

**Taking everyday people seriously:
How French Canadians saved British Columbia for Canada**

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The Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar Lecture

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Grace MacInnis, who this talk honours, tended to everyday people. She came by her commitment almost as a matter of course.² At her birth in 1905, her father James Woodsworth was already on the path that would take him from Methodist minister to longtime Winnipeg Member of Parliament to founder of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, a national left-oriented political movement. Grace, as the eldest child, was mentored into his views, an outlook that was consolidated by her marriage in 1932 to Angus McInnis, a trade union activist, also a CCF founder, and for a quarter of a century a Vancouver Member of Parliament.

At a time when women were expected to defer to their men folk, Grace MacInnis is particularly commendable for not allowing herself to be totally submerged by the these two strong men in her life, and they in turn for treating her as their intellectual equal.³ About four months before her wedding, she was approached to be a provincial candidate in her father’s bailiwick of Winnipeg and queried her future husband, who had just been elected an MP: “Do you think I should plan to go into politics in a public way (always supposing I had the ability)?”⁴ She did not do so, but rather worked behind the scenes, as she had done before her marriage. Her awareness of the shadow cast over her ambition is caught in the opening to her early speeches as to how “I begin with two disadvantages, my father and my husband,”⁵ and her reflection in old age that, had she attempted to accomplish more than she did, “I think I would have been crushed between two millstones, my husband and my father.”⁶

It took the Second World War for Grace MacInnis to put herself forward. In 1941 she accepted the CCF nomination for the BC Legislative Assembly in the constituency of Vancouver-Burrard on the grounds that, in her words, “it is the duty of everyone to be in the place where most needed.”⁷ Elected, she served four years before being defeated in 1945. It was twenty years later, following her husband’s death, that she ran nationally in his former constituency of Vancouver-Kingsway from which he had retired eight years earlier. She did so under the banner of the New Democratic Party, formed four years before, in 1961, as a successor to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in whose formation both her father and husband had been prominent.

Winning, in her view on her own merits rather than merely succeeding her husband,⁸ Grace MacInnis was the first ever woman Member of Parliament from British Columbia and served for a decade before retiring in 1974 at age 69 due to ill health.⁹ She died in 1991, and two years later the Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar program, of which this talk is a part, was established at Simon Fraser University. It was intended to complement the J.S. Woodsworth Chair in the Humanities, created at SFU in 1983 by a committee on which she sat.

Grace MacInnis’ commitment to the CCF and then to the NDP meant that much of her activity was political, and she is especially remembered for her support for Japanese Canadians before and during the Second World War and for women’s right to birth control and abortion. Whatever cause she took up, she worked hard at it. As put by one of her biographers, on finally becoming an MP,

“Grace took a deep breath and vowed that she would, in the best Woodsworth-MacInnis tradition, champion the rights of ordinary Canadians in the stony face of power and privilege.”¹⁰

It is no easy matter to take everyday people seriously, as Grace MacInnis did all her life. For those of us who reflect on, and write about, events as opposed to causing them to happen, there are particular difficulties.

For historians like myself, such a perspective is at odds with how the past is usually conceived. History is traditionally about leaders – about the small handful who for various reasons have had charge of events. Not only are their names most often associated with the past, their positions of authority have given them control, both at the time and subsequently, over how events are interpreted. Such persons are also historically most likely to have been literate and to keep the records which are then maintained in archives. To take everyday people seriously is not necessarily to discount others’ contributions, but to attempt to understand the broader context within which leaders have acted.

The widespread tendency to write everyday people out of the course of events is not easily remedied. Counter arguments, whether made by reformers like Grace MacInnis or by scholars, have had to operate on two levels. They must not only persuasively reinterpret the events themselves, they have to disassemble the material apparatus that has been constructed over time to sustain earlier interpretations.

It is this material apparatus in all of its manifestations which all too often distracts and misdirects us, without our ever realizing we are being so managed in our perspectives. Even where means exist for rethinking events, we all too often do not do so. Except and until we disrupt the material apparatus, we are complicit. It is no easy matter to change interpretations of the past.

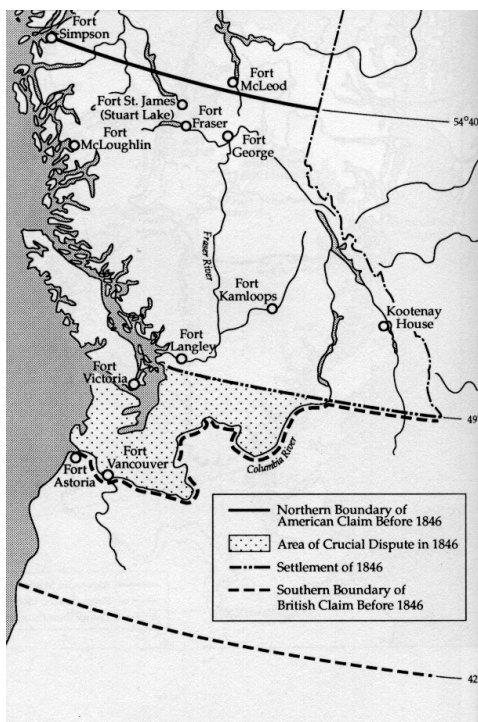
Some aspects have been better queried and interrogated from the perspective of everyday people than have others. The history of working men and women, and in particular their determination to fight for their rights by organizing themselves into trades unions, is a prime example, one in which scholars at Simon Fraser University have been in the forefront. Women’s history is another, and again SFU academics have made major contributions.

