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INDIANS AT WORK

An Informal History of Native Labour

in British Columbia, 1848-1930

ROLF KNIGHT

NEW STAR BOOKS

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PREFACE

INDIANS AT WORK originally was part of an attempt to sketch in some of the forgotten components of working-class history in British Columbia. It was preceded by three social and life histories in a similar vein and was intended to open a vista on an Indian past little discussed. Although I have brought anthropological understanding to bear, this book did not primarily flow from disciplinary interests.

If any single stimulus lay behind this and my earlier books, it was a reaction to the glorification of social ghettos which was fostered under the guise of multiculturalism during the 1970s. Many academics were enthusiastically rediscovering the supposed centrality of ethnicity in an endless stream of accounts about "cultural communities". It was my general intent to question some of the wondrous claims made for ethnicity and its allegedly guiding role in people's lives.

In the case of native Indian history the importance of cultural-ethnic identities was real enough. However, I see no reason to fundamentally alter the view presented originally. For better or worse, native people throughout BC during the latter third of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century entered the wage industries in a host of capacities, and made these an important part of their lives.

A general caution to readers is that when they find certain realms of behaviour designated as "traditional", "sacred", "ritual" or "ceremonial" they should be on guard. Simply applying these designations to particular

activities or beliefs does not in any way explain them. Worse, when something is termed "ritual" or "ceremonial", it may entail an unstated proposition that the material underpinnings or consequences can be dismissed, a claim that we are now dealing with a different realm of reality in which virtually anything goes. The fact is that food and other products generated for and utilized in "ceremonials and rituals" involve the same expenditure of effort and entail the same consumption of material goods regardless of whether they occur in ceremonial or prosaic contexts. It sometimes makes more sense to regard rituals and ceremonies as epiphenomena of the main process – the effort and goods mobilized, dispersed and utilized.

A related proviso applies to accounts of "prestige economies", those endeavours in which people seem to strive to acquire materially inconsequential rights and statuses. Detailing the workings of prestige economies was once the delight of many anthropologists who seemingly saw them as the triumph of cultural free will over earthbound considerations. Earlier anthropological accounts were filled with tales of cattle-keeping pastoralists who made use of their cattle only for prestige purposes and of Northwest coast societies whose members strove to produce surpluses to dispense or destroy in status-bringing potlatches. Contemporary anthropologists now usually treat prestige economics as part of broader economic-political systems which in no way are above and beyond material considerations. Therefore, it is with some exasperation that one finds current commentators rediscovering prestige economies and the "explanations" these offer. When the working lives of native people, in a host of industries, for over a century, are explained as simply a novel facet of their own prestige economies, you can presume that you're being had.

In regard to another dogma, the doctrine of cultural relativism has long played a stultifying role in anthropology. It proposes that the behaviour of individuals in differing societies can *only* be understood by reference to the beliefs of that society. It is hardly news that people in different societies believe and act differently and that those who grow up in a particular society are likely to reflect its beliefs. But to attribute such beliefs and behaviour to the imperatives of their cultural institutions is not an explanation, it is simply a tautology. It does not address the question of how such cultural patterns come about or what their consequences are. Explanations

based on cultural relativism often entail little more than the observation that "some like it hot, some like it cold, some like it in the pot, nine days old."

Adherence to the imperatives of cultural relativism has sometimes led scholars into making social institutions in non-Western societies seem functional and beneficial, simply because they exist. Virtually anything – endemic witchhunting, perpetual warfare, brutal slavery – could be alleged to serve necessary functions in a given society. This distorts the nature of many social and cultural practices whose consequences were anything but beneficial for many of those involved. Cultural relativism is a conservative philosophy in which the act of sanctifying traditional practices may blind observers to the social costs involved. Even as a moral philosophy it is quite vacuous.

No one who wishes to understand how certain social and historical processes actually operated can restrict themselves to traditionally accepted explanations – which may hold, for instance, that epidemics are the result of pestilential airs, or that Yaqui shamen could flit over Baja California by astral projection, or that the stock of salmon in a river system was conserved by the ritual treatment of the first salmon caught. There is no reason to accept the validity of ethnocultural explanations, indigenous or European, just because members of a particular society at a particular time believe in them. Moreover, it is often the case that a fundamental agreement in values and knowledge are not shared by all members of a society, whether tribal or modern.

Some recent material has been added to the sections dealing with the historical background to native wage labour in BC and to the comparative chapter on developments elsewhere in Canada. I have tried to integrate work which has appeared during the last eighteen years, but usually without the discussion it deserves.

Little has been added to the core of the present book, the accounts of native Indian wage labour in BC. Here and there I have modified certain passages, occasionally I have been able to add some new information. But basically that account remains as originally written. The uncharted maze of potential source material – cannery record books, company journals, court and hospital records, unpublished memoirs and papers, parish and mission diaries, reports to and from the Department of Indian Affairs,

and all the other sources which only become apparent in the course of investigation – most have been left fallow. No doubt this is a great failing on my part. Despite the imperatives and helpful suggestions about additional archival material which requires investigation, I am happy to leave such further disclosures to the established officers and aspirant cadets in the vanguard of scholarship.

GIVEN THE BYZANTINE INTRICACY of the law and the phenomenal stakes now at issue in native land and resource claims, minor details of ethnographic description can assume far greater importance than the original compilers ever conceived of. For example, contemporary claims to specific salmon fisheries may turn on the issue of whether gillnets were used indigenously or not in some locale. While questions of technology are somewhat more straightforward than other aspects of native history, even here we are often treading on less than solid ground. So, the following demurrer is in order: None of the discussion presented in this book is intended to bear upon contemporary native claims, one way or the other. None of it was gathered with that enterprise in mind and none of it is intended for such use.

In regard to some of the terms used here, where not referring to some specific group I have used the terms “Indians,” “native Indians,” or “Indian people” interchangeably in preference to whatever the currently fashionable designation may be. The terms “indigenous” and “aboriginal” are also used here, usually to denote pre-European practices or social formations.

The spelling and names of particular “tribal” communities is a recurrent problem; Erna Gunther (1956: 269) provides a list of some nineteen different renderings for the “Koluschan” Tlingit in the published literature. Other groups are as rich in alternate designations and spellings. The designation of particular Indian groups and settlements in BC is here usually rendered in traditional anthropological usage or as given in the 1990 edition of *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 7: Northwest Coast* (Wayne Suttles, Ed.). The exceptions are spellings given in the sources cited.

Much less satisfactory are the terms “white,” “European,” and “Euro-

Canadian.” Use of these all-inclusive terms tends to concretize people from backgrounds as different as, and with interests as divergent as found among native people themselves. Where of importance I have referred to people as being “Japanese,” “Hawaiian”, “Chinese”, etc., which underscores once-important social boundaries but which may be equally misleading. Those individuals with a more cosmopolitan genetic and cultural inheritance are here treated according to whichever social group they were part of. However, reality is always more complex than terms or categories can convey.

A note on the mode of citation. The original edition of *Indians At Work* placed all reference citations and additional discursive material in numbered footnotes. These have been retained in the present edition. Newly added material and citations however are noted in the body of the text, for example (Murray, 1988: 160).

I have occasionally laced this account with a degree of irreverence since it deals with topics too often hedged about with circumspect sanctity. This may be a mistake, since in Canada anything which is expected to be taken seriously cannot be treated impiously.

Indians at Work

CHAPTER 1

A Part of the Picture

NATIVE INDIAN WORKERS AND PRODUCERS have been important in some industries in British Columbia for well over a century. It is time that the generations of Indian loggers, longshoremen, teamsters, cowboys, miners, fishermen and cannery workers, and others who laboured in virtually every primary industry in BC were recognized. Wage work in the major industries of this province has been an intimate feature of Indian lives for five and more generations.

Even this leaves out the previous history of Indian groups in BC as commercial trappers-traders and as occasional workers around trading posts prior to 1858. By the 1890s, native Indians retaining neo-traditional economies dependent on subsistence fishing and hunting along with commercial fur trapping were an atypical minority.

This study is not intended to be a comprehensive social history of BC native Indians. Despite many excellent ethnographies there is as yet no complete historical overview of native Indian peoples in this province. The present study attempts to outline the history of native Indians as workers and independent producers in the primary resource and other industries of BC between 1858 and 1930. It covers the periods from the first gold rush and the main entry of European settlers, through the foundation of most of the primary industries, to the beginning of the Great Depression. It was the period of the most strategic involvement of Indian workers in the emerging industrial economy of the province.

While there were Indian workers in BC before 1858, their numbers were small and the economic-political situation qualitatively different from that which would follow. Until that time, Indian groups generally still retained control over most resources and maintained their own political autonomy. European settlement and industrial development were to change this situation drastically over the next three decades. While the incorporation of Indians into wage labour began dramatically after 1858, the terminal date chosen for this study is somewhat arbitrary. The 72 years covered approximate what would have been one relatively long lifetime and incorporate as much as seemed feasible in one book.

I have used 1930 as a cut-off date, not to imply that Indian wage labour somehow ceased after that, but because in various ways the Great Depression wrote *finis* to much local and small-scale enterprise that had developed over the previous generations. Throughout Canada and particularly in the resource industries, the decade-long depression ushered in or consolidated the hegemony of monopoly capital. The Epilogue outlines a few of the everyday and the more dramatic events among Indian peoples in BC during the 1930s and after. It is not intended as a summary of developments during those following 60-odd years.

No native Indian societies have been more researched and written about than those of the North Pacific coast. Yet throughout the extensive literature on BC Indian societies one is hard pressed to discover the fact that, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and on, Indian peoples everywhere in the province were working in the major industries of that period. Apart from a few exceptional ethnohistories, I have been forced to reconstruct the scope and nature of Indian wage labour and independent commodity production from asides and footnotes in accounts written with other concerns in mind.¹

Given the paucity of accounts that deal directly with native Indian labour, I relied heavily on fragments from memoirs, obituaries, company journals, reports from government agents and missionaries. Unpublished dissertations on particular industries in BC have been an important source, but I have only scratched the surface of the mass of company records, band documents, parish diaries, and government reports which could be of value. In most instances, ethnographic accounts had little to say about Indian wage labour during the period concerned. Most local

histories (with some outstanding exceptions) treat Indians as part of the pre-European past. That Indian workers, and Indian people generally, continued to be part of regional or local history usually goes unnoted.²

Even historical work touted as the definitive account of Indian-European relations in BC during the nineteenth century fails to break free from the established maxims. Accordingly, we hear that

During the maritime fur trading period the Indians of the Northwest coast were not, like some pre-Marxist proletariat, the passive objects of exploitation. Rather they were part of a mutually beneficial trade relationship.³

After the golden age of fur enterprise, Indian peoples were allegedly reduced to irrelevance in the economy established by white settlers. According to Robin Fisher, after 1858,

Vancouver Island and British Columbia were changing from colonies of exploitation, which made use of indigenous manpower, to colonies of settlement where the Indians became at best irrelevant, and at worst an obstacle, to the designs of the Europeans. Rather than economic cooperation there was now economic rivalry between the races.⁴

One might dismiss this as a typical academic joust with straw men (after all, who would claim that tribal Indian groups were a "pre-Marxist proletariat" – let alone pretend to know what that means). But Fisher's account is a recrudescence of the view that with the passing of the buffalo, or the sea otter, and with the coming of the steam engine, native Indian peoples were shuffled off into some form of reserve dependence. We will see how misconceived this is.

Although the above view is less universal than it was eighteen years ago, one still finds that major texts gloss over the history of native Indian involvement in the broader economy. A recent textbook intended for college readership, *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience* (Morrison and Wilson, 1986) contains 26 articles dealing with the cultures and histories of Canadian native peoples to present times. Yet it is as if everything had

stopped at the period of the late fur trade and the establishment of reserves. There is virtually no mention of native Indian workers in the wage economy.

The encyclopedic *Handbook of North American Indians*, admirable and excellent as it is, deals mainly with Indian societies in the "ethnographic present." The component articles provide only passing mention of Indian involvement in wage work, if they mention it at all. It would seem that a century and more of Indian labour in a host of different industries simply does not fall within the purview of Northwest coast anthropology. Kew (1990) presents a "History of Coastal British Columbia Since 1849" with the barest sketch of native employment, largely restricted to the commercial fishery, and that mainly revolving around the alleged displacement of native fishermen. He provides a restatement of that hoary view that native involvement in commercial fishing/canning, and in other industries, was merely a modification of their traditional subsistence undertakings. Naturally, not every author need concentrate on every aspect of native history, but there is a serious imbalance when more than a century of wage work, and all it involved, is completely overshadowed by documenting minutiae of cultural persistence.

At least two recent accounts of native Indian history in BC address the topic treated here: James McDonald's (1984) "Images of the Nineteenth-Century Economy of the Tsimshian" and James Burrows' "'A Much-Needed Class of Labour': The Economy and Income of the Southern Interior Plateau Indians, 1897-1910" (1986). They have the benefit of being delimited studies that deal with the variety of jobs and industries that native people of particular regions were engaged in. They sketch the multi-stranded reality that prevailed for native people in different regions.

