How the British Empire Died in Burrard Inlet

A deep dive into the complicated legacy of the Komagata Maru.

Crawford Kilian 16 Jul 2021 | TheTyee.ca
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Passengers aboard the Komagata Maru in Vancouver port before, in July of 1914, the ship and most aboard were forced to sea. If the episode seemed a defeat then, today it stands as a brilliant Sikh challenge to imperialist claims of benevolence. Photo by James Luke Quiney, City of Vancouver archives.

- *The Voyage of the* Komagata Maru*: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar, Expanded and Fully Revised Edition*
- By Hugh J.M. Johnston

- UBC Press (2014)
- *Unmooring the* Komagata Maru*: Charting Colonial Trajectories*
- Edited by Rita Kaur Dhamoon, Davina Bhandar, Renisa Mawani and Satwinder Kaur Bains

- UBC Press (2019)

On May 23, 1914, the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Burrard Inlet and anchored off North Vancouver near the Mission Reserve with 376 passengers — a few of them returning residents, but most new migrants. Two months later, on July 23, it left for Asia with most of its passengers, who met a violent arrival in India.

Modern British Columbians of northwest European descent think of those two months as an embarrassing glimpse into the bigotry of our ancestors, for which both provincial and federal governments have dutifully apologized. When we think of the *Komagata Maru* at all, it's a feel-bad/feel-good story: We've progressed from the racism of the old days to the multiculturalism of today.

But the story was only incidentally about us. B.C.'s white racists were just local yokels, the foils for a brilliant Sikh challenge to the British Empire itself. Many modern scholars — Canadian, British and American — see the incident as not only the death knell of the British Empire, but a serious questioning of Canada's legitimacy as a state. We can draw many lessons from the spring and summer of 1914, and they apply with equal force to 2021 and beyond.

Hugh J.M. Johnston, a professor emeritus at Simon Fraser University, has written (and updated) an excellent account of the *Komagata Maru*. It's solid history, highly readable, full of vivid characters: one was shot dead in the corridor of the Vancouver courthouse, and others, just returned from Vancouver, slain near an Indian railway station called Budge Budge.
Johnston shows us a tiny minority of the Empire's subjects, the Sikhs of Punjab, who gained British trust by not rebelling during the 1857 Mutiny. They were rewarded with jobs all over India and Southeast Asia as soldiers, police and civil servants. That gave them a useful perspective on the British Empire and the roles of its subject peoples.

By the turn of the 20th century, some Sikhs — like many other Indians — were actively working to regain independence. One Sikh party declared its goal in its name: Ghadar, meaning "mutiny." Most Sikhs, however, were politically diverse "peasant proprietors" of land in Punjab. Britain had put that land on the free market, making it far more expensive; many Sikhs went overseas to earn enough money to buy land back home to support their families.

'A white man's province'

A handful turned up in B.C. in 1903. They drew little attention. B.C. was trying to remain "a white man's province," as historian Patricia Roy has documented, and the chief obstacles to that goal were the Chinese and Japanese. The Chinese could be tolerated as houseboys, launderers and vegetable gardeners; the Japanese, however, were serious competitors all over the job market. Worse yet, Tokyo took a strong interest in the well-being of its expatriates, and Britain had signed a treaty of alliance with Japan.
So B.C. working-class hostility toward the Chinese was shrugged off in Victoria and Ottawa because the Chinese Empire was too weak to protect its nationals overseas. But Japan in the 19th century was like China in the 21st — suddenly risen from isolation to serious military power, and therefore deserving of respect by established empires. British diplomats didn't want the

Japanese complaining about the mistreatment of their nationals by West Coast yokels, and Ottawa didn't want annoyed telegrams from Whitehall complaining about the need for yokel control.

This culminated in the September 1907 Vancouver race riot, which led to sharp restrictions on Asian immigration. Japan agreed to limit the number of its nationals migrating to Canada, but thousands of Japanese were already living in Hawaii; they often moved on to B.C. or the U.S. west coast.
Even then, no one liked being tagged as racist. Both the Canadians and the British were eager to avoid accusations of racial discrimination, so they developed clever migration rules based on a law first framed in Natal, South Africa: anyone could migrate there if they could read a European language.

That excluded most Indians and other Asians, and B.C. tried the same gimmick a couple of times. Ottawa overruled Victoria every time. But in dealing with Japanese migration from Hawaii, Ottawa came up with another gimmick: migrants must come from their nation of origin in a continuous direct journey.

