

“A NATION OF ARTISTS”:

Alice Ravenhill and the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts

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IN 1996, BILL REID SOLD A bronze sculpture to the Vancouver International Airport Authority for \$3 million, making him the highest-paid Canadian artist to that date. An image of this sculpture, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, adorned the Canadian twenty-dollar bill from 2004 until 2012, and the original casting of the sculpture stands in front of the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC. Reid’s journey to this position as a Haida artist and Canadian icon provides some insight into the often contradictory role of indigenous imagery in visual representations of Canadian culture and identity. While Reid’s work was certainly inspired by his ancestral ties, he learned technique in a jewellery-making course at the Ryerson Institute of Technology in Toronto, and he learned the fundamentals of Northwest Coast design from two books, in particular. One of these books is the American museum director Robert Bruce Inverarity’s *Art of the Northwest Coast Indians*, which was published in 1950; the other is Alice Ravenhill’s *A Corner Stone of Canadian Culture: An Outline of the Arts and Crafts of the Indian Tribes of British Columbia*.¹

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¹ Alice Ravenhill, *A Corner Stone of Canadian Culture: An Outline of the Arts and Crafts of the Indian Tribes of British Columbia* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1944). In Tippet’s interpretation, Reid was consistently ambiguous about his identity for the first twenty years of his career. His decision to promote himself as an “all Indian” artist did not come about until the 1970s, after he received a Canada Council fellowship. While Reid had Haida ancestry and ties to the Haida village of Skidegate, and his great-great-uncle, Charles Edenshaw, as well as his grandfather, Charles Gladstone, were both Haida artists, his mother was raised to “become more white and less Haida,” and his father was a “white man” in the frontier of northern British Columbia in the early twentieth century. See Maria Tippet, *Bill Reid: The Making of An Indian* (Toronto: Random House, 2003), 31, 25, 67.

The story of Alice Ravenhill, who spearheaded an arts and crafts revival in British Columbia in the 1930s, is an important one to tell, and not only because of her influence on Reid's career. As Ronald Hawker has shown, Ravenhill's work was incorporated into the Indian education system in both residential and day schools throughout the province.² By the 1940s, the notion of indigenous peoples being what Ravenhill described as "a nation of artists,"³ with inherent tendencies towards the visual and oral arts, became institutionalized at a federal level in various Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) policies. This led to an increase in the production and sale of arts and crafts on the reserves. Indigenous art and imagery came to reflect continuity rather than extinction as the widespread nineteenth-century notion of the "Vanishing Indian" was compromised by the reality of an increasing indigenous population.⁴

Born in England in 1859 into a privileged family, Ravenhill began her career as an educator in the fields of public health, home economics, and child care. She immigrated to Vancouver Island in 1910 after a distinguished professional career in England. Her interest in indigenous arts and crafts only began in the late 1920s, but by the 1930s she had already become something of a local authority on the subject. During the 1930s and into the 1940s, Ravenhill devoted much of her time to the revitalization of indigenous arts and crafts in British Columbia, a moral endeavour that gained publicity and support from both indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Ravenhill's self-education in indigenous arts and crafts began with needlework. On hooked rugs, bags, book covers, cushions, and other household objects she reproduced, for sale, various indigenous designs garnered from the Provincial Archives.⁵

² Hawker argues that Ravenhill and the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts, which she founded, used arts and crafts as a way of reforming the Indian educational system and that their work was key to the "transition of First Nations art promotion from voluntary organizations (in the 1930s) to state institutions (in the 1940s)." Although Hawker demonstrates that Ravenhill's work stems from a philanthropic notion that educational reform through arts and crafts programs in Indian day and residential schools would contribute to solving the "Indian Problem," he also shows that this type of reform was in line with assimilative policies and served to legitimize government control over the production and distribution of indigenous-made objects. See Ronald Hawker, *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922-61* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 82-99.

³ Alice Ravenhill, "Formation in Victoria of the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts" (1945), 6, Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts (hereafter BCIAAC Papers), 1939-1954, box 1, file 3, British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA). See also Alice Ravenhill, "Biography, 1923-1951" (1952), 224, BCIAAC Papers, BCA.

⁴ See Daniel Francis, "The Bureaucrat's Indian," in *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), 209-32.

⁵ In the latter half of the 1920s, Emily Carr was also reproducing Northwest Coast designs, for sale, in needlework and on pottery. See Hawker, *Ghosts*, 84; Maria Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1994 [1979]), 134-36; National Gallery of Canada/Vancouver



Figure 1. Alice Ravenhill, circa 1936. Image I-51527 courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives.

Starting in the late 1920s, Ravenhill also gave public talks “on the characteristics and claims of these provincial tribal arts” at the Island and Victoria Arts and Crafts Society, the Women’s University Club, and the Business Men’s “Lunch Club” in Victoria. Ravenhill’s needlework designs and her talks were initially met with poor sales, poor attendance, and a general lack of interest. This changed in 1935, when Ravenhill redirected her attention to children. That year, sponsored by the Carnegie Fund, she gave a series of four talks at the Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology, which attracted a total audience of over 250 children. In the fall of 1936, an eight-week course on “British Columbia Indians” was added to the provincial grade school curriculum “without,” in her view, “authentic guidance being provided for the teachers.” Ravenhill took up this issue with the school board, and the result was the publication of her *The Native Tribes of British Columbia* in 1938.⁶

This influential book provides an overview of traditional indigenous culture in pre-contact times. The cover bears an image of a totem pole, leaning slightly to the right, as if to express its age and weariness at

Art Gallery, *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2006), plates 89-92.

