

# **The Eventful Life of Philip Hankin**

Worldwide Traveller and Witness to  
British Columbia's Early History

"I have had many ups and downs and have travelled several times around the world and held various positions in many parts of the globe, and although I have been somewhat of a rolling stone, yet, I have gathered some moss."

Philip Hankin, *Memoirs*

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Philip Hankin. Image C-07093 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives

## Preface

**P**hilip Hankin was penniless, starving and exhausted. He had tried his luck at prospecting for gold in the streams of the Cariboo region of British Columbia but had failed miserably. Only a few months before, he had been a lieutenant in the British Royal Navy. Now here he was, in the summer of 1864, at rock bottom. Yet within five years he would be the colonial secretary for the Colony of British Columbia and, for a few months in the summer of 1869, the administrator of its entire government. How could this meteoric change in his circumstances have happened?

His odyssey began in England in 1836. In 1849, when he was thirteen years old, his father sent him into the Royal Navy.<sup>1</sup> He first came to the Colony of Vancouver Island in 1857 on HMS *Plumper*, which had been sent to survey the coast. In 1864, after twists and turns, driven time and again off course, he went to the Cariboo to look for gold in Barkerville but returned penniless. Later that year, he was appointed superintendent of police for the Colony of Vancouver Island. Two years later, the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia merged and he was out of a job. In late 1868, he was appointed colonial secretary of the Colony of British Columbia. In the interregnum between the sudden death of Governor Frederick Seymour in June 1869 and the arrival of Seymour's replacement, Anthony Musgrave, in late August, Hankin was the administrator of the government of the colony. After British Columbia joined

the Dominion of Canada in 1871, once again he was out of a job.<sup>2</sup> He then retired with a government pension.

In 1914, when he was seventy-nine, Hankin started to write his memoirs. He professes not to have kept a diary or journal and to have written it entirely from memory. On occasion his memory did let him down but nevertheless the memoirs are a lively account of the early days of British Columbia's history. He gave the memoirs to his friend E.L. Brittain of Ottawa. As a result of the efforts of Major General G.R. Pearkes, member of Parliament for Nanaimo, the original manuscript was given for safe-keeping to Willard Ireland, provincial archivist in British Columbia. A shortened transcription from the original was serialized in the *Victoria Daily Colonist* every Sunday from June to October 1954.

Hankin's interest in writing his memoirs seems to have waned after he wrote of his time in British Columbia. He compresses the following fifty years of his life into one chapter. For a biographer, this is frustrating. It is also frustrating that he tells us so little about his family. Three of his brothers were also in the colony in the early 1860s, two of whom being original partners of Billy Barker of Barkerville. When Hankin was living in India, two of his other brothers and numerous cousins were also there. Moreover, he mentions his beloved wife only when writing of his loneliness after she died. Perhaps he was merely being reticent about family matters. He died in 1923, having drawn a pension for over fifty years.

I have referred to him as Hankin throughout this book except when writing of him as a child or in family situations where there might be a possibility of confusion with his siblings. Any unattributed quotations in this book are from his memoirs.

People wrote, and presumably spoke, about Indigenous people in colonial times in terms that today we rightly consider offensive and unacceptable. Their use in this book is confined to quotations. Not to record them as written would be dishonest to the story.

