Spirit, Hardship, and Opportunity: Narrating Imperial Adventure in Early Twentieth-century British Columbia

By

Elaine Rita Moore

B.A., University of Victoria, 1984

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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Wendy Wickwire, (Department of History)
Supervisor

Dr. Patricia Roy, (Department of History
Departmental Member

Dr. Elizabeth Vibert, (Department of History)
Departmental Member

Dr. Misao Dean, (Department of English)
Outside Member

Additional Member


Abstract

Critical examination of gendered and racialized encounters between people and landscapes highlights the varied ways in which individuals respond to complex and multifaceted discourses. By analyzing an archive of letters and photographs generated by a single individual (David Inglis McDowell) I reveal the relationship between experience and discourse in the Skeena region of northwestern British Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century. I examine McDowell’s representations of people of various origins and class backgrounds and his portrayal of both the natural and created environments through which he travelled and how these shaped the way he saw himself and others. This work contributes to the growing scholarship which views everyday lives as key sources of knowledge concerning broader social processes. I uncover the process of mythmaking and reveal that the story told by Skeena region settlers was one of conquering the wilderness and promoting progress—a frontier myth that still endures.
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Editorial Notes

I have presented excerpts from McDowell’s letters as he wrote them, with original spelling, syntax, and punctuation. The names of Aboriginal villages have been changed only if the way McDowell wrote them differs from the accepted spelling. Any amendments for clarification are noted by square brackets.

Some of the photographs that I have included in the text have been digitally enhanced only for visual clarity, as some of them were very faded. I have not changed their content or meaning in any way.

I reference McDowell’s letters by date and by the initials of the person to whom he was writing. DIM represents David Inglis McDowell; JM represents his father, John McDowell; JM, Jr. represents his brother, John McDowell, Jr.; and EM represents his sister, Ella McDowell.
Acknowledgements

The journey that lead to this thesis began on a sunless day in 1989 when John McDowell dropped by my office at the Museum of Northern BC with his father’s—David Inglis McDowell—letters and photographs of the Skeena Region dating from 1908. My path was set; I was hooked the minute I read the first letter and saw the first photograph. Without John’s faith that his father’s archive was worthy of being in a museum, this project would never have come to fruition. I am, in fact, indebted to both of David Inglis McDowell’s sons, John and Dave, for opening their hearts to me and allowing me to delve into their family’s lives. I am sorry that John did not live to see these words, but am grateful that Dave is still with us and that he knows that his father’s life had implications well beyond his own lifetime.

Wendy Wickwire has been an invaluable influence and support throughout this project. Indeed, her zeal and passion for history originally inspired me to pursue a graduate degree in that discipline. She has been a sympathetic and dedicated guide who has enthusiastically embraced my ideas. Her engagement with my work and belief in me extends her role as supervisor to one of friendship. I would also like to thank Greg Blue and Lynn Marks for sparking my interest in and instilling in me a passion for historical theory, which has been so crucial to this thesis. I feel very fortunate to have worked with two other accomplished scholars—Patricia Roy and Elizabeth Vibert. Elizabeth provided insightful encouragement to improve and clarify some of my ideas, as well as to consider the complexity of racial and gender theory. Pat’s meticulous attentions to detail and suggestions for improvement have assisted me to articulate my ideas in a more polished form than would otherwise have been possible. Of course, any remaining clumsiness is solely my responsibility. I also sincerely appreciate Karen McIvor’s encouragement to apply for the graduate program and to Karen Hickton for her help in sorting out all of the ins and outs of the program.

My friends and fellow students also provided much-needed support and stimulation along this journey. Tuesday lunches with Irene Robinson, Hugh Gordon, Jenny Clayton, and Christian Lieb provided a much-needed forum for me to vent frustrations and to learn from others who were or had been in the same boat. In addition, Lucky Budd and Heather Wilke provided the opportunity to discuss and exchange ideas and sources. Although Nicolas May was no longer a student at UVic when I embarked on this project, his brilliant thesis provided an inspirational source for a micro-approach.

Whenever I experienced feelings of self-doubt I knew I could count on my sister, Elizabeth, and good friends, Sharon Jinkerson-Brass and Victor Reece, to raise my spirits and restore my confidence. Steven and Meadow Bachalo, Kristen and Skyler Schulberg, and Solomon Reece have provided me with the needed opportunity to step outside my narrow focus to laugh and have fun.

My family has been present in my heart through this entire process. Although my mother is no longer alive, she and my father always supported my efforts and expressed pride in my accomplishments. I wish my Mother had lived and my Father was well enough to understand how they influenced the undertaking of and outcome of this project. And finally, words cannot convey the gratitude and love that I have toward my husband, Mike, for his undying support and encouragement. His intellectual stimulation, editorial skill, and endless emotional comfort have made this project a true partnership and he is present in every word. I could not have done it without him.
Chapter 1 – Introduction

David Inglis McDowell has lived inside my head for the past 15 years. I never met him. In fact, he died when my own parents were young children. He is not a relative. He is not famous or a celebrated hero. Why, then, do I allow him to live in that all too cramped room in my brain reserved for memories? Because he is an ordinary man who led an extraordinary life, a life I have had the privilege to glimpse through letters and photographs McDowell sent to his family.
The seduction of adventure and the lure of riches drew many young men to northwestern North America at the turn of the twentieth century. The construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway was a major impetus, opening up for the first time what many regarded as a last outpost of the “vanishing frontier.” David McDowell was one such adventurer drawn to northwestern British Columbia to work as a surveyor for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTPR) in 1908. Eager to stay in touch with his family he copiously wrote letters home to Massachusetts describing his experiences. In his letters he covered a range of experience, including working conditions, leisure activities, interracial encounters, and the people and landscapes he encountered. Equipped with a brownie-box camera, McDowell illustrated his letters with over 400 photographs of the region and its people. I first became familiar with the collection in 1989 when McDowell’s son, John, brought the collection of letters and photographs into the Museum of Northern BC where I was the curator. I later curated a traveling exhibit based on the collection and, after several years, welcome the opportunity to revisit the collection as the focus of my MA thesis.

In particular, my intention is to look at the relationship of the McDowell archive to the dominant discourses in the Skeena region of northwestern British Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century. I am interested in reviewing the concord and discord between those discourses and McDowell’s lived experience, as reflected in his correspondence and photographs. My work will contribute to the growing literature which views everyday lives as key sources of information concerning broader social processes. Closely reading the ways

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1 Richard Neuberger in 1938 still viewed the northwest as the “last frontier.” Richard L. Neuberger, "Our Promised Land," (1938 (Reprint 1989)).
in which individuals represent their experiences through writing and visual imagery can reveal the process of the shaping and mutability of history.²

According to historian John Rennie Short, "there are things, there are words for things, and there are ideas-behind-words-for-things."³ In other words, by means of discourse analysis historians can study the ideas embedded within language usage. The core proposition of discourse analysis is that people are always exposed to and influenced by the worldview of their time and place. And, as people are social beings who live in a cultural context, the dominant values and perspectives of their communities and cultures influence their personal values, perspectives, and actions. Accordingly, perspectives are 'constructed' of from various sources within those cultures and subjected to different influences.

Alternatively, deconstructing different perspectives serves to aid in considering the origins of and influences on particular component parts. From a practical point of view, historians can seek to uncover the discourses prevalent at particular times and places by reviewing time- and place-appropriate texts in a search for underlying assumptions and values. Experiences are not made by discourses but discourses are the route to making sense of experience.


Studying discourses reveals how language gives shape to events and experiences and thereby enables us to learn how events are perceived.

Some historians have received this focus on language with a great deal of hostility. For example, Canadian historian J.R. Miller argues that “if everything is socially or otherwise humanly constructed, then inquiry can never lead to truth.” Nevertheless, the social constructionist approach to history has gained the support of many historians. In a BC context, the work of historian Adele Perry embraces this approach and asserts, “To acknowledge that houses are built is not to suggest that they are somehow unreal.” One might take Perry’s metaphor even further and assert that to acknowledge houses are built is not to diminish their utility and usefulness, even as they fall short of some ideal, absolute, and unattainable truth.

Dominant discourses of different times and places involve significant assumptions about knowledge and power and it is important to consider the role of texts in the dissemination and also the construction of knowledge and power. As power is a necessary part of the construction of knowledge, then knowledge is imbued with power and is therefore

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4 J. R. Miller, "I Can Only Tell What I Know": Shifting Notions of Historical Understanding in the 1990s" (paper presented at the Authority and Interpretation, University of Saskatchewan, 19 March 1994). Quoted in Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," Canadian Historical Review 76, no. 3 (1995): 358.
5 Some of the leading proponents of social constructionist history are Hayden White, Lynn Hunt, Peter Novick and Joan Scott.
6 Adele Perry, On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Some other BC specialists that advocate the social constructionist approach are Daniel Clayton, Elizabeth Vibert, David Demeritt, and Bruce Braun.
political. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian asserts that, "knowledge is power... [and] there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, a political act."\(^7\)

In the colonial context, the state’s institutional systems of knowledge and power are encoded in texts as part of an economic and political project. Texts serve many roles – they show how lands were made visible, how the “other” was perceived and organized – and effectively operate as windows on worldviews, assumptions, and dreams. They also reveal how relationships of power are signified in cultural terms. The study of how past experiences are recreated and understood through texts is not a diversion from the analysis of power, but a way to understand how power works.

Central to my thesis is the idea that Canada, although technically an independent state at the time McDowell encountered northwestern British Columbia was heavily suffused with the institutions and ideologies of colonialism. By colonialism I mean a system of domination to the detriment of the colony and the benefit of a distant power by exploitation that impacted (and continues to impact) large portions of the world. Of course, that is not to suggest that colonial narratives and discourses in British Columbia were the same or that they operated similarly to those of other colonial societies. Discourses are formed in relation to distinct populations and places. Colonial ideologies are expressed in discourses and can be found in historical sources like the McDowell archive.

Museums, libraries, archives, and families across Canada hold unique and underutilized collections of personal correspondence and photography. Many of these, like

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the McDowell collection, provide sharp insights into individual, everyday lives, which in
turn bring into view broader historical currents and processes of identity formation.
Communities sometimes tend to view themselves as unchanged by the vicissitudes of time,
but individual historical perspectives force us to see identities as socially and culturally
constructed and, as such, mutable and fluid.

Of course, letters are only one of several forms of non-commercial, personal
articulation of events in time and space. Unlike memoirs which are written in retrospect and
influenced by intervening events and later perspectives, letters offer a more sincere look at
the details of everyday life as well as important events and actions as they happen, without
the benefit of hindsight. Even diaries, although generally written contemporaneously with the
events described, are nevertheless written for later consumption and appreciation and this
factor tends to limit the straightforward forthrightness of their contents. In contrast, letters
have a greater tendency to be written for the communication of recent events in the writer’s
experience with lesser focus on embellishment for the purpose of creating a long-term
impression or historical record that enhances the writer’s position. For this reason, although
letters are not totally immune from these same weaknesses, they nevertheless have value as
primary sources for history, even recognizing that the relationship between the letter-writer
and the product of his or her work is far from straightforward.

There are always two voices present in a letter, two voices through which self and
other define and redefine each other. Interpretation—reading the text—involves a dialogue
between the letter-writer and recipient. The writer is a product of his or her own time and is
influenced by the social milieu of the era. Politics, philosophy, popular opinion, the intended
audience, and ideologies are but a few of the multitudinous influences on the letter-writer.
The framework of specific historical circumstances and conditions produce letters that are inescapably reflections of social and cultural settings. A letter’s function represents an expression of the letter-writer’s intention and thus provides us with an important clue to the relationship between the letter-writer and the society to which he or she belongs. Indeed, letters are implicated in creating the reality they presume to reveal.

Since a letter is an epistle, it is reasonable to expect that epistolary theory would prove helpful in analyzing a series of letters such as those written by David McDowell. Unfortunately however, epistolary theory has traditionally focused on the critical analysis of fictional letter writing and the form of the epistolary novel, although Gilroy and Verhoeven point out the recent shift of epistolary criticism away from the fictional and toward actual correspondence. Nonetheless, the emphasis is on classification of letter writing into specific genres, particularly “life writing” and/or literature. Since it is largely irrelevant to this study into which genre McDowell’s letters fit, the usefulness of epistolary theory in this case is limited. It is not the style, but the content and meaning implicit in the words and phrases used in the letters that provides insight into the understanding of the historical process.

There is in British Columbia and elsewhere today an increasing attention paid by historians to the letters left behind by various persons. Historian Jean Barman presents the letters of two sisters from Nova Scotia, Jessie and Annie McQueen, and examines the role the sisters played in the development of British Columbia as revealed in their correspondence. Barman notes that no other “published accounts of newcomer or settler women in British Columbia, particularly on the frontier, spanned everyday experience over

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time so honestly as do the McQueen Sisters’ letters.”

Elizabeth Phillips and R. Cole Harris present the letters of Daisy Phillips, a newly married
Englishwoman in pre-World War I British Columbia “trying to create a home in one place
[British Columbia] out of the values that came from another [England].” According to
Phillips and Harris, Daisy Phillips’ letters contain “placeless elements” as a particular
example of a general story of settlement in western Canada. There has been a tendency for
historians to conflate epistolary discourse with feminine discourse and these examples are no
exception. Although men wrote letters as well, women were almost undoubtedly the masters
of the epistolary form. Although women’s letters are as valuable for shedding light on
historical processes as those of men, they tend to be confined to the domestic realm. Much of
the scholarship utilizing personal correspondence as historical sources centres on women
because often letters (and diaries) are among the only historical documents women left
behind. Historians wishing to reconstruct the lives of women often have few other sources
with which to work.

Because men were at the core of the power base of Western societies, they generated
the documents that are typically used to reconstruct history. Traditional historians generally
regard personal correspondence as part of the private sphere as opposed to the public sphere
and, hence, consider it most suitable for biography or merely as supporting evidence to other
‘more trustworthy’ sources. Personal letters in this sense are seen as a means to corroborate
and complement other sources rather than as stand-alone sources. According to historian

10 Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of
11 Barman, Sojourning Sisters, 9.
12 Harris, Phillips, and Phillips, Letters from Windermere.
13 Harris, Phillips, and Phillips, Letters from Windermere, xxii.
John Tosh, “historical research is not a matter of identifying the authoritative source and then exploiting it for all it is worth...The procedure is rather to amass as many pieces of evidence as possible from a wide range of sources...What most affects the reliability of a source, however, is the intention and prejudices of the writer.”¹⁴ In fact, it is precisely these “intentions and prejudices” — biases — that are attracting practitioners of the ‘new history’ to sources such as personal letters, diaries, and oral histories for what they can reveal about their authors and the socio-cultural conditions in which they were created.

By the end of the nineteenth century, with the expansion of colonizing forces throughout the world and their overwhelmingly male composition, men increasingly became epistolary masters in their own right. Although there are a number of published collections presenting the personal correspondence of men in British Columbia, most of them have not been critically analyzed. Historian Allan Pritchard published a large collection of letters written by Edmund Hope Verney from the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.¹⁵ These letters were written mostly to his father, Sir Harry Verney, over the twenty-three year period from May 1862 to May 1885, when Verney served in the colonies as a naval officer. Unfortunately, Pritchard does not consider the collection as an important source for excavating upper-class colonial attitudes and discourses in early British Columbia, instead asserting that the letters “are valuable for what they record of many aspects of [the history of] the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia as well as for naval matters.”¹⁶ As well, Anne Burnaby McLeod published the letters her grandfather, Robert

Burnaby, sent home to England from British Columbia between 1858 and 1873. She praises Burnaby and his “contribution” to the development of British Columbia. Again, any thoughtful analysis of the meaning behind his words is absent.

In another example, Cyril Shelford published a book of his father Jack Shelford’s letters sent home to England between 1899 and 1916. Ten of the letters (dating from the period of 1910 to 1916) describe Jack’s travels to and settlement in the Bulkley Valley district of northwestern British Columbia. Like the McDowell letters, these letters display a wealth of information about the attitudes and values that men like Shelford brought with them from home and how these attitudes transferred to rural British Columbia. However, Cyril Shelford does not offer any detailed analysis of the letters, but simply suggests a story that romanticizes European settlement of the area by people like his parents who possessed little other than “the driving hope of a better life for their family in a new land.”

Jean Murray Cole published the letters of a senior Hudson’s Bay Company officer from the Columbia district, Archibald McDonald, asserting that they reveal “a perceptive picture of people and events as seen from [McDonald’s] privileged vantage point.” Cole draws on both personal and private letters of McDonald to explore the history of the HBC, but does not analyze the reflected attitudes and discourses of that specific time and place reflected in the letters. Other British Columbia scholars examine letters that furnish a crucial link between historical experience and the work and/or research of the correspondent. Historians John Barker and Douglas Cole analyze the letters of anthropologist T.F. McIlwraith in order “to provide readers interested in exploring the greater significance of

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McIlwraith's correspondence with some background information and discussion about the letters' implications for our understandings of the evolution of anthropological fieldwork."\(^{19}\)

Their sensitive analysis highlights for readers the complex inter-relationship between McIlwraith's personal experience and his published ethnography. In addition, Jay Sherwood, an experienced surveyor himself, published a book focusing on the work of Frank Swannell, a surveyor in northern British Columbia. The journals and photographs of Swannell for the years 1908 to 1914 roughly coincide with the period that McDowell spent in the north. Sherwood's photo journal "bring[s] to life a remarkable man who lived in a romantic era of packhorses and unmapped wilderness."\(^{20}\) Although Swannell's records provide a treasure trove for unpacking cultural meanings, Sherwood introduces the collection merely as a record of "what it was like to be a surveyor almost one hundred years ago and provide a window into British Columbia's history."\(^{21}\) Unfortunately, Sherwood failed to open the curtains before looking through the window.

Another approach is to use letters written by a collection of individuals to highlight specific events such as gold rushes or particular regions. Covering the area just north of British Columbia, Kathryn Morse's *The Nature of Gold* is an excellent example of this approach.\(^{22}\) Morse uses excerpts from the letters of numerous prospectors from the Klondike gold rush, alongside other sources, to explore their connections to the physical environment and to elucidate their industrial relationship to nature.

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\(^{21}\) Sherwood, *Surveying Northern British Columbia*, 3.

\(^{22}\) Morse, *The Nature of Gold*. 
Of the sources mentioned, Jean Barman’s study of the apparently forthright portrayal of everyday life and concerns on the frontier, as covered in the correspondence of the McQueen sisters, most closely parallels the nature of my study of David McDowell’s correspondence and photographs. Essentially, I will examine McDowell’s perspectives on selected themes as reflected in his correspondence and explore the varying degrees of concord and discord between those perspectives and the dominant discourses to which he was subject and of which he was part.

Because of its isolation and the difficulties of travel in the area, settlement by Euro-Canadians came fairly late to the Skeena Valley of northwestern British Columbia. The first European known to explore the Skeena River at length was Major William Downie in 1859.23 However, despite of the fur trade, the Collins overland telegraph project, and a gold rush that brought a minor influx of people to the region in the latter half of the nineteenth century, few stayed long-term. Historical geographer Robert Galois acknowledges that until the late 1890s, “more Whites travelled through the area than resided there.”24 Even with riverboats plying the Skeena, Euro-Canadian settlement was slow to develop until after the completion of the GTPR in 1914.

Before the many changes to the area brought about by the opening of the GTPR there were three centres of commercial trade on the Skeena—Port Essington, near the mouth of the River, Kitselas, about 150 km inland, and Hazelton, about 300 km inland. Fort Simpson (now Port Simpson) was situated about 50 km north of the mouth of the Skeena. In 1906 the GTPR

established the terminal port city of Prince Rupert on an island with a deep, natural harbour about 20 km north of the mouth of the Skeena. Small farming settlements were clustered around present-day Terrace and Cedarvale and there were mission settlements at Metlakatla, Meanskinisht and Kispiox. There were also many Aboriginal villages of varying sizes along the River. From the mouth of the Skeena to Kitselas Canyon was traditional Tsimshian territory. Up-river from just above Kitselas to beyond Kispiox was traditional Gitksan territory.25 Anyone travelling the river would have encountered people from one or both of these groups.

