

East Coast, West Coast: Using Government Files to Study Immigration History

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Documents created by federal government agents responsible for the reception and regulation of immigrants at Saint John, New Brunswick, and at Vancouver, British Columbia, during the first three decades of the twentieth century are used here as case studies to demonstrate the potential utility of this type of source for social historians. Not only are government-generated sources useful for gaining a fuller understanding of the state mechanisms and structures put in place to manage migrants, but they also provide details about the socio-cultural and physical environments within which immigrants were received, as well as insights into immigrants' experiences, their activities, and their reactions to the efforts of Canadian authorities to regulate their movements and shape their identities.

Les documents créés par les agents fédéraux responsables de l'accueil et de la régie des immigrants à Saint John (Nouveau-Brunswick) et à Vancouver (Colombie-Britannique) sont ici utilisés comme études de cas pour illustrer l'utilité possible de ce genre de sources en histoire sociale. En plus de permettre de mieux comprendre les mécanismes et les structures mis en place par l'État pour gérer les migrants, ces sources d'origine étatique fournissent des précisions sur le contexte socioculturel et le cadre matériel dans lequel les immigrants étaient accueillis. De plus, elles jettent une lumière nouvelle sur les expériences et les activités des immigrants ainsi que sur leurs réactions aux efforts des autorités canadiennes pour régir leurs déplacements et façonner leur identité.

PRIOR TO THE EMERGENCE of social history as an important influence in the study of migration, published works on the history of Canadian immigration relied almost exclusively on government records.¹ Historians have continued to

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1 Notable examples are Helen I. Cowan, *British Emigration to British North America: The First Hundred Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961); Norman Macdonald, *Canada 1763-1841, Immigration*

make good use of these sources; without census reports, shipping registers, and information collected by immigration agents at ports and border crossings, it would not have been possible to trace migration patterns over time. Any survey-style history of a nation's immigration is likely to have drawn heavily upon the files of government agencies responsible for managing and overseeing immigration.² Likewise, these sources have been well used by historians interested in the state's management of immigrants. Especially notable is the work of historians writing about state-sponsored labour recruitment projects, border regulation, and deportation.³ Yet documents produced by state departments are often seen as relatively one-dimensional sources, useful for learning about the movement of groups of migrants and government actions relating to the regulation of migration, but not as useful for gaining insight into the actual experiences of immigrants or the socio-cultural contexts within which those experiences were produced.

This sense that government-generated documents are relatively "dry" sources of information has some validity. They have built-in limitations for historians of immigration who are interested in the study of migrants' experiences. As with any body of documents produced by a regulatory branch of government, they do not tend to feature "ordinary" immigrants, except *en masse*. Those who were discussed at length in official correspondence or whose letters were saved in these government files were unusual. Individual immigrants found their way into these records because they were particularly outspoken, or litigious, or unfortunate. Typically, these documents provide little in the way of the migrant's voice. Few opportunities here lend themselves to an understanding of how immigrants responded to their treatment by immigration officials or how they really felt about their experiences.

Historians will likewise find that this source gives them limited information about the personalities and perspectives of individual agents involved in the ground-level work of receiving and managing immigrants. Immigration agents

and Settlement (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939) and *Canada, Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966); Stanley C. Johnson, *A History of Emigration from the United Kingdom to North America, 1763-1912* (1913; reprint, New York: Frank Cass and Co., 1966).

2 For example, extensive use of these sources is evident in Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), and Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-2006* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007).

3 See, for example, Donald Avery, *"Dangerous Foreigners": European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979); Lisa Chilton, "Preventing the Loss of Imported Labour: Trains, Migrants, and the Development of the Canadian West" in Adele Perry, Elyllt Jones, and Leah Morton, eds., *Place and Replace: Essays on Western Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013); Milda Danys, *DP: Lithuanian Immigration to Canada After the Second World War* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986); Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrants Lives in Cold War Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2006) and "Ordering in Bulk: Canada's Postwar Immigration Policy and the Recruitment of Contract Workers from Italy," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1991), pp. 50-80; Noula Mina, "Taming and Training Greek 'Peasant Girls' and the Gendered Politics of Whiteness in Postwar Canada: Canadian Bureaucrats and Immigrant Domestics, 1950s-1960s," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 94, no. 4 (December 2013), pp. 514-539; Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Barbara Roberts, *Whence They Came: Deportation from Canada, 1900-1935* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1988).

and other front-line employees of the state filed reports, submitted forms, and corresponded by mail and telegraph, but these were all largely impersonal documents, written in formal language. In some cases it is difficult to ascertain who created them. Officials who held higher ranks within the government system left a much larger paper trail, thus providing information about their individual personalities and relationships with their immigration work. Even then, however, these sources offer little insight into the more emotional, psychological, and social aspects of these people's relations with immigrants and immigration.

As with any type of primary source, historians need to be mindful of the silences, distortions, and privileging inherent in these documents. Yet, in spite of all such limitations, the enormous body of government-originated documentation of migrants and migration that has been archived by the state provides a rich and fruitful avenue of study for historians of migration. In a historiographical essay on Canadian immigration published nearly two decades ago, Franca Iacovetta noted the need for a more "integrative approach to the study of immigrants, one in which the interconnections of class, gender, and race-ethnicity are considered not as fixed and immutable entities but as processes," as well as more "rigorous analyses of racialized discourses and the immigration reception activities of Canadian reformers" and more "studies of racism/nativism [that] take serious account of the hostile relations among and between immigrants and minorities."⁴ This need still exists. In the records that the state produced in its management of immigrants are endless opportunities to consider migrants of various ethnic and racial backgrounds in comparison and in interaction, with each other and with members of their host communities. There are opportunities to assess the state's efforts to recruit, regulate, and reform immigrants and to consider the gap between the state's intentions and their results. There are opportunities to examine power dynamics and identity (re)formations at work. Finally, there are opportunities to examine the many layers of politics (personal, local, workplace, regional, national, international) that played a role in determining migrants' experiences.

