imbued women migrants with an agency less often acknowledged in historiography. At any rate, the sheer ideological weight of the conviction that a society lacking white women could not be a moral or even adequate one provided the motivation necessary to orchestrate immigration schemes in 1862, 1863, and 1870. Organized as joint efforts of the local elite, missionaries, and British feminists, these immigration campaigns are remembered in popular lore as the "brideships", as colony- (and, later, nation-) building enterprises. Together, the *Tynemouth*, *Robert Lowe*, and *Alpha* carried roughly a hundred women, largely teenagers from working-class and sometimes indigent backgrounds. They were putatively destined to be domestic servants, but popular discourse ensured that their real destiny lay in the marriage market. As wives of miners and farmers, colonial promoters hoped, these wholesome women would render British Columbia's fragile colonial project a stable one.⁵²

The young working-class women produced by these female immigration schemes ultimately unsettled the colonial project rather than securing it. Instead of behaving as beacons of imperial rectitude, the immigrants acted like the young, working-class women that they were. Colonial promoters were deeply disappointed. By the close of the colonial period, their faith in the political usefulness of white female migration was profoundly shaken. In 1872 Sproat looked back on his experience with three separate female immigration efforts, commenting, "How to send single women to Victoria safely across the continent, and through San Francisco, is a problem which I cheerfully hand over for solution to those who are more experienced in the management of that sex than I am."⁵³ The fundamental problem with white female migration, he argued, was that *single* women were necessarily a moral problem. "The very delicate and difficult question of introducing single unmarried women into British Columbia might be partly solved by sending out a few, in charge of the heads of families — the women being from the same district as the families, and thus having an addition[al] guard for their self-respect," he argued.⁵⁴

Wholesome women, much like hardy backwoodsmen, challenged the colonial project at the same time as they bolstered it. The enthusiasm for white female migration was always tempered and eventually overwhelmed by the conviction that single women, like men, were a dangerous population that could only be properly contained by families. After the disasters of the

52 See Perry, *On the Edge*, chaps. 6–7, for an analysis of female immigration to British Columbia.

53 BCA, GR 419, box 10, file 1872/1, British Columbia, Attorney General, "Documents", G. M. S., "Memorandum on Immigration, Oct 1972", pp. 95–96.

54 BCA, GR 419, box 10, file 1872/1, "Attorney General Documents", G. M. Sproat, "Memorandum of a few Suggestions for opening the business of emigration to British Columbia, referred to as Memo C, in a letter of G. M. Sproat to the Honourable the Provincial Secretary, dated 29th August 1972", pp. 4–5.

assisted female migration efforts of 1862 and 1863, the “steady family” gained a special cachet in pro-immigration discourse that would only increase after the 20 servant-women transported on the *Alpha* in 1870 proved, like their predecessors, a disappointment to those who so sought their importation. The Female Immigration Board that oversaw this scheme recommended that the colonial government abandon the project of female immigration and shift its monies and attentions to the “assisted passages of Families, and relatives of Farmers, Mechanics, and others settled in this Colony”.⁵⁵ In pledging their support for the importation of families, and not single women, members of the board endorsed the stable family as the best kind of immigration for the colony.

They were not alone in suggesting that same-race domestic families would be the best base for a settler society and thus the best immigrants. Families simultaneously constrained young women and encouraged men to be permanent and diligent settlers. The *Victoria Press* argued, “The very class which we want above all others is the married agriculturist — the man whose social circumstances will bring him to the soil, and make him a permanent as well as productive inhabitant.”⁵⁶ Sproat agreed, writing that “the married farmer with modest means, and accustomed to work in the fields, is the best kind of immigrant for British Columbia”.⁵⁷ The HBC supported family migration when it imported 36 married colliers to work Nanaimo’s coalfields.⁵⁸ That the Colonial Office shared this familial ideal is suggested by its willingness to pay for the passage of the wives and families of the Royal Engineers, the soldier-settlers sent to enforce British claims to the mainland.⁵⁹ On rare occasions the colonial government subsidized the migration of individual families,⁶⁰ but more often used land law to buttress domestic family formation. In Vancouver Island, nuclear family formation was encouraged by laws that gave white men an additional 50 acres of free land if they were married and 10 more acres for each child under the age of 10.⁶¹

55 BCA, GR 1372, mflm B-1314, file 955/23, “Colonial Correspondence”, Wm. Pearse, John Robson, W. J. MacDonald to Colonial Secretary, July 12, 1870; E. G. A., “The Immigration Board”, *British Colonist*, June 24, 1870.

