

THE SHIPPING INDUSTRY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA FROM 1867 TO 1914

Eric W. Sager

For most of his career as historian, teacher, administrator and politician, Gerry Panting has lived and worked on the island of Newfoundland. If you infer, as mainlanders sometimes do, that the islander's horizons are narrow and parochial, you would be wrong and would understand neither Gerry Panting nor his adopted home. From his island the horizons are both oceanic and continental. He is, appropriately, a maritime historian who writes about shipowners in outport Nova Scotia, with Arnold Toynbee and Fernand Braudel on the bookshelf beside him.

Maritime history is not simply about ships or fish or economic systems, and for those of us who have worked with him, Gerry Panting was always there to remind us of the vast horizons of human experience behind the sailing ships and freight rates. His shipowners were also people who got married, bought houses, had children, read newspapers, attended church, and went down to the docks and warehouses of their port towns. And Gerry reminded us that those real people, buying and selling ships in the 1870s, were not planning the future of their region. "They wanted to operate in the black rather than the red. They did not operate in the 'Maritimes' and were not concerned, in their decisions, with the good of the region."

Inevitably the younger, present-minded historian, eagerly wanting to achieve relevance, would ask Gerry: "Why then are you studying the shipping industry of Atlantic Canada?" Only to receive the blunt reply: "Because it existed! And because it mattered to many people who lived at the time, and they said it mattered." We might not share his approach, but Gerry was offering a reminder that we risk distorting the past by looking only through the lens of the present. "There may be no point in trying to get a twentieth century answer from the study of a nineteenth century situation." Beyond this, he answered flights of theoretical fancy with plain common sense: "Terminological exactitude was essential lest we make generalisations which our evidence cannot support."

This does not mean that history bears no lessons for the present. Far from it! I risk putting words in his mouth, but I think that for Gerry history has always been an essential means of ripping apart the simple answers and the unsubstantiated generalisations which are the foundations of bigotry, racism, nationalism, and the many other "isms" in which scoundrels take refuge. Maritime history is, I think, one part of the generous humanism of a social democrat who continues stubbornly to believe that he can make the world (or some part of it) a better place.

The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord, III, No. 3 (July 1993), 61-66.

Table 1
Tonnage of New Registrations by Vessel Type,
1867-1914 (3 ports of registry)

Vessel Type	Tonnage	% of Total Tonnage
Sailing Vessels:		
Schooner	10,838	
Sloop	1,757	
Brigantine	635	
Brig	1,851	
Barque	16,153	
Ship	15,357	
Other	502	
Total Sail	47,093	14.8%
Iron/steel hulls	27,425	
Wooden hulls	19,668	
Auxiliary vessels:		
iron/steel hull	71,463	
wooden hull	30,898	
gasoline engine	3,137	
sternwheeler/sidewheeler	9,299	
Total auxiliary	114,797	36.0%
Iron/steel	71,463	
Wooden hulls	43,334	
Steam vessels:		
Screw-propelled	20,196	
Stemwheeler/sidewheelers	65,268	
Total steamers	85,464	
Iron/steel	11,845	
Wooden hulls	73,619	
Gasoline-powered:		
Screw, wood		
wooden hull	7,683	
Screw, iron	34	
Gas, paddle-wheeler	50	
Total gasoline	7,767	
Scows, barges and dredges:		
Iron scows/barges	10,596	
Wooden scows/barges	52,045	
Total scows/ barges	62,641	
Dredges	1,460	
Total tonnage	319,222	

Source: See text.

Table 2
 Tonnage of New Registrations by Owner Occupation,
 1867-1914 (3 ports of registry)

	Tonnage	Percent of T<
Shipping company/ marine transport co.	89, 358	28. 0
C. P. R.	42, 886	13. 4
Shipowner	28, 646	9. 0
Merchants	28, 482	8. 9
Unspecified other companies	24, 342	7. 6
Mariner	14, 973	4. 7
Shipbuilder/boatbuilder	11, 548	3. 6
Mining company	10, 959	3. 4
Lumber merchant or lumber company	9, 881	3. 1
Trader/contractor	8, 963	2. 8
Non-marine tradesperson	8, 458	2. 6
Banker, broker or professional person	7, 185	2. 3
Gentleman	6, 544	2. 0
Cannery or fish co.	5, 710	1. 8
Government	4, 244	1. 3
Marine tradesperson	3, 817	1. 2
Fisherman	1, 752	0. 5
Farmer/rancher	1, 677	0. 5
Other/unknown	9, 797	3. 1

Source: See text.

What has my preamble to do with British Columbia? So far as I know, Gerry Panting has never written a line about the history of British Columbia. Many others have written about British Columbia: about the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest and their use of marine resources; about the early European explorers who came by sea; about the fishers, the sealers, the steamboats, and the coastal ferries. I give full credit to all who have studied our maritime heritage. Yet there is a kind of history that is not being written—and here is my connection between Gerry Panting and British Columbia. A diligent, careful and patient empiricist, Gerry Panting spent about ten years compiling a huge inventory of data on shipowners in Atlantic Canada before arriving at conclusions which, for all their caution, will nevertheless stand the tests of criticism and of time. Who will do the same for British Columbia? Who, in the current academic climate, would dare?