⁶ Ravenhill, “Formation,” 2-3.

having stood, neglected, for so long. Here, Ravenhill defines culture as “a combination or embodiment of inherited customs and traditions which control their [indigenous people’s] actions, regulate their procedures, and find expression in their emotions and arts.”⁷ While she also discusses geography, tools, weapons, housing, and food production methods in *Native Tribes*, Ravenhill’s main focus is on indigenous arts and crafts.

Native Tribes gained an unexpected and significant endorsement in 1939, when a copy of the book was presented to the Queen consort of England, Queen Elizabeth, by Lady Tweedsmuir, a personal friend of Ravenhill’s and wife of the governor general of Canada. The Queen expressed much interest in the book and wrote Ravenhill that she was “specially desirous of learning more on the subject of the North West Pacific Coast arts and crafts.”⁸ Encouraged by the success of *Native Tribes*, Ravenhill formed a committee based in Victoria in 1940 called the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts. This society was created “with the hope of arousing more interest in our BC Indians and their arts and crafts to promote the exercise of inherited abilities for their own welfare and for the cultural and commercial advancement of Canada.”⁹ Members of the society included Major Llewellyn Bullock-Webster, director of the province’s school and community drama; Alma Russell, formerly of the Provincial Archives; Dr. G. Clifford Carl, director of the Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology; and anthropologist A.E. Pickford.¹⁰ The first thing the society did following its formation was to notify provincial and federal DIA officials of its existence in an attempt to raise funds and to gain official government support. For several years, Ravenhill corresponded with Harold McGill, DIA director in Ottawa; R.A. Hoey, who was then in charge of the section concerned with school curricula and industrial training; and Major D.M. MacKay, Indian commissioner for the province. Despite her efforts, by the mid-1940s Ravenhill lamented: “So far War claims have in every case been quoted as adequate reasons for inability to cooperate in suggestions or to respond to more definite requests.”¹¹

⁷ Alice Ravenhill, *The Native Tribes of British Columbia* (Victoria: Charles F. Banfield, 1938), 10.

⁸ Ravenhill, “Formation,” 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ For Bullock-Webster, see J.L. Hoffman, “Bullock-Webster and the BC Dramatic School, 1921-1932,” *Theatre Research in Canada* [Online], 8, 2 (June 1987). For Carl and Pickford, see Peter Corley-Smith, *White Bears and Other Curiosities: The First 100 Years of the Royal British Columbia Museum* (Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum, 1989).

¹¹ Ravenhill, “Formation,” 14.

Even though Ravenhill and the society were unable to solicit government funding, they continued lobbying the government and proceeded with their work of promoting young BC indigenous artists within the province, throughout Canada, and abroad. In 1941, a representative body of the Victoria society was formed in Oliver, British Columbia, “which,” wrote Ravenhill, “included from the start three Okanagan Indians.” Two years later, the first BC Aboriginal people became honorary members of the Victoria society, after “several Chiefs and representative individuals” attended meetings and assisted the society in its efforts to “arouse more public interest.”¹²

Ravenhill’s second book, *A Corner Stone of Canadian Culture: An Outline of the Arts and Crafts of the Indian Tribes of British Columbia*, appeared in 1944 after more than three years of labour on the part of Ravenhill and her assistant Betty Newton. This monograph contains drawings of designs created by Bill Reid’s great-great-uncle, Charles Edenshaw, and Reid later credited this book with contributing to his artistic identity and development.¹³ *Corner Stone* was distributed to all of the “Indian schools” in the province. Its purpose was to revive interest in, provide instruction for, and stimulate the production of “traditional” arts and crafts among indigenous children. For Ravenhill, *Corner Stone* was an expression of her belief that British Columbia’s indigenous peoples were “a nation of artists,” with inherent tendencies towards the visual and oral arts.

Work on *Corner Stone* commenced in 1941, when the DIA office in Ottawa commissioned Ravenhill to produce twenty wall charts of various designs “to cover all phases of Indian art work and all parts of the Province.”¹⁴ The charts, along with over a hundred pages of text outlining the characteristics, significance, and legendary origins of each design, were circulated among the Indian schools in the province. These were also published in a condensed book form, for sale to the general public.¹⁵ Ravenhill and Newton were paid one hundred dollars for their work, which, as Ravenhill declared, did “not much more than cover the cost of materials,” but they felt that their work was “richly worthwhile as sowing precious seed.”¹⁶ Following the publication of *Corner Stone*, Ravenhill stepped down from the presidency of the society because of

¹² Ibid., 12-13.

¹³ Hawker, *Ghosts*, 89; Tippet, *Reid*, 67.

¹⁴ MacKay to Ravenhill, 17 June 1940, BCIAC Papers, BCA. See also Ravenhill to Bullock-Webster, 11 February 1941, box 1, file 2, BCIAC Papers, BCA; G. Clifford Carl to Ravenhill, 21 February 1941, BCIAC Papers, BCA; and Ravenhill to Carl, 25 February 1941, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

¹⁵ G. Clifford Carl, “Foreword,” in Ravenhill, *Corner Stone*.

