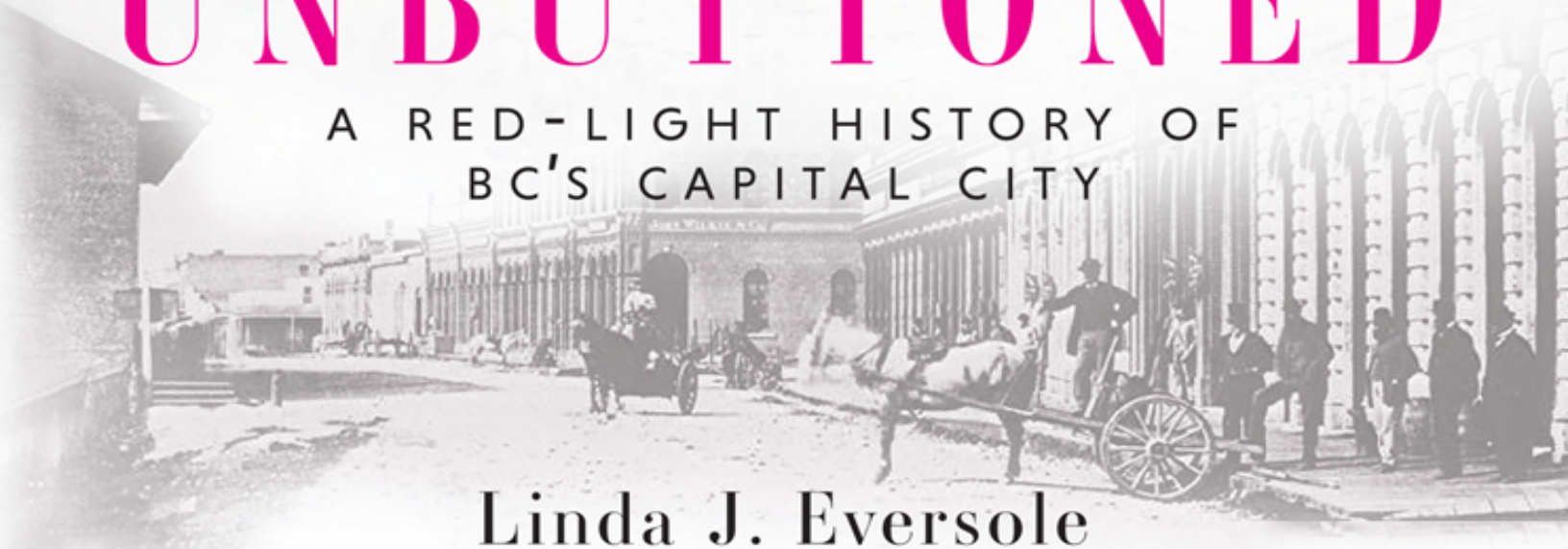
VICTORIA UNBUTTONED

A RED-LIGHT HISTORY OF BC'S CAPITAL CITY



Linda J. Eversole

Lillian Gray, ca. 1899. *Gray Family Collection*

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TOUCHWOOD

For my daughters, Machala and Cheryl, resilient spirits, empathetic hearts

Contents

Introduction

Victoria Unbuttoned, salacious as it sounds, is the result of my examination and exploration of the lives of those deemed unfit for recorded history. When we challenge assumptions about those who have come before, we challenge ourselves to see our own lives through the lens of history, without sentimentality or prejudice, and find sympathies that know no distance of time.

I am intrigued by Victoria, British Columbia—a place that has gone from being a sleepy, staid town to a charming, colourful, lively city. It's a city I would want to visit if I did not already live here. Over the past five decades I have seen Victoria grow and change while retaining a sense of its heritage. I have been privileged to observe the creation of many culturally significant works of art originating in the carving shed at Thunderbird Park. I walk down streets in the old town, which still have wooden block paving and historic structures. Along the way I have felt the presence of the people who have come before; this has driven me to learn all I can about their lives.

One group that is absent from a variety of historical records is the poor—particularly women in poverty, who were disadvantaged in a patriarchal society. The stories of their lives—especially of those who lived outside the "norm"—offer the present-day researcher greater depth of feeling and understanding of the times.

