

Reading Fletcher's Commonplace Books: The Breadth of Cultural Influences in New Westminster, British Columbia, 1887-1897

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Before I begin my presentation today I must admit to having encountered every scholar's worst fear—after I had finished my paper and the presentation to accompany it, I discovered new materials that made me rethink the entire project. More exactly, in this case, it lent added importance to the *project* while making me rethink the critical *approach* I had taken to the materials in hand. In brief, I acquired two commonplace books from a relation. At the time, the author's full name and the nature of the texts were uncertain. The only reportage I had was that the two volumes came from the Fletcher side of the family, who are matrilineal relations of the Giffords. Moreover, both families were long-time residents of New Westminster and had been there since the incorporation of the city. Therefore, my *initial* interest had been to create an electronic archive of cultural artifacts that evidence the broad range of print materials available in New Westminster during the period surrounding confederation. I also felt that the nature of the contents indicate a certain social class, marked by Classical education and an interest in the arts. What those who gave me the volumes did not know was that the commonplace books belonged to the *father* of the Fletcher who had been in New Westminster since its incorporation. I have therefore revised my intention of using these materials to evidence the social milieu of the West Coast *prior* to 1887, when the author of these volumes retired from Toronto and Québec City to Victoria, then to New Westminster, in order to be closer to his family. Nonetheless, since the majority of the print resources post-date 1887, they still contribute to our understanding of the social networks and cultural milieu of late nineteenth century West Coast Canada

My presentation today discusses the contents of these two commonplace books belonging to Edward Taylor Fletcher. He was born in Canterbury in 1817, spent most of his life in Québec City and Toronto, and retired to the West Coast in 1887, where he died on February 1st, 1897, aged 80. Print materials in the two volumes range from 1854 to late December 1896, though exactly when dated materials were added to the volumes is uncertain, and it is an incomplete set with at least a third volumes extant, though not in my possession. Moreover, Fletcher himself mentions beginning the books with the missing volume, which he dates to December 9th, 1840, by which time he had been in Canada for thirteen years. I will also discuss my current electronic archiving work with the Streetprint Engine, with

which I am making these two texts available to other scholars online. With regard to the contents of the books, my purpose today is to argue for the complexity and breadth of a network of print distribution that functioned in Canada's West Coast region in the *late* nineteenth century (in other words, evidencing 1887-1897, not beginning in 1854, as my title suggests). I also want to emphasize the dense cultural associations that attend such print materials and how their collection implies a particular social class present in New Westminster, then a city of only 2000 inhabitants (Fleming 320) that had existed for scarcely thirty-one years. My third focus is to discuss the practice of electronic archiving of these texts and their parallel distribution via online networks in the twenty-first century.

As artifacts of everyday life in the West Coast of Canada, these two folio volumes demonstrate the breadth of cultural resources available to residents of New Westminster, as well as the background of the citizenry during key years of great change in the region. New Westminster, formerly the small town Queensborough, was the capital of the colony of British Columbia from the city's incorporation in 1859 and until the capital moved to Victoria in 1868, two years after Vancouver Island and British Columbia became a single colony, and three years before this unified colony became a province of Canada. New Westminster is the oldest incorporated city west of the Great Lakes in Canada, predating Victoria by three years, likely due to the gold rush of 1858. This is, however, in contrast to its current status as more or less a suburb of Greater Vancouver, and it has never been known for the same Victorian educated class that has been well-studied in Victoria.

Fletcher's two commonplace books illustrate the strength of the cultural ties that existed between major Canadian cities (for example Montréal, Toronto, Ottawa, Victoria, and New Westminster), as well to Britain, and to a lesser degree, the United States. He arrived on the West Coast in 1887, two years after the completion of the railway and the same year goods were shipped from Vancouver to New York in a week (I wish postage to the US went that fast now!). These links between metropolitan centres and small cities are evidenced by Fletcher's insertion and occasional scrap-booking of newspaper and periodical clippings dating to the years he resided in New Westminster, though there are also formal government documents and transcriptions of speeches, presumably from periodicals. While I would expect such materials would be ready to hand in Québec City and Toronto, Fletcher's previous residences, I should point out that the great majority of the clippings that come from periodicals (though *not* the transcriptions) date from *after* his move to the West Coast. This implies he had good access to a personal subscription to these

diverse materials once he was in the West, while he presumably relied on a library or another publicly owned copy during his time in Québec City and Toronto.

Fletcher's ownership of the volumes is demonstrated by his inclusion of a receipt for a money order, written in the same hand as the books, and dated to no later than September 11th, 1894. The texts' origins are further evidenced by the single personal reference, which names his deceased daughter. So, what characterizes these commonplaces books?