McDonald's article and his doctoral dissertation (1985) deal with more than a century of economic and social history of the Tsimshian villagers of Kitsumkalum. Speaking of the coastal Tsimshian in general, McDonald surveys the changes in their lives wrought by the fur trade beginning in the nineteenth century. He quizzically notes that the early anthropologists, focused on an ethnographic reconstruction of traditional societies, often missed what was actually going on around them. After listing the range of wage labour and commercial activity in which the Tsimshian were engaged McDonald says,

I hope the evidence presented here will help correct the commonly held view that Indians were not part of the modern economic development, which began in the nineteenth century, and modify the reconstruction of traditional Tsimshian society as having been shunted off from the main track into reserves that had no part in that process. On the contrary, Indians were often critical to the successes of various industries. (McDonald, 1984: 40)

McDonald points out that wage work was not simply added on to the rounds of traditional economies, but required adjustments and compromises when native men and women worked in canneries or comparable enterprises. More than that, he suggests that many white workers employed in the resource industries during that era also combined a mix of subsistence activities with wage work:

The data I have currently examined suggests a considerable similarity between Tsimshian and immigrant workers. Both combined hunting, fishing, and trapping with a seasonal cycle of wage employment. In the nineteenth century none of these elements could support a person: nor could a strictly "traditional" economic system or a "traditional" industrial system. (McDonald, 1984: 53)

James Burrows' (1986) "'A Much Needed Class of Labour'" is more delimited in time and deals with the work history of the Salishan peoples of the southern plateau region between the late 1890s and 1910. Burrows makes the point that not only did native societies differ, but that the Euro-Canadian settlement and industries that developed in various regions also differed. He points out that the gold miners who initially entered the southern plateau soon withdrew and were followed by a more gradual settlement which gave native people one or two generations to adapt.

Burrows discusses a wide range of Indian employment, on ranches and farms, as woods workers, and as many-faceted casual labour. This indicates a broader involvement in the regional economy than I had originally supposed. The rationale of limiting his account to the period 1897-1910 escapes me, but his work will hopefully stimulate a fuller study of native Indian wage labour in their regions.

Documenting some of the drama and variety of Indian labour history in BC should dispose of the view that Indians are new to wage work. This challenges a related misconception that ongoing traditional values and attitudes somehow limited Indian capacities to deal with the new industries. Without prejudging the extent of continuing cultural traditions among BC natives, the present account holds that such traditions did not fundamentally limit the ability of most Indian workers to hold their own in many industries when opportunities were available. In other words, while Indian workers were Kwakiutl or Lillooet or members of more particular social groups, they could at the same time be catty loggers, adept farmers, or skilled longshoremen.⁵

BY THE BEGINNING OF MAJOR EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT in 1858, Indian peoples in many locales had already been enmeshed in the maritime and land-based fur trade for up to 80 years. Many features of what may seem to be "traditional" Indian society had evolved during the course of the fur trade. While virtually all Indian people continued to be enmeshed in their domestic economies as subsistence hunters and fishermen, fur trapping for trade had been added to their round of activities. Some Indians became traders and a few became occasional employees for European trading companies. Others were independently engaged in washing placer gold and cutting logs, or experimenting with the provision of a variety of products and services that were exchangeable for trade goods.

A volume might well be written about the Indian labour that was the precursor to the wage work dealt with here. The lives and work of the permanent Hudson's Bay Company "servants" – Métis, French-Canadian, Iroquois, Kanaka, and others – and their relation to local Indian peoples would also be of interest. Despite the seemingly endless writings about the fur trade in Canada, very little systematic treatment has been given to those workers who constituted the majority of the fur trade personnel. A great deal is yet to be done in these realms by those with the inclination.

While increasingly enmeshed in the fur trade, in 1858 Indian people were not yet substantially involved in wage labour. The next 30 to 40 years – until the end of the nineteenth century – would see the end of

political autonomy, a rapid decline of fur trading in most areas, the shift of Indians to a minority status, but also their integration into virtually every major resource industry in the province as workers and owner-operators.

Not the first, but one of the consistently most important areas of Indian employment from 1870 on was in the commercial fishing and canning industry. The usual view of Indian participation in this industry is of native men and women following traditional pursuits, using techniques inherited from time immemorial in the waters and territories of their ancestors. Those enamoured of the wonders of cultural conservation have viewed wage work in canneries as a slightly modified version of the traditional summer fishing encampment, in which women's work in fish preservation merely shifted to preserving fish in canneries for wages. Old wine in new bottles.

In fact, commercial fishing and cannery work was strategically different from traditional subsistence fishing, and became more so as the industry evolved. To a large extent the gear, the methods, the knowledge, and the context of commercial fishing were novel. The primary mode of early commercial fishing was salmon gillnetting on river estuaries. This was distinct from the primary indigenous methods (involving weirs and fish traps, dip nets and drag nets, and spearing). To a casual reader one type of net fishing may seem much the same as any other, but the specifics of their use make them quite different for fishermen.

While dugout canoes continued in use for travel and subsistence fishing, Indian commercial fishermen widely were using planked cannery boats by the 1890s. Indian fishermen were among the first to acquire and install the cantankerous early gas engines shortly after the turn of the century. As important as fishing gear and techniques was knowledge of the changing fishing regulations, as well as information about employment conditions. Requisite was knowledge of how to secure jobs in canneries and how to contract for a cannery boat. Indian fishermen were familiar with the changeable fish rates, quotas, stipulations, and company store prices of specific canneries well before 1900.

A considerable proportion of the Indian commercial fishermen did not fish in their ancestral territories. They fished, especially in the years before World War I, in relatively close proximity to the canneries. Large numbers of Indian fishermen travelled long distances to fish for canner-

ies in locales new to them. While members of nearby bands may have fished in their traditional waters, many Indian fishermen (possibly the majority) came to novel fishing grounds and had to learn the peculiarities of local tides and runs, the secrets of glory holes and snags, as much as any newcomer.

The canneries themselves, in which so many Indian women and some men worked, were among the more mechanized industries along the coast. Native women cleaned fish and filled cans amid clanking tinning machines, alongside steam vats and tray boilers, near conveyor and transmission belts, amid steam, and pipes, and foremen. Those canneries may seem primitive by today's standards, but they were the industrialism of the resource frontier.

Indian men and women worked at cannery jobs on an early assembly-line basis, and their work was at least partly geared by the demands of the canning line. They worked for wages, either straight wages or on a piece-work basis, often lived in company cabins in the cannery villages which were built around the plant, and bought food and goods at the company store, the cost of which was checked off their earnings. They worked as part of a heterogeneous (although ghettoized) labour force.

A belief that life and work in the canneries and commercial fishery is merely a minor modification of traditional subsistence practices can only be sustained by a willful romanticism or an ignorance of what commercial fishing and canning were all about. And yet, Indian commercial fishing entailed greater continuity with traditional roles than obtained in most industries in which Indians worked.

What of Indian seamen and sealers? An Edward Curtis picture may spring to mind of Indian canoemen travelling the coast, off to the potlatches or out to hunt seals. They did that, of course, as well as transporting themselves and members of their families hundreds of miles up and down the coast to work in canneries, hopyards, sawmills, and to visit the bright lights of Victoria or Seattle. What is less frequently known is that there were Indian seamen working on coastal sailing vessels as well as on the decks and in the engine rooms of the early steam ships. Indian deck crews also helped man the sternwheelers which plied the interior lakes and rivers of the province from the 1860s until the 1920s. Indian-owned schooners began to appear by the early 1870s and some of them were

later constructed by Indian boat builders. By 1910 at least two bands owned and operated their own steam-driven tug boats.

While some Aleut hunters travelled aboard European ships before 1820 to hunt fur seals, the main phase of pelagic sealing developed between the 1870s and 1911. Indian hunters and crewmen from much of the outer coast worked aboard the fleet of sealing vessels which carried them from the Oregon coast to the Bering Sea and back. They were seal hunters, but some also acted as seamen sailing in the stormiest waters of the world during the last days of sail. While such sealing represented a continuation of traditional activities, the context of pelagic sealing often placed those Indian hunters in rather novel surroundings and company. They worked under white skippers and often as part of mixed crews, including white sealers. During the height of pelagic sealing, possibly 40 to 50 Indian sealers stopped over in the port cities of Japan each year, to say nothing of San Francisco or Victoria.

One of the most firmly held maxims about native Indian history is that their traditional cultures militated against farming. The soil was Mother Earth and disturbing it was sacrilege, as the more high-flown romances would have it. Supposedly, what little farming Indian people took up was due mainly to missionary and government pressure. Allegedly, it was quickly given up when native people felt at liberty to do so.

In fact, Indian farming in viable areas in BC initially evolved independently of both mission and government direction and in a number of regions developed into sophisticated mixed farming. In some areas it was extremely important for more than three generations. It declined largely due to the economics of small-scale farming, additionally limited by certain government restrictions. While there probably were many Indian people who disliked farming, there were also many who made sustained attempts to continue farming, only to find it progressively less viable. Inherent cultural disinclinations were not at the heart of the matter.

Indian farming developed from a few groups tending potato gardens well before 1858 to the major Indian farming regions in the province of the mid 1880s. By then the bands around Cowichan and in the Fraser Valley, as well as some groups in the southern interior, had established farms on which they raised livestock, cereals, market produce, fruit, and fodder. By the 1890s Indian farms in some locales were comparable to

white-owned farms in those regions, with a similar complement of barns, houses, tools and livestock. Some Indian farms possessed much of the horse-drawn machinery then in use, occasionally including even the huge steam threshers which were then marvels of modernity.

While the majority of Indian farms remained primarily subsistence operations, they were of considerable importance in domestic budgets. These small farms often involved techniques such as irrigation, crop rotation, orchardry methods, and the skills of stock keeping. That many Indian farmers, or their children, eventually gave up farming and went into wage work had less to do with the cultural imperatives of the past than with the fact that even seasonal wage work usually provided better returns than farming on a small scale. Many white homesteaders came to the same conclusion.

In the Cariboo and other parts of the southern interior, Indian cowboys and ranchers established herds ranging from commercial ranches to the more usual hardscrabble cattle operations. Probably there were always more cattleless Indian cowboys and ranch hands than there were Indian ranchers. In parts of the Cariboo and Chilcotin, along the Nechako and on the Nicola Plateau, Indian cowboys were an important part of the ranch industry.

Everyone has read of the French-Canadian and native voyageurs who once manned the canoe fur brigades through the northern and western reaches of Canada. In BC, Indian canoe freighters were of a more localized importance. The heavy freight wagon pulled by a four- or six-horse team is closer to the reality of Indian freighters than is the canoe. Indian horse packers were part of the transport chains which brought supplies to work camps, mines, and small settlements in the more isolated interior during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Indian freighting and packing really came into prominence during the settlement phases of BC. Indians packed in supplies for the railway and other early construction projects throughout the province. From the beginning of the 1880s until about World War I, Indian wagon freighters teamed supplies up the Cariboo road, out of Ashcroft and 150 Mile House, and elsewhere. They were preceded and supplemented by a generation of Indian horse packers spread from the Skeena to the US boundary region. Until replaced by trucks, Indian teamsters worked for farms and ranches, hauling on a local basis.

Some may believe that reserve-based enterprises are a recent phenomenon. In fact, reserve enterprises and local Indian businesses were not uncommon 80 to 100 years ago. Some cottage industries attempted to replace purchased goods with locally produced items. One mission village in the 1870s had its own sawmill, trading schooner, tannery and cobbler shop, spinning and weaving shop, glass works and brick kiln, blacksmith and hardware shop, trading post, and other enterprises.

With certain exceptions, cottage industries disappeared quite early – probably because of their inherent inability to compete with commercially produced goods. Cottage industries were sometimes established as a part of mission policies to keep their Indian communities as separate from the broader Canadian society and economy as possible. What the history of cottage industries did show was that it was quite possible to rapidly transmit the skills of new industries to native people; it also demonstrated that such industries were not viable in an age of mass production when native people had the alternative of obtaining cash through wage work.

Some traditional manufactures, variously modified, had a more durable history than cottage industries. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was an upsurge in production of handicrafts and carving for the curio and ethnographic trade. Individual artists and craftsmen from many points along the coast and the interior produced masks, basketry, and carvings of great variety for sale to European collectors. However artistic and authentic this work was, it was produced with the intent to make money. Some Indian artists and performers wound up in rather surprising places as part of their ethnographic endeavours.

Canoe building probably witnessed a boom during the period of heightened coastal travel, and especially with pelagic sealing. Some Indian boat builders began constructing planked schooners, fishing boats, and other work boats for sale well before the turn of the century. In general, by or before 1900, a wide range of new artisanal skills existed on reserves. It would not have been unusual to find skilled carpenters, blacksmiths, haywire mechanics, and talented jacks-of-all-trades in many communities.

Indian entrepreneurs of considerable variety sprang up. They owned and ran trading schooners; they operated their own stores on some reserves. In some locales Indian businessmen owned hotels, inns, cafes, pool halls and other more specialized emporia. In at least a few places

Indian distillers did heroic service in surreptitiously brewing the "water of life"; they produced a pretty fair product, according to some appreciative samplers. In a more respectable vein, by 1900 settlements such as Port Simpson and Masset contained the range of stores and services typical of small towns on the resource frontier – most of them owned and run by Indian businesspersons.

A common view is that whatever wage labour Indian people in BC were involved in during this period, they were tied to their own locales: that they were an inward-looking people, rich in their own customs but unknowledgeable about events of the larger world. Considering their work-related travels one may wonder about this. Already by the mid 1870s BC Indians were migrating to work in sawmills, canneries, hop-yards, docks, and all manner of jobs from Alaska to the American Northwest. Some were working on coastal shipping and got as far as San Francisco, and during the following decade there would be Indian sealers aboard the schooners putting into Japanese ports and waters.

Although it may not strictly be part of labour history, we will consider a few of the ethnographic tours by native people from BC. A team of seven Bella Coola men contracted to tour museums and give public exhibitions of their manufactures and dances in Germany in 1885 and 1886. They surveyed the scene in Germany, attracted the attention of Franz Boas, and later met him during his first anthropological tour of BC. Apparently none of the Bella Coola visitors wrote a monograph about Germany of the 1880s.