¹⁶ Ravenhill to Beatrice Cave-Browne-Cave, 29 June 1940, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

“a disabling accident,” and her role in it was taken over by Dr. Carl of the Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology. However, Ravenhill’s leadership and her approach to revitalizing indigenous arts and crafts continued to influence the movement at least into the 1950s.

Ravenhill was a central figure in the revitalization of indigenous arts and crafts in British Columbia, and her two books did indeed become “cornerstones” of the movement. A word is required here on the larger movement that informed the BC indigenous arts and crafts revival. Arts and Crafts, an international reform movement that was both philanthropic and socialist, was based on an ideology that championed the arts and crafts as a means towards economic self-sufficiency and moral uplift. The movement took hold in England, the United States, and Canada during the late nineteenth century, largely based on the philosophy popularized by the British writer, artist, and socialist William Morris. The socio-economic aspect of this philosophy encouraged a return to a communal village economy, wherein artisans perfected their craft and bartered their wares. Aesthetically, the Arts and Crafts philosophy advocated imperfection as “evidence of the essential humanity of the work process; by contrast, the perfections of antique handwork and modern machine production were considered the products of different types of ‘slave’ labour.”¹⁷ In other words, a return to the daily use and production of beautiful, handmade objects was one solution to the ills of industrial society. This movement, in its purest form, was embodied in cooperative rural craft communities like the Shakers in the north-eastern United States. By the early twentieth century, the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement on many reformers and social workers was apparent. Administrators of settlement houses like Hull House in Chicago and Toynbee Hall in London adapted Morris’s ideas in their social work, convinced that art education was the key to the moral uplift of impoverished immigrants.¹⁸

In early twentieth-century Canada, Arts and Crafts movements adapted variations of these earlier socialist ideas, which found parallels in “modern” antimodernist sentiments. The BC indigenous arts and crafts revival was a localized variation of this larger movement. Here, pre-industrial society had consisted of only a handful of white settlers

¹⁷ Diane Waggoner, ed., *The Beauty of Life: William Morris and the Art of Design* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 25.

¹⁸ For settlement houses, see Mary Lynn McCree Bryan, Barbara Bair, and Maree De Angury, eds., *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams: Preparing to Lead, 1860-1881* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); and Mary Lynn McCree Bryan and Allen F. Davis, *100 Years at Hull-House* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

and a large population of indigenous communities. Thus, for British Columbians, indigenous people were central actors in the Romantic notion of the “primitive,” on which the antimodernist image of the idyllic “premodern” society was based. Proponents of revitalizing indigenous arts and crafts believed that “authentic” indigenous designs, aesthetics, colours, and techniques could only be produced by authentic indigenous people, by means of “inherited ability.”¹⁹ In other words, the essence of indigenous arts and crafts was its inherently “primitive” nature. Equally important to this movement was the notion that, because indigenous people in British Columbia had been colonized, much of their knowledge of traditional arts and crafts had been, or was, in the process of being lost.

The most immediate task during the early years of the revival was the methodical process of defining what constituted authentic “Indian” arts and crafts before that knowledge disappeared. In this way, the BC Indian Arts and Crafts revival overlapped, in theory and in practice, with professional and amateur salvage ethnologists of the day. But there were key differences in their objectives: the former sought to revitalize the arts while the latter aimed only to preserve material art objects. In order to revitalize, however, traditional “Indian” culture first had to be defined. This was Ravenhill’s agenda and it was what she achieved with her two books.

Her interest in indigenous arts and crafts renewal was not unique, nor was it carried out in isolation. For example, her contemporaries and peers Maisie Hurley and George Raley also engaged in philanthropic work that involved revitalizing indigenous art and culture in the province. Their work differed from that of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century salvage ethnologists and collectors, who focused their attention primarily on the accumulation and preservation of material objects.²⁰ While Hurley is best known for the Maisie Hurley Collection of Native Art that is now housed at the North Vancouver Museum and Archives, she was also an educator and advocate of indigenous rights. Her biographer, Sharon Fortney, explains that Hurley envisioned her art collection “playing an important role in cultural education and in the revitalization of Native artistic traditions.”²¹ Similarly, the Reverend

¹⁹ Ravenhill, “Formation,” 7.

²⁰ For salvage ethnology, see Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995).

²¹ Sharon Fortney, “Entwined Histories: The Creation of the Maisie Hurley Collection of Native Art,” *BC Studies* 167 (2010): 73. See also Janey Mary Nicol, “The Voice of Maisie Hurley,” *British Columbia History* 45, 2 (2012): 37–43.

George Raley, who headed the Coqualeetza Residential School in Chilliwack, believed that revitalizing indigenous arts and crafts was essential to the practical training, education, and economic well-being of indigenous children.²² His biographer, Paige Raibmon, discovered that Raley's ideas about the role of arts and crafts in improving the lives of indigenous people in Canada were also inspired by the "New-Deal-for-Indians" era in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.²³ In this period, American Indian educational policy shifted from one that sought to eradicate indigenous culture to one that aimed to develop indigenous culture in the Indian schools. Even though Canadian Indian day and residential schools maintained an official policy of cultural assimilation until after the Second World War, by the late 1930s, individuals like Raley, Hurley, and Ravenhill were active and successful in promoting a program of revitalizing indigenous arts and crafts in these schools.²⁴