The purpose of this article is to outline the nature of records such as those collected by the Immigration Branch of the Canadian federal government, housed at Canada's national archives as Record Group 76, and to reassess their larger potential for historians of migration. After a brief discussion of the sources themselves, we use as illustrative case studies a sample of documents created by federal government agents stationed at Saint John, New Brunswick, and at Vancouver, British Columbia, together with their superiors at head office in Ottawa, during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Thematically, our case studies relate to two subjects: "immigration buildings" or "sheds," and immigration agents and interpreters. While it is not possible here to address all of the points raised above, we endeavour to show how these sources may be used to gain a sense of how front-line immigration agents and their associates actually implemented, or failed to implement, or resisted implementing, the regulations and reception programs designed by their superiors. These sources reveal information

4 Franca Iacovetta, *The Writing of English Canadian Immigrant History* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1997), p. 22.

about the socio-cultural and physical environments within which immigrants were received, and we suggest how these sources may be mined for evidence of immigrants' responses to the efforts of Canadian authorities to regulate their movements and shape their identities.

The Documents

Government-generated emigration and immigration records may be found for a wide range of periods, produced in a wide variety of socio-political contexts. Only with the rise of nationalism and the concurrent expansion of government bureaucracy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, did the thorough documentation of all migrants' movements become a priority for governments across the western world.⁵ Controlling national borders became a critical part of these nation-building agendas.⁶ In the British North American context, the creation of immigration-related documents was spurred on by the government's desire to understand and control mid-nineteenth-century epidemics.⁷

To understand and control the spread of diseases during this period, government agents began to work in concert with health-care authorities to examine and record the movements of immigrants, especially immigrants of lower-class backgrounds, arriving at their ports. Prior to these epidemics, British North American immigration agents had been charged with encouraging and facilitating the movement of indigent migrants out of the port cities towards regions most in need of their labour, although in their earliest mandates the movements of self-supporting immigrants were not recorded.⁸ As established settler communities in British North America became increasingly interested in questions of nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century, and especially after Canada gained national status in 1867, concerns about immigrants' health expanded to include an interest in their mental health and in their ability to be productive members of society. The desirability of immigrants based upon their racial and ethnic identities became a

5 The proliferation of documents relating to immigration was part of an exponential increase in paperwork produced by the state and associated organizations across other areas of western societies during this period. For compelling explorations of this subject, see Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).

6 Laura Madokoro's article in this collection provides an excellent example of ramped-up state record keeping as a part of explicit nation-building efforts.

7 The cholera epidemic of 1832 generated a flurry of intense administrative activity, but government responses to the epidemics of the late 1840s and early 1850s were ultimately more systematic and bureaucratic. There is a substantial body of literature that deals with state responses to these epidemics. On cholera, see Geoffrey Bilson, *Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1980); Bruce Curtis, "Social Investment in Medical Forms: The Cholera Scare and Beyond," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 81, no. 3 (2000), pp. 347-379. Marianna O'Gallagher's book on Grosse Isle Quarantine Station provides a detailed overview of the state's efforts to manage epidemics through the quarantining of immigrants: *Grosse Isle: Gateway to Canada 1832-1937* (Quebec: Livres Carraig Books, 1984). For a recent overview of the whole period with particular emphasis on the state, see Mark Osborne Humphries, *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 15-26.

8 Lisa Chilton, "Managing Migrants: Toronto, 1820-1880," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 92, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 232-235; 238-242.

significant additional source of concern for political leaders in the 1880s.⁹ By the turn of the twentieth century, border control had become an obsession in Canada, as in the other British dominions and in the United States.¹⁰ This progression of community and government interest in the nature of incoming migrants and their impact on the nation was clearly reflected in the growing breadth and depth of records produced by front-line immigration agents.

The huge, unwieldy set of documents that was created, catalogued, and archived by the immigration branch of the Canadian federal government is stored at the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa.¹¹ This paper focuses on documents from this archive. For historians interested in the larger context of the federal agents' activities, government records created and held in other jurisdictions can also be useful. Parallel sets of documents about the work of Canadian immigration officials were also created and stored in provincial archives, as well as in other countries' archives, so that even relatively minor events in Canadian immigration history could generate overlapping files held in multiple locations. Countries of sending societies had their specific interests in Canada's immigration affairs, while the Canadian provinces had their own bureaucratic concerns regarding newcomers. Canada's shared border with the United States made American officials keenly interested in the activities of Canadian immigration officials.¹² Likewise, Canada's position within a network of British colonies and dominions meant that its actions regarding immigration would be carefully recorded and reviewed in other parts of the British Empire for their comparative instructional value.¹³

