# Introduction: Placing Family History in an Indigenous context

The past lives within me. A few months ago, as I coughed on a sip of water, I said “I inherited a narrow throat from my grandmother”. My coworkers laughed partly because it was an unexpected pronouncement, and partly because they weren’t sure that narrow throats could really be hereditary. What kinds of things are passed down through the generations?

As more children are born into the next generation I hear more and more about what’s passed down from generation to generation. There’s the physical - Uncle Grayson’s prominent eyebrow ridge and deep eye sockets; the Jelly narrow temples. And then there’s a whole set of other, cultural characteristics. My propensity to save elastics, twist-ties, disposable containers – Grandma Bain. Rock-collecting in far-away places – Grandma & Grandpa Bain. Secret appreciation for a well-timed pun – Grandpa Jelly.

In the past few years I’ve had the chance to read my grandmother’s memoir, Lilies of My Field (2006), and my aunt’s history of the Foote-Jelly clan on Jedidiah Island. These histories written tell the story of peoples’ movements, marriages, deaths. They tell the basic facts – what we know of our ancestors’ lives.

In the last few years, as Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission has moved across the country, I’ve also had opportunity to gain a new perspective on the history of Canada, a history that includes much we don’t conceive of as part of our nation – residential schools, institutionalized racism, head taxes. Canada, as a settler colony, set up systems and processes which reinforced Euro-Canadian settlement on this land. parts of Canada’s history were contemporary to my ancestors in what we call Canada.

What systems, structures, ways of thinking do we now take for granted? What a I’ve often wondered wI’m interested in the worlds my ancestors lived in, the ways they thought the world worked, and how their lives and mine connect to the colonial reality in Canada.

This project begins from history and from there, I hope, moves to present-day. I’d like to share the ways that I see my own life connecting with the lives of my ancestors. What I am unaware of, I am likely to reproduce. It seems to me, in reflecting on my own travels, assumptions, and life choices, that I have reproduced much of what my ancestors started – some good, some problematic. And yet each of my journeys have been chosen with care, consideration, and thoughtfulness. Never once have I said to myself, “I’ll do just the typical trip to Kenya, thank-you” or “A biology course, because that’s the Bain thing to do”. And yet, when I trace the patterns, I see echoes of my long-gone ancestors.

The implications of connecting my world and life to the choices of my ancestors is more than just personal. Culture shapes choices and worldviews, not just family heritage, and the culture that has shaped me and my family is shared by many others and by the institutions we support. One set of institutions, the Indian Residential School system, was in operation from the time my ancestors first arrived till the time I was in school. This project places my family’s history in the broader context of Indigenous histories. In taking on this work, I am beginning to see ways that my own story, connected to that of my ancestors, fits into those broader patterns in society.

I hope you’ll enjoy what you read and take notes in the margins to share over our next joint beverage. And most importantly I hope you’ll buy into my central thesis: the past matters, more than we acknowledge, especially now.

# Bain Story

“The lumber mills are dispensing with their Oriental labour and taking on white men, they say that white men are more satisfactory although their wages higher and it is a good thing for the labouring man”

* Letter from Jacob Bain (Vancouver) to his son Will Bain (Ranfurly, Alberta). 1920s (exact date unknown)

I read the sentence above sitting in my Grandmother’s apartment in Burnaby, BC. It was a Saturday morning in June – a bit rainy, probably – and I had brought along a copy of my grandmothers’ memoirs to her house. In her book, she includes one short quote from a letter written by Jacob Bain. Where’s the rest, I ask? How many letters are there? Do you have them? Can I read them?

They’re a bit tedious, to be honest, she said. He must have been getting on in years, he goes on and on about the weather.

Let me see, Grandma – I’d be interested to see them, to glance through what’s there.

She took them out of a bigger envelope – a slightly torn, re-used envelope, something saved from a mail-out years ago. Inside the envelope were multiple little old envelopes, stamps still intact, faded blue lettering shakily marking out the addressee – ‘Will Bain’. The letters were folded multiple times, several times vertically and then again horizontally, so the multiple pages would fit in their too-small envelopes.

It was part-way through the stack of letters that we came to the above quote. It hit me, right then – my great-great-grandparents, they didn’t just live in a ‘somewhat racist’ time – they benefitted from that racism, they assumed the racism within their systems was normal and even good. Within this one sentence are built a whole series of assumptions.

Jacob is talking here about ‘Oriental’ labour, not Indigenous labour, but there is a connection here. There were likely very few if any Indigenous employees at the mill. A federal government employee working with Indigenous people (‘Indian Agent’) put it this way about ‘Indian’ men: “When applying for work outside of the reserve he is often refused because white men tend to be unwilling to work alongside of Indians”.

The way he starts is fascinating:

“The lumber mills are dispensing with their Oriental labour”

Putting aside the problematic and undefinable ‘other’ labelled the “Oriental”, this statement suggests that lumber mills, and other places of employment, did in fact keep record of the ‘ethnic origin’ of their employees. Second, the lumber mills had a need for labour – however they had decided to fire all those of one ethnic group. The complete and utter believe in racial segregation is clear here – there is no question of a person of mixed heritage, for example. A belief in some kind of meaningful difference between ‘races’ is an important part of the colonial mentality, because it allows differentiation between colonisers and others.

“…they say that white men are more satisfactory although their wages higher”

My great-great-grandfather cites an obscure “they”’ – meaning his friends/companions, newspapers, his own opinion, it’s unclear – as suggesting that ‘white men’ are somehow worth paying more money. In fact, differential wages were very common at the time – it is true that white men received higher wages than ‘Orientals’. In fact the entire workforce was divided on racial lines, with white men at the top. As one report states, “Japanese men are paid 1/2- to 2/3 of what white labour earn for the same type of labour”[[1]](#footnote-1)[[2]](#footnote-2). And of course, the focus here is on men – women don’t fit into this picture.

