Immigration to British Columbia:

SHAPING A PROVINCE, DEFINING A COUNTRY

ABSTRACT

The construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway changed the face of British Columbia. Not only did the railway lead to the establishment of a significant Chinese-Canadian community, but it also provided, for the first time, a direct link between the province and the rest of the country, encouraging settlement.

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Like the waves that wash up on the shores of Vancouver Island, the history of immigration to British Columbia can be described as an ebb and flow of encouragement and deterrents. Over the years, many immigrants have come to the province, lured by opportunity and dreams of prosperity. Others have found themselves pushed away by forces of exclusion. Since the mid-19th century, waves of immigration have shaped British Columbia, giving it a unique character.

Early settlement in British Columbia occurred as a result of the same desires that brought immigrants to the eastern shores of Canada. It was explorers, traders and hunters from the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company who went west initially, driven by the promise of natural riches. In such limitless lands, it seemed that any and all dreams could come true.

These adventurous men were followed by the first British settlers, who sought to plant a firm stake in the far-flung colony. Many of them hoped to recreate a Little England in this rugged and wild territory. Recruiters encouraged migration, appealing to settlers to become "guardians of an outpost of the Empire." The Okanagan Valley, billed as a "Garden of Eden," was particularly attractive.

Sir James Douglas, Governor of Vancouver Island from 1851 to 1863, presented his immigration schemes to officials in London. He had the idea to sell land to more prosperous settlers who would be required to bring a minimum number of people to help work the land. This resulted in a large community of "gentlemen farmers" who brought their Victorian social mores with them. By 1901, British settlers in the province numbered close to 100,000, giving British Columbia a very English feel; British-styled schools and churches offered a "home away from home."

Circumstances altered Governor Douglas's vision and the province's demographic makeup soon became very different. Governor Douglas had a good reputation for treating racial minorities fairly and this attracted new settlers. The first African-American migration to Victoria took place under his watch and the newcomers reported that they were "received most cordially and kindly by His Excellency the Governor and heartily welcomed to the land of freedom and humanity."[1]

The discovery of gold in 1858, and again in 1862, brought an influx of American, European and Asian immigrants to the province despite the Governor's attempts to keep the new resource a secret. Mostly young men, these immigrants came seeking fame and fortune, and dramatically altered the face of the province. In a short two months, the population of Victoria swelled to almost 20,000. The gold rush was short-lived and once it was over, few stayed.

Although prosperity attracted immigrants to British Columbia from around the world, downturns in the economy sometimes made it a hostile environment in which to reside. Chinese immigrants first came to Vancouver, via San Francisco, during the

Fraser River Gold Rush of 1858. During boom periods, they worked as merchants and as shopkeepers; when the economy slowed, they toiled in mines and in low-paying service industries. The economic situation in China often prevented them from returning home and so they settled in British Columbia.

From 1881 to 1884, these first Chinese immigrants were joined by a great number of their compatriots. They were recruited by railway officials to build the Canadian Pacific Railway in return for assisted passage and the promise of lucrative contracts. Over 15,000 Chinese immigrants arrived during these years. Even after the railway was completed, they continued to come, drawn from their poor economic situations to a land of riches with established Chinese communities. However, as the economy slumped, residents of British Columbia began to resent these immigrants. Organized labour groups were particularly incensed that Chinese workers would accept lower wages than what European immigrants expected. Provincial authorities soon began to pass laws to restrict and discourage Chinese immigration and called on Ottawa to do the same.

As settlement in British Columbia increased, the reaction in Ottawa was to reconcile many competing interests and opinions on immigration to the "west beyond the west." Although successive prime ministers such as John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier and Robert Borden were sympathetic to provincial demands for immigration restrictions, they balanced the economic need for cheap labour with the political need to retain important provincial votes. When contractor Andrew Onderdonk informed Sir John A. Macdonald that the construction of the railway would take "12 years longer than necessary" without the help of Chinese workers, the prime minister opted for speed.

In 1885, with the railway completed, Parliament passed the *Chinese Immigration Act*, which introduced a head tax of $50 to dissuade Chinese immigration and appease dissatisfaction in the west.[2] British Columbians were still unhappy, but Ottawa dismissed further calls to legislate until 1923, when Chinese immigration was stopped almost entirely under the Act. The terms of this prohibitive legislation remained in effect until 1947.

