

Daily Life at Fort Victoria, 1846 to 1850

By Anna Stooke

Daily life at Fort Victoria between 1846 and 1850 was recorded from a top-down perspective. The post journal, then, provides more of a glimpse of the Hudson's Bay Company hierarchy than the everyday experience of a common labourer. The only "I" was Roderick Finlayson, Chief Trader at the Fort, who dutifully reported all shipping activity, work and trade for Company records. The friendships, rivalries, jokes and trivialities which marked the lives of the forty-odd Company servants and their families have not been preserved. Nevertheless, the journal presents an invaluable account of the rhythms of fur trade life in the Pacific Northwest and a daily record of how the British gained a foothold on Vancouver Island. Fittingly, the last months of the journal describe the controversial treaty process which gave the Crown ownership of aboriginal land. Yet, although activity at the fort was crucial to the eventual colonisation of Western Canada, life there hinged more immediately on the work itself. Finlayson's chief task was to supervise and trade; Company hierarchy shaped the distribution of construction, farming and other duties to the Company servants. However, although work was key, life at the fort was also controlled by outside forces. Bad weather, accidents and illness were common, often requiring Finlayson to reorganise the distribution of labour. Further improvisation was required to maintain good relations with the various, and sometimes warring, aboriginal groups which traded with the fort. The dangers of life at the fort were assuaged, however, by leisure and holidays. Weddings and other celebrations provided opportunities for friendship and boosted morale. However, the feasting which characterised these celebrations was fraught with social

tension and disciplinary issues, particularly when it came to alcohol consumption. This was directly linked to its effect on work at the fort. Indeed, inhabitants of Fort Victoria between 1846 and 1850 were businessmen, not settlers. The patterns of daily life at the fort were organized to accommodate individual survival within the greater commercial success of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Any understanding of life in fur trade society requires the acknowledgement that those in command were born with a British perspective on social relations. Furthermore, between 1846 and 1850, under the command of Roderick Finlayson, Fort Victoria transformed from a three year-old trading establishment to the headquarters of HBC operations on the Pacific coast, and then to a British colony. Such shifting circumstances could only be navigated with a daily work schedule that was founded on a solid hierarchy. As Chief Trader, Finlayson, sent supplies and mail via ships' captains to other forts, supervised the packaging of the Victoria outfit in the autumn, oversaw the construction of new buildings and farms, and, of course, traded. Much of his activity in the post journal was in a supervisory or administrative role. Indeed, he often complained that the fur trade was "quite dull," or without consequence.¹ A sense of boredom emanates from his crisp descriptions of events. By contrast, the middlemen and labourers were never short on employment.

Company servants, the majority of whom were French Canadian, were employed six days a week at construction and agriculture, and occasionally discharging trading vessels. By 6 A.M., the labourers were fed and occupied.² Work was stopped for lunch and dinner, and often continued into the evening. Most of the workers were what Finlayson termed "disposable"; they performed whatever duty had been assigned them for the day or week. Although the fort functioned as a trading post and port, daily operations for most Company servants were focused on the fort's self-sufficiency.

1 Fort Victoria Journal, 15 July 1846 and 20 February 1849.

2 As seen in the Brazier Transcription, the Cadboro Log, 11 March 1847.

The majority of the men ploughed new fields, and planted and harvested potatoes, grain, oats, peas, turnips, strawberries and orchard fruit. Others had more specific qualifications, like sawyers or dairymen. Minie and Beauchamp, respectively, were blacksmiths at the small forge. Thomas Ouamtany acted as interpreter on trade outings to the aboriginal villages along the coast; Francois Coté usually accompanied him and Finlayson as the boatman. A Kanaka worked in the bakery, and by 1850, another Kanaka was James Douglas' personal cook.³ A number of local indigenous men were engaged by the Company for a six or twelve month term; they performed odd jobs as disposable labourers, or made cedar shingles at Mount Douglas as the fort diversified its trade. Indeed, the only work performed by the entire workforce was the packaging of furs for the Victoria outfit. Nevertheless, fort life was communal. As such, the labourers and Company officers shared experiences beyond their performed duties.

3 Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed. *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1975), 283.

