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INTRODUCTION

John Muir's contribution to the political maturity and commercial prosperity in the formative years of British Columbia has never been recognized for its importance. The Muir family, proud, independent Scots, with the capacity to dream, were raised to believe that they had to rely on their own abilities to get ahead in life. When they arrived at the end of the 1840s in what was then called Vancouver's Island, they were determined to make a success of their new venture. John was already close to fifty years of age, but through determination and practical skills, and with the help of his wife and sons, he set British Columbia on the path that it has traversed to the present day. It might well be said that no other man in those early days did so much with so little.

In the 1840s John Muir was living with his wife Ann and their five children in the small town of Kilmarnock, Scotland, made famous through its association with Robert Burns. Nineteenth-

century Scotland was not an easy place to make a living, especially if, like the Muirs, one eked out a meagre living as coal miners in a land where class boundaries were hard to break. But John Muir had imbibed the Burns' sentiment of "a man's a man for a' that," and to put the ideal into practice, he decided to emigrate to a land where there was more opportunity for the working man.

In late 1848 he responded to an advertisement for land in a place that he had never heard of: Vancouver's Island, on the western edge of North America. The advertisement said that good land was available for £1 per acre, the minimum allotment being 100 acres. It sounded exciting, but £100 was far too steep a price for the Muirs, who were by no means of the gentry or landed class, and they decided on the other option offered.

This was to go out to the new land as "consignee" workers with the Hudson's Bay Company. The agreement was that, in return for three years of work, they would be given a grant of twenty-five acres of land. As a mining family, the Muirs were extremely valuable to the Hudson's Bay Company, for it was searching at this time for a source of coal at Fort Rupert on the north end of Vancouver Island. As "consignees" the Muirs would also have their passage paid. It was clearly the best way, perhaps the only way, for the Muirs to manage their emigration.

After a difficult voyage from Great Britain lasting some six months, which took them around the Cape, John and his family stepped ashore at Fort Victoria in early June of 1849. On their arrival, they found little in the way of a welcome. Certainly the situation was not at all what they had been led to expect. The colonies of the Maritimes and Upper and Lower Canada were relatively well established by mid-century, but the colony of Vancouver Island had been created only shortly before their arrival in 1849 — in fact *after* the time that the advertisement for land had appeared. What they came to was not an established colony, but a Hudson's Bay Company fort designed for the fur trade, with no town yet in existence. Moreover, it was a relatively new fort, having only recently celebrated its fifth anniversary. Aside from a few acres under

cultivation and a couple of company farms to its credit, the “settlement” was still an outpost in its infancy.

At the time of the Muirs’ arrival, the fort remained the only evidence of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s occupation of the land. Any thought about roads, a permanent source of drinking water or any form of civilized housing would have been premature prior to the commitment of those like the Muirs who were to make the area their new home. Initially, there were no independent settlers, only Hudson’s Bay Company employees.

It took the Muirs some time to understand the political and social situation in which they had landed. Fort Victoria had been built as a kind of “backup” to the main trading post, Fort Vancouver, on the Columbia River. The Hudson’s Bay Company had maintained a post on the Columbia since 1811, and in the beginning it had assumed that the area surrounding the mouth of the Columbia would remain British. But then in 1818 a convention had been signed by Britain and the United States, wherein the “northwest coast of America . . . shall be free and open” for both parties to jointly occupy. When American settlers began arriving in great numbers, and it became clear that the British were outnumbered, the Hudson’s Bay Company decided it was prudent to move further north.

In 1843 James Douglas chose the site of Camosun on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, and quickly the pickets of the palisade were going up to define the perimeter of the new outpost that was soon called Fort Victoria. In 1846 the British accepted the 49th parallel as the boundary between the United States and Canada, and it was clear that the Hudson’s Bay Company would have to evacuate Fort Vancouver on the Columbia for Fort Victoria. Fearing further expansion on the part of the Americans, the British government took preemptive action and on January 13, 1849 — some six months before the arrival of the Muirs — they leased Vancouver Island to the Hudson’s Bay Company for ten years, with the understanding that, in exchange, the Company would commit itself to colonization.

Thus when the Muirs arrived in the so-called colony, they were surprised to discover that it was a colony in name only, for the Hudson's Bay Company was wholly in control, even of the distribution of land. The man steering the course of all that happened on the island was James Douglas. Douglas had risen to be Chief Factor at Fort Vancouver and had then been appointed the Hudson's Bay Company agent on the island. He was a man determined to maintain an iron grip on the colony's future, as the Muirs quickly discovered when they went north to mine for coal at Fort Rupert as part of their contract. Douglas was thoroughly imbued with the hierarchical principles of the Hudson's Bay Company, and while such benign despotism was perhaps necessary in primitive fur-trading conditions, it was not what was needed or what the Muirs had been expecting in the new land with all its promise for the independent settler.

