
Reviews & reports

This section of *SHALE* provides an opportunity for contributors to record interviews and to write about books, journals of other societies, Internet sites, exhibitions, conferences, symposia, and meetings.

Book reviews

British Columbia and Vancouver's Island
by Duncan George Forbes MacDonald, CE
(Longman &c., London 1862).

REVIEWED BY THE DAILY BRITISH
COLONIST, Nov. 6, 1862.

All who resided here early in 1859, and from that time on to 1860, remember a stout, thick-set, pot-bellied Scotchman, a civil engineer answering to the name of D.G.F. MacDonald. He, and some others, projected a tram-way to Esquimalt early in 1860. Previous to that he was engaged in surveying the town of New Westminster; but subsequently he became connected with the Boundary Surveying Commissioner, Col. Hawkins, and helped to run the line from the Cascades down towards the Gulf of Georgia. Afterwards he went to San Francisco, and there wrote a series of letters against this country, and particularly Governor Douglas.

MacDonald was a disappointed man; he did not get a fat office, and so has vented his spleen. About the time that his old acquaintances here had forgotten him, he turns up as author—publisher—of a book on British Columbia. We have not seen the work; but a gentleman now in London, sends us a few extracts, which we append. The tenor of the book is, “keep away from British Columbia,” as may be seen in the following extract:

“...the impressions left on the mind are of grandeur, gloomy vastness, awful solitude, rendered more dismal by the howl of beasts of prey.”

Again:

“How drear and awful [is this solitude!]”¹

Of the Fraser River it says:

“...and many a poor wandering mariner [has] its foaming waters engulfed to be never afterwards heard of except when friendly hearts pour forth their sorrow for his long absence.”

The woods:

“But these are silent, or resound only with the harsh scream of birds, or the fearful cry of [wild] beasts of prey.”

[...]

Victoria climate:

“Even at Victoria, in the vicinity of the ocean, the thermometer stood 26° below zero in the beginning of November 1859....
...sledging became the only mode of external locomotion.”

These are two whoppers. Last winter was our coldest winter for many years, and the lowest temperature was 5° below zero.

Soil:

“Its (Vancouver) agricultural and grazing facilities are incomparably inferior to those in the United States, the Cape, New Zealand, Australia, and the Canadas. But British Columbia is a miserable country, neither adapted for cattle nor suited for cereals.”

Mac evidently saw things through the spectacles of a disappointed man.

¹ The [] indicate a correction to the reviewer's quote found by reference to the book, or, less frequently, *SHALE* editorial clarification.

Geology:

“His Excellency the Governor has no faith in its utility; yet geology is one of the noblest of sciences, etc.”

Uninviting idea of British Columbia:

“Prairies are few, swampy, and of small extent, and are overhung in summer by clouds of insects [whilst] masses of decaying vegetation feed the exhalations with the seeds of pestilence, and make the balmy air as deadly as grateful.

“Vegetable life and death are mingled hideously together; whilst reptiles sport in the stagnant pools, or crawl unharmed over piles of mouldering logs, brush, and rushes. ...legions of [vicious] mosquitoes...[destroy] comfort by day and sleep by night.”

MacDonald must have had the “horrors” when he wrote this.

A crusher:

“Without the facilities of farming, British Columbia can never become the resort of the British emigrant who goes forth in search of pastoral occupation....”

Lone valleys:

“A barren, detested vale, you see, it is; The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean, O'ercome with moss and baneful mistletoe.”

“But not so in British Columbia [compared to older colonies], where it would be vain to attempt to describe the hardships endured by the poor half-clad, struggling people.”

Where did the women and children come from?

“Poor creatures! even now the scenes of misery which I have witnessed in that dependency rise before me—men, women, and children famishing for want of a crust of bread in a foreign land, where charity has no existence, and where the most exaggerated tales of wretchedness and crime fall far short of what the newly-arrived colonist feels and witnesses.”

Although so bad he tries to purchase:

“I applied to the Chief Commissioner of Lands...to purchase on the Government terms, for a few constituents, a thousand acres of land, situate[d] on the banks of the Fraser....”

Discourages emigrants:

“Believe me, hopeful immigrant, when I warn you that if you cast yourself a penniless wanderer upon the wild territory of British Columbia, even the very sky over your head will rack you with bitter winds and pitiless tempest.... ...If care is not tearing your very soul out, never think of emigrating unless to Natal, Queensland, or New Zealand. [If, on the other hand, you are the] squalid labourer, the pale artisan, the starved clerk, ...the peasant drudge..., or the Irish cateran..., [then] hesitate not a moment, but be off to Australia, Natal, or the Canadas. ...British Columbia teems with natural disadvantages to the honest and industrious man....”