There are many reasons why we are unlikely to see a maritime history of British Columbia comparable to maritime histories of other provinces or regions. The most obvious reason is that cutbacks in funding to research granting agencies make it increasingly difficult to create another collaborative, long-term project on the scale of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, which Gerry founded at Memorial University in 1976, together with Keith Matthews and David Alexander. But there are other reasons. One is that we historians are so present-minded, in precisely the way that Gerry lamented. The maritime sector of British Columbia, however defined, is relatively much less important today than it was a century ago in terms of its shares of economic output and population. It follows that industries of recent origin and contemporary importance find historians more readily than an industry which was more important a century ago. Finally, at another level, it is unlikely that we shall find an historian capable of seeing the many different vessels of B. C.'s coastlines as part of a single economic system.

Yet the opportunity is there. Consider only the merchant shipping of B. C. up to the 1910s. We can read about the *Beaver*, about the ill-fated *Princess Sophia*, and about the CPR and its Empress liners.⁵ We can read little, however, about the multitude of vessels, most forgotten long ago, that were the heart of the coastal transportation system. Yet records of these vessels may be found today, most obviously in the surviving registry books. There were three main ports of registry before 1914: Victoria, where vessels were first registered in the 1850s; New Westminster, which opened as a port of registry in 1880; and Vancouver, a port of registry from 1890. Between 1867 and 1914 there were 2247 vessel registrations in these three ports.⁶ Apart from a recent thesis by David Farrell, which focuses on Victoria shipowners only, systematic analysis of these registries scarcely exists.⁷

By 1914 the total tonnage registered in B. C. was not large—only fourteen percent of all Canadian tonnage—but the industry was unlike that in other provinces in several ways. Most obviously, it was growing continuously, and even rapidly, at a time when shipowning in the Maritime provinces was collapsing. Furthermore, there was a close integration between shipowning and the local economy. Many of the locally-owned ships came from local shipyards, and in Victoria and Vancouver we find the beginnings of a shipbuilding industry which grew rapidly in the 1890s and early 1900s, boomed during the two world wars, and survived into our own time.⁸ The vessels produced before 1914 were designed for specific local trades: they transported output from the fisheries, sealing, the forest industry, mining, and local manufacturing; they transported goods and people to the communities where these economic activities were based.

Such varied industries, located along both saltwater coastlines and inland lakes and rivers, used a bewildering variety of waterborne craft. Table 1 gives some indication of the variety of modes of propulsion in the B. C. industry up to 1914. The sailing vessels included small fishing sloops, sealing schooners, and ocean-going barques and ships used initially as lumber carriers. From the beginning the paddle-steamer was much more important here than in eastern Canada, and 214 were registered between 1867 and 1914. The Yukon gold rush saw a burst of investment in paddle-steamers, and in 1898 no less than forty-two vessels of this type were registered. Many more sternwheelers appeared in the early 1900s, mainly for use in the inland lake and river systems.⁹ Scows and barges, towed by a growing variety of towboats, carried wood chips, lumber, fish, mineral products, gravel, railway ties and rails, agricultural produce, and other commodities. As the list suggests, these simple craft (sometimes little more than floating platforms) were linked to the province's major goods-producing industries.¹⁰

Much of the diversity in table 1 resulted from rapid changes in vessels used in the fisheries. Before the turn of the century a variety of sailing vessels and undecked boats were used in fishing, including sloops, yawls, smacks, ketches, and undecked rowboats. Many of these were not registered, but the growth of the fishing fleet is recorded in annual reports of the federal

Department of Marine and Fisheries. These suggest that the boat fleet grew at an average annual rate of twelve percent in the 1880s and nineteen percent in the 1890s, and by 1900 there were 5000 fishing boats in service." The registries tell us not about boats but about the larger gasoline-powered fishing vessels, and the rise of builders who specialized in these craft: George Cates, V. N. Dafoe, the Hoffar Motor Boat Company, and A. W. Lepage in Vancouver, and U. Nakade and other Japanese builders in Steveston. As the motorized fleet grew, the boat fleet almost stopped growing. The sources suggest a remarkable contrast with the Newfoundland fisheries, which remained dominated at this time by non-motorized dories and vessels. Part of the explanation for the change in the B.C. fleet has to do with technological demands in the salmon fishery (the purse-seine, for instance, was more efficient when the gasoline engine allowed the seines to be closed quickly).¹² But the explanation also relates to investment and ownership patterns which historians have only begun to reveal.

