

Context:

Nanaimo, Gabriola, history

Citations:

Jean Barman, Lost Nanaimo—taking back our past, *SHALE* 8, pp.16–26, June 2004.

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References:

Date posted:

May 14, 2014.

Lost Nanaimo—taking back our past

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This is an adapted version of a talk presented to the BC Historical Federation Annual Conference in Nanaimo in May 2004 and it is reproduced here with the kind permission of the conference host, the Nanaimo Historical Society.

In my general history of British Columbia, written over ten years ago now, I noted briefly the Hudson's Bay Company's (HBC's) relocation of their coal mining operations from Fort Rupert at the north end of Vancouver Island to Nanaimo in November 1852.¹ I then went on to populate Nanaimo with the miners remaining from the failed Fort Rupert enterprise, and with "some two dozen others and their families brought out from England" two years later on the *Princess Royal*.

There are twenty or so subsequent references to Nanaimo in my book, all of which relate to the mining economy, and to the coalminers' struggle for better working conditions. This is of course a topic that is very pertinent to the labour relations and political climate in British Columbia today. What I had done was to construct Nanaimo's history from a modern perspective.

What I have since come to realize, and what I want to explore here, is that the danger in this approach is that we may lose some aspects of the past, simply because they do not accord with our present-day interests. I am increasingly convinced that we need to take back the past as it was, not as we would have it be. We need to learn to drive in two

directions. Most often we use our present-day understandings as our vehicle for moving back in time. Far less often do we head in the other direction by taking the past on its own terms. When we do so, we are likely to encounter a lot of diversions and perhaps some dead ends. In other words, while the present leads rather easily into the past, or rather into the particular past toward which we choose to head, going from the "actual" past to the present is a far more difficult undertaking

When we dare to take back the past on its own terms, we may well discover, in the much repeated opening lines of British writer Lesley P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, published in 1953, that "the past is a foreign country, they do things differently [there]."

The history of Nanaimo, or for that matter of any other community in British Columbia, is, I suspect, not so neat and tidy as we would like, once we examine it as it was rather than as we would have it be. Looked at in this light, there are, I think, two important aspects of Nanaimo's early history that may have faded from view—an *excess of tradition* and the *erasure of diversity*.

By an excess of tradition, I mean that the societal values the *Princess Royal* families brought with them from England were so firmly held that they became, over time, more of a hindrance than a help to their

¹ Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, rev. ed., University of Toronto Press, p.55, 1995.

making their way in the new world. By erasure of diversity, I mean that difference, particularly racial difference, was much more present in Nanaimo than the blip at the beginning it is usually made out to be.

Each of these two propositions—an excess of tradition and the erasure of diversity—may sound contentious, but please bear with me as I try to make my case.

Early Nanaimo

Early Nanaimo is usually conceived, as I summarized in *The West beyond the West*, as having two stages. First the HBC; then the *Princess Royal*. As Richard Mackie reminds us in his book, *Trading beyond the Mountains*, by the middle of the century the HBC had long since diversified away from furs—they were “beyond the mere traffic in peltries.”²

The HBC began mining coal at Fort Rupert in 1849 to supply Royal Navy ships plying the Pacific coast. Three years later, mining operations were moved to Nanaimo for a variety of reasons including the higher quality of coal to be found there; disputes with the northern Natives over who actually owned the coal; and the HBC’s inexperienced and inept management of their first coal mining venture.

It is generally accepted that the people of Nanaimo were from many different backgrounds up until the arrival of the miners and their families on the *Princess Royal* in November 1854. Aboriginal people played a role in both the discovery of the coal and its extraction in the early days. The first school teacher, young Charles Bayley, recorded how, on his arrival in 1853, “the population of Nanaimo or

Colville Town as it was named by the H.B.Co. was about one hundred and twenty-five composed of Whites, French Canadians, Iroquois, Kanakas [Hawaiians], and half Breeds, a motley crowd.”³

In this view of the past, written as we perhaps would like to see it unfold from the perspective of the present day, the Nanaimo Bayley evoked was already giving way to another way of life on the model we associate with settler societies. The only element of diversity generally recognized as continuing was Chinese miners. Discriminatory attitudes toward them are well known, as is their material legacy in Nanaimo’s Chinatowns.

