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Lessons in possession: colonial resource geographies in practice on Vancouver Island, 1859–1865

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Abstract

This paper considers the establishment of a major sawmill at the head of the Alberni Canal on the west coast of the colony of Vancouver Island in the 1860s and the legacy of that enterprise in producing geographies of colonial possession. I argue that the institution of industrial forestry in the colony relied upon a conception of property rights that turned on the identification of civilized and savage space, holding that only particular kinds of labour and land improvement warranted claims of ownership. This ideology found official state sanction within the regimes of Western liberal law, was mapped onto the region around Alberni by a uniquely placed individual, and was eventually made durable through the practices of everyday life at settlement sites. In these ways, I show, colonial possession relied upon precedents within British imperial culture. However, I also argue that another geography of possession was put in place along the way. By eventually adopting a scheme wherein timberlands could be brought into production without being alienated by land speculators, the state enabled the actual practice of possession in crown territory that was previously claimed through general appeals to the British imperative to overturn its wild nature. Showing that the lessons learned at Alberni were re-applied in other parts of the region, I conclude by arguing that the historical geographies of industrial forestry reinforced crown possession of much of the Pacific Northwest. Ultimately, I claim that this story demonstrates the centrality of practice to possession, thereby highlighting an analytical space that might yield fruitful insights into the intensely situated and local nature of colonial territorial control.

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Introduction: possession (and dispossession)

On 6 September 1860, William ‘Eddy’ Banfield, Government Agent for the Barclay Sound District of Vancouver Island, wrote to inform James Douglas, the Governor of the Colony, of the establishment of a sawmill operation at the head of the Alberni Canal (Map 1).¹ He reported that a party of managers and workers, along with oxen and supplies, had arrived on the first day of the month and ‘on the following day proceeded to make a treaty with the natives – Sheshat Tribe.’ He was pleased to state ‘that an arrangement amicable and satisfactory’ had been reached, with the only difficulty being ‘some slight hesitation on the part of the natives in immediately removing their lodges from the spot’ where the mill was to be erected. Ultimately, Banfield recalled, the Sheshat were reassured in hearing that the newcomers ‘would not be permitted to wantonly injure them’ and were generally satisfied with the white men ‘settling among them.’ And so, for about 50 blankets, some muskets, molasses, food, and other trinkets, a part of the Sheshat territory ‘was quietly ceded.’²

Cole Harris, in a study of the establishment of the reserve system of Native lands in British Columbia, draws on this very same event to introduce a discussion of the ways in which Native peoples were stripped of their territory and placed upon small reserves.³ However, his account paints a somewhat different picture of what took place at the head of the Canal that September. It rests on the words of Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, a young Englishman who accompanied Captain Edward Stamp (the driving force behind the enterprise and its manager) to represent the financial interests of Stamp’s London backers. For Sproat, the ‘slight hesitation on the part of the natives in immediately removing their lodges’ noted by Banfield was much more alarming. The day after his arrival, he awoke to find that ‘the entire camp was in commotion; speeches were made, faces blackened, guns and pikes got out, and barricades formed.’ He felt outnumbered and cut off from outside assistance, and was relieved that the Natives, ‘after a little show of force on our side, saw that resistance would be inexpedient, and began to move from the spot.’ For Sproat, only the ‘show of force,’ a threat of cannon fire from the party’s ship, enabled the colonists to take possession of the land.⁴

Banfield and Sproat described the act of dispossession, the taking of one group’s land by another, in very different ways. Banfield’s account was contented and confident; Sproat’s identified the contested quality of events.⁵ These different representations raise questions about the specific ways in which the colonial party justified, achieved, and represented their taking possession of Native lands. Was there certainty amongst settlers as to their rights to the land? How was

¹ Barclay Sound and Alberni Canal are the names as they were in 1860. Currently, they are referred to as Barkley Sound and Alberni Inlet. I have used the historical versions throughout this paper.

² Banfield to Colonial Secretary of Vancouver Island, Alberni, 6 September 1860, British Columbia Archives, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01306, 107-5.

³ C. Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance, and Reserves in British Columbia*, Vancouver, 2002, xv–xvi.

⁴ G.M. Sproat, *The Nootka: Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*, Victoria, 1987, 7 (Originally published as *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life*, London, 1868, 4).

⁵ Harris puts forward this basic and fundamental reading of the event; indeed, it is why he uses it to mobilize his discussion of dispossession.

possession recorded and communicated? How was it maintained and extended? Such questions have resonance for students of British Columbia's historical geography, as contests over aboriginal land and resource rights, 'the land question' as it has been called, have been at the heart of provincial politics for over a century. And, while asked here of a specific time and place on the British Columbia coast, the questions also speak to central geographical concerns in the study of European colonialism. For, in pursuing them, one must also address two related issues: the ways in which possession at Alberni was reliant on ideas and practices inherited from a larger imperial culture and the role played by local conditions, both physical and social, in assertions of possession. As Harris has stated elsewhere, if a just politics of land and resource rights is to emerge in a post-colonial world, students of colonial history and geography must consider the specific and very local ways in which so many different peoples have suffered dispossession of territory and resources.⁶ Thus, I highlight specific practices of possession on one 'edge' of the British Empire by focusing upon the establishment of an industrial camp at the head of a long and narrow inlet of the Pacific Ocean.

I use the term *possession* to indicate the importance of ongoing practices for understanding how settler society created a sense of ownership of, belonging in, and rights to Native land on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Here I follow Derek Gregory in insisting that the 'production, circulation, and legitimation of meanings through representations, practices, and performances' and the ways that these 'enter fully into the constitution of the world' are essential to the development of full-fledged human geographies.⁷ As students of British Columbia's historical geography are aware, possession of land by non-Native peoples was not, for the most part, achieved through formal treaties between the Crown and Native peoples. Nor was it achieved through defeat by arms and subsequent submission, although violence was by no means absent. Scholars have argued persuasively that disease and depopulation led many newcomers to believe in a 'myth of empty land' ripe for resettlement.⁸ However, in the Barclay Sound district in the mid-nineteenth century the Native population was, according to Banfield's written observations, substantial and widespread.⁹ And, while those who have argued that territorial claims are reliant upon powerful political, cultural, and scientific discourses are surely correct, physical possession demands more than language, ideology, and knowledge.¹⁰ Indeed, much of the territory that eventually became British Columbia remained, in practice, Native space long after it was subjected to imperial claims. If not by far-reaching treaty, military defeat, or depopulation, then by what set of processes did Captain Stamp and his companions come to gain and maintain actual possession of

⁶ C. Harris, How did colonialism dispossess? Comments from an edge of empire, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, 1 (2004) 165–182.

⁷ D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, London, 2004, 8.

⁸ See for example C. Harris, Voices of smallpox around the Georgia Strait, in: *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, Vancouver, 1997, 3–30. Harris' use of the term 'resettlement' is a far more accurate reflection of colonial actions in a landscape long inhabited by Native peoples than the term 'settlement.'

⁹ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat, 4 March 1860, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01306, 107-1b.

¹⁰ See for example B. Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture, and Power on Canada's West Coast*, Minneapolis, 2002.

territory at the head of the Canal? And what might the situation at Alberni tell us about the nature of possession in other areas of Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland?

