

We Are Not Stones: Land, Indigenous Agency, and Colonialism in Williams Lake BC, 1821-1881

Introduction

Project Goals

This research project is an exploration of the complex realities of colonialism at Williams Lake and an analysis of the area's transformation from an Indigenous to a settler-controlled space. It focuses on the T'exelceme of the Secwepemc Nation and their interactions with various colonial systems and actors. Through a microhistorical approach applying larger themes in British Columbia history to a local context, I hope not only to enhance our understanding of our collective past in BC but also expand the scholarship relating to my home community's local history.

Analytical Framework

My analysis is partly built around the idea that colonialism exists in different forms or modes. The fur trade era was defined by imperial and commercial network-building, whereas settler colonialism was brought about through the Cariboo Gold Rush which served as a significant transition period. Both modes formed a continuous process of Europeanization, but their differences are important. It also explores the concept of enframement, the idea that various colonial systems were successively and incrementally imposed on Indigenous peoples, making resistance much more difficult.



Above: Secwepemc Chiefs gathered at New Westminster, May 1866-70
 Frederick Dally photo, BC Archives, C-09263

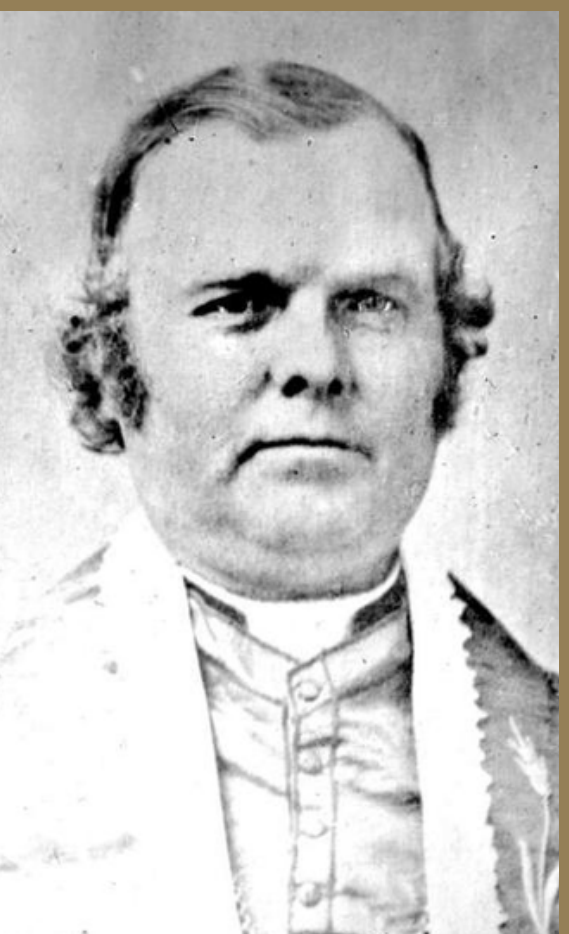
Catholicism

First Encounter with Missionaries

Father Modeste Demers, the first missionary to visit Williams Lake, came to the T'exelceme village of Pellekehiki in January 1843. He felt his efforts were successful, and indeed they lay the groundwork for a legacy of close ties between Chief William and later missionaries.

Missionaries as Intermediaries

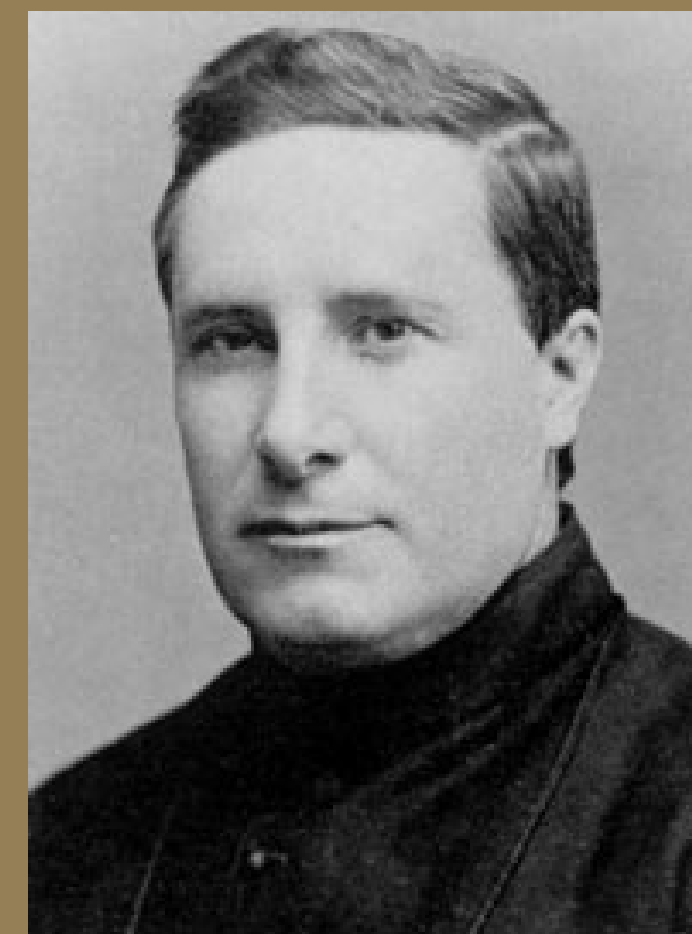
Catholic missionaries in the 1860s and 70s sought to become intermediaries between Indigenous people and colonial society. Chiefs in particular sought to use this to their advantage and regain the authority lost as a result of the Gold Rush and the smallpox epidemic. While missionaries generally validated Indigenous concerns and relayed them to the government, like Fr. McGuckin they dissuaded Indigenous people from taking actions that they feared would have violent consequences, causing many to feel they were no longer effective advocates.



