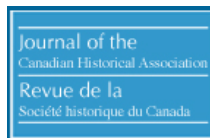


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After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-1890

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article remet en question l'idée longtemps admise qu'avec le déclin de la traite des fourrures les peuples autochtones auraient été laissés de côté par le développement économique si bien que l'industrialisation de la Colombie-Britannique se serait effectuée sans eux. Pourtant, entre le moment de la fondation de la colonie de l'Île de Vancouver en 1849 et celui de l'achèvement du chemin de fer du Canadien Pacifique, les autochtones constituaient non seulement la majorité de la population du territoire actuel de la province mais encore le plus gros contingent de la force de travail dans les secteurs de l'agriculture, de la pêche, de la trappe et des industries du secteur primaire.

After the fur trade: the aboriginal labouring class of British Columbia 1849-1890

JOHN LUTZ

Résumé

This paper challenges the long-standing view that aboriginal people were by-standers in the economic development and industrialization of British Columbia outside, and after, the fur trade. From the establishment of the Colony of Vancouver Island in 1849, through Confederation in 1871 and to the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, aboriginal people comprised the majority of the population in present-day British Columbia, and the majority of the work force in agriculture, fishing, trapping and the burgeoning primary industries.

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Cet article remet en question l'idée longtemps admise qu'avec le déclin de la traite des fourrures les peuples autochtones auraient été laissés de côté par le développement économique si bien que l'industrialisation de la Colombie-Britannique se serait effectuée sans eux. Pourtant, entre le moment de la fondation de la colonie de l'Île de Vancouver en 1849 et celui de l'achèvement du chemin de fer du Canadien Pacifique, les autochtones constituaient non seulement la majorité de la population du territoire actuel de la province mais encore le plus gros contingent de la force de travail dans les secteurs de l'agriculture, de la pêche, de la trappe et des industries du secteur primaire.

Aboriginal history is usually considered in isolation from mainstream Canadian history as though it were about aboriginal people and nobody else. But the major issues of native studies — such as the appropriation of aboriginal land and resources, the denial of citizenship rights to a large segment of the Canadian population, the conditions under which aboriginal people would agree to trap, hunt or do wage-work for a capitalist economy — are major issues of national development and central to Canadian history.

This paper takes up questions about aboriginal wage labour and applies them to a forty-year period on the west coast of North America from the creation of the Colony of Vancouver Island in 1849, through the gold rushes, the founding of the giant export

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sawmills, Confederation, the development and spread of the salmon canning industry, to just past the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, an event which tied the province of British Columbia to the North American continental economy. Throughout this period aboriginal people in British Columbia comprised the majority of the population. Despite introduced diseases which reduced the aboriginal population by approximately two thirds, when British Columbia entered Confederation in 1871 it was in many important respects an "aboriginal province" — there were three times as many aboriginal people as all the non-aboriginals taken together.¹

Although one might suppose historians would have turned their attention to the majority before beginning to examine minority groups, in British Columbia historiography the reverse has happened: only a few historians, notably Robin Fisher and Rolf Knight, have given their attention to the majority population in this era.² Most general accounts follow Fisher's pioneering work on aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations which argued that aboriginal peoples retained control of their lives during the fur trade, and had considerable influence over the trade itself. Fisher states that, with the gold-rush, the colonies which comprise modern British Columbia changed from "colonies of exploitation, which made use of indigenous manpower, to colonies of settlement, where the Indians became at best, irrelevant."³ By contrast, this paper argues that aboriginal people were not made irrelevant by the coming of settlement. In fact, they were the main labour force of the early settlement era, essential to the capitalist development of British Columbia. With other recent scholarship, this paper takes a step towards rediscovering the largest component of British Columbia's early labouring class, and highlighting one element — paid work — of the lives of the majority aboriginal population.⁴

Even in the 1860s opinion among white notables was divided about the usefulness and importance of aboriginal people to the British Columbia economy. While Charles Forbes' 1862 guide to Vancouver Island argued resolutely that "their labour cannot be depended on, and with one or two slight exceptions at present forms no point of consideration in the labour market," and A. A. Harvey described aboriginal people as

1. A fuller discussion of population estimates is taken up in Appendix 1.
2. Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver, 1977); Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver, 1978).
3. Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 96, 109, 111. For other statements along these lines see David McNally, "Political Economy Without a Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail* 25 (Spring 1990): 220n; Paul Phillips, "Confederation and the Economy of British Columbia," in W. George Shelton, ed., *British Columbia and Confederation* (Victoria, 1967), 59; Martin Robin, *The Rush for the Spoils: The Company Province 1871-1933* (Toronto, 1972), 30.
4. Alicja Muszynski, "Major Processors to 1940 and the Early Labour Force: Historical Notes," in Patricia Marchak et al., eds., *UnCommon Property: The Fishing and Fish Processing Industries in British Columbia* (Agincourt, Ont., 1987), 46-65; Richard Mackie, "Colonial Land, Indian Labour and Company Capital: The Economy of Vancouver Island, 1849-1858," (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1985); James K. Burrows, "'A Much Needed Class of Labour': The Economy and Income of the Southern Interior Plateau Indians, 1897-1910," *BC Studies* 71 (1986): 27-46.

“valueless in the labour market,”⁵ in his 1871 report on British Columbia the federal minister of public works observed that “the Indians have been, and still are, and will long continue an important population for [British] Columbia, in the capacity of guides, porters and labourers.”⁶

Who was right? Were aboriginal people “valueless in the labour market” or “an important population of . . . labourers”? How important was their labour to British Columbia’s 19th century economy? How important was wage and contract labour to the aboriginal economy? What motivated aboriginal people to join the early paid labour force?⁷ Who, and how many, were recruited? Based on a varied sample of aboriginal voices captured in biographies, ethnographies, and in letters to government and church officials, as well as the correspondence of colonial officials, fur traders, missionaries and travellers together with the records of the Department of Indian Affairs, this paper not only attempts to answer these questions, but in doing so provides a fresh perspective from which to view the early years of capitalist development in British Columbia.

LABOURERS OF THE ABORIGINAL PROVINCE

Of the 34,600 or so inhabitants of the Colony of Vancouver Island and its adjacent islands and shores in 1855, all but 774 were aboriginal. Outside the colony there were probably an additional 25,000-30,000 aboriginal people living in the remainder of what became British Columbia. This vast population was extremely heterogeneous, both culturally and historically. It was comprised of ten distinct nations or ethnic groups, speaking twenty-six distinct, and largely mutually unintelligible, languages. Each nation had its own customary laws that defined property rights, social and gender relations, and by 1849 each village had its own history of relationships with non-aboriginal people or their trade goods.⁸

Victoria, the west-coast headquarters for the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) became the capital when the colony was established in 1849. As the largest community of non-aboriginal people north of Oregon, it became “the great emporium” for aboriginal people from all over the Pacific Northwest, from Russian America (Alaska) down. The mass migrations to Victoria began in the summer of 1853, when Governor Douglas reported a gathering of 3,000 “Indians” at a potlatch hosted by the local Songhees people living across the harbour.⁹ The next year aboriginal people from “all parts of

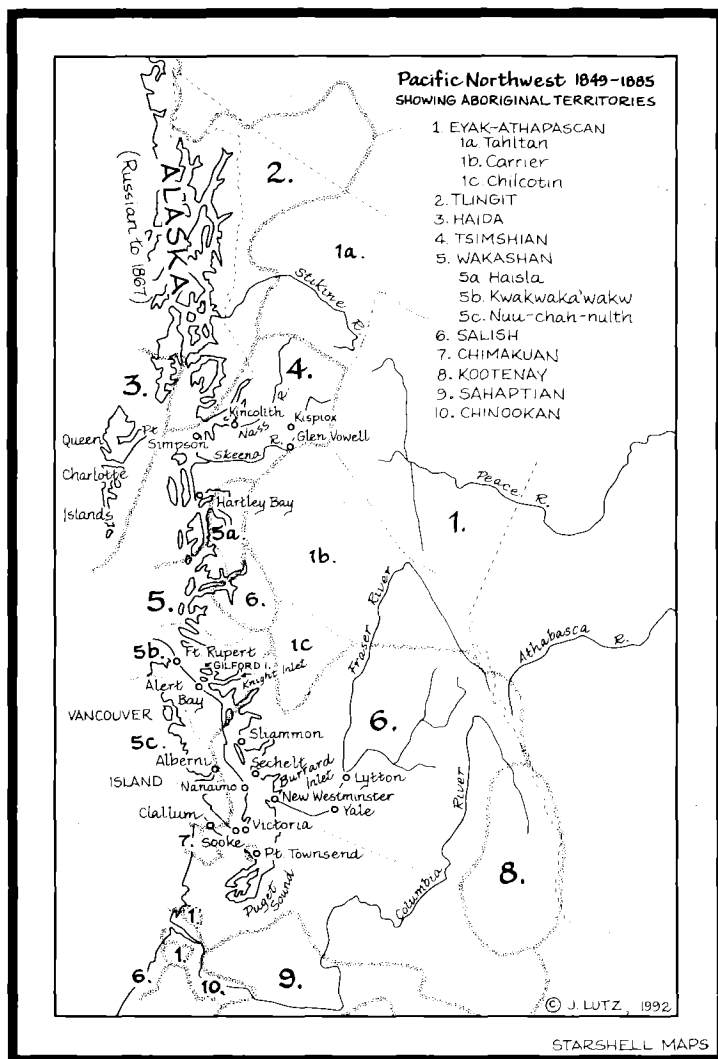
5. Charles Forbes, *Vancouver Island, its Resources and Capabilities as a Colony* (London, 1862), 25; A. A. Harvey, *A Statistical Account of British Columbia* (Ottawa, 1867), 9.

