

British Columbia's Fear of Asians, 1900-1950

by Patricia E. Roy*

The most virulent examples of racial intolerance in twentieth-century Canadian history may be found in British Columbia where riots,¹ a collection of statutes,² a plethora of propaganda,³ and the forcible movement of some 21,000 Japanese in 1942⁴ demonstrate the hostility of the province's white residents to Asians. That hostility was rooted in fear of Asian superiority. Although many British Columbia attitudes can be explained in terms of social psychology,⁵ and many fears were grossly exaggerated even to the point of irrationality, Asians provided sufficient, effective competition in the fishing grounds, in the fields, in the market place, in the classroom, and on the battlefield to warrant deep fears about the ability of white British Columbians to maintain their dominant position in the province.

Agitation against Asians, explained the *Prince Rupert Daily News*, is "a sign of inferiority. We fear the Oriental. In many respects he is better than we are." Before World War II, many white British Columbians feared the challenge to their *status quo* and dreaded the prospect of an Asian takeover. As the *Nanaimo Free Press* observed, the "real reason" for our objections to Oriental immigration is "that we are not yet strong enough to assimilate races so alien from us in their habits. We are afraid that they would swamp our civilization... we want to keep the province for ourselves."⁶ White British Columbians believed they had a natural "right" to occupy the province⁷ but they were unsure of their ability to maintain it. More-

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¹ Vancouver was the scene of two riots. See Patricia E. ROY, "The Preservation of the Peace in Vancouver: The Aftermath of the Anti-Chinese Riot of 1887", *BC Studies*, no. 31 (Autumn 1976): 44-59 and Howard SUGIMOTO, "The Vancouver Riots of 1907: A Canadian Episode", in *East Across the Pacific*, eds: Hilary CONROY and T. SCOTT MIYAKAWA (Santa Barbara: American Bibliographic Center, 1972), pp. 92-126. Immigration from India was not a continuing concern and is not examined here.

² The legal position of Asians in British Columbia is clearly outlined in H. F. ANGUS, "The Legal Status in British Columbia of Residents of Oriental Race and Their Descendants", *The Canadian Bar Review*, IX (January 1931): 1-12.

³ See Patricia E. ROY, "The Oriental 'Menace' in British Columbia", in *The Twenties in Western Canada*, ed: S. M. TROFIMENKOFF (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1972), pp. 243-58.

⁴ See W. Peter WARD, "British Columbia and the Japanese Evacuation", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVII (September 1976): 289-308.

⁵ W. Peter WARD, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978).

⁶ *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 28 January 1930; *Nanaimo Free Press*, 29 May 1914.

⁷ For example, H. H. STEVENS, *The Oriental Problem*, (n.p., n.d.), p. 1.

over, their isolation from the rest of Canada, the newness of their society, and the "different" qualities of Asians made white British Columbians especially prone to self-doubt.

British Columbians had joined Confederation without enthusiasm and they long felt themselves to be distant from the rest of Canada. Premier E. G. Prior observed in 1903, "Victoria is 3,000 miles from Ottawa whereas Ottawa is 30,000 miles from Victoria."⁸ A Victoria journalist titled her memoirs of the first months after Pearl Harbor, *A Million Miles from Ottawa*.⁹ The mountains were physical as well as psychological barriers. Even after the completion of the transcontinental railway in 1885, it was a four or five day journey, assuming there were no slides or derailments, from Vancouver to Toronto or Montreal. To the west, in contrast, lay the open ocean beyond which lived millions of Asians. Ottawa seemed very far away; Asia, very near. British Columbians believed eastern Canadians did not comprehend their problems. On occasion, they suggested such imaginative solutions as naming Ottawa the sole port of entry for Asians coming to Canada¹⁰ but normally, British Columbians confined themselves to "educating the East",¹¹ about the "Oriental problem". In addition, British Columbia's reception of immigrants had a peculiar British twist. The British-born and the native Canadians who identified themselves primarily as British were unusually prominent in the province.¹² "We are anxious to keep this a British country. We want British Columbia British and nothing else", declared Premier Simon Fraser Tolmie, a native British Columbian, in 1928.¹³ Although anti-Asian organizations later adopted the phrase, "White Canada", the weakness of the province's identification with Canada and Canadians contributed to its sense of isolation and insecurity and to its receptiveness to racist ideas.