Meanwhile, Sikhs were coming to Vancouver in growing numbers. They were encouraged by cheap fares on Canadian National steamers returning from Asian ports, which would otherwise sail home empty. But Sikhs almost never came directly from India; they left from Malaya, Hong Kong, even Japan. Many had years of overseas service as soldiers and policemen; they spoke good English and understood a lot of British law. Others were uneducated farmers, good workers but illiterate even in Punjabi. Even dressed in western suits, with their beards and turbans these early arrivals seemed alien to white Vancouverites.

While the farmers worked in sawmills and clearing Vancouver lots for construction, educated Sikhs were buying and selling some of those lots and beginning to make money. Though working-class Sikhs were paid little, they lived ascetically in bunkhouses (with older men serving as cooks) and saved their money. Then they spent it on building gurdwaras, supporting their families back home, and litigating in the courts against B.C. immigration law. In one key case in 1913, they won, and the news soon got back to Asia.

Barred from entry into Canada under orders-in-council requiring direct passage and payment of a $200 head tax, 39 Indian passengers on the *Panama Maru* had hired a Vancouver lawyer, Edward Bird. He had gone to the B.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Gordon Hunter and won their case. Hunter ruled the orders-in-council invalid, causing consternation in Ottawa and Vancouver. The civil servants went to work on new regulations.

The first global world

We have forgotten what a global world it was before the First World War. Even without the internet, people were keenly aware of events around the world. Print media and the telegraph carried the news from India, and it soon reached even the sawmill bunkhouses in Vancouver and the Fraser Valley. The Sikh community in B.C. was well known across British India, and late in 1913 a prosperous Sikh in Malaya heard of the *Panama Maru* case.

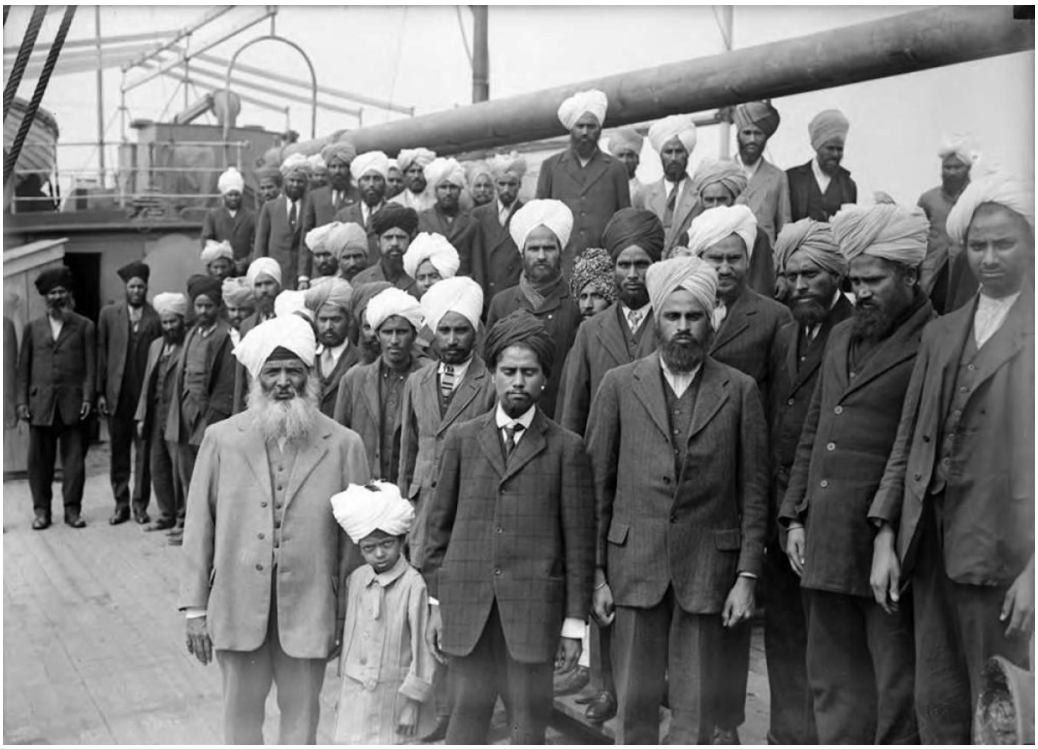
Gurdit Singh liked the idea of carrying migrants to B.C. Both an activist and an entrepreneur, he saw a business opportunity; he also saw a political opportunity to establish Indians as British subjects equal to all others. If the courts would recognize that all British subjects could move freely around the Empire, he would make a fortune. If the courts ruled otherwise, India's peoples could question the legitimacy of the British Raj and move toward independence.