My own interest in everyday people has drawn on family stories, personal correspondence, residential school records, court cases, and vital statistics, among other sources, to recover the lived experiences of indigenous Hawaiians employed in the fur trade and the Squamish and mixed descent people who made their homes in the future Stanley Park.¹¹ I have also focused on individuals, but as a window into larger events, as with a Portuguese sailor arriving in the future British Columbia during the gold rush, a doubly indigenous woman born about the time he came who raised a large family on Salt Spring Island, a missionary wife on the British Columbia north coast, and two Nova Scotian sisters heading west to teach shortly after the completion of the transcontinental rail line in 1886.¹² Each of their lives demonstrates how much it is that every people accomplish once we take them seriously.

My current research, jointly with fur trade historian Bruce Watson, aims to return everyday French Canadians to the history of British Columbia. We tend to think of the province’s origins as firmly British, which it was in its leadership, forgetting to look beyond the surface.

This is a topic of which I would like to think Grace MacInnis would approve, for she had particular empathy with French Canadians, in part because she had studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and spoke French, and in part because she felt they were getting a bad deal in Canada. They were, in her words, kept “ignorant, uneducated and helpless.”¹³ In line with her political views, she considered that “capitalists—both French and English-speaking—are the ones responsible for that isolationism.”¹⁴

Once we take French Canadians seriously, we come to realize that, except for them, it is very likely Canada would today have no Pacific coast. Rather, the United States would extend in an unbroken from California north to Alaska. It is French Canadians, I want to persuade you, who saved British Columbia for Canada.



To make my argument, I begin with the end of the story, so to speak, which is the creation of British Columbia in the first place. It was a boundary settlement in 1846 that put in place the present day province.

During the previous half century, the Pacific Northwest extending from today's Oregon and Washington north through British Columbia had been eyed by several nations, but none of them considered the area important enough to make a forcing move to secure unilateral possession. To the north lay the Russian colony that would become Alaska, to the south Spanish territory running north through California. In 1818 Britain and the United States agreed to joint oversight of the large intervening land mass that lay between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, and 42° and 54°40'.

There matters stood until the early 1840s, when American excitement over the Pacific Northwest's settlement possibilities changed everything. As Americans streamed west in growing numbers over the proverbial Oregon Trail, expansionist fever became so great that the 1844 US presidential election was won on the slogan of '54° 40' or Fight,' which was the future Alaska's southern boundary. The United States was determined to have it all.

The reason Britain did not acquiesce, as some there would have liked in exchange for lower American tariffs, lay in the land-based fur trade. Britain had no interest in the Pacific Northwest as such. It was too remote to have the appeal it possessed for the United States. Britain did, however, feel a sense of obligation to the London-based Hudson's Bay Company, to which it had given, a quarter of a century earlier, monopoly rights to trade in the Pacific Northwest.

The end result was a compromise that both sides could live with. The Hudson’s Bay Company had already, in the face of growing American settlement, moved its headquarters for safekeeping to Vancouver Island. The international boundary east of the Rocky Mountains ran along 49°, and the United States acquiesced to continuing it west to the Pacific with a jog south around Vancouver Island. Part of the reason the Americans did so was their realization that early visits by fur traders Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson gave some legitimacy to British claims.

A treaty was signed in 1846, and three years later Britain colonized Vancouver Island on behalf of the Hudson’s Bay Company, whose principal trading post now lay at Fort Victoria. In 1858, amidst a gold rush, the British Columbian mainland was made a second British colony. The two were joined in 1866 as a single British colony named British Columbia, which in 1871 joined the Canadian Confederation, and there we are today.

Britain’s determination to have the international boundary at 49° instead of the American demand for 54°40’ was not, I want to emphasize, because French Canadians in and of themselves mattered. They were all the same front and centre in the outcome, for it was principally due to their labour that the Hudson’s Bay Company, and its predecessor the North West Company, had been able to establish themselves in the Pacific Northwest in the first place and then to operate there.

Whereas most of the persons in charge of the fur trade were interchangeable without much affecting the course of events, French Canadians were not. French Canadians as a group were indispensable and irreplaceable. Without French Canadians to do the heavy lifting, so to speak, there would have been no fur trade interests for Britain to protect, and hence the principal reason for it not to submit to Americans’ demands for the entire region would not have existed. It is in this way, I want to suggest, that French Canadians saved British Columbia for Canada.

After explaining how it was French Canadians became associated with the land-based fur trade in the first place, I examine their role in British Columbia prior to the boundary settlement. I do so first in relationships to the big three – Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson – and then in respect to the Hudson’s Bay Company. In doing so, I point up the material apparatus that has for so long hidden French Canadians from view.

French Canadians’ role in the fur trade goes back two centuries in time to the beginnings of New France in the 1600s. As did colonial powers as a matter of course, France sought to make as much money as possible from its new world possession, and it was the fur trade which gave the answer. This was a time when men, and also many women, wore hats as a matter of course, and the felt made from the matted under fur of the beaver was indispensable to hat making.