Over the next twenty years Indian men and women from the BC coast and interior toured and performed at the Chicago Columbian Exposition and at the St. Louis World Fair, made consulting trips to the Field Museum at Chicago and to the Natural History Museum in New York, and visited other American settlements. Some even toured the European continent. Native people from Ontario and Atlantic Canada had been engaged in similar circuits and in overseas tours for almost a century previously, passages which were, in some respects, even more amazing.

There were a number of industries in which Indians worked that only the most unregenerate romantic can consider to be traditional. Some may wish to see Indian labour in logging as akin to "woodcraft", and may find no major difference between the occasional tree felling of aboriginal

times and the maze of skids, spring boards, steam donkeys, cables, and bull blocks used in commercial logging by the turn of the century. In fact, there was very little similarity between indigenous woodworking and the requirements of commercial logging.

Independent Indian loggers were delivering logs to the early coastal sawmills by 1856. During the next two generations they worked as hand-loggers and in the logging camps of companies large and small. By 1910 members of at least 50 bands in BC were engaged in logging and sawmilling, from the coast to the Kootenays, on isolated inlets and near burgeoning towns. They were working as independent handloggers, as members of Indian-owned logging companies, and in some of the largest corporate logging operations in the province. In some cases, the grandfathers of the 1910 fallers may already have been loggers.

Sawmill labour may even have preceded logging as a source of employment. Sawmills provided little scope for uniquely Indian work patterns and roles. While primitive when compared to plants of today, early sawmills (along with canneries) were the vanguard of industrialism in many of the resource regions of BC. Indian workers laboured as boom men, on the green chain, and as gang labour. In some mills there were Indian foremen and Indian skilled workers – sawyers and men operating the log carriage, as well as others maintaining the steam boilers. Indeed, from the 1880s on a number of local sawmills were owned and operated by Indian communities themselves or in conjunction with local missions. They provided lumber both for use by band members and for regional sale.

If Indian sawmill workers and loggers were employed on a seasonal and fluctuating basis, and interspersed their wage labour with subsistence activities, this was not especially different from the way many non-Indian workers were then employed. In the sawmills themselves, Indians and others worked in factory-like conditions. They worked around whirring circular and head saws, planers and edgers, steam driven carriages, clanking dog ladders and so forth. The discipline of work, even if somewhat flexible by today's standards, was that of an industrial plant.

Indian longshore crews arose around the export sawmills in the Crofton-Chemainus and Burrard Inlet areas from the late 1860s and on. Initially, sawmill work and longshoring lumber were broadly interchangeable and a body of Indian sawmill-longshore workers emerged

around some of the main export sawmills. There have been Indian families with more or less continuous work histories as longshoremen for five generations and more. Some sailed on lumber barques to longshore timber from the myriad of sawmill ports of the coast; others worked with the most cosmopolitan of work crews. On the Burrard Inlet docks they worked with Hawaiians and Chileans, with Indians from up and down the coast, and with men from every corner of the globe.

It is not known if any native people in BC gasped in amazement at their first sight of "fire wagon" locomotives, as so quaintly recounted in older school books. But Indian workers certainly helped cut the grade, build the tressels, and lay the rails on which the iron horses ran. While helping to build the railroads many Indian employees must have worked around construction locomotives – long before these symbols of modernity first chugged into the towns emerging along the line.

From 1881 until World War I, Indians worked in the construction of virtually every railway in BC. They worked as construction labourers and sometimes took up subcontracts for grading and clearing right-of-way. A few became skilled axemen and worked on timber bridge construction. Many contracted their own teams and wagons to haul supplies and ballast for the building of the grade. They worked on the construction of the original Canadian Pacific Railway mainline, the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railroad, on the Kettle Valley line, the Canadian Northern mainline, and on the Grand Trunk Pacific.

Many native railway workers came from the settlements along the line of the rail construction, but others travelled long distances to obtain such jobs. Later, Indian section hands helped maintain the tracks, from their completion until today. Even if they were only a small proportion of the army of construction workers involved, Indian railway workers were there.

There was no gold to be found lying in the streets of the young province, but there were thin deposits of the stuff to be found in the sand and gravel of gold-bearing streams of the interior. Indian placer miners, working their own claims, were scattered along the major gold-bearing rivers from the 1850s until the 1930s. A few Indian prospectors also ranged the unsettled parts of the province, looking for copper, gold, lead, silver, and other saleable ore leads. In the Vancouver Island coal fields,

Indian labour was employed in surface work and in coal loading at some locales, although very few worked underground.

Some may hold that while there were Indian employees in the resource industries, they should not be thought of as "workers". In some sense this may be correct – self identification and articulate feelings about being members of a broader working class were probably rare. However Indian workers played a part in some early unions and labour actions in BC.⁶

In 1893 one of the first fishermen's strikes on the Fraser was supported by Indian fishermen. In addition to rejecting the advice of a Department of Indian Affairs agent to return to work, three of the Indian leaders addressed public rallies in Vancouver and elsewhere in support of the striking fishermen. Indian fishermen and cannery workers were sometimes deeply involved in the strikes and organizational battles of the industry from 1900 on. They participated in their own groupings and as members of broader unions. It is quite a complex history of advances and retreats, of changing alliances and strategies.

It may be that Indian fishermen's organizations were ethnic defense organizations in a novel form. At times they were directed at excluding Japanese fishermen and at other times they may have acted in concert with canning companies to advance their own particular interests. However, during various periods some Indian fishermen also supported and worked with non-native fishermen in broader union organizations.

In 1906 the Duncan local of the Federal Labour Union was composed partly of Indian workers. They sent an Indian delegate to the Annual Convention of the Trades and Labour Congress held in Victoria that year, which passed a resolution committing the TLC to pursue the question of Indian franchise. In the same year, Indian longshoremen of the Burrard Inlet area were central in forming the Lumberhandlers Industrial Union, Local 526 of the Industrial Workers of the World. Indian lumberhandlers participated in virtually all the union struggles of the Vancouver waterfront, some as union members but others as strikebreakers. Squamish members were central in founding the International Longshoremen's Association in 1912, and were part of the bitter Vancouver dock strikes in 1923 and 1935. Some later helped establish the first Canadian local of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.

It is usual to follow up accounts as the above with an obligatory dictum

to the effect that Indian people and cultures continued unchanged in essence, regardless of what lives they lived. This seems an excessive and dogmatic claim. It is true that some Indian peoples were not basically incorporated into the industrial economy during the period dealt with. Different spheres of Indian societies were changed to varying extents: it may be that some changes were less fundamental than they appeared. But Indian communities that evolved during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries incorporated much of then contemporary Euro-Canadian culture. Naturally they were not exact copies of "Canadian society" and distinctive native cultural elements persisted to differing degrees among different native groups. But the overwhelming emphasis that the literature has given the persistence of Indian traditions has obscured the broad changes which did occur.

The alleged continuation of unique Indian work patterns in the resource industries may be exaggerated by comparing them to middle-class stereotypes, rather than to the actual behaviour of non-Indian workers in the same industries at the time. What may seem to be unique Indian work patterns were, in reality, variants of a pattern once common to most primary resource workers in BC, regardless of derivation.

Robin Fisher's (1977) *Culture and Conflict* describes Indian labour as having become irrelevant to the BC economy after major European settlement, adding that what employment Indians obtained was neither "steady nor permanent" and only acquired "at the pleasure of whites."⁷ That work in the resource industries was neither steady nor permanent, and that jobs were obtained only "at the pleasure of" the employers, applied equally to non-Indian workers.

While Indian labour in some regions took on the characteristics of a marginal labour force, that was by no means universal. In many cases it makes more sense to consider Indian workers as an elemental part of various industrial labour forces. Neither the absence of "regular jobs" nor the need to sell their labour power inherently differentiated Indian from other wage workers.

Whatever the nature of employment, wage labour became of importance to many Indian families and groups. They were not necessarily the last hired-first fired, nor did they regularly labour under differential wage rates. Taking both cash and non-cash components of domestic economies

into account, there was probably a considerable overlap in incomes of Indian and non-Indian primary resource workers. It is difficult to say to what degree Indian workers, as compared to others, were exploited. The business records of the early enterprises are often tenuous and many of those entrepreneurs may have had only "bottom line" realization of what the costs and profits were.⁸

ALTHOUGH INDIAN PEOPLE TOOK PART in the general industrial development of the province, it is also true that they were subject to special restrictions laid down by a series of "native laws" implemented by both the provincial and federal governments. Such laws appear to have affected the economies of independent Indian producers more severely than Indian wage workers.

Since *Indians at Work* was first published a body of research has dealt with the policies, administrative practices and the notables of the Department of Indian Affairs. This should help fill some of the lacunae which existed for writing native Indian history, but it is crucial to know what administrative actions were actually taken in the field, rather than what the legal prerogatives and policies of superintendents of the DIA were.

When accounts attempt to spell out the operation of native laws and the specifics of Indian administration, where they document the consequences of policies and actions, when they delineate the interests behind such laws, such studies deal with important dimensions of Indian history. However, little is added when accounts simply repeat the refrain that "Native people must be understood as an internal colony." Sometimes the glibness of such truisms can be detrimental to a fuller understanding.⁹

Some readers may feel that the present study does not provide sufficient emphasis on the cultural changes forced upon Indian groups by external agencies. Others may miss indignant accounts of racist stereotypes promulgated by notables of the time. While racism was prevalent enough, it was by no means directed only against Indians and non-Europeans. While institutionalized "racial" disabilities are a part of the story, it is not the main story dealt with here. If there is any ideological predilection involved it is the proposition that class and class interests, not racism

or racial interests, are ultimately what made the world go around – as much in the British Columbia of a century ago as today.

It may legitimately be held that the present account should deal in greater depth with the past struggles of Indian groups to maintain lands and resources. That also was a part of the picture. It receives brief mention in the chapter dealing with European settlement, but it is a topic that cannot be dealt with in any full way here. This is an initial survey of native Indian wage labour. There are many areas left undiscussed.

The body of this book can be taken as a refutation of the view which holds that native Indians were occupationally limited by the continuing imperatives of their aboriginal cultures. Anyone who can visualize the jobs in the industries to be described should realize that Indian workers involved had to be adept in their new jobs and hard working. Whatever else they were, whatever cultural traditions they retained, Indian loggers were loggers, Indian longshoremen were longshoremen, Indian cannery workers were cannery workers.

Virtually all Indian adults were employed in some way. Government subsidy payments were effectively non-existent throughout this entire period. Native people in BC had to support themselves by working for wages or in subsistence production or, more usually, a combination of both. There was no other choice. That also applied to the non-Indian population during the era of bracing free enterprise. There were no guaranteed medical services, no pensions, no “social safety net” for anyone.

Some historians have come to recognize that labour history is more than just a chronicle of labour unions; more than a chronicle of confrontations with employers and their allies. Such historians have delved into the day-to-day routines, the work and skills, the on-the-job social relations, as well as the home life, budgets, health, and fraternal societies of those they are writing about. In short, they have looked at labour history as the social history of particular groups of working people.¹⁰ I am in full agreement with this approach but the actual scope of the present account is more restricted and deals mainly with the work done and jobs held by native Indians in various BC industries. That is as much as my evidence permits.

Many of the accounts presented here are cursory because they are indeed based upon a mass of fragmentary evidence. Many of the bald

statements made should be read as having unstated qualifiers such as “it seems,” or “in the cases discovered,” or “probably.” I have not noted all the intricacies and contentions that could be dealt with in a more delimited study.

I have used “wage work” and “independent producers” in a rather general way. The intent is to emphasize the extent to which Indian labour was articulated, in one way or another, with the broader economy. Some readers may legitimately hold that many Indian people were not literally engaged in wage labour – *i.e.*, that they did not receive wages but instead were owner-operators providing commodities for sale to corporate buyers. It is the case that Indian independent producers – such as handloggers or commercial fishermen – were not removed from the general conditions that applied in the resource economies. There was a spectrum of modes of employment in many industries: most Indian and non-Indian resource workers laboured in a variety of such arrangements during their lives. The formation of a class of Indian employers was an important development which had, and still has, relevance to the interests and alliances made by that sector of the Indian population. Unless specified, such entrepreneurs are not implied where the term “independent producers” is used in the text.

Although I use the terms “workers” and “class” I have avoided the designation “proletariat”, not because it is unfashionable but because it bespeaks a class consciousness which was either mainly absent among native people in Canada, or of which I have no reliable evidence. Among some native sectors in Latin America one can correctly speak of an Indian proletariat. It is anything *but* the demeaning estimation that some take it to be.

Apart from the general paucity of accounts about Indian workers, some major imbalances exist in the record of native Indian history in BC. There exists a great disparity by region and topic. Relatively few studies deal with the post-contact history of the peoples of the interior of the province. Even on the comparatively well-documented coast there has been a concentration on relatively few groups. For a long time the primary interest of anthropologists was in retrieving and disputing about aspects of the indigenous cultures.

A few social institutions have received a staggeringly disproportionate

coverage – above all else, potlatching and the ideology of rank and kinship. It is not surprising that many lay readers have the impression that most members of coastal Indian societies were engaged in or preparing for potlatches from dawn to dusk, from winter to fall, year in and year out. Such over-emphasis has exaggerated the centrality of certain native institutions and has helped foster a view that when these institutions disintegrated or were suppressed, all else came tumbling down. This diverts attention from much more massive changes which demanded re-adjustment of native Indian societies.

Many day-to-day activities, which in terms of time and economic importance probably bulked larger than the more dramatic institutions, continued to play a role in variously modified forms in Indian communities. These have not usually captured the public imagination as have accounts of potlatching and winter ceremonials.