What was celebrated from Nanaimo’s first years, as is still proclaimed on the Nanaimo Museum website, was the “birth of the first white girl, Margaret” to the McGregors on March 16, 1853, and then “the first white boy born in Nanaimo,” Alexander Dunsmuir, shortly after on June 2.⁴ These first white children came from among the families who had arrived on earlier vessels bringing white women, as well as men, to this distant corner of North America.

The excess of tradition

The seminal moment for early Nanaimo is most often considered to be the arrival in November 1854 of the *Princess Royal*. It was part of the agreement made in 1849 between the HBC and the British government that, in return for proprietary rights to Vancouver Island, the HBC would undertake to establish a settlement of resident colonists. It was also in the interests of the company to promote long-

² Vancouver: University of British Columbia (UBC) Press, 1997.

³ Charles Bayley, *Early Life on Vancouver Island*, 6–7, typescript in BC Archives (BCA), E/B/B34.2.

⁴ ndmuseum@nanaimo.museum.bc.ca

term stability. Accordingly, the HBC recruited intact mining families in Britain. Twenty-three men, twenty of them with wives and over half with children, came on the *Princess Royal* in 1854 to become, in the words of early British Columbia's leading chroniclers G.P.V. and Helen B. Akrigg, "the true founders of Nanaimo".⁵ While some of the arrivals briefly chased other opportunities, in particular the riches to be had from gold, none of them returned home. As one early resident enthused, "not one of the passengers who came out on the *Princess Royal*, and who were entitled to a return passage, in terms of their engagement, embraced the opportunity to go back."⁶

Rather, the *Princess Royal* contingent put their backs to the task. Faced with Charles Bayley's "motley crowd," they had to scramble for authority, and perhaps for that reason may have scrambled doubly hard to assert a way of life that was familiar to them from their lives in England. As John Belshaw argues in his recent book on Vancouver Island coalfields, "the miners' identity as miners went beyond the business of work and was something that the miners themselves were engaged in fashioning."⁷ The priority given to recruiting mining families of good character almost ensured that they would seek to retain familiar ways. They followed these ways so fully in their new setting that tradition became a trap.

An excess of tradition had very real consequences for the second and subsequent generations. Thanks to Peggy Nicholls' meticulous research on the *Princess Royal* families, it is possible to get a fairly good sense of their priorities for their offspring.⁸ It was assumed daughters would marry young, and that sons would go to work even younger.

The forty-two daughters of the first generation who can be followed into marriage in the Nanaimo area wed between 12 and 27 years of age. Some of the latter were held back by virtue of having, as said about one of them, "to sew and to help care for the seven babies that followed her".⁹ Even so, seven out of every ten daughters were wed by the time they were 18 years old.

Sons followed their fathers into the pits. While I do not have overall data, Peggy Nicholls' examples argue that they did so at an early age, much as they would have in England had they stayed there. The Ganner family arrived with two sons, to quote from the correspondence prior to their departure, "aged respectively abt. 13 and 11 [who] have worked in the mines for some two or three years".¹⁰ Similarly, 10-year-old John Hawkes went to work underground in 1863, coupling coal cars to be hauled by mules to the sorting bins.¹¹ His friend, John Meakin, was given the same task a year later on

⁵ G.P.V. Akrigg and Helen B. Akrigg, *British Columbia Chronicle 1847–1871*, vol. 2, p.78, Discovery Press, 1977. I am grateful to Barrie Humphrey for alerting me to this reference.

⁶ Mark Bate, *Closing Chapters of History of Nanaimo*, Nanaimo Free Press (NFP), 18 May 1907.

⁷ John Belshaw, *Colonization and Community: The Vancouver Island Coalfield and the Making of the British Columbian Working Class*, McGill-Queen's University Press, p.212, 2002.

⁸ Peggy Nicholls, *From the Black Country to Nanaimo 1854*, 5 volumes, Nanaimo Historical Society, 1991–95.

⁹ Amanda Meakin in Nicholls, *From the Black Country...*, 5, 1995.