… and it is a good thing for the labouring man”

This final statement is what rings through my mind. Really, discriminatory firing based on systemic racism is a good thing? Perhaps it is implied here that he refers to ‘white’ labouring man – as if a non-white person would somehow not be included as ‘labouring’. If so, he suggests that for all white labouring men, including himself, the dismissal of Oriental men and hiring of white men is ‘good’.

In many ways Jacob is more accurate than he was even aware of. The racist hiring practises of the day, including lower wages for non-white workers, were definitively beneficial for white men. This large-scale dismissal, if it indeed is true, would have meant gainful employment for many white men and their families, and would have meant that many other Asian families were left to struggle without work. Being fired from a job in the 1920s would have been a significant moment in the life of a family; for some it may have meant finding other, even lower-paid work, and for others it may have meant a significant period of unemployment. The sudden dismissal itself was direct and material evidence of the racism rampant at the time – a racism that my great-great grandfather had internalised.

Jacob was by no mean unusual for his time – he was commenting on happenings of the day, not causing or actively supporting the dismissal of workers. Racism is a word that we Canadians love to avoid. We like to pretend that racism is a thing of the past, not the present, and that while our ancestors might have been a part of a more racist time, they were either innocent or not implicated somehow. In recent years, Canada has become more adept at acknowledging the harm of past racist practices; apologies for Indian Residential Schools, Japanese Internment Camps, and the Chinese Head Tax are good examples. And yet where are the stories of the white, Euro-descendent individuals who benefitted from this racism? If Asian families lost their jobs and ‘white’ families got work, what did that mean for my ancestors’ family and friends?

My great-great-grandfather’s letter raised these questions for me and led me to think further about the ways that my family’s story has intertwined with colonial and Indigenous stories. The privileges enjoye by my ancestors have been passed down to me, and are a part of my heritage and my presence here on this land.

Before we look further into Jacob’s letters, let’s take a step or two back and explore how the Bain side of the family came to be located on the West Coast of North America.

## Looking Back: Moving West…

### Immigrating to PEI

Before entering British Columbia, the Bains spent several generations on the Eastern coast of Turtle Island – what is now called Prince Edward Island (PEI). For most of my life I believed the history stopped there, though I have since discovered much longer histories in the matrilineal lines[[3]](#footnote-3).

The first ‘Bain’ in my ancestral line was named William. He was one of six siblings, born in Thurso, northern Scotland, in 1802. Thurso is part of the Scottish ‘Highlands’, and is the northernmost town on the British Islands. It sits at approximately the same latitude as Juneau, Alaska. Its proximity to Norway made it a significant port city during Norse occupation. After 1266, however, its northern location left it on the periphery of most activity[[4]](#footnote-4). Thurso has always been a small town – the population in 1831 was around 4500[[5]](#footnote-5), and by 2011 it was still only 8,000 people. With today’s roads and vehicles, Google suggests that a drive from Thursow to Glasgow would take approximately 5 hours, two hours beyond the nearest city, Inverness.

Even in such a small town, the word of ‘emigration to Canada’ spread quickly. Newspapers of the 1820s and 1830s were full of headlines about various parts of Canada. The Inverness Journal of 1821 lists “Nova Scotia - Notice with Inverness agents, of land for sale in Nova Scotia”. An article of 1822 announces “Nova Scotia & the neighbouring Islands of Canada - MacDonald & Elder, Sleat, Isle of Skye, intend to fit out transports for the conveyance of passengers from Inverness & the West Coast”. The service was particularly extended to ‘highlanders’: “Robert Hunter, Greenock, advertising fast-sailing coppered ships to go in June next to any port on island in the North Highlands where emigrants wish to embark”[[6]](#footnote-6). Canada was the place to visit, it seems.

The name itself, Bain mostly likely derived from Scottish Gaelic *bàn*, meaning "white", "fair". In Gaelic, the name would be *Bàin* (masculine), and *Bhàin* (feminine). In many ways, it is quite appropriate that my ancestors, arriving on Mi’kmaq territory about 200 years ago, would have a surname that summarizes them as being ‘pale’ or ‘white’.

William Bain most likely took a ship to Canada at some point in his 20s, and moved to PEI in the 1830s. At that point PEI was small and, like northern Scotland, would have been quite remote. Before colonization, PEI’s population is estimated to have been about 300 Mi’kmaq residents. In the 1700s the settler population grew significantly. While the population of the island had doubled from 23,000 in 1823 to over 47,000 in 1840, it remained a fairly sparse, rural population[[7]](#footnote-7).

Before the 1830s, the immigration to the colony was primarily highland Scottish[[8]](#footnote-8), many of whom spoke Scottish Gaelic. A report from as late as 1843 states, in looking for a minister, that “They wish to secure the labors of one who can preach in both English and Gaelic, which appears to be necessary as there are so many in that section that speak the Gaelic”[[9]](#footnote-9). A government report suggests that by the mid-1800s, approximately half of the PEI population was Scottish, meaning it was the most ‘Scottish’ province or state in North America[[10]](#footnote-10).

The predominance of Scottish Protestants in the colony was a product of British colonial policy. In 1764, a British surveyor divided the land into 67 large ‘townships’, each 20,000 acres, which were allocated in a lottery to military officers and other British residents, many of whom never visited PEI. The land was given under the condition the land must be settled by ‘100 Protestant, non-British persons within 10 years’. While these conditions were for the most part not followed, the pattern of absentee land ownership and preference for ‘Protestant’ residents persisted well into the 19th century. Through he remained a Protestant, in 1836 William became “exercised over the question of baptism”[[11]](#footnote-11), causing him to depart from his Presbyterian roots. He was baptised then, age 34, and became eventually a deacon at the North River Baptist Church.