Ravenhill's antimodernist critique of industrial capital echoed William Morris and, more distantly, Marx's ideas about the circulation of capital.²⁵ In *Native Tribes*, she notes the timeliness of studying pre-historic peoples and cultures in the midst of an unprecedented economic depression – the first great crisis of industrial capitalism in Canada. Ravenhill describes 1930s Canada as

a period when comfort and convenience [were] measured by ability to pay for their provision unrelated to the exercise of individual resourcefulness; when every detail of daily life [was] supplied on a large scale by mechanized methods; when distance [was] annihilated by modern devices of transport, [and when] the achievements of a people isolated for many centuries from contact with others [were] apt to be overlooked and deprecated.²⁶

Here, her argument for the importance of understanding pre-industrial artistic skills is expressed as a critique of contemporary society. This antimodernist aspect of her work, which drew from Morris's writings, ethnological practices of the day, New Deal politics in the United States, and Marxism, contributed to her success in generating public interest in indigenous arts and crafts.

²² Paige Raibmon, "A New Understanding of Things Indian: George Raley's Negotiation of the Residential School Experience," *BC Studies* 110 (1996): 86–93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

²⁴ For indigenous arts and crafts in Canada, see Gerald R. McMaster, "Tenuous Lines of Descent: Indian Arts and Crafts of the Reservation Period," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 9, 2 (1989): 205–36.

²⁵ See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 501–50.

²⁶ Ravenhill, *Native Tribes*, 9.

Ravenhill's antimodernist stance was further articulated as a critical observation of the effects of European colonization and assimilation policies. According to Ravenhill, pre-European Aboriginal peoples were

expert in fishing, hunting, canoe making and house construction. But the death blow was dealt to the exercise of their associated arts and crafts when adventurers and traders and well intentioned missionaries carelessly or ignorantly swept away the deeply seated customs of a hitherto isolated "nation of artists" ... with appalling rapidity. Grave demoralization soon followed the introduction of hitherto unknown alcohol, unfamiliar trading methods and diverse factors which left – after a short period of attempted self-defence – a bewildered, irritated people faced with the loss of their lands, their familiar methods of self support, their religion, from which sprang stimulus to their arts and not least, their self respect.²⁷

Her conviction that revitalizing indigenous arts and crafts was necessary to the overall well-being of indigenous Canadians was further voiced as a more specific protest against Canadian DIA policy, particularly the Indian day and residential school systems.²⁸ Ravenhill argued that, in Canadian Indian schools: "the children are confronted with unknown subjects in an unknown language – diverse from their own picturesque forms of expression; a process described by Sir George Maxwell in 1942 out of his wide experience as 'crippling and destroying a people's soul; fatal to self-respect and inducing in the individual contempt for his own race.'" ²⁹ In light of her background, it is not surprising that, for Ravenhill, the solution to these problems was the revival of indigenous arts and crafts. Ravenhill and the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts focused primarily on children, and

²⁷ Ravenhill, "Formation," 6.

²⁸ Ravenhill was one of many individuals, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who demanded reform of the Indian educational system in Canada. Children who attended the schools, their parents, chiefs, and reformers like Ravenhill resisted, protested, and advocated for change throughout the twentieth century. For residential schools and resistance, see Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Tillicum Library, 1988); and J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

²⁹ Ravenhill, "Formation," 6. Sir George Maxwell worked for the British civil service in Malaya, eventually taking the post of chief secretary of the Federated Malay States from 1921 to 1926. When Ravenhill wrote this passage in 1945, British colonial rule over Malaya was in the process of being dissolved as a result of opposition by the Malay people. The Federation of Malaya was established in 1948, and Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957, with an indigenous Islamic government. See Sir William George Maxwell, *The Civil Defence of Malaya* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1944).

on the revitalization of arts and crafts in Indian schools, because they believed that innate artistic talents were most recoverable, and responsive to nurturing, in children.

Ravenhill was influenced by other intellectual currents. Her approach assumed a belief in racial essentialism. She assumed that the knowledge and skill required to produce authentic indigenous arts and crafts derived from an inherent indigenous essence. In a section of *Native Tribes* entitled “The Study of Racial Origins,” she explains that race is studied along four lines: prehistoric remains, anatomical and physical characteristics, language, and “the type and standards of culture revealed in a people’s customs and arts.”³⁰ This idea that the arts are representative of some kind of racial essence was similarly articulated by one representative of the DIA. In a public statement to promote Ravenhill’s 1944 publication of *Corner Stone*, R.A. Hoey of the DIA office in Ottawa declared on behalf of the DIA: “We believe ... that Canadian Indians have a real contribution to make to the prosperity of the Dominion ... by the exercise of their innate gifts of conception, technique and intelligence.” In the book itself, Ravenhill similarly declares:

Give an Indian boy a pot of paint and a brush and watch results. Without Art School or instruction in method or style, animals, trees, mountains are stored in his mind, alive, and ready to spring out and express themselves in their own vitality and style, stored up by close observation and retentive memory, often constituting an integral part of his life, ready for expression at a moment’s notice.³¹

Although a philanthropic sense of duty was an underlying motivation for both, the DIA officials had traditionally favoured policies of assimilation, while Ravenhill favoured a return to the racial and cultural essence of the indigenous person through arts and crafts.³²

While a lack of funding meant that government policy did not always materialize into practice, Ravenhill’s brand of arts and crafts ideology, with its focus on revitalization rather than museum-like preservation and assimilation, was slowly being integrated into the official workings of the DIA during the interwar years. A DIA anthropological division was established in 1936, and experts like Diamond Jenness, Douglas Leechman, and Marius Barbeau acted as consultants. The following

³⁰ Ravenhill, “Formation,” 13-14.

