A CASE OF GEOCIDE

The Political and Cartographic Erasure of the Island Cache (British Columbia)

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Abstract

In this photo and text essay we chronicle the disappearance of an Island community of marginalised Aboriginal people. This disappearance is the result of changes in both the landscape (rendering the Island itself part of the mainland) and landscape memory (erasing the historiographic markers of the former insular community). The essay alerts us to the various ways that Islands are transformed in the context of relations with powerful neighbours.

Keywords

Urban Aboriginal communities, historiography, Island studies, British Columbia

Introduction: Scale

This tale of the erasure of the Island Cache is offered carefully, mindful of the contexts for other conversations about ethnocide and genocide.[1] The destruction of this small Island community, a Aboriginal[2] (mostly Métis and non-Status Indian) ghetto at the juncture of the Nechako and Fraser Rivers, shares many characteristics with wider acts of genocide and ethnocide, and indeed it occurred in the context of a wider Canadian colonial history that includes acts that fall within many definitions of genocide (eg the Indian and Métis Residential School Systems that were overtly designed to separate Aboriginal children from their language, culture, and community, and are widely understood to constitute a form of cultural genocide). The erasure of the Island Cache involved the displacement and relocation of the people, and the death of the community, though not the culture of the peoples involved. Still, the story of the Island Cache may be instructive, especially in terms of some of the more subtle elements of the colonial processes implicated in more extreme examples of the elimination of people and their communities.

The Beginning

The small island at the juncture of the Nechako and Fraser Rivers on which the community of the Island Cache[3] developed, is part of the traditional territory of the Lheidli-T'enneh band of the Carrier or Dakelh peoples.[4]

Figure 1 – Regional map of southern and central British Columbia showing position of Prince George (Mike Evans)
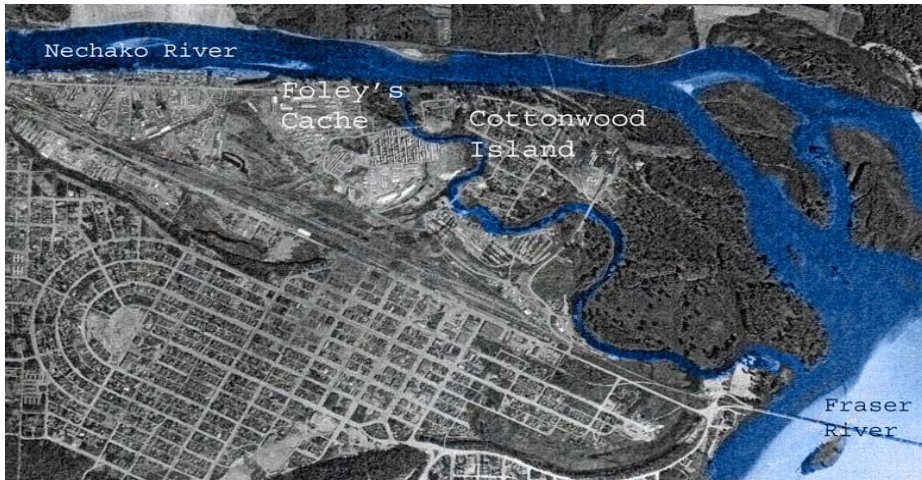
Figure 2 – Nechako Fraser Junction 1953 – Note the well-defined flood channel
separating the Island from the mainland (photograph courtesy of The
City of Prince George - photoshop by Stephen Foster)

The mainland adjacent to the Island was part of the Indian Reserve #1 until the turn of
the 20th Century when the land was annexed in order to underwrite the construction of
the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTPR) (Leonard, 1996). With the transfer of the land at
the juncture to the railway, the removal of Lheidli-T'enneh people to a new reserve, and
the development of the Prince George Town site adjacent to these railway lands, the
City of Prince George took shape. The sale also facilitated the construction of the GTPR
by providing land for an equipment depot that became known as 'Foley's Cache'.

Figure 3 - Foley's Cache 1913 (courtesy of The Exploration Place)

The Middle

Across a flood channel from Foley's Cache lay a small island, now called Cottonwood Island; this Island was not part of the Railway lands, nor part of Prince George, but an unincorporated area under the jurisdiction of the Province of British Columbia. People gradually started to settle the Island, first as squatters, then later after the Province sold lots on the Island, as the owners and renters of the small homes that sprang up on the Western half. In the industrial railway lands on the mainland lumber mills multiplied, and by the 1960s, the unincorporated community of the Island Cache was populated mostly by Aboriginal and immigrant families, most of whom were members of the working poor underclass of the region. Though the Cache was similar in many ways to other areas of the city in terms of housing stock and socio-economic conditions, it nonetheless had a reputation of as a rough area – in a word: a ghetto.

Figure 5 - Street in the Cache 1970 (photograph courtesy of K. Sedgwick)

Residents of the Cache and residents of the City co-existed, though in different jurisdictions, until 1970, when the Province and the City agreed that the boundaries of the City would expand to encompass both the Island Cache and the industrial areas on the far side of the Nechako River. Previously, the opinions of the City about the Cache didn't have much impact (although there was a nasty battle over whether the City should continue to dump garbage in the area). Now, however, the City of Prince George had direct control.