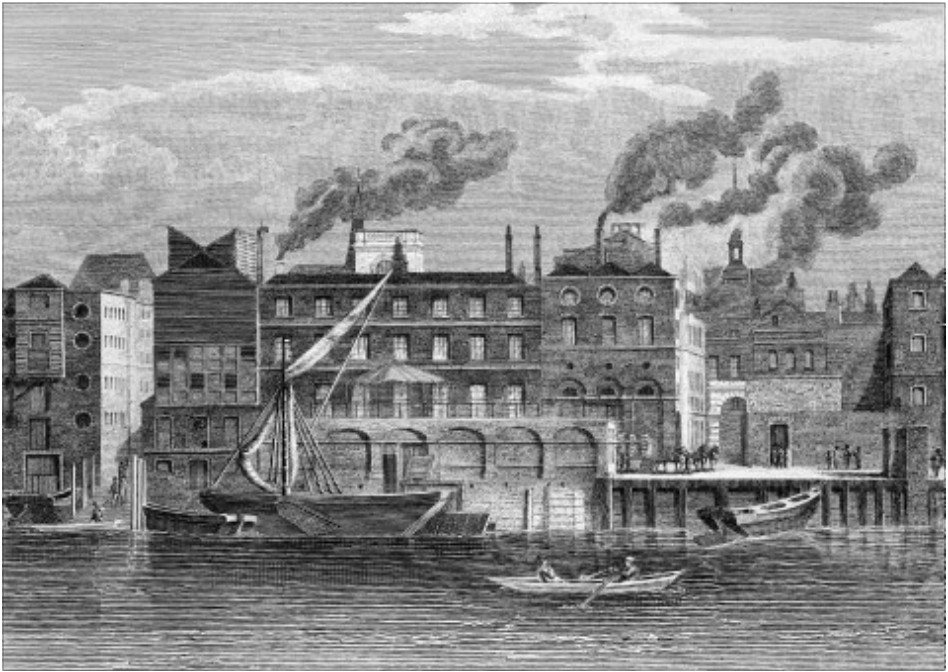
Hankin wrote in his memoirs that he had been a rolling stone all his life yet had gathered some moss. In this book I have attempted to find the moss and tell his remarkable story.

## **To Vancouver Island on HMS *Plumper***

1852–1857

Philip's father, Daniel, would not, of course, hear of his remaining at home doing nothing. Like it or not, Philip now had to find a job for eight months. By the end of this time, Daniel would have sold the estate and wound up the family's affairs. Then they would all emigrate to New Zealand to start a new life. Daniel spoke with his good friend and neighbour Nicolson Calvert. And yes, Mr. Calvert would be happy to offer Philip a job as a clerk in his brewery.

Calvert's Brewery, which the Calvert family had acquired in 1730, was based in London, at 89 Upper Thames Street. Reportedly founded before the reign of the Tudors, this brewery was one of the largest and most successful in the city. It was not a tumbledown, rat-infested tenement on the banks of the Thames like the one where both Charles Dickens and the fictional David Copperfield were thrown away as children to work. Rather, it sprawled over three acres of land on the riverbank between London Bridge and Blackfriars Bridge. Here were massive buildings, some ancient, some new. Lighters brought malt down from Ware in Hertfordshire. Huge winches raised malt up from these barges and lowered barrels of beer down into them. Almost a quarter of a mile of Archimedean screws moved the grain around. The grounds were a jumble of warehouses, vats, conveyors, machine shops, cooperages and stables for up to fifty horses and wagons. Above the counting house, where it is likely Hankin worked, were the elegant wood-panelled boardrooms and offices. There were three



View of the brewery and dwelling house belonging to Messrs. Calvert and Company, about 1820. Philip Hankin worked here for a time as a clerk. Source: Alfred Barnard, *The Noted Breweries of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 2 (London: Sir Joseph Causton and Sons, 1889). Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo G36M5A

wells on the premises, one going down as deep as 438 feet to reach the clear, pure water the brewery needed. The enterprise employed over three hundred people and every year produced over two hundred thousand barrels of beer, stout and porter.<sup>46</sup>

Using the third-class season ticket on the railway that his father had purchased for him, Hankin went down to London. He found his way to the brewery and gave the manager a letter from Mr. Calvert saying he had been appointed as a junior clerk in the office at a salary of sixty pounds a year. He thought this was a very handsome salary and noted it was more than his pay as a junior officer in the Royal Navy.

