

Colonial Perceptions on the Role of the Chinese During the Gold Rush in Barkerville.

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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. During the Gold Rush, they were the largest ethnic group to enter the region¹. 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 research paper, 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. This research paper argues that Begbie’s statements support general attitudes at the time towards Chinese prospectors.

The Chinese came to North America via efforts by the B.C. government to encourage immigration, by aiding a large merchant called the Kwong Lee Company to ship indentured workers from poor provinces to work in the mines². It was believed that Chinese people were easy to control, and their numbers would offset the high number of Americans flooding the Cariboo; the concern being that the Americans represented a possible move towards annexation by occupation by sheer numbers alone³. The appreciation of the arrangement is short lived however, and racial tension in the colonies swiftly became of critical concern. 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 legislation⁴. The query itself served to flesh out the racist and oppressive attitudes that defined life in the colonies. Begbie’s contribution to this inquiry speaks to the general attitude of the day. He writes:

“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”⁵.

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, and 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 view is supported in the writings of Patricia Roy, who says that “notions of white supremacy, then common throughout the western world and reflected in such practices of discriminatory legislation, white British Columbians betrayed their doubts about white superiority and revealed their fears that they could not maintain their status or improve

their standard of living if the ‘swarming’ millions of Asians were allowed to immigrate and compete freely”⁶. So called notions of white supremacy 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.

To understand what drives Begbie in his beliefs, it helps to know a little about his personal history and storied career. Begbie came from England in 1858, and was appointed the first high court judge of the new colony of British Columbia; he quickly established his reputation as a “resolute, but fair, upholder of British law and order in the scattered mining camps of the colony”⁷. Begbie was highly educated and sought after by the likes of James Douglas for advice; he was also a man’s man, his physical prowess no doubt contributed to his skill as a hunter, fisherman, and all around accomplished outdoorsman⁸. Through his law and order approach, Begbie seems to embody the essence of stability in his presence and practice. 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. 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, the literature suggests that his disdain was limited to the personal; his defense of them in court and in the public sphere of the colonies was upheld as the right of all men to be considered equal⁹.

In fact, Begbie endured criticism in the public and the press for his liberal views; however, he held firm to his convictions and went so far as to declare repressive taxation of the Chinese in British Columbia as invalid on the basis that it “violated the sense of fair play and the right of every citizen to expect equal treatment under British law”¹⁰. 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 on their white counterparts¹¹. Essentially, the query itself fleshed out the racist and oppressive attitudes that defined life in the colonies. As a respondent, Begbie expressed the view that the qualities of industry, economy, sobriety, and attention to the law attributed to the Chinese are the very same qualities that confound and anger their foes¹². He goes on to suggest that this is at the heart of the disdain for the Chinese: “If the Chinaman would only be less industrious and economical, if they would but occasionally get drunk, they would no longer be the formidable competitors with the white man which they prove to be in the labour market; there would no longer be a cry for their suppression”¹³. These remarks suggest that racial tension in the colonies was primarily due to jealousy and/or resentment as opposed to being grounded in reality.

Richard Thomas Wright suggests that the Chinese had strong opinions of their own, and employed strategies to make life in the colonies more bearable. White prospectors often referred to the Chinese as “celestials, slant eyes, and chinks”, and believed that they only came to North America to exploit the opportunity to find gold and take their wealth back to their homeland; this built resentment because it was perceived that the Chinese were not interested in investing in settlement or its development¹⁴. However, Wright goes on to reflect upon the Chinese experience, describing them as having come from poor farming communities, but also as being prideful of their heritage and unaccustomed to what they perceived to be rough and crude North Americans¹⁵. The Chinese dealt with this form of culture shock and racial tension by forming social groups and associations called “tonks”, and generally did not draw attention to themselves while labouring¹⁶. This view of the Chinese as enduring racism is supported in the literature:

“They were as different as night from day, and while other minorities, notably the Negroes, assimilated well into the community, the Chinese lived in a world of their own. They probably had to, for to his shame, the white man had no use for them. In newspaper accounts, we often read of explosions where nobody was killed “except a couple of Chinamen”, and a Chinese could be murdered for his gold polk, and a few questions might be asked, but nothing would ever come from it”¹⁷.

This account by Bruce Ramsey reveals a dark entanglement of abuses of which the Chinese actively sought to protect themselves against. However, it wasn't just the at the local level that the Chinese suffered; the pattern of abuse endured, as post-confederate history reveals. As a response to the “Chinese problem”, the Federal government, at the behest of the province of B.C., employed what was called the Head Tax in 1885¹⁸. This was intended to discourage immigration, thus addressing the perceived economic, social, and political problems attributed to the Chinese¹⁹. Though professionals (such as doctors) and visitors were not subject to the tax, laborers were initially charged \$50 per person or ‘head’; children were also taxed²⁰. Ultimately, this was not much of a deterrent given the opportunities for Chinese workers to make money. The tax was raised to \$100, and then again to \$500 in an effort to stem the tide of immigrants that continued to pursue success in the province²¹. Further, in 1923 the Chinese Exclusion Act passed and effectively halted the entrance of Chinese people into Canada; though abolished in 1947, its legacy essentially meant that many Chinese Canadians lived and suffered under hostile conditions²². Other nonsensical impositions on the Chinese on behalf of the government included labor policy restrictions as to how long the traditional Chinese ponytail should be allowed in order to maintain employment²³. Despite pressure from the Federal government, who had to answer to British interests, restrictions endured, resulting in legislation being passed that denied the Chinese immigrants the right to vote, own Crown land, or working directly for the government²⁴. This blatant discrimination reflected the general opinion of the public.

At first read, Sir Matthew Begbie's comments on Chinese immigration in the Report of the Royal Commission in 1885 seem to suggest that he, like those he served, resented Chinese involvement and prosperity in the gold rush in British Columbia. The provision of this secondary sources casts a new light on his comments, and reveals that despite his personal annoyance of the Chinese and their culture, Begbie was committed to the law and its principles. Early efforts by the government to expedite Chinese immigration to the Cariboo and shore up its numbers against American influences backfired, resulting in racialized tension that created a legacy of intolerance that threatened the Chinese experience of life in the colonies. The Chinese had issues of their own, and took measures to carve out an existence that was meaningful and productive. Despite discriminatory tactics employed by the Canadian government, the Chinese endured and are credited today for their early contributions to the success of the Gold Rush in Barkerville.

Notes

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