6. H. L. Langevin, *British Columbia: Report of the Hon. H. L. Langevin* (Ottawa, 1872), 28; A. C. Anderson, *Dominion on the West* (Victoria, 1872), 80.

7. For simplicity’s sake, I have combined in the term ‘paid labour’: wage work, (whether paid in kind, scrip, or cash,) piece work, and independent commodity production (hand logging for example), although each system produced its own set of social relations.

8. For an introduction see William C. Sturtivant, *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, D.C.), vols. 4, 6, 7. For population estimates see Appendix 1.

9. The Songhees, a band of the Coast Salish, were an amalgamation of several nearby villages that relocated to a site across the harbour from Fort Victoria after the latter was founded in 1843.



the mainland coast south of Cape Spencer, in north latitude 59 degrees'' dropped in on Victoria itself. Annually, from 1853 through the 1880s, 2,000-4,000 aboriginal people canoed their way to Victoria to trade or spend part of the year, travelling as far as 800 miles to do so.

Why did thousands of aboriginal people, between 5 and 10 per cent of the whole aboriginal population north of Puget Sound, paddle so far to visit a community that in

1855 numbered only 232¹⁰ Trading was undoubtedly a major attraction — the variety in Victoria was greater, alcohol was more easily available, and the prices of goods were perhaps better than at closer trading posts; and in the beginning at least curiosity to see this alien community was, no doubt, another factor.

There was nevertheless a third and key reason why aboriginal people returned year after year. As Governor Douglas explained in his dispatches to the Colonial Office, he was not unduly alarmed about being out-numbered ten-to-one during these seasonal visits by “ignorant and barbarous people. . . . For the object of the Indians in visiting this place is not to make War upon the White man, but to benefit by his presence, by selling their Furs and other commodities.”¹¹

One of the commodities aboriginal people sold was labour, a practice well established as early as 1853, when Douglas had reported that “a great part of the agricultural labour of the colony, is at present performed by means of the Natives, who though less skilled and industrious than the white men, work at a comparatively much cheaper rate, so that on the whole, they are exceedingly useful to the colonists.”¹² Indeed, nearly all early accounts mention the hiring of aboriginal labour. The first *bona fide* colonist, W. C. Grant, hired aboriginal people on his farm and reported in 1853 that “with the proper superintendence [they] are capable of being made very useful. They all live by fishing but take kindly to any kind of rough agricultural employment, though their labour is not to be depended on for any continuous period.” Similarly, colonist J. S. Helmcken used Indians “chiefly from the north” to clear land for his home, while the colony itself paid “scores of Indians” in HBC blankets to clear the land around the surveyors office and to build roads. The Puget Sound Agricultural Company also hired aboriginal labour on their farms, and by 1857 missionary William Duncan observed that around Victoria “most of the Farm Servants employed here . . . are Chimsyan (Tsimshian) Indians — and they all give them a good character.”¹³

The issue of wage labour was raised formally when, at the start of his 1856 seasonal visit, Douglas called the chiefs together and “spoke to them seriously on the subject of their relations with the whites, and their duties to the public, and after exacting a pledge for the good behaviour of their respective Tribes, **I gave them permission to hire**

10. Great Britain. Colonial Office, Original Correspondence, Vancouver Island, 1846-1867, (CO) 305/6, 10048, Governor James Douglas to Russell, 21 August 1855. Colonial Office correspondence (with a CO number) cited here was made available to me by James Hendrickson from his unpublished manuscript “Vancouver Island: Colonial Correspondence Dispatches.”

11. CO 305/14, 9267, Douglas to Colonial Office, 8 August 1860.

12. CO 305/4, 9499, Douglas to Newcastle, 28 July 1853.

13. The Tsimshian were from the Skeena River area around Fort Simpson; William Duncan, “Journal”, 11 July 1857, cited in Jean Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia* (Ottawa, 1974), 40; W. C. Grant in William Grew Hazlitt, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London, 1858), 179; Dorothy B. Smith, *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken* (Vancouver, 1975), 134.

themselves out as labourers to the white settlers, and for the public works in progress." He reported at the end of August that "the greater number of those people have lately departed **with their earnings** to their distant homes, and will not return to Vancouver's Island, before the spring of 1856; those who still remain about the settlements will spend the winter here. . . ."¹⁴

Although the economies of the aboriginal peoples varied from the coast to the interior and even within these divisions, generally they were based on a seasonal migration cycle from permanent winter villages to harvesting sites for fishing in the fall, hunting and trapping in winter, and harvesting roots and berries in the summer. From 1853 onwards, however, a spring and summer visit to Victoria became a part of the seasonal cycle, and those who could not find work in Victoria often continued south into the American territory of Puget Sound. John Fornsby, a Coast Salish living in Puget Sound first saw these "Northern Indians" when 40-50 of them came to work at a Puget Sound sawmill around 1858, while James Swan wrote from Port Townsend that the Northern Indians "yearly come to Victoria and whenever they get a chance, come over here to work — the men at our mills or among the farmers, where they prove themselves faithful and efficient; and the women, by their cleanly habits, their bright dresses and hoop skirts . . . winning the hearts or purses of the bachelors."¹⁵ Others, who did not join the migration, found work closer to their own villages in the expanding activities of the Hudson's Bay Company posts, cutting shingles, spars, picking cranberries, harvesting ice, as well as gardening, fishing, preserving food, and doing general construction.¹⁶

While the summer migrants from the north worked on the farms and public works, some of the local Songhees people became established in year-round employment in the homes of the better-off colonists as servants and cooks. Reverend Staines wrote in 1852 that his Indian servant procured meat each day by trading with other Indians, and that he was teaching his Indian cook how to prepare beef, mutton and venison. Other aboriginal people supplied venison, partridges, salmon, potatoes and berries to the colonists, as well as shingles, lathes, mats and baskets.¹⁷

With the 1858 gold rush and the consequent growth of Victoria came even more opportunities for work, and by 1860 whole villages might be deserted for the capital. Making for the Queen Charlotte islands in the *Alert*, James Cooper met the entire population of Masset heading for Victoria. At Skidegate, meanwhile, Chief "Estercana"

14. CO 305/6, 10048, Douglas to Lord Russell, 21 August 1855; CO 305/4, 12345, Douglas to Newcastle, 24 October 1853, emphasis mine.

15. June Collins, "John Fornsby: The Personal Document of A Coast Salish Indian," in Marian Smith, ed., *Indians in the Urban Northwest* (New York, 1949), 301; "Northern Indians," *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* (October 4, 1860) reprinted in James Swan, *Almost Out of This World* (Tacoma, 1971), 99; CO 305/7, 3963, Douglas to Sir George Grey, 1 March 1856; and CO 305/7 5814, 10 April 1856.

16. Mackie, "Colonial Land, Indian Labour."

17. CO 305/3, Rev. R. J. Staines to Thomas Boys, 6 July 1852; Smith, *Reminiscences*, 134; CO/305/3 Douglas to Earl Grey, 31 October 1851.

asked the officials to "tell Mr Doouglas and the man-of-war to send my people home; I wanted to build a house this summer [but] nearly all my people are away at Victoria."¹⁸ That summer, the governor reported over 4,000 visiting Indians at Victoria, double the number of non-aboriginal inhabitants in the town.¹⁹ Despite the large gold-induced increase in the non-aboriginal population, Douglas was still not concerned about its relations with the majority. "When not under the influence of intoxication," he told the Colonial Office in 1860, "[the aboriginal people] are quiet and well conducted, make good servants and by them is executed a large proportion of the menial, agricultural, and shipping labour of the Colony. Besides their value as labourers they are of value commercially as consumers of food and clothing. . . ."²⁰ He was not alone in his view. The *San Francisco Times*, for example, described the Indians around gold-rush Victoria as "industrious," which "alone establishes their superiority to the California aborigines."²¹ Moreover, it was not just Victoria that felt their presence, as aboriginal people were also relocating seasonally, or even for several years, to the gold-mining communities of Fort Hope, Lytton, Yale, and New Westminster, the capital of the new colony of British Columbia.²²

Despite claims by historians, aboriginal people were not made redundant by the influx of non-aboriginals to the gold fields, just less visible in the increasingly polyglot society of the colonies. Nor had they been bystanders as gold and coal became focal points of the economy of the Pacific Northwest between the 1840s and 1880s: in both cases, aboriginal people were the discoverers and the first miners, and they continued to work the mines throughout the century.