Philip's duties at the brewery were not onerous. He had to be at the office every morning at eight-thirty, light the gas and sweep out one small room. Then he had to run messages, take orders for beer and make

himself generally useful. Every second week he had to work late. This meant staying until nine in the evening and booking any orders for beer that came in, but as the housekeeper always brought him a tray with tea, bread, butter and marmalade, he did not mind this in the least. He compared her tea favourably with the navy tea, where he got only tea, coarse brown sugar, no milk, and biscuits full of weevils. For an officer of the Royal Navy with experience commanding seamen much older than himself and with the huge responsibilities of even a midshipman in a warship, being a junior clerk in a brewery might be thought to be a lowly position. But Philip didn't seem to mind, and he did enjoy being his own master.

He was satisfied with his new position but more so with his freedom in London. At home, he was at the beck and call of his father and, with a sick mother, would have had to take his part in raising his numerous younger siblings. He recalled in his memoirs that when he returned from London in the evening, his aunt Ria would sometimes accuse him of smoking. She would say in a pious voice, "Philip, you've been smoking!" He always had to tell her he had been in a smoking compartment on the train, and that was why his clothes stank of cigarette smoke. For a young man who had seen active and dangerous service on the rivers and ships of the Indian Ocean and had helped rescue the desperate men, women and children of the *Birkenhead*, such a life would have seemed trivial and constricting.

After Hankin had been living at home for five months and going to London to work at the brewery every morning, the doctor pronounced his mother's health was worse and that it was now unthinkable for her to travel to New Zealand. Daniel consequently had to abandon his plan of emigrating.

What should Philip do now? There must have been anxious family councils. It was soon decided—and it is hard not to believe that the imperious Daniel laid down the law—that Philip should return to the navy. Through the influence of yet another of friend of Daniel at the Admiralty, Hankin was offered an appointment as a midshipman on board either HMS *Agamemnon* or HMS *Sidon*. His choice. Both ships were at Spithead.<sup>47</sup> He chose the *Sidon*, a paddlewheel steam frigate of twenty-two guns. Commissioned to her in December 1852, he was ordered to go

aboard at once.<sup>48</sup> Announcing his appointment, the *Morning Post* called him Hawkins. Such mistakes were common when clerks had to transcribe names from handwritten lists. Soon, Hankin wrote, he fell back into the old routines of the navy and ceased to remember that he had ever been a brewer's clerk.

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Hankin was now seventeen and an experienced young officer. There were even several cadets junior to him on the *Sidon*, three of whom later became admirals. He had the good fortune to be midshipman of the watch under a man called Frank Thomson, who was a sub-lieutenant on board, or mate, as it was then called. They became good friends. Hankin used to go with Thomson to visit his mother at her home in Southsea. She was, Hankin recalled, a "dear old lady" who always gave him a warm welcome and "wore black, with a large white cap, with strings hanging down the back." She used to play the flute while her son accompanied her on the piano. Thomson became commander of Queen Victoria's yacht, later captain of the *Challenger* and later still captain of the Queen's yacht *Victoria and Albert*. Hankin and Thomson used to go to dances in Winchester together. At that time they also used to go to the many dances being given in the then-fashionable town of Ryde. Hankin loved dancing and was good at it. Even when he was seventy-nine, he admitted he was never able to resist the "Blue Danube" waltz.

In February 1853, after he had been on the *Sidon* for a few months, his mother's health deteriorated.<sup>49</sup> He wrote, "My dear mother became much worse, and came with my sister to Ryde for change of air, but she was not comfortable in lodgings and found herself getting rapidly worse instead of better. So she returned home and three weeks afterwards she died." Although Philip was still on the *Sidon* at Spithead, and could easily have obtained leave, his father would not allow him to come home to see his mother before she died. He would, his father said, "only be in the way and could do no earthly good." Fifty years later, Hankin still felt the hurt. "She was a good Christian woman," Hankin wrote, "and for 25 years had been a most devoted wife and mother. And she had not the slightest fear



of death, for when the summons came she was ready, and prepared." She was forty-nine years old.

