Quarantine in Question: The 1913 Investigation at William Head, B.C.

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Abstract. The Canadian government operated a quarantine station at William Head B.C. from 1881 to 1958. In the spring of 1913, a ship arriving from the Orient was detained because of smallpox. Subsequently, the station’s medical inspector, Dr. A. T. Watt, became the subject of a Royal Commission of Inquiry established to investigate his medical and administrative practices. That summer Watt committed suicide, but was posthumously exonerated from all the charges. This paper explores the conflicting class and racial questions that arose from this incident and the political reactions of those involved including the detainees, the government, and the media.


Measures developed since the summer of 2003 to screen travelers entering into Canada in an effort to cope with SARS are not unprecedented in Canadian history. From 1881 to 1958, the Canadian government operated a quarantine station at William Head, B.C. on Vancouver Island to inspect the passengers on ocean-going vessels arriving at the ports of Victoria and Vancouver. That station was one of more than a dozen such facilities operated by the federal government from the 19th century well

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into the 20th. In the spring of 1913 the medical inspector, Dr. Alfred Tennyson Watt, detained for quarantine a ship called the Monteagle, arriving from the Orient; there were two cases of smallpox on board. During the 17-day quarantine period from March 30 to April 16, Dr. Watt’s medical and administrative practices were called into question and later that summer, a Royal Commission of Inquiry was established to investigate him. During the course of the hearings, Dr. Watt committed suicide. After that dramatic turn of events, the inquiry report was filed and in it, Watt was posthumously exonerated from all the charges.

Exploring this one dramatic incident in an isolated part of B.C. provides an opportunity to explore the history of William Head Quarantine Station itself, the conflicting class and racial questions that were at the heart of the episode, and the political reactions of those involved including the detainees, the government, and the media. Indeed, the history of quarantine practices in general is closely tied to matters of immigration, epidemics, and public health and recent historiography provides helpful guidance in interpreting the William Head investigation of 1913. A review of some of that literature is a helpful place to begin. Two general observations about the existing literature must be made at the outset. First and not surprisingly, the literature concentrates mostly on the 19th century because of the epidemics that plagued Canada’s urban immigrant-receiving cities. My second observation grows out of the first and is a logical extension of the immigration patterns dominating North America in the 19th century: more attention is given in the literature to Atlantic ports and their responses to disease than to those on the Pacific. Therefore, my study of a 20th-century incident on the West Coast of Canada breaks new ground in both chronology and geography.

When exploring the existing literature on quarantine practices, it is useful to consider three different types of works. First, there are local or site studies that focus on communities or locations that dealt with specific outbreaks of disease or sites that came to be associated with attempts to screen immigrants such as Grosse Ile or Ellis Island. A second approach to the history of quarantine concentrates on various ethnicities such as the Irish immigrants who poured into Upper Canada in the early 1830s or Jewish immigrants arriving at New York City in the 1890s. Very often these works also point out the class differences that persisted throughout the 19th century and the different treatment afforded to passengers travelling in steerage as compared to cabin passengers. A third trend in the literature on quarantine is found in studies that focus on the politics of government response to immigration and disease, that is the enduring question of who is responsible to deal with issues like quarantine. Studies that focus on the rise of specific public health infrastructures and bureaucracies and those that concentrate on state formation generally are both included in this category.
To begin with studies that focus on a particular locale, one could include those publications that describe national historic sites and particular incidents of disease with research potential for genealogists. 2 Passenger lists from quarantined ships are of special interest to genealogists and local historians and in 1994, The Island Magazine from Prince Edward Island published an article with helpful materials for family researchers entitled “The Ill and the Dying: Family Records from the Lady Constable Affair.” In 1844, the Lady Constable departed from Liverpool with 444 destitute Irish emigrants on board. Twenty-five people died en route to Charlottetown and eight more before the ship was quarantined with dozens of cases of typhus. Passenger lists and patient names of those treated during the disaster are of particular interest and the article includes reprints of that material. American studies of local history and epidemics are not difficult to find, in particular narrative accounts of how particular communities coped with specific outbreaks of disease. 3