Coal was first discovered by aboriginal people on northern Vancouver Island. In 1846 the Royal Navy vessel *Cormorant* stopped there and "with the assistance of the Indians they collected about 60 tons."²³ The Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) at this site

18. British Columbia Archives and Record Services (BCARS), Colonial Correspondence, F347/26a James Cooper, "Report by the Harbor Master at Esquimalt to the Acting Colonial Secretary"; Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla*, 58.
19. CO 305/14, 9267, Douglas to Colonial Office, 8 August 1860.
20. CO 305/14, 8319, Douglas to Colonial Office, 7 July 1860. One major change during the gold rush was that aboriginal labour was increasingly being paid in cash instead of goods. Previously the goods most sought after as pay were blankets, which were commonly used as 'potlatch' gifts.
21. *San Francisco Times* (August 27, 1858) in Hazlitt, *British Columbia*, 208, 215. See also Robin Fisher, "Joseph Trutch and the Indian Land Policy," in W. P. Ward and R. A. J. McDonald, eds., *British Columbia: Historical Readings* (Vancouver, 1981), 155; Sophia Cracroft, *Lady Franklin Visits the Pacific Northwest: February to April 1861 and April to July 1870* (Victoria, 1974), 79.
22. Cracroft estimates 1,000 aboriginal people living at Yale in 1861 and mentions that some were engaged as servants, *Lady Franklin*, 53-3; at Lytton, the population of 250 was 80 percent aboriginal and "the Indians . . . very industrious and peaceable. Their chief employment is gold mining and packing supplies to and from the interior with their own horses of which they have in great numbers," *Lovell's Gazetteer 1870-3*, 181; Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 111.
23. James Douglas to the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, 7 December 1846, in Hartwell Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters 1846-1851* (Winnipeg, 1979), 4.

told the HBC that "they would not permit us to work the coal as they were valuable to them, but that they would labor in the mines themselves and sell to us the produce of their exertions."²⁴ Between 1849, when the HBC established Fort Rupert at the coal mines, and 1851 when the seam was exhausted, the Kwakwaka'wakw people mined 3,650 tons of coal for which they were paid the handsome price of "one blanket 2½ pt.s or equivalent in Grey Cotton for every two tons delivered at the Fort."²⁵

Starting in 1852, the Fort Rupert experience was repeated in Nanaimo after trader Joe McKay, and then Governor Douglas, were led to various seams of coal by the local people. Douglas sent the HBC's *Cadboro* to the spot "and succeeded in procuring, with the assistance of Indians, about 50 tons of coal in one day." "The natives," he reported, "who are now indefatigable in their researches for Coal, lately discovered a magnificent seam over six feet in depth. . . . Such places are left entirely to the Indians, who work, with a surprising degree of industry, and dispose of the coal to the Agents of the Hudson's Bay Company for clothing and other articles of European manufacture."²⁶

With the removal of the surface coal and the need to dig shafts and use pumps, the Hudson's Bay Company brought skilled miners from Great Britain. However, as Douglas noted in 1857, aboriginal people remained crucial to the underground operations:

The want of Indian labor is certainly a great inconvenience for the miners but really they must learn to be independent of Indians for our work will otherwise be subject to continual stoppage.²⁷

In the 1850s the coal mines regularly stopped production when the local people went to their seasonal fisheries, potlatched, or were attacked by illness. Although partly displaced by Chinese labour in the various coal mines that subsequently sunk shafts around Nanaimo, in 1877 it was noted that "the Nanaimo Indians . . . have hitherto been chiefly employed about the coal mines as labourers." In 1882 the Indian Agent overseeing Nanaimo noted that the aboriginal people there "find constant employment at the coal mines and wharves" and in 1888 "many Indians are again working at the coal mines at Nanaimo, taking the place of the Chinese; the fear of accident by explosions deterred them for some time, but now the high wages paid has attracted them again to the mines."²⁸

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24. E. E. Rich, ed., *The Letters of John McLoughlin from Fort Vancouver. . . , 1825-1838* (Winnipeg, 1941), 335.
 25. The reference is to a blanket of 2½ points specifying a particular quality of blanket. Douglas to the Governor and Committee, 3 September 1849, 3 April and 16 November 1850 in Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, 46, 84, 132; William Burrill, "Class Conflict and Colonialism: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island During the Hudson's Bay Company Era, 1848-1862" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1987), 54.
 26. CO 305/3, 10199, Douglas to Pakington, 28 August 1852; also CO 305/3, 933, 11 November 1852.
 27. Douglas to Stuart, 22 August 1857 in Burrill, "Class Conflict," 127.
 28. Canada. Parliament, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers*, (hereafter Canada, *SP*) 1878, 8, lx; 1883, 54; 1889, 13, 100-102. The 1877 annual report of the B.C. Minister Mines records 51 Indians working as coal-miners in the Nanaimo plus an unrecorded number work-

Gold, meanwhile, was first offered to the HBC in trade by the Haidas of the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1851, and in the mid-1850s by the Interior Salish of the Fraser and Thompson Valleys. In both cases white men were "obstructed by the natives in all their attempts to search for gold" and "when [the whites] did succeed in removing the surface and excavating to the depth of the auriferous stratum, they were quietly hustled and crowded by the natives who . . . proceeded to reap the fruits of their labours."²⁹ In 1858, however, some 30,000 non-aboriginals surged into the Fraser Valley and up the Thompson, completely overwhelming the few thousand aboriginal inhabitants, who continued to work alongside them. In 1858 James Moore reported that the "whole tribe of Yale Indians moved down from Yale and camped on Hill's bar, about three hundred men, women and children, and they also commenced to wash for gold" and Governor Douglas reported that "it is impossible to get Indian labor at present, as they are all busy mining, and make between two and three dollars a day each man."³⁰

Within the decade the gold rushes had passed and while most of the aliens had abandoned the diggings, aboriginal people continued to include gold mining as part of their modified seasonal cycle. In 1871 Alfred Selwyn of the Geological Survey of Canada remarked that "nearly all the Indians of the Fraser above Yale have now become gold washers. They return to the same spot on the river year after year, at the season of lowest water, to wash the sands, and, it is asserted, can almost always earn for a day's labour from one to two dollar's worth of gold." The next year the *Victoria Colonist* reported that "from \$15,000-\$20,000 is annually contributed to the wealth of the Province by mining on the Thompson and Fraser Rivers, which is carried on almost exclusively by the Natives at low water."³¹ The Indian agents and the mining department regularly recorded the bands along the Fraser and Thompson panning gold into the twentieth century.³² In addition to mining, many bands along the Fraser, Thompson and Nicola rivers took up packing supplies as a vocation. Chief Justice Begbie, who travelled this circuit, recalled that "no supplies were taken in [to the gold districts] except by Indians . . . Without them . . . the country could not have been entered or supplied in 1858-1860."³³

ing as miner's helpers. These annual reports show some aboriginal people working in the coal mines into the twentieth century. British Columbia. Legislative Assembly, *Sessional Papers*, (hereafter BC, SP) 1877, 617.

29. Quote from CO 305/3, 3742, Douglas to Earl Grey, 29 January 1852; CO 305/3, 9263, Staines to Boys, 6 July 1852; CO 305/3, Douglas to Earl Grey, 31 October 1851; CO 305/3, 8866, Captain A. L. Kuper to Admiralty, 20 July 1852; CO 305/9, 5180, Douglas to Labouchere, 6 April 1858.
30. James Douglas, in T. A. Rickard, "Indian Participation in the Gold Discoveries," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 2 (1938): 13; and *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 3 (1938) 218. There are other estimates of between 200 and 500 aboriginal people mining at Hill's Bar compared to 50-60 white miners in Hazelton, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 137.
31. Alfred C. Selwyn, "Journal and Report of Preliminary Explorations in British Columbia," *Report of Progress for 1871-72* (Ottawa, 1872), 56; *Victoria Colonist* (26 November 1872).
32. Canada, SP 1886, 4, 87-92; BC, SP 1900, 724.
33. M. B. Begbie in Langevin, *British Columbia*, 27.

Besides mining and packing, the aboriginal people of the southern Interior took up farming on their own behalf and worked as farm labour for others. In 1874 the Catholic missionary C. J. Grandidier wrote from Kamloops that "The Indians in this part of the country are now quite awake to the necessity of working, of following the examples of the whites, they look to the future and are afraid for their children's sake if they do not work." Acting on behalf of the people of the Fraser valley Alexis, chief of Cheam, asked the Indian agent for advance warning if he visited "in order to unite our people who are now a little dispersed as they are working for the whites."³⁴ "Every Indian . . . who could and would work — and they were numerous," the provincial attorney general recalled in 1875:

was employed in almost every branch of industrial and domestic life, at wages which would appear excessively high in England or in Canada. From becoming labourers, some of the Natives . . . engaged on their own account in stock breeding, in river boating, and in 'packing', as it is termed, as carriers of merchandise by land and water; while others followed fishing and hunting with more vigour than formerly to supply the wants of the incoming population. The Government frequently employed those living in the interior as police, labourers, servants, and as messengers entrusted with errands of importance.³⁵

Did they also engage in more industrial pursuits? Martin Robin has argued that "it was not merely the shrinking numbers . . . which accounted for the low participation of the Indians in the new industrial system. By inclination and habit, the Indian did not fit the industrial mould. His customary and casual and seasonal work schedule hardly prepared him for the discipline, pace and rhythm of industrial employment."³⁶ Yet, the evidence shows aboriginal people were among the region's first factory workers.