British Columbia has always been overwhelmingly a province of newcomers whose position in society was seldom quickly assured. Before World War II over half the adult population was born outside the province and many of the newcomers were new to Canada as well. Until recent years the population was small and much of the province, sparsely settled. "We are in the formative period of our national life", claimed one editor in 1921 when the population was just over half a million.

⁸ Quoted in Margaret A. ORMSBY, "A Horizontal View", CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, *Annual Report*, 1966, p. 11.

⁹ Gwen CASH, *A Million Miles from Ottawa* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1942).

¹⁰ Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), R. L. Borden Papers, #183248-9. W. J. Lamrick and T. H. Cross to Wilfrid Laurier, 5 June 1902.

¹¹ See Patricia E. ROY, "Educating the 'East': British Columbia and the Oriental Question in the Interwar Years", *BC Studies*, no. 18 (Summer 1973): 50-69.

¹² From 1911 through 1941, British Columbia had the greatest percentage of British-born in her population of any province and the lowest percentage of Canadian-born.

Percentages of British Columbians	1911	1921	1931	1941
Born in Canada	43.1	50.3	54.0	62.7
Born in the British Isles and possessions	30.1	30.6	27.3	22.3
British racial origin (regardless of birthplace)	67.8	73.9	70.6	85.0

CANADA, *Census*, 1941, vol. I, p. 168 and p. 173, plus calculations based on figures therein and in the 1931 census.

¹³ *Montreal Gazette*, 17 September 1928.

"We cannot afford to take any chances in regard to the building up of a nation with ideas and standards of living different from our own."¹⁴

British Columbians, of course, drew on an international repertoire of anti-Asian arguments for anti-Asian prejudice occurred almost everywhere Asians migrated or sought to migrate.¹⁵ California was the most convenient source of such arguments. The federal Royal Commissioners who investigated Chinese immigration in the mid-1880s took much of their evidence in San Francisco; some of the British Columbia agitators in the 1920s corresponded with V. S. McClatchey, the leader of the California exclusionists; and British Columbia protesters often drew on California propaganda to illustrate their assertion that, if additional restrictions were not imposed on Asians, the "Whole population" of some districts would become Asian.¹⁶

The feelings of insecurity and inferiority underlying the assorted anti-Asian arguments can be illustrated and analysed under several main headings: the challenge to morality, overwhelming numbers, the Japanese military threat, "unfair" economic competition, and, especially, inassimilability. These divisions are somewhat artificial; arguments and motives were seldom clear-cut or logical. Those who feared economic competition, for example, often mentioned social problems as a reason for restricting Asians. The arguments also tended to be repetitious although their intensity and emphasis varied. Election campaigns, particularly federal ones, usually generated an extra outburst of anti-Asian propaganda as could a real or apprehended influx of Asians such as the large-scale immigration of 1907, a sudden influx of returning Chinese in 1919, or rumours of illegal Japanese immigration in 1937 and 1938. Specific incidents such as newspaper accounts of the illegal drug trade or Japanese aggression in China could elicit arguments about the moral menace of the Chinese or the military danger of the Japanese respectively. The passage of the exclusionist Chinese Immigration Act in 1923 halted Chinese immigration and gradually reduced the Chinese "threat" to British Columbia. Moreover, because the Chinese population was predominantly male, the death rate exceeded the birth rate. The Japanese population in the province, in contrast, continued to increase and much of the anti-Asian agitation came to be directed specifically at them. Nevertheless, all of the mutually reinforcing anti-Asian arguments had one feature in common; their concern about white self-preservation. "Self-preservation is the first law of nature;" declared the *Vancouver Sun*, "it must be the fundamental and ever underlying motive of white Canadians in a white Canada."¹⁷

¹⁴ Prince Rupert *Daily News*, 13 July 1921.

¹⁵ California and Natal are obvious examples of the former; Australia and New Zealand, of the latter. A sense of insecurity occurred elsewhere. For some American illustrations see Richard HOFSTADTER, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (New York: George Braziller, 1959), pp. 185ff and John HIGHAM, *Strangers in the Land* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 162. There are no comparable studies of Canadian thought; however, many of Carl BERGER's imperialists appear to have believed "foreigners" could be assimilated into British subjects, that it was the white man's burden to raise up the "weaker races". *The Sense of Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 147-52 and 226-30.