³¹ Ravenhill, *Corner Stone*, 1, 2.

³² Ravenhill to the Community Drama Branch, Adult Education Department, Victoria, 12 June 1940, BCIAAC Papers, BCA.

year, “the revival and advancement of Indian handicraft” became official government policy, but assistance from the federal government was confined almost exclusively to Ontario and Quebec. The reason given for this was as follows: “Indian handicraft projects, to be successful, impose upon the Department an obligation to provide constant supervision and this obligation has until now confined efforts largely to reserves in Eastern Canada.”³³ But, by 1940, the efforts of reformers like Ravenhill to promote regional artistic accomplishments outside of central Canada had gained the attention of DIA officials, and the production and sale of handicrafts had become official (if underfunded) policy on a national scale.³⁴

“THE REMARKABLE GIFTS OF FRANCOIS BAPTISTE”³⁵

In addition to her publications and her success lobbying government officials, Ravenhill’s brief but influential work with the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts was marked by two key accomplishments – the promotion of a young Okanagan artist named Sis-Hu-Lk and a nativity play produced by the children of the Inkameep Indian Day School. Ravenhill’s two Inkameep campaigns contain all the main strands of her approach: the importance of revitalizing indigenous artistic production and encouraging indigenous economic self-sufficiency, and the centrality of racial essentialism to the movement. Her ally in these campaigns was Anthony Walsh.³⁶ Walsh was a teacher at the Inkameep Indian Day School in the south Okanagan Valley near the town of Oliver. They began corresponding in January 1939. Prior to this, both Ravenhill and Walsh had been working, unknown to each other, on the common project of revitalizing indigenous arts and crafts among indigenous children. Born in Ireland, Walsh had immigrated to Alberta after the First World War and had begun teaching at Inkameep in 1930 after several years working as a rancher, a forester, a cook, a berry picker, and a clerk.

³³ Canada, *Sessional Papers*, Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs (1939-1940), 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, (1940-1941), 10-12.

³⁵ Ravenhill to Bullock-Webster, 16 January 1940, BCIA Papers, BCA.

³⁶ For Anthony Walsh, see Andrea N. Walsh, “No Small Work: Anthropology, Art, and Children,” paper presented at the Canadian Anthropology Society Meeting, 9 May 2003, Halifax, Nova Scotia. See also <http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/inkameep>; and Thomas Fleming, Lisa Smith, and Helen Raptis, “An Accidental Teacher: Anthony Walsh and the Aboriginal Day Schools at Six Mile Creek and Inkameep, British Columbia, 1929-1942,” *Historical Studies in Education* 19, 1 (2007): 2-24.



Figure 2. Anthony Walsh, n.d. Image I-61892 courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives.

He gained the cooperation of Chief Baptiste George, as well as some of the parents of his students, in the task of revitalizing indigenous arts and crafts. As well as providing time during school hours for art and literary pursuits, Walsh encouraged his students to collect Okanagan legends and stories from their parents, which they then reinterpreted as plays. With Walsh's guidance and the help of their parents, the children made costumes and performed these dramas. Starting in 1939, Ravenhill promoted Inkameep's artistic endeavours in Vancouver and Victoria, and the Inkameep school gained some notoriety within



Figure 3. Sis-Hu-Lk, n.d. Image C-06211 courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives.

British Columbia. Both Sis-Hu-Lk and the nativity play came from Inkameep and attracted significant publicity in the early 1940s, when the *Vancouver Sun* heralded Inkameep as “one of the last strongholds of Canada’s Indian culture.”³⁷ International recognition soon followed. In 1945, the Inkameep school won honours at the Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings held annually by the Royal Drawing Society of London, and its work was among those selected to show the King and Queen at Buckingham Palace at the first Exhibit of Canadian Children’s Art.³⁸

³⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 14 April 1940, clipping in BCIAC Papers, BCA.

³⁸ Ravenhill, “Formation,” 7.

Central to this revival was Walsh's student and protégé, Sis-Hu-Lk, whose English name was Francois Baptiste. Sis-Hu-Lk was the grandson of Chief Baptiste George, who died at the age of ninety-two in 1939, eight months after Ravenhill and Walsh began their correspondence. He lived, according to his obituary in the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, "to see the beginning of the revival of that culture among his own people, due to his wisdom and foresight."³⁹ Born in 1921 at Inkameep, Sis-Hu-Lk's talent for drawing and painting was recognized early on by his family and community, including his teacher. A studio was built for him on the reserve, and, for a brief period in 1940, he was sent to study at an Indian school for art in Santa Fe, New Mexico.⁴⁰ Ravenhill was instrumental in promoting Sis-Hu-Lk in British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and Europe as "a BC full-blooded Indian and a young artist of promise and distinction."⁴¹

