



ELSEVIER

Journal of Historical Geography 33 (2007) 770–790

JOURNAL OF
HISTORICAL
GEOGRAPHY

www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

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

David A. Rossiter

*Department of Environmental Studies, Huxley College of the Environment,
Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA 98225-9085, USA*

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.

© 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Possession; Colonialism; Forestry; Vancouver Island; British Columbia

E-mail address: david.rossiter@wwu.edu

0305-7488/\$ - see front matter © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.jhg.2006.12.001

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.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1039354>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1039354>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)