Drawing evidence from official correspondence, I claim that colonial possession in the area of Barclay Sound was pre-conditioned by the actions and communications of a uniquely positioned individual (Banfield), driven by an official desire to promote resettlement on Vancouver Island's west coast, and put into practice largely by the interests of capital (Stamp and company). While guided by a set of inherited principles concerning property, civilization, and morality, those who established British possession of the lands at the head of the Canal faced challenges to their assumptions as they attempted to claim territory. In the working out of such uncertainties, new human geographies were constructed and colonial possession was made durable. Ultimately, this story demonstrates the importance of on-the-ground practice to territorial possession and points to the fundamental role played by local social and physical environments in shaping acts of possession-taking and maintenance.

Practicing possession: between Europe and the local

Colonialism came relatively late to the shores of northwestern North America. The region entered into what Mary Louise Pratt has called a European 'planetary consciousness' in the late-eighteenth century, and settlement by peoples of European background took another 50 years or so to begin in earnest.¹¹ In consequence, the non-Native peoples who came to trade and, later, build a society in Native space had at their disposal several centuries worth of ideas regarding different cultures, property rights, and the place of Europe in the world: the peoples of the region were savages; the landscape was a wilderness; Europeans would bring civilization to Native peoples and tame wild nature. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the peoples and landscapes of Vancouver Island and the British Columbia mainland had been entered into imperial geographical imaginations; for Europe they represented the other, but they were also capable, to some degree, of becoming Europe.¹²

As Patricia Seed has argued, however, Europe cannot be treated as a singular unit in the histories and geographies of colonialism. Rather, '(w)hile all Europeans aimed to establish their right to rule the New World, their means differed substantially.'¹³ France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain all made claims to parts of the Americas, and each did so with different political, military, commercial, and social means and objectives. Spanish explorers made some of the first European contacts with the coast of what came to be called Vancouver Island, but it was Britain, through the Colonial Office in London, which ultimately facilitated European possession of Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia. While the English shared a common 'technological and ecological platform — trans-Atlantic ships bearing crossbows, cannon, harquebuses,

¹¹ M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, New York, 1992, ch. 2. Pratt uses the phrase to describe eighteenth-century scientific expeditions carried out by Europeans in newly encountered parts of the world and the effects of these on European understandings of the planet and their place on it.

¹² C. Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: a Colonial Case History*, Chicago, 1997, 5–31.

¹³ P. Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640*, Cambridge, 1995, 3.

horses, siege warfare, and disease' – with other European nations, the particularities of British imperial policy and culture shaped the deployment of these 'platforms' profoundly.¹⁴ Thus, it is a particular Europe, a British-Europe, which is of interest in the present case.

Seed's interest is in the 'ceremonies' performed in asserting territorial possession and communicating the righteousness of claims to imperial 'compatriots.' For the British, she argues, such ceremonies were rooted in a discourse that identified 'unimproved' land as 'heathen' and placed the domesticated landscapes of England as the civilized counterpoint to such wilderness. She argues that, coupled with a philosophy of property rights based upon 'improvement' through the investment of human labour (a position famously advanced by John Locke), this discourse shaped British ceremonies of possession. These revolved around the everyday practices of building fences and roads, planting and tending gardens, erecting buildings, and generally going about the business of harnessing an untamed nature and providing ever-increasing material comfort.¹⁵ In essence, British possession-taking was marked by the installation of familiar (to the English) modes of everyday life in places deemed heathen and in need of domestication.

Such an argument is helpful in breaking Europe down into its constituent parts; however, a monolith remains. Just as European discourse and action cannot be treated as uniform, nor can those of one nation. In her work on early Spanish Peru, Heidi Scott has provided strong evidence of local modifications, and even repudiation, of imperial dictates.¹⁶ She argues that while it is important to understand the ways in which imperial representations shaped historical geographies of colonialism, recent work in this area has focused 'predominantly on 'official geographies' – those forms of geographical knowledge which were either constructed or approved by colonial governments – without taking into account the existence and impact of other European geographies that developed at the site of the colony.' While acknowledging that 'the very real effects of official geographical discourse on (post)colonial realities cannot be underestimated,' Scott insists that 'there can be little doubt that (colonizers) contested their relevance and authority.'¹⁷ And, she argues, for those colonial sites that were separated by great distances from metropolitan centres, the issue of local adaptation takes on a particularly heightened importance. Daniel Clayton, writing about the contact geographies of pre-colonial Vancouver Island, argues that peoples of European background arrived on the coast with various scientific, commercial, and geopolitical goals in mind and that these were reworked in the face of local conditions. The resultant geographies of fear, misapprehension, commercial exchange, and metropolitan politics that marked Europeans' experience on the west coast of the Island, he shows, were uneven and relied upon constant traffic between local and imperial geographical imaginations. Locality matters in practices of possession. The task is to uncover

¹⁴ Seed, *Ceremonies* (note 13).

¹⁵ See Seed, *Ceremonies* (note 13), ch. 1. For background on property rights, also see J. Locke, *An essay concerning the true original extent and end of civil government*, in: R.M. Hutchins (Ed.), *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 35, Toronto, 1952, 30 (originally published in 1690).

¹⁶ H. Scott, *Contested territories: arenas of geographical knowledge in early colonial Peru*, *Journal of Historical Geography* 29, 2 (2003) 166–188; Scott, *A mirage of colonial consensus: resettlement schemes in early Spanish Peru*, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22, 6 (2004) 885–899.

¹⁷ Scott, *Contested territories* (note 16), 166–167.

the ways in which a *displaced* British-Europe literally took place on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

A tenuous resettlement

From the late-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century, European traders in the British-claimed territory of the Pacific Northwest were operating largely within Native space. These were lands that, as Clayton points out, had both entered into the colonial calculations and negotiations of authorities in distant imperial capitals and been encountered by the early representatives of European capital.¹⁸ However, Native peoples remained in control of most of the vast and rugged territory, the exceptions being those fortified islands of European presence, fur-trading posts, which constituted the exchange nodes in a network of Native procurement lines. To be sure, European peoples displayed power at these sites and beyond, whether through the threat or actual use of violence.¹⁹ However, they geared such displays towards the maintenance of security for the tiny white populations, rather than towards efforts at practical control over the entire territory. And then, in the last years of the 1850s, the situation changed fundamentally. With the discovery of gold in the Fraser River, the trading regimes that structured land-use relations between the Hudson's Bay Company and Native peoples on Vancouver Island and the mainland began to diminish in importance. The balance of territorial control began to shift in favour of white settler society.²⁰

The rush to the Fraser River by prospectors coming north from California in search of gold pushed the Colonial Office to declare the mainland a crown colony in 1858. At first, this declaration amounted to little more than a claim of control over the entire territory (a claim backed up by the military might of the British Empire), with actual control limited to those small corners where there was a sufficient population of settlers to warrant the presence of colonial authorities wielding the ever-present threat of violent power.²¹ In practice, much of the mainland remained Native space in the years immediately following the colonial declaration. However, over the two decades that followed, a slow but steady arrival of new colonists would begin to solidify a European presence.²² As settler society spread from the initial pockets, it was accompanied by all of the relevant trappings: representatives of the colonial administration eager to mete out European notions of justice, police and military forces able to violently enforce this justice, and armies of Royal

¹⁸ D. Clayton, *Islands of Truth: the Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island*, Vancouver, 2000.

¹⁹ See for example C. Harris, Strategies of power in the cordilleran fur trade, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, Vancouver, 1997, 31–67 and B. Gough, *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and the Northwest Coast Indians*, Vancouver, 1984.

²⁰ C. Harris, The making of the Lower Mainland, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, Vancouver, 1997, 80.

²¹ See for example T. Loo, Bute Inlet stories: crime, law, and colonial identity, *Making Law, Order, and Authority in British Columbia, 1821–1871*, Toronto, 1994, 134–156.