I should add here for clarification it is in this time period that the term, French Canadian, which I use here, had its origins. Just as the heartland of New France along the St Lawrence River was sometimes called Canada after an indigenous word, its residents became known as *canadiens*, or Canadians, to distinguish them from their counterparts in France itself, and later as French Canadians to distinguish them from English Canadians.

Some were engaged in the fur trade briefly, being known literally as *engagés*. Others traveled back and forth seasonally, and still others stayed away a lifetime. They did so over an ever larger geographical area. At its height in the mid 1700s, the French sphere of influence gave it command of two of the continent’s major river systems – the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi – this at a point in time when water was the principal means of transportation.

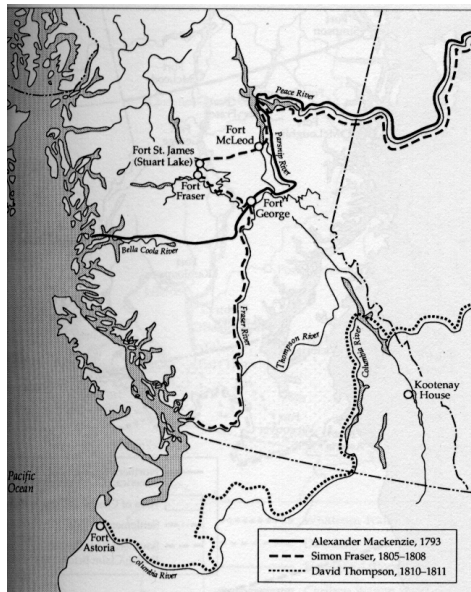
The search for new sources of furs moved steadily south and west so that by the time New France fell to the British, as confirmed in the Treaty of Paris signed in 1763, French Canadian fur

traders were commonplace across much of North America. Some had grown up in New France; others were products of the fur trade with French-speaking fathers and indigenous mothers.

The shift whereby Britain acquired New France, increasingly known as Quebec, rebounded on the fur trade. British merchants, who soon had charge of the upper reaches of the economy, formed the North West Company, which by the late 1700s controlled the fur trade out of Montreal. While a Scot or Englishman usually had charge of the annual trips intended to acquire pelts from local indigenous people, virtually all the others were French speakers in a long tradition of fur trade employment.

The North West Company’s principal competitor was the Hudson’s Bay Company, formed in London in 1670 under the aegis of the monarch with the purpose being to acquire pelts in the vast drainage basin of Hudson Bay. Unlike the Montreal-based company which went where the furs were, its British competitor opted for central posts staffed by Englishmen and Scots to which indigenous people were expected to bring pelts.

It was growing competition for new sources of furs, hence greater profits, which brought the first outsiders to British Columbia. Some came in ships in search of sea otter pelts, used in Asia to trim garments, and left as soon as they had acquired their cargo. Others arrived from the east, and it is they who initiated the land-based fur trade in British Columbia.



Most of us are likely familiar from our school days with the big three - Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson. The trio is generally viewed as responsible for the North West Company establishing the fur trade west of the Rockies, and they were so acknowledged during the boundary dispute. It is only when we maneuver around the material apparatus surrounding them that we come to realize who was truly indispensable and irreplaceable in the course of events.

Alexander Mackenzie is honoured for being the first white man to travel overland to the Pacific Ocean north of Mexico. Not expectedly, when he got to his destination at present day Bella Coola on the British Columbia north coast, he ensured his place in history. He did so by carving on to a rock that still survives today in Bella Coola: “Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada by land, 22nd July 1793.”¹⁵ So originated the public apparatus surrounding him.

| EVERYDAY REALITY | |
|---|--|
| The men making Mackenzie’s trip possible | |
| Alexander McKay | From Upper Canada |
| Jacques Beauchamp | At Ft Chipewyan |
| François Beaulieu | At Ft Chip |
| Baptiste Bisson | At Ft Chip |
| François Courtois | At Ft Chip |
| Charles Ducette | 2nd trip, at Ft Chip |
| Joseph Landry | 2nd trip, at Ft Chip |
| Cancre (Athabaskan) | At Ft Chip |

What Alexander Mackenzie forgot to add, just as have most subsequent historians, is that he did not set out alone on May 9, 1793, from Fort Chipewyan in northeastern Alberta. As well as a recently acquired telescope, compass, sextant, and chronometer to guide him, he depended for his success on an English-speaking second-in-command, two indigenous interpreters and hunters, and six everyday French Canadians.

