To Admonish or Abolish: The End of Indigenous Slavery in British Columbia, 1830-1890

Conner White
Supervised by Dr. Lutz

A Graduating Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements in the Honours Programme.
For the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
In the
Department
Of
History

University of Victoria
May 3, 2023

Since time immemorial, slavery had been a fact of life for the indigenous nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America. From Alaska to northern California, the indigenous slave trade was an important institution. So, when Great Britain, which had started to abolish slavery in 1808 and by the 1840s had become the world's anti-slavery policeman, established their colony on Vancouver Island in 1849 it would be fair to assume one of their priorities would be to crush this practice. And slavery did largely, though not entirely, disappear during the colonial period.

So it is not surprising that the few historians' who have examined the end of slavery tend to attribute it to the vague notion of 'British efforts.' A book about James Douglas, when discussing slavery, adds in the footnotes, "Slavery was at one time quite general over the whole of the North-West Coast. By the devoted efforts of Christian missionaries and the establishment of settled governments in the British and American territories it has been blotted out."[1] Barry Gough, in *Gunboat Frontiers*, about British maritime policy in colonial B.C. and in an article that Gough wrote prior makes the argument that "The slave traffic [and liquor trade] could not be ignored by British officials who came to colonial British Columbia."[2] Gough says that the British response to slavery in B.C. was, indeed, an intentional abolitionist act. Although they could not end slavery quickly, British policies were crafted and enforced in such a way that the death of the institution of slavery was inevitable. Gough concluded that abolition of Indigenous

[1] Walter N. Sage, *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1930), 100..
[2] Barry Gough, *Gunboat Frontier* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), 86.

slavery in B.C. was intentional and the result primarily of the actions of the British Navy. This way of thinking has seemingly been the norm since the 1930s.[3]

My research challenges this interpretation. By looking at the letters and diaries of key figures in the colonial government, the Royal Navy, and the church, it becomes clear that the British authorities had little intention and dedicated less effort to end the institution of slavery. This willingness to tolerate slavery is the more surprising when it emerges that, in the same period, an intentional and aggressive policy was pursued by the British authorities both secular and religious to suppress the liquor trade with Indigenous people. Donald, when he steps briefly into discussing the history of slavery in B.C., comments that "There were no campaigns against native slavery like that conducted in British Columbia by both missionaries and government officials against the potlatch"[4]

Instead, I will argue that slavery was not intentionally dismantled. Rather, it was slowly phased out of indigenous society as a result of the social and economic repercussions of deadly diseases that reduced populations and disrupted traditional social patterns, factors that disturbed long-standing patterns of intergroup warfare that had generated slaves, expanded travel which made it easier for slaves to escape, and safe havens for escaped slaves offered by naval vessels and missionary stations.

---

[3] Anthropologist and ethnographer Leland Donald alludes to the contrary, but never fully commits to it since those historical claims were beyond the bounds of his research.

[4] Leland Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery on the Northwest Coast of North America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 243.

Before going further, it would be useful to discuss the historiography surrounding slavery in BC, as well as the nature of slavery as an institution. Leland Donald, an ethnographer whose work this paper will borrow heavily from, notes in his 1997 book *Aboriginal Slavery on the Northwest Coast of North America* that slavery has never gotten "full and careful treatment" in regards to British Columbia and the wider Northwest Coast.[5] Donald points to a number of texts that touch on slavery in the Northwest Coast From a cultural standpoint, but he sees their conclusions as insufficient to truly grasp the bigger picture of slavery as an institution among indigenous nations.[6] In this way, Donald seeks to position himself as the continuation of previous research into indigenous slavery, from an ethnographic perspective.

Donald is not the only one making such claims about slavery, either. While his discussion of the particular role and impact of slavery are somewhat unique, much of his analysis is not original to him. Slavery is omnipresent throughout much of the literature surrounding indigenous society in the Northwest Coast. It appears frequently in both oral traditions, such as those of Mary Rice, a storyteller of the Puneluxutth' who speaks in interviews with Beryl Cryer in the 1930s. It also appears frequently in the usual anthropological evaluations of indigenous society. Donald follows in the tradition of authors such as Philip Drucker, Homer Barnett, and Wayne Suttles.

Instead, what is unique about Donald is that he seeks to re-examine its place in our understanding of Northwest Coast indigenous societies. The argument he wants to

[5] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery*, xi.
[6] Ibid, 3-4.

further is that slaves make an appearance in almost every facet of indigenous life.[7] Slaves, in this argument, are not only an economic and prestige factor, but play into a broader understanding of indigenous faith practices and class/social structures. This is not a traditional view on the subject, Donald notes.[8] Experts, he says, do not typically view slavery as interconnected with most facets of indigenous culture in the Northwest Coast. Many previous experts considered it peripheral to indigenous society, stating that they were merely objects of prestige for chiefs or their owners, or that they were simply extra labourers that were treated well. If Donald's argument is accepted, that slaves played a larger role in indigenous society than previous scholars gave credit for, then this has repercussions both for how the arriving British settlers would view the practice and for how difficult it would be to dislodge.

Not only was slavery far more important to indigenous society than previous scholars would have given it credit for, it also resembled European slavery in a way the British would have recognized. Since this paper is borrowing so heavily from Donald's work, we will use his definition of indigenous slavery:

1. His/her status is permanent;
2. The ultimate origin and maintenance of slave status is violent domination;
3. Slaves are alienated from their natal circumstances;
4. Slaves are dishonoured persons."[9]

[7] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery* 7.
[8] Ibid, 35-38.
[9] Ibid, 70-71.

Slaves were taken not only through warfare, but also the extensive slave trade that spanned the Northwest Coast.[10] As a result, slaves were widespread among the general population. In some villages there was up to a 30% population of slaves, others were in the range of 1-2%, and 15-20% seems to be a common average.[11] In 1845, two British army lieutenants estimated that "about one in every fifteen Indians" lived in slavery in British territory West of the Rockies, so Donald's approximation fits.[12] These slaves were not treated well, and Donald seeks to point out how violent the domination of these slaves was. They could be killed at will by their owners, their position was hereditary and they were property in every sense of the word.[13] These were slaves in a way that the British had recognized from their own institutionalized slavery that had only recently been outlawed.

Within this framework that I have proposed there are some issues worth addressing, however. Donald's interpretation of Northwest Coast slavery, and my subsequent usage of that interpretation, is not without criticism. One contemporary review of Donald's book remarked that his arguments at times are attacking a straw man of what Donald remarks are the 'orthodox' ethnographers of the Northwest Coast.[14] Furthermore, examples exist, such as the Stó:lō Nation of the Central Coast Salish, of indigenous groups who had a much different relationship with slavery than what Donald proposes as a universal rule. The Stó:lō example provides the backing that

[10] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 33.
[11] Ibid, 34.
[12] Barry Gough, *Gunboat Frontier* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), 85.
[13] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 34-35.
[14] Aaron Glass, "Reviewed Work: Aboriginal Slavery on the Northwest Coast of North America by Leland Donald," *American Indian Quarterly* vol. 23, no. ¾ (Summer - Autumn 1999), 192.

not all indigenous groups of the Northwest Coast participated in slavery at the same level, with the Stó:lō being far more ambivalent to the practice than some of the others Donald outlines.

Other responses have problematized the notion of slavery even further. Rachel Flowers's 2012 paper on the "Apocryphal Slave" calls into question the very usage of the words slave and slavery in a Northwest Coast indigenous context, regarding them as a western imposition. This argument follows that the word slave was brought by Europeans and carries a particular meaning and cultural context that is simply not present in the Northwest Coast. The many languages of this vast area are bound to have words translatable to slave "whether or not that language adheres to hierarchy or notions of exploitation."[15] Still, slaves and slavery make appearances in the diaries, letters, and journals of British colonial officials and officers during their stay in the Northwest Coast and this cannot be ignored. Whether or not slavery is a western imposition cannot be answered by this paper, but this issue is important to raise nonetheless. Because this paper is designed to handle and address the British approach to slavery in the Northwest Coast and the subsequent disappearance of what they perceived as slavery, the central argument remains undisturbed by this terminology critique.