Another imbalance in the anthropological record is that there is relatively little information about the role of women in the newly emerging economy. The general implication is that women's worlds remained little changed, or at least had a much greater continuity with their traditional roles than did that of Indian men. There may be some truth in this but it cannot be taken on faith. Both the early involvement of some women in wage labour and also the broader changes in native societies must have involved adjustments in domestic activities. It would seem that comparatively few Indian women were recorded in the earlier ethnographic accounts. Part of this lacuna may be due to the fact that women generally were not prominent in the political and ceremonial activities which attracted early observers.

Even more problematic, a disproportionate amount of the information which went into writing ethnographies appears to have come from the chiefly and newly dominant sectors of native societies. There were few accounts by members or descendants of the commoners and slave classes in coastal societies. Such people may have been involved quite differently in many of the "central" social institutions than traditional accounts would lead us to believe. It may be that their responses to the changes brought about by European colonization and the spread of wage industries were rather different from that of chiefly families.

As one exasperated anthropologist wrote, more than a generation ago,

[T]he ethnographic picture of the Northwest Coast as visualized, taught, and accepted by many anthropologists is that which in fact applies only to the nobility of the southern Kwakiutl ... there are masses of ethnographic data relating to the distinctions between the upper and the lower classes and the cultural disabilities suffered by the latter. The reality of the lower class and the magnitude of the cultural distance separating it from the upper class are firmly established in ethnographic facts and citing Drucker to the contrary will not dispose of them ... I think that much of the confusion is due to the fact that many field workers followed Boas in giving attention to the more remarkable phases of culture with the result that the homely habits of the commoners did not come to be known.¹¹

One of the most general misconceptions of native Indian history in BC is the vision of a golden past age. In this view, indigenous societies on the North Pacific coast existed in a veritable Garden of Eden where ready-smoked salmon flanks launched themselves, glittering, from the streams into trenchers of salalberry and oolichan sauce, where a superabundance of foods was always and everywhere available with the merest of effort; a veritable land of Cockaigne. In such accounts, wars and raids were mainly rough games for prestige, slaves were not really slaves, chiefs were the servants of their people, all necessities were shared, and settlements were rife with cooperation and equity. Spiritualism and tradition reigned supreme and almost everyone was part of one big family.

While the nature of the indigenous societies is mainly outside the purview of this study, readers should understand that informed accounts paint a picture quite contrary to the above rosy view. Popular conceptions generally disregard or gloss over considerable evidence of suffering, hardships, and oppression between and within indigenous Indian societies. While this is not a justification for the varied inequities which followed in the wake of European settlement, it should remind us that native Indian societies did not witness a fall from natural grace at the arrival of Europeans. Given the fantasies about the native past which now pervade the mass media, and even public education, the above point cannot be made strongly enough.

The responses of Indian peoples to the changing opportunities and

restrictions of the early colonial and industrial eras in BC were varied and intricate. One should give members of those generations credit for being something more than mere pawns responding to the acculturative pressures of Euro-Canadian society. They recognized that no solution existed in a return to a past age, even if that had been possible.

One would like to hear some accounts of those native individuals, men and women, who for whatever reasons ventured beyond the imperatives of their societies. Surely there must have been some native people, like many Europeans, who were *not* especially eager to carry on the ancestral customs of "their people". The commitment to preserving and revitalizing indigenous culture which we see today may have been less than universal in earlier periods.

Accounts of native Indian labour in BC should be considered in conjunction with the life and labour of non-native people. I have occasionally alluded to descriptions of work in specific industries as recounted by non-Indians. It underscores that whites and others tackled the same jobs as Indians did with economic results which were often not much different.

The history of Indian workers in most of the primary industries of BC, while known in part to some, will probably be novel to many. Much experience may now be lost, however much probably still remains in the sometimes fresh, sometimes fading memories of older Indian men and women throughout this province. It may be that younger native people, like their non-native counterparts, have little knowledge about such aspects of their past and have accepted variously distorted versions of their own, and our common, history.

If a better understanding of the real history of Indian working people cannot serve as a guide for the future, it may serve as a warning about blind alleys and fanciful misconceptions which lead nowhere. A fuller history would attempt to illuminate the common experiences and interests that both Indian and non-Indian working people in BC share. In a number of ways then, this study is only a part of the picture.

CHAPTER 9

Commercial Fishing and Cannery Work

WHILE SALTED SALMON FROM THE FRASER RIVER was exported in modest quantities to Hawaii and California by the Hudson's Bay Company in the 1840s and 1850s, it was not a significant or successful trade. Commercial fishing in BC was based upon export and awaited the development of the canning process, which had been undergoing trial and experiment first in Scotland and then in New England since the beginning of the 1830s. The first fish canneries on the Pacific were established on the Sacramento and Columbia rivers in the late 1860s. The first commercial cannery in BC opened on the Fraser in 1871, and the industry became important in 1876, when three canneries operated on that river. The first cannery on the Skeena opened in 1877, on the Nass in 1881, and others at Rivers Inlet and elsewhere on the central coast shortly after. Their names, numbers, and periods of operation can be a topic of endless debate.¹

Indian commercial fishermen and cannery workers were crucial during the first two decades of the industry in all these locales. Although partially displaced in the Fraser fisheries after 1900, they continued to be critical in the north and central coast fisheries. The great majority of Indian fishermen worked under some form of contract with a cannery. Although they may have arrived in their own canoes, they typically fished from cannery boats with cannery nets, and frequently were dependent upon advances to purchase food and other goods required during the fishing season. In

some of the early cannery operations Indian fishermen and cannery workers lived in tent camps they established near the cannery during the fishing season. But later the majority lived in cannery cabins or in cannery fish camps. Wives or other relatives of the Indian fishermen often made up an important portion of the cannery work force. In some regions, canneries engaged Indian labour recruiters and utilized Indian foremen in what was known as the "Tyee system".

Some Indian fishermen and their families developed ongoing relationships with particular canneries and their managers. Sometimes these had the quality of patron-client relations, but the long roster of strikes and work stoppages by Indian fishermen and cannery workers indicates that they also acted to defend their group interests. Whether these were also class interests, as employees, is difficult to decide.

By 1890 the fish canning industry had grown from a promising experiment to one of the three most important income earners in the province. The fundamental basis of commercial fishing was salmon, particularly sockeye salmon. The primary locations of commercial fishing and canning were at the mouths and estuaries of the great salmon rivers. In order of importance these were the Fraser (which in 1900 sustained 42 canneries), the Skeena and Nass (with eleven each), and Rivers Inlet (with six canneries). There were thirteen other canneries scattered along the coast located in close proximity to the local salmon runs.² The concentration of canneries on the major salmon rivers meant that many Indian fishermen and cannery workers had to travel to the canneries, which were not necessarily located near Indian settlements. Many Indian commercial fishermen did not fish in their home locales. Only later technological changes, particularly the introduction of gas-powered boats, ice facilities, and fish packers, dispersed commercial fishing to all parts of the coast.

The mainstays of the early salmon fishing fleet were planked skiffs and carvel-hulled Columbia River boats, operated by two "men" and moved by oar and sail. The primary technique was gillnetting (although seine netting from the beach was used in a few locales). A reminiscence by Walter Wicks for the Skeena fisheries in 1904 outlines the work and method quite well. Although Wicks was not a native Indian, the basic gillnetting techniques were used by all; so in lieu of a contemporary native account let's hear what Wicks has to say about the physical side of this kind of fishing.

The operation of the boat was simple but back breaking work. As my partner cast the net over the stern I pulled the boat ahead until two hundred fathoms of net was stretched out over the water. Once the net was cast we drifted lazily down river with the tide ...

The boats were 26-foot double-enders, equipped with a centre-board which acted like a deep keel for stability under sail. It was pushed down through the boat's bottom in a centre-board box and would when bucking head wind, but otherwise drawn up. We could also move the boat with nine foot oars and hard work. To haul in the nets, the boat pullers would stand and push with the oars stern-first toward the net as the net man hauled in.

There was no cabin on the boat, but we had a small tent we could rig up for protection - although it left our legs exposed to the rain. A cut down five gallon coal oil can answered for a wood cook stove.³

Cannery tug boats towed strings of these fishing vessels up or down river during various stages of the salmon runs, bringing the boats back to the cannery or a fish camp on weekends. The crews included Euro-Canadians and Japanese, as well as Indian fishermen from villages along the north coast and the Skeena. Wicks continues:

The fishermen covered many miles of water to take advantage of tidal changes which were strictly observed when making a "set." The many packing plants located floating camps at convenient places on the fishing grounds so that fishermen could deliver their catches without a daily return to the home cannery ...

As the season progressed we followed the salmon up river. Then it became real work as we fished in strong shallow tidal waters infested with rocks, sandbars, snags, and sunken logs. Bucking the tide with nine foot oars was always a must to reach some vantage point for a single set.⁴

While every river, and each stretch of every river, was different, while individual fishermen had their own particular knacks and store of knowledge, Wicks' account, in broad outline, can be taken to describe commercial salmon gillnetting from the 1880s until the World War I era, and yet later on the north coast.

By the 1880s Indian fishermen and cannery workers were already drawn from long distances, travelling by canoe and steamer, to the major canneries. The Fraser River canneries drew Indian fishermen and workers from the length of the coast – from Sooke, from the Cowichan reserves on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, from Musqueam and the lower Fraser Valley reserves, from the Kwakiutl of Alert Bay and Fort Rupert, from Bella Coola, and sometimes even from as far afield as the Skeena. Even canneries relying upon regional Indian labour also drew native fishermen and cannery workers from many different locales. This must have resulted in an interchange of experience and widened social contacts among members of Indian groups.⁵

Many Indian commercial fishermen were *not* working in their traditional fishing grounds, and they had to learn the techniques and secrets of the new fisheries as did anyone else. Gillnetting by oar and sail demanded able-bodied, healthy men – and sometimes women. At least some Indian women fished with their husbands and other relatives, usually as boat pullers. It is unknown how numerous Indian fisherwomen were but they were sufficiently common that canning companies stipulated that advance payments would not be made to women boat pullers. In some locales, Indian fisherwomen helped crew the mosquito fleet of handline trollers, cod boats, and halibut hunting canoes which took fish both for subsistence purposes and offered surpluses for sale until well into the 1930s. Indeed, when engine-powered gillnetters became general in the cannery fleets, wives and even children became fairly common aboard Indian-operated fish boats. A wonderful way to grow up, I suspect.⁶

Work in commercial fishing and canning might involve some primarily social aspects as well. Charles Nowell's brief account of his first experience of fishing on the Fraser River provides some feeling of the non-economic decisions that often must have been part of trips to the canneries. Nowell, an adventurous young man of seventeen, came from Fort Rupert to the Fraser in 1887. He reminisces:

This was the time I went to Frazer River without telling my brother. I told the woman I was going around with, who was going to Frazer River, that I'd go down there myself. So I came to Alert Bay and got on a boat that was going to Frazer River, and I got off

not knowing where the girl was staying in the canneries. I had to swipe a canoe in New Westminster and got another boy my age, also from Fort Rupert, that knows the places and the canneries there, and we went down toward where the canneries were, and inquired where the Fort Rupert people are fishing at. They didn't know, they said, maybe in one of the other canneries, so we keep on going to cannery after cannery until we find another Indian from Fort Rupert, an old man, my aunt's husband, but not a near relation. He told me that the woman I want is gone down to a camp of that cannery where he was staying. He told me he couldn't get anybody to go with him as a partner in fishing. So I went to the manager of that cannery and asked him for a boat and net. I took this man to be my boat puller, and we went down to the camp where that woman was staying.⁷

After the end of the 1887 fishing season on the Fraser, Nowell and a group of others set out for a stint of hop picking in Washington State and then on to the bright lights of Seattle – where they “blow'er in”. Nowell returns to Vancouver dead broke. There he lands a job as a stoker in a North Vancouver sawmill, and finally returns to Fort Rupert. Nowell's account underlines the fluidity and variety that many working in the coastal industries experienced. We will meet him again as a sealer and then as a labour recruiter for Rivers Inlet canneries.

There was a great deal of fluctuation in the fishing-canning industry. New canneries opened, others went broke or were retired to become fish camps. Some burned down. Government fishing regulations changed and fishing grounds shifted; the permissible periods of catch and methods allowable changed constantly. All these points, and many more, were among the considerations weighed by Indian and other commercial fishermen by the turn of the century.

Commercial salmon fishing and canning is a seasonal industry. The main salmon runs varied somewhat from one river to another, varied by the species taken, and varied annually in numbers according to the species cycle. In the most general terms, canneries were engaged in start-up operations with a small crew from the end of April to late June, when a few boats might be taking spring salmon. The bulk of the fishermen and

cannery workers arrived for the main salmon fishing season between the beginning of July and late September, extending into October if chum salmon were taken. Final packing and shut-down operations proceeded through October, and most canneries were closed for the year by early November.⁸

Basically, the main fishing and canning season was no more than three to four months with the peak activity compressed into six to eight weeks. Start-up and shut-down work might extend employment for a few workers for an additional month, but that was it. Few fishermen or cannery workers were employed for five months in a year, usually less. At the end of the season (or when they were laid off) fishermen and cannery workers got their earnings from the cannery bookkeeper, after advances and the debts to the company store were deducted. People then returned to their home villages, sometimes after a brief fling at some town along the way. They then engaged in subsistence or domestic activities around their own settlements or looked for work in alternate wage industries until the next fishing season.

