



Fort Rupert, Beaver Harbour, Vancouver's Island, July 23rd 1851

Drawing by Admiral Edward Gennys Fanshawe/ Wikimedia Commons

The Indigenous Miners of British Columbia's First Coal Fields

By John Sutton Lutz

One of the least discussed elements of British Columbia history is that all the early industries that sparked and sustained European settlement depended on Indigenous labour.

Indigenous People were the hunters and trappers that the Hudson's Bay Company and, before them, other traders depended on. It was Indigenous People who drew attention to the placer gold that started the series of gold rushes, and who packed—on their backs, in their canoes, and, later, on their horses—the supplies the miners needed. The Stó:lō and Songhees were the first to operate a commercial fishery—selling salmon which was salted and exported to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The Haida were among the first

commercial farmers—selling potatoes to newcomers—while other groups were the first to sell trees and make shingles.¹ Indigenous People were also the region's first coal miners.

Why don't we know more about this Indigenous labour, which was such an essential part of our history? The answer in part is that the history of Indigenous labour has been effectively “vanished” from settler reminiscences and accounts. Indigenous people were characterized as “lazy” in order to justify dispossessing them of land and resources, and when they worked hard in “White men's jobs” they unsettled the entire colonial enterprise and complicated the backward glances of history. Indigenous people working hard in

the industrial economy do not fit neatly into heroic accounts of pioneering, nor into traditional First Nations' stories or stories of Indigenous people's resistance to colonialism.

Nowhere is this vanishing more explicit than in the history of coal mining. The only book-length history of coal mining in BC declares that the opening of the first mine at Fort Rupert marked a new stage in BC history: "With the digging of coal the Indians had become irrelevant."² My work re-examining primary documents related to Fort Rupert reveals a different story. All of the coal mined at Fort Rupert—over 3,600 long tons in three years—was mined by Indigenous miners, and these miners were followed by Indigenous colliers at Nanaimo who worked alongside White and Chinese miners well into the twentieth century. Furthermore, these workers engaged in coal mining and other ventures in the capitalist economy for reasons inherent in their own "prestige economy."

To help understand this history I would like to propose an idea I call "transformational exchange," an observation that in moving from one culture to another objects are often transformed by the act of exchange itself. In other words, when goods changed hands, "what they were good for" was also transformed.³ We see this transformation both in the history of coal mining and in the history of gold mining in BC. Indigenous people had little use for either mineral generally, but when these minerals moved into European hands, their meaning transformed. Although waste here, gold was the ultimate status symbol there. Likewise, plain woolen European blankets transformed into status markers as they moved into Indigenous society.

In his reminiscence, John Dunn recounts the story of how Kwakiutl people trading at Fort McLoughlin (now Bella Bella) in 1835 noticed coal in the blacksmith shop and told the smith that they also had some in their territory. The next year, the SS *Beaver*, the first steamer on the Northwest Coast, on its inaugural run, stopped to investigate this coal and found that it burned well. The bay where the coal was found was named Port McNeil, after the captain, and the nearby harbour, a place the Kwakiutl knew as Tsaxis, was rechristened Beaver Cove, after the ship.⁴ HBC chief factor Duncan Finlayson noted a populous village of 50 to 60 houses within 2.5 miles (4 km) of the coal fields.⁵

The Kwakiutl people told Finlayson that "they would not permit us to work the coals as they were valuable to them, but that they would labor in the mines themselves and sell to us the produce of their exertions."⁶ Here, in 1836, we have one of the many and repeated



HBC potlatch blankets, Tsaxis, 1894. (O. C. Hastings).

Photo: American Museum of Natural History.

assertions of Indigenous title that have also largely vanished from the historical record.

Over the next decade the *Beaver* and the few other steamships on the coast stopped and bought coal excavated by the Kwakiutl. In 1846, two HBC officials, Peter Ogden and James Douglas, reported to Captain Duntze of HMS *Fisgard* that the Tsaxis coal was the only known source of coal on the Northwest Coast:

A large quantity of coal may at any time be got there by employing the Indians.... On one occasion when we employed them for that purpose, they brought in upwards of ninety tons in a few days, which they dug with hatchets and other inconvenient implements and there was no doubt that with the proper excavating tools they would have done the work much more expeditiously.⁷

The Kwakiutl miners followed a coal seam which varied from 2 to 18 inches (5 to 46 cm) in thickness, removing the trees and overlaying earth and roots until they hit the coal from 2 to 12 feet (0.6 to 3.5 m) below the surface. Douglas reported "the labour involved by the process is excessive."⁸

