

# The World is as Sharp as a Knife: A Review Article

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*The World is as Sharp as a Knife: An Anthology in Honour of Wilson Duff*, edited by Donald N. Abbott. Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1981. Pp. 343.

Wilson Duff was Curator of Anthropology at the British Columbia Provincial Museum from 1950 to 1965 and a Professor of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia from 1965 until his death in 1976. This volume was edited by Donald Abbott of the Provincial Museum (helped by a committee including Duff's daughter Marnie) and published by the Museum in Duff's honour. It consists of over fifty items, a few previously published but most new, ranging from conventionally scholarly articles, through more speculative essays, to personal statements, poems, and works of graphic art. It includes several items by Duff himself. All relate to Duff's own field of study — the Native peoples and cultures of northwestern North America — and/or to his own life and thought. The contributors are colleagues, students and friends — non-Native and Native. This is a rich assemblage and it is presented well. The format is appropriately large, the typography is easy on the eyes, the many black-and-white photographs and drawings are excellently reproduced, and the colour plates are outstanding. The result is a volume that is admirable for its scholarly, humanistic and esthetic qualities and a fitting tribute to a friend admired as a scholar, humanist and artist.

Abbott divides the collection into four sections — People, Things, Ideas and Messages — based on the concern and content of the pieces, the division also reflecting Duff's own interests and the development of his ideas. Substantive articles (that is, articles that present the results of research) by contributors and by Duff himself, articles about Duff, short reminiscences about him, works dedicated to him, etc., are interspersed. Rather than trying to deal with everything in order of appearance, I shall deal first with the substantive articles other than Duff's, second with

Duff's own work, and third with what the book tells us (and does not tell us) about Wilson Duff.

The substantive articles fall (with a little pushing) into the topical categories: art and technology, ritual and belief, and ethnohistory. Predictably, perhaps, art is slightly more popular than the other topics.

Among the articles on art, Bill Holm's is outstanding. Entitled "Will the Real Charles Edensaw Please Stand Up?: The Problem of Attribution in Northwest Coast Indian Art," it is an explanation of differences in style among six Haida artists of the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of them being the famous Charles Edensaw (more often "Edenshaw"). Recognizable differences appear in their treatment of the elements of style first identified and analyzed by Holm in his epoch-making *Northwest Coast Indian Art*, first published in 1965. The present article is thus further evidence of the validity and usefulness of the analysis. Here, as in the earlier work, Holm is concerned with form and not with meaning.

Three other articles on art are concerned, as Duff himself was, with meaning. Alan Hoover presents data contradicting Duff's identification of the moon exclusively with a bird. Martine de Widerspach-Thor gives an excellent review of what is known about the origins of coppers and hypotheses about what they symbolize. She adopts the position that the copper is a metaphor for the human body, perhaps historically deplating a slave in rituals. George MacDonald draws on the work of Eliade in an attempt to characterize the "shamanic cosmology" of the Northwest Coast, to suggest old cultural ties with East Asia, and to identify underlying principles in the art. He may be right for the Haida, whom he knows best, and some of his hypotheses may be fruitful, but in trying to generalize about the whole region he has smoothed over a lot of cultural variation.

A very different article on art is Bill Reid's brief note "The Box Painting by the 'Master of the Black Field,'" which traces the influence this masterpiece has had and which may be a revelation for readers who suppose that museums are always the best places for masterpieces.

Two articles deal with architecture. John Smyly's "Ninstints Diary" tells of salvaging totem poles in the Queen Charlottes in 1957 and also gives data on the mortuary house on Anthony Island. Andrea Laforet and Annie York describe the Thompson semisubterranean house, giving some valuable insights into daily life in this kind of dwelling. Beth Hill's "Bedrock and Boulder Bowls" catalogues these artifacts, which occur

from the Columbia River to Prince Rupert, and discusses possible uses, as in the first-salmon ceremony and the work of shamans.