²² For a discussion of the demographics of British Columbia by the 1880s, see C. Harris and R. Galois, A population geography of British Columbia in 1881, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, Vancouver, 1997, 137–160.

Engineers deployed to delimit the character of the territory. Thus, the process of solidifying control over the mainland had begun in earnest.

The year after the mainland was declared a crown colony, the Hudson's Bay Company's lease on Vancouver Island expired.²³ The fur-trading company had been charged with installing a colonial society on the island, but by most measures the project was deemed to have failed miserably.²⁴ So, with the termination of the ten-year agreement on 30 May 1859, the Colonial Office took over the administration of the Island. Douglas stayed on as Governor (he had been in charge of the Hudson's Bay Company's efforts), and had the mainland added to his gubernatorial responsibilities. In theory, if not reality, Britain now exercised control over all of the territory it claimed in the Pacific Northwest.²⁵ The colonial office had provided the political framework necessary to undertake resettlement.

As the Crown asserted possession of the mainland, it did so without negotiating treaties with Native peoples.²⁶ And, with the exception of the handful of treaties signed by Governor Douglas in the early 1850s that dealt with small areas around Victoria, the same was true on the Island. While scholars have debated the reasons for this, it seems that a combination of high costs, racism, and the pragmatics of colonial resettlement led to a disinterest in the extinguishment of Native title on the part of both the Governor and the Colonial Office in London.²⁷ As resettlement proceeded in the decades that followed, Native peoples were left with small parcels of land around their village and resource procurement sites: enough, so authorities thought, that they would be able to sustain their lives as they had before the arrival of white settlers. While this was contested by Native groups, as well as by some non-Natives, and the boundaries of these 'little spots' were occasionally redrawn, in essence the borders between Native and non-Native spaces had been cast.²⁸ In turn, the Crown claimed the vast majority of land not occupied by settlements (Native or non) or industries and held them in trust for the colony.

The gold rush also marked the beginning of a new era of staples production on both the Island and the mainland. Resources were no longer procured by Native peoples working in Native territory and sold at small islands of white resettlement, as was the case with both the maritime and land-based fur trades.²⁹ Rather, the influx of miners initiated an industrial economy that required imported labour working on pre-empted and privately secured land. This new situation made it necessary to develop a policy that would 'turn land judged to

²³ J. Barman, *The West Beyond the West: a History of British Columbia*, Toronto, 1996, 70.

²⁴ Barman, *The West Beyond the West* (note 23), 55–56.

²⁵ Barman, *The West Beyond the West* (note 23), 72.

²⁶ The lone exception being Treaty 8, signed in 1899 and covering the plateau lands in British Columbia's northeast.

²⁷ See R. Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774–1890*, Vancouver, 1977; P. Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics: the Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849–1989*, Vancouver, 1990; and Harris, *Making Native Space* (note 3), 30–34.

²⁸ Of particular importance here is the work of the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs of 1913–16, popularly known as the McKenna–McBride commission. For a detailed discussion see Harris, *Imposing a solution*, in *Making Native Space* (note 3), 216–261.

²⁹ There is a range of opinion as to the degree to which Native peoples retained control over their territories and lives during the peak of the fur trades. See Fisher, *Contact and Conflict* (note 27); Harris, *Strategies of power in the cordilleran fur trade* (note 19); and Clayton, *Islands of Truth* (note 18).

be wilderness into private property'.³⁰ By 1860, a regime of pre-emption was in place in the colonies: settlers could stake out and purchase claims of up to 160 acres. While officials originally intended for the pre-emption of already surveyed lands, they quickly realized that in order to expedite resettlement the time consuming business of surveying would have to wait. Therefore, resettlement proceeded in advance of the work done by the Royal Engineers. The settler, upon making a claim, paid half of the purchase price of approximately one dollar per acre, and the other half was due once the land had been surveyed. Additionally, pre-emptors had the right to purchase additional lands of up to 480 acres, again paying half right away and half upon completion of the survey.³¹ In this way, land was made available to prospective settlers and industrialists for relatively modest sums. In the official calculus, these lands were no longer the territory of the Native peoples; instead, they entered into a distinctly European regime of property ownership. The ground had been prepared for not just an influx of miners, but also an influx of capital and capitalists.

The new human geographies that emerged were rooted in and relied upon British common law. Tina Loo argues that 'Europeans [who] inhabited the area that became British Columbia took an active and critical interest in the law, seeing it as central to their identity and to securing their future in Britain's far western possession'. However, the security that colonists sought was of a particular type. Loo continues:

[I]n spite of their geographical isolation, a potentially hostile and numerically larger Native population, and American expansionist interest, European British Columbians were concerned less with countering the possibility of violence and crime with English law and its institutions than they were about structuring a particular kind of social, political, and economic order and privileging a particular set of values through both the civil and criminal law.³²

This 'particular kind of social, political, and economic order' reflected the liberalism that underlay dominant notions of property: the primacy of the individual over the collective. Developed during the ascendancy of laissez-faire economic philosophy in Britain, it was a legal order constructed around a classical liberal discourse that held economic freedom to be the individual's ultimate right. Colonial authorities saw a strong central state and its attendant legal system as a means through which to facilitate individual economic gain and prosperity.³³ This included clear, rule-based systems for delineating territory claims, adjudicating property disputes, and settling disputes between individuals.

As Nicholas Blomley argues, the institution of British legal regimes, particularly private property, was underpinned by a certain type of violence that served to facilitate colonialism.³⁴ These legal landscapes were founded upon a colonial geographical imagination, upon a mythological hierarchy wherein white peoples were accorded the label of civilized in contrasting them from

³⁰ Harris, *The making of the Lower Mainland* (note 20), 85.

³¹ The preceding land policy details are drawn from Harris, *The making of the Lower Mainland* (note 20).

³² Loo, *Making Law, Order, and Authority* (note 21), 3.

³³ Loo, *Making Law, Order, and Authority* (note 21), 4.

³⁴ N. Blomley, Law, property, and the geography of violence: the frontier, the survey, and the grid, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, 1 (2003) 121–141.

savage, non-white (read: non-European) peoples.³⁵ Within this imaginary, the geographical limits of the law marked the frontier, demarcating civilized space from savage space. As this frontier advanced, it damaged and often destroyed previous social orderings and replaced them with the legal landscapes of western liberalism. Instruments of British control of territory were put in place, largely through a conceptual re-ordering of space. A particular geographical imagination was deployed, bringing this region of the Pacific Northwest into the fold of an imperial capitalist modernity: new political and legal geographies were being imposed; space was being ordered within British horizons of meaning. However, the question still remains: how was physical possession actually achieved and made durable in specific places at specific times?

Preparing the ground: William ‘Eddy’ Banfield

Although other non-Native people had visited the waters of Barclay Sound prior to his arrival, Banfield has been accorded the role of the area’s ‘first white settler’ in the regional historiography.³⁶ A navy carpenter, he arrived in Victoria in 1848. The following year he was discharged from his military service and took to trading with Native peoples up and down the Island’s west coast.³⁷ Through his travels, Banfield became the colony’s foremost authority on the cultures and territories of the peoples in the region, leading him to write a series of articles about the coast for the *Daily Victoria Gazette* in the summer of 1858. In 1859, as the Colonial Office was taking direct control of Vancouver Island from the Hudson’s Bay Company, he was appointed Government Agent by Governor Douglas. He settled on the edge of Barclay Sound at a site he bought from the Ohiaht people, naming his place Ohiat (Map 1).³⁸ From that base, Banfield continued his trade and exploration and, at the behest of Douglas, began taking a census of the Native peoples of the area.³⁹ He was seemingly at ease in this setting, learning local languages and readily undertaking strenuous canoe trips to move about the territory under his charge.⁴⁰ As Barclay Sound’s ‘first white settler,’ Banfield went about making the place his own.

