

Peter Liddell

**Germans on Canada's Pacific Slopes:
A Brief Survey of German Discovery, Settlement and
Culture in British Columbia, 1778 to the Present**

Germans were among the first Europeans to land in British Columbia. Since then, as members of British naval expeditions, clerks or officials in the Hudson's Bay Company, adventurers, settlers, boodlers, boosters, investors, and entrepreneurs, they have been second only to the Anglo-Saxons in numbers and second to none in the variety and scope of their contribution to the modern development of the Province.

The first recorded German to visit British Columbia landed on Sunday, March 29, 1778, with Captain Cook. He was Heinrich Zimmermann of Wiesloch in the Palatinate, a coxswain on the *Discovery*, the escort vessel to Cook's *Resolution*. We know of him because at the end of the voyage he ignored the orders of the British Admiralty that all records, logs and notes of the voyage be surrendered, pending publication of an official record. He smuggled his notes, kept in a private German short-hand, back to Germany, where they were published in 1781 and eagerly devoured by an avid public there and soon afterwards in translation in France, Russia and elsewhere.¹

In his report Zimmermann has little to record of the landing at St. George's, or Nootka, Sound, on Vancouver Island:

Wir liefen den andern Tag ohngefehr
in dem Grad 48 nördlicher Breite in
einem schönen und bequemen Hafen,
den Herr Cook St. George-Sund nannte, ein . . .²

I mention this brief but historic moment here only because Zimmermann is, in many ways, typical of the kind of Germans who were to come to Canada's West Coast in the next two hundred years. Most adapted quickly to the predominantly Anglo-Saxon tone of the area; often they were very pragmatic people, with an adventurous spirit, who did not attempt to create a German presence in the province, such as they did in other parts of Can-

ada and North America.³ And they have left exceedingly little record of their presence, either historical or literary—at least in comparison to their numerical importance.⁴

The modern history of British Columbia as a province begins with the gold rush of 1858. Prior to that, the territory west of the Canadian Rockies was governed by the Hudson's Bay Company. Other than their agents and their dependents there was virtually no white settlement, although there were Germans who worked or visited in the territory. The Hudson's Bay Company doctor for instance, Dr. J. S. Helmcken, arrived in 1850 and stayed on after 1858 to become a member of the first provincial legislature. He was leader of the delegation which negotiated union with Canada in 1870 and is an exception among German immigrants to the province in that he entered provincial politics. Although he was born of German parents in London, England, attended a German school there for a time and did write some private papers in German, his principal schooling and medical training was in English, which no doubt stood him in good stead in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon setting of the Hudson's Bay Company and Fort Victoria.⁵

Scientists, naturalists and travellers from German-speaking countries have always been drawn to the province—even before it was incorporated as such in 1858. One of the first, who no doubt had considerable influence on the German image of the Northwest Coast, was Berthold Seemann, the German naturalist aboard H.M.S. *Herald* when she made her official survey of the North Pacific in 1846-1851. Seemann's two-volume report appeared in German very soon after its English original, and it must be assumed that Seemann himself wrote it, as he is known to have done translation from German into English.⁶

Even before Seemann, a report of a journey to the Northwest Coast had appeared in German, in Münster in 1828. In this popular account, Ignatz Hülswitt told of being captured by Indians at the very spot where Cook had landed, Nootka Sound, and having to witness the murder of his fellow crewmen and then serve the Indians for two years until his release. Unfortunately, the graphic details were all plagiarized from an authentic episode involving John Jewitt, an American blacksmith, some years earlier.⁷

Although Hülswitt may never have been in British Columbia, many more authentic travel and scientific reports were to follow, from the first, published in Graz, in 1875,⁸ to the more recent novels and documentary accounts of A. E. Johann (Alfred Wollschläger).⁹ There have been Swiss and German alpinists' reports in the 1910s and of course the pioneering studies by Franz Boas and his forerunner, Aurel Krause, on the Indians of the Northwest Coast. From the Canadian side, there were "booster" pamphlets put out by the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Dominion government, praising British Columbia as "das Californien Canadas," with "ungeheuren Gold- und Kohlenadern," and fisheries which were "wohl die reichsten auf der Welt."¹⁰ Even the German mayor of Vancouver, David Oppenheimer, got into the act with two guides for "Capitalists and Intending Settlers."¹¹