A second theme in the literature around immigration and disease control is the focus on particular ethnic identities and the class distinctions that were commonly made between passengers of different financial means. While the Irish are the focus of much of the Canadian literature because of their large numbers during the first half of the 19th century, they are certainly not the only group that figures large in the literature. The work of American historian Howard Markel on Jewish immigrants arriving at New York City in the 1890s is an important place to begin. 4 Markel points out that while Jewish immigrants were blamed for the 1892 outbreak of typhus in New York City’s Lower East Side, the punitive health care measures that were put in place served only to spread the disease because infected people, fearful of doctors, hid themselves and fled from the authorities. In another study, Markel highlighted how double standards were applied to arriving passengers, based more upon their socio-economic status than their actual condition of health. 5 The William Head Inquiry of 1913 involved first-class passengers who were unhappy about their accommodation while in quarantine, but they only represented approximately 15% of the passengers who were held in quarantine. The vast majority of travellers were Chinese and Japanese. Therefore, one suspects that the identities of the detainees, both their class and their ethnic identities, must have figured very large in the story of what happened during this quarantine incident in 1913.

Thirdly, by introducing politics into the analysis of the events that unfolded at William Head, one has the opportunity to compare this incident with others that stress the ideas, personalities, and power struggles that were at work behind the scenes but not far below the surface. Bruce Curtis, in an article published in the Canadian Historical Review in 2000, made a strong analysis of the forces of state formation that were driving the public response to the threat of a cholera outbreak in 1866. He con-
cluded that “the 1866 cholera scare not only encouraged the formation of local sanitary and public health movements, but also led to serious attempts to invest the emerging domain of public health in statistical forms.” American literature on the history and politics of quarantine and epidemics is dominated by constitutional studies about state authority versus federal involvement in affairs of public health. The William Head incident had outcomes that illustrate how responsibility for quarantine in Canada was very much a political question.

In Canada in 1913, the questions focused on the federal Department of Agriculture, which held responsibility for immigration and quarantine. But one must understand the fact that only 15 months after the very contentious and divisive 1911 federal election, political tempers were still flaring. Furthermore, in the racist context of anti-Oriental attitudes in British Columbia, economic interests in transpacific transportation were heightened and various political players were poised to capture the attention of the new Conservative Government, competing for resources. While the need to exercise control in the interests of public health were recognized, the individuals whose liberties were curtailed certainly did not appreciate or welcome measures which curbed their personal freedom. What happened at William Head in the spring of 1913 with the quarantining of one ship brings all the complexities of the themes of class, race, and politics into focus. This one incident can best be understood by using all three approaches, that is, by studying William Head as a place, by considering the race and class identities that were at stake, and by realizing that the power politics of public health versus personal liberties was very much at play.

Studying William Head, B.C. as a place is fascinating. When the author made a site visit to the former quarantine station, to explore the scene of Dr. Watt’s work and the controversial 1913 incident, she had the rare privilege of being granted admission. It was a rare privilege because William Head is not a historic site. The former quarantine station is still a federal property, but it is now the site of the William Head Institution, a medium security prison. Permission was granted to enter the facility where the author spent the day working in the on-site archives. On that occasion, she was also permitted to tour the grounds, to view the remains of the wharf where Dr. Watt greeted the arrival of ships destined for Victoria and Vancouver between 1897 and July 1913, to walk through the graveyard where he and his staff buried the victims who succumbed to their diseases, and to see many of the original quarantine buildings where Watt developed then state-of-the-art technologies for the disinfection of passengers and their baggage.