The shipping and shipbuilding industries were also making the transition to iron and steel hulls (thirty-eight percent of all newly-registered tonnage between 1867 and 1914). Most of the iron and steel vessels were steamers or auxiliaries built in Britain, but about ten percent of all iron or steel tonnage was built in British Columbia. The best-known of these steamers were the CPR Princess vessels (the Empress liners do not appear on registry in B.C. in this period). Firms such as Albion Iron Works and the B. C. Marine Railway Company built auxiliary steamers, and the marine sector was clearly a major reason for the growth of manufacturing in B.C. in the late nineteenth century. And the province's manufacturing sector was large when compared on a *per capita* basis with manufacturing in other provinces.¹³

As Gerry Panting has shown for Atlantic Canada, the ship registries are the essential starting point for a study of ownership patterns and capital investment. My brief survey of the data suggests two important trends in B.C., both very different from trends in Atlantic Canada. First, non-resident investors were always important in B.C. shipping. In the 1860s and 1870s, for instance, owners resident in the United States, Britain, China or Australia accounted for over forty percent of all new tonnage. By the early 1900s central Canadian owners were becoming more important (almost a quarter of all new tonnage, and thirty-nine percent of iron- or steel-hulled tonnage in the five years preceding the First World War). The arrival of central Canadian capital in shipping is an interesting finding, since it parallels the central Canadian penetration of other markets and industries in B.C. in the same period.

The second important trend is the relative decline of the independent owner-operator (the trader, fisherman and mariner), and the rise of the joint-stock company. The shipping company was particularly important after the turn of the century, but it had predecessors, most notably the Canadian Pacific Navigation Company, incorporated in 1883. Table 2 suggests the importance of these companies and of the C. P. R. By the early 1900s the C. P. R. and Union Steamship Company dominated major coastal routes.¹⁴ But the small independent owners remained. Among them we find the first vessels owned mainly for pleasure—and the rise of sailing for recreation is a subject worthy of study by itself!

Shipowning and shipbuilding should be understood as parts of the total transportation system, and as linkages to the major industries of the province. In the mountainous and coast-fringed environment of British Columbia, transportation was basic to economic development, and it accounted for a larger share of jobs than in most other provinces. Popular and academic historians have studied many parts of our maritime history, but we are still waiting for a diligent empiricist with the vision to tell the story as a whole.

NOTES

- * Eric W. Sager is Professor of History at the University of Victoria and the author, with Gerry Panting, of *Maritime Capital: The Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Montréal, 1990). His most recent book is *Ships and Memories: Merchant Seafarers in Canada's Age of Steam* (Vancouver, 1993).
1. Gerry Panting, "Discussion," in Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (eds.), *Working Men Who Got Wet* (St. John's, 1980), 383.
 2. I paraphrase Gerry's response to my question during a seminar in St. John's in July 1982.
 3. Gerry Panting, in Ommer and Panting (eds.), *Working Men Who Got Wet*, 384.
 4. Gerry Panting, "Discussion," in Lewis R. Fischer and Eric W. Sager (eds.), *Merchant Shipping and Economic Development in Atlantic Canada* (St. John's, 1982), 161.
 5. Robert D. Turner, *The Pacific Princesses* (Victoria, 1977); Robert D. Turner, *The Pacific Empresses* (Victoria, 1981); Ken Coates and Bill Morrison, *Taking the North Down With Her; The Sinking of the Princess Sophia* (Toronto, 1990).
 6. I am indebted to Brenda Clark for assistance in compiling information from the registries. When we used the registries in 1979, most were still in the Customs offices in Victoria and Vancouver. The National Archives of Canada holds Victoria registries from 1867 to 1908 and New Westminster registries from 1880 to 1913. Pre-1867 Victoria registries are in the B. C. Archives and Records Service in Victoria. A longer version of the present paper, entitled "The Shipping Industry of British Columbia, 1867-1914: A Preliminary Examination of the Vessel Registries," was presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Vancouver, 1983.
 7. David Farrell, "A Fleet of Shipowners: Shipping Investment Patterns in Victoria, 1861-1901" (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1993).
 8. On shipbuilding see G. W. Taylor, *Shipyards of British Columbia: The Principal Companies* (Victoria, 1986).
 9. See Robert D. Turner, *Sternwheelers and Steam Tugs* (Victoria, 1984).
 10. Towboats or tugboats are the specialty of Robert Spearing of Victoria, who has studied this subject for thirty years. See also Ken Drushka, *Against Wind and Weather: The History of Towboating in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1981).
 11. "Annual Reports of the Department of Marine and Fisheries," in Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers*, 1880-1901.
 12. See Harold Innis, "Foreward," in W. A. Carrothers, *The British Columbia Fisheries* (Toronto, 1941), v; Frank W. Millerd, "Windjammers to Eighteen Wheelers: The Impact of Changes in Transportation Technology on the Development of British Columbia's Fishing Industry," *BC Studies*, No. 78 (Summer 1988), 28-52.
 13. John Lutz, "Losing Steam: The Boiler and Engine Industry as an Index of British Columbia's Deindustrialization, 1880-1915," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers 1988* (Ottawa, 1988), 168-208.
 14. Gerald A. Rushton, *Whistle Up the Inlet: The Union Steamship Story* (Vancouver, 1974).