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

March 10, 2024

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’exelcemc of the Secwépemc 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 enrich 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 enfranment, the idea that various colonial systems were successively and incrementally imposed on Indigenous peoples, making resistance much more difficult.

Introduction

First Encounter with Missionaries
Father Modeste Demers, the first missionary to visit Williams Lake, came to the T’exelcemc village of Pellekehiki in January 1843. He felt his efforts were successful, and indeed they laid 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.

Catholicism

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

“Why No Reserve?”
In May 1880, Chief William wrote to the Victoria Daily Colonist requesting a surveyor to lay out a reserve for Indians at Williams Lake. Governor James Douglas replied that Nind was to lay out the reserve himself however the T’exelcemc 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 less 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.

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Economic Partnership

The Cariboo Gold Rush
Settler colonialism was imposed upon the T’exelcemc 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.

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“The Fur Trade

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“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 1879

Middle Secondary Sources


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