Local historians around William Head are well aware of the history of the site. Although the property’s current use does not permit on-site restoration or commemoration, the local museum, housed in the
Metchosin Schoolhouse (just outside of Victoria) has artefacts and photographs from the quarantine station. Dr. Watt’s wife, Margaret Robertson Watt, was very active in the Women’s Institutes locally and at the provincial level, and it was through my biographical work on her that I first became interested in Dr. Watt himself, his work at William Head, and his untimely death during the 1913 inquiry into operations of the quarantine station. A publication of the Metchosin School Museum Society entitled *Footprints: Pioneer Families of the Metchosin District Southern Vancouver Island 1851-1900* has a two-page entry about the Watts, which concentrates more on the activities of Mrs. Watt than those of her husband. One suspects that his suicide and the controversy surrounding it led to a silencing of his story in the local community.

William Head Quarantine Station was established in 1893, after the site at Albert Head was deemed unsuitable because it was not isolated enough from Victoria. In 1897, Dr. Alfred Tennyson Watt was appointed supervisor of B.C. Quarantines, to be stationed at William Head. He was well-qualified for this position. After graduating from the University of Toronto in 1890, he practised medicine in Victoria and became secretary to the Provincial Board of Health. By the time he accepted the appointment to become superintendent of Quarantine for British Columbia, his accomplishments included “inaugurating [sic] the first real public health work in this province [B.C.]. The Health Act was largely his work. Previously during the smallpox epidemic he had rendered good service.”

As Table 1 illustrates, although William Head was a strategic location for transpacific travellers entering Canada, the number of ships quarantined in any given year was not large. Annual reports on the station, available from 1902 to 1914, show that during that 12-year period, Watt was responsible for the inspection of over 2700 ships. However, on average, only two ships per year were detained for quarantine. In the period from April 1, 1913 to March 31, 1914, the *Monteagle* was the only one. The declining number of ships inspected and quarantined is a reflection of the fact that new measures were in place in ports around the world for vaccination of passengers. Although smallpox continued to be the most common reason why Watt placed ships in quarantine, there was no major incident of smallpox outbreak or epidemic in Canada during the time that he served as the Chief Medical Officer at William Head. He was identifying individual cases, administering vaccinations, and imposing quarantine as a preventative measure so that he could verify that no additional cases were likely to occur. Watt performed these duties according to the regulations that were in effect from Ottawa and he did so with the help of a staff including a medical assistant. From December 1911 to April 1913, that assistant was Dr. J. R. Hunter. The main priority of Watt and his staff was to be in a constant state of readiness, so that as ships arrived, they could be inspected and either cleared to proceed to their
port of entry or in the case of infectious diseases detected, and detained until the ship’s contents could be disinfected and its passengers and crew quarantined until all danger of new cases developing had passed.

Table 1:
Ships Inspected and Quarantined at William Head 1902-1914

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Ending</th>
<th>Vessels inspected</th>
<th>People inspected*</th>
<th>Ships quarantined</th>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 31, 1902</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 31, 1903</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>C 10098</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S 20953</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cr 25148</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 31, 1904</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>C 10439</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S 1570</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cr 20150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 31, 1905</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1, 1907</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>C 5358</td>
<td>3?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S 16671</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 1, 1908</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>48044</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 31, 1909</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>C 1218</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>S 13434</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cr 8428</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 31, 1910</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>C 5700</td>
<td>1?? or 3??</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cr 12911</td>
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<tr>
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<td>C 4734</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>C 4637</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cr 15507</td>
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<tr>
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<td>C 4940</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>S 17653</td>
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<td>Cr 13725</td>
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<td>Mar 31, 1914</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>C 5974</td>
<td>1</td>
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*C = Cabin passengers; S = Steerage; Cr = Crew members
Dr. Watt’s annual reports about the quarantine station’s activities reveal that there were several explanations about the number of ships being quarantined in any given year. Worldwide acceptance of the importance of vaccination meant that mandatory precautions were being taken at most major ports throughout the Orient and as a result, fewer cases of contagious diseases were being detected among passengers. At the same time, Watt observed in 1907 that world events like the end to war between Japan and Russia had a direct impact on the number of ships arriving at B.C. ports. In 1905 he concluded that the $500 head tax imposed on Chinese immigrants to Canada “has prevented new arrivals entirely.” As well, effective January 1, 1905, ships arriving from San Francisco and ports north of there were exempt from inspection. Watt anticipated in 1907 that “work on the Panama Canal and the construction of a railway across Mexico from the Gulf to the Pacific…[means] there will be a new point on the coast from which steamers will come to B.C. ports.”