Until the mid 1890s many commercial fishermen used cannery boats and nets and worked directly for the canneries at wages ranging from \$2 to \$3 per day. Licenses regulating commercial fishing had been instituted by the Federal Department of Marine and Fisheries shortly after the inception of canneries. Fishing licenses have an ever changing history of Byzantine intricacy, which few would claim to understand. However, in essence, until the mid 1890s, the bulk of the commercial fishing licenses issued for salmon in BC waters were allocated among the canneries themselves. Under pressure from white fishermen, licenses were opened to independent fishermen on the Fraser by the mid to late 1890s. However, canneries continued to use a number of stratagems – such as providing boat, gear, and advances for nominally independent fishermen – so that a core of dependent fishermen was usually attached to each cannery. They seem to have been primarily Indian and recently arrived Japanese fishermen. On the Skeena and Nass rivers the canneries continued to hold virtually all of the fishing licenses, which they used for cannery contract boats until the early 1920s.⁹

One concomitant of the rise of independent fishermen was that canneries shifted to a piece rate payment for fish some time before 1900. This

placed the risk squarely on the shoulders of the fishermen. Fish prices fluctuated from season to season, even within a season. At the beginning of a particular run of salmon, the price paid might be high, and then drop as the main run came in; at the peak of the run the fisherman might not even be assured that the cannery would buy the fish he had caught. A fairly typical rate for the Skeena canneries in 1904 was 15 cents apiece for spring salmon, 6 cents for sockeye, 8 cents for coho and a penny apiece (per fish, not per pound) for pinks.¹⁰ On the Fraser, prices were somewhat higher. What the typical earnings of fishermen and cannery workers might have been will be considered in the discussion of Mill Bay Cannery.

Although it may seem straightforward, it is difficult to determine just how many Indian and non-Indian fishermen there were in a given year or in a given region. Different sources give radically different figures. Gladstone holds that there were only 850 gillnet licenses held by Indian fishermen (out of a total of 3,664) in all of BC in 1898. By 1900, this had supposedly dropped to 347 Indian-held licenses. However, Ralston notes 555 gillnet licenses held by Indian fishermen on the Fraser River alone in 1900 (plus 393 cannery licenses, many of which were worked by Indian fishermen).¹¹ In both cases, the actual number of Indian fishermen should be multiplied by two – there being the net man and boat puller working under each license. Moreover, possibly half of the 800-plus fishing licenses held by canneries on the Skeena and Nass, and the *circa* 400 cannery licenses on the central coast, were worked by Indian fishermen. It seems reasonable to estimate something in the order of 1,500 to 2,000 Indian fishermen and boat pullers working for canneries at the turn of the century. Whatever the exact figures, it is clear that they were being gradually replaced by canneries which contracted Japanese fishermen until that process was reversed through the Asian exclusion legislation of the mid 1920s.

The first primitive gas-powered fishing boats appeared on the Fraser some time before 1910. While not overly reliable and of limited range, they allowed an increased mobility. On the Skeena and Nass, where canneries owned the licenses and boats, gas-powered fishing boats were excluded from salmon gillnetting by Fisheries regulations until 1923.

Individual Indian fishermen in various regions began acquiring their own fishing boats shortly after the turn of the century. Some reserves developed boat building as a specialty, and others became noted for the

modernity of their vessels. For instance, Bella Bella fishermen owned some 30 gas-powered fishing boats as early as 1911. By 1913 some Kwakiutl, especially those at Alert Bay, had acquired a number of gas-powered gillnetters, work launches, a steam tug, and the first Indian-owned seine boat in the region. The Masset Haida, already having built schooners and other work boats, began acquiring a fleet of gas-powered trollers some years later.¹² By 1920 Indian and white fishermen in the Queen Charlottes had organized the Queen Charlotte Salmon Trollers Association, with locals on the Islands, at Port Simpson and at Port Essington.¹³ Independent Indian fishermen operating their own fish boats became more common during the 1920s and 1930s. However, the majority of Indian fishermen seemingly continued to work under contract on cannery-owned vessels. According to Gladstone's figures, in 1929, after the "attach system" of the northern canneries had been lifted and when the partial expulsion of Japanese fishermen in the industry had taken place, the racial composition of BC fishermen was 7,884 whites, 3,632 Indians, and 2,344 Japanese, for a total of 13,860.¹⁴ This includes all commercial fishing licenses, from salmon gillnetting to cod trolling.

The increasing number of fishermen and the increased range of gas-powered boats meant that there was increasing competition for fish stocks that had previously been available only to those fishing for regional canneries. At the same time, independent boat owners were locked into a system of capital costs, operating costs, maintenance bills, and other cash expenditures. Even if these costs were relatively low by later standards, it made independent commercial fishing different from fishing on cannery-owned boats. Commercial fishing gradually became no longer just one string of a many-stranded domestic economy. Although the major canneries retained fleets of their own fishing vessels, which they contracted to Indian and non-Indian fishermen until the 1950s and later, this became an ever smaller proportion of the fishing fleet on the coast.

It may be of interest to consider a few highlights of the work life of one of the most successful of Indian fishermen. James Sewid was born in Alert Bay in 1913. His father had been a logger, his stepfather was a logging camp operator and seine boat engineer. One of his grandfathers had been among the first Kwakiutl seine boat skippers. One uncle was a veteran seine boat captain for the ABC Cannery while another uncle was one of

the first Kwakiutl to own his own seine boat. They were not members of a marginal labour force by any stretch of the imagination.

James Sewid grew up learning firsthand how to operate steam logging donkeys, how gas and diesel engines work, what cannery life was like, and so forth. At age twelve, Sewid was working on the seine boat owned by his uncle Ed Whanock and the following year he is in the engine room of the cannery seiner *Sunrise*, skippered by his grandfather. The next year Sewid took over running the engine for a seiner captained by another uncle, one Henry Bell. Admittedly, these elders may have kept a closer eye on him than Sewid remembered in his reminiscences, but young men could once do those kinds of things. Together they worked the coasts and coves of Johnstone Strait, from Alert Bay to the Knight Inlet cannery, during the later 1920s.¹⁵

Speaking of his life as a seine boat fisherman during the late 1920s and early 1930s, Sewid says:

Around June we had finished all the work on the nets and the other work around the [Knight Inlet] cannery and our boats started coming in. They were all company boats that were kept in Steveston during the winter and a man delivered them to us at the cannery. As soon as Henry Bell's boat came in we loaded the net and other things on and then went to pick up our crew in Alert Bay and the other villages. I was running the engine for him. I used to love that job. After we picked up our fishing license in Alert Bay we would go out fishing from June to October. Although I was the engineer on Henry's seine boat I used to try everything. I would put one of my friends down in the engine room and go up on the wheel and make a "set." There are many different ways to make a set, but in all of them you have to let the net out where you think there might be some fish, and then when it is out you circle around and get the other end of it. Then the bottom of the net is all pulled together and you have to pull the net in and get any fish you have caught on board. If Henry Bell was going to have his supper or take a little sleep he would say to me, "all right, Jimmy, you take over." I would watch and if I saw a fish jumping, I would make a set.¹⁶

James Sewid later became the captain of a cannery seine boat and went on to become the owner of a small fleet of seiners, as well as a prominent voice within the Native Brotherhood. A fragment of his reminiscences of being captain of the cannery seiner *Annandale* may be of interest.

I had worked with many of those [veteran seine boat] skippers and some of them were very easygoing, nice men. They didn't push their crew too much and they didn't rush. They didn't seem to care too much but just took things easy. I had worked with those kind of skippers in my earlier days. Then too I had worked with skippers who were really going after the fish. They were really hard-working men who were rough and didn't have mercy on their crew. They didn't slow down at all, especially if there were fish around. They just set and set and set and worked hard. Some of the crew would be complaining, and the skipper would just be rough with them and tell them that they must set again because there were fish around. And that was the kind of man I was as a skipper. I didn't know how my crew felt about me. I didn't want to be mean to them or anything like that but it was just my way; I liked to work fast and I'm still like that today. If a fellow was slow or seemed lazy and didn't take any interest in what I wanted to do I really went after him and told him to smarten up or else. Being a skipper on a seine boat means you are responsible for firing men and when they are family men that is quite a responsibility. The captain is the man that is going to be responsible for their families. I had to work hard in those days and I had a lot of trouble with my crew. They were drunk all the time and I didn't like it so I fired some of them. I was pretty tough at first. We would go ashore into Alert Bay and they would get a bottle and start to drink and then they came on board drunk and would have to sleep it off. I had no alternative except to fire them and get another crew to take their place.¹⁷

It is difficult to guess what readers may make of the above statement. To me, it underscores the proposition that seine boat owners play comparable roles regardless of whether they are Indian or non-Indian.

A twist to the above conclusion is entailed in another memoir: Harry

Assu and Joy Inglis' *Assu of Cape Mudge* (1989), subtitled "Recollections of a Coastal Indian Chief." Born in 1905, the son of chief Billy Assu of the Cape Mudge Lekwiltok, Harry Assu began commercial fishing at the end of World War I, and continued to do so for the next 60 years. After a varied apprenticeship he became the skipper of a cannery seiner, and went on to become a seine boat owner. It was his table seiner that was portrayed on the old Canadian \$5 bill.

In addition to his life as a seine boat operator, Assu was chief of the Cape Mudge band for sixteen years, a member of the Masonic Lodge, and an elder of the United Church on Quadra Island, and acted as a "spokesman for Indian interests" in discussions with the federal Department of Fisheries. As well as being a prominent potlatch giver, he was a founding board member of the Nuyumbalees Society, the organization that operates the local Kwakiutl heritage museum. (Assu & Inglis, 1989: xiii)

Harry Assu's story interweaves the life of a successful native entrepreneur with the ideology of ethnic nationalism. This is exemplified in Assu's comments about the natural allies of native boat owners like himself:

We were always able take care of ourselves. Indians don't join unions. I look at it this way. There is no help from the unions. If you are fired, the union cannot give you a job. It's the company that gave you the job. In the early days before I bought a boat of my own, I ran a company boat. In the company, if they thought you were a strong union man, they wouldn't have anything to do with you.

Native people and the people who managed the canneries worked pretty well together from the beginning. When the unions involved our people in a big strike at Rivers Inlet around 1916 [1936?], we lost out on our whole summer fishing season. What we lost out on was not just a job. Fishing is our living, our way of life! We own these waters, and we have to be able to fish them. (Assu and Inglis, 1989: 71)

Assu also holds that commercial fishing on the coast was/is based on indigenous knowledge. There is also reference to how various native fishermen continue to fish the waters that were their traditional territories. Possibly such accounts are intended to further future resource claims.

The misrepresentation of what labour unions in the fishing industry are all about, and what they had been able to accomplish for all of their members, is an all too often repeated maxim. Only the intentionally gullible will be convinced that the interests of native workers are best served by the good offices of native entrepreneurs and cannery operators.

During and after World War II a fleet of Indian-owned and operated seine boats, as well as gillnetters and trollers, emerged. However, the bulk of Indian fishermen did not acquire their own boats; they worked on shares on cannery and privately owned fishing vessels. Some joined the Native Brotherhood of BC, which acted as their industrial bargaining agent.¹⁸

Others, Indian fishermen and especially cannery workers, joined the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. Most did not have success stories to relate, except the success of earning a living by doing productive, challenging work, often under difficult conditions.

Canneries and Cannery Workers

THE EARLY CANNERIES USED MANUAL LABOUR in lavish amounts at every step of the canning process. Fish were unloaded, butchered, cleaned, and washed by hand. The carcasses were sliced into chunks and put into cans by hand. The cans were weighed, loaded into trays, shifted through the steaming and cooking process, soldered shut, labelled, boxed and stacked – all by hand. Even the individual cans were initially manufactured by hand, in the cannery.¹⁹

Chinese men and Indian women were crucial to canneries along the BC coast during the first generation of operation. Chinese contract workers produced the cans and did the fish butchering. Indian women (and some men and children) workers were crucial in many of the other canning phases. Although Japanese and other cannery workers partly replaced Indian employees on the Fraser during and after the 1890s, Indian cannery workers continued to be important in other regions throughout the period dealt with. In the north and central coast canneries, Indian cannery workers continued to be crucial to production.

While visiting Port Essington, on the Skeena, in June 1888, Franz Boas recorded one of his few impressions of then contemporary Indian life as

endenced by work around Robert Cunningham's cannery. It was one of the first fish canneries of the region and was fairly typical of its time. According to Boas there were some 600 Indians from a number of locales engaged in commercial fishing around Port Essington. Some Indian families rented cannery cabins while others lived in tents. They traded at the Cunningham company store with "stamps" (*i.e.*, company scrip). As a touch of up-to-date consumerism, a jeweller made a living by travelling along the coast repairing watches owned by Indian fishermen and cannery workers.

A brief outline of work in the Cunningham cannery during the season of 1888 is as follows:

Work starts in the cannery at 7 a.m. Two hundred Indians are used for processing the salmon, and Chinese solder the cans. It is quite interesting to watch the processing of the salmon. At the first table women cut them open; at the next table heads and tails are removed. Then they are drawn and thrown into a bath where they are washed. They are then put into a machine which cuts them into seven parts and throws them into a trough from which they are distributed to be stuffed into cans. The lids are placed on top at another table and then they are placed in a soldering machine which fastens the lids. They are then placed on a large iron frame. The soldering is not checked in any way. The entire frame is then placed into boiling water for twenty minutes and then cooled. Finally the cans are packed into boxes. About forty fishing boats leave here, according to tide conditions. The salmon are caught in nets.²⁰

Such observations of what native peoples of the coast were then actually doing rarely intrude into Boas' or others' ethnographic reconstructions of traditional society. That is one reason why we often know more about arcane mythology than we do about how Indian people were making a living a century ago.

An aside about Haida fishermen and cannery workers who journeyed to work at Port Essington comes from Charles Harrison's reminiscences. Harrison was a one-time missionary among the Haida who later became a settler in the Masset area. His sometimes far-fetched but occasionally

earthy memoirs mention the Haida's disdain for lesser mortals, as conveyed in a pun making the rounds in the 1880s or 1890s:

The Haidas seemed to ridicule the idea of intermarriage with the Zimsheans and in the Chinook jargon used to sing,

"Kwansun Kakkwau Spukshoot Illahe

"Kluska marry tenas'sun, Kluska marsh Sitkum sun."