The Indians in the present and future:

“Nothing can be expected but a war of extermination sooner or later, in which it is to be feared that the cunning, the ferocity, and the local knowledge of the Indian may prove an over-match for the superior knowledge of the white men, who number so few. ...The new arrival is waited for by the crafty, blood-thirsty, and implacable savage, who never throws away a chance, never exposes himself to the weapon of an enemy, nor misses an opportunity of slaughter and revenge.”

Oh! Behind the times:

“Immigration to the mines has for the present almost ceased. ...[I knew an adventurer who, being seized with the auromania, visited the golden shrine on the banks of the Fraser, and] dug for six weeks without finding a speck of the ‘shining mischief’, and after spending his all in ‘grub’, yielded in despair....”

[...]

Cruel fat Mac:

“It is to be hoped that Governor Douglas will not sympathise too much with these tribes; but that he will make them smell powder and ball.”

[...]

What a people in British Columbia:

“...The state of society is low in the extreme.... ...Night and day bands of murderous-looking ruffians prowl about and commit the most atrocious robberies. ...No man thinks of moving from his tent [by night or by day] without every barrel of his revolver charged and ready for use. ...At the darkest hour of the night, the agonising shriek and the muffled cry is heard of some poor wretch who is gagged or murdered, &c. &c.”

[The reviewer, perhaps pressed for space, unfortunately neglects to add:]

“The people in this colony are like snakes in an Egyptian pitcher, each striving to rear his head above the rest for sheer air and breath; and a crowning selfishness seizes on all, in the struggle for existence amidst a crowd of competitors.”

Wretched miner can pay £1 12s. 9d. for a tin pan:

“The maxim of the miner is, ‘Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die’. ...‘Every one for himself and the d—l for us all’ is the miner’s motto. ...Just fancy a tin pan worth 3d. is selling for £1 12s. 9d. Truly, it is the trader who makes, not the wretched miner!”

The n’ere-d’-well abuses the industrious:

“The same scum of humanity is now seething and fermenting on the banks of the Fraser River—the same riff raff, tag-rag and bob-tail of society are now digging at Cariboo.”

[...]

Imagine his bold face:

“On one occasion, those demons decided on murdering two of us; [so much we understood of their language]. [Of course that night] we could not sleep, but sat up displaying our revolvers and showing as bold a face as possible....”

The Bishop and his efforts:

“An unmarried clergyman is not the individual likely to inspire confidence.... He must either be a saint or a Pharisee.... ...If the Columbian Mission is to be kept up, the money must be sent from England.... If any impression is [ever] to be made on these savages, it can only be done by following them to their native wilds—by living with them, the life of barbarians, and feeding on the flesh of wild animals, grubs, roots, and grasses like themselves. ...When the molasses is stopped, the gathering of the children will stop too.”

This precious book contains 524 pages with a map from 45° to 57°50'N., is bound in cloth, and sold at ten shillings. Probably a greater collection of lies was never put together. ◇

British Columbia and Vancouver’s Island
by Duncan George Forbes MacDonald, CE
(Longman &c., London 1862).

REVIEWED (AGAIN) BY NICK DOE, March 2003.

So apart from that, how was it? —could, I guess, be an alternative title for the previous review. There’s no denying Mr. MacDonald’s penchant for passionate prose and poetry, and perhaps rhetoric too, but was his book in fact just comic hyperbole—an unfair view of how things were in British Columbia and Vancouver Island in the early 1860s?

First, to put things in context, we have to remember that the colonies and territories

that were carved out of the old HBC's Columbia Division were, in 1860, still very young. Oregon was founded in 1848, Washington in 1853, Vancouver Island in 1849, and British Columbia in 1858. And it was 1858 that saw the start of a gold rush that transformed Victoria, in a single year, from a sleepy little village with fewer than 300 inhabitants to a bustling town with over 3000. The gold rush started along the Fraser River, but moved quickly through the canyon into the Cariboo. Gold production peaked in 1863, a year or two after MacDonald's book was written, but by then the building of roads and other infrastructure for the new colony were underway. In 1864, the old fur-trading fort in Victoria was dismantled, and James Douglas, now *Sir* James Douglas, retired. Mr. Duncan MacDonald can, I think, be forgiven for being just a little "behind the times" when the pace of change was so brisk

On nature:

"...the general appearance of the country is very picturesque. ...Streams white with foam, flowing amid cliffs and ravines, forming at places magnificent waterfalls, whose lonely thunder swells and dies away in the interminable solitude of unpeopled space. Tremendous precipices, yawning gulfs, and towering rocks, whose naked backs have withstood the storms of six thousand years, are all there to astonish and rivet the attention."²

"Forests of the deepest green present to the wandering eye vast masses of foliage fresh and glittering in the sunlight; whilst far above, overhanging cliffs and mountains in the sky, glow piles and pyramids of snow and

ice, and glacier gorges of remarkable splendour.