- 9 For a detailed analysis of this development in the Canadian context, see chapters 2 and 3 of Christopher G. Anderson, *Canadian Liberalism and the Politics of Border Control, 1867-1967* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).
- 10 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line? White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The United States passed an *Immigration Act* in 1891 that established the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration, which oversaw the implementation of an immigrant reception system that required the use of border entry cards. See Yukari Takai, *Gendered Passages: French Canadian Migration to Lowell, Massachusetts, 1900-1920* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), p. 64; Marian L. Smith, "INS at the U.S.-Canadian Border, 1893-1993: An Overview of Issues and Topics" (paper presented at the meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Toronto, April 23, 1999); Bruno Ramirez with Yves Otis, *Crossing the 49th Parallel: Migration from Canada to the United States, 1900-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 42-43; Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 170-178.
- 11 Immigration was handled by three different ministries within the federal government Canadian federation and the Great Depression: from 1868 to 1892, immigration came under the control of the Department of Agriculture; from 1892 to 1918, it was managed by the Department of the Interior; and from 1918 to 1936 it was the responsibility of the Department of Immigration and Colonization.
- 12 See, for example, Yukari Takai's use of American and Japanese archival sources to discuss Canadian immigration and border service matters in "'These Japanese Continuously Violated the Alien-Contract Labour Laws': The Gendered Paths of Labourers, Farmers, and Housewives from Japan Traversing the Canada-U.S. Border in the Early Twentieth Century," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 40, no. 80 (November 2007), pp. 297-322, and "Navigating Transpacific Passages: Steamship Companies, State Regulators, and Transshipment of Japanese in the Early-Twentieth-Century Pacific Northwest," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 7-34.
- 13 See, for example, the Canadian immigration branch's tracking of Australian immigrant recruitment strategies in Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], RG 76, Vol. 317, File 306064.

Typically, carefully constructed finding aids accompany government-generated documents, and they can be very useful. However, the nature of the sources themselves means that it is not possible to anticipate what will be found in any one file. The titles of files do not necessarily portray their contents accurately. Most of the contents are letters, memos, and telegraphs exchanged between individuals working within the relevant government units, but the files could also contain letters from individuals situated outside of the government, as well as newspaper clippings, bills and receipts, architectural drawings, brochures, pamphlets, and photographs. Government agencies created files on all aspects of the state's engagement with immigrants, from recruitment, to settlement, to deportation. As noted above, they also interacted with other federal, provincial, and local government agencies, government officials representing other nation-states, and private enterprise. There are files on land offices, border crossings, the immigration work of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the recruitment of farm labourers and domestic servants, and issues relating to migrants' health. For the historian of migration, these files are potentially rich, but they are also unpredictable; they are full of holes and dead ends, but they are also rewardingly broad in scope.

Files on Immigration Buildings

The Library and Archives Canada files on immigration buildings reflect this variety of contents and potential for insight. The earliest government-financed immigrant sheds were established in the late 1820s and early 1830s at Quebec City and Montreal. By the turn of the twentieth century, there were immigration buildings of one sort or another at significant disembarkation sites (be they ocean passage or railway line) right across Canada. The files created to record the construction and management of these structures may at first seem relatively uninteresting. Yet immigration buildings were sites at which almost all immigrants, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, class, or age, were catered to and processed by immigration officials. These institutions, which were typically referred to as "sheds" in the official correspondence if they included accommodation, were designed to serve many purposes.

At ocean ports and at Canadian-United States border locations they contained the bureaucratic and medical inspection arms of the immigration reception system. They were thus the sites at which unwanted migrants could be stopped, detained, and turned back by government officials. They were also local administrative centres for processing and implementing new immigration policies. A steady stream of memoranda from Ottawa conveyed to front-line workers new policies that were to be implemented at these institutions. Here, government agents transferred parcels of land to aspiring farmers, and employers were permitted to recruit immigrant labourers. In their correspondence and in the promotional materials designed for press release, government officials indicated their expectations that the sheds would facilitate the successful integration of newcomers into their host society, thus ensuring that immigrants in transit would not become public liabilities. Officials wrote about the way the sheds would play an important supportive role in the efforts of the Canadian state to stimulate and facilitate the large-scale

immigration and settlement of people from selected racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. At the sheds, government agents were expected to oversee the early stages of immigrants' proper acculturation to Canadian social norms.

In theory, the sheds were places where immigrants could "rest up" after a long and difficult journey while preparing for the next stage of their migration. Immigrants were told that they could expect to receive free support and guidance there. These institutions were supposed to bridge the gap between immigrants' previous systems of support and the new communities into which they would become incorporated. Yet, in practice, the reception that immigrants were given at these locations was often anything but welcoming. Financial constraints undermined the quality of the accommodation, while xenophobia and nativism on the part of government officials and friction among different ethnic groups nurtured immigrants' sense of alienation.

A review of several decades' worth of documents relating to the federal government's establishment and management of immigration buildings provides information about the evolution of public attitudes towards the role of the state in immigrant reception work. For example, correspondence from community leaders in rapidly growing urban centres such as Virden, Manitoba, and North Battleford, Saskatchewan, in the early twentieth century conveyed to Ottawa the communities' growing expectations that the federal government would take over the work of ensuring that immigrants in transit would be able to find temporary accommodation.¹⁴ These two communities were in line with the general trend in immigrant reception work, in that services once provided by the host communities themselves were being replaced by state-run, state-funded programs of reception that were determined by protocols established in Ottawa. However, the process by which immigrant reception shifted from ordinary members of host communities to highly regulated state-run agencies and institutions was complicated and uneven. The impermanent nature of government-funded reception services, subject to the ebbs and flows of immigrating populations, political expediencies, and economic circumstances, meant that local communities were often compelled to take up some of the reception work that they felt belonged more properly to the government by the early twentieth century.