Given the ethnic composition of the passengers and crew members who typically arrived at William Head on transpacific voyages, Markel’s work on the racism that greeted Jewish immigrants arriving at New York City in 1892 provides a very useful model for this current study. While the B.C. incident took place more than 20 years after the New York City outbreaks that Markel studied, the variables of race and class were still very much at play and those identities are central to this story. The ship that Dr. Watt placed under quarantine in the spring of 1913 had 379 passengers on board; 290 of them were Chinese travelling in steerage. There were 46 first-class passengers: 22 men and 24 women and children. Watt’s own account of why he detained the ship, which he wrote on March 31, 1913 was that “the report was given that one of [the] saloon passengers had developed varioloid on the night of the 28th. On examination of steerage passengers one of [the] Chinese was found also to have varioloid and to be showing much the same development. Both passengers had come on board at Hong Kong on 8th March so that the infection presumably was from an exposure in one of the ports of Japan, possibly from an ambulant case among the stevedores. All passengers have been landed also a number of the crew and the vessel which is undergoing disinfection is upon completion to be released.”

The fact that two cases of smallpox were found, one in a white passenger, and the other in a Chinese passenger, immediately points up the class and racial identities that were at the centre of this incident. Anti-Oriental attitudes were so widely accepted in British Columbia in 1913 that they were openly discussed in the press, and indeed, in the assumptions about the type of quarantine facilities that were required for the different races. The buildings on the grounds of the William Head quarantine station reflect those assumptions. One building was designated the Chinese quarters, another, the Japanese. One might
predict then, that race played a large part in the 1913 incident. But those ethnic divisions were so widely accepted that they hardly received comment in the inquiry. Instead, it was the inadequacy of the facilities and the service provided to the white first-class passengers that proved to be the central concern. This is still a racially defined crisis, but rather than one based on fear of Oriental immigrants, it was about the uncontested assumptions that white travellers were entitled to superior treatment because of their race and class. It was definitely a call for a two-tiered health care system determined by economic class and also by race.

In the case of the Monteagle, the ship itself was only held for a few days before it was released, manned by a small crew who were deemed to be immune to smallpox either because of their vaccinations or previous exposures. The ship arrived in Vancouver on April 3, whither it was originally destined with its cargo of silk from the Orient. The remaining passengers however, were in for a much longer stay. The Vancouver Sun predicted on April 2, 1913 that “it is probable that the passengers will be kept at William Head until at least the end of the week, and probably a couple of days longer. Dr. Watt, the quarantine officer, is said to be a good entertainer and will provide every amusement possible for the enforced white guests, who will have the run of the station golf links and other forms of outdoor amusement provided.” But when that short stay dragged on for 17 long days, discontent arose among several of the cabin passengers. Indeed, before the end of the first week of their stay, several of those passengers were so distraught that they formed a committee that met “to protest against the unsatisfactory conditions prevailing at the William Head Quarantine Station.” At their second meeting, the committee members wrote a letter of complaint which they intended to submit to the Victoria newspaper, The Daily Colonist and also “to Government.” Because the Daily Colonist, like the Vancouver Sun, had predicted in its April 1st issue that the passengers would enjoy a “pleasurable time,” the committee members felt compelled to set the record straight. They wrote,

We have read with considerable interest and astonishment the notice in your issue of April 1st, of the quarantining of the CPR mail boat “Monteagle” and your remarks on the pleasurable time in store for the sixty odd saloon passengers and CPR officials who have been detained for observation.

