

Forging the Crown Jewel: The Creation of Stanley Park

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Stanley Park is a well-loved park just past the downtown core of Vancouver. Like all parks, Stanley Park had to be created by many people across generations. Stanley Park opened in 1888 after years of planning. During this planning stage, the government retroactively established provenance for the park and began unsettling its many residents. Over the decades, authorities relocated residents in the peninsula; removed skeletons from burial grounds; turned the park into a tinder-box through sloppy roadwork; and removed numerous flora and fauna to fit Stanley Park within a specific image of the Pacific Northwestern locale. Most recently, authorities placed freestanding poles from other nations in the park to manufacture an Indigenous presence that fit within a specific visage. Employing the research of local historians Sean Kheraj and Jean Barman among other academics, this paper will recount and analyse the development of Stanley Park. Particular attention is dedicated to the ways in which municipal and federal governments removed and remade Indigeneity in the park. It is clear through this research that the constructed nature of Stanley Park undermines the overall image presented to locals and tourists.

Stanley Park, dubbed the city's "Crown jewel," has existed almost as long as the city of Vancouver and has become essential to the city's identity. The park's land spans one thousand acres on a peninsula near a harbour in the Burrard Inlet. Excluding the obviously developed areas, the peninsula is popularly seen and portrayed as a "virginal wilderness" within a metropolitan core to which residents and tourists can escape. However, the history of the area contests this perception. This paper will argue that Stanley Park was constructed to appeal to tourist and resettler gaze and that the alterations to the peninsula contradict popular notions of it being "untouched". The "Crown jewel" of Vancouver was not found and preserved, but it is the result of the unsettling of both people and nature.

The history of Stanley Park, both before and after its establishment, is an example of the interactions between humans and nature. Alan MacEachern defined environmental history as a multidisciplinary area of history that looks at nature over time as well as the human relationships with it. These relationships are informed by

human use and perceptions of the environment. Environmental history relies on scholars maintaining a “dialectic belief” where we shape our environment and it shapes us in return, also known as “mutual determination”.¹ This paper operates under that lens. The creation of Stanley Park necessitated a mutually deterministic relationship between people and nature. Stanley Park’s environment informed anthropogenic approaches, and these approaches shaped the environment in return. The peninsula’s (re/un)settlement was informed by colonial perceptions of both ideal land use and ideal ecology.² As such, government officials sought to construct both a history and a present for Stanley Park that fit within their ideals. To create this history, they first needed to possess the land.

The colonial government constructed a history to justify their possession of the land. The land on which Stanley Park now resides was used by and home to many from the local Coast Salish nations, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-waututh.³ However, according to colonial authorities and the federal government of Canada, it was a military reserve. This military reserve was supposedly established in 1863.⁴ According to Jean Barman, the evidence for such a reserve is retroactive. It was not until years after the British Crown ceded land to

¹ Alan MacEachern, “An Introduction in Theory and Practice,” in *Method and Meaning in Canadian Environmental History*, eds. Alan MacEachern and William J. Turkel, (Toronto: Nelson), 2009, <http://niche-canada.org/method-and-meaning/an-introduction-in-theory-and-practice/>: xii.

² As the settlements encouraged and created by colonial governments were not the first on the land we now call Canada, I avoid using the term “settlement” without a prefix. The land was settled by First Nations prior to contact, and as such, I find it more appropriate to refer to “settlers” as “resettlers”. In the same line of thinking, to establish a colonial settlement is not only to “resettle” the land but to “unsettle” the peoples and ways of life that existed prior to resettlement. I employ the terms to reframe the ways in which we think of the resettlement of Canada by European peoples. See Jean Barman, “Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity in Vancouver,” *BC Studies* no. 155 (2007): 3-30.

³ Sean Kheraj, “Historical Overview of Stanley Park,” *Stanley Park Ecology Society* (2012), 1, <http://stanleyparkecology.ca/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/02/SOPEI-Historical-Overview-of-Stanley-Park.pdf>.