Father Modeste Demers, c. 1850
 BC Archives, A-01184

"The Indians in this sector are becoming very discontented and using threatening language on account of the delay in settling their reserves. I have used all my endeavours to keep them quiet up to the present, but it is evident that they will not heed me much longer in this matter."

-James McGuckin, April 1878



Father James McGuckin, c. 1870
 Oblates of Mary Immaculate Archives
<https://www.omiworld.org/lemma/mcguckin-james/>

Main Secondary Sources

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Indigenous Agency

The Chief William Letters

In November 1879, Chief William (pictured above, standing back right) wrote to the Victoria Daily Colonist in an attempt to elicit sympathy from the settler population and force the government to act. Six months later he wrote again, this time with far more explicit threats of violence. The letters display William's understanding of colonial systems, his belief in Christianity, his knowledge of history and politics, and his longstanding struggle to regain some of his people's stolen land. The second letter had the desired effect, ultimately forcing Superintendent of Indian Affairs I.W. Powell and others to act out of fear of an Indigenous uprising in the interior. William himself had been under pressure from other Indigenous leaders to be more forceful in his resistance efforts, testing his close ties to the missionaries.

"Land, land, a little of our own land, that is all we ask from her Majesty. If we had the deer and the salmon we could live by hunting and fishing. We have nothing now and here comes the cold and the snow. Maybe the white man thinks we can live on snow. We can make fires to make people warm – that is what we can do. Wood will burn. We are not stones."

-Chief William, November 1879

"The Indians are now reduced to this condition: - THEY MUST ROB OR STARVE. Which will they do? I need not answer. An Indian is a man; and he has eyes. If you stab him he will bleed; if you poison him he will die. If you wrong him shall he not seek revenge? If an Indian wrongs a white man what is his humility? Revenge. If want compels us to execute the villainy they teach they may discover when it is TOO LATE that an Indian can imitate the lightning and strike in a thousand places at the same time."

-Chief William, May 1880

The Fur Trade

Economic Partnership

The T'exelceme overwhelmingly took advantage of the trade opportunities created by the construction of the HBC Fort Alexandria in 1821. Both Gwesemiyast (the first Chief William after whom Williams Lake is named) and his father Kulemnitse (Columneetza) became prominent and trusted trade partners with the HBC, playing the system to their benefit.

Consequences

Through their contact with Europeans, the T'exelceme selectively adopted certain methods of agriculture, construction, social organization, and culture. There were also destructive repercussions. Competition over access to furs caused a shift towards a clan-oriented society as formerly communal hunting, fishing, and trapping grounds were claimed by prominent families. Indigenous people also began to participate in early forms of wage labour, a practice that would increase with the arrival of the gold rush.

Smallpox

The first cases of smallpox at Williams Lake were recorded in 1855, but the 1862-63 epidemic would prove far more destructive, turning Secwepemc social order on its head. Over half the T'exelceme population died, including Gwesemiyast who had encouraged fellow leaders to welcome Europeans into Indigenous territory. His son William became head chief in the midst of unprecedented turmoil.

Settler Colonialism

The Cariboo Gold Rush

Settler colonialism was imposed upon the T'exelceme from the outset of the Cariboo Gold Rush, which began in 1859. It was less the miners themselves and more those settlers who sought to profit through stopping houses, agricultural products, and ferry and bridge tolls. One such settler was Thomas Davidson, who illegally pre-empted the village of Pellekehiki in 1860. Soon, the gold rush economy and settler colonialism eclipsed the fur trade economy and its commercial network-building.

Why No Reserve?

In May 1861, the Gold Commissioner for the Alexandria District Philip H. Nind requested a surveyor to lay out a reserve at Williams Lake. Governor James Douglas replied that Nind was to lay out the reserve himself however the T'exelceme wished, but Nind never did, unwilling to impede the progress of settlement. He soon went on medical leave, and his replacements Peter O'Reilly and Thomas Elwyn became like Nind increasingly preoccupied with settler interests. When Douglas left office in 1864 and Joseph Trutch gained control over land policy, he brought it in line with the dominant settler view that land was wasted on Indigenous people. A reserve would not be established at Williams lake until 1881 in the first case of Government purchase of private property for reserve land.

"I request to be instructed on the subject of making a reserve for Indians at Williams Lake. The greatest portions of the available farming land has been preempted and purchased, and it is probable that before the summer is over it will all be taken up."

-Philip Nind, May 1861

(Left to Right) Peter O'Reilly, Henry Maynard Ball, and Thomas Elwyn, c. 1860
 BC Archives, A-01103