It was these men -- along with the indigenous people met along the way who gave guidance -- that made it all possible. The six French Canadians were already in the employ of the North West Company and had each, as Mackenzie wrote in the journal he kept along the way, “agreed to accompany me on my projected voyage of discovery.”¹⁶

Ducette and Landry were experienced canoe men who had been with Mackenzie on an earlier expedition. Bisson was working in the fur trade near Fort Chipewyan, where he and a local indigenous woman had a young daughter. Beaulieu was the mixed descent son of a French Canadian and a Déné woman. Other than that, we know almost nothing about these six men. Their names appear just once in Mackenzie’s journal, which he published shortly thereafter, and their labour gets credit only a couple of times. At one point along the way, we get some sense of the men’s indispensability:

The canoe was put into the water; her dimensions were twenty-five feet long ...At the same time she was so light, that two men could carry her on a good road three or four miles without resting. In this slender vessel, we shipped provisions, goods for presents, arms, ammunition, and luggage to the weight of three thousand pounds, and an *equipage* of ten people.¹⁷

It was on the management of birch bark canoes that the land-based fur trade depended. Each man had particular responsibilities. The steersman or *gouvernail*, who may have been the experienced Landry, guided the vessel through the water from his position in the stern. When navigating, he stood and used a longer paddle than the other men. The bowman or *avant*, who also had a longer paddle, sat or stood at the front, signaling to the steersman what lay ahead. The middlemen, known as *mileux*, did the paddling.

Canoes were strong enough to transport heavy loads, yet light enough to be carried around obstructions in the water by one or two men. Adapted from indigenous originals, canoes' construction and daily maintenance using readily accessible natural materials depended on a whole range of practical skills. Their acquisition facilitated French Canadians' employment as *voyageurs*, or canoe men.

Mackenzie tells us in his journal that days began at four or five in the morning, as was usual in the fur trade, and were filled with the unexpected. Several near disasters culminated in the canoe having, in Mackenzie's words, “become so weak, leaky, and unmanageable, that it became a matter of absolute necessity to construct a new one.”¹⁸

In the British Columbian central interior not far from today's Quesnel, the men built this new canoe. They used wood strips to form the base, birch bark to put over it, and spruce tree roots to bind or sew the pieces of birch bark together. The one critical item that could not be found was the tree pitch or gum needed to seal everything, which had to be retrieved from the old canoe. Mackenzie expressed satisfaction a day later how the men, in his words, “perceived the superior excellence of the new vessel, and reflected that it was the work of their own hands.”¹⁹

The demands of water transportation were matched by those on land. Soon thereafter the expedition stashed the canoe to await the return trip, and, heeding the advice of local people, everyone set off on foot towards the coast. Mackenzie wrote how “each of the Canadians had a burden of about ninety pounds, with a gun, and some ammunition.”²⁰ In the usual practice, a leather sling passed around a man's forehead with the ends attached to the pack, which sat at the small of the back. In some cases a second pack rested on top of the first. Arms were free for balance and maneuvering through oftentimes harsh terrain.

It was just 2 1/3 months after setting out that Mackenzie celebrated his arrival at Bella Coola by writing on the rock. No time wasted, the expedition made an even speedier return and, while Alexander MacKenzie would be recognized for his feat, the half dozen French Canadians making the trip possible returned to the obscurity from which they came.

While Mackenzie's trip proved too arduous for the North West Company to put his route to practical use in extending the fur trade westward, it again pursued that goal a dozen years later. Put in charge of fur trade operations west of the Rockies in 1805, Simon Fraser set up headquarters at newly constructed Fort St James in the British Columbian central interior, creating nearby the posts of Fort McLeod, Fort Fraser, and Fort George, now Price George. It was from Fort George that in 1808 Fraser headed down the river that would be named in his honour.

The contrast between the material apparatus grown up around the man in charge and the French Canadians who sustained him is even sharper with Simon Fraser. When most of us think of Fraser, it is two images that come to mind -- the university and the river.

Just as had Mackenzie, Fraser in his journal treated his adventures as his own, as have subsequent scholars. To the extent others are mentioned, it is his three lieutenants, one of whom was a French Canadian, Jules Maurice Quesnel.²¹ Quesnel is an exception to the usual fur trade hierarchy that had Anglophones in the higher ranks and French Canadians as the anonymous everyday labourers. For this reason, not only do we know quite a lot about this merchant's son from Vaudreuil, not far from Montreal – who during his time with Fraser was in his early twenties -- but he has his own material apparatus in the form of a town and a French-language school on Vancouver's West Side named after him.

| EVERYDAY REALITY | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Among the three dozen men making Simon Fraser’s trip, 1805-08, possible | |
| 1805 La Malice | 1807 Jules Quesnel |
| /06 La Garde | /08 La Garde |
| Gagnon | Gagnier |
| La Londe | La Certe |
| Bazile | Wacan (Boucher) |
| St Pierre | Bourbonnais |
| Saucier | Baptiste D’Alaire |
| Menard | La Chapelle |
| Gervais Rivard | |

The “frenchmen,” “common men,” or “Canadian voyageurs,” to use Simon Fraser’s terms for them, have been, as with Mackenzie’s men, almost wholly lost from view except for their names turning up from time to time in his journal, not unexpectedly when they were ill and could not work.