¹⁰ Ganner family in Nicholls, *From the Black Country...*, 4, 1994.

¹¹ John Hawkes in Nicholls, *From the Black Country...*, 3, 1993.

reaching the age of 11,¹² as was George Sage in 1865 at the age of 10.¹³

Sam Thompson, who went to work in 1868, may have begun at the even younger age of 9 because his first job was to load coal cars for his father. Unlike the others, who earned 75¢ for an eight-hour day, Sam recalled receiving only board and pocket money.¹⁴ Because another *Princess Royal* son, George Bevilockway, was considered a particularly good student, his entry into the mines was delayed until the age of 14 in 1871. He confirmed the worth of his additional schooling by soon becoming an assistant manager.¹⁵

If sons went to work young, they did not necessarily immediately follow their sisters into marriage. They tended to wait awhile. The twenty-five sons who can be traced from the *Princess Royal* contingent wed between 20 and 37 years of age. Only half of them were married by their mid-20s.

Once ingrained, the force of tradition was hard to break in Nanaimo. Attitudes toward schooling make the case. The new province of British Columbia created in 1871 was determined to give children equality of opportunity by making education free and non-denominational. Viewed from the perspective of the present day, it seems almost taken for granted that families would make use of the opportunity. When we take

the past seriously, on its own terms, we quickly discover that this was not the case, certainly not in a community like Nanaimo bound to the traditions whence families came. The trap that tradition became precluded Nanaimo offspring from taking advantage of a public good intended to serve all young British Columbians.

Nanaimo families' attitudes were evident from early on. The first head of education in the province, John Robson, noted how on the day he visited the Nanaimo school in 1872, just 11 boys and 16 girls were present whereas the community likely contained about 175 children of school age. Numbers gradually rose, but twice as fast for girls, and Robson noted somewhat wryly two years later how "there are probably as many boys as girls in the town."¹⁶

The adherence to tradition gave Nanaimo children little motivation either to go to school or to behave while there. Robson's report from the mid-1870s read: "When the school was visited, the senior classes in both departments were little advanced in their studies. The boys were noisy and disorderly."¹⁷ Robson was well aware of the reason. "A disposition on the part of many parents to send their children into 'the pit' at an early age is exercising a prejudicial influence on the rising generation by depriving them of the advantages of free school education."¹⁸

Cases of "truancy" were especially high in Nanaimo. In 1880-81, for example, 23 cases were reported in the provincial capital of Victoria among 310 enrolled boys, whereas Nanaimo recorded 70 cases among 148

¹² John Meakin in Nicholls, *From the Black Country...*, 5, 1995.

¹³ George Sage in Nicholls, *From the Black Country...*, 4, 1994.

¹⁴ Samuel Thompson in Pearl C. Reynolds, *60-Year-Old Photograph Awakens Memories of Early Nanaimo*, Vancouver Sun, 25, Magazine, March 25 1944.

¹⁵ George Bevilockway in Nicholls, *From the Black Country...*, 3, 1993.

¹⁶ Department of Education (DoEd.), Annual Report 1874: 17.

¹⁷ DoEd., Annual Report 1876: 94.

¹⁸ DoEd., Annual Report 1876: 94.

boys.¹⁹ The relative proportions were one for every sixteen boys in Victoria; one for every two boys in Nanaimo.

In 1876, written examinations were held for admission into the new public high school established in Victoria, the first in the province. Whereas 54 out of 70 Victoria students who took the exam passed, not one of the 26 who sat for it in Nanaimo did so. The average score was 277 in Victoria, 139 in the other principal city of New Westminster, just 53 in Nanaimo.²⁰ A year later no one from Nanaimo even bothered to sit the high-school entrance examination.