The early image of British Columbia as a province was characterized by gold and business opportunities. In those two areas the Germans were prominent. Although accurate settlement and immigration statistics are not

available before 1881, it is possible to draw certain reasonably sure conclusions about assimilation and acculturation patterns at this time.¹²

Until the transcontinental railway reached Vancouver in May 1887, the vast majority of newcomers entered via the port of Victoria, on Vancouver Island, and were then ferried over to the mainland and the Fraser River. 23,000 men passed through Victoria in the first summer of 1858. The ethnic make-up of the first boatload, which arrived from California in late April 1858, is taken to be fairly typical. Of the 450 passengers, 60 were British, 60 American, 35 black refugees from increasing repression in California, and the 300 others were chiefly "Germans, Frenchmen and Italians," according to the official report of the Governor to the British Foreign Office.¹³ A report in February 1859 on the prospectors who wintered over on the Fraser records mainly English and Americans, with "very numerous" Frenchmen and Germans "in abundance."¹⁴ An Austrian scientist put the Germans in second place, after the Americans; and a visiting English noblewoman reported hearing "French, German and Spanish, to say nothing of unmitigated Yankee," on her crossing to the Fraser.¹⁵

The first wave of gold-seekers died down after two summers, as the Fraser River bars were panned out. A second wave was set off in 1861 when three Germans, led by "Dutch" Bill Dietz, made the first finds in the rich interior gold fields of the Cariboo District. However, Dietz and most of those who followed either did not, or could not go deep enough and made relatively little money. The age of the hardy individual was soon past and the large semi-mechanized, capital-intensive operators moved in. Many of the miners moved on or took up other means of living after 1863.

Some of the most colorful aspects of those heady days were inspired by Germans. To list just a few: there was Capt. Billy Moore, a Hanoverian, who engaged in price-wars and breakneck races to ferry the miners to the Fraser mouth; Frank Laumeister imported camels from California in an ill-fated effort to increase his profits on the pack-route to the Cariboo; dancing girls were imported from Berlin via San Francisco to act as "hurdy-gurdies" or bar hostesses in the rough taverns of the Cariboo; and one hardy German family, the Schuberts, broke the all-male rule of the Overlanders to reach British Columbia from Canada by the overland route in 1862.

By and large, the successful immigrants of the first thirty years were those who left the lure of the gold to become suppliers, ranchers and businessmen. Victoria became the supply center and hence the first stable white community in the province. Many of the leaders in the community, brewers, bakers, furniture manufacturers, iron founders, wholesale suppliers, cigar makers, etc. were German, and several of those were Jews. The Jews established the first non-Indian burial ground and the first permanent place of worship in the province and were renowned for their philanthropy towards the transient gold-seekers. When their new synagogue opened in 1863, it was celebrated by the Germania Sing-Verein, the first cultural group to form in the province. Another sign of the German presence in the city was the fact that both the boys and the girls collegiate schools taught German (as well as Latin, Greek, French and Spanish).¹⁶

By 1881, when census figures first took note of ethnic background in British Columbia, a pattern of immigration had begun to emerge quite

clearly. In Victoria, for example, still the major settlement in the province, there were over 5,000 of British origin, almost 700 Chinese and 250 local Indians. Of the remaining 1,050, more than one third (334) were German—far more than any other ethnic group. In the last census, in 1971, the Germans emerged as by far the largest ethnic group in British Columbia after the Anglo-Saxons, with 198,300, out of a total population of just over two million.