The men’s personalities did come to the fore at the beginning of the return trip up the Fraser River when two of them decided, after several unfriendly encounters with local people, it would be safer crossing the coastal mountains by land. Fraser and the other men successfully argued for group solidarity, summed up in the oath they all then took: “I solemnly swear before Almighty God that I shall sooner perish than forsake in distress any of our crew during the present voyage.”²² The men remained loyal to each other, perhaps more so than to Fraser, even though at one point, in his words, “our feet were covered with blisters, and some of the men were lame and in perpetual torture.”²³

Here again the material apparatus distracts us, this time in its printed form. The pre-eminent Simon Fraser scholar W. Kaye Lamb, who edited his journals, dismisses the French Canadians out of hand. In his words, “The men available were on the whole an unsatisfactory lot. Few of them were capable canoe-men, and the majority suffered from physical ailments of one kind or another.”²⁴ Somewhat later in time, writing the entry for Simon Fraser in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Lamb had not changed his mind, characterizing the *voyageurs* taking Fraser down and back up his river as “an unskilled and unsatisfactory lot; most of them suffered from illness or injuries along the way.”²⁵ A recent Simon Fraser historian takes a different tack, by simply ignoring the men altogether,²⁶ whereas I would argue that Fraser was more dependent on the French Canadians than they ever were on him.

While Fraser was journeying down the river that now bears his name, David Thompson was exploring the Rocky Mountains in the hope of finding a route for the North West Company to take furs to market via the Pacific Ocean.

I am not going to say a lot about Thompson’s six years of travels, 1806-1811, which extended into the Kootenays of eastern British Columbia and established posts there, given the points echo those I’ve made about Mackenzie and Fraser. Again, the material apparatus constructed around

Thompson, and sometimes also his mixed descent wife Charlotte Small who accompanied him part of the way as with a statue erected in their honour in Invermere, British Columbia, obscures the men who came with him.

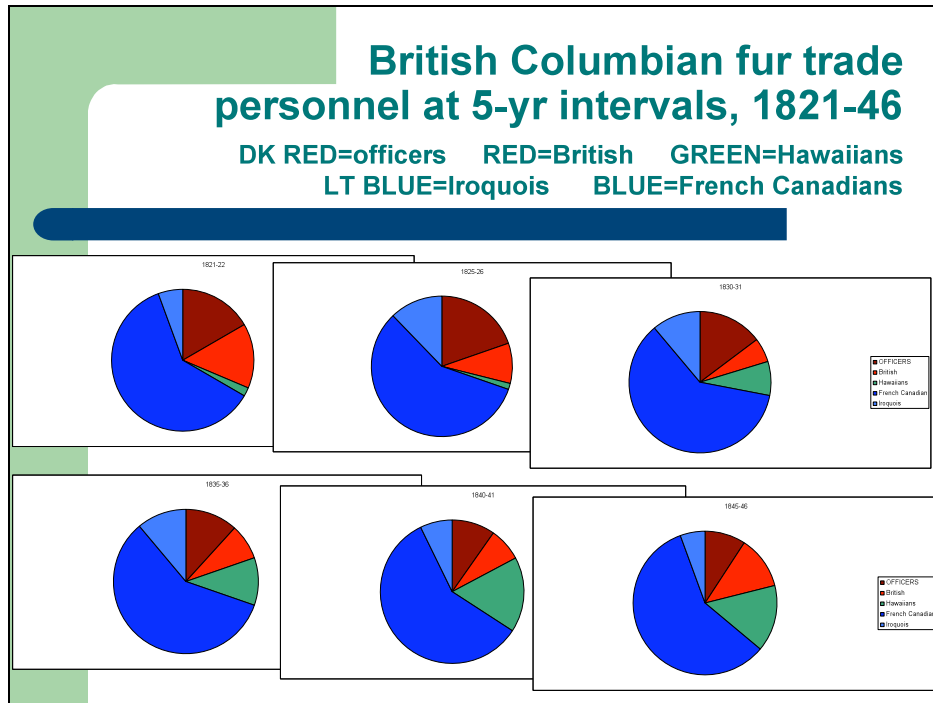
| EVERYDAY REALITY | | |
|--|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Names in David Thompson’s journal | | |
| • Michel Allaire | Baptiste Delcourt (son) | Charles Loyer |
| • Apissases (Asslin) | Joseph Delcourt (father) | Bazile Lus |
| • Baptiste Donneux | Finan McDonald | Baptiste Le Tendre |
| • Battoche | Antoine Dunord | James McMillan |
| • Beaulieux | Etienne Forcier | John George McTavish |
| • Registe Bellaire | Joseph Raphael Finlay and family | Miaquin Martin** |
| • Alexis Bellant | Joseph Gailloux | François Methode |
| • Bellanger | Pierre Gignon | Louis Mousseau |
| • Pierre Bercier | Gladu | Joseph Paquia |
| • Augustin Boisvert | François Gregoire | Louis Pacquin |
| • Bon Homme | François Guoin | Palei |
| • Bostonan | Hamelin | Pierre Pariel |
| • Michael Boulard | Jacques Hooie | Ignace Parisian |
| • Jean Baptiste Boucher | Laurent Le Fevre | François Desjarlais |
| • Michel Bourdeaux | Jean Baptiste Saganeki | François Rivet |
| • Michel Bourdon | Little/Grand Nepissing | Robillard/Robeye |
| • Buonaparte | Michel Quenneville | Ignace Salioheni** |
| • François Eno | La Fortuna | David Stuart |
| • Baptist D'Eau | Jean Baptiste L'Amoureux | Thomas* |
| • François Charpentier | Le Barbeau | François Trenchemontagne |
| • Pierre Cient | Baptiste Le Blanc | Joseph Trenchemontagne |
| • Antoine Clement | Le Camble | René Vallade |
| • Joseph Coté | La Course | Vaudette |
| • John Coxé | Charles Lagasse | Yellow Bird |
| • Crépeau | La Man | Joseph Desjarlais |

The French Canadians and others with David Thompson have similarly been lost from view, apart from some of them being named in his journals, which are only now reaching publication in their entirety. As you can see from this list constructed by my colleague Bruce Watson, they almost all have French Canadian names.