The head of the provincial system again despaired: “It is a difficult matter to raise and maintain a high standard of attainment in the senior division [of the elementary school in Nanaimo] in consequence of pupils being withdrawn from school at a much earlier age than they ought to be. Parents should not under any consideration send their children into the mines, or give them employment above ground, till the before mentioned examination has been creditably passed.²¹ Over time, some Nanaimo boys did sit for the exam, but very rarely did the few who passed then bother to go on to high school.²²

In 1886, a high school finally opened in Nanaimo itself. Attitudes toward it demonstrate the full extent to which the traditions put in place by the first generation still held firm. Just twelve pupils enrolled. The problem lay, school authorities explained, in many being “engaged in pursuits by which they were enabled to

support themselves or assist their parents.”²³ In the late 1880s, growing racism led to Chinese miners being prohibited from working underground. The school inspector lamented the consequence. “Owing to the exclusion of Chinese from the mines, a great many of our boys left school to fill their places, and consequently deprived us of some of our best material.”²⁴ The high school by this time contained 9 boys and 16 girls, whereas Nanaimo's elementary schools enrolled 430 children.

The only change came from the outside in the form of provincial regulations raising the entry age for mining. The earliest restricted boys under 14 from working underground except with special ministerial permission. Only after the turn of the century were boys under 14 completely banned from the pits. Even then they could still do clerical work above ground. A school official admonished Nanaimo parents at length in 1893: “The great inducements held out to boys of thirteen to fifteen years of age to work in the coal mines naturally draws a large number from the school every year, and place the senior divisions at a great disadvantage. You will notice, by the list of pupils, quite a number of the boys of the age above mentioned have gone to work, thus carrying off the material that should go to the High School.”²⁵

This excess of tradition had unintended consequences. By the time Nanaimo parents realized the value of schooling, the damage was done from the perspective of provincial authorities. Helen Brown has written about the enormous efforts made in Nanaimo during the 1890s to improve the quality of

¹⁹ DoEd., Annual Report 1881: 270-71.

²⁰ DoEd., Annual Report 1876: 128.

²¹ DoEd., Annual Report 1877: 19.

²² DoEd., Annual Report 1885: 313.

²³ DoEd., Annual Report 1886: 144-45.

²⁴ DoEd., Annual Report 1888: 199.

²⁵ DoEd., Annual Report 1893: 542.

schooling, but by then no one much was listening.²⁶ Provincial officials had despaired, among the consequences being large class size. Nanaimo's growth in population exacerbated the situation.

Fifty, sixty, and more pupils were crammed into a single classroom. The only solution, the board decided in 1899, lay in having "one half of these divisions attend school in the morning and one half in the afternoon."²⁷ Near the end of the year, sixty elementary children were moved into the high school building, which was still being underused.²⁸ By this time some secondary education had become the norm in urban areas of British Columbia, but not in Nanaimo.

Peggy Nicholls suggests, astutely, that one of the factors eventually moderating the situation would be local teachers from Nanaimo, who understood the familial and job pressures being put on students.²⁹

The erasure of diversity

Not only an excess of tradition, but the erasure of diversity were fundamental aspects of early Nanaimo's history.

Virtually all of the men and women who put themselves in charge of settler society on Vancouver Island and across British Columbia shared similar attitudes toward diversity. Seeing themselves as white, and

on that basis inherently superior, they looked down on persons with darker skin tones. Aboriginal people were to be disparaged, all others who were perceived as less white belittled. If not physically removed, they were at the least to be erased from view.

This perspective comes through loud and clear in the recollections of one of Nanaimo's most prominent early residents, Mark Bate, who arrived in 1857 at the age of 20 on a subsequent voyage of the *Princess Royal*. Within a dozen years Bate was manager of the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company, which in 1862 bought out the Hudson's Bay Company. As well as running the company employing most Nanaimo residents, Bate was mayor for much of the time between 1876 and the end of the century. His reminiscences, published in 1907, provide one of the most graphic portraits to survive of early Nanaimo. They give us unusual insight into how the dominant view of its history was constructed by the men who had put themselves in charge.

Mark Bate's perspective on diversity has two components. The first is his determination to reduce the perceived contribution of the HBC employees who had built Nanaimo, quite literally, into something of little consequence. Exemplary is his view of Narcisse Montigny, an HBC employee who arrived in Nanaimo in 1854 or 1855. According to Bate, "Montigny was an Axeman who supplied the Poles for House building, etc. etc. He was an uncouth, gruff, customer, who used to have lively times with the Iroquois, and others of his Tillicums. He left Nanaimo in 1858 for Fort Hope."³⁰ Bate's very visible sigh of

²⁶ Helen Brown, *Binaries, Boundaries, and Hierarchies: The Special Relations of City Schooling in Nanaimo, British Columbia*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, UBC, 1999.