Sis-Hu-Lk drew and painted animals – horses, squirrels and skunks, mountain sheep and deer, eagles, wild geese, and quail. These creatures were rendered primarily in black and white, in a realistic but somewhat two-dimensional fashion. In January 1940, Ravenhill persuaded Lady Tweedsmuir to send several of Sis-Hu-Lk's pieces to the National Art Gallery in Ottawa.⁴² The response Ravenhill received from Arthur Lismer, educational advisor for the gallery, was encouraging. Lismer suggested the possibility of an "exhibition of Indian Artists' paintings in which Sis-hu-lk's work [would] predominate." He was impressed with Sis-Hu-Lk's work but was not willing to go so far as to agree with Ravenhill's idea that the indigenous person's inherent artistic talent should be left to flourish with as little outside interference as possible. For Ravenhill, artistic talent was part of the innate racial essence of indigenous peoples and was of value for its primitive, spontaneous, and simplistic aesthetic.⁴³ Lismer agreed that Sis-Hu-Lk's style was "a racial characteristic," but it was one that did not align with "a white man's idea of anything that appears 'decorative' in line and motive," and he was "not so certain that [Sis-Hu-Lk] should be left 'natural' and untrained."⁴⁴

³⁹ *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, 2 October 1940, clipping in BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁴⁰ *Daily Colonist*, 30 May 1941, clipping in BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁴¹ Ravenhill to J. Harry Smith, Press Manager, CPR, Montreal, 19 June 1940, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁴² Ravenhill to Bullock-Webster, 16 January 1940, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁴³ Ravenhill's ideas about aesthetic and artistic development fall in line with the early-to mid-twentieth-century Modernist art movement, which celebrated "qualities of immediacy, spontaneity, purity, and indeed innocence" that were termed "Primitive." In this Modernist perspective, "Primitive Art" came from the artist's unconscious and was closely linked to children's creative expressions. See Walsh, "No Small Work," 2.

⁴⁴ Arthur Lismer to Ravenhill, 20 July 1940, University of British Columbia Special Collections (hereafter Ravenhill Fonds, UBSC).

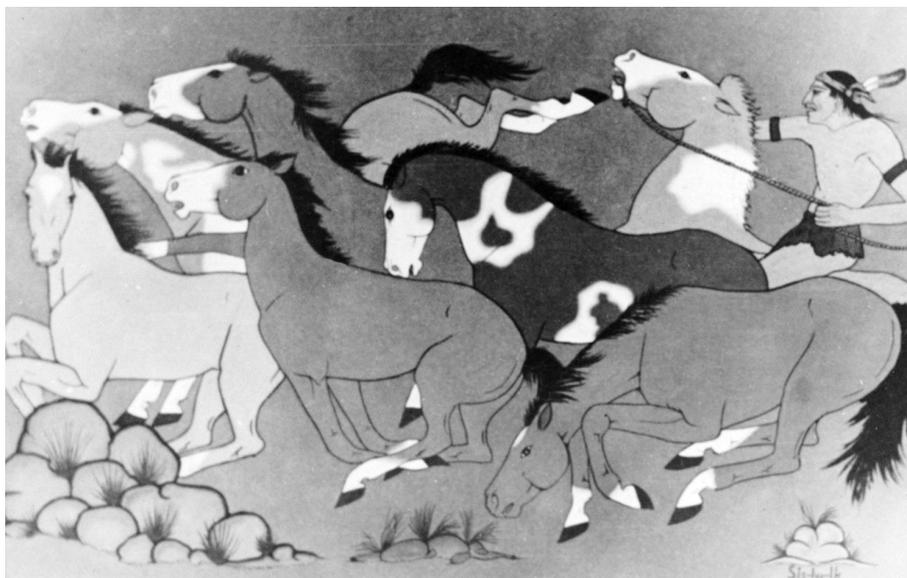


Figure 4. Painting by Sis-Hu-Lk, “Okanagan Nation” n.d. Image C-06220 courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum, BC Archives.

The exhibit was never to happen because Sis-Hu-Lk, who was then nineteen years old and also working as a rancher with his family, did not produce the larger works that the gallery commissioned. Nonetheless, he did gain some local and national attention, and he brought indigenous arts and crafts into the public eye.

In June of 1940, Ravenhill arranged an exhibit for Sis-Hu-Lk at the Windermere Hotel in Victoria. Reviews were favourable. One newspaper lauded his drawings and paintings as being “marked by vitality and spontaneity, and reflect[ing] the characteristic Indian qualities of keen observation and memory which is accurate and impressionable.”⁴⁵ Another pointed to his “vivid realism and a strong sense of decorative design, which promise[d] to carry him into the ranks of foremost Canadian artists.”⁴⁶ Sis-Hu-Lk received several commissions from this exhibit, which, like the National Gallery commissions, he never fulfilled.⁴⁷ No records from Sis-Hu-Lk himself remain in the archives, and his reasons for shunning the art world can only be inferred. His work as a cattle rancher certainly would have inhibited his ability to produce larger pieces, which would have taken more time from paid work

⁴⁵ *Daily Colonist*, 23 June 1940, clipping in BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁴⁶ *Victoria Daily Times*, 1 July 1940, clipping in BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁴⁷ Ravenhill to Walsh, 3 August 1940, Ravenhill Fonds, UBCSC.

than he could afford to spare. Ravenhill repeatedly cited “lack of funds” as an impediment to Sis-Hu-Lk’s development as a professional artist.⁴⁸