Between 1970 and 1972 there were a series of pitched political battles with the Island Cache residents writing reports, launching protests, and seeking positive compromise with City Officials and politicians who, for the most part, thought that the area was better zoned as a storage yard for logs than a residential community. City actions might be typified as ranging from outright hostility and overt attempts to eliminate the community, to a not-particularly-benign neglect.

Figure 6 - Mrs. Lucille Mossman and Mrs. Ivy Carpenter at Dump Protest 1970
(photograph courtesy of the *Prince George Citizen* [*PGC*])

Figure 7 - Restricted Tenure Notice 1970 (photograph courtesy of the *PGC)*

A high point of community action was "Operation Sandbag", aka "Up the Dyke Day", in which residents and their supporters augmented the protective dyke on the Nechako River bank. This was a timely intervention on their part, as an ice jam caused water levels to rise above the level of the old dyke in December of 1970.

Figure 8 - Operation Sandbag (aka 'Up the Dyke Day') 1970, L-R John Carifelle, Jules Morin, Doug Carifelle, Elizabeth Carifelle (photograph by R. Hull courtesy of the *PGC*)

Figure 9 - Nechako Fraser Junction, December 1970 (photograph by D. Milne, courtesy of the *PGC*)

The End

Unfortunately, the dyke was insufficient to stop a later spring flood, when sustained high water levels combined with porous alluvial soils resulted in the water of the Nechako seeping under the dyke. This flood, in May and June of 1972, was the fulcrum the city needed to lever the Cache residents out of their homes.

Figure 10 - 1972 Flood (photograph courtesy of K. Sedgwick)

Figure 11 - House Demolition Oct 1972: (photograph courtesy of the *PGC*)

Over the next six months a combination of building condemnations and sustained economic pressure resulted in 90% of Cache residents moving out; their homes were subsequently bulldozed and burnt.

By the following spring the community was gone. In a few years there was a land swap, and Industry was consolidated at the western end of the Island where the Island Cache once stood, and the eastern end of the Island became Cottonwood Island Park.

An Attenuated Epilogue

This story is not unique, of course. In eastern Canada there is an earlier example of this sort of urban renewal in the events surrounding the destruction of Africville near Halifax *(*Clairmont, 1974; Clairmont and Magill, 1976). Though the former residents of the Cache certainly felt the events unjust, many would probably baulk at the notion that the events constitute a form of ethnocide. Three further elements mark this story of erasure as one worthy of note however. First, sometime after the western end of the island was finally and fully industrialised, new streets were named and signs erected.

Figure 12 - Corner of River Road and Foley Crescent, 2004 (photograph by Mike Evans)

This sign is particularly interesting because it references one "Foley" of an earlier place – that of Foley's Cache. The problem is that the sign is just in front of the former Island Cache schoolhouse, now at western tip of the island – across the old flood channel from the location of the original Foley's Cache! In terms of the history and geography that street signs make, this an elision of the Island Cache via the relocation and valourisation of Foley's Cache. This is a geographical error that might be forgiven, as over the last three decades the City of Prince George has presided over the virtual de-islandisation of Cottonwood Island. In this photo, taken in the late 1990s, one can barely see the

outlines of the Island, which has disappeared as the flood channel has been filled in over the years.

The final irony, however, is another sign (Figure 13, below); one that proclaims the good and collaborative work of a series of community and corporate partners to restore the very same flood channels that used to define Cottonwood Island, and the Island Cache. One might well read this sign as a good one, an example of emerging partnerships in support of ecological restoration were it not for the fact that there is not one mention here of the community or people of the Island Cache. Erased at one end by industry, and at the other by nature, the marginalised and mostly Aboriginal community is thrice disappeared. The bulldozers were only the first instance of erasure, and this bears thinking about both in this case, and when we consider the character and processes of ethnocide generally.

Figure 13 - "History of Cottonwood Island and Side Channel Restoration" Plaque 2006: (photograph by Mike Evans)

Endnotes

[1] Nothing, for instance should diminish our appreciation of the scale and ferocity of events like the levelling of the Warsaw Ghetto by Nazi forces in 1941-43.

[2] The term Aboriginal in Canada (as elsewhere) is the subject of some contestation. Common usage follows a slight modification of the constituents of "aboriginal people" enacted in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982; specifically that act recognises Indians, Métis, and Inuit peoples as aboriginal peoples. In current (though not universal) practice, the term Indian has been replaced by "First Nations." Note that the term First Nations is not equivalent to "Aboriginal"—rather it is a term that excludes Métis and Inuit. Non-Status Indians are people who identify as Indian (now sometimes included in the term First Nations), but for a variety of reasons do not have legal status under the federal Indian Act. The term Métis is also subject to some contestation, but is generally used to refer to communities of people of both genetic and culturally mixed heritage arising from the interaction of First Nations and European settlers – especially in the context of the Fur trade and northwest central North America. In this article our usage follows these practices (Note also, the common practice of using the term *aboriginal* as a noun rather than adjective is a recent and unevenly accepted one in Canada, see also Chartrand, 1991).

[3] A full and detailed description of the story outlined here can be found in Evans and Krebs (2004).

[4] The term "traditional territory" is used in contemporary Canada to refer to the customary lands of particular aboriginal peoples. The term is used to refer to territories even if those territories have been effectively alienated by treaty or seizure. The area of the Island Cache falls into the territories held by the ancestors of the community now know as Lheidli-T'enneh; this community was and is part of a wider network of Carrier (or Western Dene) speaking peoples.

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