
Editorial

Curved reality and its effect on straight lives

Imagine that you are in a spacecraft orbiting the earth. Even though you are hurtling around the world at thousands of miles per hour along a path that is obviously curved, you will have no sensation at all of being acted on by any force. On the contrary, what is odd about your situation is that, for the first time in your life, you will have the experience of floating freely. Nothing is pushing you from behind—nothing is pushing you to one side, even though you are moving in a circle—and nothing is pulling you toward the ground. Yet your senses are not deceiving you. According to Albert Einstein, you are indeed moving freely in a straight line, but not relative to the 3-dimensional space of Euclid and Newton, but relative to a 4-dimensional spacetime that has been “curved” by the mass of the earth.

The notion that a path along which one moves can be both experienced as straight, and seen by a remote observer as bent, has a familiar parallel in the post-contact history of British Columbia. On one hand the settlers who came to Gabriola were for the most part good-natured, honest, hard working pioneers; yet, on the other, they were thieves who came here to steal the land from the Aboriginal people.

The *Nanaimo Free Press* of Saturday, May 9, 1874, says this of Gabriola:¹

“To a large number of our readers, this island is known as the ‘Big Island,’ and as many of these have never even visited it although so near, yet take an interest in farming

generally; it may not be uninteresting to give some slight description of it.

“Many who see these grey beetling cliffs facing the town might think it an unhospitable, barren island with nothing but gloomy pine trees on its surface; but this is not so, and though not above seven miles on its longest line, and two or two and a half on its broadest, there are many patches of rich swamp and alder bottom, and it contains no less than nineteen settlers, viz.: (going from the E. end to the W..) Messrs. Dingman [Degnen], Dick, Gray, Martin, Martin [*sic*], Kemp, Magnus [Edgar], Chapel [Chapple], McGuffy [McGuffie], Easson, Hogan [Hoggan], McLay, Hall, Le Beuf [LeBoeuf], Goss, Caulfield [Caulfield], White, and Heath, seventeen of whom are in constant occupation of their claims and hard at work.

“Their stock consists in all of some four hundred and fifty or perhaps five hundred head of cattle, besides a horse which we mention because it is in the habit of visiting a neighbouring island for summer quarters, and is on friendly terms with the cattle thereon much to the disgust of the gentleman who owns it. They have also numerous pigs and fowl, and supply us with butter, eggs, potatoes, turnips, and a considerable quantity of oats not to say anything of the very excellent beef it feeds.

“Of the settlers, the older ones of course have done most work, [such] as the Messrs. Hogan, whose dwelling house, garden, barn and buildings are a model of neatness, comfort and good workmanship. They are on the borders of a lake which they have lowered considerably.

“Amongst the others, Messrs. Magnus, Digman [Degnen], Gray, McGuffy, Chapel, and Kemp, much good and substantial work has been done, and the more recent settlers are quickly following suit. The Messrs. Martin the last pre-emptors are about to begin the cultivation of hops which Mr. Jonathan Martin thoroughly understands.

“An efficient Public School with Mr. Seneker as teacher has existed for some time, and the

¹ VIPL Nanaimo/NW History

main want at present is a regular mail service with Nanaimo.—COM.”

It certainly does not sound like your usual den of iniquity, just so long as we do not inquire too deeply into the behaviour of the horse. The settlers came here at a time when the Aboriginal people had been forced to abandon the island by events beyond their, and perhaps anybody else’s control. The land was, to the settlers, uninhabited and unused,² so why shouldn’t they be doing what they were doing?

Here’s another quote. These are extracts from the diary for 1869 of Mr. B.W. Pearse, one-time Surveyor General of Vancouver Island, when he was working in the Nanaimo area:³

“Tuesday, April 5th: Discharged Mr. Tait who was melancholy mad. Capt. Stewart kindly took charge of him. Wrote to Mr. Pemberton about him and Gabourie, etc. etc.

“Wednesday, April 27th: Completed 8700 and measured and posted 1700. Accident to compass—went to Fort to get it repaired. Compared and corrected chain. Bought rope, shrunk and stretched and marked same for measuring across the River.

“Monday, May 23rd: Completed 23600 about evening, had a council with Indians, gave them a feed of bacon and bread and requested them not to remove Posts which they agreed to allow to stand. I referred them to Governor Douglas for payment for their lands, or ‘Tai Mook’ which they call the ‘Deltu Plain’. Dollard broke down—not used after this date.

“Monday, May 26th: 4:00 a.m. proceeded to Deltu Plains intending to complete survey

² Government policy of course kept it that way. From 1866 until 1953, the *Pre-emption Ordinance* of BC banned Aboriginal people from pre-empting land. The system was eventually ended in 1970.

³ Quoted in W.A. Taylor, *Crown Lands: A History of Surveying Systems*, pp.35–37, Ministry of Crown Lands, 1990.

there. All my Posts were removed by Indians which determined me to waste no more time planting more.