¹⁶ For example, C. M. Watson and C. J. Hurt to H. H. Stevens, 31 March 1926. Copy in PAC, W. L. M. King Papers, #118453-4.

¹⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 24 June 1921.

The concern for self-preservation and the inferiority complex which pervaded the anti-Asian arguments can be seen in a relatively uncomplicated form in some of the reactions to the presence of Asian children in provincial schools. Advocates of segregated schools had claimed, among other things, that the presence of non-English speaking Asians retarded the progress of their white classmates. The demolition of that argument in the 1920s did little for white egos. A survey of the intelligence of all British Columbia school children ascertained that the Japanese were brighter than the Chinese but that both were "greatly superior to the average white population".¹⁸ This seemed to be confirmed in 1925 when Nobuichi Yamaoka, who had known no English when he came to Canada from Japan three years earlier, led the province in the high school entrance examinations. To many whites, this shocking event corroborated their worst fears that "whites are not able to compete with the Orientals either in labor or study",¹⁹ reinforcing the suspicion that "the 'yellow peril' is not yellow battleships nor yellow settlers but yellow intelligence."²⁰

Some whites required more protection than others. A second argument for segregated schools was the belief that Asian children threatened the morals of their white classmates. In commenting on proposals to set up segregated schools after a Chinese school boy servant murdered his white mistress, cut up her body and stuffed it in a furnace, the *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser* remarked: "moral standards of races are difficult to classify in order of merit and there are many daily incidents to make European Canadians modest in their claim of superior virtue. But there is no doubt that the moral, social and economic conditions of white Canadians, native and immigrant, deteriorate in association and competition with large numbers of Asiatics."²¹ Children, especially, needed to be protected from this "harmful" influence for, with them, "there is a tendency for the evil to work a stronger influence than the good."²²

Women and girls were also deemed to require special protection against Oriental immorality. In 1919, the Legislature amended the Municipal Act to forbid Chinese to employ white women or girls in any capacity.²³ In urging Vancouver, which had its own charter, to adopt a similar law, an officer of the Juvenile Detention Home blamed the absence of such a measure for the recent need to remove a white girl, "in a delicate condition", from a Chinese restaurant.²⁴ The need to protect women and young men was also a major argument against the illegal drug traffic. Drawing on two newspaper series of anti-drug articles, Leon J. Ladner told Parliament in 1922 of "snow parties" where wealthy Chinese introduced white girls

¹⁸ Peter SANDIFORD, "The Testing Programme", in *Survey of the School System*, J. H. PUTNAM and G. M. WEIR (Victoria: King's Printer, 1925), p. 508.

¹⁹ *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 25 July 1925.

²⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 24 July 1925.

²¹ *Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser*, 7 April 1914.

²² *British Columbia Magazine*, X (June 1914): 334.

²³ Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan passed similar laws but repealed or withdrew them in response to complaints from the Chinese consul. In 1923, British Columbia replaced the clause of the Municipal Act with the Women and Girls' Protection Act which forbade any person to employ or lodge a white or Indian woman or girl if local police officials did not deem it "advisable in the interests of the morals of such women and girls". (BRITISH COLUMBIA, *Revised Statutes*, 1924, c. 275). The original bill's reference to Chinese and Japanese was withdrawn after diplomatic objections.

²⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 16 April 1919.

to narcotics. He quoted with approval the assertion of Captain Macaulay of the Asiatic Exclusion League, that doing away with Asians would save "the souls and bodies of thousands of young men and women who are yearly being sent to a living hell and to the grave".²⁵ But the Chinese were only the agents of immorality. Captain Macaulay claimed Chinese drug pedlars were tools of Japan's imperialist plan to undermine the physical and mental culture of Canada.²⁶

Protestant church leaders actively campaigned against the drug traffic and its effects on morality. Some of them shared the general sense of white inferiority or, at least, used it to secure moral and financial support for church work among Asians in the province. Rev. N. L. Ward, a superintendent of Anglican Missions to the Chinese in British Columbia, warned that "unless the Christian churches of British Columbia rise up in earnest to convert these Oriental people in their midst, the history of the North African church will be repeated and Christianity will be wiped out by an Oriental wave of theosophic Buddhist thought . . . Unless we christianize the Chinese and Japanese in our midst, the day may come when there will be Buddhist and Shinto temples on Shaughnessy Heights and Rockland Avenue, and a temple erected to Confucius where now stands the Cathedral of the Holy Rosary".²⁷