On a superficial level, the official record suggests that the state invested in immigrant sheds, and the services associated with them, according to the logic of numbers of immigrants in need. However, a closer look at the records reveals that there was nothing automatic about the establishment of these institutions. While clear indications of pressing need were necessary before the federal government would create and maintain accommodation for immigrants, evidence of need was never the sole determinant of what the established services would look like or where an institution might be placed. Financial considerations were prominent in every set of correspondence in which government officials measured the possibility of establishing a new institution or refurbishing an old one. Consequently, decision

¹⁴ See, for example, the early-twentieth-century cases of the communities of Virden, Manitoba, found in LAC, RG 76, Vol. 367, File 484825, Part 1 (microfilm C10268); and North Battleford, Saskatchewan, found in Vol. 368, File 486288, Parts 1 and 2 (microfilm C-10268).

makers wanted to be sure that the larger view of the situation had been properly taken into account. On numerous levels, politics influenced the provision of services for newcomers in transit. A comparison of the history of immigrant sheds in the early twentieth century in Saint John and Vancouver brings home this point.

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, both Saint John and Vancouver generated a substantial amount of paperwork relating to immigration that would ultimately be archived at Ottawa as part of the RG 76 files. However, the nature of the documentation relating to these two locations differed in significant ways. These differences were reflected in the size of the files associated with immigrants' accommodations at each location. The immigration reception facilities at Saint John, New Brunswick, were the focus of substantial investment by the Canadian federal government. A completely new set of buildings was erected between 1901 and 1908 to process and accommodate immigrants, and another round of planning and building was undertaken at the end of the Great War in 1917-1918. The paperwork produced in the course of the design, construction, and management of the Saint John immigration buildings was voluminous. It included documents on costs, building contracts, floor plans, furnishings, and employees.¹⁵ The files associated with the buildings completed in 1921 are especially useful for gaining an idea of the physical environment and social organization of Saint John's immigrant reception program; the institution there was considered by federal officials to be the "most complete, up-to-date terminal accommodation on the North Atlantic Seaboard," with the result that it was celebrated in multiple press releases as a symbol of Canada's superior qualities as a destination for emigrants.¹⁶ In the correspondence around these press releases and in the press releases themselves, the path that the newcomers would take, from ship, to inspection hall, to detention area or waiting rooms, to ticket agents, to baggage claim, and onwards, was described in detail, including the fact that the floors they would walk on were of polished wood, the walls and ceilings made of Pedler metal, "harmoniously painted in two shades of grey," the heating, lighting, and ventilating systems "carried out in white and silver," and the toilets they would use "equipped with automatic syphon eduction range closets" (for the men) and "automatic flushometer seats and bowls" (for the women).¹⁷

The promotional materials in the Saint John files, which emphasize that the newcomer's every need had been considered during the renovations, sit in ironic contrast to the much more substantial interspersed correspondence that makes it clear that, almost invariably, cutting corners to save costs was of primary importance to the government. Perhaps the most interesting correspondence along these lines relates to the decision to save money by installing no doors at the entrances to the "foreign" women's dormitory. The decision would ultimately be overturned, but not before multiple individuals within the immigration branch

15 LAC, RG 76, Series I-A-1, Vol. 136-138, File 32997, Parts 1-14, "Immigration Building, St. John, New Brunswick" (microfilm reels C-4799-4800 and C-15865). The documents in this multi-part file cover the period 1896-1922.

16 LAC, RG 76, Vol. 138, File 32997, Part 12.

17 Details taken from an untitled, five-page document with no author, probably created in March 1921, contained in LAC, RG 76, Vol. 138, File 32997, Part 12.

had weighed in on the subject.¹⁸ The much-celebrated conveniences and comforts of the new immigrant reception system are also seriously challenged in these documents by extensive evidence that immigrants protested again and again, with various degrees of success, against the conditions of their accommodation at the Saint John sheds.¹⁹ Perhaps the most effective protests were launched by British women and their advocates, who managed to convince the government that they ought to be entitled to particularly comfortable accommodation. By 1920, if not before, female immigrants were separated into “British” and “Foreign” dormitories. The British women’s dormitory was furnished with much more care and attention to the comfort of the inhabitants. For example, British women were the only immigrants who did not have to sleep on bunk beds. The British women also had their own toilets, which were kept locked when not in use so that they would not have to share them with other, less entitled immigrants.²⁰

While the documentation of the government’s establishment and management of the immigration sheds at Saint John during the first quarter of the twentieth century is extensive, the paperwork produced by the same bureaucrats in Ottawa concerning immigrant accommodations at Vancouver was minimal for the simple reason that no such federally funded housing was provided there for incoming migrants in this period, and thus there was no need for voluminous files. In a single file titled “Vancouver immigration building,” a sparse paper trail of official correspondence informs and then confirms that the sheds in operation in Vancouver at the beginning of the 1890s would be closed and that no new initiatives would be undertaken. The file also shows that the residents and city councillors of Vancouver engaged in a futile attempt to gain a commitment from the federal government to reinvest in their reception facilities.

Social activists in Vancouver who lobbied federal authorities for an immigrant shed along the lines of those found in Saint John, Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg represented a wide range of interest groups. Archived correspondence that resulted from their efforts demonstrates not only the underlying issues behind the federal government’s decisions, but also the insights and strategies of men and women who endeavoured to change the minds of decision makers in Ottawa. Taraknath Das, secretary of the Hindusthani Association, anti-British Bengali revolutionary, and internationally renowned political scientist, was a particularly impassioned

18 The foreign women’s quarters had no doors (a hung blanket was considered appropriate enough) until a female inspector protested that the women in question would not learn what was expected of civilized Canadians if their accommodations did not convey the impression of respectability that closed doors could impart. More context for this case is provided in Lisa Chilton, “Travelling Colonist: British Emigration and the Construction of Anglo-Canadian Privilege” in Andrew S. Thompson and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *Empire, Identity and Migration in the British World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 169-191. The files that contain the relevant correspondence are LAC, RG 76, Vol. 138, File 32997 and RG 76, Vol. 666, File C1595.

