## Integrating British Columbia – and the Rest of Canada

# INTO CANADA'S HISTORY

**ABSTRACT**

Canada's history tends to consider the provinces only so far as they diverge from a central core grounded in Ontario and Quebec. Attention to migration between provinces gives a means to integrate British Columbia – and the rest of Canada – into Canada's history. To make this argument, three groups of migrants to British Columbia are considered: French Canadian fur traders, Maritimers arriving with the completion of the transcontinental rail line, and Prairie migrants moving west during the Depression and after the Second World War.

Histories of Canada struggle to integrate the provinces, and their pasts, within a national story. The focus is usually on Ontario and Quebec, with a dash of the early Maritimes, not unexpectedly so given their longer settlement histories. The National Policy and the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto axis of political and economic power reinforce such a perspective. This central core becomes the whole against which all else is measured for inclusion into Canada's history. Be it textbooks, web sites, or classrooms, the rest of Canada is included principally when events there so diverge from this mainstream that they have to be considered.

With British Columbia, inclusions tend to be of two kinds. The first describes the distinctiveness of the Aboriginal population. Coastal people's reliance on salmon and cedar, their artistic creativity, and the cultural ceremony of the potlatch are popular themes. The second inclusion turns attention to the province's Asian presence, which was historically much greater than anywhere else in Canada. Favoured topics highlight the racism and discrimination experienced by British Columbians of Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian heritage. Both interjections serve to set British Columbia apart from Canada's history as it is usually conceived.

An alternative to depicting British Columbia – and the rest of Canada – as "a bit of a bother," to quote a comment I recently heard, is to attend to the ways in which we have come together as a nation. The transfer of ideas through the printed word and federal initiatives have played a role, but even more so has the migration of peoples from one part of Canada to the other. Such movement has not affected provinces equally, some more being donors than recipients of peoples and their ways of life, others the reverse. Both directions have brought Canada together as a nation.

British Columbia's high rate of population growth since entering the Canadian Confederation in 1871 has made it principally a recipient of fellow Canadians. The population has expanded a hundred times since 1881, the first national census to include the province. British Columbia grew 22 times over the course of the twentieth century, which was almost twice the rate of the three Prairie provinces, four time of Ontario, five of Quebec, and twelve times that of the Maritimes. A small part of British Columbia's growth came through natural increase, much of it through immigration, but a goodly part, as Table 1 indicates, through migration.

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**Table 1. British Columbia Population Born Elsewhere in Canada, 1881-2001**

| | Maritimes | Quebec | Ontario | Prairies | Total born elsewhere in Canada |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1881 | 784 | 396 | 1,572 | 38 | 3,541 |
| | (3.3%) | (1.7%) | (6.6%) | (neg) | (14.9%) |
| 1891 | 5,395 | 2,567 | 11,658 | 967 | 20,699 |
| | (7.6%) | (3.6%) | (16.5%) | (1.4%) | (29.2%) |
| 1901 | 9,575 | 4,329 | 23,642 | 3,194 | 40,976 |
| | (6.4%) | (2.9%) | (15.8%) | (2.1%) | (27.4%) |
| 1911 | 18,569 | 7,496 | 45,518 | 13,097 | 86,364 |
| | (5.0%) | (2.0%) | (12.2%) | (3.5%) | (23.2%) |
| 1921 | 19,235 | 8,240 | 50,361 | 30,117 | 108,876 |
| | (3.8%) | (1.6%) | (10.0%) | (6.0%) | (21.7%) |
| 1931 | 20,853 | 9,226 | 54,486 | 57,970 | 143,420 |
| | (3.1%) | (1.4%) | (8.1%) | (8.7%) | (21.4%) |
| 1941 | 19,639 | 9,627 | 54,160 | 115,627 | 199,213 |
| | (2.5%) | (1.2%) | (6.8%) | (14.6%) | (25.1%) |
| 1951 | 24,906 | 14,968 | 69,818 | 249,608 | 359,300 |
| | (2.2%) | (1.3%) | (6.1%) | (22.0%) | (31.6%) |
| 1961 | 28,366 | 17,704 | 76,016 | 323,025 | 445,111 |
| | (1.8%) | (1.1%) | (4.8%) | (20.3%) | (28.0%) |
| 1971 | 41,275 | 31,465 | 107,295 | 451,760 | 631,795 |
| | (1.9%) | (1.5%) | (5.0%) | (21.2%) | (29.6%) |
| 1981 | 58,160 | 52,640 | 173,345 | 542,940 | 827,085 |
| | (2.2%) | (2.0%) | (6.6%) | (20.6%) | (31.3%) |
| 1991 | 65,000 | 61,905 | 200,660 | 582,360 | 911,010 |
| | (2.1%) | (2.0%) | (6.4%) | (18.4%) | (28.8%) |
| 2001 | 71,195 | 71,795 | 240,720 | 559,925 | 956,950 |
| | (1.9%) | (1.9%) | (6.4%) | (14.9%) | (25.5%) |

**SOURCES: Census of Canada, 1941, 4: 662; 1951, 1: Table 45; 1961, catalogue 92-547, Table 51; 1971, 92-727, Table 34; 1981, 92-913, Table 1A; 1991, 93-316, Tables 1 and 2; and 2001, data courtesy of Statistics Canada .**

**NOTES: Percentages are of the total British Columbia non-Aboriginal population. The earliest federal census to include British Columbia was 1881. Newfoundland is included within the Maritimes. Prairies include Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, whose proportions are minute.**

We can get some sense of the diverse ways in which internal migration has helped to link British Columbia to Canada by looking at three groups arriving at three moments in historical time. The first were French Canadians during the fur trade, the second Maritimers following the completion of the transcontinental rail line, the third Prairie migrants during the Great Depression and after the Second World War. When we observe British Columbia from these perspectives, we also begin to understand that the ties creating the nation we know as Canada might well bypass the centre in their impetus and effect.