A reading of Banfield’s correspondence with W.A.G. Young, the Colonial Secretary for Vancouver Island, reveals a man who fulfilled a unique and vital role in facilitating colonial possession of the region around Barclay Sound. In his official capacity, he was the physical embodiment of the system of law Loo discusses and represented the attendant violence noted by Blomley. Upon taking the position of Government Agent for the Barclay Sound District, Banfield swore the customary allegiance to Queen Victoria and promised to ‘defend her to the utmost of (his) power against all conspiracies and attempts whatever which shall be made against Her Person, Crown, or Dignity.’⁴¹ As the territory for which he was taking responsibility was claimed in the name of

³⁵ Blomley, Law, property, and the geography of violence (note 34), 124.

³⁶ R. Bruce Scott, *Barkley Sound: a History of the Pacific Rim National Park Area*, Victoria, 1972, 49.

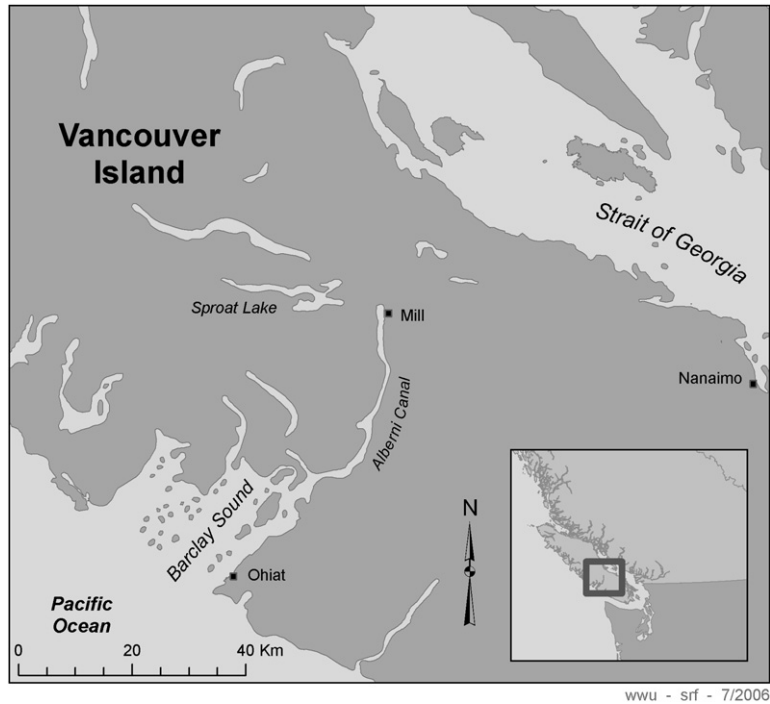
³⁷ J. Morton, *The Enterprising Mr. Moody, the Bumptious Captain Stamp: the Lives and Colourful Times of Vancouver’s Lumber Pioneers*, North Vancouver, 1977, 18.

³⁸ Scott, *Barkley Sound* (note 36), 50.

³⁹ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat (note 9).

⁴⁰ Scott, *Barkley Sound* (note 36), 56.

⁴¹ Banfield before Douglas, Victoria, 28 April 1859, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01306, 107-1c.



Map 1

the sovereign Crown, in effect Banfield was promising to defend a particular political and legal geography; to guide resettlement, uphold crown grants, and mediate relations between Native and non-Native peoples. A sort of colonial missionary, he was to institute and uphold British law in a territory that, until his arrival, was marked largely by Native control over society and space.

As settlers began to arrive, Banfield's task was to condition Native peoples and territory with British law. He was not afraid to employ violence to do so. During Banfield's first summer on the job, 'Mr. Kay of the *Morning Star*...received some sleights in dignity from the Indians about Clayoquot Sound.' In order to 'soften the dangers and difficulties either to life or property,' Banfield requested that one of Her Majesty's ships of war be dispatched to the coast.⁴² He also made sure that newly arriving settlers adhered to the law within the spaces that he had begun to condition for them. He paddled vast distances to ensure that relations between colonists and local Native peoples were amicable and that territorial claims were being respected.⁴³ He set down rules to guide interactions: no trafficking in liquor, no horseplay that might be confused for quarrelling, and no unnecessary discharging of firearms. Any disputes with Native peoples

⁴² Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat, 24 October 1859, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01306, 107-1.

⁴³ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat (note 9), 107-1a.

were to be brought to him so that the law could be applied.⁴⁴ In these ways, the former carpenter prepared the ground for and managed the arrival of colonists in Native territory. With certainty in both the Crown's claim to the District and the Royal Navy's ability to back it up, Banfield took his role as the area's 'first white settler' very seriously.

In fulfilling his duties as the legal representative of the Crown on the Island's west coast, Banfield carried with him a vision marked by *laissez-faire* capitalism. This was a vision that scanned the steep, forested inlets of the Island's west coast and saw raw resources that might be mobilized in building colonial society. While he recognized the abundance of mineral, fish, and forest resources, it was the possibility of a timber industry that caught his eye. He reported that, although agricultural settlement would not be possible in the District, the vast forested landscape 'will cause Barclay Sound to be noticed and wood eventually become an article of export, and an important item in the prospects and peopling of the Southern end of the Island.' Further, he observed, 'good water powers exist in the neighbourhood (Alberni) that I have visited, and the close proximity to the water, and inclined plane of the benches or flats, could not be overlooked and would materially enhance value by diminishing labor.' And, he noted, there was a ready market for this wood within the British Empire: 'Cedar of course abounds...of giant growth. This wood is almost unknown in our English dockyards and I feel persuaded...were it noticed there, it would supersede Mahogany for top sides of...battle ships, where light wood is a consideration.'⁴⁵ His message to the authorities was clear: timber export would be the key to British resettlement of the region.

As Loo points out, the fulfillment of such a vision of the resources of the District required certain legal institutions and private property regimes. Banfield, as the sole representative of the Crown, was the figure who began their installation on the ground. In addition to monitoring people's behaviour and resolving disputes, he identified sites suitable for settlement and landscapes rich in natural resources. In doing so, he noted species, size, and distribution of trees, all in relation to possibilities for industrial production. By communicating his findings to authorities in Victoria, he provided specific knowledge about the District, thus enabling claims to be made and capital to be invested in an area that had yet to be properly surveyed by the Royal Engineers. His range of vision, combined with a particular strain of liberalism, set the territory up as a vast and undeveloped resource space awaiting exploitation by the enterprising energy of colonists.⁴⁶

Finally, in preparing the ground for an influx of settlers and capital, Banfield served as a sort of intercultural messenger, albeit in a very uneven manner. At Douglas' request, he recorded demographic information about peoples of Barclay Sound and relayed his findings back to Victoria, painting a picture of a populous Native world. It was one that did not meet with his moral approval.⁴⁷ He was disdainful of the Native peoples' 'numbing inquisitiveness and rude curiosity' and dismissive of their 'savage and irresponsible agency.' He would do all he could to ensure that

⁴⁴ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat, 20 July 1860, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01306, 107-3, appendix.

⁴⁵ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat (note 42).

