

A WHITE MAN'S PROVINCE

A White Man's Province examines how British Columbians changed their attitudes towards Asian immigrants from toleration in colonial times to vigorous hostility by the turn of the century. It also describes how politicians responded to popular cries to halt Asian immigration and restrict Asian activities in the province.

Early manifestations of antipathy towards Asian immigrants—who were initially supported by employers and politicians—appeared as just another dispute between capital and labour related to their sojourning habits, living standards, wage rates, and competition in specific industries. Later, after a downturn in the economy, a decline in white immigration, and a burgeoning Asian population, few white men welcomed them, and racial characteristics became the nucleus of such terms as “a white man’s province”—a “catch phrase” which, as Roy notes, “covered a wide variety of fears and transcended particular economic interests.” The Chinese were the chief targets of hostility in the 1800s, but by the twentieth century the Japanese, more economically ambitious and backed by a powerful mother country, appeared more threatening.

After Asian disfranchisement in the 1870s, provincial politicians, no longer worried about the Asian vote, fuelled and exploited public prejudices. The Asian question also became a rallying cry for provincial rights when Ottawa disallowed anti-Asian legislation. Although federal leaders such as John A. Macdonald and Wilfrid Laurier shared a desire to keep Canada a “white man’s country,” they followed a policy of restraint in view of imperial concerns.

The belief that whites should be superior, as Roy points out, was common at that time throughout the western world, and many of the arguments used by exclusionists were influenced by anti-Asian sentiments and legislation emanating from California, and from Australia and other British colonies.

Drawing on almost every newspaper and magazine report published in the province before 1914, and on government records and private manuscripts, Dr. Roy has produced a revealing historical account of the complex basis of racism in British Columbia and of the contribution made to the province in these early years by its Asian population.

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and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914

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