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978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

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Colonial Relations

Colonial Relations offers a study of the lived history of nineteenth-century British imperialism through the lives of one extended family in North America, the Caribbean, and the United Kingdom. The prominent colonial governor James Douglas was born in 1803 in what is now Guyana, probably to a free woman of color and an itinerant Scottish father. While working in the North American fur trade, he married Amelia Connolly, the daughter of a Cree mother and an Irish-Canadian father. Adele Perry traces their family and friends over the course of the “long” nineteenth century, using careful archival research to offer an analysis of the imperial world that is at once intimate and critical, wide ranging and sharply focused. Perry engages feminist scholarship on gender and intimacy, critical analyses of colonial archives, transnational and postcolonial history, and the “new imperial history” to suggest how this period might be rethought through the experiences of one powerful family located at the British Empire’s margins.

ADELE PERRY is Professor of History and Senior Fellow, St. John’s College at the University of Manitoba.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

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Colonial Relations

*The Douglas-Connolly Family and the
Nineteenth-Century Imperial World*

Adele Perry

University of Manitoba



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Frontmatter

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Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
1 Empire, family, and archive	1
2 Housekeepers and wives	20
3 Free people, servants, and states	48
4 Changing intimacies, changing empire	79
5 Local elites, governance, and authority	108
6 Governors, wives, daughters, and sons	142
7 Colonies, nations, and metropolises	176
8 Wealth and descendants	218
9 Conclusion: empire, colonies, and families	254
<i>Select bibliography</i>	264
<i>Index</i>	288

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations

FIGURES

1.1	Douglas-Connolly family tree	<i>page 2</i>
1.2	The monument to Sir James Douglas, British Columbia Legislature, Victoria, BC (Image C-08263, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	12
1.3	Statue of James Douglas, Mahaica, Guyana, 2010 (photograph by Adele Perry)	16
2.1	E. Goodall, “View of Georgetown Guyana” (PY3047, courtesy of ©National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London)	22
2.2	Samuel Hearne, “A Northwest View of Prince of Wales Fort, Hudson’s Bay, c.1797 (MIKAN 2876663, courtesy of Library and Archives Canada)	30
3.1	<i>Map of British Guyana Containing the Colonies of Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice</i> (London: James Wyld, 1828). Plantations are numbered, and urban Georgetown is in the inset. (Maps 12-c-36, courtesy of ©British Library)	50
3.2	Agostino Brunias, “West Indian Creole Woman, with her Black Servant” (B1981.25.82, courtesy of the Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)	58
3.3	Robert Hood, “Likeness of Bois Brulé or the children of Europeans by Indian Women, February, 1820, Cumberland House, Hudson’s Bay” (NA-132-4, courtesy of Glenbow Archives)	71
4.1	A portrait, likely copied from a daguerreotype, created in Montreal of “Mrs. Connolly and her Two Children,” likely Julia Woolrich Connolly and her children, William Allen Connolly and Louise Magdeleine (Image 1-10550.0.1, courtesy of McCord Museum)	83

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of illustrations	vii
4.2 Gustavas Sohon, “Fort Vancouver, at the Mouth of the Columbia River, Washington Territory, 1853” (NA-1274–19, courtesy of Glenbow Archives)	88
5.1 Interior of Fort Victoria (Image A-04089, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	126
5.2 Henry James Warre, “My Partner at a Grand Ball Given at Fort Victoria, October 6th 1845” (Image C-058104, courtesy of Library and Archives Canada)	136
6.1 The Douglas home, Victoria. On the veranda are Amelia Connolly Douglas and her brother, probably Henry Connolly. (Image A-01264, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	145
6.2 “Composite” portrait of Amelia Connolly Douglas and James Douglas, with their daughter Martha Douglas Harris’ artwork embellishing the image (Image A-01230, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	150
6.3 Amelia Connolly Douglas in widow’s weeds (Image A-01234, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	161
6.4 Amelia Connolly Douglas, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren (Image A-00840, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	165
7.1 Victoria’s Pioneer Rifle Corps, also known as the Coloured Regiment or the African Rifles (Image C-06124, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	185
7.2 James Douglas, 1876 (Image A-05698, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	204
8.1 James William Douglas (Image A-01240, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	235
8.2 Jane Douglas Dallas and Martha Douglas. The photograph is marked Collier and Park, a photographer from Inverness, Scotland. (Image A-02202, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	239
8.3 Wedding of Martha Douglas and Dennis Harris, with Amelia Connolly Douglas at the right (Image A-09963, courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	242
8.4 James William Douglas, Mary Elliott Douglas, and their two sons, c.1882 (Image C-08623, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	243
9.1 Funeral of James Douglas, Victoria, 1877 (Image A-01264, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BC Archives)	255