19 Immigrants accommodated at the sheds purposefully flooded the toilets, vandalized the beds, and ignored restrictions against interactions between men and women in the recreation room. “Detained” migrants – presumably awaiting deportation – also proved themselves to be capable of escaping, regardless of the hurdles put in their way by immigration officials. Discussion concerning this type of resistance and how to respond to it may be found throughout the period December 1920 to June 1922 in LAC, RG 76, Vol. 138, File 32997, Parts 11 to 14.

20 For further analysis of this subject, see Chilton, “Travelling Colonist.”

letter writer. He wrote to William D. Scott, superintendent of immigration in the Department of the Interior, of the plight of some 900 Hindus, all “British citizens,” who had received completely inadequate assistance upon their arrival at Vancouver. According to Das, the lack of accommodation during the previous winter caused 25 of these immigrants to die of exposure to the cold. In his letter, Das argued that it was in the government’s best interests to provide more assistance in the form of temporary accommodations for new immigrants. He pointed out that not only Asian immigrants suffered; white immigrants also experienced problems with accommodation in Vancouver. Das further noted that the conditions in which immigrants were forced to live upon their arrival at Vancouver were promoting the spread of diseases that would endanger the health of the rest of the city.²¹

Annie Skinner, a long-term advocate for immigrants through her work on behalf of the Young Women’s Christian Association, the Travellers’ Aid Society, and the British Women’s Emigration Association, was another correspondent whose protests concerning the lack of state-funded immigrant accommodations were archived in this RG 76 file. Interestingly, in her letter to officials in Ottawa, Skinner chose to comment upon the challenges faced by Armenian and Russian families arriving in Vancouver. Likely the choice was made for strategic reasons, as she could have rather referenced immigrants of British or other European backgrounds with whom she had worked if she had wished. She argued that such families were placed in desperate circumstances upon their arrival. According to Skinner, the housing situation was so acute in the city that even families with money could not afford to pay for temporary accommodation. In Ottawa, the letters from Das and Skinner were joined by letters from a number of other organizations and individuals, including officials associated with Vancouver City Council.²²

The correspondence and memoranda contained in the Vancouver file indicate a cold response from Ottawa. W. D. Scott, the Superintendent of Immigration, noted that in his estimation the overcrowding in Vancouver was the result of the arrival of large numbers of people from Japan and China: “I beg to say that this Department is not in any way responsible for such arrivals, and does not propose to make any provision for their accommodation beyond the requirements for the detention of such as are undesirable or who require medical treatment.” Pressed again by Vancouver’s City Council for aid, Scott replied in brief that, “after due consideration,” the facilities at Vancouver were found to be “adequate.”²³ Clearly,

21 LAC, RG 76, Vol. 36, File 804 (microfilm C-4696), Taraknath Das to W. D. Scott, September 21, 1907.

22 LAC, RG 76, Vol. 36, File 804. The documents in this file do not provide any further information on Das and Skinner. It is interesting to note that both individuals had considerable reputations as influential members of transnational networks of advocates for social change. For Das, see Kornel S. Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), especially chap. 4; Tapan Mukherjee, “Taraknath Das, 1884-1958: Political Activist, Educator” in Hyung-chan Kim, ed., *Distinguished Asian Americans: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 81-83. Annie Skinner was a prominent member of the YWCA, the Travellers’ Aid Society, and the British Women’s Emigration Association.

23 LAC, RG 76, Vol. 36, File 804, W. D. Scott to G. F. Baldwin, November 11, 1907; W. D. Scott to G. F. Baldwin, March 23, 1908. The 1892 decision of the federal government to close its housing for new immigrants in Vancouver and Victoria after a fact-finding session on the numbers, profiles, and intended destinations of those who used the facilities was likely an influential precedent in this case. Documents relating to the 1892 decision are also contained in this file.

Vancouver was desperately in need of more government-run facilities at this time.²⁴ Yet, whereas Saint John on the east coast got its new buildings, the federal government's top immigration officials sent a clear message to the country's principal west coast port city that Ottawa would not solve the crisis resulting from overcrowded and under-funded accommodation facilities at Vancouver. When money was ultimately forthcoming from the federal government in 1914, it was earmarked for improving the facilities already in place for holding migrants for questioning, medical detention, and deportation. As Robert Menzies has shown in a study on the deportation of Asians who spent time in mental health hospitals, the emphasis on detention and expulsion became an even more central part of the work of immigration services in relation to Asian immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁵

A comparative exploration of these files highlights the significance of the racial and ethnic make-up of these regions' immigrant populations in determining how they would be treated by government authorities. For the most part, the east coast and St. Lawrence access points to Canada received immigrants from Europe; the west coast received large numbers of Asian immigrants, who were the objects of fierce, unguarded prejudice from most of the public and at all levels of government.²⁶ The decision of the federal government in 1908 to reject Vancouver's request for assistance in establishing temporary accommodations for new immigrants spoke to the race of most of those who would use those accommodations. On the east coast, the reception work of immigration agents was geared towards welcoming and supporting immigrants arriving as a result of federally funded recruitment drives. On the west coast, "reception" was more about trying to regulate and limit Asian immigration.²⁷ The significance of geographical location was not lost on some

24 For example, in 1907 many Japanese immigrants who had landed in Vancouver were sent to Steveston for the lack of accommodation to be found locally. This information was discussed at length in Japanese and American diplomatic circles. See Tokyo, Diplomatic Record Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nihon Gaikō Bunsho Archival Documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 3.8.2.20, vol. 5, "Report of Consulate of Japan," Vancouver Consul Morikawa Kishirō to Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, viscount Hayashi Kaoru, July 28, 1907; United States National Archives and Records Administration [hereafter NARA], Washington, DC, RG 85, entry 9, File 51630, Folder 44a, C. A. Turner, Inspector, Office of Marcus Braun, U.S. Immigration Inspector, New York, Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, Washington, DC, to John H. Sargent, Inspector in Charge, Seattle, Washington, Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, Washington, DC, September 14, 1907; NARA, RG 85, Entry 9, File 51931, Folder 14a, No. 6102, "Canadian Agreement," December 9, 1907.