Spukshoot Illahe is now known as Port Essington. A Zimshean clan lived there and does now. The song in English said,

"Always the same at Port Essington

"They marry in the morning and are divorced at noon." (Cited in Lillard, 1984: 158)

Back to serious matters. Estimates of the number of Indian cannery workers engaged at any given time are quite variable. Seventeen BC canneries in 1884 supposedly employed some 2,710 cannery workers, roughly half of whom were Indian. Ralston's figures for four of the larger canneries on the Fraser and at Rivers Inlet indicate a median of 120 to 130 cannery workers and 120 to 160 fishermen at each in 1890. Although piecemeal mechanization was applied to cannery processes by the first decade of the twentieth century, the number of cannery workers in total did not necessarily decline. Gladstone's estimates are as follows. In all probability they are only partial figures, since it seems doubtful that early canneries could have functioned with an average of only 64 to 73 workers per plant.²¹

For a comprehensive account of the intricacies of cannery technology and its evolution, one may peruse Duncan Stacey's *Sockeye and Tinplate* (1982). Although it deals with the processes in the Fraser River canneries between 1871 and 1912, it applies equally to north coast canneries at a somewhat later date. Stacey's (1981b) detailed investigation of labour and production methods at the Gulf of Georgia cannery, during and after this period, suggests how intricate the factors were and how difficult it is to determine seemingly simple statistics such as the numbers and ethnic derivation of those employed in a single cannery.

Canneries recruited a highly heterogeneous labour force. The "typical" cannery of the turn of the century employed Indian fishermen and

BC Cannery Workers, 1898-1905

Year	Canneries	Chinese	Indian	White	Total	Avg/Cannery
1898	51	2,340	936	390	3,666	73
1900	64	2,640	1,056	440	4,136	64
1905	67	2,940	1,176	490	4,606	69

women cannery workers from a number of different villages and linguistic groups. They did not necessarily act in concert simply because they were "Indian". Chinese cannery workers, usually under contract to a "China boss", lived in a separate company bunkhouse. They were invariably single men. Japanese fishermen lived both in bunkhouses and in the fishing camps established by the cannery near the fishing grounds. Japanese women cannery workers appeared in the Fraser River canneries somewhat before 1910. White fishermen (from a wide range of differing national backgrounds) fished out of their own camps or from nearby villages in some regions. The cannery world was less cosmopolitan than it was ghettoized.

Whatever else it was, cannery work was factory work. Those who picture Indian women cannery workers as continuing their traditional roles in fish preservation in somewhat novel surroundings do not understand the nature of work in canneries. Cannery work proceeded on an assembly line basis. The work was geared to the flow of the packing line and partly set by the speed of the machinery. Cannery workers laboured under various degrees of supervision by foremen. They produced a commodity, tinned salmon, that they normally did not use themselves. They worked for wages. They worked amid a Rube Goldberg collection of steam vats, chutes, canning machines, hoses, pipes, steam, clanking transmission belts and other paraphernalia which made even the early canneries harbingers of the industrial revolution on many parts of the coast.

The basic cannery working day was ten hours, but during the peak season the days were often much longer. Cannery workers required stamina as well as speed. It was dirty, wet and tiring work. And yet, it was not markedly worse than many industries of the time. A certain degree of camaraderie and even adventure seems to have been attached to travel and work in the canneries. It was not all gruelling work. Accounts of can-

nery work are interlaced with festive Sundays, picnics, and interludes of enjoyment. Moreover, cannery work was seasonal and one could see the end in sight – an aspect of other early resource industries appreciated by workers regardless of national derivation. The main problem was that income received had to last until the next fishing season or the next job.

Employment arrangements at canneries were relatively informal. Most canneries had a core of regularly employed Indian women who repaired nets before and during the fishing season. Additional women cannery workers were hired from the families of contracted fishermen. Both Indian labour recruiters and Chinese contractors were involved in hiring a proportion of the Indian cannery labour force. Payment was mainly on a piece rate basis – so many cents per case of tinned salmon processed – with a welter of different rates applying. The method of hiring Indian labour was for the companies to appoint an agent or “contractor” in each major village. Cannery workers were also hired and paid by the “Chinese labour contractor” at the cannery itself.²²

Indian labour recruiters were especially important on the north and central coast, well into the 1930s. Canneries often had a number of such recruiters in the main villages from which they drew their fishermen and plant workers. Indian labour recruiters lined up fishermen before each season, gave notice of prices and rates, arranged for cash advances and generally acted as go-betweens for the cannery at the local level. An account by one such Indian labour contractor is that of the middle-aged Charles Nowell. He describes his role as recruiter for a central coast cannery between *circa* 1905 and the 1920s.

After we came back to Alert Bay I used to go up to River's Inlet and fish for the River's Inlet Cannery. When I first went there, the manager told me to come back and hire some Indians to go out fishing and offered me so much for getting fishermen and fillers, and I worked for him for quite a while. My little education in English helped me in all the jobs I got. When I go to River's Inlet, we go for six or seven weeks, only just for the sockeye season. Mr. and Mrs. Lagius and my wife and children all go, and we stay in the shacks that they built for the cannery people. The other Indians go out fishing, but I have to stay in the cannery and look after the

women that are filling the cans. In those days while I was hiring Indians for the cannery, I was given authority by the manager to promise the Indians what I would do for them if they came to that cannery. I used to know before hand what the price of the sockeye would be, and I would tell them that I'd give them gumboots free or some rain coats or extra money so that I'd get the good fishermen for this cannery. I paid all their fares up and back, too, and when I get to the cannery, I tell the manager what I promised them. He get the bookkeeper to write out all the promises and make me sign it, and then it was sent to the head office. Before they start to fish, I call all the fishermen. There were two men in a boat, and they get fifteen dollars. When all the other canneries heard about it, their fishermen begin to kick, and so they have to begin doing the same. Some time in January, I used to write to the head office for advance money to give out to the fishermen. That would be the time that everybody would be out of money, and I go to my fishermen and tell them that I have advance money if they want it. They all come to my house to get what they want, and that is how I used to get all the best fishermen.²³

Nowell continued as an Indian labour recruiter working for the Brunswick Cannery at Rivers Inlet into the 1920s. Some of the strains involved in this role are implicit in his autobiography – he began drinking heavily until he finally gave up that job. Writing of the role of the Chinese labour contractor in coastal canneries from the 1880s until the 1940s, Duncan Stacey notes:

This system had many advantages for the canners. The contractor took responsibility for employing sufficient hands, especially the expert cannery labour needed in the manual canning systems, and the cannery owners believed that the China boss could get more work out of his Chinese crew ... Another reason the canners liked the contract system was that they knew before the season began exactly what the processing would cost per case. Board and room expenses were handled by the contractor, and any loss was borne by the contractor rather than the canner. (Stacey, 1981: 19)

Stacey goes on to note that Chinese contractors also hired and directed some of the Indian workers employed in canneries. What the relationship was between Chinese contractors and native Indian labour recruiters is unclear.

Some canneries overcame the problem of a regular labour supply by being located near Indian settlements. In other cases they regularly drew labour from a particular set of Indian villages. Some villages linked to particular canneries witnessed the evolution of a strata of Indian foremen and "personnel managers". For a while Stephen Cook was a recruiter for canneries drawing Indian labour from Alert Bay.²⁴

In lieu of comprehensive data on the wages and working conditions of Indian cannery labour, let us consider some highlights of a single north coast cannery. The data is drawn from the notebooks and cannery accounts kept by the manager, Henry Doyle.²⁵ Doyle was prominent in the BC Packers combine, a central figure in the consolidation phase of the BC canning industry during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Mill Bay Cannery: One Case

MILL BAY CANNERY was located in the Nass estuary not far from the village of Kincolith. Although it was the largest cannery on the Nass, it was less mechanized and more dependent on manual labour than was then typical of canneries on the Skeena or the Fraser. It was also more dependent on Indian fishermen and cannery workers than was usual. However, despite certain peculiarities, Mill Bay Cannery can be taken as representative of the canneries during the period *circa* 1890-1920.

From its beginnings in 1889 until about 1904 Indian fishermen clearly predominated at Mill Bay Cannery. During the late 1890s the cannery employed an average of 60 to 75 Indian fishermen to crew most of its cannery boats. They were drawn largely from the Nishga villages but also included Tsimshian, Haida, and a few from more distant settlements of the north coast. Indian women cannery workers seem to have been drawn mainly from the nearby villages, although Chinese cannery workers and contractors provided skilled labour.²⁶

Japanese fishermen appeared in the Skeena canneries by the late 1890s and gradually became prominent on the Nass as well. They made up an

increasing percentage of Mill Bay fishermen after 1904, especially during the construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway which drew many Indian employees, some of whom had previously worked as fishermen. During the following decade a rough parity between Indian and Japanese fishermen was reached at Mill Bay Cannery. Until 1923 fishing regulations excluded powered fish boats on the Skeena and Nass rivers, and the catch was taken by the oar and sail gillnet boats described earlier. Up till that time virtually all fishing licenses were held by the cannery.²⁷

It is unclear if the Indian fishermen and cannery workers at Mill Bay were involved in the strikes that touched the northern canneries at the turn of the century. There were local work stoppages at Mill Bay that were too minor to enter into the recorded history of industrial disputes, but which are indicative of the ongoing frictions between canners and fishermen. The Mill Bay manager listed the names of 24 Indian fishermen in the "blacklist" at the back of his cannery diary for 1908. Blacklisting was a fairly open practice used to cow dissatisfied fishermen and cannery workers, a practice that Henry Doyle was working to coordinate among the cannery clan. However, as long as substantial numbers of fishermen and cannery workers were needed, blacklisting was not a policy that individual canners could overplay.²⁸

In 1908, Indian women working in the cannery net loft earned from \$1.50 to \$1.75 per day. Men working in the plant were paid \$2.50 per day, while certain women workers earned 20 cents an hour for the standard ten-hour day. We do not know the individual earnings of the bulk of the cannery labour because they were employed on a highly variable piece rate basis. Some were paid, confusingly, under the block charge made for "China labour", since some Indian cannery workers were contracted for by the Chinese labour contractor. Since jobs with a daily wage were much desired, those working on piece rates probably did not earn more than the pay mentioned above.²⁹

Between 1902 and 1916 Mill Bay Cannery gradually and belatedly installed the basic advances in cannery machinery. The first and most important was the installation of the so-called "iron chink", a machine that sliced the butchered fish carcasses into can-sized chunks automatically and reduced the butchering crew to a fraction of what it had been earlier. While trimming the fish slices and filling cans remained a manual

task, a number of other processes were also mechanized. Greater use was made of conveyor belts, automatic can weighing was installed, as were steam boilers which did away with the time-consuming double cooking that had been required earlier. Mill Bay Cannery switched to use of factory-produced "sanitary" cans; these came pre-cut in flat form and could be easily reformed by machine. This included a method of capping the tins by mechanical crimping and did away with the slow and labour intensive process of making the tins on site by cutting and soldering each can by hand. Cold storage facilities were expanded, which allowed the plant to hold surplus fish over longer periods. Nothing very exotic, but these were the processes which effected the employment of Indian and non-Indian cannery workers.

In 1910 Mill Bay Cannery had fishing licences for 60 gillnet boats, one quarter of those operating on the Nass. It packed some 13,000 cases of salmon that year, 31 per cent of the total for the Nass, and was the largest cannery on that river.³⁰ Let us see if we can make some sense of the fragmentary accounts from the Mill Bay Cannery diary for the year 1918. While this was a somewhat atypical year due to the labour shortages that developed toward the end of World War I, it seems to broadly reflect cannery conditions on the north coast until the mid 1920s.

In 1918 Mill Bay Cannery had 48 cannery boats regularly in operation (29 manned by Japanese and nineteen by Indian crews). In addition, there were 22 Japanese-crewed boats and 26 Indian ones supplying fish from fish camps. If all supplying fishermen are included, somewhat more than a half of the crews were Indian. Fish buyers were also shipping troll-caught salmon from the Queen Charlotte Islands to Mill Bay, obviating the necessity of fishermen from these regions to travel to the Nass for the fishing season. Fishing for spring salmon began on April 8 (only three boats) but the main fishing fleet began working between the middle and end of June. The peak sockeye salmon fishing period was from the beginning of July to mid August. The number of fishing crews declined as the main sockeye run passed, although the pink and chum salmon runs saw a flurry of activity during September and October.

Apart from a few spring salmon fishermen who worked for wages, all boat crews were paid on a piece-rate basis. All fishermen were paid the same piece rates. Differences in the earnings of individual fishermen depended on how much and what species of salmon they caught. Accu-

rate records of the catches and payments to individual boats must have existed at one time, but have not survived in the present documents. On an average, Japanese fishermen earned approximately \$400 for the 1918 season, and Indian fishermen an average of \$270.³¹

The greater total earnings of Japanese crews were offset by the fact that most fished the entire season and had higher transportation and subsistence costs to pay than Indian fishermen from the region. In general, one may guess that a fisherman would be lucky if he returned home with net earnings of \$250-\$300 at the end of the season.

There were eighteen monthly-salaried employees at Mill Bay Cannery listed in cannery accounts. Excluding the \$1,700 paid by the manager to himself, the average salaries were surprisingly low. Towboat and fish packer captains were earning only \$65 to \$85 per month. Salaries ranged from a low of \$50 per month for a number of Indian women net workers to a top of \$100 per month for the plant foreman. The typical salary was only \$85 per month, paid over an average five-month season. However, this was assured net income, and room and board were also provided.³²

Since authorities differ even on the number of canneries in operation and the number of fishing boats working in a given year, one may appreciate that statistics on cannery workers are problematic. Numbers, durations of employment, income – let alone more qualitative aspects – are extremely sketchy. In many canneries, it is possible that the managers did not themselves know exactly what the ultimate dispersal of wages was.