Being situated in a port city, it is not surprising that Edward Fletcher's transcribed materials are primarily in the shipping and seafaring languages of English, French, Dutch, German, Italian, and Portuguese. However, the presence of materials in Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit mark a particular form of Classical education that shows the cultural sophistication of the volume's author. This also points to his background and a particular class structure most likely carried over to New Westminster. Likewise, the contents of the transcriptions, which are primarily religious and poetic, point to this same rich cultural heritage being available for copying and scrap-booking in this city of scarcely 2000 people.

Further evidence for these associations appear in Fletcher's attempts to do idiomatic translations of phrases from these languages into others, none of which would be his native tongue, English. For example, the materials on screen now are translations of idiomatic enquiries in French into another idiomatic form in Italian. Most likely these serve an autodidactic function, like an exercise book, and since similar exercises do not appear in the Classical languages, these may represent a desire to be able to interact in the languages of commerce that would appear in a port city. Moreover, the translations from French to Italian seem to be in different hands, pointing to the volumes being used, in part, as exercise books, although this is not a prominent use and only appears a few times. However, it is also very possible, and in my opinion more likely, that Fletcher is writing both versions in an autodidactic exercise. Fletcher's autodidactic use of two different writing hands also increases in plausibility given the dominance of the French hand throughout both volumes, which would make the books the instructor's rather than the student's. This would seem to require an unduly complex explanation.

Moving ahead on these materials, I found that the death of Edward Taylor Fletcher of New Westminster is recorded in the Vital Events in British Columbia. This is the point at which tracing my author became interesting... Having firmly established the identity and date of death of the author, and having corroboration

within the volumes for this identity, I was able to discover that Edward Taylor Fletcher was the author of a book of poetry, *Nestorius: A Phantasy*.

As soon as I realized this, I turned to *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and discovered that my mysterious autodidact had moved to Canada at age eleven, was trained as an architect and was involved in the construction of many important buildings and homes in Québec City. He eventually became a land surveyor and established Canada's regulatory system for surveyors. More importantly, since my purpose is at least in part to comment on the cultural milieu of his final home—127 Third Avenue, New Westminster—I found he was a longstanding president of the Toronto Literary Association, he wrote under various pseudonyms for a number of periodicals, was a cellist, was known for his great facility with languages, and delivered several academic and religious lectures that were later published. Moreover, he was the author of three books of poetry and wrote his own memoirs. Unfortunately, the author of the entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* mentions having accessed Fletcher's memoirs, but then fails to give any bibliographic citation for them—he then promptly died, ending my paper trail so far. No materials are recorded in Library and Archives Canada either, although I have only had limited time to look for them... The poems he published are on Classical subjects, except for a 56 Stanza work on Nestorius, the patriarch of 428 A.D. There is also a 56 Stanza poem on Atlantis, which went through two editions in the space of six years, 1889 and 1895. How many contemporary Canadian poets can claim a reprint within six year? The lectures include one on Philology and one on Christian faith.

Furthermore, as I mentioned, newspaper articles and journal clippings are either glued in like a scrapbook or tucked between the pages of the two folio volumes, and these ephemeral items evidence the breadth of materials available to residents of New Westminster—these include literary and newsworthy items taken from the *Ottawa Free Press*, *Toronto Week*, *The Daily Colonist*, *The Montreal Star*, and several European sources such as *The London Daily News* and the American-published periodical *Every Saturday*. Notably, he continued including materials, and thanatological materials in particular, up until just a month before his death on February 1, 1897 (his final series of inclusions are undated), so the distribution networks must have been fairly rapid. Other ephemera include the money order receipt that identifies Fletcher and letterhead from the Lands and Works Department of British Columbia. I suggest that as artifacts that evidence the rapid and broad transmission of a wide range of culturally diverse print materials, these clippings in the commonplace books demonstrate a unity among Canadian cities that

extended fully to the West Coast, even in the earliest days of confederation. They also show a bi-lingual diversity in New Westminster, at least among the learned. Moreover, they are strong evidence of the cultural affinities of a particular educated class of West Coasters in the nineteenth century.

There are a few potential explanations for the diversity of the print materials either copied into the books or clipped and inserted between the pages, and occasionally glued in. The first is that the New Westminster Public Library, founded the same year as the city in 1865, may have contained these materials, and hence they were not readily available for personal consumption to the public and may even have been out of date when transcribed. The New Westminster Public Library did, in fact, hold most of the *local* periodicals that appear in the pages of the books: *The Daily Columbian*, *The Mainland Guardian*, and *The British Columbian Weekly*. These were all lost in the great fire of 1898, the year after Fletcher's death, though they have largely been replaced in the current library. It would also seem plausible that *The Colonist*, the predecessor of the *Victoria Times Colonist*, would have been available in the nearest city, New Westminster. There are, however, several problems with this conjecture—while these print materials were on hand in the public library, the library was not funded and relied on subscriptions during the period when Fletcher's commonplace books show the most use. Moreover, it would not seem likely that a library patron could cut materials from the papers, so a personal subscription seems to be most plausible, while the library may potentially have played a role in the materials transcribed rather than clipped.