The work of a Coast Salish shaman is the subject of Michael and Della Kew's contribution. This is a careful account of events, in which the Kews participated, from the arrival of the "Indian doctor," through his diagnosis and curing, to the speeches that followed. It is outstanding for what the Kews are able to say about the participants, the setting, the shaman's explanation of what he was doing, and the efficacy of the procedure. They observe that "this is pre-eminently a social rather than a private ritual, despite the fact that the supernatural powers involved are private and personal."

But privacy is needed to receive those powers, and Susan Reid's "Four Kwakiutl Themes on Isolation" deals precisely with the predicament of the Kwakiutl woman needing other people and needing isolation. She analyzes a myth, a girl's puberty rite, the responsibilities of a hunter's wife, and a woman's dream, showing their common theme.

Robin Ridington's "Trails of Meaning" describes the world of the Dunne-za or Beaver Indians of the Peace River, as they conceive it, the title referring to the belief that a hunter kills an animal only after their trails have crossed in a dream. A great deal on Beaver mythology, calendrical knowledge and ritual is packed into this essay. But Ridington's identification of this conceptual structure as art seems strained or misplaced. It strikes me that in his view art would soon devour the whole of culture, though I can certainly identify a particular telling of a myth or interpretation of a dream as an artistic performance.

Marjorie Halpin's "'Seeing' in Stone: Tsimshian Masking and the Twin Stone Masks" starts with questions about the pair of stone masks that Duff brought together for the 1975 show *Images Stone B.C.*, asking how they were used and what they meant. She proceeds through a general discussion of the Tsimshian concepts *halait*, the ritual manifestation of power, and *naxnox*, the personification of power. She then describes the *naxnox* performances, which involve use of masks (some illustrated by Carol Sheehan). The stone masks were probably of this type. This is an important contribution to Tsimshian ethnography, complementing Boas and Garfield. It also manages to make clearer, to my prosaic mind, the meanings of some of Duff's (and Ridington's) poetic statements about the twin masks.

Three articles are ethnohistorical in the sense that they use historical documents. Margaret Blackman uses them, together with a life history of

Florence Edenshaw Davidson of Masset, to construct a clear and balanced account of "The Changing Status of Haida Woman." She shows that through the last two centuries there have been changes both favourable and unfavourable to women's autonomy. Donald Mitchell's "Sebassa's Men" traces the yearly round of the Kitkatla Tsimshian in 1835 and draws conclusions about the role of the chief, the famous or infamous Sebassa. Thomas R. Berger's "Wilson Duff and Native Land Claims" traces the development of two cases, *R. v. White and Bob* (the case of two Nanaimo men arrested for hunting out of season) and *Calder v. Attorney-General of B.C.* (the Nishga case), between 1963 and 1969, which are landmarks in the struggle for native rights. It is a fine account of the uses of historical documents and anthropological evidence.

Several articles in this volume are concerned primarily with Duff himself, or, while concerned with other matters, give us a view of him. Two articles form a kind of conventional obituary; these are one by Michael M. Ames on Duff's contribution to Northwest Coast ethnology and art and one by Charles E. Borden on Duff's contribution to British Columbia archaeology. (Both were first published in *BC Studies*.) Diane MacEachern Barwick has a beautifully clear and honest picture of Duff as a curator at the Provincial Museum. In Smyly's article we see Duff organizing the salvaging of totem poles in the Queen Charlottes in 1957. In Berger's we see him finding and presenting evidence in those important cases. Hillary Stewart's "Stone Mask Reunion" shows us, with words and a photograph, Duff's joy at bringing together the twin masks. In Ridington's "For Wilson: As a Contribution to the Conversation," we see something of Duff's thinking about Northwest Coast art in the mid-1970s.

There are shorter pieces as well, reminiscences and thoughts about Duff, by older Native friends — Thomas, Emma, and George Hunt, George Clutesi and Peter Williams; by younger Indian artists — Ron Hamilton, Roy Vickers, Bob Davidson and Tony Hunt; and by Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the same spirit is a Prologue by Bill Reid and an Epilogue by K. O. L. Burridge.