Concern for the preservation of their traditional moral and religious values was but one aspect of British Columbia's fear of being overwhelmed by the numerically superior Asians. This fear first appeared in respect to immigration; later, it found its source in the seemingly high birth rate of the Japanese.²⁸ As early as the 1870s, British Columbians sought to restrict Asian immigration. Even though the federal government imposed a head tax on Chinese in 1885 and gradually raised it to \$500 by 1904, the Chinese continued to come. In the meantime, significant numbers of Japanese began to arrive. The conclusion of a Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan in 1908 reduced the number of Japanese entering the country but did not halt immigration.²⁹ The percentage of Asians in the provincial population remained fairly steady at a little over seven percent from 1911 to 1931 but British Columbians still feared their "thinly populated province could easily be submerged by an Oriental migration".³⁰ So deeply implanted was British Columbia's insecurity that a prominent journalist described his province as "one of the last frontiers of the white race against the yellow and brown. It is a land where a hoary civilization meets a modern one, and where the swarming millions of ancient people, stung into restless

²⁵ CANADA, PARLIAMENT, HOUSE OF COMMONS, *Debates*, 8 May 1922, pp. 1516-30.

²⁶ *Nanaimo Free Press*, 13 April 1922.

²⁷ PAC, Department of Immigration Records, RG 76 Accn 70/47, File 815661. "Report on Oriental Situation presented to the General Ministerial Association... and adopted Monday, January 9, 1922", with B. C. Freeman, secretary, General Ministerial Association of Vancouver to Minister of the Interior, 24 January 1922.

²⁸ For an explanation of the Japanese birth rate see C. H. YOUNG and H. R. Y. REID, *The Japanese Canadians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1938), pp. 25-31.

²⁹ The secret 1908 agreement referred only to agricultural and domestic labourers whose numbers were limited to 400 per year. The British Columbia public, however, believed it referred to all classes of immigrants and hence was upset whenever the annual figure rose above 400. The 1928 agreement applied to all classes and limited them to 150 per year. It also specified that no more than half should be female thus limiting the rate of Japanese family formation.

³⁰ *Nanaimo Free Press*, 23 February 1917.

life by modern events, are constantly impinging on an attractive land held by sparse thousands of whites."³¹

Although Asian immigration declined to a trickle by the late 1920s — a revision of the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1928 reduced the maximum number of Japanese immigrants per annum to 150 — the Japanese population was still increasing. The Japanese had a birth rate as much as three times that of the white population.³² Agitators suggested Japanese girls were taught it was their patriotic duty to have as many children as possible³³ and cited such extreme examples as the Japanese women on Salt Spring Island who supposedly had twenty-three children in twenty-five years.³⁴ When Vancouver's Medical Health Officer reported that on a world-wide basis Orientals had a birth rate four times that of other races, Alderman Halford Wilson asserted that, "in the course of a few years British Columbia will come under Oriental domination".³⁵

The notion of superior Asian numbers was also used to justify the denial of the franchise to them. Giving Asians the vote, suggested many agitators, would be the "thin edge of the wedge." During the 1935 federal election campaign, both Liberals and Conservatives attacked a C.C.F. proposal to enfranchise Asians. A Conservative candidate warned that "granting the franchise to Orientals... would be dangerous, particularly in British Columbia, where in ten years Japanese would dominate the Pacific Coast".³⁶ A Liberal speaker was even more emphatic. "The franchise has one inevitable result and that is Orientals in the Civil Service and Orientals in the Legislature." He asked a Victoria audience, "How would you like your daughter to apply to a Japanese for a job in the Civil Service or to a Chinese for a job in the Public Works Department?"³⁷ As well, there was a circular argument that because Asians did not have the franchise they were undesirable citizens.³⁸

By the late 1930s, the Japanese also appeared to be a military threat. By that time there was good reason for British Columbians to be fearful. During their successful invasion of China, Japanese forces committed many well-reported atrocities against both soldiers and civilians. In British Columbia, defences were inadequate. Again, politicians exploited these fears. While Conservative Members of Parliament such as Howard Green attacked the government for insufficient defences,³⁹ a Liberal candidate won a by-election in the traditionally Conservative seat of Victoria. According to a Conservative apologist, the Liberals spread propaganda "among the women, stressing the need for greater protection against invasion of our coast by the Japs. It was pointed out what would happen to them and their

³¹ John NELSON, *The Canadian Provinces: Their Problems and Policies* (Toronto: Nelson, 1924), p. 177.