The following facts regarding the disgraceful condition of the William Head Quarantine Station will show you our lot is far from Enviable. The unsuitability of the accommodation granted by the Government, its unsanitary condition, and the tardy assistance rendered passengers and CPR officials by the Agricultural [sic] Dept. called for protests from the “Monteagle” passengers. An indignation meeting was therefore convened and a committee appointed thereat to formulate specific charges which we regrettably find necessary to bring against Quarantine administration.
The charges might be grouped under three heads; viz. (a) Housing; (b) Sanitation; (c) Administration. We shall deal with each in sequence.18

The protest committee comprised five individuals: Mr. R. W. Heberden, Chairman; Mr. D. L. Carrison, Secretary; and Mr. J. D. Grahame, Mr. A. G. Cohn, and Mr. A. C. Bromhead. In their letter to the editor, the committee members elaborated on each of these headings, and sent it off to the Victoria Daily Colonist and to Martin Burrell, the Conservative Minister of Agriculture. At one level, the protests that were being raised seem to be the self-centred complaints of a few disgruntled first-class passengers who resented that their civil liberties were being curbed because of one case of smallpox identified in a saloon passenger, and another case found to be a Chinese steerage passenger. At first glance it seems that this was a story about racial identities and class differences, but the events that unfolded clearly show that these concerns of race and class were commingled with a complex set of interpersonal conflicts and power struggles. Therefore, it is important to consider the politics behind the protest and the inquiry that followed it.

Dr. Watt was no stranger to emergency public health measures. Over the past 20 years he had gained that experience as a public servant and guardian of public health. He responded to the accusations of the committee in a letter dated April 12, 1913 in which he expressed his frustration that the situation was escalating. “As the statement enclosed has been sent to the Minister of Agriculture anything I have to say in comment will be made in a communication to him.” In other words, Watt decided to defend himself directly to his political superior. But he did not let the letter to the press go without comment.

I wish to repeat to you with regard to sending the letter to public press, that to send such a letter without the rider which you verbally agreed should be added, namely that buildings now being erected would in great part do away with any complaints, such as you have made,…and without correction of dates and figures and correction of statements re other matters which I showed you were inaccurate; and without statement going in that the temporary derangements on the first day were due to reconstruction; seems both unfair to the Department and misleading to the public.

The detainees claimed that more than 600 persons were in quarantine when the actual number was less than 400. Moreover, Watt reminded the five detainees that when he was first told about the preparation of the letter, he was led to believe that it would be signed by all the passengers and that its purpose was to impress upon the Department of Agriculture that better accommodations were required at William Head, something that he would have welcomed if it meant that more resources would be put toward the improvements that were underway. With dismay, Watt wrote that “The letter has gone far afield from such original intentions
and now is far from being a unanimous expression from the saloon passengers. All idea had to be dropped of getting even a majority to sign, so the letter must be looked upon as the expression of the individual views of those who signed.”

While the Victoria newspaper refused to publish the protest letter, the Vancouver Sun took a very different stance. On April 17, the day after the quarantined passengers were finally released and had arrived in Vancouver, the Sun did not hesitate to “tell all,” based on statements made to them by disgruntled passengers. The headline at the top of page one, declared “Quarantine Station Conditions Cause of Serious Indictments by Passengers of Monteagle.” The most vocal was not among the five committee members, but he was a very public individual. Dr. Judson Burpee Black, of Windsor, Nova Scotia, was a past president of the Canadian Medical Association and a former member of parliament, a Liberal who had been defeated in the 1911 election. Dr. Black and his wife found their stay at William Head particularly uncomfortable, understandable perhaps given that they were the oldest passengers aboard the Monteagle, (Black was 71 years old and his wife was 68) and that they were on the final leg of their journey, a trip that had taken them around the world. Wearied by the whole experience, Black did not hesitate to assert that when he reached Ottawa, he would bring up the matter with the Honourable Martin Burrell, Minister of Agriculture, who was responsible for overseeing all of the Dominion quarantine stations. Meanwhile, Dr. Black made it clear when he spoke to the newspaper that “My indictment is against Dr. A. T. Watt, superintendent of the quarantine station, and I accept responsibility for that indictment.”