The 'modern' factory arrived on Vancouver Island in 1861 when Captain Stamp commenced operation of the largest sawmill on the west coast of North America, a steam-powered facility that cost \$120,000 to build and was eventually capable of cutting 100,000 feet of lumber a day. For the Tseshaht people of the Alberni Inlet, where the mill was located, the industrial revolution arrived at the end of a cannon. When the white labourers arrived to set up the mill they chose the site where the local people were camped. The mill's operators were satisfied that they had 'bought' the site from the local people for "Some 50 blankets, muskets, molasses and food, trinkets etc. . . ." but the Tseshaht clearly had a different view of the transaction than the mill owners — they refused to leave. They were introduced to capitalist property relations when the mill managers trained their cannons on them.³⁷ Ultimately they agreed to move, and when

34. Canada. National Archives (NA), RG10, Department of Indian Affairs, Vol. 1001, items 82, 186, C. J. Grandidier to I. W. Powell, 2 July 1874 and Alexis to James Lenihan, 5 September 1875.

35. BC, *SP* 1875, George Walkem, "Report of the Government of British Columbia on the Subject of Indian Reserves," 3.

36. Robin, *The Rush for the Spoils*, 30.

37. BCARS, Colonial Correspondence, File 107/5, W. E. Banfield to the Colonial Secretary, 6 September 1860, from Lorne Hammond, unpublished manuscript on W. E. Banfield; James Morton, *The Enterprising Mr. Moody and the Bumptious Captain Stamp* (Vancouver, 1977), 22-3; H. C. Langely, *Pacific Coast Directory for 1867* (San Francisco, 1867), 158.

they returned to the mill site it was as workers. The mill manager subsequently recorded that when he "first employed Indians at Alberni, the price of their labour was two blankets and rations of bisquits and molasses for a month's work for each man, if he worked the whole time." One source reports that over its operation, the mill paid out close to \$30,000 in wages, and a considerable portion of that was likely paid to the local Tseshah people.³⁸

Two more giant export sawmills were established on Burrard Inlet between 1863 and 1867. Both rivalled the Alberni mill in size, but unlike their predecessor, they continued to operate into the next century. Together, these mills were the largest industrial operations in the colonies, each employing between 75-100 mill hands, exclusive of loggers and longshoremen.³⁹ As with other settlements around the colonies, whole aboriginal communities relocated to the sawmills, and in Burrard Inlet, most of the workers inside and outside the factory were aboriginal.

"While Europeans or at least Whites fill the responsible posts," geologist George Dawson observed in 1875, "Indians [Squa'mich], Chinamen, Negroes & Mulattoes & Half breeds & Mongrels of every pedigree abound." That year George Walkem, Attorney General of British Columbia, wrote that "our lumber mills alone pay about 130 Indian employ  es over \$40,000 annually. Each individual receives from \$20 to \$30 per month and board." Recalling this period R. H. Alexander wrote: "Our mill hands were largely composed of runaway sailors and Indians and I have known the mill to shut down for several days because all the hands were engaged in an interesting poker game." By 1877 the Indian commissioner for the province found it "difficult to imagine" what "indeed in any part of the Province . . . the miner, the trader and the farmer, the manufacturer, the coast navigator, or almost any other vocation would do without the assistance of the Indian element."⁴⁰

Inquiring into the income of the Musqueam band that worked in the Burrard Inlet the Indian Reserve Commission reported in 1877 that from the "saw mills and other concomitant interests . . . a sum variously computed at from \$80,000 to \$100,000 finds its way annually into the hands of the natives. The mill owners, too, and the shipping frequenting the mills, are benefitting by a corresponding degree, by having a local source of labour constantly available." The Indian Commissioner remarked that in 1881 aboriginal sawmill workers were preferred to whites, and workers of both races earned up to \$2.50 per day.⁴¹ (For comparison of wage rates see appendix II).

38. G. M. Sproat, *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life* (London, 1868, reprinted in Victoria, 1989), 40; G. W. Taylor, *Timber, History of the Forest Industry in B.C.* (Vancouver, 1975), 23.

39. Morton, *Enterprising Mr. Moody*, 33-7, 59; Taylor, *Timber*, 28.

40. Douglas Cole and Bradley Lockner, eds., *The Journals of George M. Dawson: British Columbia, 1875-78* (Vancouver, 1989), 115; R. H. Alexander, "Reminiscences of the Early Days of British Columbia, Address to the Canadian Club of Vancouver," *Proceedings of the Canadian Club of Vancouver 1906-1911* (Vancouver, 1911), 111; Walkem, "Report of the Government of British Columbia," 3; James Lenihan, Canada, *SP* 1876, 56; Powell, Canada, *SP* 1877, 33-4.

41. Canada, *SP* 1877, 8, "Report of the Indian Reserve Commissioners," lii; Powell in Canada, *SP* 1884, 107.

At the same time sawmills in Puget Sound, Washington Territory, employed hundreds of British Columbia aboriginal people. William Pierce, a Tsimshian from Port Simpson, remarked that in the mid-1870s his co-workers in a Puget Sound sawmill included Haida from the Queen Charlottes, Tsimshian from the north coast, Nass and Skeena Rivers, as well as Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Kitamaat and Kwakwaka'wakw from the central coast and Tlingit from Alaska.⁴² A decade later, one of these migrants, Charles Nowell, a seventeen year old Kwakwaka'wakw from Fort Rupert recalled arriving in Vancouver after returning empty-handed from seeking work in Washington State:

... I was dead broke, and went over to North Vancouver in a small canoe to the sawmill and asked the manager if he could give me a job. He told me I could be a fireman in the sawmill. I says, "I never did it before, but I will try and do my best." He says there is another Indian there who has been working there for two years and will tell me what to do."⁴³

As Nowell's reference to "firemen" suggests, these mills were large factories operated by steam power. Morley Roberts worked alongside the crew of "Indians, half-breeds and Chinamen" at a New Westminster sawmill in the 1880s and his description leaves no doubt that sawmill work was among the most "industrial" in British Columbia.⁴⁴

Some aboriginal people moved into skilled jobs but the majority of the aboriginal workers, like the non-aboriginals, were unskilled. Many aboriginal people, including the entire male population of the Sechelt band on the Sunshine Coast north of Burrard Inlet, cut wood for the mills. In addition to working for the big export mills, aboriginal people worked and ran several smaller sawmills that were scattered throughout the province, many of them first established by missionaries in order to encourage aboriginal people to adopt capitalist-Christian ethics. Not only was sawmill labour predominantly aboriginal but so were the longshore-men and -women.⁴⁵

While the sawmills of Burrard Inlet were getting into full swing, the second major factory-based industry — salmon-canning — was in its infancy. First attempted in 1867,

42. J. P. Hicks, ed., *From Potlatch to Pulpit: the autobiography of W. H. Pierce* (Vancouver, 1933), 15. In 1876 "Hundreds and sometimes thousands of northern Indians congregate every spring" to trade and work at Puget Sound mills, according to J. G. Swan, "The Haida Indians of Queen Charlotte's Islands, British Columbia," *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge* XXI (1876): 2, 8.

43. Nowell found working as a fireman too hot so he switched to loading lumber onto the ships, for \$2 a day, then became a tally man for \$7.50 per day. Clellan Ford, *Smoke from their fires: the life of a Kwakiutl Chief* (Hamdon, Conn., 1968), 134.

44. Morley Roberts, *The Western Avernus or Toil and Travel in Further North America* (London, 1887), 181-2.

45. In 1876 the 55 men of the Sechelt band cut 1,300,000 cubic feet of saw logs for the mills for which they received \$3 per thousand, the same rate paid to white loggers; Canada, *SP* 1878, 8 "Report of the Indian Reserve Commissioners," lix; Knight, *Indians at Work*, 114, 123-4. Missionary William Duncan established a sawmill and a soap factory at Metlakatla by 1871. Other mission-mills followed at Alert Bay, Glen Vowell, Hartley Bay and Kispiox. A description of the latter can be found in Hicks, *From Potlatch to Pulpit*, 69-70.

it was not until 1870 that continuous production started. Within a decade, however, the canneries were large, modern factories employing hundreds of people and using steam boilers and retorts to heat and cook the salmon and to seal the cans.⁴⁶ The early canneries relied almost exclusively on aboriginal men to do the fishing and a workforce comprised of aboriginal women and Chinese men to do most of the canning. Like the big export sawmills, they were frequently located in coastal inlets, remote from white settlement but in, or close to, aboriginal communities. One estimate suggested that the eleven canneries operating on the Fraser River in 1883 employed 1,000-1,200 aboriginal fisherman plus hundreds of aboriginal women to process the fish.⁴⁷

By 1885 a crude estimate based on the reports of the Indian Agents suggests that of the 28,000 aboriginal people in British Columbia in 1885, over 85 per cent belonged to bands that earned substantial incomes through paid labour. The remaining 15 per cent, although not wage labourers, participated to a lesser degree in the economy as fur traders.⁴⁸ More telling than the numbers are the accounts of whole villages being emptied by aboriginal people engaged in paid work. One surveyor reported, for example, that he did not know where to lay out a reserve because all the Haida were away at the canneries or the mills, while an ethnographer from the Berlin Museum was unable to trade artifacts in villages emptied by all who were mobile. One of the most interesting accounts is by Sayach'apis, a Nuu-cha-nulth, whose invitations to a potlatch in the mid-1880s were spurned by the Songhees, the Saanich, the Cowichan and the Hikwihltaah: "You are too late," they told him; "we are going to the hop fields," to harvest the crop.⁴⁹

Twenty-five years after the gold rush, aboriginal people had not been marginalized — rather they remained at the centre of the transformed, capitalist, economic activity. "Almost all the labour of the province is done by Indians and Chinese, the federal minister of justice reported in 1883."

