

Stephanie Halmhofer - "As one looks at the stone the questions arise": Nativism, Mythologized Histories, and the Conservation of Cultural Heritage in British Columbia

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Slide 1 Title: Hello everyone! My name is Steph Halmhofer, I'm a PhD student in the Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology at the University of Alberta. Today I'm going to share a bit of weird history behind the development of British Columbia's cultural heritage protection laws, which cover archaeology in the province. More specifically, I'm going to be talking about this group you see on the screen, who were called the Native Sons of BC, and the role they played in the establishment of those laws and how mythologized histories, including pseudoarchaeology, were very much part of that establishment. There's actually very little that has been written about the Native Sons of BC, and exactly zero written about their use of pseudoarchaeology. **A lot of my discussion** will be related to these two guys – Bruce McKelvie and Victor Harrison, who had prominent roles in what I'll be talking about today.

Slide 2 Who were the Native Sons: Who were the Native Sons of British Columbia? They were a nativist organization in BC that was established in 1899 and quietly closed down in the late 1990s. The Native Sons of BC were also a fraternal organization, with titles and ceremonies virtually identical to Freemasonry, including the secretive nature. There was a woman's version, called the Native Daughters of BC, who the Native Sons sometimes collaborated with on projects.

I said that they were a nativist organization. What do I actually mean by that? If you're unfamiliar with what nativism means, **in its absolute most basic** sense it's a sociopolitical belief that 'the own people' should come first. In the case of the Native Sons of BC, that referred to protecting the interests of anyone who was born in British Columbia.

Slide 3 Who were the Native Sons: But when looking more closely at nativism, you can see that it is a racist and xenophobic discourse within the broader umbrella of exclusionary nationalism.

Nativism today is actually a core part of the global far-right. This definition of nativism definitely applies to the Native Sons of BC. When they first formed, membership was open to any man over the age of 18 who was born in BC. This included Indigenous and Asian-Canadian men. But in the 1910s and 20s, the Native Sons began to more strongly promote a mythologized pioneer history of BC that was focused on promoting white settler history. This new nativist approach by the Native Sons was made obvious when they announced that Asian-Canadian men were no longer allowed membership in the organization, **and through** the active role the Native Sons of BC took in opposing immigration from Asian countries. Especially from Japan, and later also opposition to immigration from China.

Slide 4 *Protecting Prosperity by Protecting the Past:* Examining the membership records of the Native Sons, Forrest Pass noticed that membership was highest amongst lower middle-class men. I believe the highest employment categories for Native Sons members were clerks, followed by skilled labourers. Pass noted that the Native Sons sought to bolster economic positions and social status of its membership and turned to promoting a glorified and mythologized pioneer history of BC that their membership could connect with, and which the province more broadly could use to develop a distinct provincial identity.

Slide 5 *Burden of history:* The Native Sons didn't have a specific story they promoted, but rather they generally promoted a history that emphasized the accomplishments of BC pioneers while marginalizing Indigenous peoples into the oppositional "others" that the pioneers bravely encountered upon their arrival in BC, with the goal of creating a more beneficial and privileged world for their members. Unsurprisingly, they were also really into the British Empire, but for this presentation I'm focusing on the BC stuff. Pass identified the Native Sons mythologized pioneer history as being in line with what Elizabeth Furniss referred to as the "frontier cultural complex." As Furniss described, frontier myths persist because they're flexible. Additionally, what gives mythologized histories their power is narrative, not fact. Narratives can be built and rebuilt into new, more beneficial stories, from the same images, symbols, objects, and so on.

Slide 6 *The Power of Heritage*: As the Native Sons turned their attention to using pioneer myths to create a distinct BC identity, heritage became one of their most important tools. Which isn't particularly surprising because heritage can be a powerful part of identity-building. So in the 1920s, the Native Sons, especially under the direction of Bruce McKelvie, began to put an enormous amount of attention towards protecting two particular outlets of heritage. One was historic settler structures, and the Native Sons began buying historic properties to preserve their structures and turn them into museums.