William was an enterprising sort – or at least enterprising enough to compose and post an advertisement in the local paper:

Plain and Ornamental Stone Cutting

The Subscriber respectfully tenders his grateful acknowledgements to the Inhabitants of Charlottetown, and the Island at large, for the favours he has received since he commenced business, and begs leave to inform them that the is now carrying on the above business in Water Street, opposite Mr. John Gainsford’s brick house, where an extensive assortment of the very best quality of Head Stones, Tomb Stones, Hearth Stones, Grinding Stones, Stove pipe Stones, Jamb Stones, and all descriptions of House-building stones, are furnished and executed punctually, in the neatest manner, and on the most reasonable terms.

As the Sub-scriber intends residing in Charlottetown, he most respectfully offers his services, to furnish Plans and Estimates, and to enter upon any Contract for House-building &c. From several years’ constant practice in several of the principal towns in Great Britain, the Sub-scriber feels confident that he will give satisfaction to those who may favour him with their commands.

William Bain

Charlottetown, Dec. 28, 1834[[12]](#footnote-12)

His work subsequent to this notice must have been satisfactory, because just under 10 years later William was a stone cutter for the building of the Colonial House in Charlottetown from 1843-1847. The building was then known as ‘Colonial House’ – because at that time PEI was a colony of the British government[[13]](#footnote-13). PEI was and had always been Mi’kmaq land, and yet in the past few hundred years it had had been made a colony by the French, invaded by Britain, traded back to France, and finally taken by the British again. After the British government allocated the land to those favoured by the British government, as described above, those proprietors lobbied for their own Governor and administration.

While the building was paid by the British government, the construction was primarily local. As a government website says:

When tenders for trades were accepted, it was found necessary to leave the Island only for stone, which was brought from Nova Scotia. Stone-masonry, brick-laying, carpentry, joinery, plastering, slating, painting, glazing, sheet metal working and excavating were all done by Islanders, proud that the new Colonial Building was indeed a local accomplishment…[[14]](#footnote-14)

William’s personal life is harder to uncover. It’s unclear how William met Ellen Dockendorff – she was more ‘local’ than he, having been born on PEI[[15]](#footnote-15). Ellen and William Bain married in 1839 and settled in a village called North River, located in Lot 32 of Queen’s County (as described by the British survey of 1767), about 4.5 miles outside of the capital city of Charlottetown.

William and Ellen were residing on Mi’kmaq territory, and while they may not have been aware of that fact, they would most likely have been aware of the presence of the Mi’kmaq people. By the 1820s, the Mi’kmaq were marginalized in public discourse, and yet they had been resident on the Island for thousands of years. The Mi’kmaq called their island ‘Epekwitk" (or "Abegweit"), meaning "resting on the waves."[[16]](#footnote-16) The Mi’kmaq had a substantive political system, as summarized by the government of PEI:

Before the time of the European arrival, the Mi'kmaq of the Atlantic Region, the Gaspé Peninsula and parts of Maine were organized into seven political districts. Prince Edward Island was one of these districts. The seven districts made up the Mi'kmaq Nation, a union under the leadership of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In PEI, the reality for Mi’kmaq residents was bleak – in the 1820s, citizens of PEI wrote to their government about the ‘abject poverty of the Indians’. The British system of land allocation had not only been set up without communicating with the Mi’kmaq, there had been no land at all left for their residence[[18]](#footnote-18). In the 1840s Chief Thomas Labone of the ‘Micmac Tribe of Indians’ sent a letter to the Crown mentioning their better association with the French in regards to land. The government approached various land owners to purchase land, but by the 1860s the Mi’kmaq still had ‘no land to call their own’[[19]](#footnote-19).

For the most part, Mi’kmaq lived in informal settlements, as described by this report of 1875:

Old fashioned camps, and structures of an improved character form the rest of the habitation, numbering about fifty-six, embracing different Indian localities throughout Prince Edward Island.[[20]](#footnote-20)

There are no records of whether or not the William and Ellen had such informal camps on their land. However, there are records of formal attempts to allocate land to the people who once considered the entire Island their own:

Other land, in Lots 15 and 55, was purchased for the Mi'kmaq in 1852. On Lot 55, the land was poor, and subsequently, was not used by the Mi'kmaq. Lot 15’s land was very good, and was quickly taken over by “white, Irish squatters.”[[21]](#footnote-21) 10 acres of Ordnance Land was loaned by the War Department for the use of eleven Mi'kmaq families. This “Ordnance Reserve” was used extensively, with the resident Mi'kmaq families building a road and planting fields of potatoes.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The ‘Ordnance Reserve’ mentioned above, on the Eastern short of Charlottetown harbour, would have been the closest official Mi’kmaq settlement to the Bain farm. However even this land allocation was short-lived, as in 1866:

The “Ordnance Reserve” land was seized by the government of PEI and a Fever Hospital was placed upon the exact 10 acres used by the Mi'kmaq. [[23]](#footnote-23)

It was much later, in 1912, that a local Mi’kmaq resident claimed continuous occupancy on Rocky Point, just south of the Bain’s property and Charlottetown. This fourth and last reserve was a tiny 3 acres. Throughout the 1800s and into the 1900s, the Mi’kmaq population maintained a population of approximately 250 to 300 and maintained their livelihood by fishing and hunting.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In contrast to the itinerant, marginalized Mi’kmaq population, during the 1800s the Bain family flourished. Ellen and William, the first of my ancestors living in PEI, had four children before William died at the age of 47. Three of William and Ellen’s children each had 5 or more children of their own, so that from 1820 to 1900, the Bain family went from 2 to 50 members, a 25-fold expansion. During the same time, the settler population of PEI followed a similar trajectory – increasing 5-fold to a peak of 109,000 in 1891.

### Fame for Francis Bain, naturalist

It was Francis Bain, William and Ellen’s second-eldest son, who received the biggest fame in the PEI Bain family. Though he lived a short time, he is remembered by a stone that still stands on the lawn of the aforementioned Colonial House:



Stone says: “Francis Bain, Naturalist. 1842 – 1894. Erected by the Natural History and Antiquarian Society of P.E.I”

Francis was from a young age actively involved in the PEI settler community. In 1862 at the age of 20 he became responsible for the 142-acre Bain farm. His father was deacon at the North River Baptist Church – and at 23 years old, Francis volunteered as church clerk, and stayed in that role for 25 years. It wouldn’t have been the most glamourous of roles, likely entailing responsibility for recording minutes of meetings, keeping track of services, and updating church archives.