25 Robert Menzies, "Governing Mentalities: The Deportation of 'Insane' and 'Feeble-minded' Immigrants out of British Columbia from Confederation to World War II," *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 135-173.

26 The Prairies were different from either the east or west coasts in how they received immigrants. Immigrants from Eastern Europe were sometimes treated very poorly. So too were the few African Americans who, in spite of bars against their entry, managed to find their way up into the Canadian Prairies. The point that we make here relates to the eastern points of entry, not necessarily the sheds at the migrants' points of destination.

27 Read on its own, the RG76 file on Vancouver's immigrant sheds (or lack thereof) might leave the impression that Vancouver's residents and public authorities desired better accommodation for all incoming migrants and that they were thwarted by the race-based decisions of men located in Ottawa. Yet, as historians of Asian immigration to British Columbia have shown using a larger range of government and other records, the fundamentally racist basis of immigration policies of this period largely originated in British Columbia; indeed, at key moments, Ottawa, motivated by larger political priorities, endeavoured to temper

west coast commentators. In his plea for better facilities in Vancouver, Taraknath Das urged the government to establish an immigration shed similar to those “we find at every port on the Atlantic Coast, both in this Dominion and the United States.”²⁸ The Canadian situation was not unique. Historians of immigration to the United States have commented at length on similar east/west coast differences in reception attitudes and facilities, motivated by similar socio-political leanings.²⁹

Files on Immigration Agents and Interpreters

The correspondence that resulted from struggles concerning how immigrant reception, space allocation, and human resources ought to be managed provide some of the most enlightening documents held in the immigration files. Medical doctors representing the Canadian health services fought with immigration agents in charge of reception facilities about where, and under what conditions, medical examinations and quarantine would be performed.³⁰ Employees at the sheds complained about how they had been treated by their supervisors and by their state employers.³¹ Representatives of religious organizations and philanthropic societies sparred over where they would be stationed to receive newly arrived immigrants at the sheds and why their requests for prime locations ought to trump those of other organizations.³² Conflicts between regional and federal authorities could also become heated, as was fully demonstrated in documents highlighting disagreements about the location of planned immigration buildings.³³ The messy picture of conflicting priorities, interests, and personalities that results from an

provincial efforts to legislate racist immigration restrictions. For example, see Ken Adachi, *The Enemy that Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989) and *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-1941* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003); W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy toward Orientals in British Columbia, 2nd ed.* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

28 Taraknath Das to W. D. Scott, September 21, 1907.

29 Roger Daniels writes that Ellis Island and Angel Island, sometimes called Ellis Island of the West, were very different places: “For most of the millions who came in via Ellis Island, the immigration facility was a mere way station, a fleeting stop at which only a very few – mostly those who could not pass the physical examination – met with disappointment. For most of the thousands who came in via Angel Island, the place seemed a prison in which they were pent up for weeks and months, examined and re-examined, humiliated time and again.” See Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) p. 93. See also Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) for a more recent analysis of this subject.

30 For example, see various correspondence in early December 1922 that indicates tensions between immigration agent Lantalum and medical doctors regarding the use of space at the Saint John institution in LAC, RG 76, Vol. 666, File C1595, Part 1.

31 For example, see LAC, RG 76, Series I-A-1, Vol. 37, File 827, “S. Gardner, Immigration Agent, Saint John, New Brunswick, 1880-1904.”

32 There is a substantial amount of correspondence along these lines in LAC, RG 76, Vol. 666, File C1595, Part 2.

33 A particularly interesting example is provided by files relating to the immigration agent's office at Edmonton in 1892: LAC, RG 18-A-1, Vol. 68, File 492-92. This case was explored in Lisa Chilton, “Pitchforks and Red Coats: Land Office Politics and Early Urban Development at Edmonton” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Victoria, BC, June 3-5, 2013). Also see debates about the placement of the health detention building at Quebec City in 1903-1905 (RG 76, Vol. 308, File 284188, Part 1) and the quarantine station at Halifax in 1914 (RG 76, Vol. 623, File 935665).

exploration of such sources contributes greatly to an historian's sense of the complex nature of the environment into which immigrants moved upon their arrival in Canada.

A good example of the tensions that could arise concerning the management of an immigration building is provided by the correspondence generated in 1909 about the rights and privileges allowed to American officials in Canadian facilities. According to James Lantalum, the head agent at the Saint John immigration building, excluding curious visitors from interfering with the functioning of the institution was an important part of his staff's every-day activities. Lantalum's position on this subject led to a serious contest of wills in March 1909. When the American officials who used a part of the immigration building to screen migrants moving through Saint John to the United States invited their friends in for sightseeing tours of the medical and civil examination processes, Lantalum objected strongly. Much to the embarrassment of the American officials, all six of their friends were ordered away. When their remonstrations had no positive effect on Lantalum, they took their complaints to higher authorities in the United States, who contacted Ottawa for assurances that no guests of American officials would be so poorly treated in the future. Lantalum's efforts to justify his actions involved a lengthy review of the history of the dispute and a detailed explanation of the work involved in trying to keep the immigration building clear of unauthorized persons. Lantalum insisted that he was merely following orders from Ottawa received six or seven years earlier upon the insistence of American authorities, who had claimed that large numbers of visitors at the building were "seriously interfering" with their work.³⁴ Lantalum asserted that, as a result of that order, his guards blocked entry to all voyeurs upon the arrival of ships at port and that he found American officials' efforts to circumvent the "no visitor" regulations annoying. Should the American officials be allowed their way, Lantalum argued, "you would have more visitors than passengers in the building."³⁵

