Early History of British Columbia

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William Barraclough
This meeting of Nanaimo Historical Society is being held in the Credit Union Building, Tuesday, January the 10th, 1967 at 8:00 p.m. Mr. Alan Burdock, President, will act as Chairman. The speaker was a Mr. James K. Nesbitt of Victoria, who will present an address on the early history of British Columbia.

Alan Burdock
Ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege and a pleasure to call on Mr. William Barraclough, secretary and historian of the Nanaimo Historical Society, to introduce our guest speaker for this evening.

William Barraclough
Thank you Mr. Burdock, it is a pleasure to have the honour of introducing Mr. Nesbitt as our guest speaker. Mr. Nesbitt requires little by way of an introduction. It may be more appropriate to announce: "Mr. Nesbitt is with us". He is so well known personally, and through his feature writings, or by his television and radio assignments. Mr. James K. Nesbitt was a long standing member of the British Columbia Historical Association. And looking over some items of the Association, Mr. Nesbitt was honorary treasurer of the Association for several periods, around 1947. And then he served for many years as a counsel of the Association. Mr. Nesbitt's newspaper column covers a wide range of subjects and at times I find they can be rather provocative. But that is the hallmark of a good columnist. It invites letters from the readers. So, without further comment, I take great pleasure in asking our guest to come forward. Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Mr. James K. Nesbitt.

2:44

James Nesbitt
It's very nice to come up here to Nanaimo where you don't have any rain. We've had rain down in Victoria for days. It rained all up the Malahat, as soon as I got into Nanaimo there wasn't any rain. So I had a lovely walk, down from the Malaspina. Mr. Barraclough has been very kind and hospitable. He asked me to come early today and take a tour, but I couldn't come. I only got this invitation to come up here about last Wednesday, I think. And then he kindly asked me for dinner, but I had made arrangements to have dinner with a friend down the road a bit. And then he asked me, of all things, if he could take me to breakfast in the morning. And that caused me to faint, because I don't have much appetite around 8:30, I'm not like you hearty people, besides I have to leave by 9 o'clock and get back into Victoria by 11. But one of these
days I'm coming up as a real tourist to Nanaimo and look around, because it's a lovely place and I've always enjoyed it.

I suppose I'm to talk a little bit about history tonight. Everybody wants history. There's another centennial bandwagon rolling, we've got so many centennials now, I've noticed some of these mayors and aldermen of various places are getting fed up. Down in Victoria they said, this is terrible, we had '66 now we've got '67. And then it won't be long before we get to 1871. And he forgot all about 1868, which is going to be the 100th anniversary of Victoria as the capital. So I guess everybody will start screaming erelong about centennials.

We who dabble in history have a lot of fun. We're all not all, I hope, somber, sober sides. About it, the other night I was at a centennial dinner in Victoria and the Honourable Judy LaMarsh was the Chairman and she said that she hoped that everyone had some fun with their history in this centennial year. She said in Canada, we're apt to be a little too somber about history. And she said also, a little too mushy about it. And then she said, let's have some fun, while we're about it. So I thought that was very good advice. And I've had quite a lot of fun with the research and history I've done, got a few jumbled notes here.

You all, or some of you, remember Pinkie McKelvie [of course?] who was responsible for establishing Petroglyph Park down the road. It was Mr. McKelvie, who lived in Cobble Hill, who I think taught me a great deal about history, and certainly got me very curious about history. And one day, quite a long while ago now, he was very pleased that I liked history. And he looked me right in the eye, I don't think I've told this up here before, because Mr. Barraclough said the last time I spoke in the Nanaimo was in 26th of March 1958, and Pinkie, as we called him, didn't die until 1960 or '61.

In any event, Mr. McKelvie, when he was in Victoria lived in the Pacific Club, and I remember one day he looked me right in the eye, and he said, "You know young man, James Douglas was a great figure."

And I said, "Yes."