Francis married rather late, for his day, at 33. He married Caroline Matilda Clark, 10 years his junior. Before he died at the age of 52, they had 9 children, spaced two or three years apart. They would have had children in diapers throughout their entire marriage. Francis would have likely worked on the farm during the days and then taken the evenings to study, think, and write to the light of a gas lantern.

One of his strong interests was in the natural world, both plants and rocks. Despite not having completed high school[[25]](#footnote-25), he became an amateur biologist, studying ferns and herbs of PEI. He drew detailed sketches of all kinds of flowers, and is credited with creating the Biology textbooks used by PEI public school students in the late 1800s.

Francis’ approach was to create ‘collections’ of ‘specimens’ of plants found on Prince Edward Island, and its small neighbour St Peter’s Island. Francis’ eye for detail, along with his interest in the natural world, made him an eloquent descriptor of what he saw. Some of his descriptions said as much about the author as about nature, as is evident in for example in this description of one of the ‘Winter Birds of PEI’[[26]](#footnote-26):

The Purple Finch frequently winters here. He does not frequent the abodes of men, but the lonely forest, where the doomed summits of the great yellow birches, *Beula excels*, are thick-laden with strobiles, is his home. The stay-at homes never see him. But on a keen, bright morning, when the gilded twigs are surging aloft in the frigid blue, from their loftiest tops rings out the glad, sweet carol to startle and charm the adventurous woodman.

His description above is likely at least partly self-referential, as Francis would most likely describe himself as the opposite of a ‘stay-at home’. He undertook what he described as ‘expeditions to farflung corners of the Island’. Those expeditions would have been by train or by horse and wagon; sometime he brought his wife Carrie or son Waldo (Waddie).

His travels and writing gave him great appreciation for the natural beauty of Prince Edward Island. In the same piece, he describes the setting or geography of PEI:

Sheltered from the chilling breath of the Labrador Current by the primary ridges of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton, it enjoys a summer season with a more elevated temperature, a purer atmosphere, a clearer sky, and more abounding sunshine on its rich, verdure-clad swells, than are to be found on the immediate Atlantic seaboard. In winter, on the contrary… snow lies deep on the ground, and the rivers and bays for four months are firmly locked in ice. The atmosphere, however, is pure and bracing, and free from the damp chilling mists of the ocean seaboard.

Starting in 1881 and for 11 years, Francis wrote a regular column appearing in the ‘Daily Examiner’ sharing observations of birds, wildlife, weather, flowers, geology, and his various travels. He was an active member of the Natural History and Antiquarian Society,

Francis’ interest in natural science was in many ways in keeping with the times. In Victorian times it was fashionable for ‘people of culture’ to follow intellectual pursuits in their leisure time; natural science was ‘immensely satisfying to the Victorian psyche, for it comfortably amalgamated religious, scientific, and aesthetic sensibilities’ (p. 27)[[27]](#footnote-27). Natural history societies were thus some of the first organizations in Canada focus on intellectual activities. They purchased books, collected specimens (botanical or geological), and organized lectures.

Francis’ own identity as ‘Canadian’ is another aspect of this story. In many ways, Francis was considered ‘native’ to PEI, and his love for the land was tied to patriotism.

He loved his native land, its birds and plants and even its very stones to him were dear. Our boys and girls we hope will be inspired the more they know of their native land to love it more, for how can they love another land so well. There is need for more patriotism and more knowledge of our own land and its resources. (Eulogy of Francis Bain, 1905)

In another article[[28]](#footnote-28), it is explicitly mentioned that ‘some [collections] have been sent along to the Geological Survey at Ottawa, along with drawings of specimens still in Mr. Bain’s possession’. Francis Bain discovered a fossil fern that was ‘new to science’. Sir William Dawson, a Canadian geologist[[29]](#footnote-29), named it Tylodendron Baini after Francis Bain.

Despite these tokens of recognition from mainstream science, for the most part Francis operated separate from the main scientific establishment. A quote from one of the reviewers of his book, “Birds of Prince Edward Island”, is illustrative:

We regret much that Mr. Bain did not adopt some more modern nomenclature for his birds... it is well to conform, for the present, to the view of great American scientists until the more conservative voices of Canadian naturalists can have greater power (<http://eco.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8_04952_370/8?r=0&s=1>)

His ‘marginal’ position affected his scientific standing:

“At a future time we hope to see Mr. Bain, who is an enthusiastic naturalist, undertake a revised list, in which further particulars and greater preciseness will be found. He has been working alone in his locality, and therefore he deserves sincere thanks of orthinologists for what he has already done.”

Yet another article, focusing on Francis’s connection with Baptist Church history, follows a similar framing:

Without the advantages of a liberal education and largely self-taught, handicapped in this insular Province by isolation form the fellowship and the stimulation that come from fellow scientists and learned societies… To this Province that is not rich in the variety of its geological formations, he, nevertheless, became, through tireless perseverance, while supporting a family by toiling on his farm, and remains to this hour, the foremost naturalist that his native Province has produced. (http://www.islandnewspapers.ca/islandora/object/guardian%3A19370925-010)

He is very much seen as being isolated in PEI because of the lack of scientists, and was able to gain success in part because he achieved so much despite his isolation. He was able to emulate the British / European approach to cataloguing materials, despite his separation from those centres. This concept that there is a ‘centre’, located most often in the ‘mother country’, is an organizing principle of a colonial way of thinking.