Later in 1846, HMS *Cormorant* visited the bay:

Presently canoes laden with coals appeared, which hourly increased in number during the several day's stay of the vessel at that port. As the canoes came alongside, each in its turn, the tub was lowered and quickly filled. Each tub was paid for as it was hauled up, in trinkets of little value. In this manner sixty-two tons [almost 63,000 kg], at a cost not exceeding four shillings a ton [20 shillings equalled 1 pound sterling], including presents to the chiefs, were taken on board in less than three days.⁹



This image is referred to as “Coal Tyee.” One of these men or boys is likely Dick Whoakum, one of ten Snuneymuxw men who first reported coal at Nanaimo.

Photo: City of Vancouver Archives A6158

The enterprising Kwakiutl of Beaver Cove set about stockpiling coal for the next ship that might come by. They had found a new way to make money from the Whites and to assert their ownership.

James Douglas, then senior HBC official on the coast, mused in December 1846 about establishing a post near the coal mines to “employ Indians to work the Coal beds.”¹⁰ The HBC was sufficiently impressed with the availability of coal that in 1849 it signed a contract with the newly formed Pacific Mail Steamship Company to supply 1,000 long tons of coal purchased entirely from Kwakiutl miners.¹¹ The HBC also decided to create a trading post called Fort Rupert at Beaver Harbour, near the mines. Construction began in May 1849. Several Kwakwaka’wakw villages relocated beside the fort to participate in mining and trading opportunities.¹²

In September 1849, Douglas reported, “The most

friendly relations have been established with the natives who without being made acquainted with our future plans, are exceedingly useful in getting out coal.” The future plans that the HBC were keeping to themselves was the fact that they were bringing in their own miners.¹³ Meanwhile the Kwakiutl had 750 tons ready and had the full 1,000 tons mined by year end.

The next fall Douglas reported that over the “summer the labour of about 800 Indians, produced only 1700 tons, for the season, of about five months, being 2 1/8 Tons per man. The industry and perseverance they exhibited in that pursuit is truly wonderful and astonished every person who visited that spot.”¹⁴ Douglas’s report underscores a cultural change: after 1836, the entire Kwakiutl community had gradually shifted their economy to involve

a five-month coal mining season starting in May and ending in September when the salmon run started. Over the winter they hunted and held their ceremonial activities.¹⁵

The coal was mined at Suquash, about six miles (nine km) south of Beaver Harbour. Each piece of coal was loaded into a canoe and transferred to Fort Rupert where it was stored out of the weather. Each miner earned, on average, a 2½-point blanket for mining and transporting two tons of coal.¹⁶ Additional pay of three shillings per ton was earned when the ships came into port and the coal had to be ferried to the ships.

The Hudson’s Bay Company did follow through with its plans, and in 1850 Andrew Muir and his family of experienced coal miners arrived from England. The Kwakiutl protested, not only reaffirming their ownership of the coal, but also preventing the newly landed miners from working. Drawing on Muir’s reminiscences, H.H. Bancroft summarized the situation: “Troubles arose with the natives, who demanded pay for the land or its product; and when the white men refused, the savages surrounded the pit, threatening to kill all present should they persist in their robbery.”¹⁷ The resistance of the Kwakiutl led the miners to strike, the first in British Columbia history.¹⁸

Unfortunately for all, the coal seam continued to dip down, and the season of 1850 was the last for the Indigenous coal miners at Suquash and Fort Rupert.

The HBC trade blankets had four-inch long “points” or horizontal bars stitched into them to indicate their size and weight. A 2 ½-point blanket was one of the most common, measuring 66 inches long (1.68 m) and 50 inches (1.27 m) wide and weighing 3 pounds 5.5 ounces (1.52 kg). For more information, see “The HBC Point Blanket: A Canadian Icon and a Symbol of Colonialism,” by the HBC History Foundation, <https://www.hbcheritage.ca/things/fashion-pop/hbc-point-blanket>. <https://tinyurl.com/PointBlanket>



Fort Rupert circa 1866. Photograph by Frederick Dally.

Photo: Toronto Public Library K628

Douglas reported in July that the Kwakiutl miners had not procured any coal this season, “as the labour of getting them out at the depth of ten feet below the surface is greater than the Indians are willing or able to encounter.”¹⁹ Nor were the imported miners more successful in finding an economically viable seam.