In the early days of Confederation, forces in British Columbia were very interested in immigration questions since settlers would shape the nature and direction of the province within the new Canadian federation. Yet, as much as the province lobbied for certain kinds of immigration, the responsibility for this matter remained with the federal government. As a member of the British Empire, Canada had specific responsibilities with regard to sharing its wealth and furthering the community of nations. Often, it was Canada's westernmost province and most ocean-accessible territory that was forced to confront first-hand the challenges these immigration movements posed.

The signing of the Anglo-Japan Treaty in 1906, for instance, meant that Japanese immigrants were not subject to the same restrictions that the Chinese immigrants were, even though British Columbia politicians and community leaders had lobbied for full exclusion. On September 7, 1907, a protest organized by the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (which also sponsored the Asiatic Exclusion League) turned violent as participants rioted down Powell Street (Little Japan) and through Vancouver's Chinatown. They damaged property and assaulted innocent bystanders. The incident created national controversy and attracted international attention. Mackenzie King, then Deputy Minister of Labour, was dispatched to Vancouver to investigate, and Sir Wilfrid Laurier's government reassured Japan about the situation in British Columbia. Eventually, the Japanese government restricted the number of labourers and artisans immigrating to British Columbia so that the racial balance would not be "unduly" disturbed. The Japanese community in British Columbia continued to grow, thanks in part to "picture brides," a practice allowing arranged marriages from a distance. By 1921, there were 40,000 Asians in British Columbia, representing almost six percent of the province's total population. Elsewhere in Canada, the Asian population represented less than one percent.

Another strategy to limit immigration without the enactment of overt prohibition was to use regulations to manage population movements from certain countries. Again, this was a federal strategy, but one that affected the province of British Columbia most. In 1914, the *Komagata Maru*, a boat carrying immigrants from India's Punjabi province, attempted to land in British Columbia. The Canadian government had added the "continuous passage" clause to its regulation, which required that only those individuals who embarked on a direct passage to Canada could land in the country. Threatened by the arrival of the 376 passengers, locals raised the spectre of an Asian invasion. British Columbia officials wanted to prevent the passengers from landing, but

Ottawa had its relationship with the rest of the Commonwealth to consider. Canadian courts eventually ruled that the immigration regulation should stand. The ship was turned away, but not before a two-month standoff, which generated a great deal of ill will.

The construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway also changed the face of British Columbia. Not only did the railway lead to the establishment of a significant Chinese-Canadian community, but it also provided, for the first time, a direct link between the province and the rest of the country, encouraging settlement. Suddenly, the West was accessible. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, destitute farmers from the Canadian prairies hopped the rails and headed "west of west" in the hope of finding fertile lands.

British Columbia's unique position as a province of the Pacific means that it has attracted different groups of immigrants compared with the rest of the country. The violence of the 1907 race riots and the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident gave the province a reputation of being intolerant – a place of race riots and fear-mongering. Yet, so much of British Columbia's reaction to unwelcome immigration can be attributed to the fact that the province's legislators had no control over which immigrants were drawn to its shores. For better or for worse, the politics of international treaties and national interests interfered with British Columbia's ability to shape its own destiny.

Today, immigrants from around the world continue to be drawn to the province for its idyllic landscapes, rich natural resources and Pacific outlook. Chinese immigrants, many from Hong Kong, represent a growing and vibrant community in the province. In fact, British Columbia's 25th lieutenant-governor, David Lam, came to Canada from Hong Kong in 1967. Just as the ocean's waters continue to lap against Canada's western shores, immigrants from many countries continue to come to Canada, ready to embark on a new life in a land of promise.

Endnotes

[1] According to the leader of one of the early groups of immigrants from the United States. *Strangers Entertained*, John Norris. Vancouver: Evergreen Press Limited, 1971. The papers of Sir James Douglas are held at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. Library and Archives Canada holds copies of these originals.

[2] Library and Archives Canada holds a variety of *Registers of Chinese Immigration*, which document the payment of this tax by Chinese immigrants to Canada from 1885–1949. A copy of the *Register* from the Port of New Westminster is available at www.collectionscanada.ca.