Other evidence suggests that indeed Dr. Black’s protest against Dr. Watt was of a very personal nature. While the members of the ad hoc committee claimed to represent all of the saloon passengers aboard the Monteagle, there is strong evidence to suggest otherwise. Indeed, it seems that Dr. Black and the members of the committee, together with their wives, took the complaints much further and made them far more personal against Watt than other passengers were willing to do. Correspondence from other passengers to Minister Burrell suggests that Black’s protest and complaints in the Vancouver press were exaggerated. While most passengers agreed that the sleeping quarters allotted to first-class passengers were uncomfortably small, they also acknowledged that the station was under construction at the time of their quarantine, and they were quick to exonerate Dr. Watt from any undue blame for their inconvenience or discomfort in the episode. One letter that is particularly clear on this point and merits quotation at length was written on April 19 by R. S. Kinney, a teacher who was originally from Nova Scotia. Kinney wrote to Burrell stating that “From a conversation I had with Dr. Black before leaving the station, I should say that the grounds of his
complaint against Dr. Watt [are] more personal than anything else.... Further I think that the so-called protest is more political than anything else, and it has been altogether too highly colored. I have the honor to be Sir your obedient servant, R. S. Kinney.”

Despite the goodwill of Kinney and several other passengers who wrote similar letters, the call for a formal inquiry had already gone out and it was answered with the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry. Commissioner H. W. R. Moore, Esq., a Victoria lawyer, was appointed to head the investigation and report back to the Minister of Agriculture. He visited William Head Quarantine Station on May 20, 1913 to view the facilities and then he presided at sessions of the Commission held in Victoria and at William Head on subsequent dates. During those sessions, Watt was called to testify and to defend his management record in the three areas of complaint lodged by the disgruntled passengers: specifically, housing, sanitation, and his own administration.

Here one might predict that the white passengers were complaining of having to mingle with steerage passengers of Oriental origin. But that was not the case. The passengers were carefully separated according to their class: first-class passengers were kept well away from those in steerage and vice versa. But the conditions of the first-class accommodations formed the basis of the passengers’ complaints. The quarters were said to be unbearably small and inhospitable to families, the bathing facilities were said to be dirty, and the men’s toilet facilities were under construction during the first part of the quarantine period. Dr. Watt was questioned on all of these complaints and in his answers he explained that only the situation with the men’s toilets was really substantiated. That problem was resolved within a day of the ship’s arrival with the completion of the new septic system. There was virtually nothing in the investigation that overtly centred on themes of ethnicity although the entire episode was rife with racist, specifically anti-Oriental, assumptions.

During the course of the inquiry however, the accusations became more personal and more sweeping and some dramatic events took place as the inquiry dragged on into the summer. Dr. Watt’s assistant, Dr. Hunter had tendered his resignation during the quarantine of the Monteagle, and after testifying before the Commission in May and again in June, he left for Europe. During the year and a half when Hunter was employed to assist Watt, their relationship was constantly strained. As the inquiry proceeded, it came to light that Hunter had previously complained to Ottawa about Watt and that he had been hoping to see an inquiry established to investigate his boss. The events in the spring of 1913 seemed to provide Hunter with the perfect opportunity to follow through on his complaints. Encouraged by the situation that was developing among some of the disgruntled Monteagle passengers, he tendered his resignation and waited for the Commission to be formed to
investigate. Hunter’s accusations against Watt included failure to train and inform his assistant, misuse of government property (specifically a government boat), and lack of careful record keeping in financial accounts. These accusations were such that they cast aspersions on Watt’s integrity. In the final report of the inquiry, Commissioner Moore concluded that “in my opinion Dr. Hunter adopted a hot headed and unreasonable attitude. So far as he was concerned he seems to have done his best to make proper co-operation between himself and his superior officer difficult to the point of impossibility.”