The almost 400 British Columbians included in the 1881 census as born in Quebec, indicated in Table 1, were the tail end of a phenomenon helping to ensure that Canada as a nation reached west to the Pacific coast. During the first half of the nineteenth century, over a thousand French Canadians laboured in the Pacific Northwest fur trade extending south through today's Washington and Oregon. Both at the time and during British Columbia's mid-century years as a British colonial possession, their presence was critical to maintaining the future province as a distinct place as opposed to being gobbled up by the expansionist United States. While some French Canadians returned home, as described by historian Allan Greer in *Peasant, Lord, and Merchant*, many stayed on.

Over time the French Canadians who settled in British Columbia would be joined by others, some of them Métis, migrating west from the Prairie fur trade. By the end of the century the numbers born in Quebec reached 4,000, almost twice that by the First World War. Because most French Canadians were of fairly modest means and tended to opt for outlying areas, their presence was for the most part overlooked by the dominant society. This attitude worked to their favour in maintaining familiar ways of life, including adherence to Catholicism and some French language retention, through the generations.

Maritimers similarly contributed to making British Columbia Canadian. The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the mid-1880s made it possible to speed across the continent in little over a week and encouraged Maritimers to do so. The younger province promised opportunities no longer available in longer settled Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. Many of the 5,000 arrived by 1891, double that a decade later, were professionals – Presbyterian and Methodist ministers out to tame frontier sensibilities and teachers enjoying much higher salaries. Even though Maritimers' proportion of the British Columbian population was relatively small, migrants occupied pivotal positions possessing bases of authority external to their settings.

Prominent Canadian intellectuals like Nova Scotia-born George Monro Grant firmly believed that Maritimers were the most influential in nation making. Preaching and teaching embodied taken-for-granted outlooks migrants transferred west to British Columbia as a matter of course. It was not only men but also women who did so. Indeed, women were in many ways more effective, for their ways of life were much more taken for granted and thereby more seamlessly integrated into the everyday. The largely mundane character of most women's lives makes their contribution to

nation building difficult to detect except where an exceptional source of everyday knowledge survives, as with the McQueen family correspondence now available on the web through the Atlantic Canada Virtual Archives at the University of New Brunswick. I drew on the correspondence for a book exploring this broad topic entitled *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen.*

Half a century later it was Prairie migrants who headed west. From just under 60,000 in 1931, the number of British Columbians born in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, or Alberta moved upwards to reach, Table 1 shows, fully a third of a million three decades later. Depression and drought sent some packing, British Columbia's booming war and postwar economy acted as a magnet, yet others came to retire in a generally more benign climate or for a new adventure.

Whereas Maritimers' impact was greatest in the social and cultural realms, Prairie arrivals gave British Columbia a new political orientation. Many brought with them a disposition towards – or at the least familiarity with – the party in power in their old province. In Saskatchewan this was from 1944 the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and in neighbouring Alberta Social Credit. Not only did the CCF and later the New Democratic Party acquire broad appeal in British Columbia, the populism that animated Social Credit moved west from Alberta in the person of Maritimes-born W.A.C. Bennett, who for a full two decades, 1952-72, had charge of British Columbia in very personalistic fashion. Not only that, three years later he was followed by his son, Bill Bennett, who ruled, albeit more sedately, for another decade.

Just as with French Canadians and Maritimers, Prairie influence extended across multiple dimensions of British Columbian life. In the cultural baggage taken west was a particular religious disposition, and British Columbians' orientation altered in ways consistent with the new arrivals. Conservative Protestant denominations – Baptist, Mennonite, Reformed, Pentecostal and various evangelical and fundamentalist groups – appealed to many of the same Prairie migrants who embraced Social Credit. At the beginning of the Depression these denominations attracted just 4 to 5 of every 100 British Columbians but by the 1970s 7 to 8 out of every 100.

These three groups of migrants make an important larger point about Canada's history. The ties joining us as a nation do not depend on province's correspondence to a centre grounded in Ontario and Quebec with a possible dash of the Maritimes. We have been stultified in thinking of the nation according to the longstanding perception that it is the centre that equates with Canada's history. The provinces have repeatedly formed each other through migration in ways consistent with our sense of self as a nation. These constructions might, but do not necessarily, move through the centre in their impetus and influence.

Yes, Canada is a big and disparate country, but that does not mean we cannot teach about its past and present in ways that respect the country as a whole. The attributes that distinguish each of the provinces are also part of Canada's history, and need to be recognized as such. British Columbia has been formed by its Aboriginal people and by Asia, but it has also been created from within Canada. All of the provinces have been, and continue to be, formed through interaction with each other as well as with the centre. Today it is Newfoundland workers who are finding employment, and in some cases new lives, in Alberta, tomorrow who knows? This proposed entryway for integrating British Columbia – and the rest of Canada – into Canada's history is also an entryway to teaching Canada's history in a more meaningful and comprehensive fashion.