³² *Vancouver Daily Province*, 7 July 1923.

³³ *Vancouver Daily World*, 29 March 1923.

³⁴ *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 7 March 1923; PAC, H. H. Stevens Papers, vol. 3, File 29. H. H. Stevens, Speech to Luncheon of Canadian Credit Mens Trust Association, 27 June 1927.

³⁵ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 20 July 1939.

³⁶ *Victoria Daily Times*, 11 October 1935. Both Liberal and Conservative advertisements referred to "50,000 Orientals in B.C." and the C.C.F. plan to give them the vote.

³⁷ *Victoria Daily Times*, 2 October 1935.

³⁸ *Kamloops Telegram*, 10 February 1921.

³⁹ HOUSE OF COMMONS, *Debates*, 1 April 1938, p. 1966.

families; they would be killed and their property destroyed by shell fire." The Liberals claimed the Bennett government had spent nothing on Pacific Coast defence while the Liberals would increase their effort to defend the coast if their candidate were elected.⁴⁰

British Columbia's fears of a Japanese invasion were not new. A local poet had well expressed the fear:

Ye Japanese clad with equipments of war
Whose armies and navies and Juggernaut car
Would crush, if they dare, and claim as their own
What belongs to the white man — the white man alone.
Avaunt ye whom envy and malice propel
To usurp all our splendour by tactics of Hell!⁴¹

That poem was published in 1909 when the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was still very much in effect. It was not merely poetic imagination nor was the fear confined to the possibility of external attack. "Today we have in British Columbia in the neighbourhood of 12,000 Japs, all ex-soldiers, all armed and ready if any trouble arises tomorrow. In addition, ... our coast line is known to thousands of these yellow men ... and they work for the control in industrial development", wrote Premier Richard McBride in 1912.⁴²

The idea of Japanese spies persisted. It could be used as an argument against allowing Japanese to work in the coal fields of Vancouver Island⁴³ or participating in the fisheries.⁴⁴ By 1937 and 1938, spy stories were epidemic. On Vancouver Island, for example, the story of a secret Japanese arsenal increased in "frightfulness" as it was told. Police investigators who traced it back to the bar of the Canadian Legion in the coal mining town of Cumberland found it had no substance.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, such stories persisted. By 1940, not only were agitators such as Alderman Wilson of Vancouver suggesting the Japanese might engage in fifth column activities⁴⁶ but some military and police officials on the coast claimed many Japanese "are known to possess firearms and to be definitely anti-British in sentiment".⁴⁷

⁴⁰ PAC, R. B. Bennett Papers, vol. 840, #522412-3. H. J. Barber, M.P. to R. B. Bennett, 1 December 1937. The Liberals, incidentally, did relatively little to improve coast defences. See T. M. HUNTER, "Coast Defences in British Columbia, 1939-1941: Attitudes and Realities", *BC Studies*, no. 28 (Winter 1975-6): 3-28.

⁴¹ Nigel TOURNEUR, "Naval Battle Off Vancouver", *Westward Ho! Magazine*, IV (April 1909): 216.

⁴² Provincial Archives of British Columbia (hereafter PABC), Lottie Bowron Papers, McBride Confidential and Personal Letter Book, 1912-5. Richard McBride to Martin Burrell, 21 January 1912.

⁴³ *Vancouver World*, 13 November 1922.

⁴⁴ *Vancouver World*, 10 October 1921.

⁴⁵ *Cowichan Leader*, 20 January 1938.

⁴⁶ City of Vancouver Archives, Mayor's Correspondence, 1940. Speech, 16 May 1940.

⁴⁷ Department of National Defence, Directorate of History, File 169.012 (D2). "An Appreciation of the Situation in B.C. in the Event of War with Japan", Victoria, 24 June 1940. See also T. W. S. Parsons, Commissioner of British Columbia Police, "Position of the Japanese in British Columbia", 24 September 1940. PAC, Department of External Affairs Records, RG 25 G1, file 263-38; Cabinet War Committee Minutes, 9 July 1940, PAC.