Slide 7 *Heritage con't*: The Native Sons bought a lot of historic structures around the province, but they're most recognized for two. One is the Bastion, in Nanaimo, the Native Sons bought in 1907. It looks pretty much the same today as it did when they owned it. It was oldest remaining Hudson's Bay Company Post in BC, and the Native Sons bought it and turned it into a sort of unofficial headquarters for themselves, as well as a museum. It was an incredibly important building to them and the beginning of their push to preserve through purchase. They sold it in 1958, I believe, to the city of Nanaimo, but not without a lot of internal argument.

Slide 8 *Heritage con't*: The second building the Native Sons are recognized for saving, which you may recognize from the image I included on the title slide, this this storehouse at Fort Langley. It's the only remaining original building from the Fort, which was an HBC fur trading fort. In the 1920s the Native Sons bought the building and surrounding 3 acres and in 1931 they opened the building as a museum.

Slide 9 *Relics of a Passing Age*: The second outlet of heritage that the Native Sons turned their attention towards was archaeology and First Nations archaeological belongings. The Native Sons built a fairly large collection of archaeological belongings and became intensely invested in pushing for the protection of First Nations archaeological sites and belongings. In the 1920s this was actually their primary focus. Now, all of this was done through the lens of the mythologized pioneer history that the Native Sons was intensely pushing. To promote the vision of triumphant pioneers, the Native Sons needed something against which they could measure pioneer

progress. Robert Leece noted that to do this, the Native Sons repositioned First Nations as “relics of a passing age,” through which inclusivity of contemporary First Nations was replaced with protecting objects that defined the past. Included within that was also repositioning narratives of the history of such objects. Pseudoarchaeology became an important part of this repositioning. As the Native Sons argued, these objects, including petroglyphs, weren’t created by the local First Nations, they were created *by someone else* who had settled the lands first and that’s why they looked so “advanced.”

Slide 10 Have you heard of Mu: This whole presentation actually grew out of a question about pseudoarchaeology from an archivist. I was visiting the small Nanaimo archives one day to collect archival materials about this guy, Brother XII, and his conspiratorial organization the Aquarian Foundation, who are at the centre of my PhD research. Bruce McKelvie and Victor Harrison are characters in the Brother XII story, which takes place in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Brother XII was an Atlantis guy, but as the archivist was pulling out the Brother XII boxes she asked me if I had heard of Mu. **If you haven’t heard of Mu**, it’s a pseudoarchaeological lost continent story, kind of like another version of Atlantis. It was popularized in the early 20th century by James Churchward, who argued that Mu was a continent somewhere in the Pacific that was home to an ancient technologically advanced civilization of white people who were also the ancestors of various cultures around the world, and this could be seen in similarities of megalithic architecture between places like Egypt, Central and South America, India, and so on. Mu was ultimately broken apart and sunk by a series of earthquakes and volcanos about 12,000 years ago.

Slide 11 Harrison’s Letter: The reason the archivist mentioned Mu was because of this very long letter on the screen, written by Victor Harrison in 1926, who at the time was a historian for the Native Sons at their Nanaimo post, and Bruce McKelvie had just been voted in as the Grand Historian of the whole organization.

Slide 12 Hepburn Stone: The report was about this rock carving, called the Hepburn Stone after the man who found it on his property in 1923. It's currently housed at the Nanaimo Museum. The man who found the rock carving gave it to the Native Sons in 1926 so that they could study it and try to figure out where it came from. Harrison studied the stone and wrote, "as one looks at the stone, the questions arise: who cut those well-defined lines on its surface? And why?" I sound a bit like Dr. Seuss. His report concluded that the lines on the stone could only have been carved by a very intelligent people who lived on the west coast *prior* to the local First Nations, who were the survivors of the destruction of Mu and who were telling the story of that destruction through the lines carved in the stone.