The expeditions headed by the trio of Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson had an unexpected consequence for the North West Company. Its determination to extend the fur trade west of the Rockies proved to be its undoing, for as competition heated up with the Hudson’s Bay Company, the men in charge realized they would all lose out in if they did not merge. In 1821 the North West Company was essentially folded into the Hudson’s Bay Company, which kept on as many employees as it found useful.

Once we move into this time period, unlike the North West Company, routine records survive concerning French Canadians. The Hudson’s Bay Company required men in charge of trading posts to keep daily journals, some of which have been lost but others still exist. The loneliness of life in an indigenous world, such as were trading posts, means that some of these tell us quite a lot about daily lives.

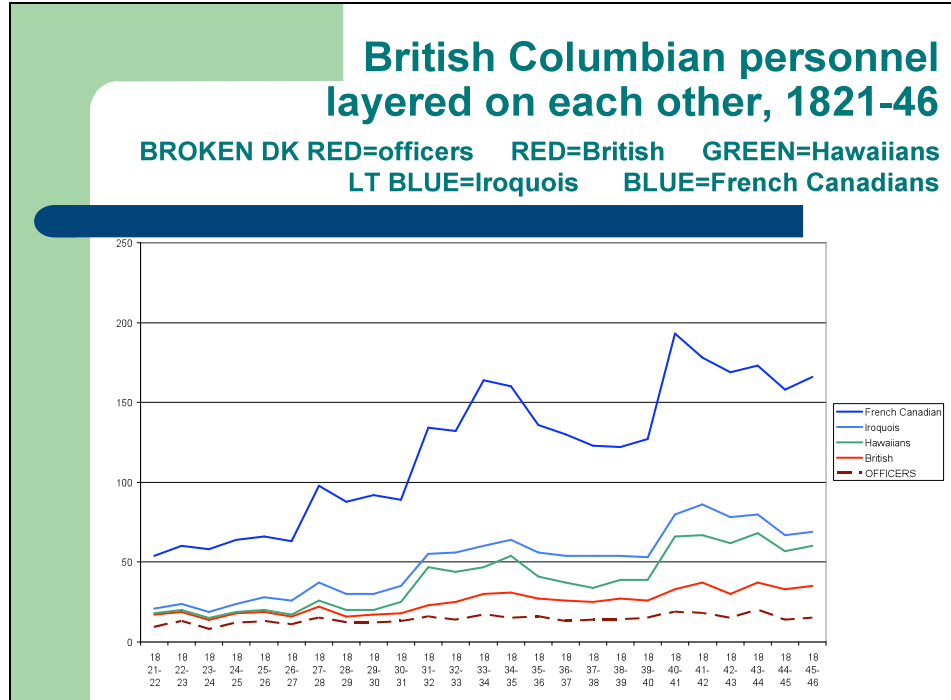
The Hudson’s Bay Company also maintained yearly accounts of all the men in its employ. Bruce Watson has meticulously analyzed these records,²⁷ which permit us to quantify French Canadians in the British Columbia fur trade in the quarter century between the Hudson’s Bay Company taking charge and the boundary settlement, 1821-1846.



These pie charts based on the employment data point up the critical role played by French Canadians in the British Columbia fur trade. Traditionally the Hudson’s Bay Company had relied on men of British background. The longstanding practice was to hire workers in the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland while ships on their way to the Pacific Northwest stopped there for supplies. Many of them were tradesmen, being the blacksmiths, carpenters, and barrel makers who maintained the fixed posts on which the Hudson’s Bay Company depended.

Another group of men in British Columbia were indigenous Hawaiians, a number of whom the Hudson’s Bay Company inherited along with French Canadians on absorbing the North West Company. These men had been hired while ships, due to the prevailing winds, stopped on the Hawaiian Islands for supplies on their way to the Pacific Northwest. The Hudson’s Bay Company continued this practice west of the Rockies, particularly as French Canadians became harder to recruit in the 1830s.

Even when we include the men in charge of the fur trade, known generally as officers and almost always Scots or English, French Canadians were the largest group. If their number be expanded to include Iroquois, hired mostly from just outside of Montreal as *voyageurs*, the proportion of persons speaking French and identifying with Quebec becomes even greater. Not unexpectedly, French was the everyday language of the fur trade in British Columbia.



This line graph layering each group of workers on top of the others gives us another means to measure French Canadian dominance. Like the pie charts, this graph indicates that more French Canadians than the total of all the other groups were employed. It also adds a critical element, which is that the overall work force rose dramatically in the mid 1830s and again in the early 1840s as the Hudson’s Bay Company expanded its operations. Even so, more French Canadians continued to be employed that the total of all other workers. They were recruited in greater numbers, even of the indigenous Hawaiians, which the Hudson’s Bay Company found amenable for the rough work around the posts.

