

Deadly Neighbours

A TALE OF COLONIALISM, CATTLE FEUDS,
MURDER AND VIGILANTES IN THE FAR WEST

Chad Reimer

CAITLIN PRESS

Contents

Foreword	7
Introduction	11
<i>Chapter 1: Cattle Barons and Upstarts</i>	17
<i>Chapter 2: Missing—Presumed Dead</i>	34
<i>Chapter 3: Perverting Justice</i>	54
<i>Chapter 4: A Hard Crowd</i>	80
<i>Chapter 5: Who Killed James Bell?</i>	101
<i>Chapter 6: The Lynching of Louie Sam</i>	123
<i>Chapter 7: Vigilantes and Conspirators</i>	144
<i>Chapter 8: The Torture of Jimmy Poole</i>	168
<i>Chapter 9: A Fight for Justice</i>	181
<i>Chapter 10: Separate Fates</i>	198
Epilogue	207
Endnotes	213
Bibliography	228
About the Author	234

Introduction

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.

— Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)

On a cold night in February 1884, on Sumas Prairie in southwestern British Columbia, a fifteen-year-old Indigenous boy named Louie Sam was lynched by a mob of mounted vigilantes. The vigilantes had ridden up from the Nooksack Valley in Washington Territory, hell-bent on avenging the killing of Nooksack merchant James Bell three days earlier. Pinning the murder on Sam, some seventy men rode north across the line to the house of Thomas York, where the boy was being held after his arrest by the local magistrate. The vigilantes grabbed Sam from the house, hurried back south and stopped short of the American border, where they hanged the Semá:th teenager from a tree limb along the side of the road.

Louie Sam's murder a century and a half ago stands as one of only two recorded lynchings in Canadian history.¹ This fact, and the American origin of the mob, have led historians and writers to represent it as an isolated and foreign incident—disconnected from people and events north of the border and an aberration from the norm of British Columbian and Canadian history. Frederic Howay, a district court judge and the province's pre-eminent historian during the first half of the twentieth century, produced the first historical account of the lynching. In a narrative history of the province, which ran some seven hundred pages, Howay devoted a brief paragraph to the lynching, giving the bare facts as he knew

and saw them. He then dismissed the matter with an air of sanctimony, writing “It will be observed that all the factors, except the site of the deed, belonged to our neighbours to the southward.” Howay’s cavalier opinion that this brutal murder had nothing to do with Canadian authorities—and that it had no legitimate place in BC history—was astonishing for a man who spent decades on the bench, sworn to uphold the rule of law and due process. The judge knew full well that the location of a crime was the first consideration in jurisprudence, because it determined whose laws have been broken and who was responsible for finding and prosecuting those who had broken them.²

Numerous pieces on the lynching have been published in the century since Howay’s treatment. These have provided greater detail on the events, some faithfully hewing to Howay’s depiction, others differing on certain points. The main point of difference has been whether Louie Sam killed James Bell or not, with earlier writers largely insisting he did and later writers equally insistent that he was innocent. Yet the basic narrative remained largely intact: the primary blame for the lynchings rested on the American vigilantes and their supporters. Canadians caught up in the events, from the local magistrate and special constables who had taken Louie Sam into custody up to provincial authorities, had done their duty but had been powerless in the face of the vigilante mob. As one of the most recent writers asks, “What else could they have done?” For their part, the BC and Canadian governments have maintained the same position up to the present, shrugging off any responsibility in the affair.³

Here, in this book, we take a closer look at the lynching of Louie Sam, and in doing so reveal a more complex and disturbing picture. When placed within the historical context of that time and place, the vigilante murder of Sam no longer appears as an isolated and foreign incident. Rather, the lynching emerges as the result of a series of events and causes on both sides of the border, with

the active participation of local people in both BC and Washington Territory.

