

COMPANY, CROWN AND COLONY: A PREVIEW

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Commercial companies played a very significant role in the colonial endeavour. The great French, English and Dutch merchant companies of the seventeenth century opened up trading routes and colonialism followed in their wake. In a few cases companies had an even more prominent role in that they took over the direct rule of territories, forming company colonies. Some of the original 13 colonies of what became the USA were governed by companies; the Virginia Company was only one example. Providence Island and Bermuda were others in the seventeenth century; St Helena was ruled by the English East India Company from 1659 to 1834; a German trading company ruled part of New Guinea in the late nineteenth century; the Eastern Telegraph Company ruled Ascension Island between the First and Second World Wars. The author became interested in this subset of colonialism when researching on Ascension Island¹ and has since written a monograph developing the topic more fully, with particular reference to the East India Company and St Helena in the seventeenth century.²

There is a Canadian element to this topic insofar as another nineteenth century company colony was Vancouver Island, ruled under a grant from the British Crown by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) from 1849 to 1859. This was a different form of governance to the usual controls the HBC enjoyed elsewhere. The company, present on Vancouver Island from 1843 with a trading post at Fort Victoria, under their grant³ were obliged to set up a representative government and provide services as well as establishing settlement. Their reward was to take ten percent of revenues from land sales and a similar proportion of royalties charged upon coal production, it already being known that the indigenous peoples collected surface coals in the northeast of the island. Running Vancouver Island Colony also enabled the HBC to assert a commanding presence in western Canada and be better placed to protect their monopoly on trade with the indigenous peoples. They could also participate in the important trade links with the Sandwich Islands (Hawai'i), Russian America and the USA, especially San Francisco. In fact, the HBC through its ambitious chairman, Sir John Pelly, had originally asked the British Government to be granted all of western Canada; Vancouver Island was something of a consolation prize.⁴ To the British government the key requirement was that the potentially strategically-significant island should become settled, protecting it from the probabilities of unorganised squatting or other illegal occupation — it was feared at that time that the Mormons might try to take it, for example.

The author, with his interest in islands,⁵ expressed to some extent before in Canada with work on Prince Edward Island,⁶ decided to follow up his book, *The Company's Island*, with a

study of Vancouver Island in its HBC period. The project widened somewhat as the HBC from Vancouver Island became much involved in developments also in mainland British Columbia and on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii, though actually called for much of this period Queen Charlotte's Island, it not being known to the Europeans that this was an archipelago). The project will be a book, which like *The Company's Island* will be published by the London house, IB Tauris. Entitled *Company, Crown and Colony: the Hudson's Bay Company and Territorial Endeavour in Western Canada*, it should be published in late 2010.

The book has an interesting story to tell. Fort Victoria, a stockaded trading post similar to many others belonging to the HBC, became a colonial capital. The British government, presumably stung by considerable criticism at home that granting the island to a trading company was, to say the least, infelicitous attempted at first to impose local oversight on the situation — they always maintained a distant oversight in that the company had constantly to report on their activities on Vancouver Island to the Colonial Office in London. Said local oversight was in the form of a colonial governor, Richard Blanshard, who arrived in 1850 after the usual several months spent in travel to this, then the least accessible of British colonial possessions. Blanshard was ill during most of his months in the colony, probably through malaria contracted on the voyage, and had an awful time of it. He argued with the HBC, was treated dismissively by the Europeans there, almost all of whom worked for the company and regarded him as irrelevant. He involved himself in punitive expeditions against indigenous peoples in the northeast at the mining settlement of Fort Rupert where three deserting sailors had been murdered. This was quite alien to the traditions of the HBC in their dealing with indigenous peoples and Blanshard was severely criticised for his harsh policies. He resigned, ill and dispirited, and was replaced as governor by the local HBC Chief Factor, James Douglas. This was the man who had selected the site for Fort Victoria in 1842 and had been in charge of company affairs on the island since just before the colony was formed in 1849. Douglas now had to balance the contrasting requirements of the trading company and the colony. To the former, settlement and colonization could interfere with the indigenous fur trade, which was the reason the HBC went there; to the latter, settlement and colonisation were a requirement. He had to organise migration, land sales and settlement; to operate coal mines — the failure of that at Fort Rupert was followed by success at Nanaimo. He had to establish a civil society with schools and churches, a legal and government system. He was concerned about the Russians to his north during the Crimean War and with the Americans to his south at all times. All his activities and

decisions had to take into account the presence of 15,000 or so indigenous peoples on the island whose attitude to the colonists ranged from seeing them as benign providers of employment and goods to a more hostile view of them as outsiders taking land and destroying their way of life. It is to Douglas's credit that during his time on the island there were no major hostilities with the indigenous people, which was not reflected in what happened in the American Oregon Territory to the south with what is now called the Puget Sound War.