If slavery is indeed a western imposition, it is potentially more useful to this paper as it will provide an understanding of exactly what the British brought to the Northwest

[15] Rachel Flowers, "Xwnuts'aluwum: T'aat'ka' Kin Relations and the Apocryphal Slave," MA diss., (University of Victoria, 2012).

Coast and their approach to what they saw as slavery. Because of their inaction on slavery, an idea they brought and imposed, their actions are worthy of greater scrutiny. If slavery is an accurate term for the Northwest Coast, and not solely a western phrase, then we can accept Donald's definitions and proceed with the exact same understanding: that slavery was truly happening here and the British continued to do nothing.

Next, it is important to evaluate the historiography on slavery in B.C. If the word 'slavery' appears in historical records, it is usually in reference to Black slavery and the abolitionist sentiments among the British, with some sources using it as a critique or endorsement of the United States. A useful source on British attitudes to slavery, Frank Klingberg's *Anti-Slavery Movement in England* is devoted to the issue of African and Caribbean slavery. Several newspaper articles of the time in the *British Colonist* discuss slavery, but none of these regard indigenous slavery in the Northwest Coast. With respect to Indigenous slavery, even the diaries of Royal Navy captains who would be policing the slave trade seldom mention it. Government officials mention Indigenous slavery occasionally, but usually just in passing. James Douglas in 1840, before he was Governor of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, wrote a powerful declaration about the trade while on a trip with the Hudson's Bay Company, writing, "The abominable traffic in slaves, and the crimes it gives rise to, will never cease as long as the Indians can afford to purchase these unfortunate beings, unless there should occur a revolution in the moral and social state."[16] This statement, made during a trip in the 1840s with the

[16] Walter N. Sage, *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1930), 100.

Hudson's Bay Company, is the most aggressively anti-slavery statement anyone in B.C. will make regarding indigenous slavery. To a certain extent, this statement by Douglas could be seen as self-interested largely because the practice of slavery was inconvenient for HBC business, at least this is the claim made by Dorothy Smith about Douglas' intentions.[17]

Historians' interpretations of the end of slavery are rarer still. Most texts that mention the end of slavery tend to passively attribute it to the vague notion of 'British efforts.' The previous quote from Douglas comes from a 1930s book that, when discussing slavery, adds in the footnotes, "Slavery was at one time quite general over the whole of the North-West Coast. By the devoted efforts of Christian missionaries and the establishment of settled governments in the British and American territories it has been blotted out."[18] One notable exception to this is the book by Barry Gough, *Gunboat Frontiers*, about British maritime policy in colonial B.C. In this book (and an article that Gough wrote prior), Gough discusses at length the British response to both the liquor trade and slavery.

Gough demonstrates that the Royal Navy was often both the "colonial policemen"[19] and "sailor-diplomats"[20] within the colonial structure. This placed incredible responsibility on them to act as the sole enforcers of British law outside HBC forts or

---

[17] Dorothy Blakey Smith, *James Douglas: Father of British Columbia* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), 29.
[18] Sage, *Sir James Douglas,* 100.
[19] Gough, *Gunboat Frontier,* 76.
[20] Barry Gough, "Send a Gunboat! Checking Slavery and Controlling Liquor Traffic among Coast Indians of British Columbia in the 1860s," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* vol. 69, no. 4 (October 1978), 159.

cities like Victoria. If slavery was something the Royal Navy was truly concerned with, as Gough argues, then it should figure in the diaries of these Royal Navy officers. Yet, the topic appears infrequently while the liquor trade is frequently mentioned.

The role of missionaries is another important source of information to consult. Gough talks about missionaries briefly and does not assign them the importance that this paper will argue they should receive. This is not entirely surprising, as Gough's book and article focused largely on the maritime policies of the Royal Navy. Still, it is crucial to understanding British policy to see the role that missionaries played. Some even argued that during his term as Governor of the province, James Douglas "did not appear to have a[n Indian] policy except as supplied by [William] Duncan."[21] Duncan was a prominent Protestant missionary who founded the settlement of Metlakatla and had exceptional influence over several indigenous groups. These missionaries had strong influences both on the colonial government and on the indigenous nations they found themselves surrounded by. These missionaries, however, often saw themselves as too weak to enact real change as they were few in number and in far-flung communities.[22]

Before analyzing the diaries of both missionaries and Royal Navy officers, the final piece of important background is discussing British attitudes to slavery. In 1805, the British parliament passed a motion stating that slavery was "contrary to the

[21] Jean Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia* (Canada: National Museums of Canada, 1974), 56.
[22] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 244.

principles of justice, humanity, and sound policy and pledging abolition with all practicable expediency."[23] The slave trade itself was banned but colonies like the West Indies had immunity from abolitionist laws. In the 1830s two subsequent declarations of even greater importance banned slavery in the British Empire.[24] Leading abolitionists used a definition of slavery that is strikingly similar to the status of slaves in B.C. "A slave in the ordinary sense of the word as a man who is the property of another, politically and socially at a lower level than the mass of the people, and performing compulsory labour."[25]

Now, this anti-slavery fury was directed mostly at the African slave trade. Few, if any, abolitionist parliamentarians were thinking of the plight of indigenous British Columbians. Explicitly in the parliamentary debates in 1833 was a direction towards freeing black slaves from bondage in Europe, the West Indies, and the United States.[26] It is unlikely any of the British public would have been made aware of the conditions of slavery in B.C.. Douglas's strong condemnation was not until 1840, seven years after the 1833 Abolition Act.

Religion was a prime mover of the abolitionist cause, with the British Anti-Slavery Society being led by a deeply religious motive.[27] The chair of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), a British evangelical colonial society, Henry Venn, was a dedicated

---

[23] Frank J. Klingberg, *Abolitionist Movement in England* (United States: Yale University Press, 1968), 127.
[24] Ibid, 206.
[25] Klingberg, *Abolitionist Movement*, 190.
[26] Ibid, 277.
[27] Klingberg, *Abolitionist Movement*, 185.

abolitionist and was a leader figure in the CMS for decades following the Abolition Act.[28] The CMS was not the only source of colonial missionaries, but it was among the most influential as it was an Evangelical Protestant organization. All of this is to say that abolitionism was a cause near and dear to the heart of the British public, and that the cause had a religious core to it. This will help to understand the feelings of the British colonists and missionaries as they arrived in B.C.

The early days of colonization saw, actually, an increase in indigenous slavery. As indigenous societies gained access to new markets and new goods to use for establishing status through potlatching or to benefit themselves, such as firearms, slavery increased. Slaves could provide direct profit to their owners, such as the "industry" of prostituting slaves during the gold rush.[29] With an increasing European presence came an increase in demand for furs, and slave labour was increasing in demand to fulfill the British need for furs.[30] Even the British fur traders themselves, despite their seeming abolitionist tendencies, employed slaves as late as the 1860s.[31] Yet, this uptick in slavery was not to last. Disease, increasing numbers of runaways, and the decline in intergroup warfare brought on by the British would kill the practice.