²⁷ Nanaimo School Board, Minutes, meeting of 2 September 1899, also 2 December 1899, Nanaimo Archives (NA).

²⁸ Nanaimo School Board, Minutes, meeting of 28 December 1899, NA.

²⁹ Peggy Nicholls, conversation with the author, 7 May 2004.

³⁰ Mark Bate, *The Men Who Helped to Build Nanaimo*, NFP, 26 March 1907.

relief that such persons departed and could thereby be erased from Nanaimo's history is even more evident in his description of three Iroquois he names as Lazaar Oreasta, Tomo Sakiowatti, and Louis Oteekorie who, in his words, "left Nanaimo prior to the termination of the Hudson's Bay Company's regime."³¹ While acknowledging the contribution of the trio, and also of their fellow Iroquois Tomo Aumtony to city building, just as he did with

French Canadians, he emphasizes how Sakiowatti, for instance, was "a rather wild, quarrelsome fellow" who "was often mixed up with drunken carousals and brawls."³²

Mark Bate took great pride how, in the first census taken in February 1857, all of the 132 persons counted as living in Nanaimo were English, Scotch, and Irish, "excepting" 5 Iroquois, 2 each French Canadians and Hawaiians, and 1 Norwegian.³³

The second linked component of Bate's erasure of diversity relates to his attitude toward Aboriginal people. Bate sharply differentiated between men and women among the "250 S'nenymos"³⁴ who, according to his calculations, lived in Nanaimo in the 1850s.

Aboriginal women Bate considered useful to city building, noting, for instance, how "a

number of Indian women were employed carrying clay" to build the dam running the first sawmill.³⁵ Bate was especially laudatory in his description of early work processes. "Coal was conveyed in canoes for shipment...thrown into a lighter made fast alongside a vessel, thence hoisted or shoveled on board. In this work of conveyance, the Indian women, as well as the men were engaged—the former, as a rule, earning the most wages, or goods."³⁶

But Bate's recognition of Indian women went only so far. As with his need to erase the HBC link, he was determined to hide from view another aspect of Nanaimo's early history. A long time gender imbalance in the newcomer population across British Columbia encouraged relationships between Aboriginal women and newcomer men. The 1857 census of Nanaimo counted 58 males, 21 females, and 54 children. There were, in other words, 2 ½ men in the newcomer population for every woman.³⁷ The situation did not much change. In 1870 there were 395 newcomer men compared to 206 women, or twice as many men as women.³⁸ Through the end of the nineteenth century British Columbia as a whole counted two to three newcomer men for every newcomer woman.

Mark Bate, like most of his contemporaries, would have none of this. The unions which numerous men, in Nanaimo as elsewhere, formed with Aboriginal women simply did not exist, from his perspective. In his published recollections, Bate gave wives to

³¹ Mark Bate, *The Men Who...*, 1907.

³² Mark Bate, *The Men Who...*, 1907. To be fair to Bate, many of his observations echoed those of HBC officials, as caught in their correspondence and journals. Bate had possession of the Nanaimo journal at the time he penned his reminiscence. See Foreward to *Nanaimo Journal, August 1855–March 1857*, BCA, A/C/20.1/N15.2; and *Nanaimo Correspondence, 1852–53*, BCA, A/C/20.1/N15.

³³ Mark Bate, *Closing Chapters...*, 1907.

³⁴ Mark Bate, *Reminiscences of Early Nanaimo Days*, NFP, 9 February 1907.

³⁵ Mark Bate, *The Men Who...*, 1907.

³⁶ Mark Bate, *Mr. M. Bate, Continues His Nanaimo Reminiscences*, NFP, 16 February 1907.

³⁷ Mark Bate, *Closing Chapters...*, 1907.