56 “The Overland Route”, *Victoria Press*, March 16, 1862.

57 BCA, GR 419, box 10, file 1872/1, British Columbia, “Papers Related to Immigration, 1972”, G. M. S., “Memorandum on Immigration, Oct 1872”.

58 BCA, Add mss E/B/M91A, Andrew Muir, “Private Diary”, November 9, 1848 – August 5, 1850 [transcript]; Add Mss A/C/20.1/N15, James Douglas — Joseph William McKay, “Nanaimo Correspondence, August 1852 – September 1853” [transcript].

59 NAC, MG 11, CO 60/9, mflm B-83, G. C. Lewis to James Douglas, August 11, 1860, draft reply, in James Douglas to the Duke of Newcastle, May 12, 1860.

60 See, for instance, James E. Hendrickson, ed., *Journals of the Colonial Legislatures of the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, 1851–1871*, vol. 1: *Journals of the Council, Executive Council, and Legislative Council of Vancouver Island, 1851–1866* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1980), pp. 133–134.

61 “The New Land Proclamation for Vancouver Island”, *British Colonist*, March 8, 1861; “Salt Spring Island”, *Victoria Press*, November 10, 1861; Macfie, *Vancouver Island and British Columbia*, p. 205.

The overlap between immigration discourse and immigration practice was usually indirect. These demands for hardy backwoodsmen, wholesome women, and steady families were rarely parlayed into concrete action. Immigration was what colonial pundits always wanted and never got. In referring to immigrants as “mythical beings”, politician John Sebastian Helmcken astutely recognized the somewhat hypnotic role immigration played in colonial discourse.⁶² The mythic rather than actual character of immigration to colonial British Columbia was not for lack of heated rhetoric or wild scheming. Colonial promoters held mass meetings, struck committees, wrote passionate letters, and developed plans for using immigration to secure their imperial fortunes.⁶³ With the exception of the 20 servant women carried on the *Alpha* in 1870, however, the colonial government’s immigration efforts were largely confined to the cheap and discursive: they subsidized mail, explored territory, printed essays, and hired lecturers to regale the masses of various urban centres. In 1861, for instance, British Columbia created an exhibit for the World’s Fair designed to prove to “struggling, hard worked Englishmen how easily a livelihood may be earned here”.⁶⁴

The modesty of these efforts deeply disappointed those who considered immigration key to imperial success. They complained bitterly about the local government’s apparent inability to organize immigration. In 1864 the mainland press commented that, excepting “fifty pounds paid to a parson at Lillooet for an Essay”, the colony had “not yet expended a single dollar” on immigration.⁶⁵ Five years later, the same newspaper despaired that there was not one person responsible for immigration “[a]mongst the army of officials who absorb the revenue of the Colony”.⁶⁶

If British Columbia’s local government was unable, its imperial masters were unwilling. The Colonial Office argued that, given its location, British Columbia could only reasonably expect emigrants from the Australasian colonies, not from Britain, and repeatedly announced that it had no intention of ever assisting emigration to the colony.⁶⁷ When pestered to subsidize steam communication, Colonial Office staff made it clear that they lacked the

62 “Legislative Council”, *British Colonist*, February 4, 1869.

63 See examples in Hendrickson, ed., *Journals of the Colonial Legislatures*, vol. 2: *Journals of the House of Assembly, Vancouver Island, 1856–1863*, vol. 3: *Journals of the House of Assembly, Vancouver Island, 1863–1866*, and vol. 4: *Journals of the Executive Council, 1864–1871, and of the Legislative Council, 1864–1866, of British Columbia*.