Place and identity have a dialectical relationship. The Skeena valley at the turn of the twentieth century was a place imbued with dreams and ambitions that reflected the times as clearly as the landscape or the cultural baggage brought by the settlers and sojourners alike. Those settlers and sojourners, including McDowell, came by their biases and assumptions as naturally and unselfconsciously as any of us. In the Skeena region people endeavored to realize their visions of freedom and opportunity and, in fact, create an identity. According to John Lauritz Larson, "What shapes regional cultures is early regional history—the stuff of which creation narratives are formed and 'golden ages' coalesce in memory."26 Benedict Anderson, in his discussion of imagined communities, advances the notion that a collection of people creates identity through the creation of a discourse, a vocabulary of self-explanation of whom, why and where they are.27 Discourse and identity are also created

25 These boundaries were likely fluid and oscillated back and forth through internal and external struggles for power.
through actions and institutional practices. These stories cannot simply be viewed as quaint regional folktales or innocent cultural idiosyncrasies because they have a profound impact on public dialogue and the public actions that flow from that dialogue. Usually, people who tell the same story about who they are and how they got to where they are tell a shared tale of victory. The story told by settlers of the Skeena region was one of conquering the wilderness and of promoting progress—a frontier myth.

In a related way, anthropologist Elizabeth Furniss uses the term “frontier cultural complex” to describe a form of,

historical consciousness—an awareness of history—that is culturally conditioned and deeply influenced by Canada’s colonial heritage. This historical consciousness is made manifest as a historical epistemology: a way of knowing about history that provides a certain set of rules and assumptions that guide how ‘truths’ about the past, and by extension the present, are to be created, understood, and conveyed.28

Furniss uses the frontier complex to analyze racial relations in modern-day Williams Lake, a central British Columbia town where “the idea of the frontier has been carried into Euro-Canadian’s conceptualization of their relationship with area Aboriginal people, in which the categories of Indian and white are mutually exclusive and oppositional and in which Euro-Canadian cultural superiority, material privileges, and political authority are taken as unquestioned truths.”29 A similar situation exists in the Skeena region today.

Any discussion of the concept of “frontier” must, by necessity, include a consideration of the work of Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner developed the “frontier thesis” which eventually became a leading theory in understanding the significance of frontier ideology in American cultural thinking. Central to Turner’s frontier thesis is the

28 Elizabeth Mary Furniss, The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 17.
notion that the expansion of the American frontier shaped not only the character of the people in America but also the nature of its institutions. The process of westward expansion transformed a bleak and untamed land into a modern civilization and helped to shape a nation. Michael Cross notes that:

Frontierists have usually written about the frontier as a process, as a symbol of the continuing American commitment to progress and improvement. It was an expression of the peculiar affinity of Americans for their land. Throughout the history of the United States the vastness of the land has exerted a strange power over the minds of its people.  

Although long dominant in U.S. historiography, the “New Western” historians challenge the frontier thesis. They view the traditional process-centred history of the frontierists as rigid and inflexible and have “succeeded in shifting attention to the notion of the West as a region, a distinct place with a history of its own.” However, viewing history through a dualistic either/or paradigm can be limiting. As historian David Wrobel suggests, “there are some advantages to constructing a paradigm that emphasizes connections between process and place, frontier and region.” By looking at frontier as a myth or part of an ideology encompassed within the discourse of colonialism and as part of the process of the formation of regional identity, one can avoid the dichotomizing polarization of the dualistic paradigm mentioned above.

Societal myths are an important aspect of a culture that is reflected in its discourses. In referring to ‘myths’ I do not suggest falsehood as opposed to truth or reality; I use the term myth to refer to social constructions composed of beliefs, values, and ideas. Myths are tools

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32 Wrobel, "Beyond the Frontier-Region Dichotomy," 407 - 08.
that societies employ to signify meanings within time and place—meanings that resonate within a society and are collectively used to locate experiences. According to historian Brian Dippie, "myths are stories that...trigger a predictable response upon the mention of certain code words."33 They are mirrors of the best and worst in human nature.

In reference to pioneer historical consciousness, Wrobel notes that, "perhaps [pioneers'] memories were mired in myth and misperception, but their perceptions of the frontier process amounted to their historical reality."34 These myths and misperceptions are woven into the fabric of contemporary regional identities. Understanding the inception and foundation of colonial attitudes and frontier myths in early twentieth-century northwestern British Columbia can give us insight into present-day attitudes in the region that are imbued with vestiges of these colonial discourses. Analyzing the traces of the frontier myth within the colonial discourses that shaped early twentieth-century northwestern British Columbia does not promote the frontier thesis but merely recognizes the frontier myth's influence on the process of identity formation. As noted by historian Michael Malone, historians should not "throw the frontier baby out with the bathwater."35 By looking at the frontier myth as part of colonial discourse rather than an analytical model after Turner, unnecessary entry into debate over whether the frontier thesis can be applied to the Canadian context is avoided.

Historian Richard Slotkin identifies mythic icons as an important component of mythic narrative, claiming that mythic stories are eventually "reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, 'icons,' 'keywords,' or historical clichés... [and each mythical

34 Wrobel, "Beyond the Frontier-Region Dichotomy," 427.
icon] is in effect a poetic construction of tremendous economy and compression and a mnemonic device capable of evoking a complex system of historical associations by a single image or phrase.”

Many of these mythic icons are recognizable in the Skeena region’s historical narratives—stories of adversity and heroism, of facing and conquering the wilderness and/or Aboriginal people. Terms like “wilderness,” “pioneer,” and “rugged individualism” merely have to be mentioned to evoke a romantic view of the local frontier past.

Scholars of the Skeena Region have focused on Aboriginal anthropology and have largely ignored the rest of its history. One exception is the history of missionaries and missionization in the area. In particular, the controversial missionary William Duncan has attracted much attention, although many of the early writings on Duncan are ethnocentric,

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37 This anthropological interest started in the late 19th century and has been heavily influenced by the work of Franz Boas and Marius Barbeau and their Tsimshian field workers Henry Tate and William Beynon. Boas’ and Barbeau’s work has been criticized in recent years by Ralph Maud, John Cove, George Stocking, Wilson Duff, Marjory Halpin, Leslie White and others. Boas’ work has come under fire for his reluctance to recognize the ethnographic present and for the unreliability of his field assistant’s (Henry Tate) notes. Barbeau’s work is considered spurious because of Barbeau’s manipulation of the data to fit his bizarre theories of ethogenesis and migration. In spite of these criticisms, however, these works continued to influence the work of many anthropologists. Today, ethnographic and anthropological studies tend to be more balanced and insightful.
idealizing, or written by his detractors. Other missionaries such as Thomas Crosby, Robert Tomlinson, William Henry Pierce, and Philip McKay have also been the objects of study.

These works have increased our understanding of the history of missionaries and missions in the region and reveal the context, circumstances, and motivations for the missionaries' actions and behavior. More recent studies, in particular, provide a nuanced analysis that also explores Aboriginal responses to missionization and the evangelical discourses through which these responses were negotiated. Although some of these studies identify and analyze discourses of missionization that operated within the larger scope of colonial discourse, the expressed focus on the mission setting narrows the scope of their usefulness for a more general analysis of the colonial discourse or related sub-discourses.

In addition to studies of missionaries and missionization, several studies have concentrated on the economic history of the region. Anthropologist James McDonald

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explores the somewhat unusual way in which the Tsimshian people at the village of Kitsumkalum managed to combine the growth of industrial capital in the region with the economic well-being of people in the village. Historian Peter Cross examines how the establishment of Fort Nass and Fort Simpson in the nineteenth century and the coming of the GTPR in the early twentieth century affected the economic base of the Tsimshian and Nisga’a people of the Skeena and Nass rivers, respectively. Ethnohistorian Brian Hosmer examines how the Tsimshian at Metlakatla conformed economic change to their own needs, thus preserving their culture to a greater degree than those who became wage earners outside their villages. By selectively incorporating elements of capitalism into their cultural lives, the Tsimshian came to view modernization less as a threat to their tribal life than as a means for maintaining their autonomy.

In addition, historian Frank Leonard’s history of the construction of the British Columbia portion of the GTPR is an important source for understanding McDowell’s*raison d’etre* for coming to the Skeena region. Although Leonard’s is an economic analysis, it is also a regional study that highlights the impact of the railway on the people and the landscape of the region. Among other topics, Leonard examines the construction process and labour relations along the line.

Dialogues of the Nisga’a Encounter with the Church Missionary Society, 1864-67* (M.A. Thesis, University of Victoria, 2003).


The standard historical text cited by virtually every author addressing the Skeena region is Dr. R.G. Large’s *The Skeena: River of Destiny.* 44 In 1996, author Ken Campbell acknowledged that Large’s book, first published in 1957, “is still the only document that describes in any detail the European settlement and development of the Skeena Valley.” 45 Although Large’s book is well researched, Campbell observes that it has some offensive and out-of-date passages and should be regarded “as an artifact of its time.” 46 In part; these out-of-date passages make the book interesting for what it reveals about its author and the prevailing attitudes at the time of writing.

In addition to Large, historian Robert Galois provides a thorough account of the general history of the upper Skeena region, especially as it relates to cultural change among the Gitksan. 47 Galois’ focus on the upper reaches of the Skeena and his emphasis on the impact of settlement on Aboriginal cultures in the area, limits the usefulness of his study as a source for this thesis. In addition to these academic sources there is a plethora of local histories, memoirs, and collections of reminiscences on the Skeena region. 48

With respect to more broadly focused works dealing with general historical considerations, Paul Carter created something of a sensation with the 1987 publication of his book, *The Road to Botany Bay.* Carter argues that historians tend to eschew any sense of

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44 Large, *The Skeena, River of Destiny.*
47 Galois, "The History of the Upper Skeena Regions."
spatial history when reconstructing the past, preferring instead to view space as “simply a stage where history occurred.” Such a view tends to discount history’s spatial dimension by affirming the timelessness of place. History is presented as a narrative that privileges a timeless, ahistorical, harmonious human condition that constructs an essentialist myth of harmony as opposed to the social reality of conflict and competition. Such linear presentations of history reproduce and legitimate the colonial ideological concept that colonizers create history in a void where none existed before. Furthermore, by viewing space as a stage on which actors appear as pawns, historians deny to those same actors the agency implicit in shaping that space. Views such as these discount and overlook pre-existing notions of space and pre-existing sites.

As an alternative to such an imperial view of history, Carter argues for a history that characterizes space as dynamic rather than static, a space “where forms and conventions break down... [and] we can discern the process of transforming space into place...history that discovers and explores the lacuna left by imperial history...which makes it history rather than, say, geography...[and] makes no claim to completeness.” Looking at history in this way helps reveal the ways in which European explorers and settlers rendered the landscape into something that could be understood, colonized, and exploited. Carter suggests that European colonizers conceived of their own time as the beginning of history, effectively erasing any pre-existing indigenous history. Through Carter’s lens, it is possible to recognize “the suppressed spatiality of our own historical consciousness.”

50 Carter, The Road to Botany Bay, xxiii.
51 Carter, The Road to Botany Bay, 350.
Historical geographer Cole Harris maintains that, “if the aim is to understand colonialism rather than the workings of the imperial mind, then it would seem essential to investigate the sites where colonialism was actually practiced. Its effects were displayed there…. [It is there], in the detail of colonial dispossession and repossessions, [that] the relative weight of different agents of colonial power may begin to be assessed.”52 In order to gain an understanding of the process of colonialism, it is necessary have an on-the-ground view of that process, what Harris refers to as the “materiality of colonial experience.”53

Harris’s student, historical geographer Daniel Clayton, takes the challenge of “spatial history” to heart in his study of three communities on the lower Skeena River.54 Clayton identifies a sequence of discourses marking the colonial institutions that dominated the white/Aboriginal relationship in three communities near the mouth of the Skeena. In Fort Simpson, a fur trade discourse predominated throughout the nineteenth century. In Metlakatla during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the predominant institution was the Church of England and Clayton identifies a dominant missionary discourse that operated within the purview of that institution. In Port Essington, government/commercial institutional discourses predominated from the 1870s through the early twentieth century. Through the identification and analysis of these discourses, Clayton “reflects on the connection between discourse and space.”55 For Clayton, the locations where these exchanges transpired had

affected the exchanges themselves and the development of dominant discourses that whites used to "report and represent, to order and constitute" Coast Tsimshian people.56

Fur trade discourses were the focus of Historian Elizabeth Vibert in her analysis of fur traders' travel journals, reports and correspondence. Vibert's aim was "to analyze traders' narratives with a view to unpacking their images of [Columbia] Plateau peoples, to interrogate those images and to reveal their contradictions" or, in other words, to uncover specific fur trade discourses.57 She acknowledges that fur traders were "in the advance guard of colonialism [and] their needs and interests were very different from those of the settlers who would follow them."58 According to Clayton, as each new discourse developed, the ones that came before it were redefined. Both Clayton and Vibert suggest that various discourses operating in specific geographic regions were related, but different.

In *The Resettlement of British Columbia*, historical geographer Cole Harris also considers the relationship between space and the process of colonialism, asserting that:

Societies and the places they occupy are part and parcel of each other. The one is not the stage on which the other evolves. Nor are societies made by their settings, as environmental determinists once thought, or settings the simple effects of human activity. The two are interrelated, each affecting the other in complex, ongoing interaction.59

Harris observes that with the decimation of Aboriginal populations, newcomers appropriated the significantly depopulated land and "largely immigrant human geographies [were] created."60 According to Harris, workplaces reflected the values of the bourgeoisie and the working-class. Harris identifies three workplace categories—urban, agricultural, and,

56 Clayton, "Geographies of the Lower Skeena," 57.
57 Vibert, *Traders' Tales*, 49.
59 Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia*, 252.
resource-based camps, which he analyzes in terms of cultural retention and change. In the urban settings, the dominant discourses of British hierarchical cultural stratifications of class and race endured. However, in the work camps and other labour-intensive settings geopolitical pressures tended to break down these hierarchical barriers. In agricultural settings, where the tensions of capital and labour were primarily absent, the emphasis shifted to family values. These works all have a limited breadth of focus: Clayton to the Coast Tsimshian, Vibert to the Columbia Plateau, and Harris to the development of immigrant societies.

The analysis of travel writing provides another approach to the examination of period texts, including letters. According to A.M. Metwalli, "almost every individual [in nineteenth-century America] who left home—even for a hike in the mountains—committed his impressions and experiences to paper and inflicted them upon the reading public." At the heart of this American travel literature is a fundamental interest in the history and mysteries of exotic and foreign locales. These interests correspond to the development of American expansionism and serve to highlight the difference of Americans from other nations and peoples, thereby strengthening the American national identity. Historian Mary Louise Pratt argues that colonizers displayed an "obsessive need to present and represent [the colony] and its other continually to itself." In part, travel writing developed from the Victorian impulse

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60 Harris, The Resettlement of British Columbia, 252.
to classify, taxonomize, and control the natural world. These processes became tools for asserting power over foreign people and lands.\textsuperscript{65}

Critical studies of travel writing as a genre gained popular ground in the aftermath of the 1978 publication of \textit{Orientalism} by Edward Said, an important twentieth-century theorist of colonialism and post-colonialism.\textsuperscript{66} Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs contend that:

\textit{Orientalism} [is] the first work of contemporary criticism to take travel writing as a major part of its corpus, seeing it as a body of work which offered particular insight into the operation of colonial discourses. Scholars working in the wake of \textit{Orientalism} have begun to scrutinize relationships of culture and power found in the settings, encounters, and representations of travel texts.\textsuperscript{67}

Said opened the path to initiate illuminating analysis of texts previously considered ‘subliterary,’ tedious and dreary, useful mainly as archival sources for historical narrative.\textsuperscript{68} According to Said, colonized people and imperial spaces were crucial elements in the formation of a European identity and its master narratives. Travel accounts are sources which are, in part, aimed at acquainting us with the “other,” and they typically dramatize an engagement between the self and the world. Scholars of critical studies use texts for exploring issues of colonialism, imperialism and power. In these works, colonialism is widely understood as differentiated spatially as well as temporally and socially, contested in the ‘centre’ and resisted in the ‘periphery,’ more fluid and less certain than non-critical studies.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{69} Alison Blunt and Jane Wills, \textit{Dissident Geographies: An Introduction to Radical Ideas and Practice} (London: Longman, 2000).
Since McDowell was an American in a British colonial setting, his letters and photographs provide a model for exploring the connections between colonialism and travel from both the American and British colonial perspectives. Nevertheless, the applicability of any travel writing analyses to collections such as these is limited by the focus on texts that were expressly intended for publication and public consumption. This is in stark contrast to McDowell’s private reflections of a man to his family, although he indicates an awareness that his letters would be shared with family friends.

Of course, the McDowell archive is more than just letters. Over 400 photographs accompany the letters. Traditionally, photographs were vested with an unquestioned veracity; but historians today are far more skeptical about such assumptions of objectivity and ‘truth.’ However, recognizing bias does not render a document or photograph unusable. In fact, as with text, bias itself is significant and can bring to light important shifts in cultural ideas. In this context, photographs add value for the clues they unconsciously convey about the attitudes and assumptions of the photographer as well as the subjects and audience and, often, their greatest value lies in their subjectivity. It is the responsibility of the historian to treat photographs like any other document by reading them in the specific intellectual and social contexts in which they were created and presented.

In an early article, archivist J. Robert Davison contends that most historians do not sufficiently understand the significance of photographs, and hence fail to explore many aspects of their full value. He suggests that historians hesitate to use photographs as primary sources either because of “the naïve acceptance of the photograph’s mechanical truth, [or]

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complete denial of any claims photography might have to objectivity." Davison encourages historians to delve more deeply into photographic archives and asserts, "[t]he real potential of historical photographs for researchers and historians [is] their ability to amplify our knowledge of the past." Nevertheless, he notes that these criticisms equally apply to the validity of all historical documents and not just photographs. For all sources, including photography, critical analysis is essential.

When photographs are denied status as primary sources, historians and researchers miss out on important historical insights that might otherwise be prompted by clues contained within them. In his article, "Family Memory, Photography and the Fur Trade," Peter Geller undertakes what Davison challenges historians to do—he uses photographs as a primary source, as a departure point for study as opposed to a complement to other research. In particular, Geller uses a single collection of photographs from the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, the Sinclair family collection, as a "means of analyzing the way individuals and groups understood their role within...larger social processes." Having situated the collection within the context of the Sinclair family, Geller notes that looking at individual photographs can complicate their analysis. However, by changing the focus to the collection as a whole, "a number of interesting avenues of inquiry open up... In using...such collections, attention must be paid to their history and nature as constructed identities." Geller goes on to analyze several photographic themes within the collection. In particular, as themes that reveal "patterns of meaning," he looks at portraits, spontaneous snaps, and group

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72 Davison, "Turning a Blind Eye," 34.
74 Geller, "Family Memory," 3.
shots as well as photos of buildings, Aboriginals, and work. After analyzing the collection, Geller concludes the collection increases understanding of the "shaping and reshaping of memory with[in] the context of [the] family, community and social dynamics in which it was constructed."\textsuperscript{75}

Geller confirms the legitimacy of Davison's view and the value of photographs as primary historical sources that can generate unique insights that might not be available from alternative sources. As Davison notes, "photographs can penetrate directly into that ineffable region beyond the uttered word where we feel and experience as much as think."\textsuperscript{76} An analysis of McDowell's photographs helps derive meaning from his experiences.

