

An Immigration Battle Won

A Book Review by Wayne Lutton

THE 'KOMAGATA MARU' INCIDENT: A CANADIAN IMMIGRATION BATTLE REVISITED

by Robert Jarvis
C-FAR (P.O.Box 332,
Rexdale, Ontario M9W 5L3, Canada)
48 pages, \$5.00

Too often, past efforts to restrict immigration to the United States, Canada, and Australia have been dismissed as the handiwork of "nativists" and "racists." Researcher Robert Jarvis is writing a new history of the Canadian immigration restriction movement. Instead of hoarding his findings and waiting to issue a *magnum opus*, he has been releasing his revised history as a series of monographs. *The 'Komagata Maru' Incident* is the second installment.

The *Komagata Maru* was a Japanese-owned, Hong Kong-based steamer chartered in March 1914 by Punjabi native Gurdit Singh Sarhali to bring a boatload of East Indians to British Columbia. Singh recruited passengers from among Hong Kong's Indian community. Charging \$100 per person, almost twice the standard third-class fare on a commercial passenger liner, 376 men (Sikhs and Hindus, with 25 Moslems) set sail from Yokohama on May 3, 1914 and reached Victoria, British Columbia on May 21. However, the arrival of the *Komagata Maru* was met by protesters and the East Indians were not permitted to disembark. Asian immigration had sparked widespread opposition among virtually all segments of British Columbian society. Trade unionists took the lead in forming the Asiatic Exclusion League, which mustered support across the Pacific Northwest, on both sides of the border.

Asian immigration had been seen by big business (exemplified by coal baron Robert Dunsmuir) as a means of increasing profits and undercutting union-led wage and benefits reforms. Trans-Pacific shipping companies, such as the steamer line founded by the Canadian Pacific Railway, promoted heavy Asian immigration, promising potential passengers (most of whom were illiterate peasants who knew little or no English) that they would be welcomed in North America where high wage jobs were awaiting them.

Bowing to popular public demand, on December 8, 1913 the Canadian government issued an order-in-council prohibiting the immigration of all "artisan or general unskilled labour classes" through all ports of entry in British Columbia. On January 7, 1914, a ban on "continuous journey" was reenacted. The laws, which continued in effect throughout the First World War, achieved the desired effect of ending Asian immigration.

Gurdit Singh, as well as the Hong Kong government, knew that these laws meant that the *Komagata Maru's* passengers could not be legally admitted to Canada. Singh intended to mount a court challenge to the orders-in-council and hoped that his charges would be allowed to "crash the gate."

Instead, the Victoria Trades & Labour Congress insisted that the Dominion government enforce the laws restricting immigration. Malcolm Reid, head of the B.C. Immigration Department, refused to allow the passengers to disembark and kept the ship anchored off shore to prevent any surreptitious landings. On July 6, 1914, the Court of Appeal unanimously upheld the validity of the steps taken to prevent the landing of the *Komagata Maru's* passengers. On July 23, 1914, having exhausted all appeals, the ship set sail for the return voyage to the Orient, arriving outside of Calcutta in late September.

But this was not the end of the story. Vancouver's East Indian community swore revenge. At 10:15 a.m. on October 21, 1914, William Hopkinson, an immigration inspector who could interpret Hindi, Punjabi, and Gurukhi, was assassinated at the entrance to the Provincial Courthouse by Mewa Singh. Singh and three other Sikhs were apprehended and Singh was convicted and hanged for the murder the following January.

Today, the terrorist is honored by Canada's expanding Sikh community as a hero and Vancouver Sikhs observe an annual Mewa Singh Martyr Day.

As Paul Fromm observes in his introduction to this monograph, "The eventual decision by waffling federal authorities to expel the *Komagata Maru* was a reluctant bow to overwhelming public opinion, that was firmly opposed to changing B.C.'s population. There are lessons here for today, as we see elitist politicians even more eager than their counterparts eighty years ago, to impose a highly unpopular immigration policy on Canadians."

Addressing the question of the prohibition of Asian immigration by the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the distinguished British historian Geoffrey Barraclough noted in *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Penguin Books, 1964/1982) that population pressures in Asia fueled the desire of millions of people to emigrate to North America and Australia-New Zealand. "The immediate response of the countries concerned was to erect a ring fence of stringent immigration laws and regulations so framed as to exclude non-Europeans... But for these restrictions," Professor Barraclough concluded, "it seems almost certain that by that date [the mid-1930s], the population of the western seaboard of North America would have been largely Asiatic."

Readers in the United States, and elsewhere, will find much of interest in Jarvis' well-written monograph. We look forward to the publication of further chapters in his history of immigration restriction. ■

Reality Check

Video Review by Wayne Lutton

FOREIGN AID & THE REALITY OF OVERPOPULATION

by Professor Garrett Hardin

Approximately 75 minutes, \$20.00

Citizens for Foreign Aid Reform (C-FAR)

P.O. Box 332, Rexdale, Ontario M9W 5L3 Canada

Since the publication of his landmark paper, "The Tragedy of the Commons," (*Science*, 1968) Garrett Hardin has been among the foremost critics of Western foreign aid programs. Last fall Professor Hardin addressed a conference on Immigration & Population sponsored by the Canadian group, Citizens for Foreign Aid Reform (C-FAR). His remarks are now available in video format.

Professor Hardin opens his remarks by pointing out that the media consistently fail to show the connection between overpopulation and many human disasters. He cites the treatment accorded the casualties of storm and earthquakes in the Indian subcontinent. As he explains, had the people been living away from the flood plains, or in homes constructed of pliable wood instead of the cement blocks which came crashing down on their occupants, few would have died. The media reported that floods and earthquakes killed the hapless folk. Hardin argues that it would be more accurate to say that overpopulation was the culprit, since people would not have been living in frequently-flooded areas if they didn't have to. And wood should have been available for housing, were it not in very short supply thanks to decades of overharvesting to meet the past demands made by India's too numerous inhabitants. But, he notes, the connection between population density and resource availability is never made: "no one ever dies of overpopulation," he says.

Reviewing Western foreign aid programs, he points out that supporters refuse to ask the question, "And then, what?" when coming up with policy proposals. He gives the example of various expensive dam projects, such as the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, which ended up displacing people from their farmlands, led to salinization of heavily irrigated and over-fertilized land, and encouraged additional population growth. Whatever immediate benefits may be attributed to the projects have been more than offset by the long-term bad consequences.

Turning to Western intervention in Somalia and

Ethiopia, he cautions that food rushed in today only makes it more certain that many will starve tomorrow. Hardin admits that he cannot recall an instance when foreign aid actually did any good over an extended period of time. His conclusion is that, aside from encouraging birth-control, Western nations would be best advised to get out of the foreign aid business altogether.

Readers of *The Social Contract* will want to order a copy of this video to share with their friends and associates. Contemporary newsreel footage compliments Dr. Hardin's presentation. This is a good way to introduce others to the concept of "carrying capacity" (how many people a given area can support without outside aid) and the problems associated with population growth. After seeing this video, viewers should then be encouraged to read Garrett Hardin's latest book, *Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos* (Oxford University Press, 1993). ■