A vastly important part of the decline of slavery in B.C. in addition to a decrease in warfare and increase in escaping slaves, is the introduction of disease into the

---

[28] Jean Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla,* 25.
[29] John Sutton Lutz, *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver & Toronto: UBC Press, 2008), 179.
[30] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 233.
[31] Lutz, *Makuk,* 77.

colony. Smallpox first struck the Northwest Coast in the 1780s. Up to one third of the indigenous population of B.C. died in the outbreak of smallpox in 1836.[32] The population continued a steady decline even into the 20th century, reaching its lowest point by 1920, but with a dramatic decline coming in 1870.[33] The loss of such a large portion of the population would inevitably bring a slave economy crashing down. Combined with a decline in intergroup warfare, not only were slaves being freed and dying of smallpox en masse, but these slave numbers were unable to be replenished effectively without warfare. An interesting result of the population decline was the sudden promotion of many slaves into regular society. In some communities, the loss was felt so strongly that there were not enough people to fulfil normal societal roles. As such, slaves or former slaves (still carrying the stigma and burden of slavery) were promoted into the social system in order to preserve it.[34] In some places, the inverse may also have been true, however. The Tahltan peoples of northern B.C. were hit especially hard by an outbreak of smallpox in the 1830s. As a result, it is quite likely that they saw an increase, rather than decrease, in slavery as a response to the sudden increased demand for labour, Donald posits.[35]

In particular, the 1862-1863 outbreak of smallpox was exceptionally devastating. Roughly 62% of the indigenous population of British Columbia was lost from this

[32] Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla,* 38.
[33] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 245.
[34] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 245.
[35] Ibid, 229.

epidemic, according to Robert Boyd.[36] As a result, there are many records of abandoned villages and a consolidation of the surviving population.[37] Not only would slavery have been impeded by the sheer loss in population, other parts of indigenous culture and life were severely disrupted. Some interpretations propose that it "served as a final blow to the Native peoples of British Columbia."[38] A population under such stress would have been focused on their own survival and the continuation of their culture. Some sources write that the families of chiefs were hit particularly hard by the outbreaks,[39] meaning that not only are vast numbers dying, but the leadership to muster a response is dying rapidly too. Under these conditions, it would be difficult to engage in raiding or warfare to gain slaves, or to even make transactions in order to buy or sell them. People would be focused purely on preserving their families and communities and helping to integrate smaller communities into larger, consolidated ones, unable to continue slave-taking.

Next, analyzing the decrees and feelings of James Douglas may serve to provide some context to the goals and motivations of the Royal Navy captains as well as establish the arrival and significance of Christian missionaries working in the province. His term as Chief Factor of the HBC and Governor of Vancouver Island and British Columbia coincides with a majority of the early and peak periods of Royal Navy

---

[36] Robert Boyd, "Smallpox in the Pacific Northwest: The First Epidemics," *BC Studies* no. 101 (Spring, 1994), 28. While there is agreement that the smallpox was devastating the mortality rates are subject to debate.
[37] Ibid, 33.
[38] Kiran van Rijn, ""Lo! the Poor Indian!" Colonial Responses to the 1862-63 Smallpox Epidemic in British Columbia and Vancouver Island," *CBMH/BCHM* vol. 23, no. 2 (2006), 542.
[39] Jean Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla,* 38.

involvement. It has been established by now that Douglas, at least in his early years in B.C., was an avid opponent of slavery. If this is the case, it is a wonder why more explicit action is not taken. Douglas's style of governance was autocratic, and he took actions unilaterally, quite often to enforce law and order.[40] One such act was to issue a decree banning the sale of liquor to indigenous people after a murder in 1858.[41] If Douglas has the power to declare this policy, and has been shown, have enforced it, why has he not taken action to oppose slavery?

Another facet of government policy under Douglas worth noting is the creation (and lack thereof) of treaties. A few were signed under Douglas's tenure, and he had the intention to sign more, but in the end this number remained low.[42] One crucial part of the treaties is the lack of mentioning slavery. Across the border, in Washington state, the United States includes as part of their treaties an article prohibiting slavery. Article 11 of the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliott states the following: "The said tribes and bands agree to free all slaves now held by them and not to purchase or acquire others hereafter."[43] Every other treaty of 1854-1855 signed in Washington includes a similar or identical clause. The 1850s "Douglas treaties" feature no such stipulations. There is no requirement, as a result of signing a treaty with the colonial government, that indigenous groups will be required to relinquish their slaves or even cease taking more slaves in the future.

---

[40] Sage, *Sir James Douglas*, 234.
[41] Smith, *Father of British Columbia,* 73.
[42] Vincent J. McNally, *The Lord's Distant Vineyard: A History of the Oblates and the Catholic Church Community in British Columbia* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, August 2000), 123.
[43] Treaty of Point Elliott, January 22nd, 1855. https://www.washingtonhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/pointElliottTreaty.pdf (Accessed March 15th, 2023).

The difference in treaties compared to the U.S. is an interesting one. The Douglas treaties may be better understood as a land purchase, which somewhat shifts their focus. Still, Douglas may have felt himself unable to act with as much authority as his counterparts in Washington territory. The U.S. was, at times, effectively waging a war against the indigenous population.[44] The resources available to Douglas and the authorities in Fort Victoria could not match this, not that Douglas had wanted to, anyway. But the fact remains that the U.S. had the firepower and the authority to enforce their will upon the local population. Douglas, desiring peaceful relations with the indigenous population and confirming land acquisitions, would never have had the capacity nor interest in making such a demand of the indigenous population he was conducting a treaty with.

In 1838, before he was made Governor, Douglas noted that a "forceful emancipation… was out of the question, owing to native feelings."[45] Still, this is when the resources at the disposal of the colonial government were virtually nonexistent. When provided with strong influences in the missionaries, and equipped with several vessels of the Royal Navy, Douglas banned the sale of liquor without any fear of the repercussions. Another supporting factor to Douglas's lack of interest in abolishing slavery was that it was, in Douglas's view, mostly a result of orders from London. He saw the demand to end slavery as being forced upon him by the colonial office. In order

[44] McNally, *The Lord's Distant Vineyard,* 24.
[45] Gough, "Send a Gunboat!" 160.

to practically achieve this, he believed he would need to anger the indigenous population, which would impede business with the HBC.[46]

Douglas also welcomed missionaries with great enthusiasm. Beginning in his days at Fort Vancouver, Douglas had a long history of good relations with Christian missionaries of all stripes. He welcomed Catholic missionaries into Fort Vancouver, and subsequently British Columbia.[47] It was mentioned that he had a deep partnership with William Duncan, a Protestant sent by the Church Missionary Society. As well, Douglas and the Royal Navy actively worked alongside Bishop Hill, an Anglican. There was a Catholic priest present with Douglas on his first trip to Vancouver Island.[48] This long standing relationship with missionaries helps show why they are so important to understanding British law in B.C. They can easily be seen as the 'moral wing' of Douglas's policy. The missionaries also provided adequate cover for Douglas and the HBC. When the HBC was given permission by London to establish itself in Vancouver Island and the lower mainland, they did so by stating that they were going to propagate the Christian faith.[49]

Despite some strong sentiments by Douglas, the HBC actually benefitted from the practice. From the very beginning of Fort Victoria, the HBC had purchased or rented a slave in the mid-1840s.[50] As late as 1860, some Coast Salish slave owners "made 'a

---

[46] Smith, *Father of British Columbia*, 26-27.
[47] Ibid, 26.
[48] McNally, *The Lord's Distant Vineyard,* 42-43.
[49] Ibid, 41.
[50] Lutz, *Makuk,* 77.

great deal of money' by sending their slaves to work for the whites, and appropriating their wages."[51] The labour of these slaves were put to work aiding in the maintenance of HBC forts, or even by the British Boundary commission delineating the 49th parallel, of which the government was absolutely aware that they were employing a slave, as his owner was always nearby.[52] This last detail can dispel any notion that the British may not have known they were working with slaves.