I was born in Qualicum Beach and spent my earliest years in a little cabin on Buller Road; my father ran the old wooden gas station on the main road along the coast. I was lulled to sleep nightly by the sound of the waves on the shore, and I am happy to say my childhood cabin still stands

among more substantial houses. We had a resident hermit, Giuseppe Roat, about whom many years later I would write, and on occasion my mother and I rode the wonderful E&N train to Victoria. It was an idyllic start to a young life.

Much of my life has been spent in Victoria, save for a childhood in New Westminster and Edmonton. I have also had various sojourns, particularly in England where I worked in archaeology; this experience fuelled my passion for history. Indeed, history is well entrenched in my DNA: My family takes pride in our roots, which sprung from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Upper Canada, and the Anabaptist Eversoles of Swiss origin. These roots were the source of family stories of travel to new lands and pioneer life.

In the early 1970s I was thrilled to get a position at the newly opened BC Provincial Museum, now the Royal BC Museum, in the History division. My path also led to employment with the Victoria City Archives, with Ainslie Helmcken, a grandson of pioneer doctor John Sebastian Helmcken. Later I worked at Point Ellice Historic House, the BC Golf Museum, the Steveston Museum, and the Sooke Region Museum. I spent six months at the York Archaeological Trust, mostly cleaning human bones from a Saxon burial. Interspersed with these great jobs were many travels to foreign places, usually in service to some historical passion—Russia's czars, Rapa Nui's magnificent statues, Oman's lost city of Ubar, and Tunisia's troglodyte homes (used to depict Tatooine in the first *Star Wars* movie). From Europe to Japan, the Cook Islands to Chile, and India to Egypt, I relentlessly followed my passion for history—a passion that is still not quenched.

Between my travels I managed to land a dream job as a research officer for the Heritage Branch of the BC Government. Twelve years of diverse assignments took me around the province and through decades of time to research all manner of properties, individuals, and locations to help facilitate preservation.

My work included research in government documents, letters, journals, newspapers, and photographs. I travelled to where the materials were—some were in archives, others were in offices, and some were held by individuals. I spent hours sitting on floors in government offices going through heavy leather-bound ledgers from land titles, surveys, and vital statistics. I tromped through deep snow to photograph an abandoned fur trade cabin near Nazko. I posed beside the world's largest truck in the coal fields of the Rockies. Impelled by the desire to understand the diversity of people's lives, I would find myself driving my elderly car through the Cariboo backroads to Quesnel Forks to explore its early log structures built by Chinese miners during the gold rush. I gazed in awe at the wonder personified in the ancient poles of Haida Gwaii, and I was privileged to be included as an observer of the ceremonies returning culturally significant objects to their rightful owners. As I worked and explored, it became abundantly clear that the personal stories of individuals are the heart and soul of any study of history.

I met many people along the way, all of whom impacted my thinking and approach to the past. Whether conversing with an elderly Indigenous resident of Keremeos about the building of the local Grist Mill (now a historic site) or a hundred-year-old former bartender who knew the early saloons of Victoria well, I found that interviews with pioneers, Indigenous peoples, and knowledgeable historians brought new information and insight and led to a fuller understanding.

These diverse experiences, which I feel privileged to have had, were born of the ideas and work of many individuals—some revered, some forgotten, some flawed, some heroic, but all human. Along the way I found myself wondering how much I could learn about the individuals whose lives were deemed unremarkable and, through a myriad of circumstances, lost to history. As I was well versed

in the types of research materials available, I dived more deeply into exploring primary source material including census records; directories; birth, marriage, and death registrations; wills and probates; military service records; and land and chattel transfers.

It was Ainslie Helmcken, Victoria's founding city archivist, who first answered my query about women in criminal activities and made mention of an intriguing woman by the name of Stella Carroll, Victoria's pre-eminent brothel keeper of the early twentieth century. What began as an idle question led to years of compiling research, writing letters, applying for copies of primary documents; it even led to a trip along the Pacific west coast—from Washington to California, family in tow—to uncover her story. As luck would have it, I was able to spend some time with John Carroll, one of Stella's family members. He provided me with numerous photographs, family stories, and leads to material from other family members, when we met in his charming townhouse filled with antique furniture, some of which came from Stella's brothel.