“And furthermore, I have a picture of Sir James Douglas hanging on the wall at the foot of my bed," and he said, “every morning when I wake up, I wink at Sir James Douglas.” And I thought that was odd enough, but then what he said really shook me. Because he looked me right in the eye again and he said, "And furthermore, Sir James Douglas winks right back at me." Well, I haven't gone quite that far yet, but one never knows.

In 1962, when Victoria had its centennial as an incorporated city, that reminds me of another centennial, won't you have your 100th anniversary here in 1874? As an
incorporated city? Well, that isn't long, so I hope you put on a really good show. But in '62, when we had that centennial, I went around speaking all over the place, until I'm sure people were awfully tired of my pet subject that year, of course, was the first mayor of Victoria, Thomas Harris, who was quite a figure. The newspapers said he weighed 300 pounds and he rode horseback, looking through boats, and he liked fine wine and pretty ladies, and he lived in a fine brick house down on Government Street, at the corner of Fort Street. And the townspeople used to serenade him with [flaring brooms] and he always came out on his balcony and made a fine speech and invited them in to his wine cellar.

7:18

So, I went on and on about this in 1962, one night I finally sat down and a gentlemen way at the back of the hall very kindly rose to thank me, and he said, "You know, Mr. Harris, you've done a fine job tonight, Mr. Harris."

And then somebody at the back of the hall said, "Psst," and he looked around for a man, and he said, "I think I've done something wrong."

And this interrupter said, "The name's Nesbitt, not Harris."

And then he said, "Oh, I beg your pardon, Mayor Nesbitt." [laughter]

So that was a lot of fun, indeed.

In the, I've got a little note here, history, it's not quite ancient history yet, but someday I might get around to writing something and then it will be put away. Mrs. Rolston, one of the women members of the Legislature, whom I liked very much, she's been gone now, more than ten years, she was a Cabinet Minister. She was also member of the Parks Board of Vancouver for a large number of years. And she smoked cigarettes, but she always did it more or less in private, because she thought that a "fast" woman who smoked cigarettes would damage her image with the public. But at the Parks Board in Vancouver, there were very few people ever there, so Tilly used to light up. And one night she lit up, and she had a very fancy hat apparently on, with all veils and flowers and things, and glory be, if the veil didn't catch fire.

And sure enough, as luck would have it, apparently it had never happened before, there was a reporter there. And the "dirty, little wretch", as Tilly said, put it in the paper. Well, some years later, when Mrs. Rolston became a Cabinet Minister, I was writing something about her for an eastern paper, and so naturally I did some research on Tilly and I found this anecdote. So I put it in, and I knew all heck would break loose, really, then this article in due course came out. And one day Mrs. Rolston tromped down the
Legislative corridor, and she opened the door of our cutter press room, and I'm sitting way down here, and I knew what was going to happen.

And she just looked at me and she marched right across the room and she said, "Why did you do it?"

And I said, "Do what?"

She said, "You know perfectly well what you did. Why did you do it?"

"Well," I said, "you're a public figure Tilly. And that's a marvelous anecdote, it's got to be published when you're in public life."

And she looked at me and she said, "You know the trouble with you, Jim Nesbitt? The trouble with you is, you're inhibited, and if I were ten years younger, I'd disinhibit you." [laughter]. And she turned right around, and walked out. So that's the way I have a little fun in politics which some day will become history.

And I just got one more little anecdote here. It's about one time, good many years ago now, we were in the Premier's office, Mr. Bennett's office, at one of his wonderful press conferences and somebody asked him about a Liberal, some Liberal had said something. I think it was Mr. Lang, who had just been defeated in Vancouver, but who of course now is in the Federal Cabinet. And the reporter said, "Mr. Premier, what do you think of what Mr. Lang said?"

And the Premier said, "Mr. Lang, Mr. Lang, now who's he? Does he got a seat in this Legislature?" And then the Premier said, throwing his arms around, "What's happened to the great Liberals like Laurier?"