In addition to botanical interests, Francis had a strong interest in what he called ‘natural history’ – exploring the geological history of PEI and making the estimation that PEI had been connected to the mainland 3,000 years earlier, for example (contemporary estimates are closer to 5,000 years). He wrote creatively about the ‘ancient past’ of the island, including a piece that describes “monster dinosaurus [sic], taking the place of mammals of today, stalked about the land in conscious pride of sovereignty”[[30]](#footnote-30). In other words, Francis used the language of ‘sovereignty’ to talk about dinosaurs but not about the peoples who resided in those places – in fact it does not seem that Francis ever mentioned Mi’kmaq peoples in his histories of PEI.

I find it intriguing that Francis Bain, a son of Scottish immigrants, was given so much credit for identifying, classifying, and even giving name to plants as if they were being ‘discovered’ for the first time. Mi’kmaq peoples had been resident in PEI for thousands of years; their traditional ecological knowledge gave them an intimate knowledge of the plans and species of the area. And yet, a mere few hundred years after colonization, the land was considered sufficiently ‘empty’ to allow an enterprising, studious young man to become the ‘local expert’.

As Linda Smith says, colonizing white people bring with them an ‘imperial gaze’ – the ability to ‘name, classify and order’ (get an actual quote) the worlds of ‘others’[[31]](#footnote-31). By preparing written text in English, Euro-descendent individuals can claim to ‘discover’ things that have been known for generation by others. Naming is one more way in which colonizers enact the presupposition of ‘terra nullius’ – the land is ‘empty’, void of people, and so remains an empty slate for colonisers to name as they choose.

Naming and claiming land was in many ways ‘old news’ by the 1800s in Prince Edward Island. The process of colonization in British Columbia, however, was very much gaining momentum. We’ll shift from Francis Bain now to look to his younger brother, Jacob (my great-great-grandfather), and Jacob’s two spinster daughters: Mabel and Nell.

## Spinsters in Kerrisdale: Mabel and Nell

Jacob moved to Vancouver with his unmarried children: Mabel, Nell, and William. They moved sometime before 1911 and possibly soon after the death of his wife and their mother, Charlotte.

Mabel and Nell were 30 and 32 by the time they first appear on a Vancouver census. They were very independent woman and gained a reputation as ‘The Aunts’. As my grandmother says, with mixed admiration and envy, they “these ladies never married, and kept so busy at their professions that they hired a person for housekeeping”[[32]](#footnote-32).

Nell, a teacher by trade, worked at least part of her time at Dawson school in downtown Vancouver[[33]](#footnote-33). As Barman (1988) points out, by the first decades of the 20th century almost all 10-14-year-olds were attending school. Vancouver at the time was divided along socio-economic lines roughly between East and West Vancouver, with the dividing line being set around Cambie (Barman, 1988). In the 1920s, Vancouver schools were becoming significantly overcrowded (Barman 1988 p. 18), with most high school classes between 35 and 40 students (p. 22), particularly in the less affluent East Side.

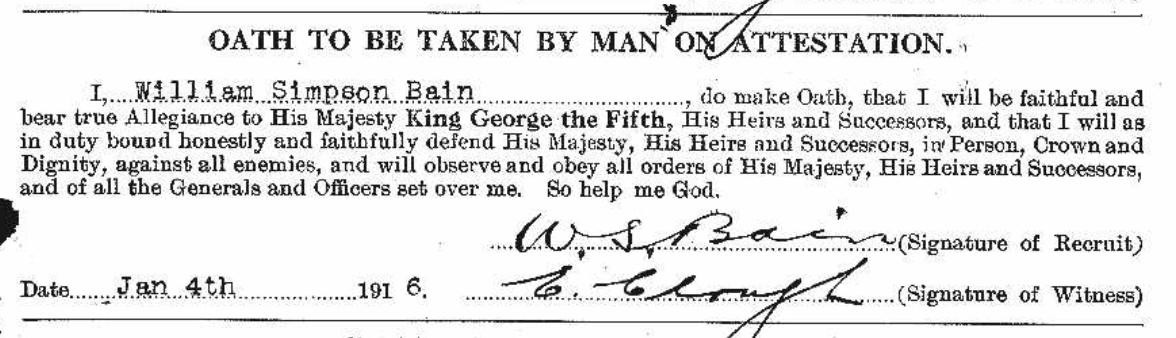
Nell’s students would have been all visitor-settlers, of European or Asian background, because at that time all Indigenous students were required to attend Indian Residential Schools. The nearest Residential School to downtown Vancouver or Kerrisdale was St. Mary’s in Mission – at that time about a 2-hour (?) journey from Vancouver. In 1920, the Canadian federal government passed legislation making it mandatory for all native children, 7 years or older, in BC to attend residential schools or face fines and prison terms[[34]](#footnote-34).

Mabel seems to have been a bit more of an adventurer than her sister Nell. She had been the first sister to move out – when she was 20 years old, she moved out from the house and was a lodger in Charlottetown, probably while going to school. She studied in Los Angeles and San Diego, California[[35]](#footnote-35). We don’t know a lot about the travel she undertook in her later years. There is record of her taking a boat from Victoria to Seattle, Washington. Though 42 years old at the time, she wrote a confident ‘38’ on the forms – perhaps because her companions, Mary and Hazel, were in their mid-20s[[36]](#footnote-36). Mabel was 5’11”, with light hair – a true ‘*Bhàin*’.

Mabel worked as a milliner or hat-maker at ‘Unique Hat Shoppe’, but she was even better known for her painting. She was said to have ridden her horse to the North Shore to paint, going on what much have been fairly arduous journeys to find the perfect scene to capture on canvas. Her paintings that remain focus on the natural beauty of Vancouver and area[[37]](#footnote-37).