Diaries and letters from both Royal Navy officers, missionaries, and government officials will be addressed separately, by chronology. While each of them ultimately espoused more or less the same view on slavery, their approach was different. As such, it is useful to discuss them all separately so as to not confuse each group's modus operandi.

In the 1830s and 1840s the British navy was the main tool used by the British to end the Atlantic slave trade. A huge amount of naval resources were used to intercept ships carrying slaves and to attack the ports from which slaves were exported. On the Northwest Coast, there is little to be said about the 1830s to 1840s when the only European presence was the Hudson's Bay Company. The Royal Navy, while sending an occasional ship, took advice from the HBC. James Douglas, chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company and later governor of the provinces of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, was dedicated to preventing a confrontation with indigenous nations

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

over slavery, as the Company was keen to keep relations cordial.[53] Direct confrontations would have impeded business interests, which were still the primary motivator for the HBC. Douglas's orders, while not absolute, did hold some sway over the affairs of the Navy. In letters with his father, E. H. Verney, a Royal Navy captain, is warned of the power of the colony over the Navy, commenting that "many of your [Verney's] duties appear to be more connected with the Colony than with the Navy."[54]

It is this period where British efforts to suppress the slave trade in the Atlantic are taking a proper shape. Committees were debating actively the use of military force in suppressing slavery.[55] It is important to note that these debates were not considering the Pacific Northwest and were solely focused on dealing with ships coming to or from Africa. Despite the debates taking place, slave patrols were witnessing a period of great effectiveness. According to contemporary reports in 1842, over half of all ships attempting to take slaves were captured and roughly one-fifth of all those taken as slaves were liberated.[56] Furthermore, the Royal Navy set out to sever the supply of slaves by making treaties with African leaders and destroying stores where slaves could be kept.[57] While the British presence in West Africa never managed to quell the trade completely, their efforts severely reduced its capacity and profit. Such efforts will never be undertaken in B.C.

---

[53] Smith, *Father of British Columbia,* 26-27, 48.
[54] Edmund Hope Verney, *Vancouver Island Letters of Edmund Hope Verney,* Allan Pritchard, ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 21.
[55] Andrew Pearson, "Waterwitch: a warship, its voyage and its crew in the era of anti-slavery," *Atlantic Studies* vol. 13, no. 1 (2016), 112.
[56] Ibid, 114. These numbers are overestimated by the British foreign office, certainly. But they still indicate the perceived effectiveness of British vessels in stopping slavery in West Africa.
[57] W. E. F. Ward, *The Royal Navy and the Slavers* (London & New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 39.

In the 1850s-1860s we saw much more activity from the Royal Navy in the Northwest Coast. Gough makes two claims about this period. One, that the Royal Navy was more effective at suppressing slavery than the liquor trade,[58] which will be demonstrated to be incorrect. The Royal Navy is unable to quell completely the liquor trade, but the important part is that, unlike the slave trade, the Royal Navy is taking efforts to actually stop the whisky smugglers. Secondly, that the Royal Navy was obliged to act on the directives of the Governor to impede the slave trade,[59] which will also be shown to be false.

Richard Mayne, a captain of the *Plumper* who spent 4 years in B.C. from 1858-1862, says very little in his diaries about slavery. His attitude is clearly one of disapproval towards slavery, but this was not an uncommon fact for most British settlers. Most of his time is spent observing the progress of 'civilization' and the spread of the Christian faith. To figure out how he viewed slavery, we can look at two incidents that he reports on. In 1859, Mayne responded to a small crisis brewing between two indigenous groups. A woman was taken as a slave by one group from another as recompense for some kind of insult.[60] Mayne, speaking through an interpreter, scolded the aggressive tribe (the slave takers) for their conduct. He said that James Douglas was very upset with them and was going to punish them if they did not improve. Crucially, Mayne does not attempt to impede the process of slavery. What he instead

[58] Gough, "Send a Gunboat!" 168.
[59] Gough, "Send a Gunboat!" 161.
[60] Richard C. Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London: John Murray, Albemarble Street, 1862), 209.

tries to do is end the fighting between the two groups. Interestingly, the chiefs he is speaking to *offer* to end the practice of “making slaves” if other nations also agree to do the same.[61] This offer could have been a misunderstanding because of the challenges of interpretation, but it could also be that they see it as a good way to accede to Mayne’s demands. While Mayne is not unhappy about the offer of abolishing slavery, this was not what he set out to achieve. His goal was to restore peace, not damage the institution.

The offer to end slavery is very curious and worthy of further discussion. In this incident, Mayne states to an assembled group of chiefs that James Douglas demands that they, the chiefs, accept British modes of law. That they must not kill those they believe to be murderers, but instead accept the rule of courts. After some violent posturing and bluster by some of the assembled, according to Mayne, the offer to end slave-taking and killing was made and that they were “quite willing” to do so. Importantly, the offer is that these assembled chiefs will cease “making slaves” and not end the practice of slavery altogether. It is also crucial that Mayne is speaking through an interpreter, while at the same time attempting to extract a slave woman from these assembled chiefs. His secondary goal could entirely have gotten mixed up into his pursuits in this instance.

The second observation made by Mayne is about the traffic in prostituting slave women. He mentions that the natives will sell women slaves for, “the vilest purposes.”[62]

---

[61] Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia,* 209.
[62] Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia*, 248.

Mayne clearly does not approve of this practice, but he does not make any mention of an attempt to abolish or prevent it in any capacity. In neither of these two incidents does Mayne attempt, from the start, to bring about a change in the institution of slavery. He regards it negatively and is not unhappy when the chiefs offer to abolish it, but he does not pursue this outcome. It is the same with the slave prostitutes; he condemns this practice, but does not seek to do anything about it.

G.H. Richards, a naval captain in B.C. from 1860-1862, supposedly had a mandate to "intervene in matters of intertribal warfare and the taking of slaves"[63] but this is not what appears in his diaries. Like Mayne, Richards notes only two incidents in regards to slavery and intertribal warfare in his whole 3 year tour. The first is an interesting observation where Richards notes that having 50 men like William Duncan in B.C. would be just as effective as the same number of man-o-wars.[64] This claim supports the argument that missionaries were as important as the Royal Navy in policing and creating law, but that will be discussed further later. What Richards is discussing in this passage is his firm belief in the mission to advance civilization, not particularly anything to do with slavery.

The second observation made by Richards is, like Mayne, about a crisis involving a woman taken as a slave. According to the story laid out by Richards, the Snuneymuxw had a woman taken from them by an unnamed indigenous group and as

[63] G. H. Richards, *The Private Journal of Captain G.H Richards: the Vancouver Island Survey (1860-1862),* Linda Dorricott & Deidre Cullon, ed. (Vancouver: Brick Books, 2012), 22.
[64] Ibid, 68.

a response they took a number of slaves from this unnamed group. Importantly, as Richards writes it, these slaves were already slaves before they were taken. The people taken by the Snuneymuxw were not made into slaves by the raid. The Snuneymuxw then lodged a formal complaint with the Governor's office, which prompted the Royal Navy to dispense Richards to handle it. During negotiations to have the woman returned to the Snuneymuxw, he offers to return the stolen slaves to the unnamed group, denouncing the "wickedness" of the Nanaimo for stealing their slaves.[65] These are not the words of a committed abolitionist. Richards says very little about his personal feelings towards slavery, since it only comes up a couple of times in the journal. When it does, he is offering to help maintain slavery or noting that the mission would be just as effective as him.