Slide 13 pseudoarch con't: It wasn't just the Hepburn stone that the Native Sons gave a pseudoarchaeological explanation, it was pretty much all First Nations belongings and petroglyph sites they visited. And it also wasn't just Mu they were focused on. Bruce McKelvie in particular had lots of theories as to a pre-First Nations history of BC, which included claims that the Lost Tribes of Israel had come to BC via China. If I remember his argument correctly he said that the Lost Tribes had first settled in China and then their descendants had come to BC. In addition to other ancient Chinese explorers McKelvie said came to BC even earlier. McKelvie also sometimes talked about a generic ancient advanced civilization who had settled in BC, which may or may not have been Harrison's Mu. Basically anyone but First Nations were responsible for the intricate petroglyphs and other rock art and belongings found around the province. It's the same lazy argument we see in contemporary pseudoarchaeological claims.

Slide 14 The Historic Objects Act: Unlike contemporary pseudoarchaeology, however, McKelvie and the Native Sons actually pushed for *more* involvement from scientists and archaeologists in finding out more about what they believed was BC's pre-First Nations past. They valued archaeological expertise and believed that objects like the Hepburn Stone and similar Mitchell Stone would lead archaeologists to become more involved in examining that history. But that was going to be hard to do without proper support to archaeologists, universities, and museums, and with sites at constant risk for destruction because of a lack of legal protection.

Slide 15 The Historic Objects Act con't: So in 1924 the Native Sons began to lobby the BC government to protect historic objects and sites in the province. They even worked with government officials to draft a bill, named the Pinkie McKelvie bill after Bruce McKelvie's nickname, to present to the government. At the same time, the Native Sons also started to convince BC archaeologists at the University of British Columbia that UBC should have an archaeology department. And their lobbying worked. In 1925 UBC announced that they were opening an archaeology department, and the McKelvie Bill passed, resulting in the creation of the Historic Objects Act.

Slide 16 The Historic Objects Act con't: The HOA declared that First Nations belongings and sites were historic objects protected against interference and destruction. The **HOA** also made for the beginning of BC's archaeological permitting system, as it allowed for some alterations to belongings and sites if a permit was first obtained from the provincial secretary. This clause was added with UBC's new archaeology department in mind.

Slide 17 The Historic Objects Act con't: Over many decades of amendments, the Historic Objects Act became the Heritage Conservation Act, which is the current heritage protection legislation in BC and covers archaeology. All archaeologists in the province need to follow the regulations set out in the Act, including the permit requirements. **It's similar, though much** expanded, to the original HOA set out by the Native Sons. There is one peculiar aspect to the Heritage Conservation Act, however, that the Native Sons would have been rather displeased with. While they really pushed for the protection of First Nations sites and belongings, they also pushed for the protection of settler sites. **The current HCA** does not cover sites post-dating 1846. Don't ask me why because I really don't know. This was added to the HCA in 1994 and I don't anyone who knows why it was added. It's not impossible to get protection for post-1846 sites, but it is difficult. So the Native Sons would have had to really fight for the protection of a lot of settler structures they wanted to protect.

Slide 18 Nativism, Mythologized Histories, and the Far-Right today: To wrap up this presentation I want to reiterate that nativism and the use of mythologized histories like those used by the Native Sons of BC, including pseudoarchaeology and other forms of historical revisionism, are still major parts of the global far-right today. And because the far-right carries more political impact than what it should, nativism and mythologized histories are **still being connected to policy** by those with the power to do so. The two examples on the screen are from a North American context, but this isn't limited to just North America. These two examples are full of nativist and historical revisionist-driven suggestions for policy changes in all sorts of sectors, including those that could impact archaeology and heritage protection.

Slide 19 Conclusion: As archaeologists, we have knowledge and expertise that positions us well to recognize mythologized histories and historical revisionism, including pseudoarchaeology. Our knowledge also gives us temporal depth to turn to and see how mythologized histories and historical revisionism have been used to support various narratives and their potential impacts. For example, looking at the Native Sons in the 1920s through to similar groups today. And when we recognize their use in harmful narratives, such as right-wing nationalist nativist discourse, we can confront those narratives by collectively speaking out and pushing back against them. Discussing methods is beyond the scope of this presentation, but I will say that those who promote harmful narratives are counting on our silence, and by refusing to grant them that we can begin to destabilize the foundations they are trying to build up from.

Slide 20: Thank you!

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