The coal mining era at Fort Rupert was over barely 14 years after it had begun. Douglas reported that the imported miners have not “turned out a single bushel of coal since there [sic] arrival, all the coal we have ... sold being the produce of Indian labour.”²⁰ Incredibly, 3,600 long tons of coal had been mined with the simplest of tools, and over 8 million pounds, or 144,000 cubic feet²¹ of coal had been hauled to tidewater in baskets, loaded into canoes, transported nine kilometres, unloaded, reloaded into canoes, and then hoisted onto ships. To get a sense of this volume, picture a box 12 feet wide and 6 feet high and 2,000 feet long. There were also 1,800 new blankets (or the equivalent in other goods) in the community!

Fortunately for the HBC, the following year the Fort Rupert experience was repeated when HBC trader Joseph McKay was led to a seam of coal in Nanaimo Harbour by Dick Whoakum and nine other Snuneymuxw men who had seen coal used in Fort

Victoria.²² James Douglas made a personal visit in August 1852, and his usually restrained tone is positively giddy in his report: “This discovery has afforded me more satisfaction than I can express.... With the assistance of the Natives, we procured about 50 Tons in a single day at a total cost of £11.0.0 paid in goods.”²³ He wrote the Colonial Office:

The natives, who are now indefatigable in their researches for Coal, lately discovered a magnificent seam over six feet in depth ... Such places are left entirely to the Indians, who work, with a surprising degree of industry, and dispose of the coal to the Agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company for clothing and other articles of European manufacture.²⁴

The HBC trader, McKay, in his own correspondence with Douglas, listed some of those manufactured goods, “including woolens, shirts, ammunition, cut glass beads, kettles, soap and tobacco.”²⁵

When McKay arrived to establish a post at the mines, the Snuneymuxw chief “WunWunShun” echoed the earlier Kwakiutl assertion of title: “[He] Said the coals were worth 1 Blkt [blanket] pr 5 Bbls [barrels] and would not listen to any proposals for allowing the

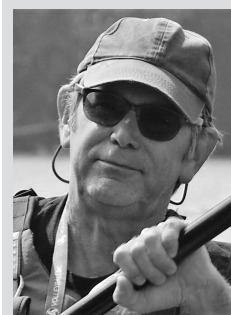
whites to work the coal.”²⁶ Just like the Kwakiutl at Fort Rupert, the Snuneymuxw raised the first coal sold at Nanaimo and like the Kwakiutl, they only worked coal mining during the part of the year that did not interfere with their salmon fishing or ceremonial activities. Ultimately, the surface coal at Nanaimo was exhausted and European coal miners were brought in to dig shafts, but the Snuneymuxw and neighbouring First Nations continued to work in the mines through to at least the 1920s.²⁷

The story of British Columbia’s Indigenous “colliers,” as McKay called them, is a lost history. In the labour history of British Columbia and in our history more generally there has been a purposeful forgetting of the importance of Indigenous Peoples in all the early industries of the province. One reason for this forgetting is that Indigenous coal miners, and Indigenous workers more generally, do not fit easily into the main storylines of history we rely on—the simple binaries of colonialism or resistance to colonialism. Indigenous workers were far from the “lazy” stereotypes retroactively applied to help settlers justify the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples, but they were not like other workers. The Kwakwaka’wakw and Snuneymuxw miners, like so many Indigenous workers, only worked when it fit their own economic and spiritual rhythms. And the thousands of blankets that these Indigenous miners earned were transformed in their economy as gifts through potlatch ceremonies, which raised the miners’ status in their culture. These workers were the foundation of British Columbia’s settler economy at the same time as they were working to protect their Indigenous rights and title and their way of life. ■

Endnotes

1. John Sutton Lutz, *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008) makes a start at telling these stories. Also see Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work* (Vancouver: New Star, 1978).
2. Eric Newsome, *The Coal Coast: History of Coal Mining in British Columbia* (Victoria: Orca, 1989), 33.
3. An excellent discussion of this is Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
4. John Dunn, *History of the Oregon Territory, and the British North American Fur Trade; with an Account of the Habits and Customs of the Principal Native Tribes on the Northern Continent*, 2nd ed. (London: Edwards and Hughes, 1846), 241.
5. Duncan Finlayson to John McLoughlin, Sept. 29, 1836, in E.E. Rich, ed., *McLoughlin's Fort Vancouver Letters*, First Series, 1825–38 (London: The Champlain Society for the Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1941), 334–35.
6. Duncan Finlayson to John McLoughlin, Sept. 29, 1836, in Rich, *McLoughlin's Fort Vancouver Letters*, 334–35.
7. Peter [S]keen[e] Ogden and James Douglas to Captain Duntze, September 7, 1846, printed in Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Vancouver's Island, Copies and Extracts of Despatches and Other Papers Relating to Vancouver's Island* [pamphlet] (London: House of Commons, March 7, 1849), 6.
8. James Douglas to Archibald Barclay, April 3, 1850, Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) A.11/72 fos 201–206d, in Hartwell