E.A. Porcher, captain of HMS *Sparrowhawk*, was in B.C. from 1865-1868. Same as the two previous captains, Porcher makes very few observations or statements surrounding slavery. He does, however, witness one very important conversation between the admiral of the British Pacific fleet, Admiral Hastings, and William Duncan, in the town of Metlakatla in June of 1868. Hastings and Porcher had arrived in Metlakatla to see how affairs were progressing there, in regard to 'civilizing' the natives. William Duncan raised the issue to Hastings that three escaped slaves had taken refuge in Metlakatla, and he sought the Admiral's advice on what they were to do about them. According to Porcher, Hasting's reply was the following, that "slavery did not now exist under British rule and that although he would not consider justifiable to take slaves out

[65] Richards, *Private Journal of G.H Richards,* 69.

by force from the tribe they were among, yet if they escaped to the Mission [Metlakatla] or on board ship he would consider himself justified in protecting them."[66] This passage is both contradictory and very revealing. Clearly slavery did persist in this part of the empire. The Admiral of the Pacific fleet, the man in charge of all the Royal Navy's affairs in the Pacific Ocean, did not wish to take any proactive measures to emancipate slaves. Whatever the Admiral meant by it, it is very clear that he was not interested in pursuing with any ferocity the abolition of slavery in B.C. Porcher similarly expressed no judgement towards the Admiral for this statement, nor any judgement about slavery in the colony.

E. H. Verney, another captain that served in B.C. from 1862-1865, like the others had very little in his diaries to say about slavery. Interestingly, the editor of his diaries notes that Verney's ship HMS *Forward* and its sister ship played an important role in the idea of the gunboat frontier of B.C.[67] This claim, however, is weakened by the contents of the diaries. More often than any exciting excursions, Verney is writing to his father, investigating exaggerated reports of violence between settlers and indigenous people, and hunting down illegal liquor traders.[68] Verney himself makes no direct references to slavery, making it difficult to discern his attitude to the practice. He is also not involved in any incidents involving slavery during his tour in B.C.. Verney was, however, involved in the suppression of the liquor trade. The suppression of the liquor

[66] E.A. Porcher, *A Tour of Duty in the Pacific Northwest,* Dwight L. Smith, ed. (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2000), 135.
[67] Verney, *Vancouver Island Letters,* 22.
[68] Ibid, 24.

smugglers received exceptional attention from the colonial government, with some instructions coming right from Governor Arthur Kennedy.[69]

Aside from the liquor trade, Verney was involved in a curious incident in 1865 in Comox. The Laich-kwil-tach had been camped two miles from Comox and refused to leave. They had been stealing potatoes and were causing nervousness among the settlers. When the chief was approached by a missionary, he said that Verney's ship, the *Forward*, had driven them away a few times already and that they would now kill any man who tried to send them away again. After they refused to leave after another order by the local police constable, the Royal Navy responded with incredible force. The following is the result, "The commander-in-chief of the Pacific Station, Rear-Admiral Joseph Denman, decided, as he later stated, that he should visit in person 'a place where so many ineffectual remonstrances had been made.'"[70] The Laich-kwil-tach were sent away, by force (although they were later allowed to return). Using several gunboats, an unprecedented amount of firepower, the Royal Navy showcased its ability to respond to threats.

This obviously raises an interesting question since the Royal Navy, as has been demonstrated, exercised tremendous hesitation to respond with any physical force to incidents involving slavery. Why was this incident in Comox worthy of such firepower, but freeing slaves was seen as an unjustified endeavour? The reason is that the Royal

[69] Allan Pritchard, "The Royal Navy and the Comox Settlement," *Journal of the British Columbia Historical Federation* vol. 40, no. 2 (2007), 25.
[70] Pritchard, "Comox Settlement," 25-26.

Navy was not concerned with slavery. Instead, their interest was in ending the liquor trade and protecting settlements. Because of this, it makes sense to use force to protect settlements rather than attack slavery.

The decade of the 1860s saw some changes come to slavery. The killing of slaves was mostly eradicated by the 1860s, but in some instances it does continue well beyond this point.[71] Yet this was not achieved by British pressures. Slave killings around HBC forts continue, despite direct attempts by HBC officials to have the ritual killings cease.[72] This is because killing slaves was almost always part of rituals or potlatch ceremonies, which explains why it was impossible to suppress the practice entirely at this time.[73] Neither the HBC nor the Royal Navy had any real impact on religious practices among indigenous communities. British pressures did achieve some gains, however. Among certain indigenous nations, the reduction of intergroup warfare was achieved. The British received mutual guarantees from among the "Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, and other tribes…" and served as peacemakers.[74] Philip Drucker, in his study on the Nuu-Chah-Nulth, noted that warfare had ceased completely by the 1870s.[75] Preventing intergroup warfare was a big goal for the British at this period, but not because, as Gough proposes, they sought to end slavery.

---

[71] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 35.
[72] Ibid, 237.
[73] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 235-237.
[74] Gough, "Send a Gunboat!" 163.
[75] Philip Drucker, *The Northern and Central Nootkan Tribes* (United States, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951), 318.

During the 1850s as well, the ships in West Africa resorted to very different methods. Few ports along the West African coast were open to the slave trade.[76] In order to close the few holes remaining, the Royal Navy no longer desired to employ blockades, but sought to make diplomatic treaties. When their treaties were refused, such as was the case in Lagos, in present day Nigeria, the Royal Navy was willing to intervene in the kingdom's internal affairs to either dethrone their king or force a treaty upon them.[77] This attack was indeed launched, but was a complete failure. Nevertheless, the British willingness to not only consider, but actually launch, an attack for the sole business of putting an end to the slave trade says a lot about their approach in Africa. Only Verney's example of a show of force, not quite an attack, at Comox comes close to the dedication of the Royal Navy in Africa to the cause.

Finally, the late period of Royal Navy involvement (the 1870s-1880s) coincides with a dramatic decrease in the indigenous population due to disease.[78] This is also the final period of Royal Navy policing, as the last efforts to use the Royal Navy to police indigenous nations ended in the 1880s.[79] Donald remarks that slavery all but disappears from the coast of B.C. by the 1890s, shortly after these patrols end.[80] By 1900, Donald claims that there were "probably" not any slaves left in B.C.[81] There are no diaries left behind from the Royal Navy that can help shine a light on the condition of slavery as they saw it. Slavery, by this point in time, had mostly disappeared due to a

---

[76] Ward, *The Royal Navy and the Slavers,* 205.
[77] Ibid, 208.
[78] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery* 245.
[79] Gough, *Gunboat Frontier,* xiii.
[80] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 238.
[81] Ibid, 245.

combination of circumstances. The ravages of smallpox, as has been pointed out, led to vast population declines. The reduction of intergroup warfare in the peak period of British intervention caused a drop in the ability of indigenous nations to acquire new slaves Runaways to Royal Navy vessels, as Admiral Hastings gave permission for, and missionary stations were readily accepted by the British.[82]

It may also be important to note the attitudes and actions of the Royal Navy regarding the liquor trade more explicitly. The previously mentioned captains refer time and time again to their involvement in handling liquor smugglers. Verney makes note of it several times in his diaries, including an incident where he actively arrests a liquor smuggler.[83] Richards, who says very little about slavery, refers to the proliferation of liquor among the indigenous population as a “curse” and ponders the prospect of the Royal Navy establishing harbour checks and indigenous police in order to root out the trade.[84] Porcher mentions his regret over not immediately bringing a known liquor smuggler to court to be tried,[85] as well as praising “reformed” liquor traders who now dealt in other goods.[86] While brief, this comparison serves to note how the Royal Navy sees itself justified and prepared to act upon certain issues. If these captains saw themselves as right to arrest liquor traders, or even just note down in their diaries their hatred of the trade, surely they could have felt the same for slavery. Yet, their words do not match this. They are clearly not interested in acting on the institution of slavery, and

[82] Ibid,, 243-245.
[83] Verney, *Vancouver Island Letters,* 132.
[84] Richards, *Private Journal*, 178.
[85] Porcher, *Tour of Duty,* 44.
[86] Ibid, 98.

their interests lie in enforcing the ban on liquor trading and preventing intergroup warfare.