All the steamboats in which we travelled were manned by Indians — the Stevedores and longshoremen and the labourers you find about the streets are for the most part Indians. All the fishing for the canneries is done by them and in all these occupations

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46. Duncan Stacey, *Sockeye & Tinplate: Technological Change in the Fraser Canning Industry, 1871-1912* (Victoria, 1982).
 47. "Salmon Pack for 1883, Fraser River Canneries," *Resources of British Columbia* 1 (1883): 4; aboriginal cannery labour has been considered in some detail by Muszynski and Knight.
 48. This estimate subtracts the population figures of the Indian Affairs census for the bands listed as living primarily or exclusively on trapping, hunting and fishing, from the total aboriginal population. The bands subtracted are: 239 people in Chilcotin, 600 on the coast, 300 of Kootenays and 2,000 for tribes not visited. See Wilson Duff, *The Indian History of British Columbia: The Impact of the White Man* (Victoria, 1965), 35-40 for estimates of tribes not visited.
 49. J. A. Jacobsen, *Alaskan Voyage, 1881-83: An Expedition to the Northwest Coast of America*, translated from the German text of Adrian Woldt by Erna Gunther (Chicago, 1977), 13 and passim; Canada, *SP* 1888, 13, 109, 157-8; Edward Sapir, *Nootka Texts* (Philadelphia, 1939).

they compare favourably with the labouring classes elsewhere. . . . they get good wages, frequently \$2.00 a day and over. . . .⁵⁰

"The stranger coming for the first time to Victoria is startled by the great number of Indians living in this town," wrote ethnologist Franz Boas in 1886. "We meet them everywhere. They dress mostly in European fashion. The men are dock workers, craftsmen of fish vendors; the women are washerwomen or working women. . . . Certain Indian tribes have already become indispensable on the labour market and without them the province would suffer great economic damage."⁵¹ Moreover, Chinook, the *lingua franca* of the fur trade, and not English, was the language of the canneries, the docks, the sawmills, the hop-fields and many other sites where large amounts of labour were performed.⁵² At no time since have aboriginal people been so central to the province-wide capitalist economy than in the early 1880s, though they continued to be vital to specific industries long after.

RECRUITMENT AND COMPOSITION OF THE ABORIGINAL WORKFORCE

There is virtually no information on how aboriginal people were recruited into the pre-industrial labour force for agriculture and public works, or the manifold handicraft industries sponsored by the Hudson's Bay Company and others. It seems clear, however, that with aboriginal labour abundant in and around the settlements of British Columbia, recruitment was not difficult. Moreover, in addition to the nearby bands, often whole communities moved to white settlements, some seasonally and others permanently to trade and work. The slim evidence available suggests that, in this period, chiefs acted as labour brokers for their local groups. As we have seen, Governor Douglas held chiefs responsible for the behaviour of those of their people who hired themselves out, and the Fort Rupert journals record that chiefs were paid at the same rate as labourers, to supervise. Similarly, sealing schooners would negotiate with chiefs to bring a whole crew from a single village.⁵³

50. BCARS, A/E/Or3/C15, Alexander Campbell, "Report on the Indians of British Columbia to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs" 19 October 1883.

51. R. P. Rohner, *The Ethnography of Franz Boas* (Chicago, 1969), 6, 9; Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg, "A visit to the Anglo-Saxon antipodes (Chapter XVIII of *Curiosa aus der Neuen Welt*, 1893, translated by John Maass)," *BC Studies* 50 (1981): 38; Jacobsen, *Alaskan Voyage*, 5.

52. Chinook was made up of words from aboriginal languages, French and English. A provincial business directory for 1877/78 published a Chinook-English, English-Chinook dictionary for the benefit of its readers: see T. N. Hibben, *Guide to the Province of British Columbia for 1877-78*, (Victoria, 1877) pp. 222-249. Franz Boas noted in 1889 that it was impossible for someone to get around British Columbia outside the major cities without knowledge of the language. See Rohner, *Ethnography*, 9 and BCARS, Add. Mss. 2305, Alfred Carmichael "Account of a season's work at a Salmon Cannery, Windsor Cannery, Aberdeen, Skeena" ca. 1885, which records the widespread use of Chinook in the Skeena canneries in the mid-1880s.

53. Fort Rupert *Post Journal*, 22 November 1849 in Burrill, "Class Conflict," 34; for the sealing industry see C. E. Crockford, "Changing Economic Activities of the Nuu-chah-nulth of Vancouver Island, 1840-1920" (Hon. thesis, University of Victoria, 1991), 58.

Recruitment became more of an issue with the advent of large sawmills and canneries — the factories — because they demanded an unfamiliar work discipline. For one thing, it was critically important to have a large, regular workforce gathered at a single site for extended, and in the case of the salmon canneries, very precise periods; for another, everyone had to start and end work at the same time. In retrospect, however, it should come as no surprise that aboriginal people were recruited and employed in these factories in large numbers. They dominated the population and either lived close to the new industrial sites (since the canneries, especially, located specifically to take advantage of aboriginal labour) or had their own means of transport to and from them. In addition, aboriginal people, under some circumstances, could be paid less than 'White' labour.

Yet little is known about the different methods used to bring aboriginal people into the factories or how they made the transition to factory labour discipline. At the beginning of the industrial era, chiefs were still relied upon as labour agents. We know, for example, that white recruiters visited the Sliammon chiefs on the Sunshine Coast in 1882 and told them that their people would earn \$3 a day at the Fraser River canneries.⁵⁴ Evidence from the early twentieth century shows that canneries employed 'Indian bosses' who would be given cash advances for themselves and others, and who would be responsible for getting a specified number of fishermen and inside workers, particularly women, to come to individual canneries. Employers also used Indian Agents as informal recruiters, and large hop growers would send agents to visit bands and sign up workers in advance of the season.⁵⁵ However, it would seem from Charles Nowell's experience with the Burrard Inlet sawmill that as the number of industrial sites increased, local groups tended less to act as units; instead, individuals began to take control of their own labour and sell it independent of 'Indian Bosses'.⁵⁶ By the late 1880s, it was common for aboriginal women to be hired by Chinese labour contractors in the canneries on the Fraser and Skeena Rivers.⁵⁷ Whether as individuals or groups, Alfred Niblack noted in October 1886, aboriginal people were aggressive and creative about finding work:

It was just at the end of the hop-picking season around Puget Sound, and hundreds of Indians were coming into Port Townsend en route to their villages to the north. A party of Young Haida stopped, and one of their number telegraphed over to Whidbey Island to offer the services of the party to a farmer to dig potatoes for him. In view of the glut in the labour market, due to the presence of so many idle Indians just then, this clever bit of enterprise . . . secured them the job ahead of their rivals.⁵⁸

54. Although they went, they did not like canning. The elders "did not like to expose their young men and women to the temptations of city life" thus few Sliammon people returned the next year. Canada, *SP* 1883, 61.

55. NA, RG10, Vol. 1349, items 85, 255, 290, 483, 501.

56. Clellan, *Smoke from their Fires*, 134.

57. Canner F. L. Lord told the B.C. Fishery Commission in 1892 that Chinese contractors hired the native women and "of course these Chinamen pay the klootchmen" in BC, *SP* 1893, 178; "When the fishing commences the boss chinaman hires Indians to clean the fish and their squaws to fill the cans," according to Carmichael. "Account of a Seasons Work."

58. A. P. Niblack, "The Coast Indians of Southern Alaska and Northern British Columbia," U.S. National Museum *Annual Report* (1888): 339.