French Canadians were, quite simply, the essential lynchpins of the British Columbian fur trade. They were the principal group at every one of the dozen trading posts around the future province. The other men all played a role, but they formed the core of workers. The four attributes that had long made French Canadians irreplaceable -- skill with water transport, resourcefulness in unfamiliar terrain, pragmatic approach to local people, and reliability in both difficult and monotonous circumstances – continued to operate. As had occurred for generations, some men had been mentored into the trade by their fathers, who likely acquired these skills from their fathers before them; while others were taken in hand by their more experienced counterparts on arriving in British Columbia from Quebec.

It is at first consideration surprising so many men stayed for so long, given how hard the work was, how long the hours, how basic the accommodation, and how low the annual wage. Hired on three-year contracts, men received transportation from and back to the location where they were recruited, basic accommodation, and a weekly ration of potatoes and fish or meat, but clothing, tobacco, and additional foodstuffs such as tea and sugar had to be purchased on credit, to be subtracted from the smallish annual wage. Men who found themselves in debt at the end of their contract, which many of them were, had few options except to continue their employment.

An even more important reason some French Canadians, and other men as well, stayed beyond a single three-year contract had to do with their personal lives. Short or longer term liaisons

with local indigenous women had long been the norm in the fur trade, with some of them verging into family life. Relationships based in the fur trade were consolidated by offspring intermarrying in the second and subsequent generations. Such unions benefited both the fur trade in giving better access to pelts and local people in giving preferred access to trading goods. It was a win/win situation.

We get some sense of this critical aspect of the fur trade from the journal that survives for Fort Langley in the Fraser Valley shortly after it was founded in 1827. There we read how “one of the Engages—Louis Ossin is allowed to take a woman from the [Indian] Camp & each man had a half pint liquor on the occasion in the evening.”²⁸

Such a policy worked. The journal reported in 1830 how “it has had the effect of reconciling the men to the place and removing the inconvenience and indeed the great uncertainty of being able to get them year after year replaced.”²⁹ The head of Fort Langley enthused how, as he put it, “All our Men have taken Women.”³⁰

These human relations, which played themselves out time and again across British Columbia, are a good part of what it was that made French Canadians such reliable employees. Even in the first generation they became committed to place, with sons then following their fathers into the fur trade.

At the same time, even as French Canadians became committed to place, they did not lose touch with their roots. The French language sustained them, and so did the cultural and religious traditions they brought from home. This sense of continuity meant, very importantly, that at the various posts or wherever they were, French Canadians cohered as a group, assisting each other in difficult circumstances, and so compounding the contribution they made as a group to the fur trade.

It was the presence of these everyday people, such as were the French Canadians, that gave the Hudson’s Bay Company its profits, just as it had the North West Company before it. The contribution these profits made to the British economy, as well as the high social positions the men in charge occupied in London, made the company known to the politicians whose determination to protect its new Vancouver Island base ensured that the international boundary would be drawn not at 54°40’ which would have given the entire Pacific Northwest to the United States but rather at 49°. It is in this way, to repeat my main point, that French Canadians saved British Columbia for Canada.

In conclusion, I want us to return to Grace McInnis. She ended her maiden speech in the House of Commons in 1965 as a new MP by describing her ideal Canada, speaking in the French language, as “hous[ing] not only wealthy and influential families but all families down to the smallest farmer and the most humble workers.”³¹

French Canadians in the fur trade for the most part fit Grace McInnis’ description of humble workers, but, as I have suggested here, they were much more than that as well. It was French Canadians who made it possible for the North West Company to extend the fur trade across the Rocky Mountains. The triumphant trio of Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and David Thompson achieved this feat not as single individuals acting on their own, but as part of larger groups of men, primarily French Canadians, who worked together toward a single end.

I am in no way denying the trio their due, but – and this is very important -- they succeeded only because of the support, sustenance, and commitment of the everyday French Canadians who were in their employ. The danger comes in only remembering the heroes, which we do in good part because of the material apparatus that has been constructed around them. Our willingness to take that apparatus at face value as the way things were is made easier by such men echoing in their selves British Columbia’s long lived Anglo-Canadian, English-speaking, Protestant ethos. The historical reality is, when we push the apparatus aside and peak behind it, Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson did not, to make the point literally and figuratively, paddle their own canoes.

French Canadians were equally, or more, indispensable to the Hudson’s Bay Company, which in 1821 took charge in British Columbia. Without their labour, given for the most part without an expectation of its being acknowledged, it is uncertain whether British Columbia would ever have come into existence.

In the long half century from the arrival of the first newcomers overland to British Columbia in 1793 to the boundary settlement of 1846, more French Canadians than any other non-indigenous group crossed the future province. Not only did they travel British Columbia as a matter of course, they gave of their labour and spawned the province’s longest lived settler families. By so doing, they ensured that, when the international border was drawn, it would run, not where in the United States wanted it to be, but where it did go. Without their hard work and determination, Canada today might well not have a Pacific shoreline.