Every previously mentioned captain mentions the 'whisky trade' and expresses disdain towards it. Richards writes in his diaries that, "This spirit dealing puts a stop to all legitimate trade. No one can compete with the whisky seller."[87] Verney takes the most action to end it, but it is present throughout the diaries of all Royal Navy captains. Blame was often laid on these illegal liquor traders for increases in violence, thus earning them the ire of the Royal Navy.[88] Gough offers some other officers who record their deep hatred of the liquor trade, as well. Such as commander John W. Pike, whose sloop *Devastation* was employed between 1862 and 1863 in investigating several schooners and ships illegally selling whisky, for which he awarded swift punishments to the offenders.[89] Patrols continued for up to a decade after the 1860s, as well, bringing the Royal Navy to seldom travelled waters in search of American and indigenous smugglers.[90] While the Royal Navy may not always have had the resources to efficiently respond to the trade, they were committed to acting upon it in a way they were not with slavery.

There is something to be said for the mere presence of Royal Navy ships and the effect it had on slavery. Father August Brabant, whose diary will be explored in more detail, makes note that very few among the Kyoquot had ever been to Victoria and none

[87] Richards, *Private Journal of G.H Richards,* 220.
[88] Gough, "Send a Gunboat!" 164.
[89] Ibid, 166.
[90] Gough, "Send a Gunboat!" 167.

of those came in a canoe. Doing so would have exposed them to the dangers of being taken as a slave.[91] With the limited resources available to the Royal Navy, and their preoccupation with supporting settlement initiatives and combatting liquor smugglers, they were unable to provide much protection to travellers to and from Victoria. This has changed by the time of Brabant's arrival and more British presence in the area. Richard Mayne observes what could have been a slave raid in 1858 that is dispersed by the appearance of his vessel.[92] The 1865 incident that Captain Verney witnessed at Comox supports this idea. They didn't do it often, but the Royal Navy had demonstrated a willingness to use force. Additionally, Mayne notes that in some attempts to retrieve 'stolen' slaves, having a Royal Navy vessel nearby aided in what could have been sour negotiations.[93] One final incident worth noting is an 1851 shelling of a village by two gunboats in order to extract from the village a wanted murderer.[94] After an incident like this, it would be logical to be somewhat afraid of the presence of a British vessel outside your home. This wasn't a direct end to slavery, but the very presence of British ships and missionaries encouraged some hesitation on the part of would-be raiders to actually launch their attacks.

Records from the missionaries are harder to split into a clean timeline than the Royal Navy's diaries. Their activities are better classified by faiths, as their activities do not readily appear to surge or lessen in any particular periods. Since their cooperation

---

[91] Augustin Joseph Brabant, *Mission to Nootka, 1874-1900: Reminiscences of the West Coast of Vancouver Island*, Charles Lilliard, ed. (Victoria: Moriss Printing Ltd, 1977), 22.
[92] Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia,* 74.
[93] Ibid, 210.
[94] Helen Codere, *Fighting with Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare, 1792-1930* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1966), 115.

with Douglas is the longest standing, it may be prudent to begin with the history of Catholic missionaries in B.C. Two records will be turned to in particular to understand the role of the Catholic Church in impacting slavery, the history of the Oblates written by Vincent McNally, and the diary of August Brabant. McNally argues that the Oblates, a group of lay people and priests associated with Eugene de Mazenod's Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate society, had an exceptional impact on the trajectory of Catholicism in B.C.[95] Gough claims that the missionaries provided a "remedy" by preaching the "equality of souls" and pushing for new economies that were free of slavery.[96] This claim, as will be demonstrated, is mostly true, but the way Gough frames it is incorrect. The conversion work was mostly concerned with bringing 'civilization' rather than "equality of souls" as a counter-balance to slavery. The new economies pushed by missionaries were also not designed to end slavery. They would, indirectly, by uprooting the traditional indigenous economy, stop the slave trade in these areas but that was not the focus of the missionaries.

The Oblates arrived in B.C. in the late 1850s after their decision to abandon efforts in the Oregon territory of the United States as a result of a difficult relationship with the U.S. government and the local indigenous population.[97] One of the first notable missions conducted by the Oblates was Louis D'Herbomez's 6-week trip to the Saanich people in 1859. He claimed it was a tremendous success and that he had extracted from this nation a promise to renounce gambling, shamanistic medicine, murder, and

[95] McNally, *The Lord's Distant Vineyard*, xxii, xvii.
[96] Gough, *Gunboat Frontiers*, 86.
[97] McNally, *The Lord's Distant Vineyard,* 23-24.

drinking.[98] Notably this coincides with the peak period of Royal Navy involvement and there is no note about slavery from D'Herbomez. What the Oblates were quite active in pursuing was the abolition of the liquor trade and the habit of drinking more generally among indigenous nations. Bishop Hill, an important figure for Anglicans in B.C., commented on how the Oblates were extremely active in lessening drunkenness.[99] In 1863, James Douglas praised the efforts of the Oblates, stating that he had "never seen the Indians so sober."[100] Indeed, the two 'sins' most reported by Oblate missionaries were polygamy and drinking.[101] Suppressing the consumption of alcohol was among the largest priorities of the Oblates, alongside proselytizing.

Another key focus for the Oblates was transitioning the indigenous economy from a non-sedentary lifestyle to sedentary farming communities.[102] These indigenous communities were self-reliant, but the perspective of the Oblates was to make them independent from cities like Victoria, too. They wanted to ensure these communities were not dependent on Western trade goods, and could be free of Western influence. This transition would remove slavery from the life of everyone in these communities. Yet, it is hard to claim that this was an intentional goal of the Oblates rather than a pleasant byproduct. Instead, the Oblates often sought to isolate indigenous communities from the evil influences of European cultures and cities, such as Victoria and New Westminster. They believed that indigenous moral issues like drinking and

[98] Ibid, 46.
[99] Ibid, 47.
[100] Ibid, 51.
[101] Ibid, 62.
[102] Ibid, 95-103.

gambling stemmed from their proximity to Europeans who brought these corrupting vices. However, these “reduction” communities were never truly established.[103] When “reduction” communities were established, on a smaller scale, the Oblates often hired indigenous men as policemen. Their job was to report on the behaviour of the adults of the group with a specific watch for gambling, adultery, drinking, failure to repay debts, and “especially” reporting to a shaman.[104] While it would make little sense for slavery to be operating in these “reduction” communities, it is telling that slavery does not make an appearance on the list of sins the Oblates and their policemen are looking for.

If they were looking to abolish slavery, another method would be to work with indigenous chiefs and elders to preach the equality of souls, as Gough argued. These Oblates held power in indigenous communities through their relationships with the elders. Elders looking to shore up their support could often gain more power by gaining the approval of a priest. At the same time, these priests sometimes would topple and replace elders when they were looking to gain more influence over an individual nation.[105] This would have presented a perfect opportunity to make a nation abolish the slave trade, but this never occurs. By McNally’s description, the Catholic Church through the Oblates had a lot of power in indigenous B.C. but never focused on abolitionism so long as they were operating.

[103] McNally, *The Lord’s Distant Vineyard*, 58-59.
[104] Ibid, 64.
[105] Ibid, 84-85.