⁴⁶ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat (note 42); Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Alberni (note 2); Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Alberni, 18 April 1861, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01306, 107-7.

⁴⁷ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat (note 9).

Native people would not ‘be inconvenient or dangerous to new settlers.’⁴⁸ Banfield also communicated the intentions of the colonial government to Native groups, doing so with blunt certainty. Upon Stamp and company’s arrival at the head of the Canal, he informed the Sheshaht that ‘it was by the express desire and sanction of His Excellency the Governor that settlement of white people among them was allowed and that any crying or annoyance on their part to whites would be greeted with chastisement.’ He was confident that Native leaders accepted the righteousness of the project, having heard his reassurances and seen ‘the nature of (Stamp’s) settlement.’ After all, Banfield reflected, British possession of the mill site had resulted in it taking on ‘quite a civilized aspect.’⁴⁹ Through such representations of Barclay Sound’s Native inhabitants, Banfield reinforced attempts to reorder the landscape through the application of the law and the promotion of resettlement and capital investment; private property would need protection from such unscrupulous characters if the frontier was to push forward.

Banfield did not take physical possession of the Barclay Sound District by himself. However, as the local representative of the Crown, he gave expression to a colonial geographical imagination that constructed the Island’s west coast as a resource landscape, unused by its savage inhabitants and awaiting the application of British law, capital, and settlers. He also provided a point of contact between Native and colonial society, serving as an on-the-ground colonial emissary. Of course, in doing all of this he was drawing upon familiar imperial tropes regarding civilization, law, and property. While his representations of his interactions with local peoples and places might not have rung true for Native people of the area, they nevertheless provided a basis for the taking of physical possession of the District by colonial society. They helped to form certain truths about the area for prospective settlers and investors, as well as authorities in Victoria. Banfield was putting in place and solidifying colonial geographical imaginings of the west coast of Vancouver Island.

First approaches: securing a site

In December 1859, Captain Stamp went to authorities in Victoria on behalf of several British investors. A retired naval master, Stamp had previously procured spar timbers from mills in Washington Territory for firms in England.⁵⁰ Having been made aware of the massive and valuable trees available in the region, a consortium in London soon became interested in establishing a large-scale sawmill operation in British held territory, and Stamp was charged with securing land and timber from the colonial government.⁵¹ He proposed an enterprise that would cut up to 50,000 feet per day for export and noted, rather threateningly, ‘that unless the land system of this Colony present somewhat equal advantages’ to those available in the United States, he

⁴⁸ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat (note 44).

⁴⁹ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Alberni (note 2).

⁵⁰ Stamp to Proprietors of the Washington Sawmill, Port Gamble, 1 June 1858, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-1.

⁵¹ Gordon Hak writes that the original ‘British investors were associated with the London firms James Thompson and Company and Thomas Bilbe and Company, though Stamp was also an investor’. Hak, *Turning Trees into Dollars: the British Columbia Coastal Lumber Industry, 1858–1913*, Toronto, 2000, 33.

would ‘be compelled, however reluctantly,...to decide on some point on the opposite coast of Washington Territory.’⁵² In addition to being surrounded by a ‘reasonable amount’ of timbered land, the selected mill site would need to contain areas suitable for a fish curing establishment and small-scale agriculture, both required to ensure a sustainable industrial settlement. And, he stated, the chosen location would have to receive regular mail service and be declared a port of entry, with accommodation for vessels up to 2000 tons. Ultimately, Stamp suggested, the colonial government would be wise to consider his needs, as the enterprise would bring busy industry to the wilderness: ‘If I make money, other persons will be ready to invest...capital, industry and population in the country.’⁵³

Governor Douglas seems to have been quite happy to oblige. Seeking to encourage industrial investment and settlement, he approved the request, with conditions. Stamp could choose up to 2000 acres for milling and settlement purposes (buildings and farms) and an additional 15,000 acres of surrounding timbered land from which to supply the mill. Upon selecting his desired lands, he was to set about constructing the mill as soon as possible, with ‘permanent improvements to be placed on the land to the extent of Seven Thousand Five Hundred pounds within the year 1860.’ As the Barclay Sound District had yet to be surveyed and an official land policy was not in place, Douglas decided that Stamp could choose his preferred lands and pay for them at such time that they were entered into the colonial land system. Stamp was assured that, given his plans to construct a thriving settlement around the mill, the after-the-fact payments for the territory would be at the rates set for unimproved agricultural lands (at most, one pound per acre) and not the more expensive ones set for lots around town sites.⁵⁴ With the terms thus set, Stamp was ready to select his preferred location. He had explored the Island’s coast to the south of Barclay Sound in 1857 and knew the area contained good timber. This firsthand knowledge, coupled with the dispatches provided by Banfield, led him to travel up Alberni Canal in the company of two timber cruisers in the spring of 1860.⁵⁵ Satisfied with the size and quality of the timber at the head of the Canal, he selected appropriate lands for the mill and surrounding settlement and communicated his wishes to Victoria.⁵⁶ The colony was poised for a new stage of development; civilization was ready to push into the wilderness.

On 29 June 1860, a crew of men arrived at the head of the Canal to begin construction of the mill and surrounding buildings. Banfield ‘accompanied the party up the canal to make everything go as smooth as possible between them and the natives.’ He noted that they seemed ‘a decent class of men and...promised to abide by written instructions’ that he left with them. Banfield asked the Sheshaht ‘not to annoy’ the work party, stating that he would visit the settlement frequently to ensure the proper behaviour of Natives and non-Natives alike.⁵⁷ Despite Banfield’s confidence in his initial cultural mediation, the work party was not convinced that they were welcome at

⁵² Stamp to Douglas, Victoria, 31 December 1859, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-1.

⁵³ Stamp to Douglas, Victoria, 30 December 1859, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-1.

⁵⁴ Colonial Secretary V.I. to Stamp, Victoria, 10 January 1860, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-1.

⁵⁵ Morton, *The Enterprising Mr. Moody, the Bumptious Captain Stamp* (note 37), 17–18.

⁵⁶ Stamp to Colonial Surveyor V.I., Victoria, 14 May 1860, BCA, Vancouver Island Colonial Surveyor, Correspondence re: Alberni and Barclay Sounds, 1860–1865, GR-1169, Box 1/1, File 1/1.

⁵⁷ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohiat, 3 July 1860, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01306, 107-2.

the head of the Canal. Less than a week after their arrival, Banfield ‘received a note from the leading man of the party stating that they had received much annoyance and apprehended danger.’ He ‘started instantly’ for the settlement and ‘found the white men much disenchanted and apparently frightened’ as the entire ‘tribe had removed from the sea board their summer encampment, and had assembled in the immediate neighbourhood where the whites had located.’ However, Banfield found the Sheshaht people to be ‘in excellent humor’ and posing no danger. He ‘explained to them that they must not force their presence into the house as white men were not accustomed to their rude manner.’ In order to allay the work crew’s fears, and to stop them from leaving for Victoria, Banfield decided to stay at the head of the Canal for a while in order to ensure a smooth resettlement. The men were reassured, and the construction of the sawmill settlement continued.⁵⁸ Claims of British possession were being put into action, but not without friction and uncertainty. Nonetheless, the abstract spaces of the Island’s west coast that had been brought into focus by Banfield were now being made concrete.