Before looking in detail at McDowell's letters and photographs and what they can contribute to the study of history, it is necessary to consider his background. David Inglis McDowell was born in 1886 and raised in Needham, Massachusetts (now a suburb of Boston, then a small rural community). McDowell grew up in a middle-class family of Irish-Scots heritage. McDowell's grandfather was a Presbyterian minister who instilled strong Scottish Presbyterian values in the family. As such, his family background relates to Jean Barman's point that "Presbyterianism went hand in hand with Scots descent."\textsuperscript{77} McDowell's complex relationship to these Presbyterian values is reflected in his letters.

McDowell was the oldest of five children (two boys and three girls). The family had fallen on hard times after the death of McDowell's mother and with the declining health of his father, who eventually had to take a job as a traveling salesman. With bleak opportunities at home, the young McDowell in 1905 abandoned his plans to become an engineer and

\textsuperscript{75} Geller, "Family Memory," 11.  
\textsuperscript{76} Davison, "Turning a Blind Eye," 34.
decided to go further afield to find prosperity. By moving from Needham and into the working world, McDowell both removed himself from the need for financial support and also made it possible for him to provide some financial support to enable his younger brother, John, and his sister, Ella, to attend college. McDowell’s letters reveal both his resentments and joys about the somewhat easier paths of his siblings as well as his grief at the loss of his mother, and his distress at his father’s declining health and need to travel to more remote jobs in order to make ends meet.

After graduating from high school there was no money for college, so McDowell left home to find work and broaden his horizons. Like the McQueen sisters in Jean Barman’s study, McDowell thought he was leaving only temporarily in order to improve his financial condition. Perhaps it is this temporary status as a traveller that led McDowell to be such a prolific letter writer—it was important to him to maintain a close connection to the home to which he eventually planned to return.

In 1905 McDowell joined the merchant marines, travelled to the United Kingdom and ended up in Montreal in 1906. He went west to the Canadian prairies to work the harvest season in the wheat fields. From there, McDowell moved on to work on a railway construction project between Spokane and Seattle in 1907. After the completion of the Snake River project McDowell found himself in Seattle where he heard about the commencement of construction of the GTPR that was just underway in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. With hope of being hired on, McDowell left Seattle by steamer on April 18, 1908 and arrived

77 Barman, Sojourning Sisters, 15.
78 Barman, Sojourning Sisters, 4.
in Prince Rupert on April 21, 1908.\textsuperscript{79} On May 23, 1908 he left by sternwheeler up the Skeena River to join a survey party for the GTPR.\textsuperscript{80}

The McDowell collection provides an opportunity to study letters and photographs generated by a single individual, an ordinary man, with no obvious ulterior motives or agenda—without a view to posterity. Historian Marc Bloch called this form of historical reference “the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves.”\textsuperscript{81} McDowell did not write his letters to an employer with the object of making himself or his work seem valuable, nor for publication with the object of presenting himself as an authority on travel and culture. Nor did he write letters as part of a scientific exploration or professional study. He merely allowed himself to explore his thoughts and reflect on his circumstances and communicate his adventures to his family. Like the letters of Daisy Phillips, McDowell’s letters “are probably closer to the psychological bone” because they were never meant for public consumption.\textsuperscript{82} Fortunately, McDowell was both observant about the unfamiliar surroundings and environments in which he found himself, and also sensitive and insightful about contemporary political and social events.

Documents such as the McDowell collection of letters and photographs can provoke multilayered insights into the life of an individual and the ethos of an age. Instead of reading texts as expressions of traditional ideas of Western culture it is useful to see them as evidence of how Western ideas served the historical process of colonization. It is particularly fascinating to explore how McDowell and his contemporaries, as agents of colonialism, went

\textsuperscript{79} DIM to JM, April 22 and 29, 1908.
\textsuperscript{80} DIM to JM, May 26, 1908.
\textsuperscript{82} Harris, Phillips, and Phillips, \textit{Letters from Windermere}, xvi.
about constructing a coherent representation out of the unfamiliar conditions and landscapes they confronted while working in the Skeena region.

Letters allow the writer to ponder what he or she wishes to say and how to say it; at the same time, they are spontaneous and deliberate, unselfconscious and self-conscious. As McDowell repeatedly notes in his letters, the postal service was erratic and unreliable; there was no guarantee that his letters would even reach their destination. Nonetheless, McDowell kept writing letters. Letter writing must have provided a kind of personal therapy or cathartic outlet, providing McDowell with a vehicle for making sense of unfamiliar and unpredictable circumstances. Someone else in a similar predicament might have used a diary to similar ends. Perhaps as family was important to McDowell writing letters kept him connected to his family.

Although I use discourse analysis as my primary method of exploring the McDowell collection, no clear-cut theoretical framework is fully applicable to my study. I have identified several theoretical models that clearly assist in understanding various colonial discourses, but none of these approach discourse from the perspective of the unpublished personal letters of ordinary men and women. Nevertheless, I can draw from the letters and photographs as a form of discourse to examine the construction, nature and authority of the knowledge that they manifest. I can then look at the material and textual dimensions of encounters to uncover the fluid and often-contradictory nature of that knowledge. In particular, I will explore three interrelated themes that shed light on the relationship between McDowell’s experiences and the dominant discourses of the society in which he lived. In the first of three chapters, I examine McDowell’s representations of people of various racial and class backgrounds. These encounters form an important aspect of McDowell’s letters as
various First Nations had inhabited the area for a very long time and, in addition, the area acted as a magnet for people from many cultural and economic backgrounds. Second, I will explore McDowell’s representations of both the natural and created environments through which he travelled and how they shaped the way he saw himself and others. Finally, I will review and analyze McDowell’s extensive collection of photographs for what it reveals about his experiences and perspectives.
Chapter 2 – Cultural Encounters

Literary theorist Edward Said argues that studies of colonial representations of the "other" tell us more about the worldview of the colonizers than of the colonized.¹ Certainly, McDowell’s letters tell us more about his world and his impressions of morality, race, gender, and class than the world of the people he describes.

McDowell grew up in the shadow of his grandfather Inglis, a Presbyterian minister, whom he described as “a giant of a man, a giant in stature as he stood in the pulpit, a giant in intellect, a giant in love and doing for others.” McDowell wrote that he sought to pattern his own life after that of his grandfather.² McDowell’s father also held strong religious beliefs and, in writing to him, McDowell was careful to give the impression that he, too, was a clean living man. In writing to his father, McDowell justified going to a moving picture show in Prince Rupert because he wanted to see “Pythes Weekly, views of actual scenes of interest in different parts of the world.” But he suggested that the picture shows were generally a waste of time and they discouraged people from making their own pleasures. However, when such “outward amusements” were not available, he claimed, people resorted to such vices as drinking.³ Yet, frequent references to going to the picture shows reveal a problem with reconciling his lifestyle with the desire to please his father.

¹ Said, Orientalism.
² DIM to JM, July 19, 1908.
³ DIM to JM, September 8, 1912.
In the winter of 1908-09 McDowell sent his father three photographs that he had taken of "The Murr-der," an enactment of a frontier "shooting fray." The photographs feature a table of smoking, whiskey-drinking gamblers engaged in a gunfight over cheating. In a later letter, McDowell responded to the disapproval his father voiced at the drinking and smoking depicted in the photographs. McDowell explained that "a good many cigarettes are smoked here but I do not smoke anything." He went on to justify having an alcohol bottle in his living quarters: "the bottle we had in the picture has been here ever since I have been in the place and it is the only one I have seen, but it is very useful for we darn our socks on it." McDowell's comments suggest concern over his father's disapproving reaction. Whether the bottle was really used to darn socks or not is unclear, but it is reasonable to suspect that a group of single men living in a tent in a rough and tumble, burgeoning "frontier" town would share the occasional bottle of liquor. Whether McDowell actually lived as "clean" a life as he portrayed to his father is not clear. However, it is apparent that he wanted his father and others to think that he lived an exemplary life, even in a rough "frontier" region where temptation abounded.

In spite of his religious upbringing, McDowell certainly was not much for Bible reading. In describing a train trip, he told his sister Ella about a conversation with a fellow traveler, a government grain inspector, who wanted him to pledge to read the Bible every day. McDowell reported that the inspector "said that nobody could live a good life without [reading the Bible regularly] & that I must have some grievous sin hanging on my neck that made me refuse to do so. I asked him if his intellect was not keen enough to realize that some people would consider that an insult & said that to many

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4 DIM to JM, March 7, 1909.
people it would seem as if he were very narrow. After a while he stopped talking so much about it & I think he saw it the way I did just a little."

McDowell obviously had a sense of humour and derived great joy from life. A letter about moving camp reveals McDowell’s humorous outlook on life. In a lengthy passage he described a comedy of errors:

When all the tents are down we are off to work and the Indians start up the river to clear a camping place and put up the tents...First we have to find the camp and each one thinks he knows a shorter way. Two or three start across a gravel bar and when they have walked ten minutes come to an arm of the river and have to come back. Others think it is better thru the woods and get into a forest of young hemlock that you could not wiggle thru in a day and go around it and have to walk half a mile further. Other three have got into a hornets nest and one stung. So it goes every time its [sic] moving time.

In this passage we can see McDowell laughing at himself and his fellow workers. He was able to see the humour in difficult situations.

McDowell saw his venture north to find work as part of a larger project of progress and modernity. His initial reaction to the region gives us a sense of how he perceived his place in the world:

I am glad I came & I think I always will be. There are troubles & hardships now but it is worth it for what will certainly come in the future. Some people will make fortunes in the next few years but I will have the satisfaction I am sure if I do not make a pile of money, of seeing & taking a hand in the building of a great work and watching it grow, and this town [Prince Rupert] grow into a large city where people will live in ease and will not think of what the people at this time went thru to make the place what it is as they know it.

McDowell’s participation in the building of the railway gave him a sense of accomplishment in bringing anticipated prosperity to the region, assisting civilization’s

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5 DIM to EM April 12, 1912.
6 DIM to JM, September 5, 1908.
triumph over the wilderness, the victory of progress over primitive. Such concepts of progress and modernity were typical of the era and were crucially connected to the way colonizers saw cultural "others" within the colonial context.  

As a surveyor for the GTPR, McDowell was a model of imperial progress and modernity. Historical geographers argue that by providing the tools of exploration, surveyors and mapmakers "became implicated in the production of an abstract space of Western sovereignty that would prevail over Native geographies and frame colonial development."  

Space and race are historically constructed concepts that have been employed in the major projects of imperial modernity. How the "other" was perceived and racialized was a factor in the reterritorialization and recreation of geopolitical space. Cultural geographer Kay Anderson recognizes that the process of spatialized racialization needs to be understood historically. She entreats us to recognize that race is a social construction, like other forms of physical manifestation such as gender. By recognizing the constructed nature of the concept of race as opposed to generalizing about minorities, we can move "towards deconstructing the, often conflicting, representational strategies that surround  

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7 DIM to JM, May 15, 1908.  
8 According to cultural theorist Anne Mcclintock, "imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity." Progress was a racialized idea and its by-products—growth and prosperity—were seen to depend on adherence to and belief in the values and ideals of the dominant society. Above all, progress required physical appropriation and control of the land by the dominant society. Accordingly, cultural theorist Robert Young asserts, "colonial practices were inscribed both physically and psychically on the territories and peoples subject to colonial control." Anne Mcclintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5. Robert Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 173.  
particular racialized places and events.‖ Analyzing the interactions between people in a localized setting, like the Skeena region, can facilitate understanding of the process of colonialization and racialization. The focus here is on McDowell’s perceptions and representations of “others.” Closely analyzing McDowell’s letters provides an opportunity to go beyond an over-simplified view of opposing forces to uncover the complexity with which webs of meaning were constructed.

McDowell had limited contact with Aboriginal people. He mentioned them only briefly in his letters, often in response to questions from his father. 12 Nevertheless, these brief comments reveal insights into the interplay between McDowell’s own perspective concerning Aboriginal people, and that of Euro-Canadian society generally. As McDowell did survey work for the GTPR along the Skeena River, between Kitselas Canyon to the west and Hazelton to the east, he gained increasing familiarity with the Aboriginal people who worked as packers, freighters, cutters of timber, and providers of other services. 13

While en-route to camp and waiting at Kitselas Canyon for the Skeena to rise during his first trip up-river, McDowell characterized his early impression of Aboriginal people in a letter to his brother noting that, “Last night I played toss with a little Indian boy and girl. It pleased them a great deal to have me play with them...We have been putting the shot, and running and jumping.” Although inconsistent with the previous statement, McDowell asserted that, “The Indians are very lazy, squatting around on the

11 Bonnett and Nayak, “Cultural Geographies of Racialization,” 303.
12 This is inferred from the absence of previous reference to Aboriginal people in the McDowell letters.
grass bucks, squaws and children, watching us." McDowell's use of words like "buck" and "squaw" suggests his familiarity with stereotyped images and the rhetoric identifying Aboriginals as slothful and lazy. However, he was occasionally willing to move beyond these, as in his depiction of one young man as a fine example of athletic prowess: "One young Indian tried putting the shot," McDowell wrote, "he could put it further than anyone, but he always stepped over the mark & threw it different from us." It is unclear whether McDowell attributed the young man's success to superior strength, the fact that he threw the shot differently, or his breaking the rules by stepping over the line. In any event, McDowell's playing games with the Aboriginal people and his appreciation of the young Aboriginal man's athletic ability contrasts with his description of Aboriginal people as "very lazy" and "squatting around." It appears that McDowell was having trouble reconciling his expectations with what he actually witnessed.

Given McDowell's religious upbringing and likely exposure to stories of massacre and captivity by Natives, his preconceptions about such characteristics as slothfulness, laziness, and licentiousness are not surprising. McDowell might also have been voicing the opinions of the residents of Kitselas (Big Canyon), a new town-site booming with the river traffic and trade resulting from the construction of the railway. Both sides of Kitselas canyon had been traditional significant sites of strategic power for the inland Tsimshian who acted as middlemen in the trade between the interior and coast. At the time of McDowell's first visit to the canyon, there was a Tsimshian village across

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14 DIM to JM, Jr., May 29, 1908.
the river from the new town-site. In these circumstances, it is reasonable to imagine that tensions between the Aboriginal people and the new settlers may well have influenced McDowell’s perspective.

Even in areas where Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian interests were less directly opposed, settlers sought justification for the devaluation of Aboriginal people and culture. Historian Robin Fisher remarks:

Aware that their presence was tending to destroy the Indian and his way of life and sometimes even feeling guilty about it, the settlers were unlikely to see much value in the culture that they were eliminating. By disparaging Indian culture Europeans could convince themselves that little of worth would be lost if the Indian way of life was brought to an end. At the same time they reminded themselves, by comparison, of the excellence of their own institutions. With some exceptions, pioneer accounts of the Indians contained much that was contemptuous, and they were suffused with ignorance.  

In these circumstances, McDowell probably believed what people were saying—after all, many of them had been around Aboriginal people a lot longer than he. As Fisher contends, people tended to “react to what they expected to see.” Coupled with attitudes McDowell encountered at home, such perspectives likely facilitated his early negative stereotyping of Aboriginal people. Such attitudes might have been at odds with what he actually observed and experienced, thereby causing conflicted feelings and views.

As McDowell’s survey work progressed, he had more frequent and closer contact with Aboriginal people who made up part of his work crew. This increased contact is reflected in one of his letters: “There are 20 here now; four Indians who help any way

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they can be of use, they own a canoe which is used sometimes to go down the river in or move in; four axmen; the level man and rodmann, two chainmen and a back-flagman, topographer, transitman, draughtsman, and chief. Two Japanese, the cook and his helper, and myself fill up the rest of the bunch.”19 From this description of the crew, it is clear that Aboriginal workers played an important role. Not only did McDowell mention the Aboriginal workers first, but he also mentioned the pivotal role of their canoe. In addition, it is noteworthy that while McDowell expressly referred to those who were readily identifiable as visual “others,” he made no express distinctions between different white members of the team who were likely of various national backgrounds.

In another letter written later that same month, McDowell refers to some recently-hired Aboriginal workers, asserting, “[t]hey are good axemen but they are lazy and I really believe it is not the money they work for but for a chance to get a full stomach.”20 Interestingly, McDowell’s comment concerning “good axemen” is inconsistent with his contention that the same men are lazy.

Anthropologist Syed Hussein Alatas shows how the cultural construction of the “lazy native” developed during the colonial period. The portrayal of Aboriginal people as “lazy” was an “important element in the ideology of colonial capitalism. It was a major justification for territorial conquest, since the degraded image of the native was basic to colonial ideology.”21 Anthropologist Mary Black-Rogers notes that fur traders in the

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18 Fisher, Contact and Conflict, 74.
19 DIM to JM, June 4, 1908.
20 DIM to JM, June 28, 1908.
Canadian north often referred to Aboriginal people as lazy, even when they worked hard because they worked at what they thought important, rather than what the traders thought important. Black-Rogers asserts that the fur traders considered “indolence [to be] an attribute of those who show independence.”

Historian John Lutz notes that many Aboriginal workers in British Columbia employed in wage labour worked to raise money for potlatching and when they earned enough money to accomplish their goal, they quit their jobs. Non-Aboriginals typically had a hard time reconciling their own work ethic with that of Aboriginal workers and, as a result, labelled Aboriginal workers as “lazy.”

In effect, if Aboriginal people did not participate in the colonial economy on the colonizers’ terms, they were viewed as lazy and indolent. It appears to have been beyond the comprehension of most Euro-Canadians that from the perspective of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal goals were even more worthy of effort than their own, “western” goals. McDowell’s early letters suggest that he bought into this attitude.

In the same letter, McDowell implied that if white men did not feed them, Aboriginal people would go “half starved.” This was a common sentiment among fur traders, who often misinterpreted Aboriginal peoples’ limited interest in the fur trade as disinterest in providing for sustenance, taking no account of Aboriginal culture and food collection practices. McDowell’s suggestion that it was not the money for which Aboriginal men worked implies their different work ethic and this might well have fostered misunderstandings like those referred to by Black-Rogers, Lutz, and Vibert. In

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24 DIM to JM June 28, 1908
any event, the broad, negatively imbued fur-trade usage of terms such as "lazy" and "starving" became part of the dominant colonial discourse of early twentieth-century British Columbia that McDowell encountered.

In a subsequent letter written just months after he arrived at his work camp on the Skeena in 1908, McDowell characterized Aboriginal people in positive terms suggestive of his willingness to judge people on the basis of personal observations. This letter intimates he had shed many of his negative perspectives of Aboriginal people in just a few short months:

I can not tell you the name of the tribe these Indians are. We have four of them here and I can say that I love the fellows. They are so strong and manly in some ways but boyish in others. The oldest one is about fifty I should judge and he laughs and sings and enjoys life just the same as a young boy. The other three are young fellows, I would think between 20 & 25. Two of them are Christians and two are not but they both seem to be the same as far as kindness and goodness goes. They would do almost anything for a person that would help them any. One time in the canoe we saw a young bird that had fallen in the water and was thrashing about in the fear of being drowned. Altho the current was swift and it would have been hard work to get back they were going to stop and help it out but they saw it got on a bush and was pulling itself out. How many white men would stop to help a little bird if it caused them a little extra exertion? The Indians are fine axemen and what fun they do have out of the axemen from the old countries, and what fun when they get lost in the woods and do any of the queer things that a city bred will do in the woods, but they do it all in such an open way that nobody ever gets 'sore' over it.  

McDowell’s account of how the Aboriginal men laughed endearingly at the white men’s ineptitude in the bush gives a rare glimpse of a positive exchange between the two groups working together.

