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A Vast Inland Empire and the Last Great West: remaking society, space and environment in early British Columbia

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Abstract

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a new order was imposed on the land and inhabitants of present-day interior British Columbia. From one perspective this was a story of human progress and improvement – the advance of colonizing Europeans into lands that they considered underutilized and unproductive and that they sought, often successfully, to bring within the growing orbit of global trade and world capitalism. Yet for many people and creatures the story of resettlement was far from a story of progress. In relatively short order – less than a century – the grasslands of interior British Columbia were swept and transformed by many of the most powerful currents of western modernity. The results of this transformation were uneven and often deeply inequitable. By the late nineteenth century native peoples had been dispossessed and struggled to survive on small resource-poor Indian Reserves; a few corporate and family-owned cattle ranches controlled the best range leaving small-scale immigrant ranchers with more or less marginal land; and many types of grassland had been heavily overgrazed. This paper explores these darker sides of European resettlement in present-day interior British Columbia by emphasizing the role of ranching in colonial resettlement, by describing the stratified rural society that ranching, in part, produced, and by revealing the different ways that cattle and ranches interacted with natural and economic processes to remake an environment.

Keywords: Colonialism; Capitalism; Grassland; Ranching; British Columbia; Environmental history; Resettlement

In a 1913 'circular letter' sent to British Columbia cattle ranchers and local grazing authorities, government official H.R. Christie, in a single remarkable sentence, described interior British Columbia as both a 'vast Inland Empire' and the 'last Great West' (Fig. 1). Consider the 'facts', said Christie: Although in climate the interior was colder than Washington or Idaho, it possessed the 'great advantage' of being 'practically free' from 'alkali land', which was largely useless for grazing and agriculture. And although 'large areas' of the interior were 'as yet almost untouched and unknown', the quality of grazing lands was already 'known to be excellent' – better even than Oregon and California where cattle and sheep ranching was much more developed. According to Christie, in British Columbia cattle ranching was 'made easy by a dry, bracing climate', plentiful water, a rich abundance of bunchgrass rangeland, and 'progressive' provincial legislation that enabled settlers with little or no capital to acquire land. An empire of nature and a frontier of opportunity, interior British Columbia was 'truly' the Last Great West.[1]

Eleven years into the twenty-first century, the words 'Empire' and 'Great West' have more troubling meanings. As P.N. Limerick has noted, 'The intrusion of outsiders into the territory of indigenous people; the exercise of various kinds of power, including military force, to subordinate the indigenous people; the transfer of ownership of land and natural resources from the original residents to the invaders; the creation of political, social, and cultural structures (tribal governments, boarding schools, syncretized religions) to contain the new set of human relations brought into being by imperialism; [and] the romanticizing and mythologizing of both the pioneers who drove this whole process and the safely defeated natives' are all good reasons to view words like Empire and Great West with suspicion or contempt.[2] Even in 1913, when these words could be uttered with optimism or written without scare quotes, it was possible to be ambivalent about, even unsettled by, the state of society and environment in interior British Columbia. Boosters like Christie imagined interior British Columbia to be an empire of nature and a frontier of opportunity. But in many ways, and for many people, the reality was otherwise: native people struggled to

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[1] H.R. Christie, 'British Columbia and the Livestock Industry,' 9 September 1913, British Columbia Archives [hereafter BCA], GR 1441, File 2733.

[2] P.N. Limerick, Empire and amnesia, *Historian* 66 (2004) 532–538.