## House on the Prairies: The Settlement Dream

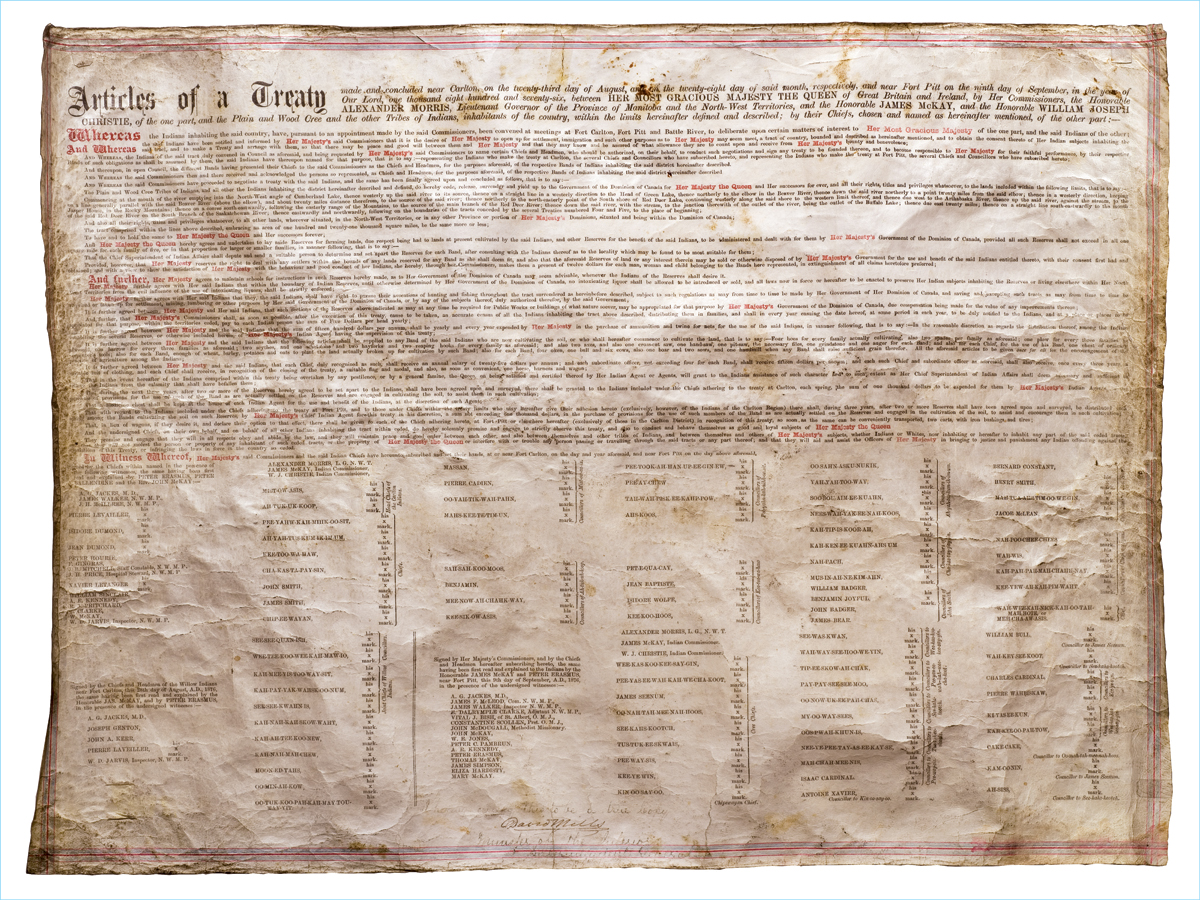
Mabel and Nell’s little brother, William Bain, had moved with them to Vancouver and in his 20s, took up work as a gas engineer and electrician. On January 4th, 1916 he voluntarily enlisted in the war effort, signing his allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth:



After the war, Will was awarded a piece of land to call his own. The land he was given so was land that for thousands of years had been Indigenous until 1876. In that year, the British government had signed a ‘treaty’ with the Indigenous nations who had been resident on that land – what they called the ‘Plain and Wood Cree Nations’, including over 40 nations. The treaty included, one of the middle lines of ‘small print’, the following statement:

The Plain and Wood Cree Tribes of Indians, and all other the Indians inhabiting the district hereinafter described and defined, do hereby cede, release, surrender and yield up to the Government of the Dominion of Canada, for Her Majesty the Queen and Her successors forever, all their rights, titles and privileges, whatsoever, to the lands included within the following limits, that is to say… [[38]](#footnote-38)

The ‘Indian’ signatories to this treaty signed, for the most part, with an ‘x’. Without going into the details of the treaty, the image of Treaty 6 below demonstrates some issues presented by the treaty, with long sentence of English legalese. Even a fluent and literate English-speaker might have trouble reading, let along understanding the legal significance, of the finely written long lines of text:

[[39]](#footnote-39)

Will settled on the land ‘given’ to him by the Canadian government. He also brought with him a woman he had met while serving with the air force in England: Kathleen Griffiths. She was, as my grandmother put it, a ‘belle of the ball’ in England; she didn’t last long on a remote farm in Alberta. She stayed until just after he was 2 years old, and then left – leaving Will Bain and his son, Ian, on a remote farm in Alberta. From there, he stayed in touch with his aging father, Jacob, in Vancouver.

## Letters from Vancouver: 1924

Jacob Bain, then in his late 70s, he took to writing letters to his son Will in Alberta. As described at the beginning of this section, Jacob’s letters are each kept in their own envelope. Each page is written in flowing, cursive handwriting: my grandmother suggests that the author had ‘an awareness of correct handwriting posture’ even if his hand was shaking somewhat with age.

