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IED 373

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Aboriginal Treaties: Sir James Douglas Letters 1850

The resource I chose is a copy of a letter by Governor James Douglas from mid May, 1850. When I started the search for a resource for this assignment I was unsure as to what type of source I was looking for but knew I wanted it to be useful in a social studies and/or history context for high school age students. I started the search by looking at teaching resources for aboriginal history, and I found many great websites for interactive and online learning for students of many ages and other resources. Through this I ended up coming across a webpage (University of Victoria and Canadian Heritage) which discussed some “Governor’s Letters”, as in Governor James Douglas. This got me curious about what these letters actually said since they weren’t on this webpage I then searched the Internet for some of these letters and eventually I found them on Library and Archives Canadawebsite**,** which seems to be the only one to have them. I ended up typing out the letters myself as the scanned copies online require magnification to read them as well as some words need a little more focus to decipher what the word is, so it became easier to decipher it once and type it out rather than repeating the process.

This letter describes, in detail but in simple terms, the process in which some of the treaties were drawn up for southern Vancouver Island. The letters discuss which groups were involved, and who from these groups were a part of the writing of the treaties, “chiefs and influential males” (Sir James Douglas). It also discussed the prices, which land was sold and how they were paid. This peaked some interest, as there were different ideas on how to do this, annually or in full from the beginning. However, it does not go into detail how and why the price was decided upon. Also in some cases the money was divided among the tribe and in others it was given to the chiefs directly, another interesting note. Also, after the tribe had sold their land they were still “at liberty to hunt over the unoccupied lands, and to carry on their fisheries with the same freedom as when they were the sole occupants” (Sir James Douglas), I am unsure how long this lasted for. Also since, that was said from the point of view of Governor Douglas, it would be important to examine the Aboriginal Peoples view on this. Finally, this letter ends with a questionable statement on the side of the colonialists; James Douglas states that the First Nations part of the negotiations signed the contract without having the actual contract there as they were told it would be copied later. This raises the question of were the conditions written in the contract later the same as what was discussed with the Aboriginal Peoples at the time they signed the paper verbally.

The aspects that I found interesting about this resource is that it is a primary source, from only one perspective, direct information about treaties, local areas, and it is simple to understand. The fact that these letters were written in 1850, when these treaties were being created makes them a useful source to some extent. Having a first hand account, and especially one from Governor James Douglas, allows us to understand his understanding on the treaties being written, and a little on the process required. Having said that, these letters only represent one perspective. It must be considered that there is another side to this story, coming from multiple tribes. I like this as it allows the students to have a resource that you can compare to another and get a better understanding of the events. When teaching this source it would need to be paired with another source that represents the First Nations side of the treaty topic on Vancouver Island in the 1850’s. This resource, being a primary source, gives us insight to the points of view of the colonialists and their thoughts and motives. Looking through textbooks today, for example, would discuss these treaties but may not be able to fully develop one side of the story due to the idea of maintaining as little biased as possible, from a western way of teaching. This source gives us information about the treaties, such as how much the land cost, the conditions, and wants of the Hudson’s Bay Company. With this source directly talking about local areas like Sooke, Cowichan, and Gordon Head it gives the information an added meaning to those reading it. As soon as I read that these areas were the land in question I immediately became more interested as I could relate to it, as I live in Gordon Head. Some primary sources can be difficult to read, which this one was but only as it was hand written and spelling at the time was different than it is today. After deciphering the letter and typing it out into an electronic document it was fairly straightforward to understand. This helps to raise interest in the document as when something is easy to understand they document tends to be more interesting. Also making it a better teaching resource, as it is straightforward and informative. Overall this source is interesting to be used as a source in a high school social studies and/or a history class.

The topic, within a history or social studies context, that this resource relates to is Vancouver Island treaties between James Douglas and the native people of the region, Songees, Klallam, Sooke, Cowichan (First Nations Peoples. 2008), who were named directly in the letter. The primary letter in this source is written, in 1850, very shortly after three of the treaties were completed. From 1850 to 1854 James Douglas wrote fourteen treaties with the Native Peoples of Vancouver Island (British Columbia). All of these purchases were for the Hudson’s Bay Company, for settlement and industry. Comparatively, from the beginning Hudson’s Bay Company, “had developed a colonial policy that recognized aboriginal possession of the land” (British Columbia). This makes sense as to why they bought it, but the letter doesn’t give any information as to if they understood what the land meant to the Aboriginal People and if they took that into any consideration when offering to buy land.

The Governor James Douglas letter I would use in a high school social studies and/or history class. This is because the letters are a primary source and therefore have historical significance to Canada and in particular Vancouver Island. Assuming that I am teaching on Southern Vancouver Island, where the letter specifically references, the students would, hopefully, have more of a connection to the events. As the event describes occurred where they live. With the students having more of connection to the location of the events it would help them understand the relevance of the situation and become more significance to them. I would use this source as part of an assignment where they would analyze the letter, distinguish the biases that they found, as well as bring up questions they had in regards to the letter for further discussion in the next lesson.

As for the age of the students, high school, this age is a minimum because when analyzing primary sources the reader needs to be able to understand that the source will likely will have some form of bias as it was written during the time of the event and will reflect the social, political, and cultural views as well as circumstances of the time. A younger age may not be able to distinguish between the fact that this piece of non-fiction may not be true today. I would use this resource near the middle of unit about the colonialism that took place in Canada and specifically British Columbia. This is because some background in regards to both cultures should be given for the students to have proper understanding of the relevance of the resource. In particular the Aboriginal side as in the past has been not been appropriately covered in the past. Also the treaties were not the first contact the colonialists and the First Nations had, and therefore their first contact should be talked about as well before this source is presented to the class. The end of the unit should discuss the aftermath of colonization for both groups, better focus on the First Nations, as there were greater affects for them than the other group.

