



University
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

KAITLIN FINDLAY

BSc (University of Victoria, 2010)

**“The Bird Commission, Japanese Canadians, and the Challenge of
Reparations in the Wake of State Violence”**

Department of History

Friday, December 22, 2017

10:00 A.M.

Clearihue Building

Room B017

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Jordan Stanger-Ross, Department of History, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Penny Bryden, Department of History, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Eric Adams, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta

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Dr. Maia Hoeberechts, Department of Computer Science, UVic

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Abstract

The Royal Commission on Japanese Claims (1947-1951), known as the "Bird Commission," investigated and offered compensation to Japanese Canadians for their losses of property during the 1940s. It is largely remembered for what it was not: that is, it was not a just resolution to the devastating material losses of the 1940s. Community histories bitterly describe the Commission as destined to failure, with narrow terms of reference that only addressed a fraction of what was taken. Similarly, other historians have portrayed the Commission as a defensive mechanism, intended by the government to limit financial compensation and to avoid the admission of greater injustice.

Yet scholars have never fully investigated the internal workings of the Commission. Despite its failings, Japanese Canadians used the Bird Commission in their struggle to hold the state accountable. Hundreds of Japanese Canadians presented claims. Their testimonies are preserved in thousands of pages of archival documents. The Bird Commission was a troubling, flawed, but nonetheless important historical process. This thesis examines government documents, claimants' case files, and oral histories to nuance previous accounts of the Bird Commission. I draw from 'productive' understandings of Royal Commissions to argue that the Liberal government, cognizant of how such mechanisms could influence public opinion, designed the Bird Commission to provide closure to the internment-era and to mark the start of the post-war period. Their particular definition of loss was integral to this project. As Japanese Canadians sought to expand this definition to address their losses, the proceedings became a record of contest over the meaning of property loss and the legacy of the dispossession. Navigating a web of constraints, Japanese Canadians participated in a broader debate over the meaning justice in a society that sought to distance itself from a legacy of racialized discrimination.

This contest, captured in the Commission proceedings, provides a pathway into the complex history of the postwar years as Canadians grappled with the racism of Second World War, including Canada's own race-based policies, and looked towards new approaches to pluralism.