The series of letters he wrote to his son, living on a farm in Ranfurly, Alberta, reveal some surprising similarities to present day. He was concerned with what he saw as a gradually warming climate:

“The Glaciers of the North Rocky Mountains have shrunken a great deal in the last few years since white men have been acquainted with them... These things all point to the idea that this Dominion is gradually growing warmer and that sometime in the future it may have a unparitirsly (?) genial climate.” (Feb 22, 1926)

He was interested in modern technology being installed:

You [had] written that [you] are installing a Radio instrument in your house. I hope you will be successful in getting it to work satisfactory, you will not seem as entirely shut off from the outside world. I see that the Bernice Radiophone can be heard quite plainly in the Peace River which I suppose is much farther that you are from here. (Dec 19, 1922)

And he also had opinions on political issues:

“Not that I think the party perfect by any means, but because it has a definite policy to carry out, a policy that would be for the best in treaty of the Dominion as a whole, and also for the Empire at large. The Liberal party is controlled by the French with 60% percent of its members are from Quebeck [sic] and interests of Quebec come first and last with them. They have a right to their share of the country interest but not the controle [sic] of the whole of them.” (July 17, 1926)

Apart from Jacob’s perspectives on climate change and politics, both of which have resonance 90 years later, in both of the above Jacob refers to the colonial state of Canada. First he refers to ‘the Dominion as a whole’. The word ‘dominion’ was actually the name of the new country upon Confederation, but was slowly dropped in common use[[40]](#footnote-40). The second text also refers to the ‘Empire at large’, suggesting that Euro-Canadians such as Jacob very much considered themselves a part of the British Empire.

These are hints at perhaps an obvious suggestion - the language of colonialism was very much a part of the day-to-day vocabulary in that time. Jacob Bain was already 22 by the time the Dominion of Canada was created. It seems that little of his language of colonialism was self-conscious, however – he did not express awareness of settler-colonialism as the basis of the country, and did not at least in existing records wonder about contemporary relations to land or Indigenous peoples.

This brings us back to another aspect of colonialism, as evidenced in the quote we began this section with. Society at the time was also quite openly and overtly racist. A head-tax on Chinese immigrants was in place - $50 in 1885, and $500 after 1903 – the equivalent of 2 years wages. Since 1895, the Provincial Elections Act of BC had stated:

"No Chinaman, Japanese or Indian shall have his name placed on the Register of Voters for any Electoral District, or be entitled to vote at any election."[[41]](#footnote-41)

Jacob would have been in living in Vancouver during the infamous visit of the Komagata Maru. The Komagata Maru, a ship inbound from India to Canada, arrived in 1914 with 376 passengers. The ship was not allowed to dock based on a ‘continuous journey’ law that was specifically designed to prevent Indian immigration. After significant legal dispute, and two months of being detained on board, the ship was turned back to India. Upon its arrival in Calcutta, 20 passengers were killed. Canadian immigration laws were not changed by the incident[[42]](#footnote-42). This incident had been preceded, a few years earlier, by activities of what was called the “Asian Exclusion League”. As report years later in the Vancouver Sun summarizes the race riots of 1907:

“The Asiatic Exclusion League was formed and, on a Saturday night, September 9 [1907], a great rally for the league took place… A monster parade marched down Hastings Street that night… someone shouted “on to Chinatown” and the trouble started… On the first trip only rocks were thrown and hundreds of windows were broken. The second trip proved more vicious, for this time there was gunfire.” (from Albert Foote, “Vancouver Revolt Cost City $16,000”, *The Vancouver Sun Magazine,* 6 September 1947; as quoted in Vancouver: A City Album, p. 59.)

This racism is linked significantly with the broader presence of colonialism. Unlike in the rest of Canada, in most of British Columbia the government had neglected to make any ‘Indian treaties’ at all. Thus, the land remained ‘unceded’ – technically and legally the territory of Indigenous peoples. Despite this, the colonial project continued in full force across the province – a topic to be explored further in other parts of this project.

## Back to Vancouver – Fort Langley

Eventually, Will and his son Ian made the move from their Ranfurly farm to the westernmost side of Canada – Vancouver. They moved soon after Will’s father, Jacob, died in 1926.

Will and his unmarried sisters, Mabel and Nell, made the decision to move to one of the oldest white settlements in British Columbia – Fort Langley. By the 1930s Fort Langley had long passed the heyday of the mid-1800s, when the small wooden-walled ‘fort’ was temporarily made capital of the new province of British Columbia. The community had, and still has, a ‘historic feel’ – meaning in the Canadian context that the legacy of colonialism is a little more explicit here than elsewhere. Mabel and Nell built a house and extensive garden, and Will built a small home nearby[[43]](#footnote-43).

The Indigenous history of Fort Langley and area has been extensively researched and documented. Just a few decades before the Bains moved to Fort Langley, in 1910-1912, the Government of British Columbia established McKenna-McBride commission, which was tasked with resolving the ‘Indian reserve questin’ in British Columbia. While the commission had a very limited mandate, and for the most part reduced already tiny reserves, as a part of those hearings, the chiefs spoke eloquently to their rights and title. The chief of the Langley band, for example, shared these words:

To-day I am telling you that I own the land, and it don't belong to anyone else - I own the land and I own the water. I have never had anyone to help me out with the Government or from anyone – the whitemen have taken our land and we have never got anything. During the time Simon Fraser came here my grandfather was up at Sapperton - when he came they were kind to him - Was it because the Indians were too kind to him that the Government is not going to give us a square deal?

MR. COMMISSIONER MACDOWALL: This question has been dealt with by the Government at Ottawa and they have decided to refer the question of Indian Title to the High Court of Canada with the right of an appeal to the Privy Council of England.

THE CHIEF: During Governor Seymour's time… we were told that the Governor was going to give us some more land and give us reserves, and he said that the Government was going to pay the Indians for the outside lands and that was in his speech… since that speech was made, we have never heard anything more about it, and I am tired waiting now for the compensation from the Government. [[44]](#footnote-44)

Unfortunately the Chief’s frustration around Indian title was not dealt with by the governments of the time, and remains for the most part unresolved to this day.

The Bain family came to Vancouver, from a long history in the ‘Dominion’ or colony we call Canada. They were an ordinary family with extra-ordinary moments; in ways that were often not evident to they and their comrades, they benefitted from the colonial institutions that others of European origin had built as part of this settler-colony. Many traits are carried from generation to generation: an affinity for the natural sciences, Protestant religion, and rural living. At the same time, our family has consistently been the beneficiary of a system that privileges ‘wasps’ – White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Even as the Bain family continues to thrive on this land, it is important to name, acknowledge, and make connections between the fair-haired *Bàins* and *Bhàins* and the Indigenous peoples on whose lands we reside.