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25 Viberti, Traders' Tales. Black-Rogers, "Varieties of Starving."
26 DIM to JM, August 16, 1908.
McDowell’s comments stand in striking contrast to the perspective of historian Tina Loo, who suggests that white hunters viewed Aboriginal men in feminized terms in order to diminish the perceived threat to their masculinity resulting from their need to rely on Aboriginal guides. Loo also asserts that the Aboriginal hunting guides denigrated and laughed at their white employers behind their backs in order to mitigate the threat to their own masculinity. In contrast, McDowell remarked on how “strong and manly” the Aboriginal men were. Despite presenting them in such masculine terms, McDowell and his fellow non-Aboriginal workers (who did not get “sore” over the teasing referred to in the excerpt above) did not appear to feel their own masculinity threatened. McDowell’s narrative suggests that the men in the camp were comfortable in their own skins. It also suggests a sense of reciprocity and agency on both sides. Even though the non-Aboriginal railway workers were probably as dependent on Aboriginals as the hunters in Loo’s study, neither party seemed to feel threatened by the other. It is unclear why the balance of power was so comfortably split between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals within McDowell’s camp but whatever the reason, we can clearly see a ‘countertext’ to the dominant discourses of the colonial project.

McDowell also commented on the sanitary habits of his Aboriginal co-workers:

“The Indians are very strict on sanitary rules around the camp and could show some of the white men things, in fact just the other night spoke to two of the fellows who went bathing in the river just above camp where the cook gets all the water from.”

McDowell’s first hand remark about the superior sanitation habits of the “Indians”

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counters the popular view at that time that Aboriginal people were “dirty” and “indolent.” In related fashion, McDowell’s comment to his devoutly religious father that the non-Christian Aboriginal people were as worthy as their Christian counterparts appears focused on encouraging his father to base his opinion of Aboriginal people on observed behaviors as opposed to acceptance of religious beliefs foreign to Aboriginal culture. For his own part, McDowell seems to have come to accept his common humanity with Aboriginal men.

Notably, McDowell commented on Aboriginal people only when he was working and travelling along the Skeena River and in the Skeena Valley; his letters written from the town-site of Prince Rupert and the backcountry/Falls River area contain no references whatsoever to Aboriginal people. This is surprising, given that those areas clearly had some Aboriginal inhabitants. Perhaps the explanation lies in McDowell’s perception of these areas as other than Aboriginal spaces.

Although McDowell was more enlightened than many people of European background, at least a few of his contemporaries shared similar changes in attitude concerning the Aboriginal peoples of British Columbia. William Bambury, a prospector in southern BC in the 1890s, was one such person. Harry M. Bright, who has worked with Bambury’s letters, comments that Bambury, “maintained his sense of development in his changing feelings as he progressed through to his later letters...[and] he would have realized with writing the first of the letters his severe opinion of the rascality of the

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28 DIM to JM, August 16, 1908.
Indians in general had changed to one of greater appreciation for their more characteristic hospitality as they had shown it to him.\textsuperscript{29}

As with McDowell, Bambury’s initial descriptions of the Aboriginal people he met on his journey contain numerous references to pejorative words such as “lazy,” “shiftless,” “dirty,” and “treacherous.” However, after several months of significant contact with Aboriginal people, Bambury’s perspective changed. Writing from Harrison Lake, he described the local Aboriginal people as “very social, and as far as may be, liberal.”\textsuperscript{30} Later still, he described the Chehalis people as “very civil.” Although not so strongly worded as McDowell’s comment about loving the Gitksan people, Bambury’s later characterizations similarly grew more positive over time.\textsuperscript{31} Although it is possible these changes arose because Bambury viewed the Harrison Lake and Chehalis people more favourably than the Aboriginal people of his earlier encounters, the apparently gradual shift in his perspective is more consistent with the growth of an increasingly accepting attitude toward Aboriginal people.

Unfortunately, most visitors to the region tenaciously held onto disapproving attitudes. As Fisher observes, “few of the white settlers took the trouble to learn about the Indians, and even fewer really knew anything nefarious about them, although they were loud in their dogmatic denunciations.”\textsuperscript{32} The analysis of letters like those written by McDowell and Bambury reveals the ambiguous and often contradictory nature of discourses concerning Aboriginal people in the early twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{29} William H. Bambury and Harry M. Bright, \textit{William H. Bambury's Travels - 1894: After a Transcript of His Letters to His Sister Written 1894-1899} (Metaline Falls, WA: Harry M. Bright, 1999), ii.
\textsuperscript{30} Bambury and Bright, \textit{William H. Bambury's Travels}, 32.
\textsuperscript{31} Bambury and Bright, \textit{William H. Bambury's Travels}, 35.
Aboriginal people made up only a small portion of the population of the Skeena region during McDowell’s tenure. Most of McDowell’s co-workers were from diverse places and cultural backgrounds, lured by economic opportunity. During the construction of the GTPR, Talbot noted, “every type of nationality will be met with along the grade. A little colony [camp] may represent as many as ten, fifteen, or twenty different tongues, from Russian to Hindoo, from British to Slav, from Scandinavian to Turk.”— However, during his early work McDowell would not have encountered as many different ethnic and racial groups as he did in later stages of his survey work when he had more contact with the construction crews. In 1910, Charles Hays (the president of the GTPR) became so desperate to find cheap labour that, in spite of his preference for “white,” Canadian workers, he stated, “we will take every kind of labour we can get.” He subsequently encouraged immigration from Asia and Eastern Europe in order to capitalize on cheap labour.

These changes in the cultural make-up of the workforce were reflected in McDowell’s correspondence. Upon his arrival in Prince Rupert in April 1908, McDowell mentioned that the GTPR gave hiring preference to “white” Canadians. However, he implied that this policy was not strictly followed: “I have spoken to a good many fellows I have seen working along the line & otherwise, and four or five of them were Americans

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32 Fisher, Contact and Conflict, 90.
while only one I saw was a Canadian.” McDowell also mentioned a surplus labour pool living in tents while waiting to be hired by the GTPR. At this early stage in the project, there was clearly a surplus of “white” labour readily at hand and Hays was able to implement his preference for “white” workers, even if not all were Canadian. However, as construction progressed and expenses rose, the wages demanded by “white” workers became prohibitive. At this point, the GTPR urged immigration authorities to relax restrictions on immigrant labour, especially from Asia.

In spite of the increasingly multinational makeup of the GTPR labour force, there is no evidence McDowell noticed any change. He mentioned non-Aboriginal visible minorities in his letters only rarely, such as the Japanese cook and his helper, the Japanese fisherman whose net was destroyed by a riverboat, or his passing comment that “Japs are very thick everywhere in B.C. on the coast.”

Although the focus has thus far been on McDowell’s attitudes to Aboriginal people and other minorities, most of the people McDowell mentioned in his letters were of European heritage. As his various and changing attitudes show, social relationships and the processes through which identities were formed were complex and fluid. As Anne McClintock maintains, “the story [of imperialism] is not simply about relations between black and white people, men and women, but about how categories of whiteness and blackness, masculinity and femininity, labour and class came historically into being in the first place.” Just as important as their genesis is their character. It is important to interrogate the meaning and politics of whiteness when considering constructions of race,

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35 DIM to JM, May 15, 1908.
36 DIM to JM, May 26, 1908
ethnicity, class and gender in early twentieth-century British Columbia. As Daniel Clayton notes, “one of the basic problems with postcolonial attempts to augment understanding of difference... is that [theorists] can also homogenize understandings of sameness.” In order to avoid this process, questioning whiteness is just as important as considering other racial constructions.

By 1910, many of the GTNR employees were Russians and eastern Europeans, commonly called “Bohunks,” a disparaging term derived from combining the words Bohemian and Hunk (a variation of Hungarian). Bernice Martin, the wife of a resident engineer near McDowell’s work camp, referred to “bohunkie RR workers, not white man, Swede nor Italian, mostly they are Montenegrins.” Martin’s comment suggests a racialized hierarchy that placed whites at the top and Montenegrins somewhere near the bottom. Swedes and Italians occupied a place somewhere in the middle.

Although McDowell never used the term “Bohunk” in his letters from British Columbia, he did use the term in a 1907 letter written during his work for the Spokane, Portland, & Seattle Railway. McDowell and his friends were relaxing after Thanksgiving dinner when four friends showed up late. When they went to the cook shack to have the cook prepare food for the latecomers, they were surprised to find “[f]our Bohunks, the name we give to any laborers who come from Southern Europe, eating what was left of the turkey. We always let the cooks feed anyone on what we have left after a meal and get what little money they can, but we had not thought of feeding turkey to them.” The

37 McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest.
39 It is interesting that Martin distinguishes Swedes, Italians, and Montenegrins (Slavs) from “whites”. "Martin, Bernice Medbury Ms 1192," ed. British Columbia Archives, March 25, 1912.
“Bohunks” were soon put in their place: “Well of course [the Bohunks] were soon got out and the cooks given a good talking to and started on the way preparing the extra meal. It was lucky we had plenty and soon we had a pretty fair dinner for four considering what had happened.” This passage suggests McDowell’s prejudice. Evidently, the contractors, including McDowell, did not think the “Bohunks” worthy of turkey, even on Thanksgiving.

Surprisingly, McDowell never used the term “Bohunk” in his letters from British Columbia; nor did he refer to southern or eastern European workers at all, even though they would have been among his co-workers. It is difficult to account for this silence. Possibly, the language barrier kept McDowell from close association with such workers, although this is unlikely since the same language barrier would have also applied in Washington State. It is more likely that by the time McDowell encountered eastern and southern European workers along the Skeena, he had a less racialized view of them. However, as a source of cheap labour, these workers caused considerable consternation among settlers and were also a major target of criticism by the press. So, it is surprising that McDowell failed to mention them in his Skeena letters.

The lack of reference to “foreign” workers renders it difficult to draw many conclusions concerning McDowell’s perspectives on such groups. However, it is clear that at least in his early days in the region, McDowell reflected views that were entirely consistent with the dominant social discourses of the time. Considering the change in his view of Aboriginal people over time, it is unfortunate that McDowell’s letters do not reflect similar changes in relation to other minorities.

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40 DIM to JM, Thanksgiving Day, 1907.
Of course, there were also numerous workers and other inhabitants of the area that were of northwestern European descent. In his first letter written from a GTPR work camp, McDowell remarked, “we have all sorts of people here. Englishmen, Scotch, Irish, French & Canadians & Americans.” Of these, McDowell most often commented critically on individuals of English extraction. He noted that Canadians were also critical of “Englishmen” and commented in one letter that, “[t]he rodman is a Londoner. He is one of those kind of Englishmen that you see quite often, and the kind that make them so unpopular in this country. Canadians as a rule welcome any Scotch or Irish but they have no use for English.” McDowell points out that even the press shared these views: “If you could see some of these Western Canadian papers almost every day in the ‘Letters to the Editor’ column or whatever they call it you would see letters making fun of the Englishman, or hard luck letters from the Englishman telling how all the good jobs go to foreigners and he is left out in the cold, cold world.”

Considering that most of the power brokers in British Columbia were of English heritage, the Canadians to whom McDowell referred were likely working-class men who, like him, were not “English.” In another letter, McDowell comments that the arrogant attitude of superiority on the part of the English “makes bitter enemies and hatred.” Indeed, McDowell’s perspective appears to have been consistent with popular opinion. As Cole Harris notes, “in Canadian eyes many ways of [English] people...were simply ridiculous.” Historian Mark Zuehlke observes that English remittance men were

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41 DIM to JM, June 4, 1908.
42 DIM to JM, September 5, 1908.
43 DIM to JM, May 2, 1909.
44 Harris, Phillips, and Phillips, Letters from Windermere, xviii.
"represented as fools, drunkards, louts, scoundrels, and snobs who refused to fit into the evolving Canadian Society."  

McDowell’s disdain for the English might have stemmed from his own Scottish-Irish heritage and the traditionally uneasy relationship between the English on the one hand, and the Scottish and Irish people on the other. Nevertheless, McDowell’s own perspective on his Irish connection was ambivalent. In a letter to his father, McDowell clearly expressed discomfort toward many persons of similar heritage to his own: “I am only hard on those [Scots] who say and make you think they were born in Scotland and are ashamed that they were born in Ireland.” Although he claimed, “I am proud of [both] the Scotch [and] the Scotch-Irish in me,” the reference to his Irish connection only in conjunction with his Scottish one suggests a reluctance to acknowledge a truly Irish component to his heritage. Considering his Presbyterian background, it may be that McDowell downplayed his Irish connection because of its association with Roman Catholicism.

In his references to people he encountered in the area, McDowell usually identified by name only those individuals who held significant posts. For example, he often identified his immediate boss with an honorific—Mr. Goodman, Mr. Agnew or Mr. Burbank. He also identified by name various dignitaries who came to the region, such as Earl Grey, Sir Rivers-Wilson and Lady Wilson, Mr. Chamberlain (President of the Grand Trunk Railway from England), Charles Hays (President of the GTPR), and Premier McBride. In contrast, McDowell rarely referred to his friends and co-workers by name.

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When he did so, it was usually in the context of some out-of-the-ordinary circumstance: "One time this timekeeper, Bennett and another fellow got 22 rabbits in one afternoon." On another occasion, McDowell named a co-worker simply because of his unusual name, Ralph Waldo Muckleston. In a few cases, McDowell referred to his subjects not only by name, but also by nationality. "There is Malcolm Campbell the topographer. He is from Edinborough [sic]... There is Baker a Scotchman, and Harrison an Englishman. They are adept at getting lost and if they pass a place can never get back to it again without somebody leading them. A good deal of fun is got out of them."

Not surprisingly, McDowell identified by name and also wrote in more depth about those individuals who became close, long-terms friends. For example, he made numerous references to his friend, Jack Obermuller:

The resident engineer there is Obermuller...I know him very well...As you can tell by his name he is of German extraction on one side but he told me he is as much Irish on the other. Surely you would expect to find him fighting with himself, but he is the most generous fellow you could expect to know. Disregarding his ancestry which of course has nothing to do with it he is an American from California.

In spite of McDowell's assertion that Obermuller's ancestry was not important, it was significant enough in McDowell's view to warrant more than a passing reference. Ethnic stereotyping is apparent in his comment that the Irish and German parts of Obermuller should be fighting each other. McDowell made this comment early in 1910, when he saw the region in racialized terms.

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60 DIM to JM, April 18, 1908.
67 DIM to JM, November 26, 1911.
68 DIM to JM, May 28, 1911.
69 DIM to JM, September 5, 1908.
50 DIM to JM, March 6, 1910.
Although he rarely mentioned his co-workers and more casual mates by name in his letters, McDowell did focus on their occupations and activities, suggesting that he defined people more by what they did than by their origins. This is especially evident after he had been in the region a while. Although names may have meant little to the recipients of his letters, they would have personalized the people of whom he wrote. Nevertheless, McDowell generally avoided the use of names for reasons that are unclear. Perhaps the practice of avoiding names was indicative of a reluctance to form strong ties that might be severed at any time for a multitude of reasons. The mobile character of McDowell’s employment made establishing enduring social relationships difficult. There was little in camp life or even in town life that one could call ‘permanent.’ The influx and outflow of people weakened the potential to form lasting relationships.

In her discussion of male homosocial culture in mid-nineteenth-century British Columbia, Adele Perry mentions miners’ practice of using nicknames, asserting that, “[n]icknames symbolized the ties of men to each other and their membership in a distinct social world.” In contrast, the only reference to a nickname in McDowell’s letters is “Muckles.” When McDowell referred to his fellow workers by name, it was always by their surnames only, a common practice at the time. It is possible the men in the railroad camps assigned nicknames to each other, but McDowell never mentioned this in his letters.

Perhaps membership in McDowell’s world of railway construction was earned by action and skill, which might explain his tendency to reference people by their actions rather than their names. In her article on the construction of masculinity in the extractive
industries of the American West, Nancy Quam-Wickham contends that the defining quality of a masculine ideal was "a pride in the acquisition of skill."\textsuperscript{52} Certainly, skill was an important component of McDowell's masculine ideal and he often mentioned how others depended on his skill: "We would not under ordinary circumstances have gone out in such weather but if we had not it would have held up work that was important and kept other men idle and so we felt obliged to go out."\textsuperscript{53} In another letter McDowell described the skill it took to complete a tunnel for which he did the survey work. "Our tunnel has come together...As the ends met so close that it was impossible to see any difference with the eye either in alignment or in the grade...I remember reading of tunnels meeting so many hundredths of a foot off of where it was expected to meet and it seemed wonderful how anyone could get so close."\textsuperscript{54} Such words embodied the pride that served as the basis of an identity shared by workers who valued skill and experience, and the ability to work hard. Historian Gail Bederman describes this "cultural process" of constructing identity:

\begin{quote}
[w]hereby concrete individuals are constituted as members of a preexisting social category — as men. The ideological process of gender...works through a complex political technology, composed of a variety of institutions, ideas, and daily practices. Combined, these processes produce a set of truths about who an individual is and what he...can do.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} Perry, \textit{On the Edge of Empire}, 28.

\textsuperscript{52} Nancy Quam-Wickham, "Rereading Man's Conquest of Nature: Skill, Myths, and the Historical Construction of Masculinity in Western Extractive Industries," \textit{Men and Masculinities} 2, no. 2 (October 1999): 136.

\textsuperscript{53} DIM to JM, January 15, 1910.

\textsuperscript{54} DIM to JM, November 26, 1911.

The way McDowell represented women was one component of his process of identity construction. He made surprisingly few references to women in his letters considering that Prince Rupert was a burgeoning northern city gaining increasing numbers of female residents, both permanent and temporary.\(^{56}\) Even in the Skeena Valley there were both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, mainly contractors’ and settlers’ wives. In a 1910 letter mentioning a young woman from home, McDowell was flattered by her inquiries about him communicated to his father. Writing in April of that year, he commented further that, “I have only seen one woman since October and for three years I have hardly been acquainted with any. There were practically none in P. Rupert.”\(^{57}\) This comment suggests that McDowell encountered only one woman in a period of six months. Local author Wiggs O’Neill wrote that on the steamboat *Islandeer’s* first trip up the Skeena in 1911, “we had seventeen commercial travellers and ten frontier ladies on our passenger list.”\(^{58}\) In addition to “frontier ladies” there were many Aboriginal women in the Skeena Valley at that time. Thus, it seems strange that McDowell claimed to have encountered only one woman in this six-month period. Perhaps he really meant to say that he hadn’t seen any “civilized” women in six months. This would have been consistent with the lack of “civilized” living conditions that McDowell wanted to emphasize in his letters.

\(^{56}\) According to the 1911 Census, there were 3030 male residents and 1154 female residents in Prince Rupert at that time and there were 8871 males and 893 females in the Skeena District. *Fifth Census of Canada, 1911: Areas and Population by Provinces, Districts, and Subdistricts*, vol. I (Ottawa: Ministry of Trade and Commerce, 1912), 38.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., April 17, 1910.

\(^{58}\) William John O’Neill, *Whitewater Men of the Skeena* (Kitimat: Northern Sentinel Press Limited, 1960), 23. McDowell often rode the steamboats that plied the Skeena. The term “frontier ladies” may have been a euphemism for prostitute, although this is unclear.
McDowell’s claim that there were practically no women in Prince Rupert is inconsistent with his earlier letters. In his second letter from Prince Rupert in 1908 (two years earlier), McDowell remarked, “there are many here, some families women and children living in tents.” During the two years between the letters, many families had established themselves in the city. Further, archival photographs of special events in early Prince Rupert clearly show a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in the crowds. As well, local newspapers from the period are littered with references to female residents and visitors.

By pointing to the lack of women in the Skeena region, McDowell was gendering the region in masculine terms. He apparently wanted to give the impression that he was in a “He-Man land.” McDowell’s tendency to exclude women from his correspondence may have consciously or unconsciously been aimed at reinforcing his standing as an adventurer maneuvering his way through a dangerous and inhospitable landscape that was too rough to accommodate women. Such a myth would have been compromised by references to “civilized” women living comfortably in the area. Similarly, while laudable, McDowell’s acceptance of common humanity with Aboriginal people may, in part, have been reinforced by a desire to show his “fit” with all aspects of the rugged frontier, including its Indigenous inhabitants. Even McDowell’s reluctance to refer to people by name may, in part, have been attributable to a desire to “paint a picture” of a difficult

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59 DIM to JM, May 3, 1908
60 Some photograph collections that illustrate this point are the McRae collection, the Wrathall collection, McDowell collection. The McRae and Wrathall collections are held at the Prince Rupert Regional Archives and copies of the McDowell collection are held at the Museum of Northern BC.
61 Early newspapers in Prince Rupert were The Optimist, The Prince Rupert Journal, and The Empire.
lifestyle in which participants had little time or energy to cultivate social graces. In fact, many aspects of McDowell’s interactions with people might either be explained by, or at least consistent with, the proposition that during his time in the Skeena region he was involved in the creation of a personal adventure myth concerned with taming the last frontier.