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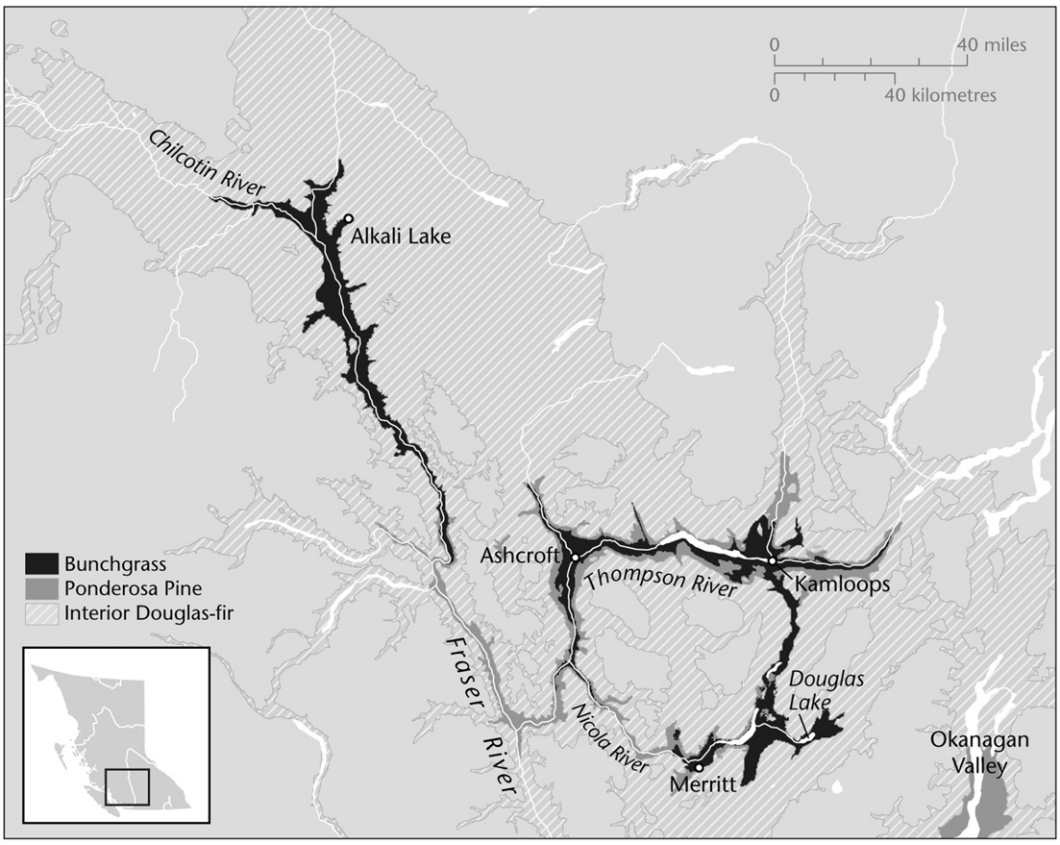

Fig. 1. Interior British Columbia showing major vegetation types. Map by Eric Leinberger.

survive on small resource-poor Indian Reserves; a few corporate and family-owned cattle ranches controlled the best range leaving small-scale ranchers with more or less marginal land; and many types of grassland were heavily overgrazed. This paper explores these darker sides of interior British Columbia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by emphasizing the role of ranching in colonial resettlement, by describing the stratified rural society that resettlement produced, and by revealing the different ways that cattle and ranches interacted with natural and economic processes to remake and, in some cases, degrade an environment.[3]

Resettlement and the rise of ranching

British Columbia may be best known for its wet and dense coastal rainforests, but large parts of the interior are dry, with sagebrush and bunchgrass at lower elevations and relatively open Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir forests in the uplands. Average annual precipitation in the drier areas is usually less than 30 cm, and only about half of this falls during the growing season. The reason for this relative aridity is rooted in the rise of massive, north–south trending mountain chains millions of years ago, which block the eastward movement of moist, warm air, effectively creating a large rainshadow over the interior. Weather and climate vary with local differences in altitude, exposure and latitude, but in general terms, winters are cold, summers are hot, and the air is dry.

Before European resettlement, this was native space: Tsilhqot'in, Secwepemc, Stl'atl'imc, Nlakapamux, and Okanagan people hunted, fished and gathered in a landscape hedged with hereditary use rights regulating access to resources.[4] They also grazed horses in the grasslands, but just when and how the horse arrived are controversial questions. Western accounts contend that the horse evolved in North America but became locally extinct there about 11–13,000 years ago and that the continent remained horseless until the Spanish reintroduced them in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By this account, there were no horses in present-day British Columbia until at least the eighteenth century when they begin to reappear in the archeological record and in the written records of non-native explorers and traders.[5] But some native people contest the basis of this history. According to some Okanagan people, for example, it was Coyote the Trickster, not the Spanish conquistadors, who brought snklc'askaxa, or horse, to their traditional territory and like other creatures it had 'always' been there.[6]

[3] My use of the term 'resettlement' borrows from C. Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, Vancouver, 1997. Following Harris, my use of the term is a reminder that native peoples occupied and possessed present-day BC long before European settlers arrived. As Harris (xxi) writes: 'Broadly, we [British Columbians] are here, most of us, because we have imposed ourselves.'

[4] B. Hayden, *A Complex Culture of the British Columbia Plateau: Traditional Stl'atl'imx Resource Use*, Vancouver, 1992.

[5] B.J. McFadden, *Fossil Horses: Systematics, Paleobiology, and Evolution of the Family Equidae*, New York, 1992.

[6] B. Cohen (Ed.), *Stories and Images About What the Horse Has Done For Us: mayx twixmntm tl q'sapi lats k'ulmstm I snklc 'askaxa*, Penticton, 1998.