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii List of illustrations

MAPS

- | | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | The Douglas-Connolly family's imperial world | 27 |
| 2 | Map of central Victoria, showing the property named in James Douglas' 1877 will and still owned by the estate in 1879 (courtesy of University of British Columbia Archives and Special Collections) | 245 |

TABLE

- | | | |
|---|--|----|
| 1 | Population, Demerara and Essequibo, 1811 | 53 |
|---|--|----|

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

If twenty years ago someone had told me I would write a book in part about James Douglas, my response would have fallen somewhere between disbelieving and horrified. In the British Columbia of the 1970s and '80s that I grew up in, James Douglas was a stock figure in celebratory local histories. I came to history as a student interested in connecting feminist and socialist politics to the past, and I could not see what role stories of brave fur traders and far-sighted governors might play here. Even when critical analyses of race and empire prompted me to return to British Columbia's past with my Ph.D. dissertation and what became my first book, my priority was to excavate the history of ordinary people in the history of empire, and Douglas was not one of those.

It was in the early 2000s that I started to see different possibilities in examining the histories of local colonial elites such as the Metis family in Red River Colony, painted by artist Peter Rindisbacher around 1825 and featured on the cover of this book. The northern North American history that occurred before the last third of the nineteenth century increasingly seemed like a time of radical possibility, though certainly not equity. Studying the particular history of James Douglas, his wife, Amelia Connolly, and their family seemed a useful way of making a pointed intervention into what was a growing literature on colonial histories and geographies, and of contributing to continuing efforts to put feminist and postcolonial perspectives into dialogue. These histories also provided a way of bringing historiographies of dispossession, migration, and gender into conversation and of mapping gender, kinship, and intimacy on a close and revealing scale. What I first imagined as a modest and contained sort of research project grew in ways that I would never have predicted, and the histories of James Douglas, Amelia Connolly, and their kin have absorbed my attention for more than a decade. This book is the end result, and I am oddly sad to see it go.

I have accrued what Antoinette Burton calls archive stories on three continents and from about twenty different archives. I would like to acknowledge the help of the British Columbia Archives, and in particular

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Acknowledgements

Fredericke Vespoor, David Matheson, Kelly-Ann Turkington and Diane Wardle who all helped me track down records. In Winnipeg, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and especially James Gorton and Chris Kotecki deserve mention. A number of archivists helped make materials available long-distance, and I thank Scott Daniels of the Oregon Historical Society and Joe Winterbourne of the Fort William Historical Park for their assistance. In Georgetown I used the Walter Rodney National Archives and I would like to thank Linda Peake, Karen de Souza, and Nigel Westmaas for their advice and direction, archivist Nadia Carter and Marlene Cox and Tota Magnar from the University of Guyana for their support. The University of Manitoba's librarians were always patient with my many requests for interlibrary loans. That the United Kingdom holds many of the relevant records is a telling point, and I should thank the British Library, the National Archives of Scotland, the National Archives at Kew, the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, and Cambridge's University Library's Rare Books Room here.

The internet can be a curse but it can also be a gift. Multi-sited and transnational research is made much more possible by the availability of historical sources online and open-access. I am grateful for the people and institutions who worked to make archival records available online. I would especially like to thank Patrick Duane and John Lutz, Jim Hendrickson, and their colleagues at the University of Victoria for making sources on nineteenth-century British Columbia, and more particularly the Colonial Office correspondence, available online at <http://bcgenesis.uvic.ca/index.htm> and for helping me with specific queries. I first read these records in their handwritten, microfilmed form, and am grateful that there is now a more accessible alternative. I do not know either John Lance Wilmer or Tikwis Begbie, but I am thankful for their work in making transcripts of Guyanese newspapers available online at www.vc.id.au/edg/index.html and an index of Guyanese colonists at www.vc.id.au/tb/.

If historians reject the presumption that history begins and ends within contemporary national borders, we need to follow lives and ideas along the routes they traveled. Doing so means learning new literatures and new archives, and the opportunity to learn about Guyana and the eastern Caribbean was a challenge as well as an intellectual pleasure. I also relied on the generosity and knowledge of other scholars who have worked on these histories. Charlotte Girard's 1970s and '80s scholarship on the Douglas family was in many ways work before its time, and the publications, unpublished material, and Charlotte's generous advice have been an enormous resource. John Adams's *Old Square Toes and his Lady* is an important book; I have returned to its pages regularly and appreciate John's knowledge and generosity. This is the second time that I have

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

xi

followed in Sylvia Van Kirk's archival footsteps, and my debts to her are substantial. The same is true for Jennifer Brown, whom I also thank for sharing unpublished material with me. Anne Lindsay helped me locate records I could not find and generously offered her research on the Connolly family to me. Nicholas Draper shared relevant files from his research on the economics of slave compensation in nineteenth-century Britain.