This possibly explains why Sis-Hu-Lk never fulfilled his commission or his artistic potential. In contrast to George Raley’s vision of a “revival of Indian art and handicraft as a welfare movement,” Ravenhill focused primarily on educational reform.⁴⁹ She did, however, also view indigenous arts and crafts as a possible economic motor. In a bid to gain the support of DIA officials, Ravenhill pitched her mission as having the potential effect of “stimulating a gradual revival of their former handicrafts among some of our Indians now on Relief as to preserve for our Province some of its unique arts while restoring these dependent people to at least a measure of self-support.”⁵⁰ Her motive here was to encourage economic self-sufficiency among indigenous people while at the same time reviving the traditional arts. These aims, however, were often economically unfeasible. For Sis-Hu-Lk, whose artistic endeavours generated such a meagre hourly wage that his productivity suffered when other work was available, practical realities intruded upon his career as an artist. Nonetheless, indigenous artisans and craftspeople had a long-standing tradition of selling their wares, even if sporadically, and arts and crafts were a standard element of the economy of many indigenous communities.⁵¹

As well as imagining its economic possibilities, reformers and DIA officials alike encouraged the continued production of indigenous arts and crafts for moral purposes – essentially, to redress the injury wrought by colonization. The loss of indigenous cultures, reflected in the loss of traditional arts and crafts, was understood to be an outcome of colonization and settlement. For Ravenhill, the revitalization of Indian arts and crafts was a moral responsibility with national repercussions – one that had the power to “knit more closely together members of our own country and Commonwealth.”⁵² Thus, the project of marketing indigenous arts and crafts in British Columbia was carried out with considerable passion as well as with careful direction. For example, Ravenhill worked closely with Walsh and the children at Inkameep to produce Christmas cards for sale to the non-indigenous market. On the one hand, Ravenhill provided detailed instruction as to the technique

⁴⁸ Ravenhill to Webster, 16 January 1940, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁴⁹ Hawker, *Ghosts*, 74.

⁵⁰ Ravenhill to MacKay, 28 May 1940, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁵¹ Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts, Report of the Committee on Indian Arts and Crafts, September 1934, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁵² Ravenhill to MacKay, 28 May 1940, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

and subject of these cards: she identified the images to be used on the front of the cards, instructed that a “thumbnail sketch of the tepee” be used as background on the inside of the cards, and stressed the importance of using colour in the illustrations. On the other hand, she also emphasized the importance of authenticity, of allowing the children to produce original work and “establishing individuality in both the pictorial (outside) message and also in the words used.”⁵³ Another project initiated by Walsh involved a radio production entitled “Songs by the Boys and Girls of the Inkameep Indian School.”⁵⁴ However, Ravenhill and Walsh’s most successful effort at marketing arts and crafts for a non-indigenous consumer market was probably *The Tale of the Nativity*.

The Tale of the Nativity was originally staged as a play by the students at Inkameep Indian School in the winter of 1939. It was published in book form the following summer, with illustrations by Sis-Hu-Lk. Both the stage production and the book met with a significant degree of media attention and interest from the non-indigenous public. This nativity play was set in the Okanagan Valley, and much attention was placed on the regional flora and fauna that appeared in the production. In the script, Mary and Joseph take shelter in a cave, where Jesus is born with the help of a gathering of talking animals – a deer, a fawn, rabbits, and chickadees. The miraculous healing of “a cripple” by the baby Jesus is incorporated into the tale, as is the weaving of rush mats, a visit from three Great Chiefs, and references to the Old Shaman and the Great Spirit. The people in this play live in lodges, eat fish and deer meat, wear fur robes, and fall asleep to the owl’s hoot and the coyote’s howl. The play was performed for the public on several occasions throughout the year. One audience member described the stage as being decorated with “fir boughs, sage brush, wild rose bushes, birds and animals,” and the cave as being “homelike and natural to the Indian child.” This performance was lauded for its “native simplicity,” a hallmark descriptor of antimodernist discourse.⁵⁵ For example, the journalist Edna Kells commented: “Simplicity, in fact, is the keynote of all the artistic effort which has carried their [indigenous peoples’] fame.”⁵⁶ For his part, Bob

⁵³ “Inkameep Children’s Drama: On the Production of Christmas Cards” (1942), Ravenhill Fonds, UBSC. For “authenticity,” see Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁵⁴ “Inkameep Children’s Drama: Songs by the Boys and Girls of the Inkameep Indian School, Oliver, British Columbia – Radio” (n.d.), Ravenhill Fonds, UBSC.

⁵⁵ *British Columbia Catholic*, December 1940, BCIC Papers, BCA.

⁵⁶ *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, 2 October 1940, BCIC Papers, BCA.

Lowe of the *Vancouver Sun* asserted: “The beauty of their work lies in its simplicity.”⁵⁷

Published in Victoria by the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts in August 1940, the *Tale of the Nativity* booklet consisted of nineteen pages with eight illustrations by Sis-Hu-Lk and was priced at twenty-five cents. The proceeds from the booklet were to be “devoted to the remuneration of Sis-Hu-Lk for his illustrations and to a fund to enable the committee to carry further these objects, and thus contribute to Canadian culture.”⁵⁸ The *British Columbia Catholic Review*, which recommended wide circulation of the booklet among Catholics in the province, described the story as having emanated “from the minds of children of the first Canadians.”⁵⁹ *The Tale of the Nativity* was sold to the non-indigenous consumer not only as an expression of “naïve simplicity,”⁶⁰ whose illustrations were of a “purely native style,”⁶¹ but also as a work that was distinctly Canadian. The apparent incongruity of promoting indigenous “authenticity” through the single most important legend of Christianity, equal only to the story of the crucifixion, appears to have gone largely uncontested, and both the play and the booklet were a resounding success.