⁴ Renisa Mawani, “From Colonialism to Multiculturalism?: Totem Poles, Tourism, and National Identity in Vancouver’s Stanley Park,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 35, no. 1-2, (2006): 44.

the Canadian government under confederation that documentation supported such a claim. In 1880, the Dominion of Canada enforced their right to lands claimed by the Crown for “defence purposes” under the British North America Act. In Vancouver, “certain lands at the Burrard Inlet” were “marked” for these aforementioned defence purposes, but officials never fulfilled the legal requirements for such an act.⁵ These lands did not include the peninsula, only the south shores of the First and Second Narrows. British officials explained their claim to the land by stating that as Governor James Douglas had the authority to possess the Narrows and the peninsula, they too had the authority to cede them to the young Canadian government. Formalities aside, the land technically belonged to the British Crown. Britain, in an effort to maintain good relations with the Dominion of Canada, “returned” the land to Canada.⁶ The fabrication of documentation and history reveal the constructed nature of this history. Scholars like Renisa Mawani have integrated these events into the narrative of the park, moving it from a confounding legal situation into an accepted history. Barman’s research reveals the colonial logic and justifications that allowed British Columbia to possess the peninsula. The history of colonial ownership was altered as the land would be altered.

City officials began altering the land to prepare for Stanley Park’s opening, only for the environment to alter itself as well. The plans to create a public park were set in motion one month after Vancouver was established in the Spring of 1886. The Dominion permitted the city to use the peninsula as a park so long as it could be used for defence in case of emergency.⁷ When the city obtained the land for the use of a park, the previously settled landscape was subsequently transformed. A road was built through and around the park on previously established First Nations trails. Midden, trash heaps made of organic material, such as the ones in Whoi Whoi (now Lumberman’s Arch), were discarded. This discarding of “trash” may not seem significant but the city was discarding evidence of previous settlement in the park. The road’s

⁵ Jean Barman, “Imposition of Stanley Park,” *Stanley Park’s Secret: the forgotten families of Whoi Whoi, Kanaka Ranch and Brockton Point*, (Vancouver: Harbour Books, 2005), 86-88.

⁶ Barman, “Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity,” 21; “Imposition of Stanley Park,” *Stanley Park’s Secret*, 86-88.

⁷ Barman, “Imposition of Stanley Park,” 89-90.

creation also resulted in the removal of Squamish families living in the area. Surveyors would chop sections of homes down while Indigenous people were inside.⁸ This created a hostile environment for the families in Whoi Whoi and framed those who lived on the land in opposition to the Crown and the Dominion. Furthermore, according to Kheraj, the road work being done was “careless”. This “carelessness” would be devastating.⁹

In the summer of 1888, months before the park’s opening in the coming September, the road work resulted in a minor natural disaster that would legitimise the city’s paternalistic relationship with the park. The combination of the “carelessness” in the roadway construction and of the dry weather during the summer led to the peninsula’s forests going up in flame. The spread of the fires also spread fear in the hearts of many Vancouver residents. They grew concerned that the natural beauty they so desired would be preemptively destroyed. A “late summer rain” would quell the fires but not the anxiety felt by Vancouverites.¹⁰ Kheraj writes that local authorities, motivated by a concern for preserving nature, used the fires to afford them the power to further intervene.¹¹ Officials constructed trails for firefighters and placed fire hydrants throughout the peninsula to protect it from future fires. In doing so, they could keep the park from being reduced to “blackened stumps”.¹² The Park Board “maintain[ed] the image of an undisturbed natural forest” only by disturbing it.¹³ The fires and the roads’ created are connected incidents, revealing that the virginal Stanley Park was merely a construction by city officials. The focus on creating an uninhibited wilderness justified displacing the dead.

The presence of First Nations people and immigrants on the peninsula was hidden to create the modern understanding of the park as “untouched”. This is evidenced in the neglect of the cemetery in Brockton Point. Residents of Brockton Point and Kanaka Ranch were buried in the park and on Deadman’s Island. These residents included

⁸ Barman, “Imposition of Stanley Park,” 90-92; “Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity,” 20.