Another factor that the Muirs had not counted on was the attitude towards colonization held by the British government and the Hudson's Bay Company. Whereas the Muirs looked forward to being able to own land and participate in the economic development of the region, those overseeing colonization believed that the new colony of Vancouver Island should replicate the class system of the mother country. In December of 1849, Archibald Barclay at the London office of the Hudson's Bay Company (incidentally the same man that personally handed John Muir his commission as a consignee) wrote to James Douglas, emphasizing how he, as their agent, should view the process of colonization. Douglas was not to attempt "to reorganize Society on a new basis . . . but to transfer to the new country whatever is most valuable and most approved in the institutions of the old, so that Society may, as far as possible, consist of the same classes, united together by the same ties, and having the same relative duties to perform in the one country as in the other." Such a class-based template for colonization reinforced what Douglas had learned in his duties as Chief Factor with the Hudson's Bay Company, and it was this class system that he attempted to introduce in the new colony. Naturally

enough, it flew in the face of everything that the Muirs, as freedom-loving Scots, were expecting to find in the colony once they had their own land and were no longer merely labourers. In the following years these two conflicting visions of Vancouver Island caused enormous problems for the new settlers.

For a short time, the Muirs took heart that there would be a change from the news that an independent Governor was being sent out by the British government to take control of the new colony. On March 9, 1850, the Queen's representative, Governor Richard Blanshard, arrived to take over the helm of colonization, but his every move was thwarted by a cold and uncooperative group of hardcore Company men. Douglas had always considered himself to be the right choice for Governor, and he made it nearly impossible for Blanshard to make any progress in the colony. In short order, the Governor packed his bags and returned home a frustrated man.

Shortly thereafter, in October 1851, Douglas was appointed Governor of Vancouver Island. In the eyes of those seeking reform, of which John Muir was one, this only amplified the conflict between Douglas and the new settlers, for now he wore the hat of a Hudson's Bay Company official and that of the Queen's representative. To John Muir and his peers, changing the course of the colony from one so clearly aimed to benefit a private company to a truly democratic system of government, would prove a struggle unequalled to any they had witnessed prior to that date. Much to John's credit, by 1856 Douglas had been instructed to establish an elected assembly for the island, of which John Muir was a founding member.

The struggle with James Douglas over the direction of the colony is, however, only a part of the Muir story. After Muir had shown that the venture into coal mining at Fort Rupert would yield little, he and his family returned to Fort Victoria where they purchased land at what is now known as Sooke. The land was far from the fort and the developing town — often a two days' round trip with the Natives in their canoes. But they had been forced to travel this

distance, since the Hudson's Bay Company under Douglas had reserved all the land around the fort for its own use. Muir was in fact the first settler to succeed in what was to become the province of British Columbia. Although Captain Walter Colquhoun Grant preceded John as the first independent settler, he failed to make a positive impact and departed a broken man before the second anniversary of his arrival. Muir not only developed his land at Woodside, but he did so with full awareness that he and his family were farming land that had been used and inhabited for many centuries by the native T'Sou-ke, and he attempted to treat them equitably.

In the course of time, John went on to open up the rich coal fields at Nanaimo, he built the first successful steam-operated saw-mill in British Columbia. He also built and operated the largest privately owned fleet of ships in the Northwest and was the first individual in the province outside the Hudson's Bay Company to develop trade with South America, the Orient and Australia. He went on to provide spars for the world's sailing ships, while supplying a large portion of the timbers required in the construction of the San Francisco wharves in the nineteenth century. John and his family succeeded through their own ingenuity and hard work. They hired newly arrived immigrant families to work in their many ventures and were instrumental in laying the basis for the economic growth of British Columbia.

Although fiercely independent, John was also a gentle man who possessed a generous character, giving to all who passed his way. He did not achieve prosperity by treading over his fellow man, nor did he leave bitterness or hatred in his wake as he passed through life. He looked upon each man as his equal, whether he was white, Chinese, or Native. He acted upon a strong personal desire to see his new home of southern Vancouver Island grow into a vibrant community unrivalled elsewhere along the West Coast. He dedicated hundreds of hours as one of its earliest reformers and participated in the first Legislative Assembly of what was to become British Columbia. In doing so, he was instrumental in setting the course for its future.

This account of John Muir is based upon Muir's own diaries and fragments of history recorded in dozens of diaries, newspaper clippings, archival books and chronicles preserved since that day. The events described occurred in the order presented and they are all based on fact, but facts alone cannot possibly give the flavour of the man and his place in time. For this reason I have chosen to tell Muir's story from his own point of view, through his own voice. I have developed the recorded situations by adding thoughts and conversations to enhance and bring to life what otherwise would simply have been a dry list of events. Wherever possible I have used the language found in his diaries, often taking over Muir's own Scottish phrasing. My hope is that I have created a permanent record of the life of a courageous man and his family, who settled a new and often unforgiving land. I trust you will enjoy meeting this amazing gentleman as much as I have revelled in writing about him.