Stella's life opened a gateway to understanding the business of brothels and prostitution, and insight into the complexity that went beyond a single establishment. It also brought to light individuals whose only records were seemingly in police and court documents and newspapers. I gathered and put aside information on the history of the business of prostitution in Victoria—more specifically the lives of individuals who were involved, predominantly American women. In later years I would follow an easier research path via digital access to records; these revealed even more primary information, allowing me to employ forensic genealogy to track present-day descendants. In this way I used skills already honed over the years when tracing individuals for legal purposes for government agencies and law firms.

In all this I gained a greater understanding of unconventional lives—not necessarily criminal or immoral, just unconventional. By sharing my findings in this book, I hope to shine a light on the lives of women who followed a specific path, sometimes from need and sometimes from choice. Their involvement in the sex trade does not define them but is merely a part of their story. For some such as Stella Carroll, Lillian Gray, Emma Johnson, and Christina Haas, the sex trade was a big part of their lives and a profession they followed. For others, such as Grace Trachsler, Martha Gillespie, Nettie Sager, and Dora Son, it was less a vocation and more a way to cope with illness, addiction, and a fear of living in poverty. For Edna Farnsworth and Alice Young, it was an unfortunate chapter that ended short, tragic lives that had hardly begun.

All of these women's stories are very different. I regret that I was limited, both by my own lack of familiarity and by the sparseness of available primary sources—save for the observations and racist rants reproduced in court reports and news stories—from profiling in any great detail the experiences of women from Indigenous or Chinese communities in Victoria. I was, however, able to include a few details on the life of Kateka, an Indigenous woman whose story intersects with that of local policeman John Westrop Carey (see Chapter 1).

Sexual commerce is not usually top of mind when talking about the growth of a city. In fact, as illuminated in the saying "the world's oldest profession," sex work is an ever-present economic sector that consistently defies attempts at abolition or regulation. Where people gather and settle, the business will always be present.

The west coast of North America was coming into its own in the mid-1800s because of gold—particularly the California Gold Rush of 1849. The coastal location was desirable for many other reasons, but this event brought the type of sojourner that in time would profoundly impact the Pacific

Northwest region and lead to the eventual creation of the Province of British Columbia. Early exploration and the already-established trade in furs, with the resulting establishment of forts and trading stations, brought increasing interest from individuals driven by a desire for adventure and new opportunities. This grew to greater numbers a few years later when the exhausted California goldfields gave way to discoveries farther north along the Fraser River in what was then the Colony of British Columbia. Communities along the coast were inundated with great economic opportunities, and aside from the obvious needs of transportation, shelter, and supplies, there was an impetus for permanent settlements to grow and thrive.

A rush to capitalize—not just for settlers, but for Indigenous populations too—meant local expertise and knowledge of the land was also a valuable resource. Thus came the expectation of mutually beneficial trade and alliances for traders and Indigenous peoples. However, this expectation would fall far short for the Indigenous peoples who lived in the area as well as those who travelled to interact with the HBC. In terms of sexual commerce, the imbalance of power was exposed and carried on through attitudes of settlers who did not partner well with people they thought of as inferior, despite being dependent on their labour. Daily interaction could lead to friction, and the lack of a common language beyond chinook jargon—the commonly used pidgin trade language spoken in the Pacific Northwest—meant only basic communication between disparate individuals. As far as sexual contact, an increase in population and in particular the introduction of alcohol and dance halls (also known as “squaw halls,” a pejorative term in settler parlance) led to a necessary establishment of law and order, based on the British system. The influence of religious proclaimers determined to bring others to the God they worshipped had considerable power on the

establishment of order in the growing community—as did their beliefs on morality. These newcomers made the rules and administered them as they saw fit.