The largest percentage expansion of the population of British Columbia took place at the end of the last century and in the years before the First World War. In that period, the exploitation of the provincial resources began in earnest. Large amounts of capital and expertise began to flow into the economy from abroad, and Vancouver now outstripped Victoria as the commercial and financial capital. Germans played a prominent role in this development.¹⁷

The best known of the German investors of this era, Alvo von Alvensleben, illustrates both the entrepreneurial verve of the Germans and their acceptance among the predominantly Anglo-Saxon populace.¹⁸ Alvensleben had arrived in 1904 virtually penniless and worked in a variety of jobs—fishing, lumber, real estate and farming—before finding his métier as an investment broker in 1906. It has been estimated that he was responsible for attracting between five and seven million dollars in German investments into lumber, mining, fishing, and property before the boom began to slow down in 1912-13. Some of the most prominent families—including, it is said, the Kaiser's family—invested through Alvensleben. Socially too, he and his fellow Europeans introduced a greater degree of sophistication to local life, with receptions, hunting and fishing trips and outings to a fashionable resort villa owned by Alvensleben. This was also the era when gentlemen's business clubs were founded, and it is quite clear that here too, the Germans were accepted.

But as the euphoria waned in the years before 1914, many of the dealers left, either for Germany or the United States. Alvensleben himself stayed until the declaration of war made it impossible for him to continue profitably. He moved to Seattle, was eventually interned and, by the time he was released, had been bilked of most of his assets. Although he tried to set up in business as before, the times had altered and he never again equalled the heyday of 1906-1913.

The First World War produced one particular incident which has marred the otherwise mostly unprejudiced history of the Germans in British Columbia. It took place in May 1915 in Victoria, following the sinking of the *Lusitania* in the Atlantic.¹⁹ A riot, fanned by sailors and troops, broke out at a hotel which had once been owned by a German, the "Kaiserhof." Stores were smashed and looted, threats were made to march on the Governor-General's house, because his wife was "German" (though born in British Columbia) and considerable feeling was aroused against the local Germans—many of whom had been resident for decades. Oddly though, the synagogue, which was only seventy-five yards away from the "Kaiserhof," was untouched, and the mob moved off, after smashing the German businesses, to do the same to Chinatown. In other words, the riot appears

to have been an outlet for a general xenophobia as much as it was an expression of anti-German feeling.

Research to date has not uncovered any signs of overt suspicion of the Germans in British Columbia,²⁰ except for the "*Lusitania*-incident." German newspapers, such as the *Vancouver German Press*, German clubs and churches, as well as German immigration were banned by federal, not local, statute, of course. And no doubt there was a sense of vulnerability, if not fear, among the German population during the two wars. One symptom is the sudden drop between 1911 and 1921 in the number of those who acknowledge German origins (from 11,880 to 7,273). And in the Second World War, a group of German miners and workers was moved out of the area of Trail, presumably because of the strategic importance of the huge smelter there. Otherwise, the German population of British Columbia appears to have achieved model acceptance in all regions of the province.

German settlement patterns in British Columbia have been dominated by historical factors and government policy. In the early, founding years Germans settled mainly in the cities but also founded some of the earliest cattle ranches and orchards in the interior of the province. With the arrival of the railway in 1887 and increasing encouragement from the various bodies charged with immigrant affairs, urban centers tended to grow rapidly. There are no signs, however, of ethnic ghettos developing, except for Chinatowns in the major centers and one fishing village populated by Japanese. Unlike the prairie settlers, the Germans who settled in British Columbia did not found cohesive communities for the most part.

There have been four exceptions—settlements where there has been a predominantly German community. The first, established in 1910-11, was the town of Edelweiss. This was created by the Canadian Pacific Railway on the western slopes of the Rockies to house the Swiss mountaineers and guides whom it had been hiring for a decade to attract tourists and potential settlers to the British Columbian Rockies.²¹ The settlement outlived its usefulness quite soon, however, and the mountaineers moved off.

