Gabriola SOUNDER, p.19, November 26, 1999

Pick a history—but make it good

Gabriola has many histories—natural and human. Perhaps one day, we'll be able to tell the island's human histories together, not as we do today as one set for "us" and another for the people who were here first. One history that's less often told is Gabriola's post-contact history *before* the opening of the Nanaimo coal mines in 1852. It's an easy story to tell—nobody knows very much—but it's also impossible to tell without ambivalence.

The records show that the first contact between BC's First Nations and outsiders was when Juan Pérez reached the Queen Charlottes in 1774. But it was not the first arrival of Europeans we should note, it was the arrival of foreign diseases. In 1782, or thereabouts, eight years before the Spanish first saw the Strait of Georgia, and 45 years before the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading post at Fort Langley, smallpox arrived. It was probably brought from Mexico via horsemen on the Prairies, across the Rockies, down the Columbia, and up through Puget Sound. Estimates of the proportion of the local population that died range from 50 to 90 percent. Whole peoples were wiped out, their names lost forever. The Italian poet, Francesco de Petrarca, writing at the time of the Black Death, said this. "Future generations will be unable to imagine the empty houses, abandoned towns... fields littered with the dead, the dreadful silence and solitude that hung over the whole world." It was like that here too.

In 1791–2, the Spanish explored the Strait of Georgia and stayed on our island a few days. Captain Vancouver charted the mainland coast across the water, but there were no more expeditions until Simon Fraser paid a fleeting visit to villages at Musqueam, New Westminster, and (possibly) Port Hammond in 1808.

Although one can count several hundred visits to the outer coast by American fur-trading vessels between 1800 and 1825, there is no record of any of their ships entering the Strait of Georgia. They wanted sea otter pelts, and sea otters don't live here, never have. After Fraser's visit, another 16 years went by before the first of the HBC expeditions came to the lower mainland. The 1824 McMillan expedition was followed by exploratory visits in 1825, and again (possibly) in 1826. In 1827, a party of 25 founded the first settlement in the area, a mile down river of the present Fort Langley. These newcomers were, in the Canadian tradition, people of mixed heritage including French-Canadian (the largest group), Scottish, Hawaiian, Native American, English-Canadian, Irish, and Métis (but, sorry, no Welsh).

From the Fort Langley Journals, we know that the Snunéymux^{w} people had a summer village near Barnston Island in the Fraser River. Fishing for sockeye on the Fraser along with many others was part of their seasonal food-gathering activities, several of which took place on Gabriola. Here they fished, hunted, picked berries, and dug for clams and camas bulbs—not a bad life really. Native society, with its small groupings, and accustomed as it was to the sharing of resources, was poorly understood by observers at the time. Perhaps, judging by the emphasis

placed on "overlapping" land claims in some newspapers today, it still is. European society was more structured, and for Europeans, it was the land itself that was owned, not each of the many things the land could provide.

Violence was everywhere more common then than in our Canada of today. This was particularly nastily so on the outer coast where "Boston Men" dominated the fur trade until the sea otters neared extinction in the mid-1820s. Reports of fighting between Natives were common. The Cowichan, who had large seasonal villages on Lulu Island, were especially feared. Captives taken in raids, if not quickly ransomed by relatives, became slaves. It's tempting to imagine that life before the coming of the immigrants was all sweetness and light. But the reality is that it wasn't.

The Journals show that because the HBC were traders, not trappers, and the Natives were their customers, they tried to remain neutral in Native disputes. The HBC did not oppose slavery, neither did they intentionally engage in it, though the American fur-traders on the outer coast did. The HBC tried to restrict access to firearms, though this was sometimes necessary to redress the balance after the Americans had done so. For the most part, people seemed to have got along. Most of the single men at the fort married local women and raised families, and the Journals tell of feasts and celebrations enjoyed by all. The HBC Chief Factor James Douglas, later governor of Vancouver Island and BC, who was of mixed black West Indian and Scottish heritage, rightfully recognized Native peoples' concerns.

Fort Victoria was founded in 1843 in a lovely setting. The fur-trading years were ending and gold was about to be discovered. In 1849, Vancouver Island became a colony and not long after, the first settlers came to Nanaimo. They came to a "vast empty wilderness" that 70 years before had been home to so many. Many pioneers brought with them excitement and a zest for life, but for the Native people, the future was grim. They were to be economically marginalized, continually wracked by new diseases, confined to tiny reserves, forbidden even to buy the land that was once theirs.

We can look back on the past with admiration, anger, regret, and curiosity. We can distil from reality our own versions of history, our own myths, to match our own feelings and interests. We can also of course, be indifferent to it all. But to say that because it's history, we can do nothing to change it, is, I think, wrong. What we do today, will, in a hundred years, also be a history, and it will be a history that we made ourselves. Let's hope that when it's done, it will be looked back on with unreserved pride.