When Stamp and Sproat arrived at the head of the Canal in early September 1860, then, important groundwork had been laid by the advance crew. Banfield seems to have managed to keep relations relatively quiet between Native and non-Native peoples, thus enabling the party to settle in and begin work. Equally importantly, the products of their labour (fences, buildings, and wharves) demonstrated the promise of improvement that accompanied British settler society; everyday life was proceeding in an industrial settlement. While both Banfield and Sproat recorded the official moment of possession-taking as the negotiation (with or without threat of cannon fire) that took place when Stamp and his company arrived in early September 1860, the process had begun earlier. Regardless, the enterprise was on its way, and by the summer of 1861 the gang saws were cutting 14,000 feet of timber per day for export to Australia and England.⁵⁹

Messy possession: timber, the state, and industrial capital

The operation at Alberni was not, of course, the first non-Native exploitation of the Island’s forests. Starting with Captain Cook’s use of the timber around Nootka Sound to refit his ships in 1778, the world’s navies noted the fine spars that could be taken from the forests of Vancouver Island.⁶⁰ Although the first European crews drew on the timber for immediate needs and not for sale, a supplementary trade quickly developed within the larger fur-trade, as merchants attempted, with varying degrees of success, to capture a portion of the demand for mast spars in Europe and China.⁶¹ Hudson’s Bay Company workers began milling timber shortly after the establishment of Fort Victoria in 1843. Powered by a local stream, the mill’s output was hampered by summer drought and it barely served the needs of the fort. By 1853 the small population tending to the fur-trade and overseeing hesitant colonization efforts

⁵⁸ Banfield to Colonial Secretary V.I., Ohait (note 44).

⁵⁹ Hak, *Turning Trees into Dollars* (note 51).

⁶⁰ A spar is a tall, straight tree, stripped of branches and smoothed. These were essential in providing masts and booms for the large ships of the world’s navies.

⁶¹ W.K. Lamb, Early Lumbering on Vancouver Island, Part 1: 1844–1855, *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 2, 1 (1938), 32–38.

provided enough domestic demand that a new sawmill was built at nearby Albert Head, this one driven by steam power.⁶² In the same year, the Muir family opened a mill on Sooke Island, southwest of Victoria.⁶³ Utilizing nearby stands of timber, all of these mills were resolutely local operations, producing lumber mainly for the immediate needs of the settlements on the southern tip of the island. Stamp's enterprise was fundamentally different; dedicated to production for worldwide export, the mill required exclusive access to large tracts of land containing enormous quantities of timber. This was a new approach to forest resources in the colony, one that required new practices of possession.

In granting Stamp the right to purchase up to 15,000 acres of 'unimproved agricultural land' around the head of the Canal, Douglas was operating in the absence of a land policy tailored to the colony and this new form of industrial resettlement. The timing of the mill's establishment coincided with the transfer of administration of the Island from the Hudson's Bay Company to the Colonial Office, and Douglas did not have authority to unilaterally set land alienation terms; hence the arrangement centred upon the right of first refusal once rules were set in place.⁶⁴ Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies, The Duke of Newcastle, approved of this intermediate measure, noting that 'in the meantime the Company will no doubt commence their operations and enter upon the land in faith of the promise' that had been made to them. He was adamant, however, that colonial authorities keep track of the lands being claimed by Stamp: 'It would be desirable to determine clearly, as soon as possible, the conditions under which the right of selecting 15,000 acres of forest is to be exercised by the company. The selection should be made in blocks of not less than a certain length and breadth, and within a certain time.'⁶⁵ While the exact method was not yet set, Newcastle was implying that this new land use needed to be regulated and ordered.

As a first step towards such government control, Stamp was directed by authorities to produce a rough map, or 'tracing,' of his claims. He provided this, along with a written description, on 14 May 1860. In addition to identifying specific sites for the mill and farming operations, he asked for 'all the Timbered and Prairie land for one half-mile back' from the shores surrounding the mill and farm settlements.⁶⁶ As the sole colonial enterprise in the Alberni Canal, the sawmill interests were without competition for timbered lands and Stamp was keen to tie them up for his mill. That fall, he paid 400 pounds to the Government for lands claimed to that point. However, the exact area and limit of this territory was not officially determined at the time of purchase.⁶⁷ Despite Banfield's diligent reconnaissance, official knowledge of the geography of Alberni Canal was limited; no proper surveys had been made and lands were not officially inventoried. Thus, Stamp's claims amounted to rough and ready approximations; the products of a man more concerned

⁶² F.W. Howay, W.N. Sage and H.F. Angus, *British Columbia and the United States: the North Pacific Slope from the Fur Trade to Aviation*, Toronto, 1942, 301.

⁶³ Hak, *Turning Trees into Dollars* (note 51), 18.

⁶⁴ Colonial Secretary V.I. to Stamp, Victoria, 10 January 1860 (note 54).

⁶⁵ Duke of Newcastle to Douglas, Downing Street, 6 April 1860, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-1.

⁶⁶ Stamp to Colonial Surveyor V.I., Victoria (note 56).

⁶⁷ Memo – Lands at Alberni, Acting Colonial Secretary V.I., 1865, BCA, Vancouver Island Colonial Surveyor, Correspondence re: Alberni and Barclay Sounds, 1860–1865, GR-1169, Box 1/1, File 1/1.

with the day-to-day needs of his enterprise than the bureaucratic requirements of the state. Stamp's mapping of and payments for his claimed land seem to have been aimed at securing his ongoing right to select more lands to feed the mill, rather than to guarantee ownership of his property. After communicating his initial claim to authorities in Victoria, he reminded the Colonial Surveyor that he retained the 'right to select a further quantity of land in that locality,' up to the limit of 15,000 acres.⁶⁸ The regulation and order envisaged by the Duke was not taking hold; instead, possession at the head of the Canal was marked by ambiguity and uncertainty.

As early as the winter of 1862, authorities in Victoria attempted to remedy this situation. Sproat was directed to 'state the exact limits of the land at Alberni and Barclay Sound which the Saw Mill Association' claimed. He replied that Stamp's description from May 1860 formed a part of the claim, and that as soon as the weather permitted, he would furnish them with the remainder of the required information.⁶⁹ This promise was not fulfilled; the company would go on to claim additional parcels of land over the next three years, never providing the government with anything more than a written request or rough sketch outlining a claim.⁷⁰ Colonial authorities were not satisfied with such an ad hoc arrangement, and nor, does it seem, was the company. When the first official map of Barclay Sound and Alberni was made available in Victoria in 1862, Stamp found it to be incongruent with his claims. He demanded adjustment and clarification.⁷¹ The messy, ill-defined possession that had marked the first years of the sawmill settlement was becoming untenable.

In the fall of 1864, the issue started to come to a head, with colonial authorities compiling and trying to make sense of the pieces of correspondence that made up the company's claims.⁷² Throughout November, Sproat (now manager as Stamp had left the operation a year earlier) was in contact with authorities over exactly which lands were owned by the sawmill interests.⁷³ They had established a mill site and village, two farms, and several roads and wharves. They had also cut timber in the forests surrounding these sites. There were a number of questions left unanswered by the loose agreement Stamp had made with Governor Douglas: Which lands were purchased through the initial 400 pound payment? Did the company own the areas they had claimed in order to access solely the timber? Did the investments that had been made in these areas warrant ownership? By the spring of 1865, some of the answers were becoming clear. The colonial government had finally passed an ordinance allowing the cutting of timber on crown land for a royalty, thus officially setting in place

⁶⁸ Stamp to Colonial Surveyor V.I., Victoria (note 56).

⁶⁹ Sproat to Colonial Surveyor V.I., Victoria, 16 January 1862, BCA, Vancouver Island Colonial Surveyor, Correspondence re: Alberni and Barclay Sounds, 1860–1865, GR-1169, Box 1/1, File 1/1.