Generally, tolerance for cultural difference seems to have characterized the Skeena region during McDowell’s time. Cole Harris’s work confirms this. Harris observes that the rigid social class structure of England and even the formal class structure of eastern Canada did not transfer intact to British Columbia. He notes that the "barriers between people of different cultures were beginning to break down as they lived with each other and coped with many of the same challenges."  

Several basic conclusions can be made about McDowell’s interactions with different groups of people. Although the numerous references in his correspondence confirm that national origins were initially of significance to him, these references almost disappeared during his tenure there. By 1912, McDowell rarely mentioned the national backgrounds of the people he described. Instead, he was far more likely to mention their livelihood. This supports Harris’ assertion that ethnic barriers were breaking down. Barriers of class were also reduced. Bernice Martin, the wife of a GTPR construction contractor, expressed her surprise that everyone “from D on well down to our Italian [servant] and the bull cook” addressed her husband by his first name, Leslie. She commented further “that’s the way it is in this country.” Similarly, among miners in the

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64 “Martin, Bernice Medbury Ms 1192,” April 6, 1912.
British Columbia interior, Cariboo resident T.O. Eifion observed that “[s]ocially we are a combination of all ranks from the proud aristocrat to the mean despicable city vagabond. The great barriers of rank which exist in most countries has [sic] entirely broken down among us.”

It appears from both McDowell’s letters and other sources that in places such as labour camps there was a counter-discourse of shared experience that contrasted with the bourgeois discourse of rigid class and racial distinctions. In reference to the ethnic diversity of mining camps in the BC interior, sociologist S.D. Clark maintains that, “The cultural heritage of the various groups were [sic] largely lost in the general mixture of nationalities. Social divisions did appear along economic or political lines, but they tended to emphasize the lack of distinctive features within the population.” The situations Clark, Eifion, and Martin describe appear similar to what McDowell experienced in the Skeena region. This breakdown of barriers might provide an explanation for the decrease in McDowell’s reference to national origins in his letters.

Next is an exploration of how discourses of masculinity and adventure in the physical landscape of northwestern British Columbia in the early twentieth century worked both with and against dominant colonialist discourses in McDowell’s text.

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Chapter 3 – Encounters with Landscape

David Inglis McDowell’s encounters with the physical landscape were as influential as his encounters with people in shaping his perspective of the Skeena region and his role in the colonial project. By narrating his adventures in letters, McDowell created a new conceptual space, a process that literary theorist Fredric Jameson calls ‘cognitive mapping.’ As noted by historian Richard Phillips, “the construction of geographies of adventure is generally—but not universally—motivated by a clear agenda: broadly speaking—imperialism. Adventure stories constructed cultural space in which imperial geographies and imperial masculinities were conceived.” Closely analyzing McDowell’s interaction with surrounding landscapes reveals the complicated and sometimes contradictory ways in which McDowell and his contemporaries saw their place in nature and society. Further, it helps highlight the relationship between the production of geographical space and the emergence of imperial space.

Central to this analysis is the idea that “nature” and “wilderness” are socially constructed human concepts. Acknowledging that “nature” is socially constructed is not saying that “nature” does not exist, but rather that it can only be viewed through culturally influenced ideas about its character. People from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds conceive of the natural world differently. Therefore, there is no way to

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conceive of nature "in the raw" or outside of our cultural perceptions. The ideological underpinnings of the society from which he came influenced McDowell's ideas about his physical surroundings. Of course, such influences operate as a two-way, bi-directional exchange. Places are as profoundly influenced by the ideas that people bring to them as people are influenced by the places through which they pass.

The role of surveyors generally in the colonial project, and McDowell's particular role as a surveyor, are critical to uncovering his relationship with space. Surveyors use the principles of geometry and trigonometry to make a detailed map of an area of land, including its boundaries, area, and elevation, by taking linear and angular measurements. As producers of maps and charts, surveyors were key in the production of imperial geographical space. In this context, part of the process of making and mapping colonized spaces was the narrating of adventures from newly colonized areas. Maps and charts had long been associated with the romance of exploration, and served to conjure images of spirited adventure and intrepidity. Not surprisingly, McDowell constructed both cognitive maps in the course of his private life and virtual maps in the course of his work as a surveyor during the same time period.

Maps and charts also imply power and control over territory and so have played a crucial role in defining the parameters of Western cultures and geographies. The empirical nature of surveying and cartography bestowed maps and charts with authority that conveyed a notion of power and control over the environment. Historian Jerry Brotton argues that, "whilst [maps and charts] were valorized for their demonstration of

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learning, they were also valued for their ability to operate within a whole range of intellectual, political and economic situations, and to give shape and meaning to such situations."" Maps and charts reinforced the significance Western societies ascribed to the "discovery" of foreign lands. There are abundant metaphors in the literature about maps and charts being windows through which we can view our cultural ideologies.5 It logically follows that questioning the implications of map-making and surveying can be useful for the study and analysis of colonialism, imperialism, and state formation.

Critics of the triumphalist version of history, which sees maps and surveying as objective and neutral, have in recent decades come to the realization that maps and survey documents can also be seen as subjective representations of the cultural, social, and political values of their sponsors and producers. Such critics and cultural theorists reject the notion that maps and charts are mimetic and simply mediate between spatial reality and the human perception of reality.

The relationship between the map-maker/surveyor and the product of his or her work is far from straightforward. Interpretation—reading the cartographic text—involves a dialogue between the cartographer and society. The cartographer is a product of his/her own time and is influenced by the social milieu of the era. Specific historical circumstances and conditions produce maps and charts that are inescapably social and cultural documents. Accordingly, a map’s production and function provides a useful key to our increased understanding of a particular social order. That is, a map’s function

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represents an expression of the map-maker’s perspective and this provides us with an important clue to the broader perspective of the society employing him or her. In addition, cartographers and surveyors are rarely independent decision-makers free of economic, military or political constraints. Accordingly, the maps they produce reflect such constraints as well as the more expected demonstration of skill in translating various data into map form. Further, although claims of objectivity and neutrality have made surveying and cartography powerful tools for colonizing spaces and minds, a review of the ways in which geography and cartography are implicated in the conquest and colonization of foreign territories has begun to resonate among scholars. Historical geographer J.B. Harley asserts, “[a]s much as guns and warships, maps have been weapons of imperialism. Insofar as maps were used in colonial promotion, and lands claimed on paper before they were effectively occupied, maps anticipated empire.”

As was the case with other surveyors of the period, McDowell’s survey work for the GTPR did not simply or innocently serve to fill gaps in knowledge, but actively erased preexisting social and geopolitical systems in preparation for the emplacement of the modern nation state. Erasure of Aboriginal knowledge of the landscape was necessary in order for discovery to be possible. The textualization of the landscape by surveyors and cartographers reifies space as a blank text, ready to be inscribed by the impending colonial process. Colonial powers perceived undeveloped space as a challenge and, in particular, as areas to be filled in, ruled, and owned. Cultural critic John McClure calls this expansionist method “redemptive unmapping,” a process of clearing landscapes, not

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in an attempt to leave them unspoiled, but in order to create the optimum conditions for their remapping. Surveying and map-making are fundamental to the creation of the object to be possessed.

McDowell not only made official maps, but also sketched informal maps for friends and family. In a letter to his father in 1909, McDowell drew his own map of the Skeena Valley:

![Map of Region Drawn by McDowell](image)

**Figure 2 (Map of Region Drawn by McDowell)**

This map is as interesting for what it doesn’t show as for what it does show. On the map McDowell drew in all of the Euro-Canadian settlements as well as his camp, but did not include any of the Aboriginal villages (although there were many along the line). The only natural feature he named was the Skeena River; he did not label the coast or ocean or any of the other rivers or streams. The Alaska-British Columbia boundary features quite prominently, the writing there being large and bolder than any of the other. By

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including the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates and featuring the Alaska-British Columbia boundary so prominently, perhaps McDowell wanted it clear to all who viewed the map that he was in the northern wilderness. This wilderness area as McDowell portrayed it was a wilderness with few settlements, devoid of Aboriginal people, and wide open for exploitation. This map is an excellent example of the process of cognitive mapping and redemptive unmapping.

The process of converting British Columbia into a domesticated world of property lines, boundaries, fences, parks, and First Nations Reserves has not been a significant element of the mainstream historical record. Because there was no definitive military conquest and no structured state power in British Columbia until the mid-nineteenth century, the process of colonizing the land was fairly gradual.

The early explorers of British Columbia were ideological progeny of the enlightenment, the broad cultural movement that perceived global space in scientific terms. For eighteenth-century intellectuals, charting and map-making were the epitome of the ordered and structured creation of a coherent archive of knowledge. With the founding of the official British Hydrographic Office in 1795, mapping became a fundamental objective and tool of colonial administration and conquest. The British

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8 DIM to JM, November 21, 1909. The map is prefaced with: “I am on the work of the second contract of the contraction of the railway from the west. We have 8 miles to look after 141-148 inclusive from Prince Rupert. I will try to make a little map of the country below.” At the bottom of the page, someone (presumably McDowell’s father) has made the note: “Ella’s latest, he gives a sketch of camp, three shacks, cook house, sleeping quarters, and work room, showing each bed, chair, stove.” This note is in reference to a sketch of the camp McDowell drew in a letter to his sister Ella. The letter is missing from the McDowell collection.


convinced themselves that cartographic science enabled them to know the "real" spatial dimensions of imperial spaces, including British Columbia. Each map created in these circumstances reflected the objective scientific mind-set of the day and was saturated in the ideology of the British Empire. Maps charted a peculiarly British space.

James Cook's initial voyage to British Columbia in 1778 launched a rational, scientific campaign to transform the land from what was perceived as an impenetrable blank into a knowable empire. Spearheading this campaign were cartographers who, like Cook himself, surveyed and mapped the landscape. Cole Harris asserts that "from their earliest encounters, Europeans had begun to remake this territory in their own terms: mapping it, renaming it, claiming possession of it, bringing it within reach of the European imagination." In essence, by bequeathing to the Empire a precisely defined territory, cartographers created and defined not only its spatial image, but also its very existence. The Empire existed because it was mapped. This conceptualization of Empire relied on Britain's characterization of maps as unproblematic and trustworthy statements of spatial reality.

Until recently, historians rarely critically analyzed charts and maps even though such documents formed the supporting structure of the gradual colonization and domestication of British Columbia. This lack of interest is reflected in historian Albert Farley's assertion in 1967 that the earliest European maps of the northwest coast were "fanciful representations" but, as "factual information became available," the fantasy dissolved and "the coastline took shape....The evolution from unknown Indian territory to a province with precisely surveyed boundaries, accurately measured altitudes and
carefully mapped planimetry” gradually came to fruition. Farley maintained that by the 1960s “a general map of the province was sufficiently complete in form and content as to evince no striking inadequacies.” British Columbia’s colonial project was complete. As Farley shows, such a view of the landscape as terra nullius, as a blank space that didn’t exist until it was “discovered” and mapped by Europeans, had credence at least into the 1970s. The absence of First Nations people within Farley’s study and his statement of Aboriginal lands as “unknown” reflects the colonial attitudes which continued to dominate mainstream history at that time.

In contrast, Daniel Clayton’s book Islands of Truth, which examines the relationship in British Columbia between power and knowledge including the commercial knowledge produced by maritime fur traders, articulates a more critical perspective. The author particularly focuses on the association between imperialist power and the “scientific” knowledge produced by Cook and Vancouver. For Clayton, the maps and ledgers resulting from encounters on the Northwest Coast are examples of the “culture of colonialism.” Such documents manifest imperial power and the process through which Aboriginal territories were subjected to British control. Clayton reveals the figurative and symbolic violence ingrained in the scientific exploration, commercial fur trading and imperial negotiations relating to Vancouver Island. His meticulous analysis of archival materials reveals a distinct contrast between the spaces of land and sea where tangible physical contact took place and the more conceptual spaces where that contact was represented (maps, ledgers, and journals). According to Clayton, the

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11 Harris, The Resettlement of British Columbia, 161.
“imperial archive” is representative of the complex, contested spaces of contact in a spatio-temporal scheme and he traces the story of this imperial archive and reveals that knowledge is always a form of power. Although he is prepared to concede that Cook and Vancouver may in part have had humane scientific agendas, Clayton argues that the knowledge they collected and disseminated profoundly broadened the reach of British power into British Columbia. Explorers were not mere vehicles in the imperial process, but were indeed among its essential constituent parts. Clayton shows agency on the part of all the participants of contact, with shifting balances of power and authority. Through his thoughtful analysis of archival texts, Clayton reveals the oscillating, contestable and mutable nature of the contact process. As Clayton tells us, “colonialism is as much an ongoing process of inscription as it is a process of physical occupation, resettlement, and domination.” In the course of his work, Clayton shows that maps and ledgers acted as powerful metaphors supporting the imperial takeover of British Columbia from its First Nations inhabitants.

Historical geographer Ken Brealey presents a similar argument wherein he considers the processes of map-making in colonial British Columbia and how maps can be considered ideological weapons. He analyzes the way maps were used both to map and also to unmap space. In Brealey’s words, “even as [map-makers] strive to ‘make’ one geography become, they are ‘unmaking’ another...While this genre of maps suggests that a European imperial state is being parachuted into a ‘peopleless’ wilderness, the reality is

12 Albert Leonard Farley, "Historical Cartography of British Columbia, with a Separate Appendix of Maps" (University Microfilms, 1967), ii-iii.
13 Clayton, Islands of Truth.
14 Clayton, Islands of Truth, 63.
that the one is being grafted onto another that is already there." K. G. Brealey. "Mapping Them 'out': Euro-Canadian Cartography and the Appropriation of the Nuxalk and Ts'ilhqot'in First Nations' Territories, 1793-1916." Canadian Geographer-Geographe Canadien 39, no. 2 (1995): 142 and 44.

10 Brealey, "Mapping Them 'out'," 154.

As Clayton and Brealey demonstrate, the story of land ownership and control in British Columbia is tarnished by the process of dispossession and reinscription. As is evident from the following passage taken from a letter to his father, McDowell had some awareness of this process of dispossession:

I can not tell you the name of the tribe these Indians are. There are not a great many of them. Little villages are scattered along the river many miles apart. They say they are dying out. In fact we see the graves and ruins of old towns without a soul around.

Although McDowell acknowledged that villages were "scattered along the river," he implied their imminent demise by mentioning the common view that their inhabitants were "dying out." The suggestion that the villages were "without a soul around" to people them, might reasonably lead us to think that McDowell thought them permanently abandoned and, hence, a clear sign that Aboriginal people in the area were dying out. In this case, the destruction of the villages made imminent by the surveying and grading of the right of way, subsequent railway construction, and ensuing white settlement would at least not directly hurt or displace the former inhabitants of the villages. However, such inhabitants may have been away for seasonal subsistence activities or have relocated.
temporarily to commercial centers such as Port Essington or Port Simpson, with the intention of nevertheless maintaining some connection to their traditional villages. In this case, the destruction of the villages in the name of progress would clearly be more directly catastrophic to the lives of Aboriginal people. In respect to the graves he mentioned, all villages with a long occupancy record would have had a large graveyard. Even if a village was still actively occupied, with the devastating epidemics of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, many graves would have been evident.18

In another letter to his father, McDowell recounted his chance meeting and conversation with an Aboriginal man, Solomon Harris:

I was talking with an Indian on the beach today who was mending his net for the salmon...I told him that the railroad was going thru it. All he would say was too much work, too many stone. He did not seem to know whether to believe it or not.19

The tone of this letter seems somewhat mournful and raises a number of questions. Did McDowell regret the change he saw in store for these Aboriginal people once the railway was completed? Was his interest in talking to Aboriginals motivated by his earlier-stated belief that they were “dying out?” Did Solomon’s reluctance to “believe” in the railroad indirectly reflect a belief by McDowell that Aboriginal people couldn’t understand the significance of the changes ahead? Was McDowell subscribing to the colonial/missionary rhetoric equating Aboriginal people with children, unable to comprehend the implications of the events that surrounded them? Such questions are difficult to answer in retrospect. However, it is clear that McDowell saw change as

17 DIM to JM, August 16, 1909
unavoidable. It is also clear that he viewed only ‘civilized’ men as capable of understanding the fate of Solomon Harris and his people in light of the modernizing project in which they both played a role. It appears that McDowell regretted his role in what he viewed as the destruction of Aboriginal cultures, and had mixed feelings about his role as an agent of progress. In turn, such remorse and guilt reflect McDowell’s genuine affection and concern for Aboriginal people. Regardless of McDowell’s personal understandings concerning why the villages were deserted, he clearly considered the destruction of Aboriginal cultures as imminent in the face of progress—how could they survive when confronted with the superior forces of civilization? This attitude was in accord with common social theories of the day that saw Aboriginal people as ‘doomed to extinction.’

McDowell’s letters are peppered with references to undiscovered or “new” land. For example, he mentioned Mr. Bacon, Harbour Engineer for the GTPR, as “the man who discovered the harbor.” He did not acknowledge, and may not have known, that Prince Rupert harbour was traditional Tsimshian territory that had been occupied for at least 5000 years before Mr. Bacon “discovered” it. However, McDowell, like others who worked in the region, must have at least known that the region was previously occupied and used by Aboriginal people and, therefore, not newly “discovered.” On another occasion McDowell and his friends went “exploring” near the town-site of Prince Rupert and “found a falls about 50 feet high that only a few others have seen.”

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19 DM to JM, April 17, 1910.
20 DM to JM, December 6, 1908.
21 DM to JM, September 8, 1909.
statement serves to deny agency and humanity to the many Aboriginal people who must have seen the falls over the preceding thousands of years of their occupation.  

In another letter McDowell mentioned that people must advertise their intentions to purchase “wild government lands” in the region. However, to characterize the land as “wild” was to think of it as empty or as terra nullius, a self-serving perspective that made the dispossession of Aboriginal inhabitants morally more palatable. Similarly, while on a trip up the coast McDowell described the scenery as “rocky and desolate” with “hardly a vestige of life anywhere.” However, and in spite of these words, McDowell must have seen many Aboriginal villages. This is a further example of references to words and phrases such as “wild lands” or “wilderness” serving to effectively expunge the Aboriginal inhabitants from the minds of the colonizers allowing them to see the land as “new.” Further examples of related statements abound. McDowell told his father, “It is because of being a newer country with greater opportunities that holds me here.”

McDowell also spoke of the Yukon as a “vast new territory” and of Prince Rupert as a “newer place” than Seattle with more opportunity for making money. Of course, depicting the land as “new” conveyed that it did not belong to anyone. And, if it did not belong to anyone, then there was little or no moral obstacle to seizing control of it. It is clear that by the time McDowell came to the region, the rhetoric of erasure was so entrenched in the colonizing discourse that people, including McDowell, did not hesitate to espouse it. This was McDowell’s version of John McClure’s “redemptive unmapping.”

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22 There is some archaeological and oral history evidence the area surrounding Prince Rupert Harbour was an area long contested between the Tsimshian and the Tlingit.
23 DIM to JM, October 30, 1910.
24 DIM to JM, September 19, 1911.
25 DIM to JM, December 4, 1912.
Removing Aboriginals from the landscape opened it up for reinscription and reterritorialization by the modernizing forces of the expansionist state. Aboriginal occupation was perceived as inconsistent with the advance of civilization.

