

British Columbia in the Balance 1846-1871

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Book Review

British Columbia in the Balance 1846-1871

By Jean Barman

Harbour Publishing, 2022, 319 pages

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In Jean Barman's book, *British Columbia in the Balance: 1846-1871*, the author explores the beginnings of British sovereignty in what is now British Columbia. Barman explores the key players and mechanisms behind the rapid evolution of British Columbia's entrance into Canadian Confederation aiming to uncover the forces responsible for monumental change. As a professor of history and leading historian specializing in British Columbia, her deep-rooted knowledge is demonstrated in each chapter that unfolds with historical accuracy, suspense, and engagement.

Barman draws on primary sources accessible by the University of Victoria such as the private exchanges between the Colonial Office in London and James Douglas, Arthur Kennedy, and Frederick Seymour. Barman utilizes a methodology that centred around reading and reflecting on private journals and correspondence. She employs a top-down approach which entails beginning analysis at the highest level of a system and then cascading downwards to address details with policies, or directives from the top. Barman also utilizes a bottom-up approach which prioritizes the input and autonomy of individuals impacted by grassroots participation, community involvement, and decentralized decision-making processes.

Related to this point, James Douglas emerges as the pivotal figure and protagonist who steered British Columbia from the grip of potential American annexation of the 49th parallel. Douglas adopted a collaborative stance toward the Indigenous populations under his authority due to his mixed ancestry and marriage to an Indigenous woman. His method of governance was crucial in keeping the Gold Rush from being chaotic and preventing the United States from annexing the region. She writes, “It is intriguing to ponder but impossible to know what might have ensued respecting the BC we today take for granted if not for James Douglas” (p. 137).

Barman’s narrative traverses significant milestones from the transition of Hudson’s Bay Company’s dominion to the establishment of colonies on Vancouver Island and mainland B.C., all spurred by Douglas’s initiatives. The famous Gold Rush of 1858 emerges as a watershed moment that prompts strategic interventions to counter American encroachment and Indigenous unrest. Devoting significant space to the Gold Rush, Barman stresses the great contributions made by working-class miners and she reiterates the significance of including Indigenous women’s involvement in the historical discourse.

Barman explores the top-down story to highlight everyday people like gold miners and a bottom-up perspective in the narrative of Anglican Bishop George Hills, to reveal BC’s varied social fabric—including the relationships between immigrants, settlers, and Indigenous peoples. Barman highlights Indigenous women’s often overlooked achievements, suggesting that their marriage with gold miners contributed to the stabilization of society. Nevertheless, she notes that despite their involvement in mining and land ties, there is a lack of discussion regarding the role of Indigenous men in this story. Barman also discusses the treatment of Indigenous women as objects, sexual workers, and maltreatment by White men due to a shortage of White women.

A few critiques of Barman include the reliance on Eurocentric and colonially biased correspondence upon which she was basing her account. This approach often privileges Western perspectives and marginalizes the voices and experiences of non-European or Indigenous communities. This lack of diverse voices through archival material reflects a narrow lens through which one sees history. Perhaps through no fault of her own Barman uses the dominant lens to recount history. By excluding perspectives, Barman runs the risk of presenting an incomplete or biased portrayal of the subject matter as embracing diversity fosters a more nuanced understanding of the issues at play.

Barman's thorough research is obvious in each chapter, and her intellectual approach is highlighted by the numerous footnotes and references. Her thesis on the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers provides insightful analysis, but it also establishes a foundation for future research into this intricate historical interplay. At times, it lacks depth and should be an area of further exploration.

Barman's thorough and nuanced analysis not only offers a convincing re-evaluation of British Columbia's historical trajectory, but it also emphasizes how important it is to acknowledge the various players who formed the province's past. *British Columbia in the Balance: 1846-1871* encourages researchers and practitioners to engage directly with primary sources and archival materials which leads us to understand the roots of contemporary society. By delving into the past, we gain insights into the traditions, values, and practices that have shaped our present reality. Knowledge of past events, decisions, and their consequences enables us to learn from the mistakes and successes of our predecessors informing our decisions today. Moreover, our collective past, both the bright and dark chapters, allows us to preserve the stories, experiences, and struggles of individuals and communities across time.