And I found my poor, weak voice, and I said, "Mr. Premier, there's a bust of Laurier up in the archives attic gathering dust."

And he said, "What's this? What's this?"

And so I explained it, I said, "That bust of Laurier sat on the mantle in the Speaker's suite until Social Credit came along, and then some Social Creditor threw Laurier out."

And the Premier said, "That's terrible." So he rang a lot of buttons, and the secretary came running in. And he said, "Go up in the archives, and get Laurier." Well, the secretary thought the chief had gone mad, however explained, he went up to see Mr. Ireland and in a few minutes came down bearing this bust of Laurier. Which the Premier, with a great flourish, put up on a cabinet. Well, that little spontaneous act got a great deal of publicity for the Premier, and about a week later, he told us that someone
reading all this was going to present him with a bust of Sir John. A. Macdonald and in due course, that bust arrived. A very handsome, bronze bust, made in London by the [Mosh?] Brothers, and we wanted to know who had gave it to the Premier, but he said he was not at liberty to divulge it, unless he asked the donor, which he did, and then he said the donor wanted no publicity about it.

So we had a lot of fun there, and then I came across a little statuette of Sir Richard McBride, up in the archives. And I spoke to Mr. Ireland and I spoke to the Premier's assistant, and I said, can I put on a show with Sir Richard, and he got the okay from the Premier. So, but when I got this statuette, Sir Richard had broken nose. He's painted green, with a long coat on, it's really quite handsome, and he had a chip out of his nose, so I had to take it out to a pottery shop, and get Sir Richard's nose repaired. So in due course, I brought this into the Premier's office, and he was delighted to have it, and I said, "Mr. Premier, it cost me three fifty to have Sir Richard's nose repaired."

And the Premier said, "You've never spent three fifty, and you never will again to better advantage." So I simply did not get my three fifty out of the government for Sir Richard McBride. But when I go to a press conference down there and I see him, I think, well, there's my contribution to history.

12:47

We are always coming across interesting little bits and pieces as we research history, I'm a little hesitant, in front of a group of historians, to bring all these things out, because I'm sure you know all about them, but maybe you don't. It's not too long ago I found a letter, written by Cecilia Douglas, the oldest of the five daughters of James Douglas, and who is Mrs. J.S. Helmcken. She wrote this in 1857 to Mrs. William Fraser Tolmie, at Fort Nisqually. And Mrs. William Fraser Tolmie, as I'm sure you know, was Jane, the eldest of the eight daughters of John Work.

“My dearest Mrs. Tolmie, to begin my beautiful epistle, Mr. MacDonald and Miss C.B. Reid were joined in holy matrimony by the Revered Mr. Cridge. The party actually walked to church. Mr. MacDonald was there about ten minutes before and at the door met his bride elect. I tell you what I should like to see next spring, a little MacDonald. I sincerely hope, two at once, for she is always turning us all to ridicule for having little brats so soon. Poor little May is very poorly indeed. Her head is all broken out into small pimples, which break and form larger ones. As for Amy, she is as lively as ever, full of talk and mischief. Mrs. Ella is as round as a puncheon of ale. So is Mrs. Cridge. Do you know Mr. Cridge's secretary, who married the wooden leg man? Well, she is in the same prolific condition."

I find that a delightful letter. It shows as Miss Whitman said on this delightful tape, that human nature really doesn't change. I suppose when Mrs. Helmcken wrote that letter,
the original of which is in the archives, when she wrote that letter to Mrs. Tolmie more than a hundred years ago, she never thought of course that it would be preserved and would be a part of the history of this Island and this Province.

History of course has its serious side as well as all the fun that the Honourable Judy LaMarsh says we should have in our study of history. Three years ago, just about now, it was in February 1963, a few months after the death of John Kennedy, I read in the *American Heritage*, that beautiful publication of history, an essay that John Kennedy had written, published after his death, very beautiful. It's one of my prizes, I'm sure many of you have seen it. John Kennedy of course was writing for the American people, but what he wrote I think applies to us too.

