THE PRICE PAID FOR NEGLECTING BC HISTORY

ABSTRACT

The year 2008 will be the 200th anniversary of Simon Fraser's trip down the river which bears his name, and the 150th anniversary of the Fraser River gold rush and the founding of the crown colony of British Columbia. In the year 2010 the province will host the Winter Olympics. The Canadian presentation at the closing ceremonies in Turin in 2006 did little to convey the spirit of modern day Canada, and even less to portray the spirit of BC. The celebrations in 2008 and 2010 present an opportunity to showcase the history and culture of British Columbia in a more inclusive way and highlight the place of BC in Canadian history.

CHARLES HOU

Retired teacher and author Charles Hou was the first recipient of the Governor General's Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History, and the originator of the annual Begbie Canadian History Contest.

British Columbia recently paid a high price for neglecting its history. At the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, the province was given eight minutes to sell itself to the world. Many BC citizens, including Premier Gordon Campbell, were mortified by the result. Rather than an attention-grabbing display of what makes British Columbia a great place to hold the next games, viewers were presented with a clichéd and somewhat garbled version of what it means to be Canadian. There was little in the presentation to tell the world why BC was selected to host the next Olympics or why they should visit the province in 2010.

How can we explain the deficiencies in the Turin presentation? For many years our schools and universities did a poor job of educating students about our history. The textbooks used in British Columbian schools until the 1980s were published in eastern Canada. They focused on the history of Quebec and Ontario and paid scant attention to BC history, particularly native history. When native history was mentioned at all it was usually dealt with superficially or in a negative way. Women, labour and ethnic groups also received scant attention. University history departments for years taught Canadian history in a similar fashion. As a result generations of Canadians, and British Columbians in particular, grew up with an incomplete knowledge of their past.

One of the most important events in our history, for example, was British Columbia's entry into Confederation. As someone educated in BC, I knew only that the province became part of Canada in 1871. When the provincial curriculum changed in the 1980s a whole unit was devoted to the topic. I did some research in the provincial archives and found that there was a serious and very interesting debate in the colony in 1870 over whether BC should join Canada or the United States. Much to my surprise I found that there were two major annexationist newspapers published in Victoria at the time. Another surprise was that BC chose to join Canada in part because the residents would acquire responsible government. Even the Americans could not promise that. In school and university I learned all about Upper and Lower Canada's struggle for responsible government and but never realized that BC went through a similar process. To make the subject interesting to my high school students I put together an extensive collection of primary sources presenting the arguments made by both sides, and had the students re-enact the 1870 debate in the Legislative buildings in Victoria.[1] The re-enactment was a great way to teach my students about BC history, as every event in the province's history up to 1870 was relevant in the debate.

The James Cook bicentennial celebration in 1978 provides another example of what happens when people do not know their history. Cook anchored off the west coast of Vancouver Island in 1778 and was the first European to set foot in BC. Given

the way Canadian history had been taught in the past, I knew that the government of the day would tend to focus on Cook and ignore the fact that there were native people living in the area at the time of his arrival. In 1975 I took a group of students to Victoria, where they demonstrated on the front steps of the Legislature to support honouring the Nootka chief Maquinna, as well as Cook, during the bicentennial celebrations. Chief Maquinna, who likely met Cook at Friendly Cove in 1778, was a skilled diplomat who dominated the sea otter trade on the coast for many years and played the British and Spanish diplomats for all they were worth.[2,3] I think we actually convinced the governing New Democratic Party to include native people in the bicentennial celebrations. Unfortunately, we did not lobby the Social Credit opposition, who soundly defeated the NDP in the fall election.

The native people of the west coast asked the government for funds to rebuild a native settlement at Friendly Cove in time for the Cook bicentennial. This could have created a major tourist attraction on the west coast analogous to Louisbourg in the east. It might well have included some Spanish buildings, as the Spanish built a fort at Friendly Cove in 1789 to challenge Britain's claim to the area. The reconstruction would have provided an opportunity for people to both celebrate Cook's voyage and learn more about BC history and native culture. Unfortunately the new government turned down the native request and the opportunity was lost. Instead of erecting a statue of Maquinna greeting James Cook at Friendly Cove, the government erected a statue of Cook in Victoria facing the Empress hotel, with his back to the site of an early native settlement across the bay.