I have had many interlocutors and correspondents. I benefited from ongoing conversations with Laurie Bertram, Jarvis Brownlie, Diana Brydon, Antoinette Burton, Sarah Carter, Tina Mai Chen, David Churchill, Ann Curthoys, Karen Dubinsky, Ryan Eyford, Sherry Farrell Racette, Barry Ferguson, Patricia Grimshaw, Paula Hastings, Stuart C. Houston, Betsy Jameson, Esyllt Jones, Kurt Korneski, Marilyn Lake, Kiera Ladner, Mary Jane Logan McCallum, Richard Mackie, Kathryn McPherson, Erin Millions, Cecilia Morgan, Melanie Newton, Fiona Paisley, Steve Penfold, Todd Scarth, Alissa Trotz, Jane Van Roggen, Elizabeth Vibert, and Angela Wanhalla. Susan Armitage, Jean Barman, Bettina Bradbury, Sean Carleton, Gerry Friesen, Jean Friesen, and Kenton Storey all read the manuscript in its entirety, and I am especially grateful for Bettina's and Gerry's astute and careful readings. As series editor for the *Critical History of Empires* series, Catherine Hall has been an engaged, attentive, and (luckily) patient editor. I am responsible for whatever errors are in the pages that follow, and have been down this road enough to know that there will be some.

Research is a kind of thinking, and this is one of the reasons why I usually like to do it myself. But this project is much richer for the work of some capable research assistants: Jackie Cooney, Jarett Henderson, Jonathan Hildebrandt, Alexandre Michaud, and Karlee Sapoznik. Chris Hanna knows a great deal about the archives of nineteenth-century British Columbia, and he undertook the work with land records there. Laura Ishiguro did key work in the British archives. Krista Barclay made sense out of the footnotes, made the family tree, and helped with the images. Erin Leinberger made the maps.

All of this has been made possible by a number of institutions. I am lucky that the happenstance of academic hiring in a small country landed me at the University of Manitoba, where the university, the Department of History, and St. John's College have been unwaveringly supportive. In the middle of this project I spent the better part of a year at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and doing so changed my mind in all sorts of predictable and unpredictable ways. I am grateful for the space, community, and access to records that Clare Hall provided. For more than a decade I benefited from a Tier II Canada Research Chair in Western Canadian

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Acknowledgements

Social History, and the kind of multi-cited archival research upon which this book depends was only possible because of it.

Historians write about the past, but we do so in the present and for the present. This book is about the complicated identities and relationships produced and calcified by colonialism, including the fraught histories of racialized migrants and the uneasy histories of being a settler in Indigenous space. These are my own histories and my own present. Much of my scholarly research and writing has been concerned with analyzing the vernacular experience of colonialism. I have done so alongside other scholars and in dialogue with social movements that demand a more just and sustainable way of living in Indigenous territories and among Indigenous peoples. 2012–13 was the winter we danced, and it echoes in the pages that follow.

Versions of this research were presented to audiences across Canada, England, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. In very different forms, parts of this research were published as “‘Is Your Garden in England, Sir?’: Nation, Empire, and Home in James Douglas’ Archive,” *History Workshop Journal*, 69:1 (Fall 2010) 1–19; “Historiography that Breaks Your Heart: Sylvia Van Kirk and the Writing of Feminist History,” in Robin Jarvis Brownlie and Valerie Korinek, eds., *Finding a Way to the Heart: Feminist Writings on Aboriginal and Women’s History in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012) 81–97; and “James Douglas, Amelia Connolly, and the Writing of Gender and Women’s History,” in Catherine Carstairs and Nancy Janovecik, eds., *Feminist History: Productive Pasts and New Directions* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013) 23–40. I am grateful for the permission of the publishers to reprint this work here.

As someone who has both borne children and written books and found that the two experiences have almost nothing in common, I pretty much loathe the shopworn analogy between having babies and writing books. But still the babies have shaped this book, its concerns, and its arguments. The book is rooted in the presumption that the affective labors of caring for children and creating homes in contexts of inequality are highly meaningful, enormously political, and above all interesting and worthy of historical attention. As I have worked out these arguments, Peter Ives and I raised our daughter, Nell, and son, Theo, and I am grateful for all the difficult and wonderful lessons this has brought. I am also thankful for the people who have helped us do so, especially Claudia Scott and Sudesh Gupta, Thelma Randall and everyone else at Cornish Child Care.

I wrote this book in coffee shops in Winnipeg, Vancouver, Toronto, London, and Georgetown. I wrote it at a cottage in the Laurentian Mountains that my in-laws rented one summer. I wrote it in my office at

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03761-8 - Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World

Adele Perry

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

xiii

St. John's College, which began as a school for elite Indigenous children in Red River Colony. But mainly, I wrote this book at home, on the black chesterfield by the fire, while my children played, argued, and texted, and while Peter talked about global English, listened to terrible 1980s music, and tried to go rowing. All of this is also in these pages, and it could be no other way.