⁷⁰ Stamp to Colonial Secretary V.I., Victoria, 22 August 1861, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-13; Anderson and Co. to Assistant Surveyor General V.I., Victoria, 18 June 1863, BCA, Vancouver Island Colonial Surveyor, Correspondence re: Alberni and Barclay Sounds, 1860–1865, GR-1169, Box 1/1, File 1/1, map appended. Klee-coot (South) Lake became known as Sproat Lake shortly thereafter.

⁷¹ Stamp to Colonial Secretary V.I., Victoria, 10 February 1862, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-14.

⁷² Memo – Lands at Alberni, Acting Colonial Secretary V.I. (note 67).

⁷³ Sproat to Colonial Secretary V.I., Victoria, 25 May 1865, BCA, Vancouver Island Colonial Surveyor, Correspondence re: Alberni and Barclay Sounds, 1860–1865, GR-1169, Box 1/1, File 1/1.

a timberland policy centred upon private exploitation on public land.⁷⁴ Wary of speculators and the threat of inflating land prices at the expense of ordinary settlers, leaders of colonial society had come to view crown timberlands as a public trust. Faced with either purchasing the lands from which the mill had been drawing timber (as per the original agreement between Douglas and Stamp), or beginning to pay a royalty on trees cut, Sproat found himself in a tight spot. Profits were slim and any such payments would ruin the firm. And, the company had no interest in owning lands that had already been stripped of timber. Ultimately, he agreed that the company would accept ownership of the mill and village site and the two farms for the 400 pounds. He also offered the government ownership of the roads that the company had built, thus handing over responsibility for their maintenance.⁷⁵ Five years after the establishment of the sawmill at the head of the Canal, the state had finally clarified the terms of colonial possession.

The mill closed down shortly thereafter, and industrial activity did not return to the area until the 1880s.⁷⁶ There was simply not enough accessible (in proximity and cost) timber to sustain operations. The company had been cutting trees on lands that Stamp or Sproat had laid claim to, but no payments were ever made on these. With the government's clarification of timberland policy, this advantageous situation came to an end. Nonetheless, within five years a significant industrial settlement had taken hold at the head of the Canal; possession was being practiced. Initially, the nature of this possession was confused. While Native peoples had certainly been dispossessed of the mill site and its immediate hinterland, questions of ownership remained unsettled. The young state, keen to lure milling operations to British territory and away from American control, had allowed the representatives of capital to begin to shape the nature of British space on Vancouver Island. The uncertain cartographies of control that began to emerge stood in the way of the construction of the colonial state. As Matthew Edney has argued in a study of British India, imperial possession of and power over territory relied upon knowledge provided through and produced by maps.⁷⁷ In the case of colonial Vancouver Island and the messy possession evidenced at Alberni, then, industrial forestry required that other mappings be created; those suitable to agricultural settlement simply did not apply. Rather than an alienation scheme centred solely on private property, a geography was adopted wherein private timber claims could be mapped onto vast swaths of Crown land. While similar arrangements were in place in portions of the eastern colonies of British North

⁷⁴ Morton, *The Enterprising Mr. Moody, The Bumptious Captain Stamp* (note 37), 20; The Government of the Province of British Columbia, *Final Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Timber and Forestry, 1909–1910*, Victoria, 1910, 11. Hak, drawing on Lamb, argues that the initial 15,000 acres promised to Stamp was crown land upon which Stamp was permitted to cut and pay royalties, thus marking the beginning of such a land policy. *Turning Trees into Dollars* (note 51), 68. This interpretation, however, is not supported by a reading of the colonial correspondence. Rather, authorities told Stamp that he could cut on crown lands *beyond* his claims if he agreed to pay a royalty. He did not agree to this and went ahead with the assurance of the right to purchase up to 15,000 acres. Colonial Secretary V.I. to Stamp, Victoria (note 54); Stamp to Colonial Secretary V.I., Victoria, 13 January 1860, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-1.

⁷⁵ Sproat to Colonial Secretary V.I., Victoria (note 73).

⁷⁶ Morton, *The Enterprising Mr. Moody, The Bumptious Captain Stamp* (note 37), 25; H. Hill, *Tales of the Alberni Valley*, Edmonton, 1952, 15 and 35.

⁷⁷ M.H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: the Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843*, Chicago, 1997, ch. 1.

America, they were by no means the default position for British colonial authorities.⁷⁸ Douglas had left questions of payment and tenure unanswered and for several years the Alberni mill benefited from access to virtually free timber. Once the colonial legislature decided upon a timberlands policy suitable to local conditions, Sproat realized that the Alberni mill could not continue. However, in the process another practice of colonial possession had been unleashed in the colony. Private exploitation of crown lands would draw them into the circle of improvement and everyday productive life that marked British claims of possession; abstract claims of sovereignty over vast stretches of territory would be made durable. The mill may have failed, but its legacy would be felt across the Island and on the mainland.

Lessons

When Stamp left the operations at Alberni in 1863 after a shake-up of the partnership, he did not intend to give up on sawmilling. That March he ‘employed a party of six men to prospect the inside of the Island and the coast of British Columbia for spar timber and a sawmill site.’⁷⁹ He wrote to authorities in New Westminster about an area on the mainland across from northern Vancouver Island called Port Neville. He thought he might like to claim land and timber there, noting that it was ill-suited to any kind of substantial agricultural settlement.⁸⁰ Stamp was operating within the same basic framework that had been employed in establishing the mill at Alberni. He communicated information about the mid-coast of the mainland with the same *laissez-faire* vision of resource capitalism that had marked dealings in Barclay Sound and the Alberni Canal. He made his claims to the territory by providing the usual rough tracing. And, confident in his plans to bring improvement to the wilderness, Stamp expressed the desire that his ‘exertions in opening up the country may not be overlooked by the government.’⁸¹ However, when he wrote to authorities in the fall to confirm his plans, Stamp also demonstrated an understanding of the necessity of developing effective and mutually satisfactory geographies of possession. In a familiar move, he requested pre-emptive purchase rights to lands for farms and the mill site, not to total more than 2000 acres. But, in stark departure from the Alberni experience, he requested the exclusive rights to the timber on up to 10,000 acres of crown land, subject to ‘any reasonable amount of stumpage.’⁸² It was the wood he was after; ill-suited to agriculture, the land was superfluous to Stamp’s needs. Private claims would mark sites of settlement, then,

⁷⁸ See for example G. Wynn, *Timber Colony: a Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick*, Toronto, 1981, ch. 6; and Wynn, Administration in adversity: the Deputy Surveyors and control of the New Brunswick crown forest before 1844, *Acadiensis* 9, 2 (1977) 49–65.

⁷⁹ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., Victoria, 18 June 1863, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-19.

⁸⁰ New Westminster (just south of present-day Vancouver) was the seat of government in the separate colony of British Columbia. The two colonies were joined in 1866.

⁸¹ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., Victoria, 22 September 1863, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-20.

⁸² Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., Victoria (note 81).

but they would also mark resources on public land. By October, Stamp was informed that the government was happy to oblige. He replied that he would continue with his plans upon his return from England the following spring.⁸³ Once again the representative of capital was putting possession into practice. However, this time the proposed mapping was clear and quite different.