The Fort Victoria journal reveals Finlayson to be a man dedicated to his job as Chief Trader. James Douglas described him as a man with a "degree of energy, perseverance, method and sound judgement in all his arrangements."⁴ The crisp record of the day's events, each log formatted the same, denotes the regularity and control with which he oversaw the fort's operations. Nevertheless, life at Fort Victoria still yielded interruptions and distractions. The daily work was subject to unpredictable weather; in June of 1846, a sudden frost blighted the potato crop. High winds or storms often prevented a ship from sailing, and the wet winters turned the fort to mud. Upon arriving at the fort in March 1850, J.S. Helmcken was shocked to see Dr. A. Benson wearing seaboots on land. However, he soon discovered their necessity. He wrote,

the Fort yard was muddy and the sidewalk to the stores consisted of two or three poles, along which Benson trudged, but off which my boots slipped every few steps! So my boots and my pants were not a little muddy, and the wretch Benson laughed at me, saying, "I told you so! You'll soon be like me, if you remain here."⁵

Yet although the weather could be unpredictable or frustrating, the temperate climate was such that the labourers were not victim to frostbite, like their counterparts in Rupert's Land and Canada. Instead, Helmcken's anecdote reveals the potential for accidents which frequently occurred at the fort.

Many of the entries in the post journal end with a note on the employees who were on the "sick list." (See also the Interpretive Essay *Measles and Malingers: Illness, Disease, and other Afflictions in the Fort Victoria Journal 1846 – 1850* by Caitlin Ottenbreit). Despite its connotations of illness, many labourers were unable to work due to injuries caused by work place accidents. The work

4 Eleanor Stardom, "Finlayson, Roderick" *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* (2000) <http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=6099&interval=25&&PHPSESSID=vq4b7ps3aob7sclhnc55j9q43> (18 April 2010).

5 Smith, *Reminiscences*, 281.

was physical, and dangerous working conditions were an aspect of everyday life. A French Canadian, Gravelle, was wounded by being "jammed" between a tree and ox chains while hauling logs in November of 1846. Earlier that year, in June, the Kanaka Jack Kaau was on the sick list for two weeks after being mauled in the face by an ox. Injured men prior to the arrival of the first resident surgeon in 1850 were treated by a ship's doctor and confined to the bachelor's quarters to convalesce. If an injury was slight, like a cut or a swollen wrist, the labourer was given a less strenuous occupation. Indeed, the period of recovery after an accident was an employee's only opportunity for leisure other than Sundays and holidays; this may explain the repeat appearance of certain individuals on the sick list, often for noncritical injuries. Minie appeared regularly, his common complaint being that he had fallen or had sore limbs. The post journal reflects Finlayson's distaste for this inability to work. On 22 January 1849, his account of fort business was interrupted for a scornful description of Minie, who "got himself Severely hurt in the Knee yesterday by a fall in descending the bank before the peoples dwelling" near the Mill. Despite Finlayson's disdain, it is evident that fort operations depended on the labourers more than Company officers. The recorded accidents, whether they were intended or not, reveal at once the hard work and the danger which characterised life at Fort Victoria.

Individual safety and the survival of the fort also depended on diplomacy with the surrounding aboriginal communities. Company business required that Finlayson maintain good relations with his aboriginal trading partners; fortunately, the local Songhees, who also benefitted from European trade, had been friendly since the establishment of the fort. However, the fort was sometimes caught in the middle of tensions between one trading group and another. On 7 June 1846, balls from the crossfire between some Snohomish and Songhees people landed within the fort stockades. In March 1850,

Helmcken saw "bullet holes in the pickets and bastions made by hostile Indians."⁶ Nevertheless, violence between the whites and the aboriginal community was rare. It was more practical for Finlayson to respond with a threat of power. One such occasion was on 24 August 1848, when tensions between a group of Skagits, Klallums and Makah near the fort caused Captain Courtenay of the *Constance* to "very considerably" demonstrate the power of the Royal Navy. [See the paintings by John Haverfield of these demonstrations in the Gallery section]. However, daily interactions with local tribes were usually peaceful and based on trade. These relations were governed by aboriginal law, even when it involved labour at the fort. When a Cape Flattery slave, the Cowichan Weena Camalla, escaped to Fort Victoria, Finlayson bought him for one gun and one load of shot to maintain favorable trading with the Makah. Camalla was then required to stay at the fort until his labour repaid this debt. Slavery had been outlawed by Britain since 1833, but operations at the fort had to function within the traditions of the indigenous population to succeed. Company business was at the foundation of these interactions, but the threat of violence and the necessity of peaceful relations for daily survival was a more pressing concern.