From the tributes and messages written in honour of Wilson Duff, two images linger in my mind. One is from Clutesi, who tells of an occasion when Duff was expected to speak to a group of native artists, but rather than follow a patronizing younger speaker, chose to remain silent — and the artists felt a "closer kinship" than words could have produced. The other is from Davidson, who writes that his admiration for Duff's knowledge of the art inspired him to greater achievement. "When I did a creation I would say, 'That'll fool Wilson.'"

Duff's own writings in this volume consist of six anthropological articles, two dozen poems and a short story. Four of the articles, all quite short, were previously published. These are: "Mungo Martin, Carver of the Century" (1959), an appreciation of this Kwakiutl artist, who worked at the University of British Columbia and at the Provincial Museum; "The Killer Whale Copper" (1960), a history of a copper belonging to Mungo Martin; "Stone Clubs from the Skeena River Area" (1962), describing a group of unusual prehistoric artifacts, which became increasingly important in his thinking; and "Thoughts on the Nootka Canoe" (1964), in which he suggests that this type of dugout has as its prototype the Eskimo umiak. Duff's other two articles are: "Sea Levels and Archaeology on the Northwest Coast" (presented at the Northwest Anthropological Conference in 1963), which is of some historic importance as the first discussion of the implications of changing sea levels of the location and survival of archaeological sites; and "The World is as Sharp as a Knife: Meaning in Northern Northwest Coast Art" (presented at the Northwest Coast Studies Conference at Simon Fraser University in May of 1976), which was a major statement of his views on the northern art. The poems were written, I believe, in the last three or four years of his life. They are short, aphoristic, often striking in their creation of verbal and logical paradoxes (see Ridington, *BC Studies*, Summer 1978). They too are, in part at least, an attempt to put into words his feelings about Northern Northwest Coast art. The short story, entitled "Nothing Comes Only in Pieces," was written, I believe, about 1972, as a means of exploring the meaning of a Haida myth.

Duff's "The World is as Sharp as a Knife" (the title is said to be Haida proverb) presents some (though certainly not all) of what he had to say about the northern art. He believed that works of art make statements; the content (e.g., bear, frog, raven, human) shows what the statement is about—the subject, while the structure ("armature") supplies the predicate. The content has a literal meaning (e.g., bear = clan crest) and also a metaphoric meaning. At this level Duff finds many sexual symbols (e.g., bear = vulva). The artists, having "hidden agendas," have used this deeper level of meaning to make statements that we do not yet clearly understand.

I miss what Duff was saying in conversations, in 1973, about art and society and I have problems with this final development of his views. In this article, in his poetry, and in his unpublished writings, Duff points to

visual paradoxes in the northern art and creates his own verbal paradoxes. I see — sometimes though not always — the visual paradoxes and I appreciate the verbal paradoxes. Then Duff asks me to believe three things: (1) that the visual paradoxes express basic truths about the real world, (2) that the verbal paradoxes express the same truths, and (3) that it was the artists's intention to communicate these truths. But I cannot believe. It seems to me that both carved forms and words provide the means whereby we can not only communicate sense but also create nonsense, play around, mystify others, and even delude ourselves into thinking there is sense where there is none. How do I know which it is?

Sadly, I must now turn to what has been left unsaid. On the evening of the 8th of August 1976, Wilson Duff finished writing a number of letters, one of them to me apologizing for not being able to finish a promised piece of writing, the others (I believe) in the same regretful vein, and then he killed himself. He was 51. This fact of suicide dominates the thinking of everyone who knew him, as no other kind of death could have done. It demands a response and the present volume is in fact a response to this fact. Yet nowhere in the volume, though there are many hints and indirect references, is the fact unambiguously stated.

I understand how the editors may not have been able to do so but I believe that the fact should have been stated clearly and early in the volume. For one thing, suicide is a statement that is intended to be heard. And whatever that statement was, Wilson Duff should be allowed to make it. For another thing, this omission creates an undercurrent of mystery that runs through the parts of the volume that relate to Duff and his work. For some readers the volume may have a distracting in-group feeling.

