Document Analysis

History 1120

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**The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-1808**

In the early 1800s, Northern British Columbia was an unchartered hinterland, hiding wealth within its mountain ranges. Simon Fraser was one of the earliest explorers in this area. Fraser was a partner in the Northwest Company and was given responsibility to extend the company west of the Rocky Mountains. He was responsible for the founding of many of the earliest trading posts in Northern BC, and saw value in many places, before others could. Fraser kept a day-to-day log of his life as he explored the West and also sent letters back to the leaders of the Northwest Company. These documents have been preserved and now provide valuable insight into the explorations of Northern British Columbia. They help to prove that the fur trade was essential to the development of BC. The documents also show how important relations with the First Nations were in the area and they also demonstrate that without Simon Fraser, the fur trade may have never pushed west.

The Northwest Company pushed explorers into BC early. They sent Fraser to establish footholds in the areas he saw fit. “We have established the Post beyond the mountains, and will establish another in the most convenient place we can find before the Fall, where people can live, and this I believe was all that were expected this summer.”1 This passage shows that the Northwest Company built some of the first settlements in BC, many of which are still towns in the modern era. The fur trade truly initiated the creation of BC.

Simon Fraser and his men generally had very positive relationships with the First Nations peoples they encountered. There were two willing First Nations men that acted as guides for the crew as they made their journey to the Pacific Ocean. Fraser and his men also encountered several groups as they travelled, and all their interactions were peaceful, and often mutually beneficial. “In the afternoon, some Toohowtins and Atnaughs arrived on horseback. They seemed peaceably inclined, and appeared happy to see us”.2 This passage makes it clear that Fraser recognized the value in having good relations with the First Nations peoples. They held endless knowledge of the landscape and the environment. By maintaining good relations with the Natives, Fraser was able to go about his work peacefully as well as use the knowledge the First Nations could offer him. These interactions were essential to the continuing success of the Fur Trade in the North.

Fraser was sure to keep his journals accurate and detailed. For much of his writing, he and his crew are exploring the area of Stuart, Moberly and McLeod lakes. Long before Fort St. James became a hub of the fur trade in BC, Fraser saw immense potential in the area. “Fish abounds in the lake at certain seasons of the year, and animals of the fur kind are plenty”.3 Though it was a while before the trading posts in this area took off, Fraser recognized their importance very early on. His awareness of the valuable land and resources in the area paved the way for the development of the fur trade in Northern BC. Another example of Fraser’s contribution comes in his first letter, addressed to the proprietors of the Northwest Company. In this letter, Fraser summarizes his arrival in the New Caledonia area. He writes that he has established one Post and will soon establish a second that they can winter at. The crucial passage however, is when he writes about the profits his crew has made. “I cannot form any ideas of what returns will be made in this quarter for this year but I imagine that they will be no wise considerable. But not withstanding I think they will be worth the pursuit”.2 This passage demonstrates how instrumental Simon Fraser was to the development of Northern BC. If profits were not being made, many people would’ve lost faith in the area and called off the operation. Fraser saw the long-term benefits of the area and he recommended that they continue work. Without this foresight, the fur-trade in the North would’ve been stunted, and Northern BC wouldn’t have become what it is today.

These letters and journals demonstrate how the fur trade was key to the development of British Columbia. They also show the importance of indigenous people in the expansion of the fur trade, and how crucial Simon Fraser was to the advancement of the Fur Trade. Without his intuition, operations in the area might’ve been over before they could really start. Fraser’s persistence made all the difference, and it is because of this that BC became what it is today.