For historians interested in piecing together how immigrants were received, these are evocative documents. The outcome of this particular contest of wills was that Lantalum was firmly reprimanded for his attitude by his superiors in Ottawa, and the ban on all visitors without business in the building was lifted. It is worth noting that at no stage in the lengthy correspondence among various Canadian and American government officials on this matter did the rights of the migrants feature as a legitimate issue for consideration. Presumably, no immigrants of the "right" sort filed an official complaint that could be tied directly to the intrusions of voyeuristic sightseers.

The files created about individual employees of the immigration branch of the federal government can also be useful to the historian of immigration. For example, a file on a Saint John interpreter provides compelling information about the workings of official immigration reception at that port city. Correspondence in this file shows that, in 1904, immigration officials associated with the Saint John immigrant building engaged in discussions with Ottawa about the need to hire

³⁴ LAC, RG 76, Vol. 563, File 808943 (microfilm C-10644), Lantalum to W. D. Scott, April 23, 1909.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

an interpreter to assist them in their work with newcomers who could not speak French or English. During the course of the correspondence among local and federal officials, only one candidate for the position was mentioned. Christopher Nichols was recommended for the post by a long list of local petitioners. Nichols' primary credential for the job was that he was known to be "a sober and steady man and a good Liberal."³⁶ The fact that he could speak several languages might have been useful, if they had been languages spoken by the immigrants then arriving at that port. As it was, Nichols' expertise was in languages of the Mediterranean region, including Arabic. The closest that he came to competency in Northern or Eastern European languages was a very limited knowledge of German. Nichols' member of parliament strongly endorsed his candidacy and even became involved in adding pressure to the immigration office at Ottawa to raise his salary and rewrite his job description when Nichols found his job and its pay not to his liking after he was offered the position.³⁷ When Nichols decided not to take the job after all, no effort was made to replace him. This file strongly suggests that no interpreter was working at this port. It raises questions about how, and even whether, immigration officials were able to communicate verbally with many of the immigrants coming through this port in the early part of the twentieth century. It also highlights the many ways in which patronage could affect the immigration reception work of the state.

Files on federal government employees on Canada's west coast also offer valuable insights into the workings of the state. Documents concerning British Columbian interpreter Fred Yoshi provide a particularly interesting example. Yoshi (also referred to as Fred or Frank Yoshly, Saburo Yoshiye, and Kiyoshi Suhinoto in different contexts) first entered the official record as an interpreter and "fixer" for Japanese immigrants in 1906, when he was identified as an individual implicated in the illegal landing of 82 migrants on Vancouver Island.³⁸ By 1914 Yoshi was employed as the official Japanese interpreter for the Vancouver branch of the Federal government's immigration office. This was a position that he held until he was fired and arrested for running an illegal immigration system, involving the issuance of Canadian passports to Japanese immigrants using forged birth certificates, in 1931.³⁹ The files on Yoshi contain correspondence, reports, lists, memoranda, and information from witnesses, produced by officials within the immigration system, members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and people working within the judicial system, for the period 1920 to 1932. These documents reveal information on how the efforts of the Canadian state to restrict the immigration of Japanese nationals were undermined by people working both

36 LAC, RG 76, Vol. 232, File 133999, Part 1 (microfilm C-7381), Petition of the undersigned residents of the City of Saint John to Joseph J. Tucker, MP (stamped August 12, 1904). See LAC, RG 76, Vol 232, File 133999, Part 2 (microfilm C-7382), for other references to the use of a "patronage committee" at Saint John.

37 LAC, RG 76, Vol. 232, File 133999, Part 1.

38 Further details are provided in James. D. Cameron, "Canada's Struggle with Illegal Entry on its West Coast: The Case of Fred Yoshly and Japanese Migrants before the Second World War," *BC Studies*, no. 146 (Summer 2005), pp. 43-44.

39 LAC, RG 76, Vol. 342, File 361435 (microfilm C-10250), RCMP, "Re: Seiroku KOJIMA (Japanese), Fraud," Vancouver, BC (2 Charges), May 5, 1931 (reproduced in BC Archives, GR-1547, reel B1041).

within and outside the state bureaucracy. They contribute to a better understanding of how networks of companies and individuals created a financially remunerative enterprise out of human smuggling.⁴⁰ They provide details about the specific experiences of a handful of named individuals who sought entry into Canada and the United States, as well as the likely experience of hundreds of other unnamed migrants. They also bring to light the assumptions, attitudes, and prejudices of the white British Columbians who sought to understand Fred Yoshi and his work with migrants.⁴¹

These documents suggest that relationships established over many years of work on the front lines of immigrant reception at Vancouver created a social dynamic not easily understood by higher authorities within the government and judicial system. It seems these authorities were interested only in whether or not tight rules around Asian immigration to Canada, and through Canada to the United States, were being followed. For example, when asked by his superiors in Ottawa to explain whether Yoshi had been interviewing immigrants on his own, and thus essentially without oversight, Yoshi's supervisor A. E. Skinner stated that indeed Yoshi had been doing so and that he felt that the system in place was perfectly appropriate. His superiors disagreed. Further correspondence among the immigration officials suggests that Skinner was quite defensive about his Japanese colleague. Was this response because, as historian James D. Cameron suggests in his review of this case, Skinner or other immigration officials working at Vancouver were in league with Yoshi, and thus Skinner sought to cover their tracks?⁴² Or did Skinner's front-line work with immigrants at Vancouver give him a perspective on Japanese migration and on Yoshi's interaction with these immigrants that differed from those of the more distant senior officials in immigration services?⁴³

40 For further information on this subject, see Takai, "Navigating Transpacific Passages"; Yukari Takai, "Asian Migrants, Exclusionary Laws, and Transborder Migration in North America, 1880-1940," *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October 2009), pp. 35-42.