The incorporation of aboriginal people into the capitalist labour force was a spatially discontinuous process that did not affect all aboriginal groups simultaneously or in the same way. Industry did not spread out gradually from the central settlements of Victoria, New Westminster, and Nanaimo; rather it arrived suddenly on inlets far removed from settlement. Moreover, many aboriginal groups opted to travel long distances to obtain employment while their neighbours did not. Those aboriginal groups that had previous exposure to working with or for non-aboriginal people were the first to take up the long migrations to find wage labour in the south.⁵⁹

Participation also varied across generations and gender. Overall, the industrial workplace favoured younger people; agriculture, on the other hand, did not discriminate between young and old or between men and women.⁶⁰ The contrast was captured by William Lomas, the Cowichan Indian Agent: "All the younger men can find employment on farms or at the sawmills and canneries, and many families are about to leave for the hop fields of Washington Territory. . . ." The elderly he saw were not faring so well:

The very old people who formerly lived entirely on fish, berries and roots, suffer a great deal through the settling up of the country. . . . With the younger men, the loss of these kinds of foods is more than compensated by the good wages that they earn, which supplement what they produce on their allotments; but this mode of life does away with the their old customs of laying in a supply of dried meat, fish and berries for winter use, and thus the old people again suffer, for Indians are often generous with the food they have taken in the chase, but begrudge what they have paid money for.⁶¹

The British Columbia aboriginal societies had their own gender-based division of labour which were largely appropriated into the canneries.⁶² Although, generally speaking, native men would fish and women would mend nets and work in the canneries, some women also fished with their husbands (the boats required a puller and a fisher)⁶³

59. The Tsimshian that lived around the HBC post at Fort Simpson went to Victoria before other Tsimshian groups not living at the fort. Similarly it was the Fort Rupert Kwakwaka'wakw, and the southern Haida around Skidegate (who had exposure to white miners and whalers in addition to itinerant sea-borne fur-traders.) that were the first of their respective 'nations' to begin labour migration. For the Fort Rupert people see Philip Drucker and R. F. Heizer, *To Make My Name Good: A Re-examination of the Southern Kwakiutl Potlatch* (Berkeley, 1976), 215; For the Haida see J. H. Van Den Brink, *The Haida Indians: Cultural Change Mainly Between 1876-1970* (Leiden, 1974), 51.

60. Jacobsen, *Alaskan Voyage*, 13.

61. Lomas in Canada. *SP* 1888, 13, 105.

62. Jo-Anne Fiske, "Fishing is Women's Business: Changing Economic Roles of Carrier Women and Men," 186-197 and Lorraine Littlefield "Women Traders in the Fur Trade," 173-183 both in Bruce Alden Cox, ed., *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis* (Ottawa, 1988); Marjorie Mitchell and Anna Franklin, "When You Don't Know the Language, Listen to the Silence: An Historical Overview of Native Women in B.C.," in P. E. Roy, ed., *A History of British Columbia: Selected Readings* (Toronto, 1989), 49-68.

63. Canada. *SP* 1883, 60 records an aboriginal husband and wife fishing team, the wife pulling the boat and the husband handling the net and making \$240 in 14 days.

and some, particularly older, men would mend nets and work inside. The infirm would look after the infants, while even young children had work in the canneries cleaning cans. In peak cannery periods, every possible person would be brought in to work and infants were placed in a corner where they could be watched.⁶⁴

The traditional division of labour between male hunters and female processors of the catch was generally carried over into the capitalist economy of the sealing industry as well. When the local seals were hunted-out and schooners called at west coast villages to pick up crews, as many as 870 aboriginal people were hired, most of them men, although women were sometimes employed as boat-handlers. On the other hand, "the Indian women and children are always the most eager to go to the hop fields, where they always earn considerable sums of money, and, among these Indians, the wife's purse is generally entirely separate from the husband's."⁶⁵

In some cases, however, aboriginal gender divisions of labour could not be grafted directly onto the capitalist economy. Were women or men better suited to work on steamships, in sawmills, or to sell food in the street markets? In the era 1849-90, both men and women worked at non-industrial occupations such as gold mining, farming, agricultural labour, rendering oil, and loading coal. With regard to the service trades, men are more often mentioned as cutting and selling firewood while women are commonly recorded as bringing fish and game to urban markets. In urban areas women did domestic work such as washing clothes, taking in ironing, and cleaning house,⁶⁶ and they were also employed to make fishnets.⁶⁷ Prostitution was an additional source of income for hundreds of aboriginal women from the late-1850s through the 1880s.⁶⁸ But in keeping with the gender divisions of labour prevalent in capitalist society, I have found no mention of aboriginal women being employed in the sawmills, coal mines, and on railroad crews.

64. Carmichael "Account of a season's work."

65. Canada, *SP* 1887, 5, 92; 1888, 13, 105. In 1913 Indian Agent Charles Cox reported that Nuu-chah-nulth men and women keep their incomes separate, in Royal Commission on Pelagic Sealing, Victoria, Indian Claims, December 1913, Vol. 8, 135, in Crockford, "Changing Economic Activities," 43. The Department of Fisheries Annual Reports in Canada, *Sessional Papers*, record the number of aboriginal people involved in pelagic sealing, 1882-1910.

66. Canada, *SP*, 1888, 13, 106; Cracroft, *Lady Franklin*, 79. W. F. Tolmie wrote in 1883 that the aboriginal women in Victoria worked "as washerwomen, seamstresses and laundresses, earn much and spend it all in the city." BCARS A/E/Or3/C15.

67. Canada, *SP* 1884, 106; Carmichael, "Account of a Seasons Work;" Indian women 'knit' nets that "will average from 120-150 fathoms [long and 16 and a half feet deep], at the cost of one dollar per fathom." *Resources of British Columbia* 1 (December 1, 1883).

68. By 1865 the Victoria police were writing the Colonial Secretary that some 200 Indian prostitutes lived "in filthy shanties owned by Chinese and rented . . . at four to five dollars a month," in Peter Baskerville, *Beyond the Island. An Illustrated History of Victoria* (Windsor, Ont., 1986), 39-44. For the 1880s see John A. Macdonald, Canada, *SP* 1885, lix. For an aboriginal account of prostitution, see Franz Boas, *Contributions to the Ethnography of the Kwakiutl* (New York, 1925), 93-4.

The effect on aboriginal social and familial relationships of different participation rates by age and gender deserves more scholarly attention. The one study that has been done, of the Carrier people of the Chilcotin, where there was more demand for males in wage-occupations, shows that aboriginal women carried on and even enlarged their role as providers for households in the subsistence economy. Among the Carrier people, this had the effect of increasing the social status and power of women.⁶⁹ Among the coastal people women were gaining more prominence as "title holders" or "chiefs." Further research may reveal whether this was due to depopulation, their new incomes, their increased role as providers of subsistence, or other factors.

WHY DID ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WORK FOR WAGES?

It is noteworthy in itself that aboriginal people in British Columbia chose, in large numbers, to work for pay. Indeed, in 1852, one of the HBC agents wondered if they could get the west coast people interested in any work besides fishing:

when they can get all their wants and even a superfluity by a course congenial to them (fishing), it would be erroneous to suppose that they may be easily persuaded to follow an occupation they dislike and which is less remunerative, merely to gratify our will.⁷⁰

Certainly in the 1840s and 1850s there was no pressure on the traditional resource base or subsistence economy which had sustained them for eons.⁷¹ Even by the 1870s and the beginning of truly industrial labour, only a few of the aboriginal groups on southern Vancouver Island and in the Fraser and Thompson valleys were finding their traditional resource-base eroded to the point that they could not have reverted to a totally subsistence economy if such was their preference. Nor did evangelism have a significant impact until the 1860s and then only in a few locations, by which time church representatives were merely reinforcing an existing desire to participate in wage labour.

Prior to the wide-scale opportunities for wage labour most of the peoples of the west coast participated in the fur trade for reasons which, according to the "enrichment thesis," were broadly based in their own culture's traditions. Moreover, the new wealth generated by the fur trade, the relocation of bands to common sites around forts, population decimation from disease and firearms led to an enrichment of cultural activities, including, on the west coast, the potlatch.⁷² "The arts and crafts, trade and technology, social and ceremonial life were all brought to new peaks of development. The climax of Indian culture was reached well after the arrival of the white man on the scene."⁷³

69. Fiske, "Fishing is Women's Business," 186-197.

70. J. M. Yale, 1852 in Mackie, "Colonial Land, Indian Labour," 89.

71. J. A. McDonald, "Images of the Nineteenth-Century Economy of the Tsimshian" in M. Seguin, ed., *The Tsimshian: Images of the Past: Views for the Present* (Vancouver, 1984), 49.

72. Philip Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast* (New York, 1965), 129; Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 47-8.

73. Duff, *Indian History of B.C.*, 55.

Potlatch is a word in the Chinook jargon that refers to the different ceremonies among many nations of the Pacific Northwest that included feasting, dancing, and the giving of gifts to all in attendance. The potlatch was a central feature of the lives and economy of, especially, the coastal Indians. It was only through potlatches that one's hereditary status and rights to resources, property (including songs and dances) and names could be claimed and maintained. The more guests and the more gifts, the higher the relative status of the person giving the potlatch. High-status recipients of potlatch gifts were expected to reciprocate with potlatches in order to maintain their own relative position, and to protect their claims to traditional prerogatives.⁷⁴ All the evidence suggests that the fur trade intensified potlatching, and along with it the carving of totems and masks, the weaving of blankets, and all the other arts that were associated with the ceremony.⁷⁵

Because of the cultural necessity to periodically distribute valuable gifts in a potlatch, the west coast people were a natural trading market. They had uses for property, possessions, and wealth which, while very different from those of the traders themselves, were nevertheless complementary. The traditional potlatch goods were valuable precisely because they were rare, or because they took much time and laborious effort to make. "On the other hand, the intrusive white civilization offered its goods for things that were relatively abundant": fur, fish, and unskilled labour.⁷⁶ Manufactured blankets and other mass-produced goods were substituted as potlatch goods for locally made, hand-produced items.

