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A bicentennial to mark Black History Month: James Douglas, the man some call the father of British Columbia, was born in 1803

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This year is the bicentennial of the birth of British Columbia's first governor. Today, the man some call the father of British Columbia is relatively unknown.

Sir James Douglas was born Aug. 15, 1803, in British Guiana (now Guyana) and educated in Scotland. He came to Canada as a young man to work for the Northwest Company, later taken over by the Hudson's Bay Co.

At first blush, Douglas' life and work are a typical 19th-century story in the land that eventually became Canada.

Douglas was a fur trader who spent decades ranging throughout the continent, often by canoe. He lived for years in remote communities, such as Fort St. James, which are vestiges of the northern British Columbia fur trade's boom period.

But a second look reveals a man whose background was partly connected to Africa and the Caribbean coast of South America.

Douglas was born out of wedlock in Demerara of a Scottish sugar planter father and a "free coloured" mother from Barbados. These details, however, were not commonly known by his contemporaries, or spoken about by his children.

As John Adams' recent biography of Douglas and his family so engagingly explains, however, Douglas was in many ways sensitive to the needs of oppressed peoples.

For example, he welcomed African-Americans escaping racial prejudice from California to the young colony where some of their descendants still form a small community today.

The B.C. Black History Awareness Society, based in Victoria, held a reception to mark the first day of Black History Month on Feb. 1 as well as launch its new educational centre.

Douglas's lifelong marriage to Amelia Connelly -- a Metis of mixed Cree and French-Canadian/Irish background -- was fairly typical of fur traders and influenced his attitudes towards and relations with native Indians, which were quite liberal compared to those of his successors.

For example, the only treaties signed with First Nations in British Columbia -- with the exception of the Treaty Eight area in the Peace River district -- were signed by Douglas on behalf of Queen Victoria on Vancouver Island. Also typical of fur traders, Douglas was fluent in French due to the key role played by Metis and French-Canadians.

The Canadian Unity Council's B.C.-Yukon regional office has made the Douglas bicentenary a priority. The council, a national non-governmental organization incorporated in 1969, has always stressed the need to know and understand Canadian history.

On Sunday, May 11, the regional office will sponsor an educational day tour of Fort St. James, a two-hour drive from Prince George and home of a national historic site.

The fort, founded in 1806, played a significant role in the development of Canada's west. Sir James lived there for several years.

It was originally established by the Northwest Company and then taken over later by the Hudson's Bay Co. The companies traded with the Carrier people and other First Nations.

As Professor Cole Harris of University of British Columbia explained in a recent interview, what visitors to Fort St. James may not realize is that, in its heyday, this isolated place in a rugged terrain was connected to the hub of the fur trade, Montreal -- nearly 5,000 kilometres away -- and, from there, to the distant markets of the United Kingdom and continental Europe.

The life and work of James Douglas have an impact on us in many ways, including the legal precedents he set in treaty-making with First Nations in British Columbia.

Indeed, his legacy touches on Canadian history as a whole with the role he played in the negotiation between the United States and Britain on what was eventually to become the Canada-U.S. border west of the Rockies.

Sir James was a powerful figure in the history of British Columbia and Canada. Though many have argued that he was relatively enlightened for a man of his time, he was far from perfect.

Pomposity and behaving as a colonial despot were two of his many flaws. Douglas was, like many at the time, opposed to B.C. joining Confederation and was reluctantly "grandfathered" into being a Canadian citizen.

He died in Victoria on Aug. 2, 1877. Hundreds attended his funeral, including many native Indians. Despite his notoriety at the time, Douglas appears to have been largely forgotten.

As 2003 is the 200th anniversary of his birth, we have an opportunity to rekindle our interest in Sir James and his impact on B.C. and Canada.

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