⁹ Sean Kheraj, “Improving Nature: Remaking Stanley Park’s Forest, 1888-1931,” *BC Studies* no. 158 (Summer 2008), 72.

¹⁰ Kheraj, “Improving Nature,” 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

Squamish families, mixed Anglo-Indigenous families, Chinese men who came in pursuit of gold, and Quebecois fur-traders. According to a Squamish man known as August Jack, Squamish and white people were buried closer to the water, and Chinese men were buried closer inland.¹⁴ When the city established its own cemetery in 1887, a year after the establishment of Vancouver, this burial place was unsettled and neglected. Officials uprooted skeletons and bodies during road-building. Wooden fences that marked graves were not maintained by the city nor replaced with other forms of grave markers once the park was established. The “natural grandeur and primitive beauty” boasted by Vancouver officials was incompatible with a narrative that included Stanley Park’s past role as an eternal resting place.¹⁵ The construction of the wild park could not accommodate a past of human settlement on the land. Thus, this past—represented by the grave markers—fell into disrepair and eventual decomposition, and the bodies of those buried in Stanley Park were unearthed and displaced to make way for resettlement. The resettlement would also require a removal of the park’s flora and fauna to satisfy a settler and tourist gaze.

Officials of the City of Vancouver created the park to alter the ecology while simultaneously framing Stanley Park as a locale of uninhibited nature. On the day of its inception, September 27, 1888, Mayor David Oppenheimer waxed poetic about the value of the park once it had been given a “helping hand”.¹⁶ The peninsula (then beginning to be called the “Crown jewel” of Vancouver) was filled with “future potential” rather than current beauty.¹⁷ The park’s alterations were done in accordance with social elite’s romantic ideals. This elite desired a return to nature while also requiring that this nature be aesthetically pleasing. This desire necessitated the intervention of

¹⁴ Barman, “Imposition of Stanley Park,” 94-96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94-96.

¹⁶ Kheraj, “Improving Nature,” 65-66.

¹⁷ From its inception, Stanley Park has been possessively referred to as a “Crown jewel”, which not only places it within the commonwealth and linguistically connects it to the British Crown but also renders Stanley Park a “national treasure” that the city must maintain and protect. Language like this permits intervention and a paternalistic relationship. Nicole Shukin, “Ecological Citizenship, Ecological Melancholia: The Ruins of Stanley Park,” *Dalhousie Review* 90, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 118.

scientists and urban planners.¹⁸ Mud flats at the park's entrance were turned into the Lost Lagoon, a man-made lake; and, beginning in 1902, crows, owls, and hawks were shot to make the area more appealing and to preserve the local duck population. Grey squirrels were imported from New York to entertain park-goers.¹⁹ In 1910, the city's efforts to alter the park under the guise of "preservation" were epitomised. That year, insect and fungi outbreaks began killing the trees. The outbreaks would attack the forest for years. The city responded, and "[d]ead and dying trees had to be removed; splintered tree tops had to be pruned; underbrush had to be thinned".²⁰ The removal of dead trees allowed for the park's overall skyline to be improved while also removing the risk of the insects and fungi breeding. The diseased western red cedar trees were replaced with the supposedly heartier Douglas fir. City officials also began spreading insecticides throughout the forest, initially by spraying hand but later by aeroplane. These actions were not without controversy as, in a moment of ecological citizenship, the *Vancouver Sun* raised concerns that park officials were attempting to "civilise" the forest in the peninsula.²¹ This did not stop the officials. They continued to alter the forest, removing spruce and hemlock trees through controlled burnings. They also removed deciduous alder trees because they did not fit with the idea of Stanley Park as a quintessential Northwest conifer forest.²²

Twenty years later, however, these actions were almost forgotten. In a 1936 tourist brochure, Stanley Park was referred as "virgin", a peninsula that "remains today as it was at the time the 'white man' came...".²³ The tourist brochure is, as evidenced, incorrect. The forest had been drastically changed in years prior. Yet, this brochure is an explicit example of how perceptions of Stanley Park were not true to

¹⁸ Kheraj, "Improving Nature," 65-66.