A curious case, and one worth investigating, is that of Father August Brabant. Brabant was a Catholic missionary who was preaching among the Nuu-chah-nulth from 1874-1900. He left behind much of his thoughts about the province and his work in a diary that has been republished several times in different editions. However, the curious note about this diary is that it is a propaganda piece with little to no correlation to real events.[106] So while this doesn't provide any good evidence for events, Brabant's writings are useful for understanding attitudes and values of the time. Since Brabant's time in B.C. comes after the Royal Navy's peak period of involvement, Brabant could have established himself as a renowned figure leading the charge at the end of slavery. He also could have bolstered his reputation by placing himself in the midst of quelling the liquor trade. Neither of these things are how Brabant chooses to portray himself.

Brabant makes note of slavery numerous times in his diary. Interestingly, he often does so with very little judgement. One time, while travelling, Brabant discusses how "Shiyous [a native Chief] and his oldest son and one of his slaves took us to Clayoquot."[107] Another time he refers to, as was previously mentioned, how few of the Kyoquot had ever had the chance to travel to Victoria. He mentions slavery more times later in the diary, without any sense of judgement or hostility to the idea. Brabant seems to acknowledge slavery as a fact of life. Brabant shows little interest in the material conditions of the slaves, or the idea of abolitionism. Later in his time in B.C. he makes a comment about the disappearance of slavery, which is curious. His mission began in 1874, and in 1881 he remarked that "[the] old marriages almost amounted to selling

[106] Brabant, *Mission to Nootka*, 5.
[107] Ibid, 30.

their daughters as one would sell a canoe or a horse–just as of old the chiefs sold their slaves."[108] This remark seems to suggest that simply 7 years into his mission, the slave trade has become a thing of the past. Not just the immediate past, but a thing "of old."

On one hand, it seems that Brabant is suggesting that by 1881 the slave trade in B.C. was dead. The chiefs of old sold their slaves, but no longer. Another possible interpretation of this passage is that the slave trade is alive and well, as Brabant himself had shown in the previous years leading up to 1881. What this instead means is that the selling of slaves is no longer occurring, but slavery itself has continued. Whatever the implication of Brabant's statement, it remains clear that Brabant is disinterested at best in the affairs of slavery in B.C. His comment that slavery was a thing "of old" could be seen as him disapproving, but aside from that he makes no negative remarks, or any judgements at all, regarding slavery. Brabant also makes little note of the liquor trade and of drunkenness in B.C. What he does note is one passage where he comments on the amount of liquor on ships and of some indigenous passengers being drunk.[109] Like slavery, Brabant poses no explicit judgement or hostility to this fact, but accepts it and moves on. The first time that Brabant does raise a problem is concerning the potlatch. His opinion is a weak conviction towards abolishing the potlatch, stating that although he sees little issue with it continuing, he would rather have it be abolished than not.[110]

[108] Brabant, *Mission to Nootka*, 93.
[109] Ibid, 23-24.
[110] Brabant, *Mission to Nootka*, 53.

These two sources, representing a Catholic missionary and the ideals of a broader Catholic organization, show that slavery was far from the priorities of these missionaries. Their interests, broadly speaking, are with the liquor trade, potlatch, and the spread of European lifestyles through economics and faith. Slavery is rarely mentioned by either text, and when it is, receives little attention.

William Duncan, a Protestant and missionary whose importance cannot be overstated, had equally little to say about slavery in B.C. Duncan's origins in the mission came from the Church Missionary Society of Henry Venn, who has been discussed already. This society was rooted in the evangelical and abolitionist cause, which had an influence on Duncan. Duncan's arrival to B.C. coincides with the peak period of the Royal Navy, as well, which is how he was able to secure support from a captain Prevost for his trip to Fort Simpson.[111] Motivated by an intense feeling of duty, Duncan saw for himself the task to completely transform indigenous society from the ground up.[112] Duncan's efforts can be divided into two phases. His time spent in Fort Simpson, and his time in Metlakatla.

After arriving at Fort Simpson in 1857, Duncan's preaching work initially attracted little interest. But by 1862 he had a following of about 50 people, all of whom were indigenous.[113] No local chiefs were particularly interested in impeding or endorsing Duncan's work. He had several concerns. Duncan once gave a sermon about the evils

[111] Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla,* 26.
[112] Ibid, 41.
[113] Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla,* 52

of prostitution, which seems to have been widely effective.[114] Another time, following a series of discussions with James Douglas, Duncan proposed a plan to overhaul policing and punishments for primarily liquor-related offenses in Victoria and other settlements.[115] But Duncan has nothing to say in his letters about slavery. Duncan's background should provide him with a heavier abolitionist tinge than most missionaries, but he, like other missionaries, shows a clear desire to banish liquor from the colony, but no explicit interest in pursuing slavery. This is not to say that Duncan does nothing about slavery, however.

Like the Oblates, Duncan eventually came to the conclusion that the towns, in this case Fort Simpson, were a corrupting influence on the indigenous population. The creeping tide of white society was driving unrest and with it, increased violence and an insatiable demand for liquor.[116] Duncan's goal was to create a self-sufficient community that could escape the vices of European society and enable the indigenous population better access to good, Christian, values. In 1862 Duncan took his converts and moved en masse to a former village site at Metlakatla, fleeing vice brought about by Europeans, not the indigenous institution of slavery. To a certain extent, slavery follows Duncan.

Duncan was among those missionaries who chose to aid escaping slaves themselves. Duncan was not the only one doing this, it is important to note. As

[114] Ibid*,* 53.
[115] Ibid, 54-55.
[116] Ibid,*,* 58-59.

European settlement increased, more slaves were able to make it to safety by fleeing their masters.[117] Following Admiral Hastings's decree that any slave who makes it on board a Royal Navy vessel, or to a Christian mission, shall be considered free, Duncan took to aiding individual slaves that made it to Metlakatla. In fact, "The village [Metlakatla] became known as a 'city of refuge' on the coast for runaway Indian slaves, and received a number of Tlingits and Alaska Haidas." There was even a fund established in the settlement in order to pay back chiefs whose slaves escaped.[118] While this makes Duncan look like a saint of abolitionism by comparison, it is important to place this in context. By paying for slaves to be set free, Duncan was making a transaction that was already commonplace in Northwest Coast's slavery – and his willingness to purchase slaves made him part of the slave trade. Slaves were already readily killed by their owners during potlatches and rituals. As such, the system could account for this by the taking of new slaves through warfare so the number stayed relatively stable. What undermined slavery was not Duncan's giving aid to runaway slaves but by the ending of intergroup warfare by the Royal Navy.

Porcher notes how Duncan is an active participant in helping suppress the liquor trade along the northern coasts.[119] Porcher's account of this makes it unclear precisely how this is happening. Duncan could be working alongside the Royal Navy to find smugglers, or he might be bypassing them and working alongside indigenous constables. Porcher does not make any note of Duncan's methods, merely stating that

---

[117] Donald, *Aboriginal Slavery,* 244-254.
[118] Peter Murray, *The Devil and Mr. Duncan: A History of the Two Metlakatlas* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985), 133.
[119] Porcher, *A Tour of Duty,* 95.

he is making progress. Duncan is making efforts both to help suppress the liquor trade as well, alongside aiding slaves. Given how many figures are in favour of/acting to pursue suppressing the liquor trade and taking little action against slavery, it is interesting to note Duncan's efforts in both.

Another figure who is taking action towards both slavery and the liquor trade was Anglican Bishop Hill. Hill writes of his experiences all across B.C. over many years, notably during the 1860s. He is one of the few missionary sources that actively speaks out about slavery. His diaries contain many discussions, and examples of, slavery and as such it will have to suffice to pull just a few examples. Hill makes his feelings toward slavery quite clear, by referring to indigenous society and individuals affected by slavery with a great deal of pity and disgust.[120] Hill's efforts here are largely directed at dissuading African slavery, however.