"...I do not think I ever beheld anything more lovely than the Lake of Chilukeneyuke as I once looked down on it by moonlight. Every star in the wide expanse above, as it shone with glittering brightness in its tranquil course, was mirrored in the translucent waters. It was truly a delicious scene, charming and fascinating the senses, and filling the inmost soul with a glow of delight and reverential."

The book abounds with passages like this, and there is no doubting the impression the landscape made on the author. "The whole is wild and grand in the extreme," he says, "I never beheld anything like it", "the whole territory...is endowed with savage beauty beyond description".

If the author is sometimes repelled by the British Columbian landscape, he was not alone in this. For Captain Vancouver, the snow-capped peaks were "sterile"; the cliffs of dripping rock and vertical forest were "barren", "dull", "gloomy", "dreary", and "comfortless".³

On the Fraser River:

"A trip up this river in summer is very delightful, as the scenery is wild and grand in the extreme."

On the birds of the forest:

"...the harsh scream of birds."

Yes, and also:

"...no troops of feathered songsters fill the air with melody, or welcome in the breath of spring with the voice of gladness, and the notes of love."

Sentimental piffle perhaps...but I have to agree. The hedgerows and deciduous woods of England are more melodic than British Columbia's coniferous forests.

² It is interesting that in spite of admonishing the governor for his lack of interest in geology, he nevertheless upholds the 6000-year time scale of Genesis, a position that had quite faded from respectability among scientists by the start of the nineteenth century.

³ Jonathan Rabin, *Landscape of the Eye*.

On the climate:

“In the winter of 1860 the Fraser River had been frozen over, and many perished from starvation and exposure.

“The climate [of Vancouver’s Island] is comparatively mild, and it is in many respects more agreeable than that of British Columbia, the island being, as it were, protected by its giant brother from the cold winds of the North and East, and being swept over by the balmy winds of the West, which gain in softness as they steal over the gentle bosom of the Pacific Ocean.”

Although the author devotes nearly ten pages to a discussion of climate, including a temperature table for the summer months in Victoria 1859, his discussion ranges all the way from the climate of the west coast to that of Lake Winnipeg, the Red River, and Toronto. The main message is that winters are long and cold, and summers can be hot.

Until the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for Nanaimo Harbour to freeze over in winter, and it was not impossible for Gabriolans to walk to Nanaimo. One elderly lady on the island recalls very vividly the sound of the ice cracking in False Narrows as the tide moved up and down beneath it.⁴

On the economy:

Most statistical scales place the forest industry as the most important of British Columbia’s economy, followed by tourism and the mining industry, then agriculture, and fishing. MacDonald’s ratings weren’t all that bad, given the times he was writing in. The greatest obstacle he saw to the development of the economy was, rightly so, the enormous amount of capital required.

⁴ The Colonist reviewer by the way mistakes MacDonald’s terminology. By “26° below zero”, with respect to the temperature in Victoria, he means 26°F, just six degrees Fahrenheit below freezing (-3°C).

On one side, he saw penniless immigrants, on the other the vastness of the land.

On forestry:

“The forests are of vast extent, and sufficient to supply the whole world with valuable timber for generations to come. ...but it must be many years ere a lumbering trade of any consequence will be carried on in this territory.

“Unfortunately, British Columbia is but thinly peopled, and the forests are so dense, that much capital will be swallowed up ere they can be subdued into cultivation.”

Evidently 1860 was too early for the concept of a tree-farm to be advanced. Although Europeans began cutting trees the moment they got here, it wasn’t until after the railways had been built in the late 1880s that the forest industry began to take off. The first major sawmills and pulpmills didn’t start producing until the 1900s. The Harmac mill dates from 1950.

On mining:

“Recent explorations have shown that gold is not the only valuable mineral in the country. Specimens of silver, etc. There are also various kinds of stone, such as granite, sandstone, limestone; also salt and many other minerals. ...these sources of wealth are not likely to be rendered available in our day and generation.”