Yet, as has already been shown, life at the fort was not without casualties. Illness and death were factored into the daily operations. On 11 November 1849, Finlayson described the death of the daughter of his superior, James Douglas, thus: "Nothing remarkable except the death of poor little Rebecca Douglas who breathed her last about 6 p.m." On the afternoon of 14 November, her remains were "consigned to the Tomb," though the journal notes that trade occurred and the men were employed as usual. This should not be construed as callous; instead, the fact that daily operations persisted reveals that death was a natural aspect of life in the fur trade. In fact, it caused more of a disturbance when inhabitants at the fort were not working, as was the case when Boulanger died on

⁶ Ibid., 284.

New Year's Day, 1849. Finlayson wrote that this funeral "cast a gloom" on their holiday.⁷

Celebration was an integral part of fur trade life. The long hours of the work week had to be balanced with time for leisure and social occasions to maintain employee morale. On Sundays, all work stopped, though most men at the fort were not seriously religious. Before the arrival of the resident minister, Reverend Robert John Staines and his wife Emma in March 1849, regular church service was unusual and only provided by visiting missionaries or a ship's chaplain. On 23 June 1848, a French Catholic missionary, Monsieur Veyret, informed Finlayson of the days which should be kept for religious observance. Finlayson complied, reluctantly, though he only permitted this while a priest was on site. Indeed, visiting ministers were much more important for their ability to perform marriages between Company servants and aboriginal women. There were often multiple weddings on one day. Helmcken described a wedding celebration at the fort in 1852 thus,

the ceremony over, the bride and bridegroom leave the church to return to their parents' house for a good time, and then the guns roar from the bastions. The bell in the middle of the fort rings---the dogs howl thereunder---the men fire muskets---all hurrah. Grog is served out all round, there is feasting, revelling and jollity, and everybody heart and soul wishes the handsome, favorite, and favored couple very many happy new years.⁸

While this colourful display was likely more extravagant than most, it does reveal the amusement and closeness of community life at the fort. Similar celebrations happened on major holidays like Christmas and New Year's Day. The holiday feast was served in the afternoon, after divine service in the morning. Evenings were free for revelry; New Year's celebrations in 1850 went on for three nights, the third day being "allowed the people to recruit after last nights exertions at dancing which they kept up until a late hour."⁹ Festivities were accompanied with time off and extra rations of beef and

⁷ Fort Victoria Journal, 2 January 1849.

⁸ Smith, *Reminiscences*, 297.

⁹ Fort Victoria Journal, 3 January 1850.

pork, as well as servings of rum. The animals were slaughtered a few days before in preparation for the feast.

The fact that celebration was centred around food and drink highlights the role of food and eating in the lives of working men at Fort Victoria. Indeed, the provisions at the fort were the cause of class tensions between Company officers and servants, whose dining experiences were as different as their employments. According to the post journal, Company servants received 10 lbs cornflour, 4 quarts of peas, and 21 lbs salt salmon for the week. Their aboriginal wives received three quarts of peas and two quarts of flour.¹⁰ This was a rather monotonous diet, though local fruit was available in season. Sugar and molasses were occasionally available, especially on holidays; this, however, could not have been enough, as molasses were an object of theft.¹¹ All the fort residents complained about the food, which Helmcken said was "because they could not get everything they wanted---as they could in England or Scotland."¹² However, a fur trader in 1878 dismissed this attitude. "It has been charged upon the H.B.Co. that their labouring men were poorly fed," he wrote, "but until the gold excitement there were never better fed working men in any country."¹³ Despite these claims, it was true that Company officers received a larger variety and larger proportions of food. Their dinners consisted of red meats, mixed vegetables and pastries. Also, instead of eating in the mess hall with the labourers, they dined separately. After James Douglas moved permanently to Fort Victoria in 1849, high ranking residents and Company officers ate their morning and evening meal at the Chief Factor's house.¹⁴ Spatial separation at mealtime was not entirely negative, however, as it allowed Company

10 Fort Victoria Journal, 11 July 1846.

11 Fort Victoria Journal, 12 February 1849.

12 Smith, *Reminiscences*, 119.

13 Richard Mackie, "Colonial Land, Indian Labour and Company Capital: The Economy of Vancouver Island, 1849-1858" M.A. diss. (University of Victoria, 1984), 123.