Let me face the mystery squarely. A question that I think must be asked and I hope some day will be answered is this: Did Duff's growing obsession with the northern art and the work of Charles Edenshaw drive him, or seduce him, into taking his own life? There are indications that it did. And as my response to Duff's suicide and to this book I feel I must pull them together.

Duff's interest in art grew quite naturally out of his professional orientation and museum work. Throughout his career he was concerned primarily, I believe, with the preservation and, especially, the *appreciation* of native culture.

As Borden tells us, Duff was interested in archaeology from his undergraduate days on. But he did not actually do much archaeological work himself. His most important contributions to archaeology were in getting

the B.C. government to recognize the need for salvage archaeology, helping in the forming of policy and drafting of an antiquities act, making the public conscious of B.C.'s prehistoric heritage, all these well described by Borden, and of course in his use of prehistoric materials in two major publications. The first of these was his most substantive work, *Prehistoric Stone Sculpture of the Fraser River and Gulf of Georgia* (1957). This was an exhaustive and meticulous study designed to test some notions then current about Northwest prehistory, in particular Borden's view that stone sculpture originated in the interior and was one of those features of culture brought to the coast by one of several waves of migrants into this region. Duff's conclusions did not support Borden's view. They were in fact about a decade before their time, supporting much better what Mitchell in 1969 called "the continuity model" of prehistory. But when it appeared, Duff's *Prehistoric Stone Sculpture* did not, I think, get the recognition it deserved, and this must have been a disappointment to Duff. Twenty years later he returned to some of the same pieces with considerations of aesthetics and questions about meaning in his widely acclaimed *Images Stone B.C.*

Similarly Duff did not pursue an early interest in field ethnography. For his MA thesis (University of Washington, 1951), he did ethnographic work among the Coast Salish of the Fraser Valley and published a good traditional monograph on them in 1952. But his later work with the Coast Salish seems to have consisted of checking on items of special interest rather than of undertaking any systematic investigation. As the Kews and Barwick indicate, he continued for some years to attend and participate in the winter dances — but less as research than as *experience*. (Cf. Kew and Kew referring to the middle 1950s, and this was my perception while attending several dances with him in the winter of 1962.) He worked briefly with the Carrier in 1951 and published a note on Carrier social organization but did not pursue the topic. Work on the Skeena the following year led, on the one hand, to work with Tsimshian materials collected by Barbeau and Beynon, and on the other hand, totem pole salvage. The Tsimshian ethnographic work he later turned over to Marjorie Halpin. After a brilliant beginning in the early 1960s on Indian political and demographic history, he also abandoned that project.

It was perhaps the salvage and restoration work that, more than anything, contributed to the growth of Duff's interest in art. In 1952 Mungo Martin moved from UBC to BCPM and from then on Duff was involved in carving programs and with salvage of Gitksan, Haida and Kwakiutl

carvings (see Abbott, p. 36). Barwick notes also that by 1959 Duff was trying his own hand at carving and doing very well.

By 1967, two years after he had moved from the museum to the university, Duff's interest had begun to focus on the Haida artist Charlie Edenshaw. In that year he collaborated with two leading authorities on Northwest Coast art, Bill Reid and Bill Holm, on the show "Arts of the Raven" at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and one of his tasks was to plan a gallery for works ascribed to Edenshaw (Holm, p. 177).

By the early 1970s Duff's interest in Edenshaw seems to have grown into an obsession. Barwick (p. 27) writes, "In 1971 and 1972 his letters rather incoherently discussed his increasing immersion in the symbolism of Haida art, wryly noting that various friends 'are concerned about my sanity and reputation.'"

Indeed friends were concerned and I was one of them, because by the summer of 1973 it appeared to me that Duff believed himself to be in some mystic communication with Edenshaw. That summer I taught a course on Northwest Indians at UBC and one evening at my invitation he lectured on Haida art. He talked long after the end of the period, offering some fascinating interpretations, and finally telling us that while in the Queen Charlottes some years before he had been given a name that had belonged to Edenshaw. The Haida, he said, believe that when a name is given, something of the last owner is transferred to the new one. The implication was clear: something of Charlie Edenshaw now resided in Wilson Duff.