McDowell often referred to Aboriginal people as "civilized" or as assimilated to the colonizers' way of life, and hence did not see them as obstacles to the colonization process. For example, McDowell told his father:

There is a very old white man up the river who has been here for something like twenty years. He was originally sent out as a missionary by the English Church but got at outs with them I do not know whether on religious grounds or otherwise but I imagine religious. At any rate he has Christianized those along this river and taught them how to do a great deal as the white men, in fact he has helped to civilize them and they all think a great deal of him, trust him explicitly.27

From McDowell's perspective, which coincided with that of most settlers of the time, it appears that Aboriginal adoption of the colonizers' "civilized" ways involved the forfeiture of prior claims to the land and surrender to the European system of land ownership. These were to be important components of the adoption process.

McDowell also portrayed Aboriginals as hapless victims of progress; their way of life was incongruous with the progressive changes that McDowell and others like him wrought on the region. McDowell depicted Aboriginal people as unfortunate casualties in the march toward modernity. An example is McDowell's encounter with Solomon Harris where he pointed out that the railroad was going through, likely changing the physical character of the place, and noting Harris' inability to understand the implications of such

26 DIM to JM, April 18, 1908 & October 17, 1913.
27 DIM to JM, August 16, 1908.
a momentous event; McDowell was practicing his own form of unmapping. In spite of any differences there might have been between the view of Aboriginal people as converts to civilization or as hapless victims, one significant factor remains uniform – any previous rights they may have held to the land were trumped by the unstoppable momentum of progress, modernity, and civilization.

In Alaska and the Yukon, the gold rush of 1898 triggered an influx of adventure-seekers, which spilled over into British Columbia well into the twentieth century. Whereas the Eastern States and Provinces were seen as fully populated and resource-exhausted, the new frontier was viewed as an intoxicating profusion of resources awaiting exploitation and plunder. Wilderness was often looked upon as “savage, rich, and going to waste.” Wilderness was understood in terms of its opposition to civilization and, not surprisingly, the designation of wild spaces played a central role in the justification and rationalization of agricultural expansion and resource exploitation. As Philosopher David Rothenberg notes, “[w]ilderness as an idea has been essential to the furtherance of civilization.” The concept that cultivation and resource extraction represent the expansion of civilization and the conquering of the wilderness through its conversion into economic resources to be utilized by civilized man was for many years central to Western ideology.

The northern frontier wilderness was seen as a beast to be tamed, something violent and potentially dangerous, as opposed to the bucolic hinterland of Thoreau’s

28 DIM to JM April 17, 1910.
wilderness. Literary historian Henry Nash Smith notes "the static ideas of virtue and happiness and peace drawn from the bosom of the virgin wilderness...proved quite irrelevant for a society committed to the [colonial] ideas of civilization and progress."\textsuperscript{31}

Instead, northwestern British Columbia at the turn of the twentieth century represented one of the few remaining areas in North America wherein the possibility existed for what Richard Slotkin refers to as "bonanza economics," a system of acquisition of abundant natural resources without equal inputs of labour and investment.\textsuperscript{32} These opportunities afforded North America the opportunity to avoid the perceived economic and social exhaustion that faced Europe, and lend support to William Cronon's argument that the story of "progress" is the grand narrative of North America.\textsuperscript{33}

There can be little doubt that McDowell saw the Skeena region as a frontier or new space as a place for economic opportunity and progress and as a place for exploitation and development. For example, he described the new town-site of Prince Rupert in these terms:

This place will be such as hardly has happened in a generation...and I should take all advantage that I can. There will be a good sized town here before anyone owns a lot of land and then everything will open up and everyone will have a chance who is there at first to get a start with no old established rivals to over come.\textsuperscript{34}

These words suggest that McDowell did not see Aboriginal people as "established rivals" having a viable prior claim to the land. His comment about the opportunities at Prince

\textsuperscript{32} Slotkin, The Fatal Environment, 39-40.
Rupert having "hardly...happened in a generation," is consistent with the view that the region was a blank slate—a frontier to be exploited, like those of a generation before in the American west. By excluding them from the landscape, he denied Aboriginal people a role in the newly emerging social infrastructure. Clearly, they were not viewed as an impediment to western-style progress and civilization—they were insignificant.

Because landscapes are socially constructed ideas whose meanings shift as the result of specific social practices, concepts such as the last frontier must be probed for the ideologies they encode and the cultural functions they perform. According to cultural historian Susan Kollin, "Turner's observations about the closing of the frontier should not be understood as a truth claim but as an elaborate narrative strategy that helped rationalize U.S. expansion...Turner used this rhetoric to advocate U.S. expansion in Canada, a land seemingly empty, unclaimed, and full of promise." The building of the GTPR would help facilitate this northward focus and exploitation. Capitalists saw nature as something to be exploited.

The discursive construction of northwestern British Columbia as the last frontier awaiting exploitation reveals a longing for undeveloped spaces in a world whose surface was perceived as nearly fully mapped. These "undeveloped" and "empty" spaces represented opportunity for economic gain to people who were willing to work hard and endure hardships. It is clear that such ideas influenced McDowell when he wrote, "There

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34 DIM to JM, January 6, 1909.
36 Morse, The Nature of Gold, 12.
37 Renato Rosaldo describes this longing as "imperial nostalgia" in Renato Rosaldo, Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 69.
are troubles & hardships now but it is worth it for what will certainly come in the future.\(^{38}\)

Visions of the physical struggle with nature attracted many men to northwestern British Columbia and other regions such as Alaska and the Yukon as they “sought to escape from the boredom of industrial labour...[and] rapid urbanization, industrialization, and economic turmoil.”\(^{39}\) Certainly, adventure as well as economic opportunity played a role in McDowell’s migration west. In northwestern British Columbia, McDowell was able to live and behave in ways that would not have been possible within the atmosphere of social constraint at home.

The Skeena region was not only “wild” but also masculine. Phillips notes that, “adventures map masculinities in relation to geography, and geography in relation to masculinities.”\(^{40}\) While recent scholarship abounds concerning women on the frontier, with few exceptions there is a dearth of literature that considers the particular experiences of men on the frontier as gendered individuals and the processes of constructing ideas of masculinity within that particular setting.\(^{41}\) In spite of this textual deficiency it is nonetheless possible to reveal these processes on the northern “frontier” through the analysis of sources such as the McDowell archive.

\(^{38}\) DIM to JM, May 15, 1908.
\(^{40}\) Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure*, 45.
McDowell’s letters reveal spaces of adventure and, within those spaces, the mapping and unmapping of masculine identities. For example, McDowell’s lack of references to women in his letters from northwestern BC suggests that he viewed the area as masculine space, a space where privation and adventure left little room for feminine concerns. Further, by inhabiting this masculine space he asserted his own masculine identity. Kollin asserts that at the turn of the twentieth century Americans were overwhelmed by immigrants and that their “beleaguered” masculine identities were linked to the frontier where “Outdoor adventures emerged as one means of invigorating U.S. men by allowing them to test their strength and endurance against the challenges of the wilderness.”

North American and European nations identified their national heroes as masculine adventurers who triumphed over the wilderness and the frontier. In McDowell’s time it was largely accepted that bodily strength and resolve were closely associated with masculinity. Masculinity was viewed in terms of hard work and toil while idle, rich men were seen in feminized terms. In the US, the self-made man developed as the masculine ideal in the first half of the nineteenth century. However, by the turn of the twentieth century it was becoming difficult to fulfill this ideal. Rapid industrialization, technological changes, urban crowding, and immigration produced a society that was viewed as “oppressively crowded, depersonalized, and often emasculated.” One of the ways to escape this emasculating environment was to leave home and seek adventure.

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The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century abounded with accounts of how the frontier made "real" men. For example, General Horace Porter commented, "Let one remain in a quiet city, playing the milksop...leading to an unambitious namby-pamby life...while the other goes out on the frontier, runs his chance in encounters with wild animals, finds that to make his way he must take his life in his hands, and assert his rights."  

Since college was not an option for McDowell, his choices of employment were limited. He could get a job in the overcrowded city near home (Boston), or he could take his chances and try to carve a niche for himself in the West. Geographic mobility might have compensated for the lack of opportunity for social mobility in the East. The pioneers of the nineteenth century were giving way to young men who were educated and vigorous and were "turning the light of scientific discovery on plain and mountain."  

As a surveyor in the Skeena region, McDowell clearly saw himself in this role, part of a modernizing project to civilize and exploit the "frontier." He was a "manly" man who confronted the wilderness in an effort to exploit and tame it.

References in his letters suggest McDowell thought that an adult male adventurer had to become "manly" or "rough" in order to endure the often-harsh frontier conditions. While working in the Skeena Valley, McDowell described a British Company land surveyor as "a rather rough man," that he encountered travelling "down the river with a toque on, pulling a toboggan on which were a roll of blankets, an ax, a tea pot and cup, a few pair of sox, moccasins and a few other things," and made the observation that the

“rough” man “likes his beer and probably would not object to stronger drinks.”
McDowell added, “it seems hard to believe that such a person could have been living in Needham only a few months ago.”
It seemed difficult for McDowell to fathom that only a few months earlier this “rough” man had been living a much softer, civilized life. The inference is that this man and others like him had to become “manly” and “rough” in order to endure such harsh conditions. Further, by association, McDowell was conferring those attributes upon himself.

Although McDowell included drinking as part of his definition of a rough man, he often pointed out that he didn’t approve of drinking and even went so far as to blame “drink” for his friend’s father’s suicide (even though the man left a note attributing his suicide to the fact that he had Bright’s disease). To McDowell, self-control was a manly trait and he remarked about men who have “run down their systems by drink and other excesses” who are weakened by their lifestyles and are more likely to die of prostration. Thus, lack of control and self-discipline was likely to lead to weakness of body and spirit and could even prove fatal. Perhaps for McDowell, it was acceptable for a “rough” man to drink, but not to excess; excesses made men weak and vulnerable, putting them in an unmanly state. Even though McDowell disapproved of drinking, he did mention having a glass of whiskey with his uncle Samuel who did not “touch smoke or touch liquor although he is not a teetotaller.”

Clearly, McDowell viewed drinking in moderation as

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46 Kimmel, Manhood in America, 62.
47 DIM to JM, February 6, 1910.
48 DIM to JM, March 13, 1914.
49 DIM to JM, July 30, 1911.
50 DIM to JM, October 5, 1911.
not really drinking. It was excess that he really viewed with disapproval, whether excessive drinking, smoking or gambling.

McDowell often chastised his younger brother John for his lack of drive and ambition. When John quit jobs because they were too physically difficult for him McDowell questioned whether they were really as difficult as John made them out to be or if it was just because John was weak. At one point when John wrote to McDowell that he wanted to get back at one of his employers, McDowell wrote “I do not see what they teach them in school if it does not include being manly and above the petty squabbles of children.”51 For McDowell, shirking duty to one’s employer and admitting that one was too weak to do a job showed a lack of self-discipline and was unmanly.

Such a perspective is related to McDowell’s belief that “rough” living in “rough” conditions made a man tough and manly. Rough living meant living without the niceties and physical comforts of “civilization.” While in the back-country McDowell often spoke of his “adventures and experiences” in the mountains and in the process set himself up as a heroic figure whose adventures in adverse conditions endowed him with the masculine qualities ascribed to those pioneers who faced adversity, tamed the wilderness, and forged civilizations. Nevertheless, McDowell’s manly boasting is very subtle – it would not be considered manly to be too self-promoting. In one letter McDowell revealed his feelings about self-promotion:

Altho I think a lot of these men that tried to get to the poles and the waste places of the earth to get what information they could. I think the papers & preachers etc. have made too much of a talk about the heroes etc. They went to do it and they knew there was chance of not coming back but were willing to take the

51 DIM to JM, February 11, 1914.
consequences. I have seen some and known of too many acts of bravery that would keep papers going for months and long winded articles about them but the participants have never said anything and would hardly bother to write home about them.\footnote{DIM to JM, May 11, 1913.}

McDowell’s life in a shared environment with such brave men undoubtedly, on occasion, called for bravery on his part, too. After all, the geography of McDowell’s backcountry was a physically inhospitable place, teeming with physical threats and dangers. However, his letters contain little to either substantiate or repudiate such a proposition and, given his comments above, he considered himself too modest and manly to brag about personal demonstrations of courage. In all likelihood, McDowell saw his actions rather than his words as his essential defining feature for, as noted by Phillips, “in a setting defined by movement and freedom, the hero defines himself through his actions.”\footnote{DIM to JM, May 11, 1913.} In McDowell’s case, his description of the dangers he faced in his encounters with bears, for example, are light and jocular in tone, probably in order to avoid explicit boasting while still drawing attention to the bravery and manliness of his deeds.

As a surveyor and far distant son, McDowell not surprisingly referred in some detail to the frontier landscape of the area in his letters home. By examining the way McDowell represented the Skeena region, we can gain increased understanding of the process of transforming landscapes. During his time in the region, McDowell worked on three distinct projects: as a surveyor for the railway in the Skeena River Valley, both before and during its construction; as a surveyor defining lots and the layout of the sewer system in the new town-site of Prince Rupert; and, finally, as a surveyor for the hydro-electric company, working in the “back-country mountains” near Falls River to locate a
site for a hydro-electric dam to supply power to the burgeoning city of Prince Rupert, and later as an overseer for the construction of the dam. As McDowell moved from one location to another, his views of landscape and nature varied and changed. While McDowell certainly saw the region as a frontier, he perceived the landscape of each location in terms of its particular relation to civilization. McDowell classified different areas within the region as falling on a continuum somewhere between wilderness and encroaching civilization depending on their comparative stages of transformation. For example, he saw Prince Rupert as being near the civilized end of the continuum, Falls River as near the wilderness end, and the Skeena Valley as somewhere in the middle of this continuum. His view of where on the continuum a place fit changed over time. I next examine the differences and recurrent themes in McDowell’s representations of each of the three areas of the Skeena region: Prince Rupert; the Skeena Valley; and the Falls River back-country.

McDowell’s early characterization of the town-site of Prince Rupert was as a frontier or transitional space nearer wilderness than civilization “It probably seems strange to you to think of sewers being built where not a house stands or a soul lives. There never has been a place so built as this, and it may be a very long time before such another one is.” McDowell’s reference to this possibility signals his perception that this was one of the “last” frontiers. As a frontier, McDowell saw great opportunity for economic prosperity in the northwest. As he wrote to his father, “Of course everything is higher [in cost] than in the east but I think prosperity is more general and the chances of

53 Phillips, Mapping Men and Empire: A Geography of Adventure, 59.
54 DIM to JM, March 7, 1909.
making a living and saving are better than in the east.” By contrasting east and west, McDowell was pitting civilization against frontier. Further, it is clear from the tenor of McDowell’s letters home that he was sensitive to the imminent disappearance of this frontier, his current home. Railways brought civilization and, by definition, civilization and frontier could not coincide—civilization begins where the frontier ends. Inevitably, a frontier is by nature transitory and will at some stage be transformed into civilization. McDowell recognized his role in such transformation and, indeed, perceived of himself as an active agent in the process of “civilizing” the frontier.

When McDowell first arrived in Prince Rupert he made a point of stressing how “primitive” it was. He wrote about the “tent city,” its temporary buildings, and inadequate roads. He later described conditions in the town as a “great deal better” than they had been, but “still in a tentative state.” Although vacant lots had been sold, sewers and other such infrastructure were not in place. Transportation was still difficult and McDowell believed that until the railway was complete, Prince Rupert would not be fully profitable and civilized:

I absolutely can not see any immediate future before this place. Many people think the railroad will be running in about three years but I cannot possibly see it built before five years...I regard mines as the only thing that could make this place boom much and so far there have been no mines found where more than a dozen people can be employed within several hundred miles. Any day there might be a great find made that would change everything.57

For McDowell, the region’s natural resources could not be profitably exploited without a modern transportation network and, therefore, the region as a whole could not flourish.

55 DIM to JM, July 25, 1909.
56 DIM to JM, November 15, 1908.
As time proceeded, McDowell noted what he clearly thought of as "advancements" in Prince Rupert's civilized status. He noted the establishment of bars and moving picture houses and the arrival of the first bicycles and automobiles (at a time when there were only a few plank roads for them to drive on). McDowell also noted the departure of the first passenger train to Hazelton in 1912, two years before completion of the railway line to points further east. Yet, in spite of the improvements, McDowell still viewed Prince Rupert as a frontier town where "we have never known natural conditions." It is interesting to note that McDowell equated "natural conditions" with a "civilized" state, such as in the east, rather than an undisturbed state of nature.

Wildlife is a recurrent theme throughout McDowell's letters from the Skeena region although he never mentions wildlife or hunting in relation to the town-site of Prince Rupert. This stands in contrast to the view of local historian R.G. Large who asserts that in early Prince Rupert "it was easy to bag deer just outside the town." Promoters and boosters often exaggerated the wealth of an area by portraying it as teeming with game and fish. Wildlife represented the conceptual ideal of the North American wilderness. In the north, "Overrun by nature's 'minions,' the territory was viewed as distinct from the artificial and temporal world of fallen humans." Wild animals were seen as boundary markers between civilization and wilderness. However, in contrast to entrepreneurs who promoted Prince Rupert as a small outpost of humanity encroached upon by a burgeoning wilderness teeming with wildlife, his writings suggest

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57 DIM to JM, May 23, 1909.
58 DIM to JM, March 27, 1913.
McDowell saw Prince Rupert as a burgeoning town-site and island of civilization that had already begun and would continue to encroach on the surrounding wilderness. McDowell’s vision of the positives and negatives of progress and civilization was not the picture promoters wanted to send to potential investors and settlers.

Another recurrent theme throughout McDowell’s letters is health. When McDowell was in town for any length of time, he would complain of feeling lackluster, lazy, and lethargic. “I got last week so that I felt the same in the morning as at night. I felt half asleep all the time. I never felt particularly sleepy at night but in the morning I never seemed to wake up…. I feel best when the weather is worst. When the sun comes out now I begin to feel bad.” He complained about getting several colds. “I got feet damp and stayed in office that way and got a cold.” McDowell’s notions of health were consistent with the turn of the twentieth-century ideas that linked nature with virtue and civilization with decadence. The effects of city life, even if Prince Rupert was merely a frontier town, were seen as detrimental and a dose of nature was considered a prescription for what ailed “tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people.”

McDowell perceived the more civilized town-site of Prince Rupert in a different light than the Skeena River Valley. On his first trip as a surveyor for the GTPR up the Skeena, McDowell described the river in these words: “They say the Skeena is the most turbulent & dangerous river on the continent. I do not know if it is so but it is probably

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61 DIM to JM, February 7, 1909 & July 25, 1909.
62 DIM to JM, September 15, 1912.
pretty bad.” He asserted that the scenery improved as one moved inland from Prince Rupert. The further from civilization one got, in his view, the better off one was. He described the difficult travel conditions and the “primitive” living conditions. His letters are peppered with references to supply shortages, lack of people and amenities, and to being “out of touch with things in the world.”

McDowell’s descriptions of the dangers and beauty of the Skeena River Valley on his first trip up the river suggest McDowell had a preconceived idea that he was going to a “wilderness” area. However, he well knew that his own presence in the region only arose as a result of the construction of the GTPR which, when finished, would significantly increase the region’s proximity to progress and civilization and, in the process, tarnish its “wilderness” aspects.