64 “Industrial Exhibition Circular”, *British Columbian*, May 30, 1861.

65 “Emigration”, *British Columbian*, June 15, 1864.

66 “What Shall We Do With Them?”, *British Columbian*, June 4, 1869.

67 NAC, MG 11, CO 60/5, mflm B–81, T. W. C. Murdoch and Frederic Rogers to Herman Merivale, April 28, 1859; mflm 69.303, Great Britain, House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers, vol. 38 (1863), no. 430, “Emigration: Number of Emigrants who left the United Kingdom for the *United States*, *British North America*, the several colonies of *Australasia*, *South Africa*, and other Places respectively; distinguishing, as far as practicable, the Native Country of the Emigrants, 1860–1863”, mflm 69.303, p. 7.

requisite political will. “When this Country was supposed to be overpeopled, there was the appearance of a domestic object in schemes for using the proceeds of English taxes to encourage emigration. But that state of things has long ceased to exist,” one noted.⁶⁸ Domestic issues like overpopulation fuelled the various assisted emigration schemes of the 1830s and 1840s and would again motivate major emigration schemes in the *fin de siècle*. These efforts ground to a near halt when popular economic fortunes bettered and events like New Zealand’s Maori Wars and the Indian Rebellion of 1857 challenged British faith in the imperial project.

Whether in London, Victoria, or New Westminster, many doubted British Columbia’s ability to attract settlers, but only a few challenged its need for a large white population. In 1861 the *Victoria Press* argued that mass immigration was an impractical goal cooked up by those unaccustomed to colonial labour, race politics, and labour relations. “It may suit a number of lackadaisical beings who are entirely unfitted for Colonial, or in fact any practical useful life, to be enabled to obtain, by a superabundant supply of immigrants, civilized *servants* at the same price they now pay for Indians,” the press wrote.⁶⁹ Yet those who questioned the merits or feasibility of mass white immigration never captured the mainstream of public discourse. Ultimately, British Columbia’s apparent inability to attract white and especially British immigrants served not as a reason for challenging the viability of colonialism, but rather as a rationale for the colony’s entry into Canadian confederation.⁷⁰ If British Columbia could not use immigration to become a stable settler colony in its own right, it would try to do so as a Canadian province. That British Columbia finally registered a white majority in the first census taken after confederation suggests that this strategy was effective. With continuing depopulation of First Nations and the arrival of the transcontinental railroad in 1886 — that tangible technology of both capital and nation and conveyor of migrants *par excellence* — British Columbia would begin to look increasingly like a textbook white settler colony, but it would continue to be haunted by a spectre of hybridity that was, in the final analysis, more nurtured by immigration than vanquished by it.

British Columbia’s colonial pundits spilled much ink on the topic of immigration. They did so because immigration was central to their effort to transform British Columbia into a white settler colony. For them, immigration was a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, one that would marginalize First Nations people, minimize non-white settlers, and nurture white migration. It would do so in explicitly gendered ways that reflected the importance of gender to the construction of a settler society. In newspapers,

68 NAC, MG 11, CO 60/14, mflm B-87, H. M. [Herman Merivale], April 8, note *en verso* in T. W. C. Murdoch to Frederic Rogers, March 31, 1862.

69 “The Immigration Bubble”, *Victoria Press*, July 27, 1861.

70 BCA, GR 1486, CO 60/29, mflm B-1440, Frederick Seymour to Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, September 24, 1867.

government reports, and colonial circles, they called for the immigration of white, preferably British immigrants who would fit into three gendered models: the hardy backwoodsman, the wholesome woman, and the steady family. This discourse reflected a minority's aspirations rather than a society's social experience. However constant and blustery the pro-immigration discourse, British Columbia's settler society would continue to be small, dominated by men, and relatively diverse until the Canadian Pacific Railroad integrated the province into more continental patterns of demography and settlement. Immigration was indeed a tool for negotiating exclusions and inclusions, but not always in predictable ways.