The bulk of cannery labour was hired by Chinese labour contractors. They negotiated the piece rates with the cannery manager, recruited most of the workers (sometimes in conjunction with Indian recruiters), and saw to it that the requisite labour force was available for the various jobs. Payment for cannery work was usually made on a piece rate per case packed. This was distributed by the contractor to cannery workers on differing piece-rate scales.

A crude estimate of earnings by cannery workers at Mill Bay in 1918 – if one divides the \$18,140 paid through the Chinese contractor to the crew of approximately 60 men and women working under him – would be some \$300 per person for the entire canning season. However, cannery workers doing different tasks received different piece rates and some did not work the entire season. It is my impression that a cannery worker who cleared \$200 during a season, after various deductions, was probably

more usual. However, when compared to the earnings of fishermen themselves we can appreciate that women cannery workers may have contributed a substantial share of total family incomes.³³

It seems that the real incomes of fishermen and cannery workers had apparently not improved much, if any, during the 25 years of mechanization and reorganization carried out by canneries on the north coast. According to Gladstone, the typical wage of Indian fishermen working for canneries on the Skeena and Nass during the mid 1890s was some \$45 per month, plus board, while Indian men working in cannery net lofts were then getting \$70 per month. In 1908 cannery wage rates for Indian men and women were \$1.50 to \$2.50 per day. By 1918 the top Indian salary at Mill Bay was only \$85 per month while the earnings of average Indian fishermen were less. In the interval the cost of consumer goods had increased substantially.³⁴

As yet we have no diaries or reminiscences by Indian cannery workers of that period. How they decided where to work, how they budgeted their incomes, what joys and fears were blended with their working lives, is undocumented. However, it is clear that Indian fishermen and cannery workers did not fatalistically accept the conditions and wages offered them by the canners.

Unions, Strikes, and Indian Fishermen

THERE MAY HAVE BEEN COWICHAN INDIAN FISHERMEN involved in the brief work stoppages at the Ladner and Ewen canneries on the Fraser during the mid 1880s. Unfortunately, little of the day-to-day activity, hopes, and strategies of Indian fishermen of the early period have come down to us. We know even less of the Indian (and other) women cannery workers who almost universally supported the work stoppages over grievances and pay rates.

The first major strike of salmon fishermen occurred on the Fraser in 1893. It was a period of retrenchment by canners. At the same time there was an increase in fishing licenses held by white fishermen, who initiated union organization under the banner of the Fraser River Fishermen's Benevolent and Protective Association (FRFBPA). No extensive cannery mechanization had yet taken place and fishermen and labour were in relatively short supply. In the previous year, the pioneer canner Thomas

Ladner wrote that he was desperately trying to recruit sufficient Indian fishermen, noting that fellow cannery magnate, Ewen, was complaining about other canneries "stealing" his Indians through the dastardly stratagem of offering them \$2.25 per day wages. As late as July 14, shortly before the main 1892 fishing was to begin, Wadhams Cannery had crews for less than a third of its 80 boats. Such a situation must have stimulated the hopes of white and Indian fishermen in their demands for \$3 per day or 10 cents per fish for the coming season.³⁵

According to Ralston, at least a third of the 2,350 fishermen on the Fraser River in 1893 were Indian. This made their participation in any strike action vital. While the FRFBPA enrolled white and some Indian fishermen directly, other Indian fishermen were allied informally through representatives from their own fish camps.³⁶ The Association also made overtures to the Japanese fishermen but excluded Asians from membership. This marked the beginning of a more than 50-year history of open ethnic rivalry in the fishing industry, which some labour organizers attempted to combat in the interests of a broader solidarity.³⁷

Virtually all fishermen – Indian, white and Japanese – came off the Fraser River at the beginning of the 1893 strike. Thomas Ladner, along with other canners, complained that "their" Indians were being intimidated by FRFBPA organizers, including a number of "half-breed" union organizers who were arrested. Various scare tactics were instituted by the canners who brought pressure to bear upon Indian fishermen in the fishing camps. They mobilized the BC Superintendent of Indian Affairs, A. W. Vowell, who with the Indian Agent of Cowichan Agency and the governor of the provincial jail, toured the Indian fishing camps urging them to return to work.³⁸

At a Vancouver public meeting held to raise support for the strike, three leaders of the striking Indian fishermen (Cranberry Jack, Capilano George and George Meshell) regaled the audience with their views of the government agents. According to a reporter from the Vancouver *World*, "the Indians fully understood the grievances of the white fishermen and being in sympathy therein, had joined the union." They also said that Indian Agents should be looking after the interests of the Indians and not the interests of the canners.³⁹

The canners were taking action as well. Ladner wrote to his Victoria partner:

I wrote you last about the devilish time we were having with the Union. I succeeded with others in getting the Authorities to come up and take the matter up, they came here [Canoe Pass Cannery] yesterday and visited the different camps and tribes and last night the Indians all went in except the Cowitchans and the Kuper Island Indians. These are which I have at the Wellington Cannery. Today I took some of their [cannery] boats away from them and gave them to Northern Indians and White contractors and they have promised to all of them go out tomorrow.⁴⁰

The strike began to come apart gradually and then collapsed when Japanese fishermen returned to the river *en masse*. Only minor concessions were made. White and Indian fishermen began drifting back to work, some Cowichan fishermen being the last to stay out. Some Indian fishermen lost the season when others took over their cannery boats. The strike extended the fishing season and required hiring some new crews. On August 10, 1893, Ladner again wrote to his Victoria partner.

Call on the Indian Department at once and ask them to allow the young fellows that belong to the Indian School at Kuper Island to remain here for a couple of weeks longer, they are working as boat pullers and earning good wages. The teacher called on me yesterday and told me the holidays would soon be over, but that he did not wish to take them away from earning some money if the Indian Department had no objections ... this would deprive me of a number of pullers and stop boats fishing. The teacher's name is Rev. G. J. Donckele.⁴¹

Ah, hired education!

The Indian fishermen of the Cowichan area formed their own local of the BC Fishermen's Union when it was organized in 1900. However, even before the Cowichan joined, a local of the new union was formed among Indian and other fishermen at Port Simpson, then the largest settlement of the north coast. Commercial fishing had expanded rapidly on the Skeena and Nass, but it was still an isolated region and the canneries depended very heavily upon Indian fishermen and Indian women cannery workers.

The first recorded strike in the region was in 1894, when "unorganized" Indian fishermen, supported by women cannery workers, went out in canneries on the Skeena. There were broader based strikes on the Skeena and Nass in 1896 and 1897. In 1899, a strike centred on Rivers Inlet pulled out some 2,500 Indian and white fishermen, as well as some Japanese fishermen.⁴² Japanese fishermen were becoming important in the northern canneries and despite inter-ethnic rivalry there were cases of alliances between these groups, though they were never long lasting.

One of the most determined of the northern fishing strikes took place on the Skeena and the Nass in 1904. It was led by Indian fishermen unaffiliated with any union. (What happened to the BC Fishermen's Union local established in Port Simpson in 1900 is unclear.) One leader was an Indian from Port Essington known as Nedildahld. He was said to be

a first class agitator, being possessed of a good command of language and the faculty of impressing the most optimistic feeling among his followers. In consequence of the influence of Nedildahld, the Indians are unanimous in their refusal to fish.⁴³

Initially this strike was supported by Japanese fishermen, but under pressure from the canners and in view of past grievances with Indian fishermen, they gradually returned to work. Some years later, when Japanese fishermen were more prevalent in the north, they initiated strike actions, only to have them undercut by strikebreaking white and Indian fishermen.

At its height the 1904 strike involved 800 Indian fishermen and 200 women cannery workers; it dragged on most of the season, and then slowly came apart. Some 300 Indian fishermen left the Skeena to fish the remainder of the season on the Fraser. The Albion Cannery owner who hired them and provided advances was raked over the coals by Henry Doyle, the executive officer of the recently formed BC Packers combine. Doyle was in the process of establishing a coast-wide blacklist system through which strikers would not be hired anywhere in the industry during the duration of a strike and selectively excluded afterward.⁴⁴

The most dramatic fishermen's strike of the early period occurred on the Fraser in 1900. Locals of the new BC Fishermen's Union had been established at New Westminster and Vancouver; some Indian members directly enrolled in these two locals. The leaders of the BC Fishermen's

Union were Frank Rogers and Will McClain, two leaders of the Vancouver trade union movement and both prominent in the Socialist Labour Party. Despite growing anti-Asian sentiment among white and Indian fishermen, Rogers and McClain attempted to enroll all fishermen on a class, not an ethnic, basis. Their efforts were blocked by elements among both white and Japanese fishermen. However, the bulk of the Indian fishermen on the Fraser gave support to the impending strike mainly through informal groups usually described as "under their own tribal leaders."⁴⁵

The fishermen's demands were for 25 cents per fish and \$3 per day for shoreside crews, with a guarantee that the fish delivered to the canneries would be purchased, and some form of union recognition. The canners refused to negotiate and the strike call was issued in mid July 1900. It was initially solid and union picket boats soon swept the handful of strike-breakers off the river. Japanese fishermen working under contract to thirteen of the canneries initially recognized the strike.

On July 15 the Fishermen's Union and its sympathizers mobilized a rally in Vancouver to elicit public support. The Vancouver rally started with a parade down a main city street led by the Port Simpson Indian Brass Band, and ended in an open-air meeting at the corner of Hastings and Cambie streets. The rally was addressed by Will McClain, by a Winnipeg labour leader named Trimble, and by an Indian chief from Port Simpson. Funds were collected, new members signed up, and McClain and the Port Simpson Indian Brass Band left for a rally in Nanaimo to raise funds and support "from the class conscious coal miners" there.⁴⁶

Some days later the canners raised their offer to 18 cents a salmon, although with no guarantee how long this price would hold, and with no recognition of any union. The Japanese fishermen, under their own leaders in the Dantai, were preparing to accept the offer, but the bulk of the white and Indian fishermen appeared committed to their original demands of 25 cents per fish or no fish. There were two opposed counter-marches of Japanese and white fishermen in the Steveston area, the centre of fishing activity on the Fraser. It was then that the canners decided to bring in the militia, a form of labour negotiation then much in favour. Certain cannery operators, acting in their capacity as magistrates, determined that the situation was potentially riotous, and convinced the provincial government to send troops - who became known as the "Sock-eye Fusiliers". Shortly after the militia had established their camp at

Steveston a large contingent of striking fishermen paraded around it, singing a parody of "Soldiers of the Queen".⁴⁷

Although individual Japanese refused to fish, the strike began to collapse as the bulk of the Japanese fishermen returned to work. Some of the white and Indian fishermen now began to waver. The Indian fishermen of one cannery went out on the river, but after meetings between union and Indian leaders they returned to camp again. According to some accounts the bulk of the Indian fishermen were among the strongest supporters of the strike. With a heavy salmon run already coming in, the canners became worried. Ralston tells us that

When the strike was prolonged, there were signs that most Indians, rather than break with their union allies, were simply preparing to leave for their homes and forfeit the rest of the season's work. A general exodus of Indians would pose another problem for the canners: their operations would be partially crippled by the loss of the services of the Indian women and children who were employed in processing.⁴⁸

On July 25, the canners arranged a large meeting of Indian fishermen at Canoe Pass which was attended by Duncan Bell-Irving, a major player in the canning business, and by A. W. Vowell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for BC. They succeeded in extracting a promise that if the strike was not settled by the following Sunday, the Indian fishermen would go back to work.⁴⁹ Some six days later, the remaining fishermen voted in support of their union leadership, but also voted to return to work under the new rates offered by the canners. Variouslly described as a defeat or a partial success, the 1900 Fraser River strike did mark the beginning of attempts to unionize the industry.

One result of the strike was the spread of Fishermen's Union locals to a number of communities along the coast. By early 1901 locals existed in Vancouver, New Westminster, Steveston, Eburne, Canoe Pass, Cowichan, and Port Simpson. Some of these locals enrolled Indian fishermen directly and the latter two locals were composed predominantly of Indian fishermen.

The 1901 fishing season saw what was essentially a replay of the 1900 strike, although more bitter, and apparently leading to a more clear-cut

defeat. Lodges of the BC Fishermen's Union began to stagnate. Some white fishermen shifted their focus to anti-Asian campaigns and turned for help to local politicians, some of whom were all too ready to fish in troubled waters. The last major strike on the Fraser during the era occurred in 1913. It was initiated mainly by Japanese fishermen, who had become the predominant force on the river.⁵⁰

The canning companies had introduced a series of wage and rate cuts, confident that they could rely upon the racial divisions among fishermen to defeat any strike. They were correct. In this case it was the Japanese fishermen who mobilized against the rate cut. The strike was broken with the help of Indian fishermen and cannery workers. No single ethnic group had a monopoly on courage or opportunism in these labour struggles.

During all these events, Indian women cannery workers came out in support of Indian and other striking fishermen. Indian cannery workers struck in conjunction with fishermen in 1893, in 1900, 1901, and initially in 1913 on the Fraser. The 1904 strike of the Skeena saw 800 Indian fishermen and 200 Indian women cannery workers come out of the plants.