The Raj itself was very well aware of the political activity in the Sikh diaspora, and it kept many activists under surveillance. New Delhi communicated regularly with London about groups like the Ghadar party, whose members were often in the Sikh diaspora. Canada had its own Sikh surveillance operation, led by a young Anglo-Indian named C.W. Hopkinson. He rapidly rose from court interpreter for Indians to immigration agent to a spy tracking Sikh communities from Vancouver to San Francisco.

The Sikhs, like most Indians, were divided about having to live under the British Raj. Some Sikhs were as loyal to the British as in 1857, while others wanted independence, and the same was true of 300 million others in British India. But the *Komagata Maru* united them all as a test of the Empire itself. In theory, a British subject could freely move anywhere in the Empire; in practice, only white subjects could do so. South Asian British subjects normally moved overseas in large groups of indentured labourers to distant British colonies, whether Fiji or Trinidad or Uganda. It wasn't quite slavery, but such migrants had little say in their destinations, their work, or their future.

A crazy-quilt empire

Britain, it was said, had acquired its empire in a fit of absent-mindedness. In reality the Brits had known exactly what they were doing, but they hadn't thought it through. So the Empire was an administrative crazy quilt, with near-autonomy for some colonies while others were directly run from London.



Gurdit Singh (in the light-coloured suit) and his son stand in front of passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru*. Singh, activist and entrepreneur, chartered the vessel to carry migrants to BC, testing whether British subjects who were not white could freely move anywhere in the Empire. Photo: Library and Archives Canada.

As a Sikh, Gurdit Singh was an egalitarian who, like everyone else, sat on the floor of his local gurdwara to share a meal. The idea of challenging the Empire to acknowledge the equality of all its British subjects must have been very attractive. The Empire was very aware of that attitude among Indians in general and Sikhs in particular, so when he began looking for a ship to carry migrants to Vancouver, the telegraph — the internet of 1914 — blew up.

London had a mess on its hands. The Indian masses mustn't be upset, and the Canadians mustn't be upset either. But the B.C. yokels were on the Empire's wavelength: free migration around the Empire was for whites, with non-whites limited to migration as labour serving white interests.

Hugh Johnston judges Gurdit Singh's venture as a kind of unfortunate misunderstanding — that the victory in the *Panama Maru* case reflected a consistent legal system across the Empire. The implication is that if only he'd understood Canadian immigration sovereignty, he'd never have chartered the *Komagata Maru*.

But in *Unmooring*, Radika Mongia of York University argues that Gurdit Singh was very aware of the Empire's patchwork laws and uncertain authority: "Although the Canadian Parliament had some control over immigration," she writes, "the nature, extent, and legitimacy of such control were still in flux." She goes on to say: "If the legality of the legislation was settled and the outcome of its application guaranteed, then it is likewise difficult to understand the anxiety and uncertainty that beset [Malcolm] Reid, the immigration inspector, causing him to select a path

bordering on illegality rather than ‘processing’ the passengers, confident in the knowledge that deportation was the assured outcome.”

The *Panama Maru* case had rattled both Victoria and Ottawa. Orders-in-council had been rapidly rewritten, but the arrival of the migrants revealed a Canada not at all confident of its legal position.

When the *Komagata Maru* arrived in B.C., everyone on board passed the public health test at William Head, near Victoria. The ship sailed on to Vancouver and anchored early on the morning of May 23, just off North Vancouver’s Mission Reserve.

Now began a kind of siege. Gurdit Singh tried to get his passengers ashore while immigration officials worked to bureaucratic rule and skirted illegality in doing so. Singh and his associates couldn’t even go ashore to talk to the lawyer Edward Bird or members of the Shore Committee — resident Sikhs providing support to the new migrants.

It does look as if the Canadian authorities didn’t trust their own laws to stand up in court. Immigration bureaucrats worked as slowly as possible. No one was allowed off the ship except the Japanese captain and crew; off-duty Vancouver cops circled the ship in small boats every night to make sure no one tried to swim to shore. The Shore Committee communicated with the ship through a Sikh ex-soldier who sent and received messages from Stanley Park using semaphore flags.

