

# Hardy Backwoodsmen, Wholesome Women, Steady Families:

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## Immigration and the Construction of White Society in Colonial British Columbia

### A Timeline of BC's Colonial Period

- ❖ Late 1700s, Hudson's Bay Company begins trading with the linguistically, culturally, and politically diverse First Nations peoples densely populating the lands that would come to be called British Columbia.
- ❖ 1849, colonial authority formally established with Vancouver Island being declared a British colony.
- ❖ 1858, the discovery of gold on the Fraser River leads to the Fraser River Gold Rush and a second colony being declared on the mainland called British Columbia. James Douglas appointed Governor.
- ❖ 1862-1863, the Cariboo Gold Rush.
- ❖ 1862, an "apocalyptic" smallpox epidemic hits, leading to massive depopulation among Indigenous communities, though they remain a firm majority of those living on the land.
- ❖ 1866, the two colonies merge under the name of British Columbia.
- ❖ 1871, British Columbia enters Canadian confederation as a province, ending the colonial period.

### A "Not Very White" Colony

BC's settler population never rivaled the Indigenous population during the colonial period. By the early 1870s, the Indigenous peoples still outnumbered settlers 4-to-1.

More than that, the settlers themselves were consistently diverse. Chinese, African-American, Latino, and Kanaka (Hawaiian) settlers all had a significant presence, as did Jews and continental Europeans, neither of whom fit neatly into the British conception of whiteness at the time which was frequently limited to "Anglo-Saxons."

This relatively small number of predominantly male settlers living amongst a large Indigenous society made relationships between Indigenous women and white, settler men quite common, further lending to the diversity and hybridity of the colony.

### James Douglas as a Colonial Authority

Douglas was himself a "hybrid figure," with a "creole" mother and a Scottish father, and was married to the half-Cree Amelia Connolly. He encouraged the migration of mainly middle-class African Americans in 1858. He also opposed the eviction of Northern Indigenous peoples who had gathered outside Victoria, (Including the Nisga'a, Hieltsuk, Nexalk, Kwakwaka'wakw, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian) but did so by proposing schemes of moral and social regulation of those peoples, with the argument that their potential to serve as a colonial labour force made them valuable to whites.

So, while Douglas's governorship can be seen as evidence of the diversity of the colony, it is also evident that he acted explicitly in support of the settler colonial agenda.

### Colonial Ambitions

For colonial promoters (a term used to refer to a loose collection of journalists, politicians, officials, missionaries, and like-minded others), immigration was seen as a tool to dispossess Indigenous peoples and establish a stable, white, and explicitly gendered settler society in their place.

For them, immigration was a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, one that would nurture white migration while minimizing non-white settlers, and marginalizing First Nations peoples. As such, promoters called for targeted immigration of imagined white archetypes which they thought would lead to their white supremacist vision of colonial settlement: "Hardy Backwoodsmen," "Wholesome Women," and "Steady Families."

## Gendered Roles in the Colonial Scheme

Colonies of settlement are defined by their racialized reproductive and gendered character. That colonizers settle implies more than residence. It denotes a structure of power dependent on the literal reproduction of those colonizers. Immigration is then meant to provide more than non-Indigenous bodies; it is meant to provide the right kind of bodies, namely those gendered bodies suited to building a white settler colony.

### The Role of Women

Imperial discourse accorded white women a special role as "harbingers of empire." These "Wholesome Women" were cast as essential to the colonial project not just because of their role in the reproduction of a white society, but also for their assumed moral purity which was thought to be the best way to ensure men's proper behaviour.

These two prescribed traits combine into the idea that white women, as white men's "natural" objects of desire, would draw them away from the "temptations" of Indigenous women.

This discourse held that white women's contribution lay not in their own actions, but in their ability to influence and transform otherwise troublesome untethered, single white men into suitably settled and productive members of the white settler colony.

### The Role of Men

The role ascribed to white men was that of the "Hardy Backwoodsman," a steady, hardworking man, especially a farmer, looking to permanently settle in British Columbia.

This was held up in contrast to the miners, who were seen as "wandering, immoral, and anti-social", as well as so-called "croakers." A "croaker" was a man cast as bourgeois, lazy, and effeminate, unwilling to put in the hard work needed for the colony to prosper.

These "Hardy Backwoodsmen" were to establish homesteads that would dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands and put those lands to work in furtherance of the colony's economic prosperity. His finding a "Wholesome Woman" to marry would then ensure that the land he cultivated would remain in white hands in perpetuity.

### The Realities of Immigration

Immigration in the colonial period rarely lived up to the expectations of colonial promoters. British Columbia consistently struggled to attract white immigrants until the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railroad in 1886. The railroad's ability to bring great numbers of white immigrants to BC was likely one of the driving factors behind BC joining Confederation.

Even when promoters arranged for the immigration of people who they thought would fulfill their imagined archetypes, they rarely acted in the ways that the promoters imagined once they arrived.

One example of this mismatch with on-the-ground reality is the so-called "bride ships" which brought over roughly a hundred working-class young women, mostly teenagers, supposedly as domestic servants, but whose real destiny lay in the marriage market. These young women ultimately unsettled the colonial project rather than securing it, acting as the single, working-class women that they were rather than the beacons of imperial morality that they had been imagined to be.

People immigrated for their own reasons and although the colonial context made them a part of the imperial project, using immigration as a tool for establishing inclusions and exclusions, immigration did not always operate in predictable ways. In fact, it could be said that immigration nurtured British Columbia's hybridity more than it challenged it.