³⁸ G.P.V. and Helen B. Akkrigg, *British Columbia Chronicle...*, p.404, 1977.

all but one of the *Princess Royal* contingent and to four other men who came out on earlier vessels. These women he described in glowing terms. They were “faithful,”³⁹ “a good mother, a good house manager”⁴⁰ “a kind-hearted, generous woman who delighted in ‘doing a good turn’”.⁴¹ They were all white women.

In sharp contrast, at least three Englishmen, three from the Orkneys in northern Scotland, a Welshman, a couple of French Canadians, and a couple of Iroquois who Bate mentions at length, were described as if they were wifeless when in reality they had Aboriginal wives.⁴² Bate could be enormously flattering about these men. He characterizes Englishman William Sampson as building up “a valuable Estate” on Saltspring Island, but as if he did so all by himself.⁴³ With James Stove from the Orkneys, who remained in Nanaimo, Bate described how he, “with much steady, persevering labour, made himself a home there which is today, with its alluringly pleasant surroundings, as pretty a spot as one could wish for.”⁴⁴ Bate

erased Stove’s Aboriginal wife, just as he did with the others.

The only person to get an acknowledgment from Bate as having a family by an Aboriginal woman was for the purpose of ridicule. A Welsh miner named Thomas Jones is described as “a run-away military man from Uncle Sam’s domain” who died in 1864 and “was father, by the way, of Azariah Jones, known in town as the ‘Dummy’”.⁴⁵

Bate effectively erased Aboriginal women from the history of Nanaimo. They could not, almost by definition, be faithful wives, or indeed wives at all. What is absolutely clear is that the Nanaimo Mark Bate and others erased did not disappear. Diversity was, rather, lost from view in the determination of the *Princess Royal* contingent and others to construct the Nanaimo of their aspirations.

An early glimpse of the diversity that marked Nanaimo comes from February 1860, when a Victoria newspaper reported that an Aboriginal girl aged 12, who had supposedly “already been the victim of a white man’s passions under the guise of keeping house for him,” was found dead in the home of a Nanaimo man named Weston.⁴⁶ Not only was she discovered there, the article claimed that Weston’s “Indian woman” had been feeding the dead girl liquor in order to secure her “possession” by another man.⁴⁷ Bate recalled William Weston, almost certainly the same man, only as “the village

³⁹ Mark Bate, *Sketch of Geo. Baker And Other Pioneers*, NFP, 6 April 1907; also *The History of the Early Nanaimo Settlers*, NFP, 4 May 1907.

⁴⁰ Mark Bate, *More Sketches of old Time Nanaimoites*, NFP, 13 April 1907.

⁴¹ Mark Bate, *Sketch of Geo....*, 1907.

⁴²

Isbister	Orkneys
Martin	English
Sampson	English
Stove	Orkneys
Fortier	French Canadian
Paley	Orkneys
Iroquois	a couple
Jones	Welsh
Monigny	French Canadians
Weston	English

⁴³ Mark Bate, *The Men Who....*, 1907.

⁴⁴ Mark Bate, *How Chase River Came by Its Name*, NFP, 30 March 1907.

⁴⁵ Mark Bate, *Closing Chapters....*, 1907.

⁴⁶ Information from Bruce Watson’s biographical dictionary in process, used with permission.

⁴⁷ *To the Editor*, Victoria Gazette, 22 February 1860.

Constable, Nanaimo's first 'bobby'".⁴⁸

Clearly, Bate kept in contact with Weston, for he described his death a couple of years before Bate wrote in 1907.

Another glimpse comes from a decade and a half later, December 1876, when the British Columbia Reserve Commission visited the Nanaimo area to confirm Indian reserves. As Cole Harris documents in *Making Native Space*, the commission's principal goal was to free up as much of the province as possible for newcomer settlement.⁴⁹ Thus, not unexpectedly, the three commissioners first consulted with Mark Bate in his dual capacities as mayor and manager of the town's principal employer, the Vancouver Coal Company. The commissioners next met with local Indian chiefs, when, to quote from the commission's report, "the evils of concubinage of their young women with the white men around were specifically pointed out."⁵⁰

The commissioners almost certainly admonished the Indian chiefs at Bate's request, given no similar lecture was given to chiefs anywhere else on Vancouver Island or on the lower mainland. In other words, Bate was well aware of the diversity he was determined to erase and sought, via the commission, to persuade Aboriginal men to stamp it out through prohibiting their daughters from taking newcomer husbands.