In MacDonald’s day, the only mining activities were for coal and gold. Although some of the prospectors found deposits of copper, silver, lead, zinc, and other ores in the 1860s, they saw no possibility of extracting them given the lack of roads, railways, and navigable rivers. The first major growth in mining, other than for coal and gold, was in the Kootenays in the 1880s. Locally, coal of course was mined at Nanaimo beginning in 1852. Iron ore deposits on Texada Island were first worked in the late 1870s. Sandstone quarrying on

Gabriola started around 1887 and brickmaking from crushed shale around 1895.⁵

On agricultural:

“Many persons fancy that a gem of the brightest lustre was added to the diadem of the Queen by the withdrawal of the province of British Columbia from the jurisdiction of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and its having been thrown open to colonisation. Nothing, however, can be farther from the fact.... The largest portion of the entire territory is an inhospitable wilderness, wild in the extreme, difficult of access, and inhabited only by Indians, a few factors of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and, with rare exceptions, the rudest outcasts of society. It is useless to disguise the fact, that the country is not adapted to agricultural pursuits on any extensive scale.”

MacDonald is driven to exasperation when seeking to instil the notion that the geography of British Columbia is different from the other places in the world that had been settled by British colonists. That the colony is unsuited to agricultural pursuits, and that land, in the light of this, was too expensive, is a theme he comes to time and time again. But, nineteenth-century administrators, journalists, and immigration officials thought otherwise. They evinced a strong belief that small-scale agricultural production on the family farm, acquired through the pre-emption process, would provide the social, economic, and moral backbone of the colony.⁶

⁵ June Lewis-Harrison, *The People of Gabriola*, Friesen & Sons BC, 1982.

⁶ R.W. Sandwell, *Peasants on the Coast? A Problematique of Rural British Columbia*, Canadian Papers in Rural History, ed. D.Akenson, vol.10, pp.275–303, Ganonoque, Langdale Press, 1996, cited in *Beyond the City Limits—Rural History in British Columbia*, UBC Press, 1999.

Captain Vancouver’s journal entry for May 1792 admirably captures the vision:

“To describe the beauties of this region, [Puget Sound] will, on some future occasion, be a very grateful task to the pen of a skilful panegyrist. The serenity of the climate, the innumerable pleasing landscapes, and the abundant fertility that unassisted nature puts forth, require only to be enriched by the industry of man with villages, mansions, cottages, and other buildings, to render it the most lovely country that can be imagined; whilst the labour of the inhabitants would be amply rewarded, in the bounties which nature seems ready to bestow on cultivation.”

Of course, there are places in the province where this dream has come close to being a reality—the Gulf Islands, southern Vancouver Island, the Fraser valley—but for the province as a whole, economic advancement has been, as MacDonald rightly foresaw, through large-scale, capital-intensive resource extraction rather than through small farms.

On fishing:

“Will it be credited that up to the present moment no organised attempt has been made to prosecute the fisheries of British Columbia further than for the immediate supply of the local market, except by the Hudson’s Bay Company. ...Truly the piscatory advantages of British Columbia are very great, and must one day command serious attention.”

Several historians have observed that salmon, not furs, were the major export of the HBC’s Fort Langley right from the days of its founding in 1827.⁷

On tourism:

“The long list of furs and feathers...would naturally lead one to fancy that the resources of sporting and hunting were without limit.... ...In the interior of the country, elk, deer, and

⁷ Richard Mackie, *Trading beyond the mountains—The British fur trade on the Pacific, 1793–1843*, UBC Press, 1997.

bears of all kinds abound; with wolves, foxes, beaver, otter, martin, and lynx, and also grouse, geese, duck, and snipe. These however are found only at a distance from the haunts of man, and in places where it would be extremely dangerous for a white to travel. ...None but the experienced native trapper and hunter can be successful.

...Most of the military and naval officers on duty in the colony have perambulated these wilds for days without seeing a skin or feather."

Tourism, as we know it today, didn't of course exist back then, but from the very earliest days wealthy European trophy hunters were attracted to the west's primordial wilderness. It seemed, as one writer puts it, "a sportsman's Eden". But the hunting paradise was soon to disappear. When easily-accessible game stocks sharply declined toward the end of the nineteenth century, hunters, motivated by a desire to ensure that their sporting activities would continue, and also in part, by a desire to preserve the social traditions of Britain, began establishing game reserves. Paradoxically, it was these reserves that were later to form the basis of Canada's present-day National Park system, and, of course, its tourist industry.⁸

On the people:

MacDonald quite vividly conveys the fact that the characters of the people of the colonies, at that time, were not at their best. The Aboriginal people were close to the nadir of their history, faced by disease, disruption of their economies, ubiquitous racism, alcoholism, and the ending of the traditions that gave them pride in their own culture. He describes several of their customs, but the descriptions that leave the lasting impression are those that deal with

cruelty, especially with respect to their slaves, which he especially disapproves of, and their savagery in combat, both against whites and other tribes. He subscribes to the generally-held belief of his time that the Indians were destined to disappear, to be replaced apparently by the people that he himself describes as "riff raff"—"the scum of humanity". He is a racist, yes, but he shows concern, even if condescendingly.