That difficult working relationship between Watt and Hunter was only one factor in a long list of things causing stress for Alfred Watt in the spring of 1913. Just a few months earlier Dr. Watt made an emergency trip to Ontario because his son was suffering from a serious case of pneumonia. He had joined his wife and family who had travelled to Guelph, Ontario seeking treatment for their son when he left William Head in December 1912 and returned in early February. Other health problems were plaguing the extended family as Watt’s brother Lorne was seriously ill during that same period. Indeed, Dr. Watt’s brother finally succumbed to his illness and died in mid-May of 1913. In fact Watt could not attend his brother’s funeral because it was held in Toronto on May 20th, the very same day that Commissioner Moore arrived at William Head to do his first site visit of the facilities and to officially launch the Royal Commission of Inquiry. The Watt brothers had been very close and the emotional strain of his brother’s death should not be underestimated. These personal troubles were the backdrop to Watt’s professional woes.

The commission met for the last time on June 13, 1913 at the quarantine station, and then Moore was left with the task of writing his final report. In the course of doing so, the Commissioner learned on July 10th that when the Monteagle left Vancouver, outbound for a return trip to the Orient, two crew members took ill with smallpox the first day out after leaving William Head. He wrote to Watt’s lawyer, saying that while he did “not propose to hold another sitting of the commission on this point…I would be glad to have the benefit of any observations that your client, Dr. Watt may care to make in this matter, when this letter and the reply will be attached to the record of the Commission.” Watt’s lawyer replied a few days later to say that Dr. Watt was not well, but he hoped to be able to see him later that week with reference to this matter. A week later, on July 23rd, the lawyer replied to Moore that “Dr. Watt is not at all well and has been ordered by his medical advisors to have a complete rest.” The lawyer had spoken with Watt’s wife and received an explanation through her about the two crew members and their medical histories; one had been repeatedly vaccinated without a successful “take,” and the other had been vaccinated during the quarantine at William Head, but without success. Watt had been informed of these
two cases, and on June 21, he had written a letter explaining the measures he had taken with the two men. All of this was communicated to Watt’s lawyer through Mrs. Watt. Then events took a very unexpected turn. One week after this exchange of correspondence between the Commissioner and the lawyer, Dr. Watt was dead. On July 27th Alfred Watt committed suicide by walking out of an upper-storey window in the Vancouver hospital where he was being treated for neurasthenia.

After that tragic turn of events, the Victoria *Daily Colonist* was quick to point fingers at those who had driven Alfred Watt to his early grave. On July 29th, 1913 the newspaper’s editorialist wrote a glowing eulogy of Watt as a “public servant and guardian of public health” saying that transportation company officials and their passengers all agreed that Watt’s work was worthy of “sincere and hearty appreciation.” Then the accusations flew with this assertion:

There is no room at all for doubt that Dr. Watt died a victim of political persecution. That is a hard thing to say, but that the shattered condition of his nerves which was the direct cause of his death was due to the persecution to which he has of late been subjected is beyond question. Far be it from us to suggest that those responsible for the recent investigation anticipated any such tragic consequences; but the fact remains that a valuable officer has been lost to the public service, a valuable life has been lost to the community as a result of an investigation into baseless charges involving the integrity of one in whom a high sense of honour was combined with an unusual degree of sensitiveness.

The editorialist went on to declare that the grief caused to Watt by the insubordination, criticism, and accusations of members of his staff was a clear outcome of the worst aspects of political patronage at play due to “the change of administration in Ottawa.” That was a direct reference to the fact that Watt’s assistant, Dr. Hunter, was appointed by the new Conservative government, and that Watt had no power to fire him even though he was ill-suited to the quarantine station post, lacking both experience and a willingness to learn from and submit to Watt as his superior.