1. https://noii-van.resist.ca/?page\_id=94 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \*\* still looking for info Hastings Mill and whether they were actually this blatant about differential wages/firings \*\*\* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Still in the works ☺ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thurso> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Thurso,_Caithness,_Scotland>. More info: http://www.scottishaccommodationindex.com/thursopics.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.ambaile.org.uk/?service=feature&action=do\_advanced\_search&language=en&publication=&author=Emigration&description=Canada&date\_from=1820-01-01&date\_to=1832-12-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The island was first colonized by the French, who aimed to make PEI a ‘granary’ for their fort at Louisburg, Cape Breton; however many Acadian residents were forcibly removed by the British after the fall of Louisburg in 1758. 2011 population of just under 150,000 residents - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince\_Edward\_Island [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/population_bkg.pdf>: Although proprietors were obliged to settle their properties with “foreign Protestants,” a great deal of the subsequent immigration into the colony was undirected. Moreover, it was never “foreign” and only sometimes “Protestant.” Highland Scots dominated the early British colonization period. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.islandnewspapers.ca/islandora/object/guardian%3A19370925-010

   “History of the North River Baptist Church” By Gordon C. Warren, of Acadia Univesity, Wolfville, N.S. a Native Son – Sept 1932. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Government of PEI Historical Milestones, <http://www.gov.pe.ca/infopei/index.php3?number=12183&lang=E>. One noteworthy character was Lord Selkirk, Thomas Douglas, who in 1803 brought 800 (!!) Scottish Highlanders to PEI. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “History of the North River Baptist Church” By Gordon C. Warren, of Acadia Univesity, Wolfville, N.S. a Native Son – Sept 1932. http://www.islandnewspapers.ca/islandora/object/guardian%3A19370925-010 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Island Narratives Project, William, Francis and Laura Bain: http://vre2.upei.ca/cap/node/887 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It was in Colonial House that the ‘fathers of confederation’ met in the 1860s. The building has since been renamed ‘Province House’ – like much of Canada, retaining the colonial infrastructure while changing the terminology. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. from http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/pe/provincehouse/natcul/natcul1.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ellen’s family, which is explored in further depth in another section (still to come), had roots back to Maine [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. http://www.gov.pe.ca/infopei/index.php3?number=19670&lang=E [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. http://www.gov.pe.ca/infopei/index.php3?number=19670&lang=E. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Tammy MacDonald, Research Director, MCPEI. Mi'kmaq Presence on Prince Edward Island: a 12,000 year history <http://www.mcpei.ca/files/u1/Mi_kmaq_history_on_PEI_1.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Tammy MacDonald, Research Director, MCPEI. Creation of the Reserves on PEI. http://www.mcpei.ca/files/u1/Creation\_of\_the\_Reserves\_on\_PEI\_1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <http://www.mcpei.ca/files/u1/Mi_kmaq_history_on_PEI_1.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. http://www.mcpei.ca/files/u1/Creation\_of\_the\_Reserves\_on\_PEI\_1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. http://www.mcpei.ca/files/u1/Creation\_of\_the\_Reserves\_on\_PEI\_1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. http://www.mcpei.ca/files/u1/Creation\_of\_the\_Reserves\_on\_PEI\_1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. http://www.mcpei.ca/files/u1/Mi\_kmaq\_history\_on\_PEI\_1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. He attended school at the home of a pastor’s wife until 13 or 14 years old, and then took a few terms in Charlottetown before being pulled out of school because of his brothers’ illness [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The Canadian Science Monthly 3(9) Sept 1885 127-129. Retrieved from http://eco.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8\_04165\_17/10?r=0&s=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Prince Edward Island’s Early Natural History Society – by Winifred (Cairns) Wake http://vre2.upei.ca/islandmagazine/fedora/repository/vre:islemag-batch2-496/OBJ/07\_Prince\_Edward\_Island-s\_early\_Natural\_p\_27-33.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. <http://eco.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8_04195_21/17?r=0&s=1> Canadian Record of Science, Volume 4 no. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Mentioned at the end of this article: http://www.islandnewspapers.ca/islandora/object/guardian%3A19370925-010

    “History of the North River Baptist Church” By Gordon C. Warren, of Acadia Univesity, Wolfville, N.S. a Native Son – Sept 1932. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Daily Examiner, Feb 28 1883, as quoted here http://vre2.upei.ca/islandmagazine/fedora/repository/vre%3Aislemag-batch2-82/OBJ [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Linda Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies (1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lilies of My Field, p. 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Being a schoolteacher was a common occupation for young women of the time. By the 1920s it was becoming more acceptable for young women to work – Barman quotes a Vancouver school official saying in 1925 that women no longer “recede from competition with men in industry in their desire for economic independence”. However, the Dawson primary school was led by a ‘head teacher’ rather than a ‘principal’, because it would not be seen as appropriate to have a woman as a principal. (Vancouver Historical Society newsletter). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Historical Issues: Canada’s Bureaucratic Colonization of Indigenous Peoples.” No One Is Illegal Vancouver. 2007. <http://noii-van.resist.ca> March 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Dictionary of Canadian Artists by McDonald, cited in Lilies of My Field p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Mary Barr (25 years old, 5’5” with brown hair) and Hazel McRome (23 years old, 5’4”). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Will add more about her art etc – need to do more research & ask Grandma. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. From http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100028710/1100100028783 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Photo from http://treaty6education.lskysd.ca/treaty6 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In fact it was not until 1982 and the repatriation of the constitution that ‘Dominion Day’ became ‘Canada Day’. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. “From Racism to Redress: The Japanese Canadian Experience.” The Canadian Race Relations

    Foundation. <http://www.crr.ca/> March 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/komagata-maru/ [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ask Dad & Bain brothers more about this. Mabel & Nell’s house still standing? [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Meeting with the Indians of Langley Band, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)