However, the HBC were not particularly successful in the prime objective of the British Government, which was to establish colonisation on Vancouver Island. One of the problems was the application of the then fashionable Wakefield theory, which sought the settlement by gentlemen farmers with labourers and estate workers. Land was not free, it cost twenty shillings per acre and those taking large areas were to bring labourers out. Better land was available for less cost and with fewer restrictions elsewhere in North America and, as a result, few independent settlers came to Vancouver Island. Many of those who did take land were HBC people who worked or retired there. James Douglas himself had taken 677 acres by 1858.⁷

Then the quiet backwater that was Vancouver Island Colony became caught up in gold rushes which changed everything. First was a short-lived flurry on the Queen Charlotte Islands, then, in 1858, a much more significant rush around the Fraser and Thompson Rivers on what became the British Columbia mainland. Victoria became the entry point and supply depot for the miners who moved to and through the settlement in their thousands. The colony had to cope first with the boom, followed later by the bust as the gold rush was not sustained. The boom

brought to attention the potentialities of British Columbia as a colony and after a spell as an independent colony ruled firstly also by James Douglas, Vancouver Island, which had been taken from the HBC, united with British Columbia with the capital at Victoria, before going on to enter Canadian federation.

The full story, which will take 90,000 words or more, is to be told in the book through the interrogation of the copious primary documentation available, including, but by no means limited to, the hundreds of letters and despatches penned by James Douglas. There are records in London, in the British Columbia Archives in Victoria and the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, housed within the Manitoba Archives in Winnipeg.

The author is Professor of Geography at Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland and is also director of the university's Centre of Canadian Studies. The centre, now housed within the School of Geography, Archaeology and Palaeoecology, has been established for about 25 years and acts to facilitate and disseminate research and teaching about Canada in its region. There are conferences and seminars and the annual Eaton Lecture, sponsored by the Eaton Foundation. A series of lectures organised by the Centre formed a special issue of the *British Journal of Canadian Studies* in 2006;⁸ past and present staff edited *Doing Development Differently*, a book on Irish and Atlantic Canadian regional development in 2007,⁹ and other projects currently under way are investigating water quality in Ontario and mineral development in a number of provinces.

- 1 Royle, S.A. (2004) 'The island has been handed over to me': Ascension Island as a company colony, 1922-1942', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 25.1, pp. 109-126.
- 2 Royle, S.A. (2007) *The Company's Island: St Helena, company colonies and the colonial endeavour*, I.B. Tauris: London.
- 3 Vancouver's Island Royal Grant, 13 January 1849, *Papers relative to Vancouver's Island*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1849, xxxv.629.
- 4 *Copy of correspondence between the Chairman of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Secretary of State for the Colonies relative to the colonization of Vancouver's Island*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1847-48, xlii.693.
- 5 Royle, S.A. (2001) *A geography of islands: small island insularity*, Routledge: London.
- 6 McFerran, K.E. and Royle, S.A. (2007) 'Rural development in an insular setting: Prince Edward Island', in S. Hodgett, D. Johnson and S.A. Royle (eds) *Doing development differently: regional development on the Atlantic periphery*, Cape Breton University Press: Sydney, pp. 186-212; Royle, S.A. (1999-2000) 'Community needs and post-secondary education in Prince Edward Island', *The London Journal of Canadian Studies*, 15, pp. 34-42; Royle, S.A. (1999) 'Bridging the gap: Prince Edward Island and the Confederation Bridge', *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 14.2, pp. 242-254; Royle, S.A. (2002) 'Regional development issues in Prince Edward Island, Canada', in M.M. Klemencic (ed.) *Podezelje na prelomu tisocletja: izzivi in problemi. Rural areas at the millennium shift: challenges and problems*, Dela, 17, pp. 230-237.
- 7 J.D. Pemberton, 24 June 1858, *A return of all lands in Vancouver's Island sold to any individual or company*, British Parliamentary Papers, 1857-58, xli.571.
- 8 Hodgett, S. and Royle, S.A. (eds) (2006) Governance, culture and identity in contemporary Canada, special issue, *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 19.2, pp. 141-303.
- 9 Hodgett, S., Johnson, D. and Royle, S.A. (eds) (2007) *Doing development differently: regional development on the Atlantic periphery*, Cape Breton University Press: Sydney.