Both in McDowell’s lifetime and today, wildlife helps to define wilderness. People at the turn of the twentieth century considered northwestern British Columbia as an area where wildlife ranged in plentitude. According to Colpitts, “Even by the beginning of the twentieth century, back-to-nature adherents searched for wildlife so that the regions visited could be validated as truly natural.” Promoter Frederick Talbot boasted that, “The sportsman, too, will revel here, for whether his quest is for fish, fur, or feather, he will be able to gratify his desires to the full among the dense forests and broad, swirling rivers.” Comments like Talbot’s created an expectation of abundance. However, the limited diversity and numbers of wildlife in the Skeena region were

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64 DIM to JM, May 26, 1908.
65 DIM to JM, July 28, 1912.
inconsistent with such expectations. McDowell repeatedly mentioned the lack of large
game animals in the Skeena Valley:

If there had been much game here either big or small I would have bought a rifle
or a shot-gun or both but this country is as destitute of game as probably any wild
and wooded country could be imagined to be. We occasionally see rabbits and
grouse but no more than you would see in the woods around Needham.... As I
have said often before this country is practically destitute of large game. 68

Frank Shelford, a settler in the nearby Bulkley Valley, also commented on the lack of
wildlife in the region. 69

In transitional areas wild animals were often presented as unwitting victims of
progress in undeveloped regions viewed as being transformed into modern industrialized
spaces. This sentiment fittingly describes how McDowell eventually saw the Skeena
Valley. As with most newcomers, McDowell expected that conflict and confrontation
would ensue between himself as an agent of progress and the landscapes he encountered.
Unlike the town-site of Prince Rupert where wildlife was not an expectation, in the
Skeena Valley McDowell’s initially expected abundance and those expectations were not
met.

As it had in relation to Prince Rupert, health also played an important role in
McDowell’s vision of the Skeena Valley. On his first trip up the Skeena River McDowell
beseeches his father, “Do not worry about me now. It is a good healthy life, and not trains
or wagons or anything to damage a person’s limbs. Nothing on wheels, no wheels at all
and no horses. What could happen to a person anyway?” 70 In contrast to when he was in

68 DIM to JM, January 15, 1910 & DIM to JM, Jr., November 5, 1911.
69 Shelford, From War to Wilderness.
70 DIM to JM, July 19, 1908.
town, while McDowell was working in the Skeena Valley, he often described the lifestyle as very healthy. In another letter he expresses these sentiments:

I think of the advantages of this kind of a life. As you remember I used to have many colds. Last winter I had one and the only one I have had in a year and a half. The only pain I ever feel in my stomach is when it is empty and I do not let that happen often. Those pimples on my neck that used to cause me so much annoyance have been gone for a year only the scars are left. My eyes which I used to think were getting weak give me no signs of it now. And so I think I will be all the better when I do get back to what we call civilization.  

Progress, modernity and civilization were the antithesis of wilderness, which was viewed as archaic and primeval. And even though the Skeena Valley was a region in transformation, it was still a remote region that was representative of wilderness on the brink of civilization. McDowell’s letters reflect his belief that he was living a healthy life away from the dangers and decadence of established civilization. Ironically, McDowell also saw himself as an active agent of the “progress” that would inevitably and very soon bring civilization to the area.

With increased exposure to the Skeena Valley, McDowell’s opinions of the area changed. In spite of his rapturous descriptions of the beauty of the landscape on his initial journey up the river, McDowell later described the scenery as “monotonous” and at one point went so far as to say that “Sometimes it seems as if nature is dead here.” This is clearly in contrast to his earlier descriptions of the rapturous beauty of the area.

The third area where McDowell worked is not as easily geographically defined. As a surveyor for Ritchie, Agnew and Co., the company that was to provide hydroelectric power to the new community of Prince Rupert, McDowell travelled to several

71 DIM to JM, September 5, 1908.
"remote" areas seeking potential places for a hydro-electric dam. Much of this time was spent in a mountainous area between the Skeena River and the Kitimat Channel in the area drained by the Ecstall (Hocstall) River. During this period of employment with Ritchie Agnew, McDowell also did extensive survey work in other "back country" areas such as Work Channel and Georgetown on the Tsimshian peninsula as well as for the location of the Port Edward town-site.

Unlike the Skeena Valley, McDowell viewed the "back-country" areas where he worked for Ritchie Agnew as pristine wilderness, untouched by civilization. Anticipating a trip to the Falls River, he wrote in a letter home, "We will be in the snowline among the glaciers etc. for 1 or 2 months." In another letter he wrote, "I was up at Lake Burtinel, past the glacier at the head [of the Falls River] off the border of the map." It appears McDowell wanted to convey that some of the areas where he was going were so remote they were not even on the map. Off the map, McDowell's geographical imagination was set free. In another letter he mentioned that he was headed to a location that was a two-day hike from the base camp at the mouth of the Falls River. McDowell seemed to revel in the isolation he felt the mountains, which he saw as a world closer to raw natural phenomena. The wild barrenness of the mountains and glaciers seemed chillingly inhuman, yet at the same time touched McDowell deeply. He described the mountain scenery as "glorious," and in positive terms repeatedly referred to it as a place where he was closer to the extremes of the elements and away from human contact. He described sleeping under the stars by "great fires," floating down a glacial river and at the same

72 DM to JM, April 17, 1910.
73 DM to JM, June 7, 1912.
time getting sunburned. The area was so remote that the mosquitoes did not “even
bother” to show up.\textsuperscript{36}

McDowell’s letters describing his mountain experiences are full of references to
wildlife, which suggests that he perceived the latter as an integral element of the
“wilderness” status of the back-country areas where he worked. Whereas McDowell
lamented the lack of wildlife in the Skeena Valley, in the mountains he celebrated its
abundance. In one of his first letters written from Falls River, McDowell described at
length his encounter with a black bear:

\begin{quote}
Coming down the mountain one day…I ran right into a big black bear who was
coming up. I surprised him more than the other way. He turned & ran off
sideways as fast as possible. I felt good when I realized he was going off but I did
not have time to be scared. He must have been within 10 feet of me.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{quote}

By scaring the bear and not having time to be afraid in spite of the bear’s proximity,
McDowell underscored his courage in the face of danger. McDowell also hunted for
mountain goat which he noted were, “very common here,” and talked about hunting
ptarmigan and grouse.\textsuperscript{78} In other letters, McDowell mentioned further encounters with
bear, more goat hunting, and the sighting of grizzly and wolf tracks. McDowell’s
frequent references to wildlife exemplify his perception of the back-country as being far
removed from civilization – this mountainous region “belonged” to the abundant wildlife
that lived and breathed its air rather than to man. In describing the tracks of grizzlies and

\textsuperscript{34} DIM to JM, May 18, 1913.
\textsuperscript{35} DIM to JM, July 28, 1912.
\textsuperscript{36} DIM to JM, July 28, 1912 & April 8, 1913.
\textsuperscript{77} DIM to JM, July 28, 1912.
\textsuperscript{78} DIM to JM, July 28, 1912.
wolves and his encounters with "big" bears, McDowell was highlighting the dangers of being in such a wilderness and, in the process, reinforcing his own enriched masculinity.

The American identification of virtue with nature tied the heart and character of the nation to the fate of its landscape. With the dwindling of wilderness and resources in the west, America's expansionist drive shifted to the north. According to Kollin, "Pointing to the U.S. habit of considering the north country as merely an extension of itself...Canada has always been an important element in developing an American National identity."79 Northern BC was considered unsullied, unspoiled, and largely unmarked by culture. In this way, the region functioned as what Anne McClintock calls "anachronistic space," the primitive geography that appears out of step with history, where time has stood still and progress has been arrested.80 For McDowell, the appeal of the Falls River drainage area hinged on its position as an anti-modern, non-civilized space and its apparent capacity to remain primitive and wild, resisting change and the onslaught of history. In comparison, the Skeena Valley was a region in transition from anachronistic space to 'civilized' space and the town-site of Prince Rupert was but a further step along the road to modernization and civilization.

The history of adventure, like the history of colonialism, involves gradual but unceasing change, its boundaries forever in flux. McDowell's adventure narratives capture this change. Phillips contends, "[i]f adventure stories affect 'real' people and places, it is

79 Kollin, Nature's State, 89.
80 McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest, 40-41. This discussion builds on Fabian, Time and the Other.
because they have the power to do so. The power to write is linked to the power to map, to assert certain readings of the landscape."\[^{81}\] In fact, McDowell’s experience with surveying and map-making, his extensive and intensive exposure to the area, his not inconsiderable literary skill, and his fascination with the world around him together conspired to make David Inglis McDowell a viable voice reflecting these changes, not so much over time but through geographical space.

Kollin notes “the ambivalent sentiments nineteenth-century Euro-American writers often expressed toward the land: even as they mourned the loss of natural spaces, they nevertheless continued to generate images that celebrated the nation’s course of empire.”\[^{82}\] Similar inconsistencies were reflected in McDowell’s narratives. McDowell’s role in the replacement of more intimate movement through nature with a mechanized railroad served in part to distance people from nature. Nevertheless, although McDowell saw himself as an agent of progress, this did not prevent him from criticizing its tragedies. McDowell saw the various regions where he worked (Prince Rupert, the Skeena Valley, and the back-country) in various stages of mediation with nature, each with varying impacts on the landscape. At times he celebrated his role in the colonial project; at other times he lamented it.

\[^{82}\] Kollin, *Nature’s State*, 35.
Chapter 4 — Visual Encounters

Visual images allow us to glimpse into the ethos of our society. Photographs, in particular, are physical manifestations of our values and ideals. Cultural identities are constructed within our epistemology or systems of knowledge and photographs play a role in the creation of these systems of knowledge. Historians, however, have been slow to employ photographs as a foundation for research. Traditionally, they used them only as visual images relating to the text on particular persons or historic events, typically portraits of politicians or celebrities, or pictures of disasters or events of national significance. Recently, however, they have increasingly employed photographs as a primary source, especially in relation to postcolonial discourse analysis, literary deconstruction, and material culture studies. Further, the trend for “history from the bottom up,” has meant increased use of photographs of everyday people and events as a focus of historical research.

Photographs are more than a message from their creators. They are the product of interplay between creator, subject and audience. Examining the relationships among these players and their context can offer a glimpse into the way identities are constructed and negotiated to help better understand the complex meanings hidden within them. Careful examination of photographs can often reveal or at least give clues to the power

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relationships among the creator, subject and audience. In more general terms, visual images offer glimpses into the way identities are constructed and negotiated.

The snapshot era of photography commenced with the introduction of the portable brownie camera in 1900. Photography suddenly became cheaper, simpler, and more immediately rewarding. David McDowell fell under the spell of the brownie camera. He took hundreds of photographs as visual souvenirs of his travels. He also purchased photographs taken by professionals—sometimes to fill in gaps, and sometimes for comparison with his own photographs. The rise in popularity of amateur photography resulted in an increasing popularity of photograph albums. Like millions of other amateur photographers, McDowell compiled albums as a way of organizing his photographs. This chapter analyzes a number of McDowell’s photographs individually and in the context of their placement within the albums he created.

Once the context of a photograph changes, its meaning changes. For example, the removal of an individual photograph from an album of related photographs or of an album from its family context will impact the meaning assigned to it by “new” viewers unfamiliar with its earlier context, and give these objects a variety of new meanings and interpretations.3

Tension is created by the common tendency to confuse the photographic image with its subject matter. For viewers, at least, when an object is photographed and seemingly frozen in time, it is effectively displaced by its photographic representation. Thereafter, the photograph has a metonymic relationship with its subject matter – the
viewer’s perception of the photograph becomes the viewer’s perception of its subject matter. Through this process, the photograph becomes more than a mere image of an external subject.³

In a somewhat similar manner, in spite of depicting specific subject matter, viewers often view photographs as representations of intellectual concepts such as progress or decay. For example, while on display at the Museum of Northern British Columbia, the McDowell photographic collection served as a symbol not only of progress, development and transport, but also of the “rugged individualism” that serves as a metaphor for nation-building in the Canadian and American context.

Another problematic aspect of photographic interpretation is the role photographs play in creating notions of authority. The interpreter’s voice infuses photographs with authority. No matter how strong the illusion to the contrary, the viewer is never in a relation of direct, unmediated contact with the subject of the photograph or the “real stuff” of the past. However, when photographs are presented in a publication, exhibition, or even a family album, they are infused with authority and, in the process, are commonly understood to be representations of “reality.”⁴

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³ Susan M. Pearce, Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 22.
I do not subscribe to the essentialized argument that photographs have no intrinsic meaning. On the other hand, I think that some of the nuanced arguments of postmodern theory focus too strongly on the political context of photography at the expense of other, possibly more valuable, contexts. I agree that photographs relate to power. However, charting the territory between an approach that asserts that power is intrinsic to the photograph, and one that proposes photographs have no meaning outside of their context, can assist in uncovering historical insights that might otherwise remain hidden.

How does one go about analyzing a specific collection of photographs such as the McDowell collection? Because the photographs were produced during the same period as McDowell’s extensive collection of letters to his family, it is appropriate to consider whether the letters reveal information that might be useful in analyzing the photographs. In his letters, McDowell occasionally mentioned enclosing his and others’ photographs along with postcards. However, he rarely described the photographs in any detail or named the people in them. From time to time, however, he referred to captions on the back side of photographs that have since been glued into his albums; the latter are therefore unavailable for review. However, many short captions are included in the albums themselves and at least some of the photographs are glued into the albums along only one edge, thereby making back side captions available for review. In his letters, McDowell sometimes identified family members and friends who might be interested in

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seeing particular photographs. As well, McDowell occasionally asked his father to return photographs so that he could keep them with his collection.

Today, all of the known McDowell photographs are in albums and, as a result, they can bring us closer to the intentions of the compiler. McDowell’s original manner of presentation—presumably including pointing, anecdotes, filling in missing information—however, died with him. What is left today are the albums themselves, their framework and layout. Of course, McDowell’s letters do help fill in some of the blanks; but any additional insights must be inferred.

In general terms, an album is a personal reflection of the predilections and experiences of its compiler(s), a story made up of photographs. As Peter Geller asserts, the themes revealed in photograph albums can help us identify “patterns of meaning.” Whether an album is arranged chronologically or thematically, the links between pictures demand attention. Historian Martha Langford remarks that:

A close reading of a photograph is like a stone dropped in a pond, with its ever expanding inclusions, occlusions, and illusions. A book of photographs layers surface upon surface of real and virtual intersections; clusters and breaks are spaces of association whose meaning must be taken into account.  

I will apply formal and contextual analysis to the McDowell photograph albums, reading them as cultural texts. Like his letters, McDowell’s photographs reveal the shaping of events and experiences and how they are perceived. Like letters, photographs can be read and thereby act as a tool for the analysis of colonial discourses.

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7 Geller, "Family Memory," 3.
8 Langford, Suspended Conversations, 4.
Four albums containing David Inglis McDowell's photographs of the Skeena region survive. Two have bound pages that, with certainty, have not been rearranged since the album was compiled. One of these focuses on McDowell's travel and work experiences in the Skeena region. I shall refer to this as McDowell Photograph Album #1. In a reference that is almost certainly directed at this album, McDowell in 1910 commented to his father that, "When I was in Rupert I got an album for my photos and have been putting them in a few at a time." All of the photographs in the album pre-date 1911. Because of the unchanged order of the pages, this album arguably can reveal more about McDowell's perspective as the photographer and compiler. Album #1 can comfortably be characterized as a combination of travelogue and memoir because it covers McDowell's work experiences as well as his travel experiences. I will analyze Album #1 in depth. Later, I will look at some of the specific photographs in this and the other albums.

According to Brian Coe and Paul Gates, the typical themes of snapshot albums are people, leisure, the seaside, townscapes, work, interiors, and events. The possible categories seem endless. For example, they might include urban, rural and wilderness landscapes, family, friends, children, adults, seniors, industry, countries, cultures, travel, and so forth. Martha Langford suggests that such categories are limiting because they are subjective and frequently overlap and can leave one swimming in a sea of statistics.  

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9 DIM to JM, October 30, 1910.
11 Langford, *Suspended Conversations*, 129.
In spite of Langford’s assertions concerning the limitations of categorizing photographs, several themes can be identified and usefully discussed in relation to McDowell Album #1. Upon close analysis of this album, it is clear that McDowell did, in fact, place the included photographs carefully so as to focus the viewer’s attention on numerous parallels, contrasts, and themes. Some of the themes intended by McDowell are suggested by his groupings of different photographs. For example, the first page in the album contains three post cards of totem poles and Aboriginal carvings in a village setting (figure 2). McDowell’s caption states, “In Gitwangah – Skeena River,” Gitwangah (Kitwanga) is a Gitksan village situated on the Skeena between Kitselas and Hazelton; it was near McDowell’s Grand Truck Pacific (GTPR) residence. The second page features three of McDowell’s own photographs (figure 3): two of unnamed Aboriginal workers navigating the river in a canoe and another of two Aboriginal men standing outside a tent. The caption on page 2 reads “Indians employed by the G.T.P.R.” Page 3 contains four of McDowell’s photographs of the village of Gitwangah (figure 4): one of the village from a distance, one of two buildings and a totem pole, another of several totem poles situated along the river bank, and one of a riverboat sitting near the shore. The caption on page three reads simply “Gitwangah.” It appears reasonable to categorize the theme of these photographs as relating to Aboriginal people and culture on the Skeena River. Even though the photos of the workers could be categorized under the theme of work, and the riverboat could fall under transportation, the fact that these particular photographs are grouped together suggests that McDowell’s intention was to draw attention to their Aboriginal subject matter.
Page 4 focuses on scenes of the Skeena and Bulkley rivers. With the exception of the first photograph, that of the “Indian Bridge” spanning the Bulkley River at Hagwilget Canyon, the remaining three photographs depict natural scenery with no man-made elements (figure 5). The fact that the photographs immediately preceding the one of the bridge relate to Aboriginal people and culture, and the ones immediately following depict scenery supposedly unaffected by man, suggests that McDowell intended the photograph of the bridge as a segue from a theme pertaining to Aboriginal people and culture to one pertaining to natural scenery.
The facing page (page 5) is similar in organization. While the first photograph depicts a sternwheeler riverboat, the remaining three photographs depict scenes of the "Upper Skeena River" with no man-made elements (figure 6). The photograph of the riverboat is placed in the same position on the page as the photograph of the Indian Bridge on the facing page, possibly suggesting a contrast between human technology and natural scenery, respectively, in relation to Aboriginal culture and Euro-Canadian culture.
The following two facing pages (6 and 7) relate to McDowell’s work for the GTPR. Page six contains three photos of “Residency 18 G.T.P.R. Mile 147,” where McDowell lived while working as a surveyor. These photographs show McDowell and his co-workers variously sitting and standing near buildings in the camp. Page seven contains three photographs collectively captioned “Location Party & Work.” The first shows a figure with a survey stick standing precariously on a very steep bank with the river below; the second, the head and shoulders of a man standing in a clearing; the third, a canoe filled with a survey party. The photographs included on pages six and seven clearly show different aspects of McDowell’s life while working for the GTPR.

It is difficult to decipher a theme for page 8. It features a photo of the town site of Kitselas, a photo of Kitselas Canyon, a scenic shot of the Seven Sisters mountain range, and a photo of a pack-train in Hazelton. Perhaps these photos were meant to contrast the town sites with surrounding natural scenes. Or perhaps they were meant to illustrate to
his eastern relatives that BC town sites were remote and “wild,” as suggested by the pack-train and the ungroomed streets.

On page 9, in addition to a single scenic photo of the Skeena Valley, McDowell presents three pictures of the same GTPR camp (presumably, residency 18) in winter, summer, and fall (figure 7). The winter photo is obviously the earliest in the series because there is no railway or evidence of brush clearing. The summer photo shows a temporary rail line and more brush clearing. The last picture is the fall scene depicting the finished rail. Clearly, this series was intended to record the progress of the railway construction. Further, the three photos of this project of modernity contrast with the photo of “pristine wilderness.”

