

Unit 13: Video 1 Transcript

Q6: Describe community formation.

A: One of my other interests is the establishment of communities, particularly in British Columbia but in Canada generally, and the mechanisms by which that happens. And the extent to which the story of those communities becomes simplified. I mean narratives are meant to be simple, and that's one of the dangers of doing history is that people look for the simple narratives. And I think that's a very human tendency. It's just what would make this story easy? If we had a villain! And it's very often not that way.

So I was interested in the establishment of early settlements on Vancouver Island, early colonies on Vancouver Island, particularly around the Nanaimo, in what became the coalmining belt, that runs from Ladysmith north through Nanaimo, Wellington, and then there's another piece of it up near Cumberland in the Comox Valley. And what I was curious about in looking at that was how—well, for starters, why would anyone go there in the first place, you know? In the 1850s, why would anyone leave the British Isles to go mine coal on Vancouver Island? The only way to get there was to go around Cape Horn. It's a three- to six-month voyage. It's a terrible trip out. It's no cruise ship, and the slightly faster route would be to go through Panama and run the risk of getting malaria. So it's pretty much Cape Horn. The good news is you get a side trip out to Hawaii, and then you come up to the West Coast. So I was curious as to why anybody would go there. And if you could get at that motivation, then you'd be able to get a sense of why they built their communities the way they did and whether they were happy with what they found or whether they were disappointed. And then how they respond to everything else that comes along after that.

And it works out pretty straightforwardly in some respects. They came for the money. They thought they were going to have a much better living. They were able to sell their property, everything they had in England or in Wales or in Scotland; hop on a boat; spend this long passage around the Horn. And then they were going to earn more money as a family. Their household income was going to be substantial. It didn't quite work out that way, in part because mine owners wanted to increase their profits and they would do that

by driving down wages, by replacing boys in the mines with Aboriginal workers, with Chinese workers, and out of whom they could get more labour because they they'd be hiring adult males and not just boys. Work opportunities for women were really limited in these resource extraction communities. And so the society that they built around places like Nanaimo, from the start it's fraught. It's largely about disappointment.

The workplace is very dangerous. So the white miners very often blame the non-white miners for this. In some cases, this is where you see the — this is a foundational moment for British Columbia and racism. "You can't trust those people because they can't read warning signs." Well, maybe if you wrote it in Chinese, they'd be able to read them. But okay, given that you're not going to do that, is this really about racism or is it about mine safety? And fairly consistently, it's about mine safety and family income. You do see a lot of anti-Asian sentiment, but not so much as you see fear of death, fear of accidents, worry about the future for family members.

So the society they're building, indeed in some of these households in places like Nanaimo, you would have maybe two generations of family members, maybe three. Sometimes it's a horizontal connection, so you'll have two brothers and one of them is married and the other one may not be. They've got three kids over here. There might be a couple of nephews over there. Maybe there's a grandparent as well or a grandchild. But also, a couple of boarders, people who are completely unrelated living under the same roof. And perhaps a couple of Chinese men, adult males anywhere from 15 years on living in the household as cooks, as assistants, miners' assistants. And so you might have this very, very cosmopolitan shack, a very small house with eight or nine people in it, and they're from all over the planet. There'll be an Australian, a Welshman, a couple of Scotsmen and their wives, the kids, some of whom were born in British Columbia, some of whom were born in South Africa or whatever. They've been born along the route out to Vancouver Island. It's very complex households. As a consequence, very complex communities as well.