The longest standing and most realistic argument against Asians in British Columbia was their economic challenge to white dominance. There was ample evidence to demonstrate their dominance of certain industries. In 1919, the peak year of their employment in the fisheries, Japanese held 3,267 licences or nearly half the total number of licences issued that year.⁴⁸ The Chinese largely controlled market gardening and the distribution of fresh vegetables; the Japanese did not enter the Fraser Valley berry industry until after 1914 but, within a decade, controlled thirty-nine percent of the acreage devoted to small fruit growing.⁴⁹ Both Chinese and Japanese became prominent in retailing as well as in the service industries in the cities after World War One. In Vancouver in 1937, for example, Asians held ninety-one percent of the greengrocers' licences, fifty-three percent of the cleaners and dyers' licences, and twenty-nine percent of the tailors' licences.⁵⁰ It did not matter that all of these were specialized fields, the statistics clearly suggested that if Asians could force white men out of certain occupations, they might eventually drive them out of many more.

Before World War I labour organizations were in the forefront of anti-Asian agitation; by the 1920s and 1930s, farmers and retail merchants⁵¹ were often the most prominent objectors to the presence of Asians, their lower standard of living, and willingness to work longer and harder for lower returns than white men. The arguments of the various economic interest groups were often similar, often stressing many of the traditional shibboleths against Asians and the threat to others rather than their own immediate fears. It was not an agricultural group but the Vancouver Board of Trade which told Prime Minister King that "in certain sections of the province", the Japanese "have succeeded by their ability for intensive cultivation, in practically ousting the white settler".⁵²

Government responded to such entreaties. As early as the 1870s the province attempted to restrict, by law, the employment opportunities of Asians. Over succeeding years, the province — sometimes in defiance of the federal government as in the case of alien mining laws, sometimes in co-operation with it as in the fishing licence reduction programme of the 1920s — devised a collection of laws to keep Asians out of certain industries and occupations. Asians could not be employed on public works, on certain crown timber lands, or government contracts. Since many professional organizations required their members to be on the voters' list, the disfranchised Asians were barred from such careers as law and pharmacy. Provincial minimum wage legislation introduced in 1926 was designed to drive Asians out of the lumber mills.

Paradoxically, the laws designed to limit Oriental economic competition forced many of them to leave the employed class and become entrepreneurs. This

⁴⁸ YOUNG and REID, *The Japanese Canadians*, p. 43.

⁴⁹ BRITISH COLUMBIA, LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, *Report on Oriental Activities Within the Province* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1927), pp. 5 and 22.

⁵⁰ "Licensed Orientals in the City of Vancouver — Year 1937". Vancouver, City Hall, 6 May 1938.

⁵¹ See Patricia E. ROY, "Protecting their Pocketbooks and Preserving their Race: White Merchants and Oriental Competition", in *Cities in the West*, eds: A. R. McCORMACK and Ian MACPHERSON (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1975), pp. 116-38.

⁵² PAC, RG 76, Accn 69/17, W. E. Payne to W. L. M. King, 25 January 1923.

created new variations on the theme of "unfair competition". In a leaflet outlining their opposition to enfranchising Asians, the Native Sons of British Columbia explained:

Many of us can well remember the days when the Orientals — then comparatively few in number — were our servants; we saw them leave those humble domestic and manual pursuits in which they were engaged and become the competitors of our farmers; then, gradually they entered into trade and the business occupations of our urban life, and invaded the professions. Once our servants, now our competitors in industrial occupations and commercial and economic spheres — today they are demanding full citizenship — give it to them and tomorrow they will be our masters.⁵³

The *Nanaimo Herald* expressed a similar sentiment when it complained:

It is bad enough that good Canadians are unable to find employment while Orientals are at work, it is worse when Orientals become employers themselves, engage in trade and business and even settle on the land. These settlers can never become Canadians. There can never be any blending of the two races, and the Canadians cannot live in competition with the Oriental in any line of business.⁵⁴

A classic example of the objection to the Oriental entrepreneur occurred in the Cowichan Valley where the farmers in 1914 suggested a scheme to allow the temporary admission of Asians as agricultural and domestic labourers.⁵⁵ A few years later, residents of that area initiated a petition calling for legislation to require municipal approval before any Asian could buy or lease land.⁵⁶