Bird had won the *Panama Maru* case by going to a single judge. Now, government lawyers told him he could have two or three test cases, but only if he took them to the B.C. Court of Appeal and a full panel of judges. But the passengers at first refused the deal, which kept them trapped on board for the next month. Keeping the ship supplied with food and water became a recurring problem.

Hundreds crowded the Vancouver waterfront every day to watch the ship and the official traffic with it. The local papers were full of stories, and so were other media, especially in India. Bizarrely, local authorities called the passengers “lawbreakers” when they were trying hard to bring their case before a court.

At last Bird was allowed to bring one migrant ashore as a test case. He was rejected, and Bird promptly took the case to the Court of Appeal — which rejected all the migrants. Gurdit Singh accepted the verdict but then had to negotiate for enough coal, food and water for the return to Asia. It took a special federal emissary, overruling the local authorities, to close the deal: he was the only one with sense to realize that a few thousand dollars for supplies was a cheap price to pay to be rid of a severe embarrassment.

BC member of Parliament Harry Stevens in the white hat was adamantly racist and led the campaign to keep *Komagata Maru* passengers from disembarking. He boarded the ship with, just to the left, immigration inspector Malcolm Reid. Photo: Library and Archives of Canada.
Having demonstrated the inequality of British subjects, Gurdit Singh and his passengers returned to face Indian authorities who were waiting for them. Late in September the *Komagata Maru* was directed to end its journey near Calcutta, in Bengal. That was on the opposite side of the subcontinent from Punjab, where the Sikhs didn't speak the language or look like the locals. When they were divided into two groups to be sent by train to Punjab, one group refused and began to march toward Calcutta. Near a railway station called Budge Budge, a battle broke out between the marchers and local soldiers and police.

Twenty of the Sikhs died, and the rest scattered. Most were recaptured, but Gurdit Singh escaped, spent years in hiding, and eventually returned to public life. He spent two terms in jail for protesting the Raj, but still lived to see India become an independent state.

Back in Vancouver, meanwhile, a resident Sikh shot the spy C.W. Hopkinson dead in the hallway of the Vancouver courthouse — not for his role in barring the migrants, but because he thought Hopkinson had played a role in the deaths of two Sikhs in the Vancouver gurdwara. He was hanged in 1915.

Canada quickly forgot the *Komagata Maru* as war broke out in Europe, but the Raj would never be the same. Indians would still fight for Britain, but they would also fight for independence from a hypocritical foreign power that considered them inferior.

Taking Canada's measure

In the light of the scholarship in *Unmooring*, Gurdit Singh looks like the most brilliant political analyst/activist of his time. He took the measure of Canada as a "white man's country" that was also part of a multiracial global empire, and by sending the *Komagata Maru* to Burrard Inlet he showed the world that Canadian law, and Canadian sovereignty, were fragile institutions.

He also demonstrated that white British Columbians of all classes were profoundly racist: the managers despised Asians but hired them because they were cheap, and the workers despised Asians because they were unwelcome competition for terrible jobs. If white workers had allied with their Chinese, Japanese, Indigenous and Sikh neighbours, they would have had the managers at their mercy. (Such alliances did form, especially during fishers' and dockworkers' and canners' strikes, but they were fleeting.)

A century ago, an "advanced" country was by definition an empire or at least part of one like Canada or Australia. The established empires worried about the rising empires of Germany and Japan. America had just finished off the decaying empire of Spain, and the rising empires saw themselves as either the future masters of Britain and France, or their future colonies.

Gurdit Singh was a child of his time. He didn't object to the idea of empire, as long as the people of Punjab — Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus — enjoy their fair share of imperial benefits along with the English and Scots and Welsh.

If British imperialists were absent-minded about anything, it was the original inhabitants of their new dominions: the Indians and Burmese of South Asia, the Bantu and San of South Africa, the Aboriginals of Australia, the Māori of New Zealand and the Inuit, Métis and First Nations people of Canada. The Empire would give them nothing unless forced to. Ian Christopher Fletcher, in *Unmooring*, observes:

"In 1916, legal scholar and former Colonial Office official Arthur Berridale Keith published *Imperial Unity and the Dominions*, a study of imperial constitutional developments in the last years of the Edwardian era. We find two chapters side by side, 'The Treatment of Native Races' and 'Coloured Immigration," and even a reference to 'the famous voyage of the *Komagata Maru*.' But what catches our attention is the discussion of the claim of the Indigenous people in British Columbia that they had not surrendered the right to their lands and remained owners of the whole province, a claim that Keith says is 'absurd.'"