When presenting this resource to a class, it would require the students to understand the cautions required when analyzing a primary source. The need to keep in mind that the resource was not written in their time, there would likely be biases. Having said all that this resource is informative of the treaty situation in 1850 on Vancouver Island. This credible source, as we know that James Douglas was a large part of them, as today they are still referred to this day as the Douglas Treaties. There are just some biases to consider. I would also pair or follow up this resource with one about treaties in 1850 from the Aboriginal Peoples side to balance the information, as there are always at least two sides to every story. In this case I may even, if found, present an Aboriginal resource from someone or tribe who liked the treaties and someone or tribe who did not.

In conclusion, I found this source, very interesting and relevant. In particularly from a social studies and history teaching stand point. I found this source to be detailed enough to be informative as well as fairly easy to read once deciphered. I enjoyed this source and hope to use it in the future as a teacher.

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The below transcript was taken from original source.

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Douglas, Sir James

MG 24, A 35

Letterbooked

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2238

Sir James Douglas

Correspondence 1850- 55

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Fort Victoria,

16th May 1850.

Archibald Marclay Msqr.,

Sir,

I have the honor to acknowledge

Your communication of December 1849, stating in a more

Detail form the views of the Governor and Committee res-

pecting the Colonisation of this Island, the rights of the

Natives, and thie instructions as to the extent to which

These rights are to be respected.

On the receipt of that letter I summoned to a conference

the Chiefs and influential (men) of the Songees Tribe, which

inhabits and claims the District of Victoria from Gordon Hedd

on Ano Strait to Point Albert on the Strait of the De Fuca as

their own particular heritage. After considerable discussion,

it was arranged that the whole of their lands forming as

before stated the District of Victoria should be sold to the

Company, with the exception of village sites and enclosed

Fields, for a certain remuneration, to be paid at once to

Each member of the tribe. I was in favour of a series of

Payments to be made annually, but the proposal was so gener-

Ally disliked that I yielded to their wishes and paid the

sum at once.

The members of the Tribe on being mustered were found to

Number 122 men or heads of families, to each of whom was

Given a quantity of goods equal in value to 177 sterling and

the total sum disbursed, on this purchase ₤103.14.0 sterling

at Dept. price. I subsequently make a similar purchase from

the Clallum Tribe, of the country lying between Albert Point

and Soke Inlet, in consequence of the claiments not being

as well known as the Songees, we adopted another mode of

making the payments by dealing exclusively with the Chiefs,

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who received and distributed the payments while the sale was

confirmed and ratified by the Tribe collectively. This

special purchase cost about ₤30.0.8 I have since made a

purchase from the Soke Tribe of the land between Soke Inlet

and Point Sherungham, the arrangements being concluded in

this, (a)s in the preceding purchase with the Chiefs or heads

of families who distributed the property among their follow-

ers. The cost of this tract which does not contain much

available land was ₤16.8.6. The Cowetchin and other Tribes

have since expressed a wish to dispose of their lands on

the same terms, but I declined their proposals in consequence

of our not being prepared to enter into possession, which

ought to be done immediately after the purchase, or the ar-

rangements may be forgotten and further compensations claimed

by the Natives. The lands purchased from the other Tribes

embrace the s(eacoa)st and interior from Gordon Head on the

Ano Strait to Point Gonzales, and from thence running west

along the Strait de Fuca to Point Sherungham, a distance of

about 44 miles, which includes the Hudson’s Bay and Puget

Sound Companys’ Reserves.

The total cost as before stated is ₤150.3.4

I informed the Natives that they would not be disturbed

in the possession of the Village sites and enol sed fields,

which are of small extent, and that they were at liberty to

hunt over the unoccupied lands, and to carry on their fisher-

ies with the same freedom as when they were the sole occupants

of the country.

I attached the signatures of the native Chief’s and

others who subscribed the deed of purchase to a blank sheet

in which will be copied the contract of Deed of conveyance,

as soon as we receive a proper form, which I beg may be sent

out by return of Post. The other matters referred to in

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your letter will be duly attended to.

I have the honor to be,

Sir,

Your Obedient Servant

(Sd) James Douglas

received in London 7th Aug. Fort Victoria, 16th May 1850.

Archibald Barclay, Esqr.

Sir,

I have to acknowledge the receipt of

the 8th Inst. of your letter of the 8th Feb. by the Barque

England direct from St. Francisco.

The instructions therein respecting a reserve of 100

acres of land for Captain Grant in the vicinity of his farm

will meet with attention.

The communication noted in the margin of your letter,

have been received as will be observed, by the reference to

them, in my several letters to your address.

I am most happy to learn that the Governor and Committee

approve of the advances made to Captain Grant on his first

arrival in the Colony. I have sense censod making further advances

on his account since the month of December last, as he does

not manage his affairs with the degree of prudence and at-

tention to economy so necessary under any circumstances and

more particularly with his limited means to the attainment of

success.

He has made no other survey than the outline sketch

transmitted with my letter of the 3rd April. I have therefore

no sketches to send at present, neither do I suppose that he

will every accomplish the surveys you have so repeatedly re-

quired me to procure

I would have long ere this employed another person to

Make these surveys had it not been for heavy charges,