The *Sidon* was an old ship and spent much of its time puttering around Portsmouth. Being on board wasn't very exciting and Hankin soon grew restless. When Captain George Goldsmith eased the ship out to journey to Spithead, only a few miles away, some machinery broke and the ship had to go to dry dock for lengthy repairs.<sup>50</sup> It was that kind of ship. Hankin wrote:

I had now been ten months at Spithead, and was getting rather tired of it, and longing for a change. So I wrote to the Admiralty, making application for a sea-going ship and in a very short time I was appointed to the *Plumper*, a small screw steamer, barque rigged, and carrying 6 32-pounder muzzle-loading guns. She had an auxiliary screw and under favorable circumstances could steam six knots. We fitted out at Portsmouth, it was therefore very easy for me to join her. I was very sorry to leave the *Sidon*, and all my messmates. Less than a year after this, the Crimean War broke out and the *Sidon* went to the war, and when before Sevastopol, a shell burst on board and killed and wounded 22 men at the foremost Main deck quarters, where I should have been stationed—if I had been in the ship—so perhaps after all it was fortunate for me that I was not on board.

Hankin was appointed to HMS *Plumper* on August 1, 1853.<sup>51</sup> The *Morning Post* now called him P.J. Hankeir. Very soon after Hankin went on board, his new captain, John Wharton, was married. His bride, Matilda Gomm, was conveniently the niece of the commander-in-chief of the East Indies Squadron.<sup>52</sup> This occasion, happy for the bridal couple, was to have less than happy consequences for Hankin a year or so later. Far too soon for his marital bliss, Wharton had to leave his bride and take his ship to sea.

The *Plumper* steamed out of Portsmouth Harbour in mid-September 1853.<sup>53</sup> As soon as they were clear in the channel, they lifted the propeller, raised the sails and set course for Sierra Leone, where they arrived after

about twenty days. This would be their base while on the West Africa Station. "The capital, Freetown," Jan Morris wrote, "became the principal base of the Royal Navy on the West African coast."<sup>54</sup> Sierra Leone, Hankin said, was a lovely spot with beautiful tropical vegetation. He always had the happy disposition to look on the bright side. Others with less hardy health called it the White Man's Grave. Statistically, they were right.

Under Captain Wharton, the *Plumper* was a happy ship. Both the captain and the first lieutenant, Mr. Didham, were kind and pleasant to Hankin. The second lieutenant, Edward Shaw, taught him seamanship—for free, unlike Rev. Jones on the *Castor*—and how to moor and unmoor a large ship, shift topsails and such nautical accomplishments. The first part of his tour of duty went well and he enjoyed the ship and his colleagues.

The *Plumper* cruised along the coast of West Africa for eighteen months, visiting Liberia, Accra, Cape Coast Castle and Lagos, and then went on to Ascension. Always they were striving to disrupt the slave trade and liberate slaves.

Cape Coast Castle was one of the many forts on the Gold Coast, in what is now Ghana. For the 170 years before the British first established a colony there in 1821, it had been a major slave trade centre. Here as many as a thousand slaves at a time were collected and held in underground dungeons while awaiting passage to the auction blocks in South and North America. One of the most active land-based anti-slavers on the coast was Sir William Winniett, governor of the reconstituted Gold Coast colony.<sup>55</sup> He came from Nova Scotia and at the time was one of the most senior "colonials" in a position of responsibility. He bought slave trading castles along the coast to damage the trade and he negotiated numerous anti-slavery treaties with local potentates. He had died in Cape Coast Castle in 1850, not long before Hankin arrived on the coast. The vigorous governor of Sierra Leone at the time Hankin was on the coast was an affable Irishman named Arthur Kennedy. It is unlikely that such a junior officer as Hankin would have had occasion to meet him. A decade later, though, Kennedy played a pivotal part in Hankin's life story.