“There is little more important for a citizen to know than the history and traditions of his county. Without such knowledge, he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone, but draws a strength far greater than his own from the cumulative experience of the past. And a cumulative knowledge of the future. Our past is a record of stirring achievement in the face of stubborn difficulty. It is a record filled with figures larger than life, with high drama and hard decisions, with valour and with tragedy, with incidence both poignant and picturesque. History after all is the memory of a nation. Just as memory enables the individual to learn, to choose goals, and stick to them, to avoid making the same mistake twice, in short to grow. So history is the means by which a nation establishes identity and purpose. The future arises out of the past. And a country's history is a statement of the values and hopes, which having forged ones gone before, will now forecast what is to come.”

“A knowledge of history is, above all, a means of responsibility - of responsibility to the past, and of responsibility to the future. A responsibility to those who came before us and struggled and sacrificed to pass on to us our precious inheritance of freedom. And a responsibility to those who will come after us, and to whom we must pass on that inheritance, with what new strength and substance it is within our power to add. History is not something dead and over. It is always alive, always growing, always unfinished. And every citizen today has his own contribution to make to the great fabric of tradition and hope that binds all citizens, dead and living and yet to be born, in a common faith and a common destiny.”

It's a beautiful essay. I can read it, and reread it. As *American Heritage* said, this magnificent work of John Kennedy, who now tragically, himself, belongs to history.

18:14

Well, last year was the 100th anniversary of the union of the two colonies. That was quite an event, I had done a lot of research on it, through the newspapers. The
newspapers really had a fine time. There was Vancouver Island, a separate colony, and British Columbia, a separate colony, almost foreign lands, one unto the other. It was perfectly ridiculous. I sometimes think that the men who lived then were more progressive than those maybe who lived today, because we've got municipal divisions all over the place. Down there in Victoria, if we live in the City of Victoria, Oak Bay thinks we are, well, kind of outlanders. And of course we who live in the City of Victoria, we’re convinced that Oak Bay and Saanich and Esquimalt do nothing but sponge on Victoria. And of course, we can't seem to get anywhere.

But a hundred years ago, they simply charged ahead, and despite all the hoots and the catcalls, and the bitterness, they joined up Vancouver Island with British Columbia, even though an awful lot of people on Vancouver Island said they were being "swallowed up" and that they would disappear, which of course was nonsense. They disappeared politically, but that's a good thing. If those men, a century ago last year, hadn't been so far-sighted on Vancouver Island today, there is no doubt that we would have been a separate province of Canada, which some people today would like, but which of course would be ridiculous.

There's not too much about that union. The Colonist said in November of 1866:

“Proclamation of Union. At noon, amid the firing of guns by the fleet at Esquimalt, Sherriff Adamson proclaimed the union of the colonies before a crowd of two hundred persons, and Vancouver Island ceased to exist as a separate government. There was neither enthusiasm nor indignation expressed at the announcement. On the contrary, the people present appeared to be in the best possible humour, and more disposed to chaff each other upon the new arrangement than to either cheer or denounce it.”

And so it went on, a great deal in the papers, editorials:

“No sooner was the Gordian knot tied and the happy pair announced one, than Her Majesty's ships in Esquimalt, caught up the dying echo of the sacerdotal benediction and boomed forth a royal salute of 21 guns in honour of the occasion. No cards were issued, but the marriage license and contract were publicly exhibited for the gratification of enquiring friends, and copies forwarded to the country districts that all might be enable to learn the terms of this blissful union.”