White farmers feared Asian competition would drive them off the land. Fruit growers in the Creston Valley claimed that if Chinese continued to settle reclaimed land there, their produce would "eliminate the White Farmer, since he is unable to compete with the Oriental".⁵⁷ A Vancouver Island potato grower told a Legislative Committee investigating vegetable marketing, "we cannot live and work like the Oriental, the way they produce those goods... He lives like a rat and works like the devil."⁵⁸

In their rhetoric, the farmers also stressed the almost mystical qualities of the land and its importance in preserving the white race. These arguments appealed to others. "The ownership of land is different from the possession of any other commodity", asserted one weekly paper. "A house can be burnt down and a business destroyed but land passes on from generation to generation as long as the world rolls on."⁵⁹ When rumours circulated in the Okanagan Valley that the large Coldstream Ranch near Vernon was passing into Japanese hands, the Conservative M.L.A. for South Okanagan, J. W. Jones, spoke at a mass meeting in Kelowna. He remarked on the extent of Japanese land ownership in California and

⁵³ NATIVE SONS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, *Argument Advanced by the Native Sons of British Columbia in Opposition to Granting of Oriental Franchise* [New Westminster: Jackson Printing, c. 1932].

⁵⁴ *Nanaimo Herald*, 10 May 1922.

⁵⁵ BRITISH COLUMBIA, ROYAL COMMISSION ON LABOUR, *Report* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1914), p. M26.

⁵⁶ PABC, Premier's Official Correspondence, 1921. Jas. Greig, Clerk, Municipal Council of Duncan to Premier John Oliver, 20 July 1921.

⁵⁷ PAC, H. H. Stevens Papers, vol. 59. R. B. Robinson to H. H. Stevens, 30 April 1936.

⁵⁸ "Select Standing Committee on Agriculture of the British Columbia Legislature to Investigate the B.C. Coast Vegetable Marketing Board and Its Agencies, 16-20 November 1936", p. 140.

⁵⁹ *Comox Argus*, 25 December 1919.

Washington, the declining portion of British in the Canadian population, and the unique problems of British Columbia because of the presence of Doukhobors and Orientals. In conclusion, he warned, "the passage of the ownership of the soil, on which our whole civil foundation rested" could not be tolerated.⁶⁰

Few British Columbians would have admitted there was any possibility of incorporating Asians into their society. Indeed, the fundamental argument against the Asian was his alleged inassimilability. Every white British Columbian presumably understood this catchword but did not necessarily define it in precisely the same way. Nevertheless, it always included the concept of "difference" and usually referred to Asian superiority. "We must recognize the fact that all history has so far demonstrated the fact that the Oriental and white races do not assimilate", explained Rev. A. C. Cooke, a prominent Congregationalist clergyman. "This is fundamental and vital. It is not to say that these races are inferior to us. In some ways they show a decided superiority, but it is that they are different — different not only in color and physical build, but in habits, in tradition, in ideals and customs."⁶¹

In a simple form, inassimilability was often a variation of the economic argument, the difference in standards of living,⁶² but it was social as well. "The wide difference between the Orientals and the rest of our Canadian population in language, tradition and customs of life make difficult, if not impossible, the appreciation by the Orientals of our social, political and national ideals, and... the impossibility of assimilation makes it undesirable for large and solid communities to be permanently located in small Anglo-Saxon communities", declared the Farmers' Institutes as they passed a resolution calling for a prohibition of Asian ownership of farm land.⁶³ "Social pressure", asserted the *Vancouver World*, is the Asiatics' "strongest force in driving out the white families who pioneered in the district he invades".⁶⁴ In the cities, critics complained Orientals coming in large numbers had shown themselves to be "impossible of assimilation". They had not entered "the citizen life of the country" but "grouped themselves together in the worst parts of Canadian cities and become festering sores".⁶⁵ By the 1930s, the Chinese population was declining but the inassimilability argument continued to be applied to the Japanese. "Here in British Columbia", commented a west coast of Vancouver Island weekly, "we have growing up alongside one another, two cultures and two races without any hope or desire for fusion. If the Japanese are inferior to us in some ways, they are certainly our superiors in others; but they are so different it seems hopeless that we should ever amalgamate with them."⁶⁶ Of course, no one really wanted the Japanese or Chinese to assimilate. As Japanese Consul Ukita complained, "the Japanese are trying their best to become Canadians. They are doing everything they can to become assimilated into the country. But you will not let them. We are doing our best but we cannot change our color in a day."⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Kelowna *Courier*, 22 January 1922.