Those historically in charge and then their successors of like mind have for the most part controlled the past’s portrayal. Whether it be French Canadians or other everyday people in the past or, for that matter, in the present, we are too easily distracted by the material apparatus that almost inevitably grows up around the small handful whose names have come down through time. It is not a matter of denying such persons their due, but rather of getting beyond such a singular perspective to a broader view on how it is that all of us influence the course of events. Written, oral, and visual sources survive if we only search them out. Doing so, we come to realize, along with Grace MacInnis, that everyday people matter, and sometimes very much indeed. Only by each and every one of us taking everyday people seriously, both today and in past time, will we effect change. Grace MacInnis tended to everyday people, and so should we.

¹ This talk foreshadows a book manuscript in progress on French Canadians in the making of the Pacific Northwest by Jean Barman and Bruce Watson.

² My terminology borrows from political scientist Alan Whitehorn, the inaugural Woodsworth Chair in the Humanities at Simon Fraser University, who defines Grace MacInnis as “continuing the socialist tradition of both her father and husband” in his foreword to S.P. Lewis, *Grace: The Life of Grace MacInnis* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 1993), 10.

³ On the second point, see Ann Farrell, *Grace MacInnis: A Story of Love and Integrity* (Markham ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1994), 21.

⁴ Grace Woodsworth to Angus MacInnis, fall 1931, quoted in Farrell, *Grace MacInnis*, 70-71.

⁵ Grace MacInnis, quoted in Lewis, *Grace*, 89, also 253.

⁶ Grace MacInnis age 83, c 1988, quoted in Lewis, *Grace*, 88. See also Farrell, *Grace MacInnis*. 95-96.

⁷ Grace MacInnis, 1941, quoted in Lewis, *Grace*, 148.

⁸ “I know myself it was no consolation prize at all,” Grace MacInnis is said to have told a reporter. “I had done enough on my own. I am always very pleased about that because so often, you know, they say, ‘She succeeded because her husband died.’” See Lewis, *Grace*, 261.

⁹ Grace MacInnis said in an interview toward the end of her decade as MP that she considered one of her outstanding achievements to be “to have lived long enough to be standing on my own feet, in my own mind as well as in the public’s mind, and to have emerged from under the shadow of my relatives.” Grace MacInnis talking to Peter Stursberg, quoted in Farrell, *Grace MacInnis*, 96.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Grace*, 262.

¹¹ Jean Barman, *Stanley Park’s Secret: The Forgotten Families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch, and Brockton Point* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2005); and, with Bruce Watson, *Leaving Paradise: Indigenous Hawaiians in the Pacific Northwest, 1787-1898* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).

¹² Jean Barman, *The Remarkable Adventures of Portuguese Joe Silvey* (Madeira Park BC: Harbour, 2004); *Maria Mahoi of the Islands* (Vancouver: New Star, 2004); with Jan Hare. *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Cosby and the Methodist*

Mission on the Northwest Coast (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006); and *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

¹³ Grace MacInnis, CCF Open Forum, Vancouver, April 30, 1945, quoted in Lewis, *Grace*, 177.

¹⁴ Grace MacInnis, talk to CCF at Rio Hall, 3325 Kingsway, Vancouver, autumn 1944, quoted in Lewis, *Grace*, 178, also 186.

¹⁵ Alexander Mackenzie, July 22, 1793, in W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), 278.

¹⁶ Alexander Mackenzie, in Lamb, ed., *Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, 256.

¹⁷ Alexander Mackenzie, May 9, 1793, in Lamb, ed., *Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, 257.

¹⁸ Alexander Mackenzie, June 21, 1793, in Lamb, ed., *Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, 315.

¹⁹ Alexander Mackenzie, July 2, 1793, in Lamb, ed., *Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, 336.

²⁰ For example, Alexander Mackenzie, July 4, 1793, in Lamb, ed., *Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie*, 339.

²¹ See W. Kaye Lamb, “Simon Fraser,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* on line, and the introduction to Lamb, ed., *Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser 1806-1808*, esp. 15-30.

²² July 6, 1808, in Lamb, ed., *Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser*, 113.

²³ July 16, 1808, in Lamb, ed., *Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser*, 120.

²⁴ Lamb, ed., *Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser*, 19.

²⁵ Lamb, “Simon Fraser,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, on line.

²⁶ Stephen Hume, *Simon Fraser: In Search of Modern British Columbia* (Madeira Park: Harbour, 2008).

²⁷ See Bruce Watson, *Lives Lived West of the Divide: A Biographical Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies 1793-1858* (Kelowna: Centre for Social, Spatial, and Economic Justice, UBC Okanagan, forthcoming).

²⁸ February 28, 1829, in Morag Maclachlan, ed., *The Fort Langley Journals, 1827-30* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 99.

²⁹ Archibald McDonald, Report, February 25, 1830, reproduced in Maclachlan, *Fort Langley Journals*, 222.

³⁰ McDonald, Report, February 25, 1830, reproduced in Maclachlan, *Fort Langley Journals*, 222.

³¹ Gloria MacInnis, maiden speech in Parliament, January 24, 1966, quoted in Lewis, *Grace*, 263. She strongly supported the Official Languages Act of 1969 (291).