This then leaves us with a gap in our explanation for the wide variety of print materials, including daily and weekly newspapers from across North America. Print materials that post-date Fletcher's move to the Coast range from the *Chicago Rundschau* to the *Montreal Weekly Gazette*, the *Ottawa Free Press*, and the *London Daily Times*. The first potential answer, apart from the existence of a broad and effective communications network across North America and Europe, lies in the only entry in the books that is personally and actually authored by Edward Fletcher. On the ninth of June, 1869, Fletcher writes in the bottom of page sixty-five of the first volume:

Nearly twenty nine years have passed since I made the first extract in this book : the German extract on the Apostle John bears date 9 Dec. 1840 as the day of entry. Since then I have married, have had thirteen children of whom seven have died : and my dear wife died 8th April 1868 [last year] : my dear daughter Harriet Allna died 8 October 1868 aged 14. (65)

Due to this content, it comes as little surprise that Fletcher modeled Boethus in his consolation of philosophy in these books. Nonetheless, since this shows Fletcher was still in Québec City in 1869, and he was an executive member of the Toronto Literary Association at least as early as 1857, we have a good explanation for the wide range of textual materials available to him in metropolitan centres; however, this is very early in the volume and most of the materials from periodicals prior to his move are transcribed rather than clipped. As for when most of Fletcher's surviving children arrived in New Westminster, the only archival hint is an unclaimed letter from the New Westminster Post Office from January 1871, addressed to a W. D. Fletcher. There was also a Sidney Edward W. Fletcher born in Victoria in 1884, but Vital Events for the period are not comprehensive. Moreover, descriptions of the place of writing include an 1871 entry in Québec. Materials from the *Ottawa Gazette* date to the same year, as do print materials from New Westminster, and this may reveal part of Fletcher's family's travel—1871 was the year that British Columbia entered the confederation and that the capital of the colony cum province became Victoria. Whether or not the Fletchers were involved in governance remains uncertain, but the print materials surround an important period.

The breadth of print distribution to New Westminster can only be discussed with these materials after 1887, but what can be said with some certainty is that after confederation, Edward Fletcher moved to the West Coast to be with his family, and he died there in 1897, aged eighty. Since the preponderance of print clippings date from 1888 and 1889, and range from Vancouver's *Daily Commercial Advertiser* to *The New York Times*, it seems reasonable to assume that this elderly man in his seventies was not likely traveling across North America to collect them, and that they were readily available in New Westminster by this time, for private subscription. Moreover, by 1888 he has access to both stationary from the Land and Works Department of British Columbia and London's "Nineteenth Century" periodical, which he transcribes rather than take a clipping from, suggesting that the materials were either such that he did not want to damage them, or more likely that they belonged to a public institution such as the New Westminster Public Library, before it burned to the ground in 1898.

So, what conclusions can be drawn from these materials? Most importantly, I believe they point to an educated class active on the West Coast in the Nineteenth Century, and in New Westminster, rather than solely in Victoria. Victoria was a larger population centre, but New Westminster was notably the home to the first Asylum and Penitentiary in British Columbia, and housed the Anglican Bishop. The

excerpted materials also point to the kind of “complex historical communication networks” described by Eva-Marie Kröller (71) and how rapidly these changed with the opening of the railway across Canada. After all, freight could cross North America more quickly than it could cross the Atlantic. I also hope to use these materials to begin a broader investigation of this unique and unstudied figure from Canada’s literary history, and in particular the significance of his scholarly and artistic presence on the West Coast.

With regard to making these materials available, my work to date has focused on establishing a searchable electronic archive of them, which will be available online to scholars. This is through the Streetprint Engine, a database devised for visual and text-based delivery. The purpose of this engine, run through the Canadian Research Chairs Humanities Computing Studio at the University of Alberta, is “to make formerly inaccessible texts and other artifacts available in an exciting new way to researchers, students, and the general public alike” (n.pag). Streetprint is designed to work with ephemera. Also, major projects on scrapbooks are already produced and are online. As the Streetprint project self-describes, it is “the world’s most user-friendly free website solution for showcasing, teaching, and archiving of popular print and... artifacts” (n.pag).

Works Cited

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