41 Interesting parallel cases may be found in the Chinese immigrant community. Chinese legal interpreters in Vancouver served as power brokers between the city's Chinese community and Canada's ruling Liberal Party. No one better illustrates the intricate power politics that interpreters performed than two interpreter rivals, Yip On and David Lew. These two men were hired to help with the enforcement of Canada's anti-Chinese immigration policy. However, in their fight for the federal post of Chinese immigration interpreter in Vancouver from 1910 to 1925, they forged covert political alliances with Anglo politicians that ultimately foiled the anti-Chinese laws they had been hired to enforce. For discussion of interpreters and other power brokers among Chinese immigrants in Canada, see Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era, 1885-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), especially chap. 1. We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper for pointing us towards Mar's study.

42 The Yoshi case is explored in depth in Cameron, "Canada's Struggle with Illegal Entry on its West Coast."

43 Peter Johnson's exploration of the social dynamics at play at the quarantine station at William Head, Vancouver Island, provides evidence of numerous instances in which immigration officials and medical professionals employed by the state to work on the front lines of immigration reception displayed understandings and opinions of immigration matters at odds with those of their distant superiors. Peter Johnson, *Quarantined: Life and Death at William Head Station, 1872-1959* (Vancouver: Heritage House, 2013).

Conclusion

A file housed at Canada's national archives with the typically awkward and misleading title "Locating and looking after immigrants (Care of Immigrants) (pamphlet), 1897-1924" contains a letter issued in 1903 to "each of the Dominion Land Agents and Sub Agents [and] also to the Immigration Agents at the sea ports and to the Train Inspectors." The letter was sent by James A. Smart, Deputy Minister of the Interior, the top bureaucrat within the federal government's immigration branch, to remind the employees working under his supervision of "the proper caring for and treatment of newly arrived immigrants to Canada." The letter conveyed Smart's expectation that *all* newcomers who came in contact with these officials would be treated with the utmost courtesy and respect, regardless of whether they arrived as individuals or as members of large groups of immigrants. "The Department must of necessity place absolute reliance and confidence in its officers to conduct this business in a way which will reflect credit upon the Government and upon the people of Canada generally, especially in view of the fact that first impressions are very often lasting ones," he wrote. A year later Smart requested that a similar memorandum be sent out again to all officials working in the field of immigrant reception. Apparently he felt that another reminder was necessary.⁴⁴

Smart's pointed admonishments to immigration agents make little sense in the context of the cases explored here. How does one interpret a clear request for impartiality in immigration agents' dealings with newcomers in light of the very evident racism, intolerance, and disinterest exhibited by the same authorities in Ottawa when responding to the needs of specific groups of immigrants arriving at Vancouver and at Saint John during the same period? What scandals and newsworthy backlash prompted this repeated statement of concern about the impact of immigration agents' attitudes on immigrants' impressions of Canada? The answers to these questions are, at least partially, imbedded in the same sources that generated the questions.

As two historians who have been working with records created and archived by federal government agencies for many years, we believe that there is significantly more potential in these sources for rewarding study than is generally recognized. Whether used as a core source or to supplement other types of sources, the paper trail created, gathered, and stored by the immigration branch of the federal government still has much to offer historians of Canadian immigrants and immigration. We have reviewed only a few files associated with two of the scores of federally funded institutions and agencies that worked with Canadian immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century. The material covered here is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to government-generated documents on immigration, immigrants, and related matters. Yet even these few files demonstrate the potential value of this type of source. When read together, the files reveal a multifaceted and complex picture.

44 See LAC, RG 76, Vol. 139, File 33175, Part 1 (Microfilm C-15867), J. A. Smart to J. O. Smith, June 3, 1903; J. A. Smart to immigration agents, May 19, 1903; James A. Smart to Mr. Scott, April 7, 1904; Circular, "Immigration," April 15, 1904.

Because these files relate to the workings of federal institutions and agencies that were mandated to receive all immigrants, they shed light on the experiences of people of all ages, ethnicities, races, places of origin, genders, and classes, in comparison and in relation with each other. Documents like those reviewed here offer evidence about the socio-political and physical environments within which immigrants were received, as well as the assumptions and expectations of both immigrants and members of the communities that received them. The insights gained through a review of the evidence are far from simple, however. Comparisons of the east and west coasts suggest a clear privileging of transatlantic immigrants. Yet it would be inaccurate to read that privilege as uncomplicated. As our review of the files relating to the employees at the Saint John location suggests, the needs of immigrants arriving on the east coast were, in fact, often blatantly ignored, especially if they were not of British background. Read with an eye for undercurrent tensions, these documents offer insights into socio-political dynamics within Canadian immigrant reception services at the local, regional, and national levels that are otherwise difficult to access. Likewise, these sources can provide useful information concerning migration-related international political concerns. While a comparison of files associated with immigrant sheds at Vancouver and at Saint John demonstrates that reception work performed by immigration agents on both coasts involved screening and rejecting prospective immigrants as much as it involved welcoming and supporting them, it is also clear that the state was hardly a monolithic entity, and that different government bodies (and different individuals within them) sometimes expressed widely divergent opinions about how migration should be managed.