“The wooing and engagement were not of the most harmonious character, owing to the moody disposition of the bride, but the proffered hand having been accepted and the vow solemnized, let us hope that their path through wedded life may be strewn with roses; that, appreciating each other the better; stoically overlooking mutual foibles, and being kindly affectioned to the one to the other, they may not only enjoy much domestic felicity themselves, but may be the means of imparting it to those around them.”
“Well, the heads of our respective rival households have been made one and it now becomes us to consider our position and duties as subordinate members of the united family.”

It sounds a little pessimistic, and of course they had their troubles, but eventually it did work out.

Over in New Westminster, *The British Columbian* wasn't really much more enthusiastic, although, being over on the mainland, I suppose they felt victorious.

“Not a cheer was given, not a hat raised; no smile of satisfaction lit up the public countenance, no congratulations were offered to either bride or bridegroom. The flag on the Hyack Engine House was run up as a signal to H.M.S. *Sparrowhawk* to fire a salute, but that was the act of the government, not of the people.”

Then *The British Columbian* had some editorial advice about all this:

“Now however that the deed is done, it will be our wisdom to let bygones be bygones and put forth our best efforts to make the match a happy one - to sink, as far as possible, all those local and party differences and jealousies which have sprung up, and looking upon the whole as one colony, which it is, and one united community, which it ought to be, seek to promote the best interests of British Columbia as a whole.”

Well, it was all rosy that November of 1866 on the 19th and 20th of November. But it didn't last long. What do you suppose happened on Vancouver Island, down in Victoria? All those dreadful people from British Columbia, the customs collectors, and police and all that type of thing, they all arrived in Victoria and started shoving people around. And so Victorians didn't like that at all. But *The British Columbian*, looking at all these complaints, just had no patience with Victoria.

What do you think they said about my native city, down there on the southern end of this Island? I still get enraged when I read it.

“Like most ill-assorted unions, that which was consummated between British Columbia and Vancouver Island does not promise to be a very happy one, unless we fall back upon the homely adage, ‘A bad beginning makes a good ending.’ We would fain hope that such may prove to be the case in this instance. But scarcely had the guns which heralded the completion of the union died away when the first discontented growl was uttered by the public in that place Victoria. This does not at all surprise us. It cannot surprise anyone who has been a close observer of that restless, discontented, misguided community on the Island. We never supposed that those who, in political parlance, pass for 'the people of Victoria,' would be content with union, any more than they were without it. Indeed, for the matter of that, it is extremely doubtful whether they
will ever be content under any conceivable political condition. Yet one would imagine that considerations of mere policy would have suggested the propriety of maintaining a sort of decorum during the ‘honeymoon.’ Such however, would not appear to be the case. We are forced to admit that there does appear to be a little irritating friction in the first working of the new political machinery. But that is no more than might be expected. The ship is only making her ‘trial run,’ so to speak; and it is scarcely fair to raise a ‘hue and cry’ against both ship and builders, if every wheel and joint do not work smoothly just at the start.”

However, that was the beginning, and I'd say it's all worked out very well.

25:21

I find it interesting looking back on James Douglas, he had been the Governor, as you know, of course, of both Vancouver Island and British Columbia. The British government wanted this union, they used to write letters out to James Douglas, but he was pretty high and mighty. And I've got an idea he just threw those letters into the basket more or less, although some of them he kept. There's one here from the Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State for the Colonies, who wrote to Douglas in 1863, saying, in effect, you better get a move on and do something to amalgamate those two colonies. But Douglas did nothing. And I suppose it was his doing nothingness that forced possibly his retirement in 1864.

However, Monday, November the 19th, 1866 in the diary of Martha Douglas, who was then about 12, I think, James Douglas always had his children keep diaries, and it's a good thing he did, because the Douglas Diaries, of course, are a fascinating and highly important part of our history.

Martha's diary is altogether wonderful. It gives a picture of Victoria, and New Westminster too, through the eyes of a small girl, with a brilliant father, who encouraged her and almost [whipped?] her on. Martha wrote most days in the diary, and then there would be a long period of blankness, three or four days, and then in Douglas' own handwriting in Martha's diary it would say, "Martha Douglas is a lazy little girl. She must henceforth pay more attention to her diary." And then there would be a few more days of blankness, and then Martha got busy again.