The pleasantness on board the *Plumper* could not continue. Captain Wharton, longing to return to his new wife, requested to be relieved of his

command. The Admiralty gave its consent. On April 7, 1855, it appointed Captain William Haswell to take over command of the *Plumper* while the ship was at Ascension Island.<sup>56</sup> Hankin wrote:

The change was not for the better, for Haswell was a tartar, who used to shake his fist within an inch of your nose and tell you he would make you jump before he had done with you. I think everyone on board hated him, and it was quite impossible to please him. I remember he used to wear white spring side boots with patent leather tips to them, and he would go up the rigging into the fore and main tops to see if he could find anything out of order, and he would rub his hand underneath the gun slide, to see if he could find any dust there. He certainly was a martinet, but the ship was as smart as paint and polish could make her. I was now a sub-lieutenant, or a mate, as they used to be called, and had charge of a watch. ...

As soon as Captain Haswell had taken over command from Captain Wharton, we made sail for Lagos, and were soon cruising about again at various places on the West Coast of Africa, hunting for slavers. We were in 3 watches—4 to 6, and middle 6 to 8, and morning afternoon, and first, and often being on duty from noon to 4 o'clock, we would have sail drill—shifting topsails, top yards until 7:30 p.m. Then I had the first watch to keep, from 8 p.m. until midnight.

How I hated it all. The hot climate, and many men ill with fever, the terrible monotony of the life, and the constant bullying of the Captain nearly drove me wild. As I had now been some time on the coast, I wrote home to my father's friend, Mr. Clifton, at the Admiralty, to ask him to try to get me appointed to some ship in the Crimea, for the war with Russia was now in full swing and at length a letter came from the Admiralty to say that I was to go back to England, if I could be spared. So Haswell sent for me into his cabin. He told me that he had by that mail received a letter from the Admiralty to say that I was to be sent home immediately, if I could be spared and then I should be appointed to some ship

in the Crimea. Then the Bully went on to say, "So you thought you would get out of the ship, did you? Would you like very much to go, Mr. Hankin?" "Yes, sir," I replied. "Very much indeed." I was asked again—"Yes sir, very much indeed," I again answered. "Well, sir," he said, as he shook his fist in my face—"You won't go, sir. I'll see you damned first. Now go back to your duty."

So there was an end for ever of all my hope of my being able to leave the *Plumper*. Some months afterwards, a brig called the *Sappho* commanded by Captain Moresby arrived at Lagos, and from there [was] ordered to Australia. I tried to join this vessel, and persuaded Captain Moresby to try to get leave from Haswell to let me go. If he had known of the fate of the *Sappho*, I am sure he would have been only too pleased to have let me join her, for she sailed to Australia and was never heard of again!

While the *Plumper* was anchored off Sharks' Point at the mouth of the Congo River, Haswell ordered Hankin to take a small boat on an expedition upriver. He set off in the whaleboat with a month's provisions and five Krumen to go some two hundred miles up the river to see if any suspicious-looking vessels were anchored off a place Hankin called Punta da Legna.<sup>57</sup> This was a trip he enjoyed, and it was a great escape from the bullying captain. He recalled he shot plenty of parrots, some monkeys and curious birds, "many of which proved excellent eating."

No other white men were sent with him, he wrote, for they caught fever so easily and many on board were already ill. He, however, kept his good health and "it was as good as a picnic. I used to sleep every night in the stern sheets of the Whale boat, with the awning spread and serve out Quinine Wine every morning at 7 o'clock as a preventive against fever. At the expiration of the month, I returned to the Ship, and Haswell seemed much disappointed when, after 14 days, the Doctor reported I was quite well."

The *Plumper* was stationed for a while at the mouth of the Congo and also at Saint Paul de Louanda. Now spelled Luanda and the capital of Angola, Louanda, at the time of Hankin's visit, was one of the largest cities in the Portuguese Empire. Technically, the slave trade was illegal

there but the laws were not enforced with any noticeable diligence or enthusiasm.