A more traditional settlement pattern in the Canadian West has been the religious community of the Hutterites, Mennonites, Russian-German Catholics and others. In 1925 groups of Prairie Mennonites moved into two areas of British Columbia, one around Chilliwack in the rich valley of the Fraser River and the other around Vanderhoof in the north of the province. This latter community has since dissolved, but another has grown up, also on rich farmland, near Courtenay on Vancouver Island. In these two remaining communities German is still used—especially in the larger, Fraser Valley settlement, where there are very well-attended German community schools and cultural activities.²²

The fourth identifiable community which still exists is in Northern British Columbia at Pouce Coupe. Here, in 1939 and 1940 the Canadian government settled 518 Social Democratic refugees from the Sudetenland. With almost total disregard for their urban origins, their skills, education and political opposition to Nazism, the Canadian authorities chose to send them to an inhospitable corner of British Columbia, where farming was little more than a marginal possibility. However, within three years 107 lots had been cleared and in five years the project showed signs of being self-

sustaining. Some fifty of the original settlers, or their offspring, still live there by choice.²³

While immigrants were able to enter Canada from Germany after 1925 and until 1931, they were obliged to commit themselves to agricultural or rural work. In British Columbia, many of the immigrants entered the lumber industry or farming, and eventually some became independent businessmen or farmers and orchardists. After World War II, immigration policy changed in favor of skilled and semi-skilled workers or professionals, with the result that many of the new immigrants went to Vancouver and Victoria. Approximately half (49.9%, or 99,000) of all Germans in the province live in these two centers.

With the conspicuous exception of the bureaucracy and the provincial level of politics, the Germans have been, and still are, well represented among the ranks of major institutions—especially in lumber and real estate. They have an average to slightly high rate among ethnic groups of language retention (14% of all ethnic Germans in the province spoke German for preference in the home in 1971). Culturally, the Germans enjoy ten to fifteen hours/week of German language programs on radio and television in Vancouver. There are two weekly German language newspapers, the national *Kanada-Kurier*, which contains four or five pages of local news, and the *Pazifische Rundschau*, which has evolved from an advertising flyer with editorials into a full-fledged newspaper. Several churches in Vancouver, Victoria and the Mennonite communities conduct German-language services and there are active social and cultural clubs in most urban centers, ranging from the Alpen Club in Vancouver, with three thousand members, to the more modest circles of the nonsectarian groups in rural districts. German is taught as part of the British Columbia school curriculum in most urban areas and there are strong community German schools in the major population centers. Six of the ten community colleges offer German and the three universities each have a full undergraduate German program and the largest, the University of British Columbia, has an active graduate program to the Ph.D. level.

As the second largest ethnic group in British Columbia (8-9% of total population), the Germans have played an active but low-profile role in the evolution of the province. Typically, they have been staunch individualists rather than groups or communities. They did not normally come to British Columbia because of oppression or deprivation elsewhere and so made little attempt to resist the normal processes of acculturation or assimilation. They have tended to immigrate in search of improved economic conditions. As the population ages (almost two-thirds of those who are presently resident in British Columbia arrived in the 1950s), it is possible that interest in the language may wane and the process of assimilation will accelerate. But at this juncture, the German "profile" in British Columbia remains as it has always been—prominent but not dominant, active, productive and ubiquitous.

University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia

Notes

1. H. Zimmermann, *Reise um die Welt mit Capitain Cook* (Mannheim, 1781; rpt. Bibliotheca Australiana No. 73, Amsterdam: N. Israel; New York: Da Capo Press, 1973). Zimmermann was to have an important and courageous role in the events preceding Cook's murder on the Sandwich Islands later in the voyage. He and his crewmate, Barthold Lohmann, may also have been the "Germans" who later prevented a serious outbreak of scurvy, by introducing sauerkraut to the daily diet.

2. Zimmermann, p. 59.

3. The lack of a strong German desire to preserve their native culture in British Columbia was much regretted by Heinz Lehmann, who wrote the only German language survey of the Germans in the province to date—a six-page sketch in his book *Das Deutschtum in Westkanada* (Berlin, 1939).

4. The only other author to have attempted an assessment of the German presence in British Columbia, apart from Lehmann (above), is Bruce Ramsey, in his book *A History of the Germans in British Columbia* (Winnipeg, 1958) and in his chapters on the Germans, Austrians and Swiss in: *Strangers Entertained*, ed. John Norris (Vancouver, 1971), pp. 98-110.

5. Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed., *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken*, Introd. by W. Kaye Lamb (Vancouver, British Columbia: University of British Columbia Press, 1975).

6. B. Seemann, *Reise um die Welt und drei Fahrten der königlichen Britischen Fregatte Herald nach dem nördlichen Polarmeer zur Aufsuchung Sir John Franklin's [sic] in den Jahren 1845-51*, 2 Bde. (Hannover: Carl Rümpler, 1853). Seemann also introduced, annotated and translated into English: F. H. von Kittlitz, *Twenty-Four views of the vegetation of the Coasts and Islands of the Pacific with explanatory descriptions taken during the exploring voyage of the Russian Corvette Senjavin under the command of Capt. Lütke in the years 1827, 1828, 1829* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1861). This book contains two sketches of Sitka, none of the Canadian west coast, but Seemann makes reference to the flora there in his introduction (vi).

7. I. Hülswitt, *Tagebuch einer Reise durch die Vereinigten Staaten und der Nordwestküste von Amerika* (Münster: Verlag der Coppentrathschen Buch- und Kunsthandlung, 1828).

8. Dr. Carl Friesach, "Ein Ausflug nach Britisch-Columbien im Jahre 1858," orig. in *Mitteilungen der Philosophischen Gesellschaft*, Gratz [sic], 1875, transl. in R. L. Reid, "Two narratives of the Fraser River Gold Rush," *B.C. Historical Quarterly*, 5 (1941), 221-228.

9. A. E. Johann [i.e. Alfred Wollschläger], *Ein Traumland-British Columbia: Reisen im kanadischen Westen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1971). Johann has written many other semi-documentary and travelogue books on the Canadian West, including British Columbia.

10. Ministerium für Landwirtschaft der canadischen Regierung, *Auskunft über den Staat Canada für deutsche Ansiedler* (Ottawa, 1882).

11. David Oppenheimer, *The mineral resources of British Columbia. Practical hints for capitalists and intending settlers, with appendix containing the mineral laws of the Province and the Dominion of Canada* (Vancouver, 1889).

12. Presumably there was not enough time to organize a detailed census of British Columbia after her recent entry into union with Canada, although "ethnic background" questions were asked in other provinces in 1871. Other sources of information are gazetteers, voters' lists and vital statistics (after 1871 only).

13. Sir James Douglas, quoted in: Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964), p. 130.

14. Col. Moody to A. Blackwood, Feb. 1, 1859, in: W. E. Ireland, "First Impressions," *B.C. Historical Quarterly*, 15 (1951), 97.

15. Friesach, p. 227. See note 8 above. Dorothy Blakey Smith, ed., *Lady Franklin visits the Pacific Northwest*, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Memoir No. 11 (Victoria, British Columbia, 1976), p. 38.

16. *Lady Franklin*, p. 16.

17. A measure of Vancouver's rapidly increasing importance is its population increase in the decade 1901-1911, as compared to Victoria,

	<u>1901</u>	<u>1911</u>
Vancouver	29,000	124,000
Victoria	21,000	31,600

18. Ingrid Laue, "Alvo von Alvensleben (1879-1965)," *Deutsch-Kanadisches Jahrbuch*, 5 (1979), 154-173.
19. "War and Patriotism: The *Lusitania* Riot," *B.C. Historical News*, 5, No. 1 (1971), 15-23.
20. See for example, James R. Friderer, "Discrimination in Western Canada," *Race*, London, No. 2 (1973), 213-222.
21. C. Lintern Sibley, "Making the Rockies Residential," *The Canadian Magazine of Politics, Science, Art and Literature*, 37 (1911), 467-472.
22. John Jacob Krahn, "A History of the Mennonites in British Columbia," MA Thesis University of British Columbia, Vancouver 1955.
23. A. Amstatter, *Tomslake, History of the Sudeten Germans in Canada* (Saanichton, British Columbia: Hancock House Publishers, 1978). F. Wieden, *The Sudeten Canadians* (Toronto: Sudeten Club, 1979).