But this is most curious, on Monday the 19th of November, 1866, in Martha's diary, but in the handwriting of James Douglas, there's no doubt of it, he gives in Martha's diary, his only view that I know of, of what he thought of that union:

"The union of Vancouver Island and British Columbia was proclaimed today. The ships of war fired a salute on the occasion. A funeral procession with minute guns would have been more appropriate to the sad, melancholy event."
That surprises me, about Douglas, a man of very great vision, but he did not like that union.

And in March of 1867, a century ago now. He wrote to his daughter Jane, who was the wife of Alexander Grant Dallas, and living in Scotland. He wrote again showing his disapproval:

"I suppose Alex is in a great way about the union of the colonies. I have no patience either with those who are carrying out the new system of government. It makes me savage even to think of the ruin and oppression this measure will lead to. This poor island colony now lies prostate and bleeding at every pore. The routing is far too good for the stupid assembly that passed the fatal, unconditional union resolution."

[Around?] James Douglas was in that the case.

Now we come round to January the 24th of 1867, a hundred years ago, two weeks from today. And I think it showed a great deal of imagination on the part of the government in Victoria, or their centennial advisors, to open this year's session of our Legislature in New Westminster, where the first session of the first Legislative Council of the new united colony opened and was held in 1867. Opened on the 24th of January. And so the Lieutenant Governor, the Premier, and all the Members, and all the Cabinet, and all the guests, I guess, are going to New Westminster, two weeks from today for this historic re-enactment of the opening of the House there. And the next day, they come on back to Victoria and we carry on. We're really not going to lose permanently Victoria as a capital

29:39

Though, I sometimes think, don't worry if I'm a little jerky here. These modern buildings have huge lights, you might as well sit in a furnace room. They have windows that never open. I'm always pleased we've got people from the Prairies, and eastern Canada coming out to live with us. I suppose there are some of you here. And I'm glad, and I wish that these visitors, these new guests from the Prairies, and from the east would leave their wretched internal heat at home. Right out there it's probably about 50 degrees, and I bet in here it's 90. Just because all those people from Saskatoon live inside at 90 degrees all winter. That's my only objection, but after this, I've been going around, making a lot of talking lately, and I'll be doing more this year, and I get into these hothouses. So, I don't what I'm going to do, I'm going to have to bring an electric fan with me. No, never mind, if you don't mind me dripping. Windows don't open any more.
Anyway, *The Victoria Colonist* was a little annoyed, naturally, about the capital being in New Westminster, and they did on the 25th of January, 1867, they ran the Governor's speech, but it was four days before *The Colonist* got around to even mentioning the opening of the House in New Westminster. It said, four days late:

"The first council of the united council of British Columbia and Vancouver Island was opened on Thursday, by his Excellency Governor Seymour. At 1:30 p.m., the members of the New Westminster Volunteers, under Captain Pritchard, the Home Guards, under Captain Calder, and the Seymour Artillery, under Captain Holmes assembled at the Drill Hall, and headed by the brass band, marched to the camp accompanied by a numerous number of citizens and visitors. The volunteers were drawn up as a guard of honour, to receive his Excellency at the Council Chamber, while the Hall was quickly filled with spectators."

So Governor Seymour read his speech and departed, and then up got that loud mouthed, Victorian, you might say, as I suppose the people of New Westminster thought him, Dr. J.S. Helmcken, and he promptly, right on opening day, let out a terrible squawk, about Victoria being snubbed and about this wonderful Vancouver Island being neglected. He said Vancouver Island was suppose to have eight members, and all those terrible people in New Westminster would let this Island have was seven members. And so Dr. Helmcken went on and on and on. Well, that was a most interesting session.