With some exceptions, aboriginal people welcomed the arrival of traders on boats and the establishment of trading posts in their territories. They were equally jealous of trading posts in their rival's territories, or territories that they considered their hinterland.⁷⁷ Thus, in the seventy years prior to 1849, and since the first direct trading with Europeans, the society of the aboriginal people had changed so that trade with the foreigners had become an integral and largely welcome part of their culture.⁷⁸

It appears that the same cultural forces that drew aboriginal people into the fur trade continued to operate and draw them into the wage and industrial labour force. Aboriginal people permitted, if not welcomed, initial non-aboriginal expansion into their territories to take advantage of the wealth-generating potential that the aliens offered. In 1843 the Songhees people helped the HBC build Fort Victoria.⁷⁹ In the 1850s the Haida and the Cowichan both appealed to Governor Douglas to establish a settlement among them that

74. There is an enormous ethnographic literature on the potlatch; a good bibliography can be found in D. Cole and I. Chaikin, *An iron hand upon the people* (Vancouver, 1990), 213-23.

75. Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*; Duff, *Indian History of B.C.*; Cole and Chaikin, *An iron hand*; Helen Codere, *Fighting With Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare, 1792-1930* (Seattle, 1966).

76. Drucker and Heizer, *To Make My Name Good*, 15.

77. Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 27-49.

78. This is particularly true of the west coast people, and to a lesser extent, those of the interior.

79. Thomas Lowe, *Victoria Colonist* (29 October 1897); Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist* (Edmonton, 1968), 145.

they might find work.⁸⁰ When he first visited them in 1881, although their village was still suffering from an unprovoked attack by the Royal Navy, the Kitamaats asked Indian Commissioner Powell if he would establish a sawmill in their community.⁸¹ Even in the 1880s, when Port Simpson Tsimshian people refused to accept an Indian agent, refused to be administered under the Indian act, and prevented surveyors from assigning reserves, they permitted salmon canneries into their territory. Different bands of Kwakwaka'wakw refused to allow a priest into their village yet they too permitted the canneries, sawmills and logging camps.

Aboriginal people apparently found that these new forms of work could be used like the fur trade, to enhance their position in their own society. In 1853, for example, using the wealth they had accumulated from working around Victoria, the Songhees people hosted a potlatch. Three thousand aboriginal people, perhaps a tenth of the population of the entire coastal area, attended this feast.⁸² Having seen Victoria, the wealth of the Songhees, and the opportunities for work, the steady flow of thousands of coastal people to Victoria started the following season. Wage work became another adaptation of the seasonal subsistence round that had already been modified to include an extended trapping season, when furs were the easiest route to accumulation.

White employers, government officials and missionaries noticed that aboriginal people worked to be able to potlatch. But the non-aboriginal immigrants could not reconcile their own work ethic with the motivations that led aboriginal people into the work force. The Indian Agent for Fraser Valley, James Lenihan, expressed his confusion this way:

The Indians generally have views peculiar to the country as to the value of money. One band, numbering about fifteen families, applied to me in the spring for some agricultural implements and seeds. I questioned the Chief respecting a 'potlatche' which he had held the previous winter, and ascertained that he himself and two of his headmen had given away in presents to their friends, 134 sacks of flour, 140 pairs of blankets, together with a quantity of apples and provisions, amounting in value to about \$700, for all of which they had paid in cash out of their earnings as labourers, fishermen and hunters.⁸³

George Grant, who accompanied Sanford Fleming on his cross-country inspection of possible routes for the CPR, exhibited his puzzlement in describing the aboriginal work force at the Moodyville sawmill on Burrard Inlet in 1872:

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- 80. CO 305/4, 12345, Douglas to Colonial Secretary, 24 October 1853; Margaret Ormsby states that when the Haidas were unable to mine gold on the Queen Charlotte Islands for lack of tools they offered to sell their rights if the HBC would form an establishment, Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, xci.
 - 81. Canada, *SP* 1881, 5, 143. This was also the wish of the Kincolith people of the Nass River, NA, RG10, Vol. 11007, W. H. Collinson to the Reserve Commissioner, 10 October 1887.
 - 82. CO 305/4, 12345, Douglas to Newcastle, 24 October 1853.
 - 83. Lenihan says that on reasoning with the chief he agreed to discontinue the Potlatch and was given \$80 in seeds. Canada, *SP* 1877, 38.

The aborigines work well till they save enough money to live on for some time, and then they go up to the boss and frankly say that they are lazy and do not want to work longer. . . . Another habit of the richer ones, which to the Anglo-saxon mind borders on insanity, is that of giving universal backshish or gifts to the whole tribe, without expecting any return save an increased popularity that may lead to their election as Tyhees or chiefs when vacancies occur.”

Of particular interest was the story of “big George,” who had

worked industriously at the mill for years until he had saved \$2,000. Instead of putting this in a Savings Bank, he had spent it all on stores for a grand ‘Potlatch’. . . . Nearly a thousand assembled; the festivities lasted a week; and everyone got something, either a blanket, musket, bag of flour, box of apples, or tea and sugar. When the fun was over, ‘big George’, now penniless, returned to the mill to carry slabs at \$20 a month.

Similar comments can be found scattered throughout the accounts of missionaries, government agents and travellers.⁸⁴

Aboriginal accounts confirm that income from wage work was used to enhance the prestige of the labourers. Charley Nowell recollected that between 1870-76 his brother had regular employment as a cook: “That’s why my brother was the richest of all the Indians at Fort Rupert. Every payday he used to be paid with trade — in blankets. . . . When the people of Fort Rupert know that my brother is paid, they come and borrow blankets from him. . . . My brother keeps on loaning until he has got enough (principal and interest) to collect and give a potlatch.”⁸⁵

In addition to accumulating wealth for potlatching, many aboriginal groups had other traditional uses for wealth. James Sewid, a Kwakwaka’wakw, told the story of his great-grandfather who trapped for several winters in order to hold a potlatch needed to recruit a war party to revenge his son’s life. Northern men especially paid a substantial bride price to the families of their future wives. Shamans were paid to cure illness, and compensation was often demanded as restitution for intentional or unintentional killing or wounding of another.⁸⁶

Helen Codere, who has made an intensive study of the Kwakwaka’wakw, has noted that while fur-trade wealth increased the frequency of potlatches, wage labour increased the number of guests and the wealth distributed to an even greater extent, and to her the

84. George M. Grant, *Ocean to Ocean: Sir Sanford Fleming’s Expedition through Canada in 1872* (Toronto, 1873), 319-20; Knight has a similar story from a completely different source that seems to describe a response to Big George’s Potlatch by a rival, *Indians at Work*, 114; Capt. C. E. Barrett-Lennard, *Travels in British Columbia With the Narrative of A Yacht Voyage Round Vancouver’s Island*. (London, 1862), 60.

85. Ford, *Smoke From Their Fires*, 54-5.

86. James Sewid, *Guest Never Leave Hungary: The Autobiography of a Kwakiutl Indian*, ed. James Spradley, (Kingston, 1989), 27; Victoria Wyatt, “Alaskan Indian Wage Earners in the 19th Century,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 78 (1987): 43-49.

years between 1849 and 1921 could justifiably be called "the potlatch period."⁸⁷ Her conclusions are borne out by Kwakwaka'wakw district Indian agent George Blenkinsop's 1881 observation that potlatches, "of late years, increased to a very great extent." He explained that among the Kwakwaka'wakw "the custom was formerly almost entirely confined to the recognised chiefs, but that of late years it has extended to the people generally, and become very much commoner than before. . . . [the Potlatch] has spread to all classes of the community and became the recognised mode of attaining social rank and respect."⁸⁸ Codere charted the increases in the number of blankets given at Kwakwaka'wakw potlatches going back over a century, numbers which were well remembered by her informants owing to the importance of establishing relative prestige levels. The number of blankets distributed at the greatest single potlatch in the following twenty year periods gives an indication of the striking increase in wealth available and distributed: 1829-48: 320 blankets; 1849-69: 9,000 blankets; 1870-89: 7,000 blankets; 1890-1909: 19,000 blankets; 1910-29: 14,000 blankets; 1930-49: 33,000 blankets. The first memories of Billy Assu, a Kwakwaka'wakw from Cape Mudge, were of his father's 1911 potlatch: "My father worked for the money to give that potlatch for many years. He gave away goods and money to the value of more than \$10,000."⁸⁹

The same phenomena appeared to be drawing other aboriginal groups into the paid labour force. In 1881 Cowichan Indian agent Lomas predicted that a significant proportion of the \$15,000 earned by the Cowichan people at the canneries that season would be given away at potlatches. Similarly, in 1884 a delegation of Nuw-ah-nulth chiefs explained that they worked for their money "and like to spend it as we please, in gathering our friends together; now whenever we travel we find friends; the 'potlatch' does that." Among the Haida the number of new totems being raised with the accompanying ceremonies reached its peak in the period 1860-1876. Writing generally of this period missionary William Pierce, a converted Tsimshian wrote: "In these days, any man of a common order may give a potlatch if he is rich enough."⁹⁰ In short, it would appear that aboriginal people were not just servants of industry but also made industrialization serve their interests as well.⁹¹

87. "The Kwakiutl had a potential demand for European goods in excess of any practical utility the goods might have possessed. This can be seen both as a stimulus to the Kwakiutl integration in their new economy and as a direct stimulus to the potlatch," Codere, *Fighting With Property*, 126.