![Progress of Railway Construction at Work Camp no. 18 (page 9)](image)

Pages 10 to 25 juxtapose shots of work, people, camp life, and wilderness—all in relation to McDowell’s work for the GTPR. These appear to be somewhat more loosely organized than the previous ones. For example, photographs of the construction of two
tunnels (mile 135 and mile 147) appear several pages apart and shots of camp life are dispersed throughout. Within this series, are thirteen photographs of people, eight of which have them in front of log structures, and two of which present them bathing and skinny dipping in the river. One shows men at work on a tunnel, while another depicts an Aboriginal family in a canoe. Still another portrays a prospector with a large pack on his back and pick in his hand. Generally, the photographs illustrate the rough living and working conditions of McDowell and his co-workers. The two shots of the “Interior of Cabin Residency No. 18” (figure 8) reinforce this focus.

Figure 9 “Interior of Cabin at Residency no. 18” (page 24)

Pages 26 to 31 of the album feature photographs relating to McDowell’s 1907 work on the Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railway (SPSR) along the Snake River in Washington State. The shots of the SPSR all show a severe, treeless landscape, which stand in contrast to the immediately preceding GTPR shots with mountains and abundant greenery. Many of the SPS photos feature horses that were employed in the construction
of the railway, whereas the GTPR shots show no horses whatsoever. The SPSR buildings are primarily tarpaper shacks made with finished lumber, whereas all of the GTPR buildings are log structures. In addition to photographs highlighting such contrasts, some of the pictures feature similarities between the GTPR and SPSR projects. For example, both series feature canoes being poled along a river; both show riverboats; both feature long shots of the river; both show various stages of railway construction; both show a derailed train; and both show pictures of the residency buildings and people (figures 9 & 10).13

Figure 10 Canoes on the Snake and Skeena Rivers (pages 18 & 26)

12 Horses were not used on the Skeena portion of the construction of the GTPR as the country was too rough and mountainous to easily maneuver horses. From Hazelton east, horses were used extensively.
13 In the album, these photographs do not appear next to each other or even on the same page, as depicted above, but in theme related sections of the SPSR and GTPR and since the two sections are together they are clearly intended as a comparison of the two regions.
A group of photos on pages 31 to 37 take the viewer backwards in time from 1911 with shots of McDowell and his uncle’s family in their Sunday finest near Bellingham, Washington, to scenes of Prince Rupert in 1910, then 1909, and, finally 1908, the year of his first arrival in the area. McDowell may have included these shots to show some likeness between 1910 Prince Rupert and 1911 Washington State, and to contrast those comparatively “civilized” areas with the “primitive” tent city from which Prince Rupert had so recently developed. Alternatively, as the photographs of McDowell with his uncle’s family come at the end of six pages of photographs relating to his work on the SPS, McDowell might have intended the family photos to simply conclude a section of the album focused on Washington State.

On pages 38 to 45, McDowell brings his viewers forward in time with a 1911 photograph of the first passenger train to leave Prince Rupert. He then shifts back again to 1908 with a photograph of Prince Rupert’s first locomotive, which arrived via water for use in railway construction. Pages 39 and 40 continue the railway construction theme, showing various photos of railway construction in and around Prince Rupert in 1908-09. Page 41 features a photo of the inaugural sailing of the *Rupert City* in 1909. Below it on
the same page is a shot of Port Simpson, also in 1909, with several dugout canoes on the shore and one of the remaining bastions of the old HBC fort. Pages 42 and 43 present “Metlakatla Village & Children” on facing pages. Metlakatla was the village chosen by Anglican missionary William Duncan in 1862 as the site for a utopian community for his Aboriginal Christian converts.14 Page 44 shows sewer and road construction in a 1909 landscape completely devoid of buildings, the site of the future city of Prince Rupert. On page 45, McDowell takes the viewer even further back in time with various photos of the tent city at Prince Rupert in May 1908.

It is difficult to determine any exact meanings from this section of the album. Nevertheless, since McDowell several times began with the present and worked his way back in time, it appears he was attempting to contrast present “civilization” with much rougher conditions only shortly before—life in tents without sewers and in close proximity to old forts and Aboriginal mission villages.

The final three pages in the album move viewers in a very different direction. On page 46 McDowell placed three shots captioned “Harbour & Street in Old Quebec 1906” (figure 11). The first is a vertically-oriented photo of a street in the old part of Quebec City. Next to it are two horizontal shots, one of a ship in the harbour and another of Quebec City from the water. Unfortunately page 47 has suffered some damage, and two of the photographs are partially missing. Despite this, it is still possible to see that the intention was to mirror the preceding facing page depicting Quebec City. Even the caption, “Harbour & Main Street Prince Rupert 1908,” for example, is strikingly similar

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14 Although Duncan moved many of his converts to New Metlakatla Alaska in 1887, the original village of Metlakatla remained populated by Tsimshian people and today is a thriving community.
to the one on the facing page (figure 12). Similarly, the single vertical and two horizontal photographs on each facing page are placed so as to make the arrangement of the two facing pages exact mirror images, one of the other. Further, the two horizontal harbour shots of Quebec City are balanced by two horizontal shots of Prince Rupert Harbour. Even the subject matter of these photographs shows evidence of an intentional balance—each harbour having a photograph of a ship in its waters and a second photograph depicting the nearby city from the water. The vertically-oriented photos on each of the two pages are similarly balanced—each depicts a street scene in the city being the subject matter of the page.

The two pages highlight contrasts. Whereas the ship shown on the Quebec City page appears to be a modern military ship, the ship on the Prince Rupert page is an old-fashioned ship with sail rigging. Whereas the buildings in the street scene on the Quebec City page are all permanent structures of brick and stone, the buildings in the Prince Rupert street scene include several temporary structures of wood and canvas. And even Prince Rupert’s more permanent structures are made of wood. Whereas the harbour shot of Quebec City shows a well-established, walled city, the harbour shot of Prince Rupert depicts a freshly-cleared, rugged landscape with only a few, unimpressive structures. These two pages clearly contrast “civilized” images with “frontier” images. In addition, they are an interesting juxtaposition of old and new, with Prince Rupert representing the new and Quebec the old.
Although photographs on the last page of the album are unidentified, they appear to have been taken by McDowell in Ireland and Scotland on his overseas trip in 1905. They continue the themes of comparison, contrast and development seen in the preceding
two pages, showing sites in Ireland or Scotland with an even more established civilized history than old Quebec City and the "new" city of Prince Rupert in 1911.

An analysis of McDowell’s photographs reveals much about his relationship with the people and landscapes he encountered in the Skeena region. For example, he rarely named his subjects. Even when he did, he rarely provided any further identification or other information about them. As discussed in chapter 2, McDowell’s letters allow us to glean his relationship to some people though he rarely referred to his friends and companions by name. Despite this, both McDowell’s photographs of human subjects and his references to people in his letters confirm his interest in the people around him. There are 139 photographs of individuals and small groups of people in two of the four albums. Of the 139 people, only 36 are named and sixteen of them are family members.

Although he seldom identified the people in his photographs by name, McDowell usually placed them in some kind of context. Examples of McDowell’s captions to photographs include, “Mountain Climbers,” “a Winter Night’s Gathering Rupert 1908-09,” and “The Prospector.” Uncharacteristically, in a very few instances he not only provided a context but also named the photographed person. For example, he captioned one photograph as “Joe, The Mail Carrier,” and another, “Brennan With a 120lb Pack.”

McDowell often did not caption photographs of his own family members. The assumption is that family and friends viewing the album would know the individuals. It also suggests that he was not thinking beyond his own generation.

Overall, the above pattern suggests that what people were doing and how they fit into McDowell’s account of adventure were of more interest to him than the details of their personal identity. Those comparatively few photographic subjects who were not
family but whom McDowell named, were generally met outside his travel adventures.
Unlike the unnamed persons who were of interest primarily because of their role in
frontier adventures, such people were important because of who they were. Hence,
McDowell identified them by name.

Further insights can also be gained from studying McDowell’s photographs. As
noted earlier, McDowell viewed the Skeena regions according to three separate areas:
Prince Rupert, the Skeena Valley, and the Falls River/Back-country. His photographs
reflected his attitudes toward these areas. For example, only four of the photos of the
Prince Rupert area represent natural scenery. This stands in contrast to the photographs of
the Skeena Valley, twenty of which natural landscape scenery. McDowell included sixty-
two photographs of the Falls River area that represent natural scenery.

McDowell’s photographs of Aboriginal peoples and cultures are similarly
revealing of his attitude. Two albums feature six such photos taken in the Prince Rupert
area, twelve in the Skeena Valley, and none in the Falls River/Back-country. The Prince
Rupert photographs include forty-seven pictures of the town site and buildings. The
Skeena Valley photographs include seven pictures of town sites and villages, and the
Falls River series includes one photograph of a small farm at the base of an unidentified
waterfall (Brown’s Mill?). Technology and industry are quite prominently featured in
photographs from all three regions, with about sixty photos of building, construction, and
technology in the Prince Rupert area, thirty-two in the Skeena Valley, and twenty-two in
the Falls River/Back-country (the dam site and triangulation stations).

McDowell’s heavy emphasis on photographs of scenery in the Fall River/Back-
country area suggests that he wanted to emphasize its wilderness character. The subject
matter of many of these photographs features glaciers and snowy peaks. Such photographs reinforce McDowell’s view of the area as a pristine wilderness, a perspective clearly substantiated in his letters. In one of his letters, for example, McDowell mentioned that his boss (Agnew) came to the mountains in the area with his sister and her friend for a weekend of recreation.

Mr. Agnew wanted to get an idea of the country for himself so I told him to come along...so when he came he brought his sister & another lady from Hamilton, his sister is from Montreal...One night we were away above the timber line and put up one tent for the ladies by splicing alpine stocks, we boys slept under the stars...Mr. Agnew & I both shot at a goat and got it but do not know who killed it. I did not want it, but as it was a good one he was going to take it.\(^{15}\)

This passage reveals more about McDowell’s views of masculinity than of his attitude toward women. For example, he inferred that they took an easy route and pointed out that the women had it easy in the tent while the men slept under the stars in the rain. The photographs of the outing (figure 13) show the men with heavy packs and the women with none. They also show men engaged in manly pursuits such as hunting while the women do the cooking. The men are pictured as ruggedly equipped for rough living, whereas the women are pictured in feminine dresses and aprons that are particularly ill-suited to the masculine mountainous domain in which they are temporarily located. Again, we see a theme of adventure in masculine space.

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\(^{15}\) DIM to JM, August 25, 1912.
Figure 14 "Mountain Climbers on the Divide Between the Falls River and the Hocstall, Aug. 1912"

The fact that the Skeena Valley had fewer photographs of natural landscapes than the back-country series, and Prince Rupert the fewest of all, again suggests a scale of civilization. In spite of Langford's assertion that statistical analysis causes confusion, this rough statistical analysis supports my earlier assertion that McDowell viewed the three areas (Prince Rupert, Skeena Valley, Falls River/Back-country) in relation to their proximity to "civilization" and progress.

Although McDowell's intentions underlying his albums cannot be determined with certainty, the photographs and patterns they reveal clearly do tell a story. Just as a person's character cannot be defined apart from his/her actions, the photographs in McDowell's albums cannot be dissociated from the context of his adventures and his clearly very considered placement of the photos into albums. Analyzing the photographs
that McDowell chose for his albums and the way he arranged them reveals much about how he saw the world and his role in it. As Langford asserts, “snapshots [measure] social, ideological, and psychological indicators.” In this context, it is clear that McDowell saw himself as an agent of progress. In broader terms, McDowell’s comparisons and contrasts of old and new, primitive and modern, frontier and civilization, suggest that he saw the world in the binary, black and white terms of nineteenth/early twentieth-century enlightened reason. Through his photographs and albums, McDowell illustrated his view that “wilderness” was giving way to systems of modern transportation and civilization. In the process, he constructed his own adventure story within the context of a modernist cultural space in which imperial geographies and imperial masculinities were conceived.

16 Langford, Suspended Conversations, 131.
Conclusion

Anthropologist George Hamell writes that “Culture, or rather societies, never confront the unknown, but confront an unknown made known by their preconceptions of such encounters.” Indeed, David Inglis McDowell’s encounters and representations of places and people in early twentieth-century northwestern British Columbia were in part shaped by his expectations and outlook. When McDowell arrived in Prince Rupert in 1908, he found himself in an unfamiliar colonial frontier coloured by complex ideologies and attitudes. What he saw and experienced often failed to correspond with his expectations, and his views and understanding of the world were turned upside down. Through his letters and photographs, we can see how McDowell grappled with a world hitherto unknown to him and how he found it difficult to abandon earlier beliefs and preconceptions even in the face of contradictions and inconsistencies.

McDowell’s perspectives as reflected in his letters and photographs are helpful in exploring how discourse shapes experience and how awareness of this process adds depth to our analysis of history. Links between discourse analysis and material experience uncover the complexity and mutability of the historical process. McDowell’s letters and photographs reveal numerous instances of concord and discord between dominant discourses and lived experience, both of which are subject to challenge from competing discourses, values, and experiences. The contradictions and tensions uncovered by

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analysis open up different interpretive possibilities for unpacking the contestable and changeable nature of history within contradictory spaces of encounter.

The analysis of colonialist attitudes in early twentieth-century British Columbia mandates consideration of the complex relationship between race, gender and place. Using the relationship between gender and race as a unit of analysis, Adele Perry argues that the imperial discourses of the colonial elite were discordant with social practice in mid-nineteenth-century colonial British Columbia. Similarly, by examining the archive generated by McDowell over a short time frame using a micro-analytical approach, we are able to see the historical process at work in his racialized and gendered responses to unfamiliar people and places. For example, when McDowell first encountered Aboriginal people along the Skeena River, he disparagingly referred to them as “bucks” and “squaws” and regarded them as lazy. However, after increased contact with Aboriginal workers, McDowell proclaimed his love for and common humanity with Aboriginal people. At the same time, McDowell hung on to some of his negative opinions concerning Aboriginal people.

McDowell’s views of “white people” are equally worthy of attention. Perry contends that in British Columbia, “White people, like people of colour, were racialized, and the historical process by which whiteness was constituted can and must be excavated.” In his early letters from the region, McDowell almost always identified the origins of the people he wrote about, even if he did not name them. Most of the people he wrote about were of northwestern European heritage, and he often stereotyped people according to their heritage, particularly the English, whom he portrayed as arrogant and
inept. However, by 1912 McDowell rarely mentioned the nationalities of the people he described in his letters. Though rarely referring to them by name as we saw in chapters two and four, he increasingly defined people by their actions rather than origins. To the extent that McDowell’s perspective was reflective of his peers, it appears that white people on the “frontier” in northwestern British Columbia were becoming increasingly tolerant toward the cultural “other.” For example, McDowell’s descriptions of eating with Aboriginal workers and other “laborers” when in camp appear to reflect a breakdown in racial and class distinctions. This breakdown of barriers is consistent with Cole Harris’ observations that neither the fixed, racialized social class structure of England nor the formal class structure of eastern Canada were practical in the rough and tumble towns and labour camps on the edge of empire. Here, people were thrown together by circumstance and necessarily relied on each other, making social barriers impractical and out of place. From the McDowell archive as well as other sources, we see the development in “frontier” spaces of a counter-discourse of shared experience and tolerance that contrasts with the dominant bourgeois discourses of rigid class and racial distinctions in more settled areas of British Columbia.

McDowell’s references to gender also provide instructive material for critical investigation. While in the Skeena region, McDowell often spoke of his “adventures and experiences” and in the process situated himself as a heroic figure whose adventures in adverse conditions endowed him with the masculine qualities attributed to pioneers who faced adversity, tamed the wilderness, and forged civilizations. McDowell often defined

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2 Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*.
3 Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 197.
4 Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia*, xix.
himself in masculine terms and clearly thought one had to become “manly” and “rough” in order to endure the harsh conditions of the frontier. As well, McDowell rarely mentioned women, even when he would have clearly encountered them, and this exclusion appears to have consciously or unconsciously been a means of reinforcing his status as an adventurer, a heroic figure who was travelling in a perilous and harsh landscape unsuitable for the fairer sex.

McDowell’s encounters with geography and space were equally as important as cultural encounters in the construction of his identity. As with people, he viewed space in gendered, racialized terms. McDowell’s usual exclusion of women from his letters sent home from the frontier, along with his characterization of the region in masculine terms, show that he saw space as gendered. Similarly, the absence of Aboriginal people in McDowell’s letters and photographs from the back-country and Prince Rupert, as well as his descriptions of them when writing from the Skeena Valley, illustrate that McDowell also saw space in racial terms. Opening up the fissures along the lines of race, gender and space, reveals the construction of identities during a period of major change in the social landscape. McDowell’s letters and photographs contain numerous inconsistencies and ambivalences: they lament his role in the destruction of Aboriginal culture; convey confusion about people of different cultural and class backgrounds; and reveal conflicting views of masculinity and gender. Such inconsistencies and ambivalences both reinforced and undermined the colonial ideological lens through which McDowell first saw the region.

Nevertheless, and as indicated in such comments as “there is nothing in P. Rupert yet and can not be much except ‘hot air’ until the railroad is thru,” and “as sure as the
railroad comes the town & the city come,” McDowell also saw himself as part of an unstoppable project of civilization that was opening up a vast expanse of harsh, unforgiving territory to modern ways. In this context, McDowell viewed the three areas of the Skeena region where he worked as representing various stages of civilization. The ends of the scale were marked by the back-country at the lower, wilderness end with Prince Rupert near the more civilized end. The Skeena Valley occupied a niche somewhere in between these two. This scale was by no means static, as the influx of settlers tended to move into areas closer to the civilized end of the scale.

The organization of McDowell’s photograph album #1 illustrates this sliding-scale view. He began the album with representations of abandoned ancient Aboriginal villages signifying the unspoiled, wild nature of a pre-contact Aboriginal world. He maintained this theme with his photographs of wilderness scenery along the Skeena River. Ensuing photographs showed the encroachment of civilization, first with riverboats and then the railroad, which symbolized industrial modernity. Subsequent photographs depicted the small towns of Kitselas and Hazelton along the Skeena River. From there, photographs show the newly-constructed railway leading to Prince Rupert, at first an empty townsite devoid of trees or other signs of life, and later a small but bustling city with hotels and automobiles. At the end of the album, McDowell provided a striking contrast between the new, burgeoning civilization of Prince Rupert and the older, more established civilization of Quebec City. He took his viewers to Europe in the final page, a place he obviously viewed as the pinnacle of western civilization.

5 DIM to JM, April 18, 11908 & July 3, 1910.
As John Tosh notes, “The concept of progress is fundamental to modernity, because for two hundred years it was the defining myth of the West, a source of cultural reassurance and of outright superiority in its dealings with [others].” If one accepts Tosh’s thesis, McDowell viewed in a positive light his role in helping to usher northwestern British Columbia into the modern world. He identified instances of modernization and civilization as superior to what had existed in the region before his arrival. In spite of his reservations concerning the destruction of Aboriginal cultures and the “wilderness” in which they had traditionally existed, McDowell saw himself as part of a modernizing imperial project critical to the betterment of mankind.

This imperial myth of the west did not decline after McDowell’s tenure in northwestern British Columbia; and it still pervades present-day discourses espoused by many cultural and social institutions in the province. Museums and school curricula abound with stories of “pioneers” blazing the trails of civilization and industry through the wild and empty land that was “discovered” by white men. Our critical reading of sources such as the McDowell archive reveals the contestable, mutable nature of imperial discourses and how they operated “on the ground.” We can see how myths and identities were constructed and reinforced. As historian Mary Ellen Kelm observes, colonialism was a personal process.\(^6\) Critical examination of gendered and racialized encounters between different people and between people and landscapes highlights the varied ways in which individuals responded to complex and multifaceted discourses encountered in northwestern British Columbia in the early twentieth century. Through a microcosmic

approach we can see the process of mythmaking and recognize myths that persist into our present-day society. Through our increased understanding of the past, we gain a better understanding of the present, including the gendered and racialized attitudes that permeate our societies. The story told by Skeena region settlers was one of conquering the wilderness and promoting progress—a frontier myth that still endures.

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