“Thursday, June 2nd: Corrected 16 link error yesterday and completed 2 miles of Coast Survey. Evening had a splendid observation of Ursa Majoris, really the only decent one yet with the small theodolite.”

The picture here again is of an honest, hard-working man, trying to do a good job in the bush, short-handed, and with his fair share of irritating practical problems to deal with, just one among them being that the Indians keep removing his “Posts”. But just think for a minute, how you would react if a complete stranger walked onto what you thought was your land, and, with scarcely more than a gruff g’day, started hammering in posts and tying pink ribbon to everything. What for?—you aren’t entirely sure. All you know is that you’re far from being at the centre of whatever it is that’s going on. Why then wouldn’t you remove the disquieting, slightly ominous, and seemingly useless “Posts” the moment the coast was clear? Yet if that thought occurred to Mr. Pearse, he didn’t, so far as I know, record it. Here are two more observations. These are by Lieutenant Richard Mayne who was aboard HMS *Plumper* with Captain Richards when he was surveying the coast from 1857 to 1861:⁴

“...Cowitchin [Cowichan] harbour...is not worth much; but it will be of importance when the Cowitchin Valley, which runs back from it, becomes settled. ... It is peopled by the Cowitchin tribe of Indians, who, as I have mentioned, are considered a badly-disposed set, and have shown no favour to those settlers who have visited the valley.

Although it has been surveyed it cannot yet be settled, as the Indians are unwilling to sell, still less to be ousted from their land....

⁴ R.C. Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia*, p.152 & p.175, John Murray, London, 1862.

“... We found the ground on the west bank of the Courtenay nearly as good as that on the east. The soil, indeed, appeared quite equal to it, but it is not so level. We estimated the clear land here altogether at 7000 or 8000 acres. The Indians told us that a great many blankets would be wanted for the purchase of this tract, as all the neighbouring tribes resorted there in the summer-time to collect berries, shoot deer, catch fish, &c., all of which were found in large quantities. Indeed, they showed some reluctance at taking us over it, feeling sure, no doubt, that we should desire to possess it when its qualities became known.”

Judging from his book, Lieutenant Mayne got along fine with the Aboriginal people, and they with him. “Stolid as Indians appear in their villages”, he writes, “upon a cruise [cross-country journey] ... I have always found them in high spirits, and they would [around the camp fire in the evening] discuss the adventures and mishaps of the day’s journey with great animation, frequently referring to me to settle any vexed question that might arise”.⁵ What I find quite uncanny about his writing however, is his seemingly unquestioning acceptance of the inevitability of the dispossession of the Indians of their land—the only issue, it seems, is the number of blankets required to accomplish this. Was it perfectly obvious what the Indians were expected to do once having surrendered lands vital to their culture, economy, and to their way of life?

Of course, not everyone failed to look outside the spacecraft and observe that their path was far from being as “straight as an arrow” as it might seem:

“... The Indians have not been treated well by any means. There is continually an empty boast that they are British subjects, but yet have none of the privileges or the right of

⁵ ...*ibid*, p.102.

one. Their lands have never been paid for, in these districts at least. They are not taxed nor yet vote. They are confined in their villages to certain places. Nor are any means taken to protect their rights of fishing & hunting & yet if an Indian kills another in obedience to their laws of chivalry & right he is immediately taken up to Victoria.”⁶

So can we glean anything from Einstein’s conception that the paths of objects through spacetime are perceived differently by different observers, depending on their place in that time and space? Maybe not.⁷ But it sure makes me wonder how someone else, in some other place and some other time, will perceive my own life, which to me flows straight ahead in all good conscience, but which leaves me relatively little time to take a look out of the window. ◇

⁶ Robert Brown, *Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition*, (1864), quoted in Daniel Marshall, *Those who fell from the sky—A History of the Cowichan Peoples*, p.104, Cultural & Education Centre, Cowichan Tribes, 1999. To Brown’s limitations of their rights we can add denial of the right to potlatch (1885–1951), assemble in public (1880–1927), educate children in their own language (1920s–1983), and raise funds and hire lawyers to work on land claims (1924–1951). Aboriginal people have only been allowed to vote in provincial elections since 1949, and in federal elections since 1960.

⁷ Lest you think that I allude to a perpetrator-less crime, don’t overlook, as many textbooks do, that the geometric model of Einstein’s theory is not perfect. Straight lines in a given number of dimensions can appear to be curved from the perspective of a higher dimension, as well as the other way round. Straight lines on the surface of a sphere, for example, are great circles in three dimensions. “Honesty” in a curved reality revealing “duplicity” in a higher dimension? Well, perhaps. But then again, didn’t Richard Feynman, one of the greatest theoretical physicists since Einstein, say (in effect), we travel in an infinity of different ways between two points in spacetime; the path that is “real” has only become so because it is the path that has been observed.