

CASE STUDY: The Chilcotin "War"

On October 26, 1999, two hundred people gathered in a small park near the Fraser River in Quesnel. They were there to honour five Tsilhqot'in chiefs who had been publicly hanged 135 years earlier. The people stood near the unmarked graves of Head War Chief Lhatsas'in, Chief Biyil, Chief Tilaghed, Chief Taged, and Chief Chayses. Although no one knows the exact location, people think they lie underneath Quesnel's hospital.

The events that led to the hangings so long ago are often forgotten in the history of British Columbia, yet they are important for us to remember. Some have called these events the Chilcotin War; others call it the Bute Inlet Massacre. Some say that it was the only actual war waged between First Nations people and European colonizers. Whatever you choose to call it, this resistance was the sad result of the coming together of the political, economic, and cultural realities of the colonial years. The resistance grew out of the rush to extract resources, in this case gold. It came from the conflict between colonial assumptions about land ownership and First Nations beliefs. Finally, it is an illustration of the devastating aftermath of the smallpox epidemic.

The events began with the discovery of gold in the Cariboo in 1858. Previously, few Europeans other than fur traders had made their way through the interior of the province. People began to flood in along the routes leading from the Fraser River, in search of gold. One of the incoming miners brought smallpox with him, setting off an epidemic in 1862.

The Tsilhqot'in people, whose territory is on what is called the Chilcotin Plateau, had had relatively little contact with Europeans before the gold rush. They pursued their traditional lifestyle of hunting and fishing, moving throughout their lands between the Coast Mountains and the Fraser River. They did not participate in the fur trade. The Hudson's Bay Company tried to encourage them by building Fort Chilcotin within their territories, with little success. The last trader there, Donald McLean, became well-known for his often intolerant treatment of First Nations people. He wore a bullet-proof vest for good reason.

When more Europeans started entering their territory in the early 1860s, the Tsilhqot'in tolerated them. They traded with the newcomers and worked for them packing and guiding. Most of the men who came just passed through, but one, named William Manning, stayed. He built a cabin at Puntzi Lake on a traditional Tsilqoh'tin camping site and began a farm. He is said to have threatened the Tsilhqot'in by saying he would bring back smallpox.

Not long after, smallpox did come. In 1862, an epidemic struck the Tsilhqot'in with devastating consequences. Hundreds died within a few short weeks. Villages were empty except for the dead bodies. Making matters worse, two businessmen took the discarded blankets that had wrapped the sick and dying, and sold them, unwashed, to

other Tsilhqot'in. Another smallpox outbreak was kindled. It is estimated that between half and two-thirds of the Tsilhqot'in population died in 1862 and 1863.

At the same time, a Victoria businessman named Alfred Waddington began his dream of building a road from the coast at Bute Inlet, up the treacherous Homathko River, across the Chilcotin, and into the Cariboo. The colonial government gave him a licence to build the wagon road, but it did not consult the First Nations people of the region, nor did it pay them any kind of compensation. Waddington did hire some Tsilhqot'in people as packers, guides, and cooks.

The events which sparked the Chilcotin War began in the spring of 1864. Some Tsilhqot'in people, smallpox survivors, were still ill and starving when they came to Waddington's camps to work in exchange for muskets and food. They were treated badly, thrown only scraps of food or given none at all. The foreman, William Brewster, is said to have thrown his scraps into the fire rather than give them to the starving people. Brewster is believed to have ignited the violence of that spring through his actions. Returning to the Homathko River after the winter break, the road builders discovered that their store of flour had been taken. They searched far and wide for the culprits. Finally they questioned some Tsilhqot'in men. After a long delay, one man said, "You are in our country; you owe us bread."

The man in charge of the builders, probably Brewster, demanded to know the names of all the Tsilhqot'in people. He wrote them down. "I have taken down your names," he told them, "because you would not tell who stole the flour. All the Chilcotins are going to die. We shall send sickness into the country, which will kill them."

The act of writing down names was still mysterious and magical to many First Nations people at this time. Papers with written words seemed to hold power. This act, in addition to the threat of smallpox, frightened the people. Had not William Manning's threats come true? News of the encounter passed quickly to the leading Tsilhqot'in chief, Lhatsas'in (sometimes written Klatsassan). He was the most powerful war chief among the Tsilhqot'in, said to be so fearsome that children ran away when they saw him.

By April 1864, he decided that he had to defend his territories and stop the Europeans from crossing Tsilqoh'tin land. Newcomers were entering Tsilhqot'in land without paying any compensation. They brought diseases that threatened to wipe out his people completely. He and his followers declared war on the interlopers. They did not necessarily act for all Tsilhqot'in people in their actions, but they were acting for the future of them all.

What followed was seen as wanton and savage acts of violence by colonial society. Considered in another light, however, they were a series of strategic attacks conducted according to the practices of warfare. The warriors used surprise attacks at dawn, and in one case destroyed the ferry crossing on the Homathko River, making it difficult to cross in pursuit.

Lhatsas'in and about twelve warriors carried out three attacks on the Homathko River construction camp at the end of April, 1864. Thirteen men were killed, including Brewster. Two more attacks, this time back in Chilcotin country, left five British dead. One was William Manning, the rancher.

The Tsilqoh'tin warriors were resisting the invasion of their lands; they were defending their land and culture. The European immigrant settlers saw these as unprovoked and unwarranted attacks. The newly appointed governor of British Columbia, Frederick Seymour, felt compelled to take swift action. He sent out two hastily formed military groups. One moved eastward from the coast at Bella Coola, and Seymour accompanied this contingent himself. The other group came westward from the Cariboo under Gold Commissioner William Cox. His second-in-command was the old fur trader Donald McLean, called out of retirement.

From June through August nearly 200 colonial troops searched for the men they called murderers. One of the casualties was McLean, shot while he was scouting alone. Finally Cox sent out a message to Lhatsas'in that they could come to the camp safely and meet with Governor Seymour without fear. It is clear that the warriors believed they were coming to negotiate a peace settlement between two warring nations; it is just as clear that the colonial government saw them merely as criminals.

On the appointed day Lhatsas'in and six others arrived at the old HBC Fort Chilcotin, where the soldiers had camped. They were unarmed. Instead of being received as equals, they were immediately seized, handcuffed, and transported to the little settlement of Quesnel on the Fraser River. At the end of September 1864, Chief Justice Matthew Baillie Begbie sentenced the five chiefs to be hanged. Later a sixth chief would be hanged in New Westminster for his role in these events.

The death toll was terrible: hundreds of Tsilhqot'in dead from disease, fifteen Europeans killed, and six chiefs hanged. The memory of the events may have faded from the general public view, but it never left the hearts of the Tsilhqot'in people.