⁶¹ *Vancouver Daily World*, 30 July 1921.

⁶² For example, *Vancouver Daily World*, 6 February 1920.

⁶³ *Fruit and Farm*, V (March 1914): 189.

⁶⁴ *Vancouver Daily World*, 26 January 1922.

⁶⁵ Rev. John MacKay, quoted in *Vancouver Daily World*, 17 July 1919.

⁶⁶ *West Coast Advocate*, 3 March 1938.

⁶⁷ *Vancouver Daily World*, 6 February 1920.

Economic, social and cultural differences were only part of the inassimilation argument. "Putting it bluntly", declared H. H. Stevens, M.P., "assimilation, after all means inter-marriage." This idea was equally repugnant to whites and Asians.⁶⁸ As Attorney-General M. A. Manson explained, "the *real objection* to the Oriental and the one that is permanent and incurable is the ethnological differences as between the white and Oriental races." It is hard to believe, he continued, "that in the Divine arrangement of things it was intended that the blood of the Oriental and the blood of the white should mix".⁶⁹ Concern about miscegnation, of course, underlay much of the agitation for the protection of women and girls and for the establishment of segregated schools.

The "ethnological argument" was useful. It seemed to be the basis of race preservation; it transcended any economic or political self-interests and hence seemed unselfish; and, being a possibility rather than a reality, it was particularly useful for propagandists who exploited vague fears. Though it was sometimes resurrected as in Premier Pattullo's use of it to justify his demand before the Rowell-Sirois Commission for the return of "as many Orientals as possible... to the land from which they came",⁷⁰ the frequency of the use of ethnological argument generally declined from the 1920s to the 1930s. In the early 1930s, white British Columbians felt relatively secure against Asians;⁷¹ in the late 1930s they had a real threat in the form of Japan's aggressive policies. Given the long tradition of fear of Asians it is not surprising that British Columbians acted as they did after Pearl Harbor and forced the federal government to evacuate the Japanese from the coast in order to protect them from hostile and fearful whites.⁷²

Some politicians such as Ian Mackenzie survived the Second World War with their anti-Asian beliefs intact; others changed their minds. H. H. Stevens, who had been speaking out against the Oriental threat since before the First World War, told 700 Chinese at a 1949 federal campaign meeting that if he were elected, he would represent them "as my fellow Canadian citizens. There will be no discrimination, no difference."⁷³ Stevens was responding to a specific new circumstance, the enfranchisement of the Chinese in 1948, itself a symptom of change in British Columbia. In the immediate post-war decades, the province was prospering; there were plenty of well-paying jobs for everyone. Immigrants were coming from many parts of the world. Though Chinese were again able to immigrate to Canada, there was little danger of them overwhelming the securely established white population. The bitterness against the Japanese had been intense; their disabilities were imposed a little longer but were also withdrawn by 1950. Japan posed no military threat. The Japanese-Canadians had been dispersed throughout Canada and were no longer unique to British Columbia. Moreover, despite harrowing circumstances, they had

⁶⁸ Vancouver *Daily Province*, 2 December 1919. Inter-racial marriages were rare. The Registrar of Vital Statistics seldom reported more than one or two a year.

⁶⁹ PABC, Attorney-General's Papers, 2060-17-18. "Attorney-General's Speech on the Oriental Debate in the British Columbia Legislature, 15 November 1922".

⁷⁰ *British Columbia in the Canadian Confederation* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1938), p. 353.

⁷¹ See Patricia E. ROY, "The Illusion of Toleration: White Opinion of Asians in British Columbia, 1929-1937", annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Asian Studies, Fredericton, May 1977.

⁷² See WARD, "British Columbia and the Japanese Evacuation".

⁷³ Vancouver *Daily Province*, 22 June 1940.

proven themselves loyal to Canada. As well, the war had made racial hostility unfashionable.⁷⁴ In their secure and prosperous world, white British Columbians could shed their anti-Asian fears and accept their Asian neighbours not as potential superiors but as equals.

⁷⁴ Ironically, there is today some concern in the Japanese community that it may disappear as the Sansei, the third generation, increasingly intermarry with the white community. Ken ADACHI, *The Enemy that Never Was* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp. 362-63.