We can also glimpse the erasure of diversity from the perspective of the men themselves.

⁴⁸ Mark Bate, *Interesting Early Nanaimo History*, NFP, 11 May 1907.

⁴⁹ UBC Press, 2002.

⁵⁰ Alex C Anderson and Archibald McKinlay, *Report of the proceedings of the Joint Commission for the settlement of the Indian Reserves in the Province of British Columbia*, Victoria, 21 March 1877, in Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, vol. 3645, file 7936, C10113.

For all of the attempts to ridicule and discourage such relationships, they persisted. The gender differential within the newcomer population virtually ensured that only some of the men at work in the mines would find marital partners of similar backgrounds to themselves. The relatively older ages at which *Princess Royal* sons married than did their sisters testify to the paucity of marriageable young women. Girls as young as 12 were routinely courted, and sometimes persuaded into wedlock.

Numerous men working in Nanaimo opted for Aboriginal women. Hawaiians and Iroquois did so as a matter of course, but so did at least four dozen English, Scots, French Canadian, and others who, in the language of the time, were white. The records of Nanaimo's St. Paul's Anglican Church, Ebenezer Methodist Church, and St. Peter's Catholic Church make it possible to trace marriages, as do colonial and provincial records. Because of their survival, we gain an appreciation of how men did not so much seek to prostitute women for the short term, as with the Weston incident, but sought them out as life partners through church-sanctioned marriages.

Some men persevered in Nanaimo, likely repeatedly made conscious of the way in which they had diverged from the accepted life course. As just one example, 16-year-old Orkney Islander James Malcolm was among the first group of prospective miners brought to Fort Rupert in 1851 then transferred to Nanaimo in November 1852. Within the year he was living with a local Native woman named Emma. Their first child together was born at precisely the same time as the Dunsmuir son hailed even today as the first "white" boy. The HBC's head at Nanaimo informed his superior, James Douglas in July 1853: "Two births

have occurred in this Establishment since the *Cadboro* sailed in the cases of Mrs. Dunsmuir and the native wife of John Malcolm, labourer.”⁵¹ James Malcolm married Emma in Ebenezer Methodist Church in 1861. The Malcolms’ eight children suffered the consequences of diversity, as with the Nanaimo school teacher’s equation in 1880 of the Malcolm sons’ behaviour with their skin tones. “The Malcolms are half-breeds and it is more difficult to deal with them as they are not looked after at home and they take the other boys away from school with them.”⁵² Given the high rates of truancy in Nanaimo, it seems likely that the Malcolm sons were only participating in a general phenomenon.

Numerous men responded imaginatively by erasing themselves. From 1859 it was possible to take up land on Vancouver Island and the nearby Gulf Islands by marking out up to 160 acres, registering the claim, taking up residence, and then paying a relatively small sum once the land was surveyed. While Nanaimo was given over to coal mining, nearby islands beckoned, including Gabriola Island, just three miles (five kilometres) away.

The men who settled Gabriola were certainly not all from Nanaimo, nor did they all have Aboriginal wives. But, at the same time, as June Lewis-Harrison describes in her book, *The People of Gabriola*,⁵³ and as I detailed a couple of years ago in the Gabriola history journal *SHALE*, a

preponderance of early settlers fit both categories.⁵⁴ The first pre-emptor was Nanaimo carpenter Alexander McFarlane in January 1863. He was followed two months later by two and likely three Nanaimo miners, Richard Chapple, Thomas Degnen, and Thomas McGuffie, and over the next several years by at least a dozen men who, like their predecessors, had families by Aboriginal women. Some of these men lived on Gabriola prior to taking up land, and numerous of them commuted to work in Nanaimo mines as they attempted to make their Gabriola holdings self-supporting.