88. George Blenkinsop, Indian Agent and Rev. A. J. Hall cited in G. M. Dawson, "Notes and Observations on the Kwakwaka'wakw People of Vancouver Island and Adjacent Coasts made during the Summer of 1885," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Section 2 (1887): 17.

89. Codere, *Fighting With Property*, 124; Harry Assu with Joy Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge: Recollections of a Coastal Indian Chief* (Vancouver, 1989), 39.

90. Canada, SP 1882, 160, 170; Canada, SP 1885, 3, 101; Brink, *The Haida Indians*, 42; Hinks, *From Potlatch to Pulpit*, 126.

91. Another indication of this is that traditional raiding of enemies was performed en route to and from their seasonal wage labour until the early 1860s; See for example CO 305/7, 9708, Douglas to Labouchere, 26 August 1856; CO 305/8, 7950, 13 June 1857; CO 305/10, 6949, 25 July 1859.

However, the fact that aboriginal people had their own reasons for working for wages and chose when they would both enter and leave the labour force was a source of constant frustration to white employers. Indeed, the fact that aboriginal peoples had their own agendas probably accounts for the schizophrenic comments of white employers who spoke about them as "indispensable" while condemning their "unreliability" and "laziness."

Like most other groups outside the urban area, the Kwakwaka'wakw, for example, "continued to earn their own subsistence, which meant that earnings could go to the purchase of manufactured goods. Since they required only a limited amount of manufactured goods for consumption needs and since they did not hoard, any surplus could be and was used in potlatching."⁹² Because of their subsistence cycle, winter was the main ceremonial season — and few aboriginal people were willing to work year-round and miss the winter festivities. In the beginning this was not a problem in labour-intensive activities like fishing, canning, harvesting, and logging, which were not conducted in the winter. Increasingly, however, the sawmills, the railways, the steamboats and other large employers were anxious to have a year-round and stable labour force so that seasonal labour, the choice of large numbers of aboriginal people, was becoming less compatible with the demands of capitalism.

It is no coincidence, then, that the federal government passed a law banning potlatch in 1884, just as aboriginal peoples reached their peak importance in the economy. Although the potlatch had drawn many aboriginal people into paid labour, by the mid-1880s it was inconsistent with the 'stable' habits of industry that both missionaries and government agents saw as essential to the development of a Christian capitalist society. Seeing the potlatch as a bulwark which enabled the aboriginal people to resist acculturation since the seasonal cycle kept them mobile and away from schools and churches, missionaries and the Indian agents argued that it kept aboriginal people poor and mitigated against the accumulation of individual dwellings, land holdings, and private property.

Although the law proved ineffectual, and was not successfully enforced until 1908, it did provide government agents and missionaries with powerful suasion against potlatching.⁹³ Some of the bands responded to government pressure, others that had been christianized gave up the institution at the insistence of their ministers;⁹⁴ some bands in urban areas seemed to be slowly adopting the more individualistic and acquisitive ideals of the new majority. So, despite the ineffective laws, the 1880s were also the climax years of the potlatch along the coast generally.⁹⁵ Ironically, the very cultural imperative that had brought aboriginal people into the workforce was outlawed because, due to changing circumstances, it was no longer sufficiently compatible with the requirements of capitalism.

92. Codere, *Fighting With Property*, 126.

93. Cole and Chaikin, *An Iron Hand*, 19-20.

94. With the acceptance of Christianity 'modified potlatching' continued in some places, but the new Christians also had new imperatives to work. New houses built with milled lumber, nails, and glass windows, as well as new standards for clothing, contributions to build a church or purchase musical instruments etc., all demanded cash incomes.

95. Although the Kwakwaka'wakw proved an exception in this regard.

CONCLUSION

In the period 1849-1890 the connections to the capitalist economy varied widely among the many nations and linguistic groups that comprised the aboriginal people of present-day British Columbia. Depending on particular circumstances, integration into the paid labour force also had different effects on the social relations between men and women, youth and elderly, and nobles and commoners. Some patterns are nevertheless emerging as research in these areas moves ahead. West coast aboriginal people joined the international economy when Captain Cook first traded sea otter pelts with the natives of Yuquat (Nootka) in 1778, but their relationship to the economy changed dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century. Before the 1850s they were largely hunters, fishermen, trappers, and gatherers who exchanged the products of the land for products of the European market. By 1890, however, the industrial revolution having arrived on many of their inlets, bays and rivers, most aboriginal people were trading their labour for wages.

Aboriginal people were central, not marginal, to the development of new industries and the spread of capitalism in the province-to-be. Coal would not have been mined in British Columbia in the 1840s and 50s, export sawmills would not have been able to function in the 1860s and 70s, canneries would not have had a fishing fleet, or the necessary processors in the 1870s and 80s, without the widespread participation of aboriginal people. The gold rush may have diverted the attention of historians, but it did not divert aboriginal people from the economy. It was the aboriginal workforce that allowed the creation of a capitalist regional economy based on fur trade, then coal mining, sawmilling and salmon canning. This was the regional economy that kept the Hudson's Bay Company on the Pacific coast, persuaded Britain that the establishment of colonies could be profitable as well as strategic, and ultimately ensured that British Columbia would be *British* Columbia.

While the capitalist economy needed the vast pool of aboriginal labour, aboriginal people used the capitalist economy for their own cultural purposes. Wage labour was one juncture where the potlatch system and capitalism were curiously complementary. Aboriginal people fitted seasonal paid work into their own economic cycle and, in the era described, were able to maintain a level of control over their participation in both. However, the compatibility of capitalism and the aboriginal economy was breaking down by 1884, when the anti-potlatch laws were passed by the federal government: eager to participate in seasonal wage activities from spring to fall, aboriginal people were less interested in participating in the year-round employment that the economy was increasingly demanding.

By the taking of the census of 1891, British Columbia was no longer an 'aboriginal province'. Aboriginal populations had nearly reached their nadir and alternative pools of labour were becoming available. Since then, although aboriginal people have not comprised the majority of the labour force, they have been consistently important in key sectors, namely fishing, canning and agricultural sectors. In this way, as well as others, the aboriginal and non-aboriginal histories of British Columbia are still inextricably linked.

Appendix I
Aboriginal and Non-aboriginal Population Estimates for
British Columbia, 1835-1901⁹⁶

Year	Aboriginal Population	Non-aboriginal Population
1835	70,000	*
1851	65,000	*
1856	62,000	1,000
1861	60,000	13,624
1871	37,000	13,247
1881	29,000	23,798
1885	28,000	—
1891	26,000	72,173
1901	25,488	153,169

Appendix II
Average Rates of Pay, Various Professions
in British Columbia, 1864-1890 (dollars per day unless specified)⁹⁷

Occupation	1860	1864	1883	1890
Indian Agent			200/mth	
Indian Dept. Constable			40/mth	
General Labourers	2.50	3.00-4.00	1.75-2.00	1.25-2.50
Coal Miners			3.00-4.00	
Gold Miners				1.75-3.00
Colliery Labourers			2.50	
Skilled Tradesmen	5.00	?-4.85	3.50-4.00	4.00-6.00
Laundresses		2.10/doz shirts		10.00-18.00/mth
Longshoremen				50¢/hour
Lumbermen		48.50/mth		1.50-2.25
Millhands				2.50

96. Aboriginal population from Duff, *Indian History of British Columbia*, 39-35, and for 1901, from Canada Census. Non-aboriginal population is taken from Douglas's census of Vancouver Island in 1854 which gave 774 whites on Vancouver Island, plus an estimate for the mainland. The 1861 population estimate is from Phillips, "Confederation and the Economy of British Columbia," 59. Other estimates are from Canada Census for 1871, 1881 and 1891. Since racial information was not tabulated in 1891 the non-aboriginal population given here is the total population less Duff's estimate for the aboriginal population. See also CO 305/7, 11582, Douglas to Labouchere, 20 October 1856 and CO 305/6, 10048, Douglas to Russell, 21 August 1855.

97. 1860 wages from Bishop Hill to the Secretary, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, May 8, 1860 in Bishop Hill Collection, Text 57, Box 3, File 3 Anglican Diocese of British Columbia, courtesy of Ira Chaikin. 1864 from Matthew McFie, *Vancouver Island and British Columbia* (London, 1865), 499-500; 1883 from Canada, Province of British Columbia, *Information for Intending Settlers* (Ottawa, 1883), 23; and for 1890 from Canada, SP 1891 "Immigration Agents' Reports," 95-7. Longshoreman rate from Biggar, *Canadian Handbook*, 20. The figures for 1860-64 are converted to dollars at the rate of one pound to \$4.85. Indian agent's salary from Indian Affairs Annual Reports.