A Canada was born on the 1st of July 1867, and January and February and March, everybody knew that was going to be accomplished. And out here, the British Columbians, once having got on the march, were determined, to march as quickly as they could. They'd just marched to this union, an [epical?] event and now they knew that Canada was being born 3,000 miles away. And right in January and February and March of that year came the first great howl, for the United Crown Colony of British Columbia to join Canada. And even that, that tremendous event, took only four years, and in July of 1871, this Crown Colony hopped right across the mountains and the prairies to that far distant country of Canada, and became part of it.

We realize how foreign Canada was to British Columbia then when we read the early day newspapers. It’s altogether incredible; I still pinch myself when I read, for instance: "Mr. Creese left this morning for San Francisco, en route to Canada." Before 1886, indeed, this time in 1867, because the union of the colonies took a long while to get used to, you would read, Mr. Pidwell, or whoever it might be, left this morning by the *Enterprise*, for British Columbia. Those little newspaper notes show the foreignness of these parts, one to the other, and how extraordinary it was that all these vast mergers came so quickly.
Governor Seymour, when Douglas left of course, Kennedy became Governor of Vancouver Island and Seymour of British Columbia. And then when the colonies united, Kennedy went away and Seymour became the Governor of the united colony. Seymour was promptly into hot water, he had a terrible time. And his colonial secretary, Arthur N. Birch, *The Colonist* really went after them, hook, line, and sinker. To *The Colonist*, and to a lot of people of Vancouver Island of course, Kennedy was, Seymour was a dreadful man. He was the one that wanted the capital in New Westminster. So Victorians and the Legislature over there promptly started this cry to get the capital in Victoria. They said they represented all of Vancouver Island; people of Victoria were pretty impertinent. They even said they represented the people of Nanaimo. The people of Nanaimo didn't want to go over there to New Westminster, they'd much rather come to Victoria. But one of the Nanaimo papers, I don't think it was *The Free Press* then Mr. Norris, forget what paper in 1867, anyway, what do you think that awful Nanaimo paper did? It turned traitor on Victoria, and said it preferred New Westminster, and that people in Nanaimo were quite happy to be away from the thralldom of that place Victoria.

So, all these delightful arguments went on and on and on. Seymour got into a great row about education, I read that from time to time, I didn't know what it was really all about, but Douglas was the one who started free education, not much of it, but it was a start. Then Seymour came along and he got pretty petulant about the whole thing. He had an idea that the poor shouldn't go to school, and that if the rich wanted their children to be educated, they could just darn well pay for it.

He sent an extraordinary message to the Legislature, a short time after it opened in New Westminster, a hundred years ago. It's rather long. I read a great deal about this lecture in the newspapers, but they never, they did not go into any great detail. It was only the other day that I got out the journals of the House, and there I found complete, in the complete text of this extraordinary message, which Governor Seymour sent to the Legislative Assembly about education. And that really started an uproar.

“The Governor is of the opinion that this colony is not yet old enough for a regular system of education to be established; nor would he wish under the present constitution to press his own views upon the Legislature, though he has no desire to conceal them. He thinks that any man who respects himself would not desire to have his children instructed without some pecuniary sacrifice on his own part. The State may aid the parent, but ought not to relieve him of his own natural responsibility, else it may happen that the promising mechanic may be marred, and the country overburdened with half educated, professional politicians, or needy hangers-on of the government.”

It's an extraordinary document.
“As the Governor is aware”, this is the Governor himself saying this, “as the Governor is aware, that there is no subject upon which more words have been wasted then that of gratuitous instruction, and the duty of the government authority towards the people in the matter, he will at once proceed to consider the relations in which the government may properly stand towards the parent. In his own view, all that the State can do is to enable the children to overcome the almost mechanical difficulties which seem to bar their passage over the threshold of knowledge. And having effected this, to leave to parental affection and knowledge of individual character the choice of the arms of which the child shall, at a future period, fight the battle of life. It is idle for the State to drive on...