Other men with Aboriginal wives took other courses of action. Saltspring Island attracted a larger group of men with families by Aboriginal women, including onetime Nanaimo resident Henry Sampson. Other men sought out an island of their own. Joe Silvey pre-empted smaller Reid Island north of Saltspring. Although Portuguese Joe, as he was known, never lived in Nanaimo, for him, as for many other islanders, it was their market town. For many years, Joe sold there the oil from dogfish he caught for use in miners’ lamps.⁵⁵

By losing themselves from view, families on islands gained greater opportunities to manage their children’s upbringing. In the case of Gabriola, parents repeatedly made clear the value they attached to the school. In 1874, the provincial head, John Jessop, described how there were “thirteen children in attendance, all half-breeds.”⁵⁶ The designation was not, however, nearly as

⁵¹ Joseph William McKay to James Douglas, Nanaimo, July 17, 1853, in *Nanaimo Correspondence*.

⁵² John Mundell, teacher at Nanaimo, to C.C. McKenzie, Superintendent of Education, Nanaimo, 18 March 1880, in *BC Superintendent of Education, Inward Correspondence*, BCARS, GR 1445.

⁵³ Frieson & Sons, 1982.

⁵⁴ Jean Barman, *Island sanctuaries--Early mixed race settlement on Gabriola and nearby coastal islands*, *SHALE* 2, 5-14, March 2001.

⁵⁵ See Jean Barman, *The Remarkable Adventures of Portuguese Joe Silvey*, Raincoast Monographs 1 Madeira Park: Harbour, 2004.

⁵⁶ Jessop Diary, BCA, GR 1468, 8 October 1874.

judgmental as it might have been in Nanaimo, for the superintendent found much to praise. “Second class reading & spelling very good—All in first Reader last spring—First Reading Class making fair improvement...Children orderly & well behaved & making good progress.”⁵⁷ Jessop enthused how “Parents also (in great contrast with other districts) are much interested in the school and careful to keep up the attendance.”⁵⁸ Unlike Nanaimo, parents took control of the school to the extent of complaining bitterly, a few years later, about a teacher who did not meet their expectations. As to the reason, the superintendent noted how he “Heard complaints of parents respecting the non-improvement of their children.”⁵⁹ Gabriola parents saw in the school the best possibility for their children to acquire skills permitting them to negotiate their diversity.

Lessons learned

The very different attitude of Gabriola and Nanaimo families toward the principal state institution of the day, the public school, makes little sense so long as we persist in viewing the past from the perspective of the present day. It is very hard to understand why parents would not take advantage of the opportunity for free education. Staying in school a year or two longer would not have lost Nanaimo daughters a husband, or sons a job in the mines. It is equally difficult to comprehend why parents on Gabriola erased themselves from view rather than fighting for their rights, in line with today’s priorities. It does appear that, yes, the past is a foreign country.

⁵⁷ Jessop Diary, 8 October 1874.

⁵⁸ Jessop Diary, 23 March 1874.

⁵⁹ Jessop Diary, 11 February 1878.

All of these actions become comprehensible once we take the past on its own terms. An excess of tradition caused Nanaimo families to lose sight of the opportunities formal education might offer their children. Families marked by diversity were both erased by others and erased themselves.

The direction in which families headed, whether in Nanaimo or on islands like Gabriola, did not necessarily lead down a straight road to the present day. As Helen Brown has so well demonstrated, Nanaimo families had to work very hard during and after the 1890s to join the educational mainstream from the divergent path they had chosen for themselves in earlier years. In similar fashion, it was only as negative attitudes toward race moderated in the dominant society in the later twentieth century that families who hid themselves away on islands, whether it be Gabriola, the Saltspring and Russell Islands of Maria Mahoi,⁶⁰ or the Reid Island of Portuguese Joe Silvey, could comfortably take pride in their distinctive identities.

By treating history, not as a reflection of ourselves, but as a foreign country, we acquire a greater appreciation of why it is that individuals acted as they did. We need to learn to drive in two directions. By doing so, we can take back the past on its own terms to discover that, yes, they did do things differently there. ◇

⁶⁰ See Jean Barman, *Maria Mahoi of the Islands*, New Star, 2004.