The fort settlement grew into a community, then a colony, then a city; along with this growth came the evolution of the quasi-legal business of prostitution and the attendant changes in law and its application, morality, and ideas of reform. In the beginning the members of this rudimentary society were dependent on each other for everything. Entries in the *Fort Victoria Journal* reveal a community working together to build the fort, clear land, build fencing, plough fields, and run supplies from Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River (near present-day Portland, Oregon). Local women participated in agricultural work alongside the men and partnered with them in living arrangements. By 1848 the Reverend Monsieur Veyret was determined to take control and convince the populace to follow a godly life. He was looked on with some contempt, for his arrival coincided with the spread of diseases previously unknown to the local population. In time he did persuade some of the workers— many of whom were Metis who had been transferred to Victoria from Fort Vancouver to work—to formalize their liaisons. As the *Journal* recorded:

> *Mon^r^ Veyret has married eight of our Canadians to ~~their~~ Indian Women.*[1]

With the onset of the gold rush, the agricultural community became a transport and supply centre for gold seekers, and the population grew dramatically. A larger and more formalized policing and judiciary was put in place, and the little settlement of Victoria became home to a variety of individuals from all over the world, many arriving from the US seeking a more lucrative future. In 1861 Hector Smith, from California, was made chief of police not long after his arrival. He had this to say in a communication about the

conditions related to the white inhabitants and the Indigenous population:

> *The lowest class of Society from Victoria infests the coast, supplying spirits to the Indians and carrying on other nefarious pursuits, to the great demoralization of the Indians, and to the serious danger and annoyance of respectable settlers.*[2]

This was supported by the Reverend Alex Garrett, Principal of the Indian Mission at Fort Victoria. In his government report, he used language and descriptions that would not be tolerated in the present day. His words below clearly illustrate racism and division:

> *The moral and social condition of all the Indians resident at Victoria is extremely bad.*
>
> *This arises mainly from the following causes:*
>
> *1. From the natural tendency to evil of the savage mind, the natives copy with extreme facility the vices of their civilized neighbours.*
>
> *2. They are drawn toward ruin with resistless power by the strong temptation held out to them in the gains of prostitution, and the ease with which they obtain a large amount of intoxicating drink.*[3]

Garrett did not seem to have any use for any of the inhabitants of the colony, generally, but one comment would ring true: Alcohol was destructive for many of the residents, whether Indigenous or settlers, and its effects would be felt for generations to come. Garrett was already seeing the terrible effects of diseases, such as measles and smallpox, brought into a community not equipped to withstand it, and he tried to introduce inoculation programs

with mixed results. In the end, alcohol and disease would decimate the Indigenous population.

As the fort grew to a colony in 1849, then a sizeable settlement in 1858–59, dance halls, saloons, hotels, and small brothels were scattered throughout the community while religious leaders tried to create some sense of decorum. Clashes arose, not just over morality and prostitution but the general air of debauchery—alcohol again the fuel. More non-Indigenous women appeared in the colony, some as wives, but others also looking for opportunities or dealing with their own difficult circumstances. Nettie Sager and Martha Gillespie, who we will meet in early chapters, were among the women who caused a stir in town. Although their stories were quite different, both were well known in their day.

The transition from open debauchery to some discretion in operating small brothels came with the ability to obtain more substantial places to work. From the 1870s, buildings were constructed with more permanence in mind; rental opportunities were there, and for some the chance to purchase a well-located house near areas where workmen resided. Broughton Street was centrally located and adjacent to carriage works and later the Victoria Transfer Company. It had several medium-size houses to rent and one to buy. Also, the barrack-type annex of the stables was made available as a brothel property to rent and was well suited with its number of small rooms.

Broad Street too was a prime location, and even though the cabins gave way to brick buildings, rental properties such as Duck's Building were available; madams such as Vera Ashton, Marval Conn (AKA Emma Johnson), and Stella Carroll eyed these properties, anxious to create upscale carriage houses with a higher-class clientele and substantially greater profits. Their stories in Victoria began in the 1890s, and in the case of Stella continued to the onset of the First World War.

Many brothel keepers learned their business in San Francisco's high-end resorts, particularly from the famous madams Jessie Hayman and Tessie Wall, who set a standard to which other madams would aspire. Stella Carroll, Lillian Gray, and Christina Haas had ambitions; they knew their business and all aspects of running a parlour house. Others such as Della Wentworth and Henrietta Morgan had less grandiose aspirations but also learned much from their days in the notorious "sin city" that was San Francisco; they set up shop on Broughton Street.