He mentions that he has been discussing "the American troubles" so his comments are discussing abolitionism in regards to the American Civil War and the African slave trade, rather than anything taking place in B.C. On several occasions, Hill gave sermons about the evils of slavery. For example, in May of 1864, Hill simply notes in his diary that he "spoke out upon slavery."[121] In another, more peculiar, incident, Hill refers to the "bondage of Satan" in the superstition of eating rats to overpower one's oppressors in the event of being made a slave; as well, refers to this same bondage

[120] Bishop Hill, *Diaries of 1862,* 8.
[121] Bishop Hill, *Diaries of 1864,* 51.

with the “cruelties” the slaves endure.[122] While not about indigenous slavery, this presents itself as among the few examples of missionaries actively pursuing abolitionism. Hill likewise takes great pleasure in the suppression of the liquor trade. While he himself doesn’t participate in the policing or suppression, he notes many examples in 1863, for example, of large amounts of liquor being seized from smugglers. Hill describes this seizure as “an act of mercy & of justice.”[123]

All of these different accounts show that missionaries were not only widely active in B.C. during this period, but were deeply involved in the policies of the colonial government. Catholic missionaries sought to establish autonomous and self-sufficient communities to keep the indigenous population from the vices of European society, an effort that while ultimately unsuccessful, would have contributed to a decrease in slavery. The Catholic Church had little to say overall about slavery directly, but their efforts brought them great influence among different indigenous nations, and brought the approval of Douglas’s government. William Duncan and the Protestants of the Church Missionary Society undertook great efforts to aid individual slaves and combat the illegal liquor trade. Building the settlement of Metlakatla, a “reduction” community like the Catholics wanted, created a sanctuary for slaves to flee to seek their freedom. While this arrangement wasn’t going to end slavery in the long term, it was a way to help individuals.

[122] Bishop Hill, *Diaries of 1863,* 25.
[123] Bishop Hill, *Diaries of 1863,* 31-40.

Indigenous oral histories do provide some counter-arguments to this narrative, however. Mary Rice, a woman of the Puneluxutth' and a cultural authority, is one of those interviewed by Mildred Cryer in the 1930s. In one of these interviews, Rice mentions how “the priests” had told her people that it was wrong to keep slaves and had demanded that they “send their slaves back to the places they had stolen them from.”[124] Because the interviewer is repeatedly probing Rice on the topic of slavery, she mentions a similar incident about the Cowichan, where priests demanded they return their slaves.[125] The period of time in which these events would have taken place is an interesting one. More than likely, Rice was discussing the decade of the 1880s. This means that it is taking place at a time when the power of the colonial government is increasing greatly and that slavery was already on the way out. Whoever these priests are, Rice also does not say. It is difficult to assume any particular church, but if these priests were indeed demanding that slaves be returned, it is likely they were Protestants or Anglicans. Rice does not comment on the successfulness of the priests’ attempts, either, only that they scolded her people for practicing slavery and demanded it end.

All of this is to say that slavery in B.C. was not ended by a deliberate effort like the potlatch or the attempt to end liquor smuggling. What we see is, not coordinated efforts by the Royal Navy, government, and missionaries to clamp down on a booming slave economy. Unlike just across the Straits of Juan de Fuca where abolition became part of the treaty process, in BC a lack of interest was demonstrated by almost all

---

[124] Beryl Mildred Cryer, *Two Houses Half-Buried in Sand*, Chris Arnett ed. (Vancouver, BC: Talon Books, 2007), 136.
[125] Ibid, 151.

parties in doing anything about the slave trade. Many ignore it altogether, while some make small and local attempts to help individual slaves. The notable exception to this is Hill, who gave talks across the colony about abolition. The provided evidence proves that the traditional argument about the Royal Navy ending slavery, as voiced by Gough, cannot be believed as truth. The British authorities in no way concentrated attention on eradicating slavery. While they were happy about its disappearance, to claim that that was their goal from the beginning fails to stand up to the evidence. Instead, slavery withers away unopposed. The sudden onslaught of European diseases dramatically shifted the economic and political landscape of B.C. The British efforts to end intergroup warfare in order to further their interests hindered any increases in slave populations, and slaves were being given more avenues to flee their owners than ever before. The abolition of indigenous slavery in B.C. was an accidental byproduct of other British goals, not the primary motive for their actions.

Bibliography

Bishop Hill, *Diaries 1862-1864*.

Boyd, Robert. “Smallpox in the Pacific Northwest: The First Epidemics.” *BC Studies* no. 101 (Spring, 1994), 5-40.

Brabant, Augustin Joseph. *Mission to Nootka, 1874-1900: Reminiscences of the West Coast of Vancouver Island*. Edited by Charles Lilliard. Victoria: Moriss Printing Ltd, 1977.

Codere, Helen. *Fighting With Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlaching and Warfare, 1792-1930*. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1966.

Cryer, Beryl Mildred. *Two Houses Half-Buried in Sand.* Edited by Chris Arnett. Vancouver, British Columbia: Talon Books, 2007.

Donald, Leland. *Aboriginal Slavery on the Northwest Coast of North America.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.

Drucker, Philip. *The Northern and Central Nootkan Tribes.* United States, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951.

Flowers Rachel. “Xwnuts’aluwum: T’aat’ka’ Kin Relations and the Apocryphal Slave,” MA diss. University of Victoria, 2012.

Glass, Aaron. “Reviewed Work: Aboriginal Slavery on the Northwest Coast of North America by Leland Donald.” *American Indian Quarterly* vol. 23, no. ¾ (Summer - Autumn 1999), 191-193.

Gough, Barry. *Gunboat Frontier*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984.

Gough, Barry. “Send a Gunboat! Checking Slavery and Controlling Liquor Traffic among Coast Indians of British Columbia in the 1860s.” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 4 (Oct, 1978): 159-168.

Klingberg, Frank J. *Abolitionist Movement in England*. United States: Yale University Press, 1968.

Lutz, John Sutton. *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations.* Vancouver & Toronto: UBC Press, 2008.

Mayne, Richard C. *Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island*. London: John Murray, Albemarble Street, 1862.

McNally, Vincent J. *The Lord's Distant Vineyard: A History of the Oblates and the Catholic Church Community in British Columbia.* Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, August 2000.

Murray, Peter. *The Devil and Mr. Duncan: A History of the Two Metlakatlas.* Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985.

Pearson, Andrew. "Waterwitch: a warship, its voyage and its crew in the era of anti-slavery." *Atlantic Studies,* vol. 13, no. 1 (2016): 99-124.

Porcher, E. A. *A Tour of Duty in the Pacific Northwest.* Edited by Dwight L. Smith. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2000.

Pritchard, Allan. "The Royal Navy and the Comox Settlement." *Journal of the British Columbia Historical Federation,* vol. 40, no. 2 (2007): 20-27.

Richards, G. H. *The Private Journal of Captain G.H Richards: the Vancouver Island Survey (1860-1862).* Edited by Linda Dorricott & Deidre Cullon. Vancouver: Brick Books, 2012.

Rijn, Kiran Van. ""Lo! the Poor Indian!" Colonial Responses to the 1862-63 Smallpox Epidemic in British Columbia and Vancouver Island." *CBMH/BCHM* vol. 23, no. 2 (2006), 541-560.

Sage, Walter N. *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1930.

Smith, Dorothy Blakey. *James Douglas: Father of British Columbia.* Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971.

Treaty of Point Elliott, 1855. https://www.washingtonhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/pointElliottTreaty.pdf (Accessed March 15th, 2023).

Usher, Jean. *William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia.* Canada: National Museums of Canada, 1974.

Verney, Edmund Hope. *Vancouver Island Letters of Edmund Hope Verney.* Edited by Allan Pritchard. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996.

Ward, W. E. F. *The Royal Navy and the Slavers.* London & New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023.