An analysis of the documents created by the quarantining of the *Mon-teagle* and the subsequent inquiry into operations at William Head confirms that this episode in the history of early twentieth-century Canadian quarantine precautions was indeed a complex story of confluence. It is the story of place as a West Coast port adjusted to the changing context of transpacific travel trends. It is the story of identities as a small group of white, first-class passengers pressed for special treatment based on considerations of class and race. It is also the story of ideas; ideas about politics and power pitting public health control measures against personal liberties. These variables, at the centre of the 1913 incident at William Head, are still important considerations as Canada faces the 21st-century challenges of protecting public health and taking the necessary precau-
tions to put preventative health care measures in place during emergency situations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada and the Laurentian University Research Fund. Thanks are due to Kristin Ireland and Lee Ann Spooner Fielding for their excellent work as research assistants.

NOTES


2 For example, Grosse Ile became a National Historic site in March 1996, and it is a place of particular importance to the Irish. In 1997 Michael Quigley published an article “Grosse Ile: Canada’s Famine Memorial,” in which he explained the history of this site from 1832 to 1937, with particular attention to the Irish tragedy at the station in 1847 where thousands of Irish emigrants died. A similar publication from the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada is Norman Anick’s 1984 “Gross Ile and Partridge Island Quarantine Stations.”


6 Bruce Curtis, “Social Investment in Medical Forms: The 1866 Cholera Scare and Beyond” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, 3 (September 2000): 379.


8 When the author visited William Head in the fall of 2000, the place was embroiled in yet another scandal, a very contemporary one. It was election year and the Reform Party of Canada was determined to gain political mileage from stories about how this prison might be more aptly called “Club Fed,” a place where prisoners mingle freely, live co-operatively, and even enjoy a private golf course.


A. T Watt, Superintendent of BC Quarantines to the Minister of Agriculture, October 31, 1905 and April 1, 1907.

13 Markel, “Knocking Out the Cholera” p. 430.
16 “Liner Arrives Here with Half her Crew,” Vancouver Sun, April 3, 1913 p. 5; and “William Head Depot Grows Like Mushroom: Six Hundred and Fifty Passengers on Monteagle Form Quite a Townful,” Vancouver Sun, April 2, 1913 p. 7.
17 National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 17, Volume 1190, Correspondence 232194, File 228852 “Minutes of a general meeting of the saloon passengers of the RMS “Monteagle.”
18 NAC, RG 17, Vol 1190, Correspondence 228392, 9 April 1913 to the Editor, The Daily Colonist, Victoria, B.C.
19 NAC, RG 17, Vol 1190 Correspondence 232194, File 228852, A. T. Watt to Messrs. Heberdeen, McCarrison, Grahame, Bromhead and Cohn, April 12, 1913.
21 “Quarantine Station Conditions Cause of Serious Indictments by Passengers of Monteagle,” Vancouver Sun, Thursday, April 17, 1913 p 1.
23 NAC, RG 17, Volume 1190, Correspondence 232194, File 228852, R. S. Kinney to Hon. Martin Burrell, Minister of Agriculture, Ottawa, April 19, 1913.
25 “His Death is Keenly Regretted: Mr. H. L. Watt is Called by Death, Well-Known Treasurer of Canada Life Assurance Company—Brother of Dr. A.T. Watt, of William Head,” The Daily Colonist, May 23, 1913, p. 10.
26 Among the items collected during the Inquiry, one personal item is preserved: a bookmark with an excerpt from Tennyson’s poem, In Memoriam that seems to have captured Alfred Watt’s feelings for his brother very effectively. The quotation reads: “To my dear Brother, ’But thou and I are one in kind/ As moulded like in nature’s mint/ And hill and wood and field did print./ The same sweet forms in either mind/ At one dear knee we proffer’d vows/ One lesson from one book we learn’d/ Ere childhood’s flaxen ringlet turn’d/d/ To black and brown on kindred brows.” NAC, RG 17, Vol 1190, File 228852.
27 NAC, RG 17, Vol 1190, Correspondence 232194, File 228852, Moore to Robertson, July 10, 1913.
28 NAC, RG 17, Vol 1190, Correspondence 232194, File 228852, Robertson to Moore, July 23, 1913.