Ultimately, Stamp decided against starting an enterprise at Port Neville. Instead, he chose an area on the south shore of Burrard's Inlet for his mill. The prime consideration driving the change in selection was the availability of sufficient stands of accessible timber. 'After a careful examination,' he wrote to authorities in the spring of 1865, 'I am now satisfied that sufficient timber exists on Fraser's River, Burrard's Inlet, Howe Sound and the adjoining coast to justify me in erecting a costly sawmill in that locality.'⁸⁴ The experience at Alberni made it clear that if timber cut on Crown lands was subject to royalty, it had to be easily and cheaply transported to the mill.⁸⁵ Going on, he made the usual request for the right to purchase a mill site and lands for agriculture and asked for a 21 year lease (at one cent per acre) for up to 15,000 acres of timberland in the area, as well as an additional 1000 acres at Port Neville. He also detailed the need for the establishment of a mail service and port-of-entry customs office, the former of which he was willing to take on under contract with the government.⁸⁶ In the end, he reminded the Colonial Secretary that 'should the sawmill co. establish their mill at Burrard's Inlet, many thousand pounds will be permanently invested there from which British Columbia will derive great benefit.'⁸⁷ By mid-summer, and after quickly aborting an initial selection, he finally settled on his mill site.⁸⁸

Wanting to secure and confirm his possessions, Stamp expended much ink in writing to colonial authorities in New Westminster. Unlike at Alberni, however, the presence of Native peoples did not concern him. While surveying the initial site on which the mill was to be placed, James Launders noted that there was a Native village located on one edge of the 100 acres Stamp had chosen.⁸⁹ It appeared to him to be a significant site and he remarked that the peoples of the village seemed distrustful of his presence. Drawing upon the familiar Lockean notions of property and the legal boundaries implied by the frontier concept, Stamp was convinced that the Natives had no interest in or ownership of the lands; they could be easily removed to make way for his operations.⁹⁰ Instead, he identified the government as a threat to secure possession. He went to great lengths to make sure that his initial lease of timberlands was clearly and precisely recorded. Of particular concern was a Naval Reserve that was positioned on the point of land at the First Narrows; he wanted to be sure that, if it were to be opened up for lease, he would have right of

⁸³ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., Victoria, 2 October 1863, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-21.

⁸⁴ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., New Westminster, 17 May 1865, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-23.

⁸⁵ Lack of easily accessed timber, in the end, doomed the Alberni enterprise. Hak, *Turning Trees into Dollars* (note 51), 9, 34.

⁸⁶ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., New Westminster (note 84), 1643-24.

⁸⁷ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., 30 May 1865, New Westminster, University of British Columbia Special Collections, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–2.

⁸⁸ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., New Westminster, 18 July 1865, BCA, Colonial Correspondence, GR-1372, B01366, 1643-28.

⁸⁹ The site was just inside the point of land known as the First Narrows, present-day site of Stanley Park.

⁹⁰ Hak, *Turning Trees into Dollars* (note 51), 66.

first refusal.⁹¹ Stamp was also concerned about competing claims by other settlers: those of coal mining interests at English Bay in 1865,⁹² cranberry growers on the Naval Reserve in 1866,⁹³ and former employee Jeremiah Rogers who, in 1867, attempted to establish competing timber claims.⁹⁴ In order to avoid confusion and conflict, Stamp was adamant that he be provided documentation detailing his arrangements with the government. He was quite impatient to find that the colonial bureaucracy was rather slow and cumbersome.⁹⁵ More than half a decade had passed since Stamp first attempted to construct an industrial sawmill operation in ‘unimproved’ country; in his second go-around, he was guided by the lessons in possession taught at Alberni, both in terms of that which worked and that which did not.

The government also drew lessons from its counterpart across the Strait. It was clear from the start about the terms of land ownership and timber access.⁹⁶ The messy nature of possession surrounding the Alberni operations had been a spur to both a cessation of vague deals between industrialists and the colonial administration and the development of a timberland policy that protected the state’s interest in creating a flow of forest revenues while retaining control and ownership of forested lands. No longer willing to encourage economic development at any price and recognizing the potentially lucrative nature of the timber business, the state gained confidence and started to see itself as a partner in the harvesting of the forest resource, not merely a beneficiary of economic spin-offs. Further, as evidenced by its enthusiastic acceptance of Stamp’s choice for the site of his new operations at Burrard’s Inlet, and despite the warnings offered by Launderers, the government saw no need to settle issues of land title or ownership with Native peoples who occupied lands sought by industrialists. The Lockean property ethic and evolving liberal legal landscapes that facilitated the dispossession of the Sheshaht at the head of the Alberni Canal were on full display in Burrard’s Inlet. However, they were now conditioned by past lessons; the template of practiced possession that was forged on the Island was transferred to the mainland.

The basis for the dispossession of Native land and its repossession as a timber resource is laid bare in this story of two sawmill operations and the lessons that connect them. At its core, colonial possession of territory in British Columbia was founded upon a conception of property rights derived from a racist ideology that turned on the identification of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and held that only particular kinds of labour and land ‘improvement’ warranted claims of ownership. This

⁹¹ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C. (note 87); Ball to Stamp, 12 February 1866, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–29; Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., 24 January 1867, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–35.

⁹² Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., 29 July 1865, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–13.

⁹³ Ball to Stamp (note 91).

⁹⁴ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C. (note 91); Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., 7 February 1867, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–37; Trutch to Stamp, 11 January 1868, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–40; Colonial Secretary B.C., 25 November 1868, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–45a.

⁹⁵ Stamp to Colonial Secretary B.C., 28 September 1865, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–20; Crease to Stamp, 30 November 1865, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–26.

⁹⁶ Colonial Secretary B.C. to Stamp, 11 April 1865, New Westminster, UBCSC, Hastings Sawmill fonds, Box 1, File 1–2; Hak, *Turing Trees into Dollars* (note 51), 68.

ideology found official state sanction within the liberal property regimes of Western law. It was mapped onto the Barclay Sound area through Banfield's efforts and eventually made durable through the practices of everyday life at the mill and settlement sites at Alberni. In these ways, colonial possession relied upon precedents within British imperial culture. However, another geography of possession was also put in place along the way. By eventually adopting a scheme wherein timberlands could be brought into production without being alienated by land speculators, the state enabled the actual practice of possession in a crown territory that was previously claimed only through general appeal to the British imperative to overturn its wild or 'unimproved' state. When, in the middle of the 1860s, new export-oriented sawmills began to open around Burrard's Inlet, the lessons learned at Alberni would be applied, and over the next few decades vast swaths of the coast would be drawn into the orbit of industrial forestry.⁹⁷ The historical geographies of early industrial forestry on the Island and coastal mainland, then, reinforced crown possession of much of British Columbia.

Thus, the story of these early mills and the characters that drove their establishment illuminates the importance of situated practice in shaping the nature of European colonial possession. British notions of property, law, and improvement were carried into Barclay Sound, up the Alberni Canal, across the Strait of Georgia, and onto the mainland by actual people. As they were literally put into place by along the way, such notions were challenged and sometimes reworked, over time leading to the creation of new and durable geographies. From the waters of the Sound to the shores of Burrard's Inlet, then, the construction of colonial territorial control was a dynamic process, born of ideology and empire, but sensitive to both period and place. A part of the answer to Harris' question, 'How did colonialism dispossess?', can be found by studying the actual ways in which settlers managed to achieve and maintain possession of particular 'edges' of empire.⁹⁸ And, 'edge' is just the right term; reliant on the centre for position and stability, but also distant and constantly becoming something new. In bringing the 'edge' towards the centre, then, practice matters.

⁹⁷ Hak, *Turing Trees into Dollars* (note 51), 68–79.

⁹⁸ Harris, How did colonialism dispossess? (note 6).