Passengers of the *Komagata Maru* with Vancouver's 1914 skyline behind them. Most were sent back to Calcutta where some were gunned down while protesting being forced onto trains to the Punjab region. Photo: James Luke Quiney, City of Vancouver Archives.

Generations and decades would pass before white Canada began to recognize that its own claims to dominion were truly absurd. Ottawa and the provinces, entities defined by settlers, have been imposed on a land already defined by those who have used it for thousands of years. Settlers might quarrel about who could be a settler, but the Indigenous peoples' opinions were ignored.

By then, two world wars had confirmed an old saying: "The only reason to become a great power is to be able to fight a great war. The only way to remain a great power is not to fight a great war."

Two great wars finished the British Empire. Gurdit Singh as an old man witnessed the abject flight of Britain from India, and the carnage that resulted. Other empires retreated as well: the Netherlands from Indonesia, France from Southeast Asia and Africa, and Portugal from Africa. Even the Russian Empire imploded a second time in 1991, into a mess of pseudo-states that Vladimir Putin is trying to put together again. Somehow the concept of empire is more persistent than that of the sovereign nation.

A force to reckon with

By the time Gurdit Singh died in 1954, Canada was still racist, but not as confidently racist as in 1914. Sikhs had begun to migrate into B.C. again after the First World War, and women had been among them. That ensured a permanent settlement, not just a crowd of male sojourners. Whatever the white majority thought of them, they prospered. According to the 2016 census, 1.9 million Canadians were of South Asian descent, 365,000 of them in British Columbia.

As political now as in 1914, Sikhs are a force to reckon with, from the Trudeau cabinet and Jagmeet Singh in Ottawa to any number of MLAs in B.C. and across the country. But the issues that their ancestors raised a century ago are still with us.

Canada today is even more attractive than it was in 1914. When it's been politically convenient, we've accepted huge numbers of immigrants and refugees: Hungarians in the 1950s, American draft dodgers and deserters in the 1960s, Vietnamese, Chileans and Ugandan Ismailis in the 1970s. We often talk about the need for immigrants to enlarge our shrinking, aging population.

But not all refugees have been equally welcome in recent years, especially if they arrive from countries we have no political or strategic stake in. The Tamils who lost the Sri Lankan civil war are an example. Justin Trudeau looked great welcoming the first Syrian refugee family to Canada, but most Syrian refugees still sit in squalid camps in the Greek islands.

More immigrants and refugees are certain to come, whether of their own free will or simply to save their own lives. They will pose problems. The U.S. will want us to take our share of the drought-stricken Central Americans coming north, just as the European Union thought each of its member states should take a reasonable number of Syrian refugees.

Canada currently plans to admit 401,000 immigrants this year, 411,000 in 2022, and 421,000 in 2023. But would we take comparable numbers of Haitians, Salvadorans, and Eritreans if they somehow got here?

And would we consult with the Indigenous nations about accepting these new migrants onto their unceded lands? Would we ask our health-care system if it could handle another half-million patients a year? Would we accept the environmental burden of feeding and housing and employing so many new people?

We are already offering permanent residency to 20,000 temporary workers in health care, 30,000 in other "essential" occupations and 40,000 international students who've graduated from Canadian institutions. Are we just robbing their home countries of people they desperately need, or including those countries in an impromptu network of mutual assistance?

The British Empire was as much a triumph of marketing as of naval firepower. Gurdit Singh was not the only one to challenge it, but he did help to expose its supposed legitimacy as so much impromptu bullshit. After a century of enormous growth, enormous violence, and further improvisation, we have only worked our way deeper into a quagmire.

As the pandemic has shown, no nation can seal itself off from the rest of the world and escape the consequences of global disasters. In some cases we will all have to cede some of our sovereignty to new regional or multinational governments — for the good of the planet.

The worsening climate will make vast and populous regions of the planet uninhabitable. Those who now live there will seek refuge, and if they die in the process they will send us videos showing how they died. The new multinational governments may prevent or soften such catastrophes, but it cannot privilege anyone — least of all on the basis that "we've always lived here and we own this patch of the planet."
Our impromptu borders and institutions are figments of our political imagination, and they have encouraged us to spread across the planet's true borders of mountains, rivers and seas. We can no longer stumble into some empty valley and claim it as ours until someone stronger drives us out of it. We live on a single planet, which we have gravely impoverished, and we must share it — or leave it to the distant descendants of our rats and raccoons.

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