14 Smith, *Reminiscences*, 283.

servants an opportunity to relax away from Company authority.

Indeed, the social divisions accentuated by food at Fort Victoria paled in comparison to tensions regarding alcohol consumption. Rum was the most common spirit available to Company employees. It was served out in rations on holidays, though, otherwise, frequent consumption was frowned upon for its effects on labour at the fort. Indeed, after purchasing and drinking rum from an American vessel in December 1849, some Company employees were "laid up" for two days. The overuse of alcohol also temporarily affected Finlayson's authority. On Christmas Day 1848, he received "a Severe Cut in the left hand in attempting to get a Knife from Thomas the interpreter, who took hold of it with the intention of Stabbing Some of the men in a drunken row." Generally, however, labourers enjoyed a night's "carouse" and sometimes swore by alcohol's medicinal qualities.¹⁵ This difference in opinion often caused conflict between Finlayson and his men. On 25 December 1846, for instance, he had to apprehend Coté repeatedly for being "rather riotous." Coté deserted the fort "with the intention of taking up his abode with the Natives in defiance of [Finlayson's] orders and the Rules of Service." The Frenchman's punishment, when he returned and acknowledged his misconduct, went unrecorded. Another "insolent" employee, however, was taken in irons to the Block house, and in July 1847, a Cape Flattery thief was flogged.¹⁶ Yet although disciplinary action was taken on occasion, it was as often not taken. Company morale was, after all, an important factor in the amount of work performed at the fort. Indeed, at other HBC forts, the post surgeons recommended alcohol to "cheer drooping spirits."¹⁷

Indeed, life in the fur trade was difficult for most of those involved. Despite the communal

15 Fort Victoria Journal, 3-4 December 1849; Michael Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday Life in Hudson's Bay Company Service, York Factory, 1788 to 1870* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites, Environment Canada, 1889), 103.

16 Fort Victoria Journal, 15 October 1847 and 20 July 1847.

17 Payne, *The Most Respectable Place*, 103.

atmosphere, there could also be periods of isolation. This could be particularly emphasized by the social hierarchy. Finlayson's social equals were ship's captains or Company officers from other forts. Their visits were temporary, and their departures may have inspired loneliness or a despair at the return to normal operations. "We are once more clear of visitors," Finlayson remarked on 14 July 1846. His predecessor, Charles Ross, found life at Fort Victoria to be marked by "dreary solitude."¹⁸ Indeed, life at the fort was ordered first and foremost by the needs of the Hudson's Bay Company, whether that meant manufacturing items for trade, improving the architecture and infrastructure of the fort, or feeding its employees. Individual survival and self-sufficiency were integral to Company success; social life was not. Although some would choose to retire at Fort Victoria, Company officers and servants were employed in the fur trade, not directly in a colonizing capacity. However, they not only worked, but lived at the fort. As such, their daily lives were touched by more than Company business.

Daily life at Fort Victoria was shaped by many universal experiences. No matter their position in the social hierarchy, the residents worked hard and suffered through illness and death. Their lives were all marked by the same irony of living together in relative isolation. Life in the fur trade on the Pacific Coast could be dangerous, and routine and monotonous. Indeed, it was characterised by extremes. Although the operation of the fort was of the utmost importance, individual survival in the face of bad weather, poor working conditions, and sometimes volatile relations with the fort's aboriginal neighbours shaped the daily experience. This unpredictable environment was balanced by celebrations and leisure time, though these too were the affected by social tension. Nevertheless, the rhythms of daily life at the fort fit into the larger commercial venture that was the fur trade. Yet

18 Terry Reksten. *"More English than the English": A Very Social History of Victoria*. (Victoria: Orca Book Publishers, 1986), 6.

always at its base was the pursuit of a normal existence.

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