- Bowsfield, ed., *Fort Victoria Letters, 1846–1851* (Winnipeg: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1979), 84; Douglas to Barclay, December 22, 1850, HBCA A.11/72 fos 362–366d, in Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, 140.
9. Despatch from Commander Gordon Her Majesty's Steam Sloop, Cormorant, to Captain J. A. Duntze of Fisgard, October 7, 1846, in *Colonization of Vancouver Island* (London: Burrup and Son, 1849), 10–13.
10. Douglas to Barclay, December 7, 1846, HBCA A.11/72 fos. 13–196, cited in Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, 5.
11. Samuel Comstock to George Simpson, January 11, 1850, HBCA D.5/27 Microfilm 3M 89.
12. See Robert Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements, 1775–1920: A Geographical Analysis and Gazetteer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994).
13. Douglas to Barclay, December 5, 1848, and September 3, 1849, HBCA A.11/72 fos 78–96d, in Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, 29–30 and 46–47.
14. Douglas to Barclay, December 22, 1850, in Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, 140.
15. E.E. Rich, ed., *London Correspondence Inward from Eden Colville, 1849–1852* (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1956), 16–17. Eden Colville estimated in January 1850 that the total Indigenous population at Fort Rupert was about 1,000, so most were mining coal.
16. Douglas to Barclay, November 16, 1850, HBCA A.11/72 fos 354–61, cited in Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, 132. Or the equivalent in grey cotton at a cost to the HBC of “2 pounds, 3 shillings 6 pence per ton—which is fully as cheap as it could be produced by regular miners.”
17. H.H. Bancroft, *The History of British Columbia* (San Francisco: History Co., 1887), 194; John Muir to Richard Blanshard, May 7, 1850, in BC Archives (BCA), GR 1372, file 1176. See also *Fort Victoria Journal*, April 23, 1850.
18. Marki Sellers, “Negotiations for Control and Unlikely Partnerships: Fort Rupert, 1849–1851,” *B.C. Historical News* 36, no. 1 (2002): 14. See also William Burrill, “Class Conflict and Colonialism: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island during the Hudson's Bay Company Era, 1848–1862,” master's thesis, University of Victoria, 1987.
19. Douglas to Barclay, July 11, 1852, BCA A/C/20/Vi/2A, Letters to the Hudson's Bay Company from Vancouver Island Colony.
20. Douglas to Barclay, July 3, 1850, HBCA A.11/72 fos 270–4, in Bowsfield, *Fort Victoria Letters*, 104.
21. 40 cubic feet per ton based on <http://forum.onlineconversion.com/showthread.php?t=6691>
22. Dick Whoakum of the Nanaimo Band in May 28, 1913 to the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for B.C. Meeting at the Nanaimo (No.1) Town Reserve, May 28, 1913; Joseph William McKay, *Recollections of Chief Trader in the Hudson's Bay Company, Fort Simpson, 1878*, MS., Bancroft Library, San Francisco.
23. Douglas to Barclay, August 18, 1852, cited in Bruce McKelvie, “Founding of Nanaimo,” *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 8, no 3 (July 1944): 175.
24. Douglas to Colonial Secretary John Somerset Pakington, November 11, 1852, CO 305:3 No. 933, 147 in <https://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/V52108.html>.
25. Joseph McKay to James Douglas, September 16, 1852, HBCA, published on the Nanaimo Archives website, <https://www.nanaimoarchives.ca/transcripts-and-recordings/hbc-mckay-letters-1852-1853>.
26. *Nanaimo Post Journal*, September 1, 1852, transcribed by Carol Hill, 2013, <https://www.nanaimoarchives.ca/transcripts-and-recordings/hbc-mckay-journal-1852-1854>. Snuneymuxw chief WunWunShun's name is also recorded as Wunwimshim/Wunwunchiamc in the journal.
27. Lutz, *Makuk*, pp. 172–73.



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