The year 2008 will be the bicentennial year and the sesquicentennial year of major events in British Columbia history, providing BC with another opportunity to promote a more inclusive version of our past.

In 1808 Simon Fraser descended the Fraser River from a point south of Prince George to the river mouth, completing the river route across Canada which Samuel de Champlain started in 1608. The most difficult section of the river to navigate was the Black Canyon, a section of the Fraser River that cuts though a gap between the Cascade and Coast Mountain ranges. The native people in the canyon, who wanted to trade with the newcomers, helped Fraser on his trip and welcomed and fed him at settlements now known as Lytton, Spuzzum and Yale[4]. Like other explorers who made their way across Canada, Fraser could not have achieved what he did without the help of local guides. Fraser was disappointed to find that the river was not navigable and that it was not the Columbia River. The Fraser Canyon would nonetheless become the transportation equivalent in western Canada of the St. Lawrence River in eastern Canada, providing a route for an important Hudson's Bay Company trail, the Cariboo Wagon Road, the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Canadian National Railway and the Trans-Canada Highway. The canyon and the HBC trail would make a great location for a new museum and a park to celebrate both Simon Fraser's accomplishment and the place of native people in Canadian history. A new museum would also provide an opportunity to shed light on the importance of women, labour and the many ethnic groups involved in the development of BC. The federal government is reportedly investing $110 million in Quebec City's 400th anniversary celebration and could surely contribute to the construction of a museum and the acquisition of land for a park in the Fraser Canyon.

The year 2008 is also the 150th anniversary of the gold rush and the founding of the crown colony of British Columbia. In 1858, 30,000 gold miners headed up the Fraser Canyon in their search for the richest deposits of gold. They came from all over the world, with most coming from the United States. The miners trampled on the land and rights of the native people, and a major confrontation was narrowly averted.[5] Disease inflicted further harm on the native people and they later lost much of the land the government set aside for them during the construction of the Cariboo Wagon Road, the CPR, the CNR and the Trans-Canada Highway. To make matters worse, the churches and government set out to destroy the native languages and culture. To its credit, the BC government is currently trying to make up for past wrongs by providing the native people with the resources to sustain their communities and take control of their educational system.

The Winter Olympics in 2010 also provides an ideal opportunity to celebrate British Columbia's history and culture. Almost everyone is impressed by native art, but not all realize that native masks were made not to hang on walls but for dancers to wear during their performances. If the BC government made a commitment to teach the world about native history the native people might be willing to perform the dances they have rarely shared with outsiders. If colourful native costumes

and dances were added to those of the Spanish and British who sought control of BC at Friendly Cove, the French-Canadian and Scottish voyageurs who traveled with Simon Fraser, the Americans attracted to the gold rush, the Chinese who helped build the CPR, the East Indians and Japanese attracted to the Lower Mainland, and the many Europeans and others who helped build the CNR and the Trans-Canada Highway or who settled in BC, we could provide the world with a spectacular show. All of the performers could then be invited to dance together. This would be a unique way to respect native people and the people from all over the world who have made a home in BC.

The years 2008 and 2010 give us an opportunity to tell the world our story. I hope that we will not make the same mistake in 2010 as we made in 1978, and that all Canadians will be able to take pride in our Olympic year.

Endnotes

[1] Charles Hou and Marlena Morgan, *The Destiny of British Columbia: Confederation or Annexation? 1866-1871*. Vancouver, BC Teachers' Federation, 1984.

[2] Robin Fisher, "Muquinna," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, vol. IV, pp. 567–69.

[3] Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian–European Relations in British Columbia, 1774–1890*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1977.

[4] W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Simon Fraser: Letters and Journals*. Toronto, Macmillan, 1960.

[5] Donald J. Hauka, *McGowan's War*. Vancouver, New Star Books, 2003.