

## Document Analysis

Tracy Bergman

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Tracy Penny Light

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The Chinese were among the many hopeful from all over the world who traversed the mighty Fraser River to Barkerville, British Columbia in search of gold. The stakes were high at this time considering the influx of gold seekers from around the world, as was racial tension. This assertion is based on an excerpt from the Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, which was penned by Sir Matthew Begbie in 1885. This primary source reflects upon the longer, historical tension and power dynamic between 'white' and Chinese prospectors. For the purposes of this document analysis, the Royal Commission itself will be explored in terms of its objectives and connection to contemporary issues of immigration, as well as the contribution of Begbie; his excerpt will be shared and examined regarding the nature of his criticisms of the Chinese and what may have underpinned his views. This review of that passage casts a light on his comments, and proposes that despite what may have been his personal annoyance of the Chinese and their culture, Begbie was committed to his principles and appreciation of hard work, and seemed to desire at least the appearance of neutrality.

In 1844, the British Columbia government created a royal commission to consult on what was called the "Chinese Question"; the purpose was to establish a consensus of concerns regarding the supposed imposition of the Chinese and use these findings to create stricter immigration legislation<sup>1</sup>. The query itself fleshes out the racist and oppressive attitudes that likely defined life in the colonies; so called notions of nationalism create tension and controversy even today, and in part drive what could be considered racists opinions over current immigration initiatives, despite the economic necessity of such practices. However, one could consider the reaction of whites to the arrival and employment of the Chinese as a fear response to the unknown; travel was very limited at the time, let alone international travel. It could be assumed that most men in the colonies had never laid eyes on an Asian person, and had limited exposure

to even basic, accurate information about the Chinese and their culture. It is ironic, by comparison, that such fear in the form of racism is still so prevalent considering the vast wealth of knowledge at our fingertips today.

At first read, Sir Matthew Begbie's comments on Chinese immigration in the Report of the Royal Commission seem to suggest that he, like those he served, resented Chinese involvement and prosperity in the gold rush in British Columbia. Begbie writes that "The Chinaman is in every respect the reverse of a European ... His religion, his notions of honor and rank, his mode of thought, his dress, his amusements, his sense of beauty, his vices (bad or immoral practices) are not to our taste at all, or such as we can take to or even understand; and his language... appears to us at once incomprehensible (unable to understand) and ridiculous... what is most annoying, they come here and beat us on our own ground in supplying our wants. They are inferior, too, in weight and size of muscle, and yet they work more steadily and with better success on the average than the white men"<sup>2</sup>. This sample reveals both disdain and a grudging respect for the 'Chinaman'. For example, given his status as the Chief of Justice, it is remarkable that Begbie reduces himself to the level of a schoolyard bully when he mocks the Chinese for their use of their mother tongue; in the next breath he extols the work ethic of this group, almost as if there exists some kind of yet to be discovered unfair cultural advantage. It also provides comment on the political climate of the time; Begbie does not hold back on his attack of the perceived cultural and social deficits of the Chinese; his willingness to do so publicly suggests that it was socially acceptable to fear or even loathe the Chinese and their participation in the gold rush. This was possibly underpinned by a belief that whites were naturally superior and more deserving, and ultimately resentful of the Chinese. This may have personified fears that white men could not maintain their status or improve their standard of

living if the Chinese were allowed to compete alongside. This possibly means that life in the colonies was fairly rough and combative, if not downright violent.

One might assume that Begbie was the quintessential white man in a position of power, upholding the patriarchy, possibly at the expense of the Chinese. For example, when he mocks “his religion, his dress, his amusements, his sense of beauty, his vices”, Begbie seems to be belittling that which is “different” from himself.<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Begbie even seems to question the masculinity of the Chinese when he discusses what he considers their relatively small stature; perhaps despite himself, Begbie acknowledges that despite this observation, their actual deliverables were exceedingly good. It is curious then to discover that despite what may have been his personal feelings on the culture and ways of knowing of the Chinese, it is possible that above all else, as a man of the law, Begbie sought to be considered fair and neutral, and as relating to the people of the colonies he served.

During the days of the Gold Rush, there was a surge of workers from around the world who came to Barkerville in search of gold. Amongst them were the Chinese, who also settled into the colonies; the racial tension that developed spurred, in part, the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration. Sir Matthew Begbie’s contribution to the document at first seemed to suggest that he was simply another racist who felt threatened by the presence of these foreign workers, but upon reflection seemed to have sought a balance between his personal misgivings and the facts of the matter, which seemed to suggest that the Chinese were exceedingly productive and worthy of their own establishment. The racism endured by these immigrant workers continues to be a global challenge today.

Notes

1. "Royal Commission On Chinese Immigration, 1885." *Pier21. Ca.* Accessed on October 13, 2016, <http://www.pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/royal-commission-on-chinese-immigration-1885>.

2. Begbie, *Royal Commission*, p. 72.

3. Begbie, *Royal Commission*, p. 72

## Bibliography

Begbie, Matthew. "Royal Commission On Chinese Immigration, 1885." *Pier21.Ca*. Accessed on October 13, 2016, <http://www.pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/royal-commission-on-chinese-immigration-1885>, 72.

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