



The quiet waterfront at the settlement
of Campbell River in July 1910.
Photo by Frank Ward
courtesy Museum at Campbell River

Introduction

by Philip Stone

*T*o British Columbian's, and people from all over the world, that treasure BC's parks, there is a dog-eared, loosely bound sheaf of paper that has sat in museum archives and a few family bookshelves that tells a priceless story.

It is the story of the 1910 Strathcona Discovery Expedition, an adventure that would explore and then pave the way for legislation creating the very first of British Columbia's Provincial Parks.

It is a curious fact that for most Canadians, even many British Columbians, Vancouver Island is virtually unknown. The name suggests something akin to the Island of Montreal or Manhattan, a small urban island forming part of that west coast city. The truth is of course that Vancouver Island is a huge island, the world's 43rd largest in fact. It is covered with towering forests, carved by rugged inlets, run by turbulent rivers and crowned along its spine by a spectacular range of mountains.

Looking southward down Buttle Lake
with the rugged summits of the ‘Great
Central Crags’ in the distance above
Price Pass.
Photo by Philip Stone

The region’s First Nations knew this better than any. They traversed the Island for millennia through the mountains: trading, warring, hunting, gathering and, in places, for ceremonies, funerals and quests.

When European settlers began to arrive and colonize the west coast in the mid to late 1800’s, it was the lure of mineral and timber riches that first drew them to explore the Island’s interior. Like the First Nations, they found the best land for settlements to be along the southeast coast of the island. The vast forests and ore seams inland provided employment and resources to fuel these new communities.

It was on an exploratory trip, up the Island’s west coast in 1865, that John James Taylor Buttle saw, what was assumed to be, the now much-loved lake that bears his name. Buttle commanded a party of seven onboard the H.M.S. Forward and in June 1865 headed for Clayoquot Sound where a previous exploratory voyage had left off.

Buttle and his team spent that summer navigating and charting the waterways and maze of islands in Clayoquot. Their work eventually led them to Bedwell Sound and inland up the Bear [Bedwell] River. On July 29 the party split up and Buttle and his team started up the Ursus River valley, climbing high up the surrounding hills to an elevation he estimated to be close to 6,000 ft. From here it best to let his own words, printed in the August 12 Daily British Colonist newspaper describe the scene:

“... I ascended one of the mountains arising from our camp, accompanied by Tomo and the two Indians.

At about 4000 feet we came to snow; this continued in various depths till we arrived at the summit, an altitude of about 6000 feet above the level of the sea. From the summit I got a good view in the direction of Comox; and in what I should judge to be the centre of the Island, I saw a very large body of water - I should suppose twenty miles long. It is either a chain of lakes, or else one very large lake with islands in it.”

Whether or not it was his namesake lake, or more likely Great Central Lake, word spread like a legend of the splendor of Buttle’s Lake secreted in the wilds of the Vancouver Island mountains.

Almost thirty years later Rev. William Bolton and his party arrived at the actual Buttle’s Lake from Nootka Sound via the Burman and Wolf rivers in August 1894. Reputedly Bolton was the first European to navigate the waters of Buttle Lake as part of an epic journey along the length of Vancouver Island.

Bolton’s expeditions were initiated and sponsored by the Province newspaper. His route weaved across the island from east coast to west, through the Nimpkish valley and Woss Lake to Tahsis, and from there onto Port Alberni via Buttle Lake and over the “Great Central Crags”.

From the reports of Buttle, Bolton and other contemporary explorers, surveyors, timber-cruisers, prospectors and sportsmen a picture of the scenic beauty of the Buttle’s Lake region took shape.

At the turn of the twentieth century, word of the legendary Tyee salmon at Campbell River was attracting tourists each summer to fish. Charles Thulin’s



Willows Hotel offered salubrious accommodation for well-heeled visitors from Vancouver, Victoria, San Francisco and beyond. Several accounts from the time tell that groups regularly hiked up the Quinsam trail from Campbell River to Buttle’s Lake. The trout fishing and scenery was making a name for the lake and the province’s nascent tourism industry was taking note.

Lobbying from various quarters eventually prompted the Provincial Government of Sir Richard McBride to take steps toward establishing a Park on Vancouver Island. Notable amongst park advocates was a tourism delegation held in 1909 in Vancouver. Land was duly set aside in the Strathcona Reserve, a large but oddly shaped area in the centre of the island.

The Hon. Price Ellison was the Commissioner of Lands in Sir Richard McBride’s cabinet and was by accounts, an enthusiastic supporter of Strathcona Park from the outset. It was just a matter of weeks between the reserve being established and Ellison’s departure from Victoria for Campbell River to explore it.

Colonel Holmes had already spent quite a bit of time in the Campbell River district working as a surveyor on several significant projects. He and his party had only just returned from one such foray, along the 50th parallel to survey the blocky north east corner of Strathcona, when they were met with the news, in Campbell River, of Ellison’s imminent arrival and the task ahead for the Discovery Expedition.

The 1910 Strathcona Discovery Expedition party at the south end of Buttle's Lake. Photo by Frank Ward courtesy Museum at Campbell River

Several members of Holmes' survey crew promptly turned around and headed back up the Campbell River with Ellison including James Manning and Rev. Bolton's son Gerald. Although Holmes gets a bit of a short-shrift in Harry McClure Johnson's account of the expedition, he was a highly experienced and valuable member of Ellison's team. Holmes had a hand in surveying most of the east boundary of Strathcona Park. He had accompanied William Ralph in the survey of the lamentable Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway Grant as well as the 50th parallel and Allen Creek (now Ranald Creek) Strathcona boundary block.