Los Angeles madam Lee Francis (AKA Beverly Davis) collaborated with "Serge G. Wolsey" (the pseudonym of journalist Gladys Adelina Lewis) on the memoir *Call House Madam.*[4] While undoubtedly dramatized, this memoir gives insight into the costs of high-end establishments in the heyday of San Francisco in the 1890s and early 1900s. Lee was "turned out" by Jessie Hayman when just a teenager and had plenty to say on how things were run. According to *Call House Madam*, brothels ran under one of two systems: The first was a boarding house arrangement where women paid for a room, board, and expenses while the madam provided a clean and well-decorated establishment. The second system was a percentage house where the madam also supplied food, liquor, and the services of additional staff such as housekeepers, bouncers, and musicians. In exchange, the madam took a percentage of earnings, anywhere from 25 to 55 percent; the madam also earned money through liquor sales. Women in these houses were expected to dress well, with a wardrobe to impress on the streets and tantalize in private.

Lower-level prostitution could range from a woman perched in her window in various stages of undress and soliciting customers, to women working in their own premises and offering services at much lower prices, between two to five dollars.

Today most, if not all, of the small buildings that housed brothels have been wiped out in the development of the city of Victoria. The only remnants are large brick buildings that were originally rented to madams or independent operators along Herald, Johnson, and Fisgard Streets. Duck's Building on Broad Street is one remaining vestige of the sex industry; here, the second and third floors ran as a high-end establishment from 1892 to 1905. With the disappearance of suitable buildings and the pressure of moral reform, the sex industry gradually went underground, disappearing into discreet hotels and private residences after the First World War. Despite such pressure, street prostitution also began to flourish once again, and the dangers of such a life led to many tragic endings.

The women profiled in this book are just a few of many who came to Victoria seeking a life that would provide them comfort and companionship. Some succeeded, and others didn't. To understand the business of prostitution, it is necessary to explore the lives of those who practised it and to examine their relationship to the wider community around them.

Chapter One

FURS, FORTUNES, AND FANCY WOMEN

In 1843, to stem American expansion into British-held territory, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) established Fort Victoria, enlisting James Douglas from the company's depot on the Columbia River to locate the site and begin construction. In time Douglas was made chief factor of the Pacific Coast operations; he would oversee the many stages of development of the new community.

Fort Victoria. *Victoria City Archives M09017*

The centre of the fur trade was more northerly, but it was thought expedient to have a depot on British territory that was still well placed to service traders coming south, particularly the Haida and other Northwest Coast groups bringing sea otter furs. In time this trade dwindled. A *British Colonist* editorial in 1861 suggested northern Indigenous traders shouldn't be allowed past the central coast near Cape Mudge as they weren't bringing many furs but seemed

to be bringing trouble by contributing to the trade in vice.[1] The language used was vitriolic and unbridled with racist intolerance that today would be recognized as hate literature. The traders were accused of committing every sort of crime and spreading terror with violence all along the coast until their arrival in Victoria where they “rendered the whole outskirts of the town a perfect brothel.” Hateful intolerance was rampant right from the beginning of the establishment of Fort Victoria; the despicable characterization and language used by established leaders was deemed acceptable, and so it would continue. Unsurprisingly, there were indicators that sexual commerce was well established from the earliest times and already controversial.

Opportunities for trade were not limited to local Indigenous groups or the male population. Both men and women came to Fort Victoria with items to sell, such as dried berries, clams, and beans, and they also sought employment as labourers, servants, and guides. As traders and later colonizers arrived in increasing numbers and set up shop, basic needs quickly became apparent—transportation, shelter, food, alcohol, and sex. Not necessarily in that order.

The Hudson’s Bay Company had a male workforce, and interaction with Indigenous peoples was largely for trade. The construction of the fort brought local people into closer contact, and the Indigenous peoples’ knowledge, expertise, and ability to gather needed items from the land was a definite asset. In addition, the fort was constructed on traditional territory. The local population was later supplemented by workers, known as “Kanaka,” brought from the Sandwich Islands (today the Hawaiian Islands) or directly from other HBC forts where they were already employed. Although the local population mainly lived across the harbour, those that stayed in town were segregated