There is great deal of truth to this in many ways; it's a question that is still being argued, especially as today it is applied to what we call "higher education" in universities. You will recognize in what Seymour said a century ago many, much of the discussion that is still going on.

“It is idle for the State to drive on in an even line the idle and the industrious. The boy of ready aptitudes and him whose brain becomes pained and confused in endeavouring to master the simplest problem. The Governor conceives it to be the duty of the governing power to assist in the giving to all elementary instruction, and then to offer inducements to those who are able to come to the front in the intellectual struggle with their fellow men. But he will not, while addressing the Council, conceal any portion of his thoughts. He believes that the community in which he resides is one where complete toleration and religious opinion exists.”

It is incredible that he would drag religion into this message. For no good reason that I could find out when I was doing this research.

“It is not therefore under these circumstances for the State and its salaried officers to interfere with the belief of any one. The government has not undertaken to prove to the Jew that the Messiah has indeed arrived. To rob the Roman Church of her belief in the merciful intersession of the blessed Virgin. To give special support to the Church of England, to mitigate the acidity of the Calvinistic doctrines of some Protestant believers, or to determine authoritatively the number of the sacraments.”

You can imagine the Legislators over in New Westminster listening to that!

“Therefore, the Governor is of the opinion that when the time comes for the establishment of the large common school, religious teaching ought not to be allowed to intrude. It is vain to say that there are certain elementary matters in which all Christians, leaving out the Jews, must agree. It is merely calling upon a man picked at random, allured by a trifling salary, to do what the whole religious wisdom, feeling, and affection of the world has not yet done. The paring down of all excrescences which a
man on a hundred and fifty pounds a year may think disfigure the several religions, and reducing them to a common standard, becomes a sort of Methodism which may locally be named after the schoolmaster who performs it.”

41:10

“In a colony with which the Governor was recently connected, he left the following school system: There was a public school open to all denominations where the school master did not presume to open to the children any sacred mysteries. The charge upon the children attending regularly was half a dollar a month. But, there were denomination schools also, to which the government contributed, but in a moderate degree. It was found that these denomination schools, though more expensive to the parents, absorbed a greater number of the children. Such is the system the Governor would desire to see in this concentrated community.”

Well, you can imagine what that did. All the newspapers said it was silly, and there was a terrible hullabaloo. So of course Seymour had a bad time here with the public, but he carried on for two years, and in June of 1869, Seymour died up coast on an official visit aboard H.M.S. Sparrowhawk.

As you historians here in Nanaimo know, there is only so much we can talk about history. It’s easy enough to start, and the difficulty is sometimes to know when to stop. So I’ve given you just a few bits and pieces of the past, most of which you probably know anyway, because you’re all pretty good students, and I thank you for your attentive listening and I hope when you come down to Victoria you further read some of these exciting diaries and letters and newspapers. And I thank you again for having me up here in this lovely place where there’s no rain. [applause]

[unidentified male]
Mr. Nesbitt, on behalf of the Historical Society, I wish to thank you very much for your very instructive talk. I [really?] was in Victoria in 1910 and I knew your…

Mr. Nesbitt
I was there before you.
[laughter]

[unidentified male]
But I knew your father very well.

Mr. Nesbitt
Really?

[unidentified male]
...in the Fifth Regiment, with Sergeant [Major? … inaudible]. And also of course, the Helmcken family. One thing, every Saturday night for quite a few years, I used to go down to the Helmcken House, for a little get-together with the Helmcken family and the old doctor. He used to play cards in the dining room, and I used to play, [you'd sing?] round the piano, just think that that piano came out, around the Horn, and it is one of the historical monuments in Victoria today. I thank you very much for your speech.

Mr. Nesbitt
Thank you Mr. [Rawlings?]  

Thank you very much.

[end of recording]