This mystic communication seems to have closed off other channels and limited his intake of empirical knowledge. Hamilton (p. 46) tells how Duff turned down a field trip to Cape Alava, the richest archaeological site on the Northwest Coast, in the company of a group of experts on the area, so he could instead spend the week with the "old man" — his term for Charlie Edenshaw. Hamilton's other reminiscences reflect Duff's single-minded pursuit of an understanding of "the minds of the 'old masters' . . . especially Edensaw." Conversations "never strayed off the subject of Northwest Coast Indian art" — but it was the older art, with never a discussion of Hamilton's own contemporary work, even though Duff had used one of Hamilton's prints in a course he had taught. Duff pursued the question of whether Edenshaw could have been influenced by West Coast art, and Hamilton adds, "Wilson often asked questions that just couldn't be answered!"

The questions Duff asked and the answers he sought are the subject of Lévi-Strauss's brief "Three Memories of Wilson Duff" (English, pp.

259-60). Writing of their first meeting, in 1973, Lévi-Strauss says of Duff, "His profound admiration for the arts of the West Coast was obvious at all times, and so was his anxious need, always unsatisfied, to penetrate their most secret meaning, even beyond the meaning assigned by the artists themselves." On their second meeting, in 1974, "He was, one felt, tormented by problems related to the psychology — I would even say the metaphysics — of art." On this occasion Duff asked Lévi-Strauss to define the function of the mask. Lévi-Strauss answered that he believed "the essential function of the mask to be the transformation of the individual wearer into another being. But," says Lévi-Strauss, "it was clear that this logical answer, devoid of mysticism, left him unsatisfied." On their third meeting, in 1975, Duff was "tormented" by the duality of the two stone masks that he was about to bring back together. "Why, he kept asking himself and me," says Lévi-Strauss, "would one feel the need to make a mask of a mask?" When Duff discovered that the two masks indeed must have been made together, he repeated the question more urgently. Lévi-Strauss wrote to him suggesting that he was not asking the right question. Double masks, articulated by hinges, are common; stone precludes the use of hinges; and so the duality is "easily explained by a technical necessity." The real question is why they are of stone. Duff never answered the letter and Lévi-Strauss concludes:

Once again, I had probably disappointed him by offering him an explanation that was too simple for the great mysteries his soul was seeking. Thinking of Wilson Duff as I knew him, of his vast knowledge that forever disappeared with him since he committed so little of it to writing, I wonder if it was not, after all, this desperate quest for infinite mysteries — perhaps because they were above all an exigency of his mind — that killed this unaffected, charming, altruistic and kind man, who was also a great scholar.

In his quest for mysteries did Duff then come to think that death would provide answers, perhaps by reuniting him with his alter ego Edenshaw? Some of his poetry, such as "Death is a Lie" (p. 308), with its intimations of reincarnation, suggests so. Ridington even suggests (p. 268) a Christ-like mission.

He communicated so intensely with the closed eyes of the past that his relations with the living suffered. Perhaps he ultimately came to feel that only by becoming one of the dead, could his message to the living achieve completion.

The present volume does, of course, propagate his message.

But self-doubt may also have contributed to Duff's death. Ames writes (p. 19):

He was at times as uncertain about the value of his recent interpretations as he was sometimes audacious in their statement. Though he had developed a deep knowledge of Northwest Coast cultural traditions, he was never at ease with the comparative and theoretical perspectives that would have enabled him to place this knowledge in a wider context.

To put his doubts at rest and to convince the skeptics, Duff especially needed a method for testing his ideas about the art and Edenshaw. Without such a method, he was trapped in a circularity. The image that recurs in his poetry of seeing himself in a mirror may reflect this trap.

Seeking answers to unanswerable questions, hungering for mystery, daring to test his intuitions about death, doubting but not having the means of allaying the doubts — any and all of these may have motivated Duff's last act. Other readers of this book may find clues and other meanings. The book holds a great deal about this extraordinary man and the things that he devoted his life to.