Nimkish seine boat crews operating out of Alert Bay attempted a brief work stoppage in 1912 for higher wages but were undercut by other fishermen in the region. Japanese, Indian and white fishermen participated in semi-organized strikes on the Skeena in 1917. But the upsurge of political and union militancy that marked the World War I years in BC seemed to bypass the fishing industry. There were ephemeral work stoppages led by regional fishermen's associations at Rivers Inlet in 1922, on the Fraser in the mid and late 1920s, and at Nootka Sound in 1929. They had little effect. The organization of the Fishermen's Industrial Union, and a series of successor unions which later culminated in the establishment of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, signalled an upsurge of union activity during the 1930s and 1940s. They attempted to and did organize all fishermen and fish plant workers, of whatever ethnic derivation and in whatever phases of the industry, into one industrial union.⁵¹

CHAPTER 15

Epilogue as Prologue

THE GREAT DEPRESSION was a limbo in which Indian and many more non-Indian families found themselves. Naturally, not even during that decade did an entire population exist in a state of suspended animation. Events of that terrible time deserve fuller treatment than they can be given here. The following is not intended to suggest that native Indian participation in the broader economy somehow ended in the 1930s, but that decade does seem to have been a watershed of sorts.

Many Indian enterprises and farms were senescent or in plain decline a decade before 1930. Only the occasional Indian-run business, logging company, or other small enterprise tottered through the following decade. The main exception was the Indian fishing fleet. Although the collapse of small-scale enterprises was a process general throughout the Canadian economy during those years, it seems to have been of exceptional intensity among Indian-owned businesses.¹

Some of the previous sources of wage labour had already dried up. The railway and construction booms had come to a halt during World War I and would not re-emerge until much later. Work on river and lake steamers was largely gone by the beginning of the 1920s, as was horse and wagon freighting. Some Indian-produced goods, such as basketry and carvings, no longer found a viable market.

The centrality of Indian cannery workers had begun to decline with the mechanization and consolidation of the canneries before World War I.

During the 1920s displaced Indian workers could often find employment in the remaining canneries. Their role in commercial fishing continued to be extensive – especially after the legislated exclusion of many of the Japanese-Canadian fishermen during the mid 1920s.

Of course, not everyone was unemployed during the Great Depression – although to many people it seemed that way. Whether Indian communities were more, less, or equally affected relative to non-Indian workers depended partly upon what industries they had previously been involved in. Although fishing and cannery incomes were almost cut in half during the early 1930s, production revived and fishing and cannery work continued – but with reduced wages and fish prices. Although logging and sawmilling went belly-up between 1930 and 1933, the industry gradually began to pick up again. There too, wages were markedly lowered throughout the decade.

The desperation of the times is evidenced in an efflorescence of reserve subsistence farming and widespread reliance upon subsistence hunting and fishing. Similarly, a host of emergency economic activities, previously of declining importance, resurfaced: bounty hunting, placer mining, and marginal trapping. It is difficult to say who was in the most desperate straits during that terrible decade.

Even during the depths of the depression, relief and welfare payments to Indian people were insignificant. In 1935, the Department of Indian Affairs budget for BC allocated and spent some \$125,000 for Indian relief. This “staggering” sum was recurrently commented upon and was reduced the following year when the DIA was merged with and became the Indian Affairs Branch of the Department of Mines. The relief allocation constituted some five dollars per capita per year for each status Indian then in BC. In practice, few Indian families received any relief payments and only the indisputably incapacitated and infirm received minimal amounts.²

In total numbers, far more white working people faced similar conditions. Many single men and families responded to the situation in ways not dissimilar from the emergency strategies adopted by native Indians. At least one native man, who had experienced both the “jungle camps” of the unemployed as well as reserve poverty, could sympathize with the desperate conditions in which the migrant unemployed found themselves during the late 1930s.³

Some authors have suggested that a resurgence of “Indian identity” in BC began during the 1930s and point, for example, to the formation of the Native Brotherhood of BC in 1932.⁴ The Native Brotherhood was founded primarily by leaders of north and central coast Indian communities and grew into what for a generation was the most influential native organization in the province. It evolved as a multi-purpose organization, part of whose role was to lobby federal and provincial governments for the attainment of various Indian rights, although not land claims. Its leadership was drawn mainly from prominent members of the former Protestant mission villages.

While the original mission systems were senescent by the 1930s, much of the ideology and internal political structure bequeathed to such communities was still operative. The early leaders of the Native Brotherhood had grown up during the height of the mission village system. For some decades the Native Brotherhood managed to draw support from many coastal communities, although this waxed and waned over the years and it never garnered significant support from groups in the interior of the province.⁵

No real history of the Native Brotherhood has been written. Drucker's (1958) account of Native Brotherhoods in Alaska and BC, while valuable, is really a part of the phenomenon to be examined. It is as much a mythological charter as an analysis. The Native Brotherhood's shifting relationship with labour unions and its political and economic bases would be a study in its own right. A body of letters and position papers to government commissions, companies and public organizations relevant to such a study undoubtedly exists in sundry archives, as does a *circa* twenty-year run of the Native Brotherhood's monthly newspaper, *The Native Voice*. Fortunately, these developments are beyond the purview of this book and I am happy not to tackle them.

Indian workers and unemployed during the 1930s were active not only in native organizations. In the bitter Vancouver dock strike of 1935, some Indian longshoremen were union supporters while others acted as strike-breakers. Indian fishermen and women cannery workers seem to have participated in the organizational battles and strikes which sporadically coursed through the fishing industry in that decade.⁶ Much of the complexity of those events may have now become shrouded in ethnic nationalist mythology.

I know very little about what Indian peoples in the southern interior of the province were doing during the 1930s. There may be some surprises in store for future researchers. For instance, in 1936 and early 1937 members of the bands in the Lillooet-Fountain area had created an organization called "United Indians of the Lillooet District". Conditions there were desperate. Drought had knocked out subsistence farms, wage work was virtually non-existent, government ration payments were totally inadequate. In an attempt to force the Indian Affairs Branch to issue additional emergency rations the leaders of the United Indians began mobilizing a "March on Lytton", the headquarters of the regional Indian Agent.

Some of the correspondence of the United Indians organizing efforts has survived, and the phraseology it contains might astound even the most jaded reader.⁷ One of the slogans raised by the United Indians was "We Refuse To Starve." A letter from an Indian organizer (January 22, 1937) is addressed to an "Indian Workers Club" in Fountain. In the many petitions delivered to the regional Indian Agent, Indian petitioners often described themselves as "farmer", "unemployed labourer", "workingman", or "worker". Although no "hunger march" was apparently mounted, for about two years organizing efforts were carried on among bands throughout the region. While some of the rhetoric involved may have been just that, while the momentum may have been transitory, it indicates something of the variety of Indian responses to the depression years.

The main concerns of most Indian people during that decade were neither in helping to organize native associations nor in supporting union activity. Probably most Indian men and women were primarily involved in a mix of recrudescing subsistence activities and whatever income-generating activities they could find or devise. Nor should it be imagined that an entire decade was spent in grim poverty and abject misery. Marriages and births, friendships and partings, personal sorrows and passions great and small, continued as ever. Even modest potlatches continued in some coastal locales. Most people probably wrung some joy and sustained decent social relationships during desperate times. These were part of the daily minor triumphs that a full social history would deal with. It may be that a rounded life history or a realistic novel could convey such understanding better than a scholarly history would.

By 1941 the emerging war industries and military recruitment had created a labour shortage. Indian men and women flooded back to their tra-

ditional work in the resource industries and also into a host of novel jobs. Indian workers became employed in a wider range of industries than ever before. Some worked in the Vancouver and Esquimalt shipyards, banging out the wartime cargo ships, others in a variety of factories and construction projects. Native employment during World War II should have reminded observers just how rapidly and broadly native people could adapt to novel jobs when given the chance and incentive to do so.⁸

Many Indian fishermen who became prominent during the next generation acquired their vessels during this period. In December 1941 (with the entry of Japan into the war) the entire Japanese-Canadian fishing fleet was confiscated and the Japanese-Canadian population in BC was interned. When these expropriated fishing vessels were later auctioned off, more than three quarters of them were acquired by and added to the cannery fleets. This provided a large number of cannery vessels available on a rental basis, which benefited native fishermen who were prominent in the cannery fleets. Japanese-Canadians were not allowed to return to the BC coast or enter fishing until 1949, and some native spokesmen were vociferous proponents of Japanese-Canadian exclusion.⁹

The post-war period involved a general economic retrenchment in Canada, but one which was relatively brief in BC. Job attrition in the primary resource industries started only later, but the 1950s witnessed a selective assault upon sectors of organized labour. Native Indians were not necessarily removed from this process. During that decade the Native Brotherhood was viewed by some interested parties as an organization that could be used to undercut the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, then the primary union in the industry. A prominent scholarly study of native Indians in BC raised the possibilities of this role, but concluded that it was impractical.¹⁰

The resource development boom that marked BC during the 1950s and part of the 1960s bypassed certain Indian workers. By the late 1950s many of Indian people, especially those in the fishing-canning industry, began to experience long-term, structural unemployment. The formerly widespread network of canneries and mills became concentrated in a reduced number of locales. This was particularly dramatic in the shift of fish canneries to essentially two locales in the province. Some regions were simply stripped of the plants and jobs they had once had.

In other spheres, the BC provincial franchise was extended to status

Indians in 1949 and Frank Calder, then a young Nishga activist representing the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, was elected as an MLA from Atlin riding. Three years later, a major revision of the Indian Act removed clauses banning the potlatch and other cultural restrictions. Status Indians obtained the federal franchise in 1960.

Social security programs basically had not existed and were gradually provided to the Canadian public only after World War II. Health and welfare programs were extended to Indian and non-Indian people over the next two decades. Probably the most important element of new government services was the improvement in health and medical care. The success of these medical services can only be fully appreciated by talking to older people or tracing the records of mortality through kinship and demographic charts. Deaths from preventable diseases, which long had been a general fact of life in many Indian communities, became more unusual. The Indian population of BC, more or less stable during the previous two generations, began to increase rapidly.¹¹

The late 1960s witnessed the beginnings of unprecedented government funding for native peoples. To my knowledge there is no complete tabulation of the sources and the dispersal of funds in the name of native people during the past 25 years. The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development is merely the largest and most visible agency involved. It is remarkable that no one has hazarded a full account of what monies were dispersed and where they went.

The last generation has witnessed the emergence of a native Indian middle class, many of whom are involved in administering economic and social programs dependent upon government funding. It would be surprising if the ideology of this strata were not some form of ethnic nationalism. This view holds that no classes or fundamentally different interests exist between Indian people, and that conflicts are exclusively inter-ethnic ones. It is an outlook that increasingly calls for rights and resources to be allocated according to the different racial claims on them. It holds that the native condition can be understood and dealt with only by native Indians themselves, a view which now seems to find general acceptance among native Indian people. Non-Indians, after a generation of public indoctrination and schooling, have also come to accept this proposition: it is in accord with hoary views about ethnic boundaries and rights.

In conjunction with these developments is the emergence of a public ideology about native Indians and aboriginal society. That ideology deserves a study in its own right and would deal with claims about the inherent spirituality and conservationist nature of native cultures, their general equity, and their inherent capacity to instill pride in their participants. This ideology has roots that go back well over a century and while it may contain some elements of truth, as it is presented to the general public it can be described as an example of the "invention of tradition". Almost 70 years ago, William MacLeod (1928) alluded to the similarity between the colonization of Celtic Britain and that of North America; he noted similarities in the fictional traditions that have grown up around each. Eric Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) provides some compelling examples of this process in Great Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when many English, Scottish and Celtic "traditions" were created and installed in the public consciousness. Such accounts of historical creation which attained political success may provide a much needed scepticism when considering the claims being made about native traditions today.

Some eighteen years ago, when this book was first published, any policy that required the transfer of large blocks of land and other public resources to exclusive Indian title seemed utter fantasy, with no real possibility of realization. Since then, political developments have made such transfers and conjoined native sovereignty all too probable. Before falling in line to support such far-reaching changes we should ask ourselves how it is that the powers-that-be in Canada have been so supportive of native land and resource claims. One should ask why the mass media, American and Canadian, have so persistently advanced the ideology of native sovereignty. Why is it that institutions not normally noted for their commitment to either truth or social justice have ranged themselves so fully behind these native policies?

A system of distinct caste rights is not without precedent in Canada. As recently as the mid 1940s there existed a set of legally distinct, racially defined castes in BC – native Indians, Asians, European immigrants, native-born whites – each having separate and unequal rights. It was a situation that all persons and organizations concerned with social justice sought to eliminate. Today we find both "progressives" and "conserva-

tives" backing campaigns to restore a system of distinct rights and powers for "aboriginal nations".

Given the retrogressive developments of the past decade, it would be foolhardy to predict what may emerge over the next generation. However, current programs to establish enclaves of native sovereignty may one day be viewed as an almost inexplicable madness. It is a policy that a future generation may hold to be as misdirected and ill-conceived as Indian policies of a century ago are today.

A process which has become increasingly clear during the previous eighteen years is the extrusion of huge sections of the Canadian population from the economy. Mass structural unemployment, progressive impoverishment, privatization, and a tearing up of the fundamental social contract created by the previous two generations, have become the central social issues in Canadian life, not the peculiar inequities faced by native peoples, past and present. An unstated proposition behind the drive for native rights – *i.e.*, that it involves the righting of the major historical inequity in Canada – can be a smokescreen covering the growing social injustices and dissolution of this country.

Although one program of restitution does not necessarily exclude another, the devastation and effective disenfranchisement of a growing sector of the Canadian population is the main social issue to be faced today and in the future.

Whatever the future developments may be, the history of native Indian participation in the varied industries of BC during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remains. The details of Indian participation in wage labour may change in the light of future studies, but I see no need to fundamentally revise the general outline presented in the body of this book. Employment in the broader economy was an important aspect of native Indian history.