"The condition of the Indian is the most deplorable that can be imagined; many of them are puny and stunted; they are rapidly decreasing in numbers, and must soon disappear altogether.... Let us, however, recognise the beauty and power of true enthusiasm, and, whatever we may do to enlighten ourselves and others, guard against checking or chilling a single earnest aspiration in favour of these poor barbarians."

"I feel confident that the influx of these Chinamen will eventually prove very detrimental to the dependency.... They are a poor miserable half-starved crew, with only a thin blue calico shirt to cover their emaciated bodies. What is to become of them in winter, which is so bitter and cold...? Truly these helpless creatures in a foreign land are objects of compassionate sympathy."

Although MacDonald is evidently a religious man, he does, to his credit, clearly see the role of the church in the colonization process. He includes with apparent approval the following quote with respect to New Zealand:

"We began our colonies always by an injustice. What right had we to be in New Zealand? We put our foot there, we took the land from the natives, and then with a sort of sanctimonious hypocrisy we turned around and said, 'We know that we do you injury, but we will do you the least possible injury'.

"But there were certain persons, missionaries and others, who said, 'We will preach the gospel to those people; we will make them

⁸ Karen Wonders, *A Sportsman's Eden*, The Beaver, Oct./Nov. 1999 and Dec./Jan. 2000.

Christians; we will do all except do them justice'.

"If we went away and allowed them to govern themselves and inhabit their own country without interfering with them, [then] we should do them justice, but that we do not intend to do."

On neighbours:

"...never dream of going to any heavily-timbered country except in small bands of ten or twenty men. For what avail would be the labours of one man in clearing the forest, where it often takes twenty able men to remove one tree or stump? ...The only way, therefore, to get on is to exchange labour. You work with me one week, and I work with you the next, and so we shall both profit by the combination of labour."

An important ingredient no doubt of country life in general, and life on the Gulf Islands in particular.

On the lack of females:

The immigrants of the gold rush and, before it, the fur trade, were nearly all men.⁹ The gender imbalance in some small enclaves was more than 100:1, and even as late as 1870, of the non-Aboriginal population of British Columbia, 73 percent were male. MacDonald makes little mention of this, other than to record that "it would be madness in females to go thither" given the condition of society. The miner, he maintains, is of "a roving disposition" and "neither marries nor is given in marriage". However, without directly addressing the drawbacks of a lack of female

companionship, he, at one point in his book, meanders off in the following direction:

"[Once, in Panama on a sultry day]...I turned into one of those snug retreats, scarcely visible through the luxuriant verdure, so frequent in the isthmus, to get a mouthful of cold water. The heads of the family had doubtless gone to the trackless woods to gather the wild fruits so pleasing to the eye and grateful to the taste, for no one was visible but a young Indian maiden, who, fawn-like, startled at my approach, and would have fled into the thicket had I not made signs of peace and friendship. Raising my hands in the form of a cup, the woodland beauty was instantly reassured, and led the way to a shady grotto where a crystal mountain spring flowed gently from the rifted rock, whilst I followed in speechless admiration of the vision of loveliness which floated onward in such bashful coyness. This charming nymph was attired in a loose covering of the purest white, down which her plenteous black hair hung to almost incredible length...etc. etc. She was indeed exquisitely beautiful.... But I must leave these sunny lands and their pleasant memories, and return to the snows and storms of British Columbia."

It gets the message across, I think. Personally, I can't wait for the movie.

All in all, I found this book one of the more colourful and more readable books on the "geography" of Vancouver Island and British Columbia that were published in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ It is unfortunate that copies are now so hard to find. ◇

⁹ Jean Barman, *Island sanctuaries—Early mixed-race settlement on Gabriola and nearby coastal islands*, SHALE 2, pp.5–14, 2001. Also, Adele Perry, *Bachelors in the Backwoods—White men and homosocial culture in up-country British Columbia, 1858–71*, in *Beyond the City Limits—Rural History in British Columbia*, pp.180–194.

¹⁰ Some of the other books are R.M.Martin, *Hudson's Bay Territories and Vancouver's Island*, 1849; W.C.Hazlett, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 1858; R.C.Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 1862; J.Emmerson, *British Columbia and Vancouver Island*, 1865; and M.MacFie, *Vancouver Island and British Columbia*, 1865.