This series of events unfolded in half a dozen episodes. First, on Sumas Prairie, the birth and growth of a cattle economy and cattle barons such as Thomas York led to conflict over grazing land and a string of alleged cattle thefts and criminal trials throughout the 1870s. Second, a man who was no stranger to the cattle feuds, Sumas stockman Henry Melville, mysteriously disappeared in spring 1882. Melville's White neighbours became convinced that he had been killed by Squosaleny Sam, Louie Sam's father. Third, in November 1882, Squosaleny Sam and two other Semá:th men were convicted on charges of killing a steer belonging to Thomas York, and Sam died in prison while serving a draconian sentence. Fourth, south of the border in February 1884, Nooksack merchant James Bell was shot to death and his cabin set alight, with locals fingering Squosaleny Sam's son Louie for the crime. Fifth, after his arrest a few days later on Sumas Prairie, Louie Sam was abducted and lynched by a vigilante mob riding up from Nooksack Valley, a coordinated raid in which Sam's Canadian jailors were complicit. And sixth, emboldened by their impunity in the Sam lynching, in October 1885 a Nooksack Valley vigilante mob abducted and tortured a Semá:th man named Jimmy Poole, trying to force him to confess to a horse theft.

These episodes were themselves part of an even larger process. As White newcomers moved into the Nooksack Valley and Sumas Prairie, they dispossessed the Indigenous residents and claimed the land as their new home. The wave of dispossession was neither neat nor pretty and involved various forms of coercion, even violence. As new White communities were planted and grew, leading settlers worked to entrench their dominant place in them, sometimes resorting to force and violence to do so. This violence—up to and including lethal force, inside the law and out—was most often aimed at the newcomers' Indigenous neighbours, who were

seen as defiant or even violent themselves. But fellow Whites who either posed a challenge to those with influence or who lived on the margins of their communities were also targets.

Recent academic writing has used the term “settler colonialism” to describe this larger process, one in which immigrants from Western countries moved to new lands and stayed. The Indigenous peoples of these lands were dispossessed and marginalized in the new societies and polities the White settlers established. Within the British Empire, colonies developed into White-ruled nations, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These young nations then carried on the task of colonizing the new lands.

This book examines what this process of settler colonialism looked like on the ground in the Nooksack Valley and on Sumas Prairie, revealing that the force and violence of that colonialism was both evident and ugly.⁴ In so doing, the book provides a fuller, more interesting and more critical portrayal than the histories and memoirs commonly written on North America in general, and specific regions in particular. Invariably, such writings have been constructed upon two powerful and abiding themes: the myth of the frontier, and the privileged place of founding pioneers. In the frontier myth, the new lands of North America were deemed to be in a wild and savage state, sparsely populated by peoples who had done little to tame and “settle” the land. Into these wild lands came English-speaking White immigrants who pushed ever-westward, moving across the continent in an unstoppable line of settlement. The Indigenous peoples who were there were pushed aside, their dispossession justified by the newcomers’ claim that these peoples—who had lived off this land for thousands of years—were not making proper use of it.

National differences emerged as the frontier myth came down through the decades. Canadians were convinced that their frontier was peaceful and orderly, a place where Indigenous peoples were



A rare photograph of Sumas Prairie taken during winter sometime in the 1880s, looking west to the ridge that ends the plain. Image courtesy Daphne Sleight, ed., *One Foot on the Border*, 372

treated fairly. By contrast, the American frontier was viewed as violent and lawless, the first people seen as an obstacle that needed to be pushed aside, even eradicated, by any means necessary.⁵

The widely accepted pioneer history of Nooksack Valley, Sumas Prairie and other regions across North America emerged from the frontier myth. Pioneer men—and they were overwhelmingly men, although many were accompanied by their hardy, resourceful wives—were the ones who carried the frontier forward. It was they who tamed a daunting environment and the Indigenous peoples who inhabited it. These were the leading men in the mythic drama—rugged, self-made individualists and founding fathers—the embodiment of the virtues of the new towns and settlements they established. Of course, the heroic feats and personal traits attributed to the pioneers were unachievable by mere mortals. The early White settlers who appear in this book show that all too clearly. They were not evil monsters, although they took part in evil and monstrous deeds; they were ordinary men, with both strengths and weaknesses, and with both laudable and dark chapters in their

lives. They were, though, agents of a colonizing process that had coercion and violence built into it, and some of them proved to be deadly neighbours to the Indigenous people and marginalized Whites amidst whom they settled.