Hankin wrote that here he met the explorer David Livingstone, who was about to start on his journey across Africa to Quelimane on the Indian Ocean. This journey, which was to make Livingstone world famous, was allegedly the first made by a white man across Africa. During this journey he reached, and named, Victoria Falls and tracked the Zambezi River for most of its course.

Livingstone invited Hankin to go with him. He jumped at the opportunity and was anxious to accept. He begged Haswell for permission but Haswell would not let him go. So he had to abandon his hopes for this journey, which he had found so alluring. A biographer of Livingstone wrote, "While Livingstone was at Louanda, he made several acquaintances among the officers of Her Majesty's navy, engaged in the suppression of the slave trade. For many of these gentlemen, he was led to entertain a high regard. Their humanity charmed him, and so did their attention to their duties. In his early days, sharing the feeling then so prevalent in his class, he had been used to think of epauletted gentlemen as idlers, or worse. ... Personal acquaintance, as in so many other cases, rubbed off the prejudice."<sup>58</sup> Here perhaps we see Hankin's charm at work.

In November 1855, the *Plumper* finally had some success when it captured a slave ship off Cabinda, freeing ninety slaves, whom they sent to Saint Helena.<sup>59</sup> The *Plumper* went to Saint Helena for a fortnight. This, Hankin said, was a delightful change after the heat and discomfort of the African coast. While on the island, he visited Napoleon's tomb. (Napoleon's body was not taken to Paris for reinterment in Les Invalides until 1861.)

Hankin stayed at a farmhouse on the top of a hill, where it was delightfully cool. This farm was owned by a Mr. Evans, who kept two or three cows. He had a nice vegetable garden and made a living from that. Lena, one of Evans's two daughters, gave Hankin a present of two pounds of nicely packed butter, which she asked him to take back to the ship. Perhaps there had been a romantic dalliance, at least on his part. He thanked her and imagined it was a token of love and affection. He was undeceived when a boat came alongside the *Plumper* soon after he was

back on board with a highly scented note, which read, "Dear Mr. Hankin, I must write you a few lines before you leave to say how much I miss you, but I hope we shall meet again some day, and with Love and Kisses, I am always your loving Lena. P.S. Please don't forget to pay for the butter, 2 lbs [£] 4 shillings."

So much for romance, Hankin might have thought. "So I sent the money by the boatman," he wrote in his memoirs, "and I have never heard a word since from my loving Lena, and as that is now 59 years ago I don't suppose I ever shall."

The *Plumper* had been away from England for three years when, at last, orders arrived for it to return home. From Saint Helena they sailed to Ascension and from there, after having taken on board a supply of turtles, they sailed for England. They arrived at Portsmouth on November 30, 1856, after a twenty-one-day voyage.<sup>60</sup> "I shall never forget the bitter cold we experienced in a heavy gale off the Isle of Wight," Hankin wrote. "I had the middle watch to keep and only white trousers to wear and a Purser's Monkey jacket."

Safely anchored at Spithead, the *Plumper* was soon surrounded by boats, and the bumboat women, as they were called, climbed on board to sell their bread and butter, cold fried fish, smoked bloaters and other good things. "What a treat it all was," Hankin wrote, "after our miserable fare on the Coast of Africa, to taste good English bread and butter again." After the port admiral had inspected the ship, the crew, including Hankin, were paid off. The Admiralty sent the *Plumper* to the dockyards to be refitted for its next voyage with a chart room on its deck.

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Hankin now had his examinations for lieutenant to pass. The first one, in seamanship, he passed creditably, with a first-class certificate, but he had two more to face, which he dreaded. He studied and trained on board HMS *Excellent*, at anchor in Portsmouth. One examination was in navigation at the Royal Naval College in the dockyard at Portsmouth. He got through this without much difficulty, obtaining a second-class certificate. The other was in gunnery.