James Manning also left a written account of his time with Holmes and as part of the 1910 Strathcona Discovery Expedition. He reflects on the sensation that Ellison's expedition generated and the enthusiasm for the new Park.

It is a true shame that that spirit of excitement and pride was not kept alive throughout all of Strathcona Park's first hundred years.

Manning described the Discovery Expedition's adventure succinctly from his point of view, but what is clear that Price Ellison was well equipped and supported by a strong and experienced crew. The men from the Duncan Band along with several of the packers had already spent the better part of that spring and summer on the Campbell River and in the surrounding mountains and knew the river and region well. That in part may account for a bit of the lackadaisical manner that Johnson refers to.

In 1910 the outlook toward such endeavours as the Discovery Expedition was very different than today. For Price Ellison it must have felt part of his duty as Commissioner of Lands to explore the Strathcona Reserve firsthand. How else would he be able to make recommendations so that the Provincial cabinet could make an informed decision on the suitability of it as a Park? As you will read, for a man in less than ideal physical condition and well into his fifties, it was no small task.

Sadly that drive, determination and sense of duty in our Provincial leaders seems to somehow gone astray. It is a testament to its length, logistical hurdles and difficulty that even though the route and history are known very well, to the best of my knowledge it had not been repeated until the 2010 Centennial Expedition took up the challenge.

The route that Ellison proposed to travel through the new Park was to be a bold and strenuous undertaking.

From Campbell River he and his twenty-three companions began their journey along rough riverside trails and horse tracks to McIvor Lake. They had brought up two canoes from Victoria which were launched onto the lake. As well they had at their disposal a 35 ft. war canoe that had been brought up the previous summer by Charlie Thulin's partner Mr. Hannah. It took over two weeks to ferry the party and all their provisions up to Upper Campbell Lake.

At Lord Bacon's Landing (a character you will meet shortly) the exploratory expedition setup a basecamp of sorts, and planned their ascent of Crown Mountain.



Crown Mountain has been long over-shadowed by its more illustrious mountain neighbours to the south. When mountaineers think of Strathcona Park they will quickly recall Elkhorn, the Golden Hinde or Rambler Peak, but Crown Mountain not so much.

But a century ago Crown Mountain was playing a pivotal role in land planning whose results and implications we see clearly today. There must have been several factors that launched it into the spotlight: its proximity to the 50th parallel, its visibility as an isolated peak from Campbell River and notably its distance inland being suitable as the terminus of the E&N line. For Ellison even its name held portents. He was a minister of the Crown and the peak was

referred to as the "Crown of the Island". Although rumours may have called it the highest summit on Vancouver Island, it is hard to take that seriously when already in the 1860's British surveyors had pegged Mt. Everest's height from over 100 miles away.

Nevertheless Ellison was clearly taken with Crown Mountain and as Johnson's story relates, it was his determination that spurred the expedition on to its summit. They took an overland route that no one would even consider today (unless to retrace Ellison's line that is) hiking up and over an entirely different mountain before even beginning the climb.

Entering the Park from Upper Campbell Lake a select group of nine members of the Strathcona Discovery

The Strathcona Reserve as it was known in the early 1900s. Note the original extent of the Campbell River and lakes.

Expedition laboured their heavy packloads up Allen Creek (now named Ranald Creek)to the top of Mt Myra (now named Mt Evelyn).After a brief respite along the high ridge they descended all the way back to the valley bottom at Myra Lake before heading back up toward Crown Mountain.

On July 29th 1910 the Hon. Price Ellison, his daughter Myra King Ellison, nephew Harry McClure Johnson, Colonel Holmes and the rest of the summit team, stood on the top of Crown Mountain to christen it and the new park with champagne. If there is a moment that BC Parks began, this was it.

Their journey was far from over though. That afternoon they began their descent from the mountain and down into the North Fork of the Elk River (now Tlools Creek).They met the rest of the party, packers, cook and rivermen at the Elk River Camp exhausted but elated.

Pressing on the expedition headed out of the Elk River valley and south along the upper Campbell River to at last enter the magnificent “amphitheater” of Buttles’ Lake. It was more relaxing travel on the lake and they returned to their favourite pastime of trout fishing, stocking up for the next overland trek.

At the south end of Buttles’ Lake they said goodbye to Colonel Holmes who was to remain on the lake a while longer to survey it. At the same time a Captain Roberts arrived at Buttles’ Lake having just completed a survey from Great Central Lake over the ‘Great Divide’.

It was impeccable timing as this was exactly the route Ellison planned to take and now it was all marked and measured. They came to curse Roberts’ route as they tried to follow it up Price Creek and over Price Pass to Margaret Lake. However the reality is, that it is difficult enough just to move through that terrain let alone survey and blaze a trail at the first attempt.

The Great Divide is the watershed divide between east and west coast rivers. Leaving the Campbell drainage behind at Price Pass, the expedition then followed the course of Margaret Creek on its way to join Drinkwater Creek and Great Central Lake and out to Port Alberni on the west coast.

Although it is impossible to say exactly how far they travelled it is about 300 kilometres from Campbell River to Port Alberni that way.

The physical demands of that journey cannot be over-stated yet the legacy that resulted from it should never be under-stated.

When Price Ellison returned to Victoria there can be no doubt that the experiences and those of the entire expedition in Strathcona left an indelible impression upon them all. Ellison duly submitted his glowing report to cabinet and in March 1911 the Strathcona Act was passed into legislation establishing British Columbia’s first Provincial Park.

Following is Harry McClure Johnson’s account of the 1910 Strathcona Discovery Expedition. A story that deserves to be held up with the best and most vital of British Columbia’s heritage.