After Ravenhill retired from her position with the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts, the organization continued, even more effectively, to promote the work of young artists, primarily through museum exhibitions. In the 1940s, the society was most notable in promoting George Clutesi, the Tseshaht painter who gained significant notoriety as an artist, writer, actor, and activist.⁶² During the late 1940s and 1950s, the renamed British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society also provided a platform for politically active indigenous artists like Ellen Neel and Mungo Martin to exhibit both their artwork and their politics.⁶³ These exhibitions often contrasted older artefacts with newer works and challenged the notion of the “Vanishing Indian” by demonstrating both consistency and change in indigenous arts and crafts. Whereas philanthropy motivated non-indigenous reformers like Ravenhill and Walsh, as well as others like Maisie Hurley and George Raley, for many indigenous artists and

⁵⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 14 April 1940, BCIA Papers, BCA.

⁵⁸ Alice Ravenhill, Review of *The Tale of the Nativity*, *Northwest Bookshelf* (1941): 84–85.

⁵⁹ *British Columbia Catholic*, December 1940, BCIA Papers, BCA.

⁶⁰ *Daily Colonist*, 3 December 1940, BCIA Papers, BCA.

⁶¹ Miscellaneous magazine clipping, no title, n.d., BCIA Papers, BCA.

⁶² For Clutesi, see George Clutesi, *Stand Tall, My Son* (Victoria: Newport Bay Publishers, 1990).

⁶³ For Neel and Martin, see Phil Nuytten, *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, Mungo Martin* (Vancouver: Panorama Publications, 1982).

communities the motivation behind revitalizing their artistic traditions was political.⁶⁴

Ravenhill had some unexpected mid-century political influence. In the final years of the Second World War, both the provincial and federal branches of the Native Brotherhood, the foremost intertribal indigenous organization in this period, became increasingly activist.⁶⁵ The rhetoric of human rights and social justice that the war produced contributed to this rising tide of protest. Debates over enfranchisement and compulsory military service were fuelled by the British Columbia Native Brotherhood's public nationalist statements of support for the war, as "the real Canadians."⁶⁶ The North American Indian Brotherhood (NAIB), which was born out of the Native Brotherhoods in 1944, advocated for representation of "the Indians of Canada" in Parliament, a Royal Commission to revise the Indian Act, and "a new deal for the indigenous [sic] of this great country."⁶⁷ In 1950, the British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society and its "distinguished founder, Dr. Alice Ravenhill," were officially recognized by *Indian Time* magazine, a national indigenous rights publication whose leadership overlapped with the leadership of the NAIB and included Maisie Hurley.⁶⁸ *Indian Time* and the NAIB represented the genesis of national-level political mobilization and organization in Canada at the end of the Second World War. This was a defining moment in the indigenous rights movement, and in these formative years cultural revival through the arts and crafts provided one of the foundations of a unified and politicized indigenous identity.

⁶⁴ As Hawker argues, the interwar period marks a transition to increased government and non-indigenous control over the production, distribution, and consumption of indigenous art and imagery. However, as Leslie Dawn points out, this manipulation occurred within a context of "internal contradictions and external opposition," of land claims and assertions of identity that "threatened to destabilize what had long been held as foundational truths for the discipline of ethnography, for the principles of museum collecting, for enacting government policies and legislation, and for acquiring territories." See Hawker, *Ghosts*; Leslie Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 272.

⁶⁵ For the Native Brotherhood, see Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), 114-24.

⁶⁶ Alfred Adams, President, Native Brotherhood of British Columbia, Vancouver Office, to the Officers and Members of the Native Brotherhood of BC, 7 February 1945, BCIAC Papers, BCA.

⁶⁷ Andrew Paull, North American Indian Brotherhood, Grand National Convention Call, 16 July 1945, BCIAC, BCA. For a recent account of Andrew Paull's life and career, see Brendan Edwards, "I Have Lots of Help behind Me, Lots of Books, to Convince You': Andrew Paull and the Value of Literacy in English," *BC Studies* 164 (2009/10): 7-30.

⁶⁸ Doug Wilkinson, pub., *Indian Time* (Vancouver), November 1950.

CONCLUSION

Starting in 1947, the University of British Columbia and the Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology turned their attention to restoring totem poles from the Northwest Coast region. The project involved many indigenous peoples, including Mungo Martin, Ellen Neel, and Bill Reid. In 1959, Reid was commissioned by the University of British Columbia to duplicate a series of thirty totem and house poles.⁶⁹ By this time, Reid had absorbed Ravenhill's carefully collected and replicated designs, and her inspirational as well as intelligent writings. She had hoped Sis-Hu-Lk would achieve provincial and national recognition as an artist in the 1940s, but only in the following decades would social conditions welcome an artist of Bill Reid's ambition and stature. Thanks, in part, to Ravenhill's groundbreaking and committed work with the Society for the Furtherance of British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts, and to her literary and teaching abilities, mainstream audiences in British Columbia were prepared for the postwar Aboriginal arts and craft resurgence, and her activism was recognized by postwar leaders of human rights and social justice. Ravenhill was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of British Columbia in 1948, six years before her death. Her cultural importance continues to be felt.

⁶⁹ Tippett, *Bill Reid*, 105-22.