¹⁹ Barman, "Changing Times," *Stanley Park's Secret*, 161.

²⁰ Kheraj, "Improving Nature," 90.

²¹ The *Vancouver Sun*'s response is typical of what Nicole Shukin terms "responsibility" in which the ability to witness and then respond to a perceived "ecological trauma" "is rhetorically cast as an exemplary and emotional idiom of *national* citizenship." It is a liberal construction that relies on the naturalisation of certain environments as cornerstones of nation-state identity. See: Shukin, "Ecological Citizenship and Ecological Melancholia," 114-15.

²² Kheraj, "Improving Nature," 76-90.

²³ *Ibid.*, 71.

its past or its present. The city had altered the park's ecology and responded to natural changes in its ecology with force. The removal of an Indigenous present in exchange for an Indigenous fiction reveals how Stanley Park was constructed for the tourist and the resettler gaze.

To further create a specific idea of Stanley Park, officials removed Indigenous residents and replaced them with symbols of Indigeneity. First Nations people's presence in the peninsula did not end with British or Canadian governments obtaining the land. At the same time of the fungi and insect outbreaks, authorities were trying to evict families at Brockton Point and in Whoi Whoi. The houses at Brockton Point were visible from the downtown core and considered unseemly and ugly. In 1913, a reporter described the village there in terms of decay and disarray. This language perpetuated the notion that First Nations people could not care for the land nor their properties correctly and that intervention by resettlers was necessary. In 1917, the City of Vancouver and the federal government joined together to unsettle the residents at Brockton Point. Those houses were then burned.²⁴ In Whoi Whoi, the residents were pressured to leave and were eventually relocated to reserves for the Squamish nation. The last Squamish resident, "Aunt Sally", died in Whoi Whoi, already renamed Lumberman's Arch, in 1923.²⁵ Officials unsettled the residents of Whoi Whoi and later elevated non-Salish nations at the cost of the Squamish residents.

Lumberman's Arch was the first location for the erection of a totem pole of Kwakwaka'wakw origins in 1903. In 1919, an imitation Kwakwaka'wakw village in Whoi Whoi was proposed but never actualised, though four poles were introduced in 1923, the same year as Aunt Sally's death. Again in 1936, more totem poles were erected. This was part of the celebration of Vancouver's fiftieth anniversary. These totem poles were introduced to "enhance the viewing experience for visitors".²⁶ The freestanding poles were an assortment of Kwakwaka'wakw and Haida poles. Some of the poles were removed from these nations under the guise of "preserving" culture, while others were created and maintained by people like Chief Dan Cranmer of the Kwakwaka'wakw in Alert Bay. These Indigenous creations were chosen

²⁴ Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity," 23-26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶ Mawani, "From Colonialism to Multiculturalism?," 46.

from the Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw under the colonial il/logic that these nations had better mental and physical faculties than the Squamish or other Coast Salish nations (who also did not create freestanding poles). Barman attributes the inclusion of Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw poles to the fact that these nations are far from Vancouver. The city can construct a historical and "authentic" Indigenous past from nations that do not claim title to Stanley Park or have any Indigenous present in accordance with that land. These poles were removed in 1962 and placed in Brockton point, once home to multiple families and a cemetery.²⁷ The totem poles, which still remain in Stanley Park despite the unsettling of Indigenous families, are evidence of how Stanley Park was constructed for a specific resettler and tourist gaze.

A history of unsettlement, alterations to the landscape, and colonial impositions reveal the constructed nature of the park. Rather than a "virgin wilderness", it is a carefully manicured locale with a cleaned underbrush, imported totem poles, and the early inhabitants removed. The city desired a visage pleasing to both residents and tourists alike, something the "untouched" forest could not provide. To do this, they created a narrative of the "primitive" wild by inventing a past and present suitable to newcomers. The city could not obtain a real "crown jewel" and so they forged one.

²⁷ Mawani, "From Colonialism to Multiculturalism?," 31, 35-36, 44, 46-47; Barman, "Erasing Indigenous Indigeneity," 26-27.

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