

The Conversion of the Port Simpson Tsimshian : Indian Control or Missionary Manipulation?

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Recent historical and anthropological literature has tended to reject the view that the Indians were passive participants in the fur trade dominating the northwest coast at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Rather, Indians are seen to have had a decisive role in determining the nature of their relations with the fur traders. Robin Fisher asserts that this element of control ended with the advent of European settlement and that, at this time, European ways were forced upon the Indians, particularly by missionaries and government officials. Missionaries, he notes, came to convert the Indians to Christianity and therefore demanded the repudiation not only of traditional religious practices but of the total cultural framework.¹ The rise of numerous mission villages, complete with churches, schools and hospitals, is offered as proof of the pervasiveness of mission work in determining cultural changes.

Changes in indigenous cultures accompanying the intensification of European contact are frequently seen as evidence of native people's inability to maintain or accommodate their traditional way of life in the face of European civilization. In the case of British Columbia's Indians, Fisher postulates that sometime at the end of the fur trading era and the beginning of the settlement period they became incapable of exercising a great deal of choice or control in their relations with Europeans. He claims that the fur traders did not attempt to "direct" change among Indian societies, whereas the dominant powers of the settlement period, namely the church and governments, did try to reshape Indian culture.² In this framework, therefore, missionary successes are seen as the result of Indian inability to cope with a massive intrusion of European mores.

There are two possible explanations for this interpretation. First of all,

¹ Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977), pp. 119-45.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

very little serious analysis has been undertaken describing Indian reaction to missionaries and their reasons for accepting such innovations as churches, schools, hospitals and European social and political institutions. The available sources describing the settlement period are predominantly missionary records and government documents. As these sources have a strong anti-native bias, the changes effected by both missionaries and governments are seen as proof of Indian inability to withstand settlement forces. Secondly, twentieth-century life among the Indian people of British Columbia is often depicted as that of a demoralized people, disillusioned with the values of both traditional culture and western civilization. This current loss of confidence and inability to cope is often transposed to the nineteenth century and, furthermore, is linked to the coming of European settlers to B.C. The assumption seems to be that only demoralized and disillusioned people, those who have lost faith in their traditional cultural values, will convert to Christianity.⁸

The experience of the Methodist missionary, Thomas Crosby, who lived at Fort Simpson from 1874 to 1897, suggests a more complex series of reasons for conversion. A group of Fort Simpson Tsimshian, led by the chief Alfred Dudoward and his wife Kate, converted to Methodism in 1873 while trading in Victoria, and upon their return to Fort Simpson a public meeting was held at which they decided to ask for a Methodist missionary. During his first years at Fort Simpson, Crosby was remarkably successful in transforming the village from an Indian settlement to a model Canadian town. The Indians offered little resistance to the dismantling of their way of life. Towards the end of Crosby's tenure at Fort Simpson, however, the Tsimshian virtually turned their backs on Crosby's leadership and pursued a more independent course of action. One of the main reasons that they had converted was their hope that by forsaking their past they would acquire full Canadian citizenship along with its material, political and social rights. The governments' handling of the land question was a decisive illustration that such hopes would never be realized. Crosby was powerless to change the governments' position and, as a result, powerless as well to rally the Tsimshian around the mission. At Fort Simpson, therefore, the Tsimshian had a decisive role in the conversion process and in determining the success of the mission. They

⁸ Jean Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia*, National Museum of Man Publication in History, No. 5 (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1974). Usher contends that the Tsimshian of Fort Simpson were converted because of the persuasive personality of William Duncan. Nevertheless, she makes the assumption that the loss of faith in traditional values was instrumental in the Tsimshian decision to convert. See pp. 50-58.

were not, as proponents of Social Darwinism would argue, accepting Christianity because of an inherent incapability of resisting the onslaught of superior ways. Rather, Crosby depended on their agreement for the implementation of his policies.

[This article examines Tsimshian society before and after the arrival of Thomas Crosby, considers the progress of the mission among the Fort Simpson (Port Simpson, after 1880) Tsimshian, seeks to explain the Tsimshian's conversion to Christianity as an action deliberately chosen by them as a means to attain wider goals, and concludes with some suggestions about future analysis of missionary-Indian relations.

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When Thomas Crosby arrived at Fort Simpson in the spring of 1874, the Tsimshian had been in contact with European civilization for over eighty years. The fur trading era began at least as early as 1792 when the Spanish explorer Jacinto Caamãno spent a month among the Tsimshian studying their way of life.⁴ In 1831 the Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Nass but replaced it with Fort Simpson in 1834. The fur trade introduced the Tsimshian to both new material goods and the European market economy. The Coast Tsimshian enhanced their reputation as traders, acting as middlemen between the Europeans and the inland groups of Indians. Those who were adept at dealing with the Europeans quickly rose to social prominence, a fact that led to a rearrangement of traditional social positions. Many of the Tsimshian came to place less emphasis on such traditional activities as fishing, hunting and gathering, and instead to spend more time trading with other Indians for fur, meat, fish and potatoes, which in turn they traded to the Hudson's Bay Company for whatever European goods they desired.

The fur traders made no effort to "direct" change in Indian society, a fact that has prompted Jean Usher to state that contact "enhanced the existing cultural framework."

The aboriginal culture was largely oriented to the acquisition and display of wealth, and the influx of prestige goods from the traders only gave vitality to already existing cultural institutions.⁵

Few new skills were needed, and change proceeded in existing directions. Art, crafts, house building and ceremonial life flourished. Even when the

⁴ Jacinto Caamãno, "The Journal of Jacinto Caamãno," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 2 (1938): 201.

⁵ Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla*, p. 34.

Tsimshian gave up their largely nomadic existence and settled around Fort Simpson in 1834, Indian

laws still functioned, and by potlatching intensively, they were trying to adjust their real situation to their social ideals . . . this was still an Indian dominated society, and the Indian solutions for these problems could still be applied.⁶

Fisher has suggested that the fur trade was a "mutually beneficial symbiosis in which neither gained from the hostility of the other."⁷ While coming to a similar conclusion, Philip Drucker has pointed out that "it is not the mere listing of culture items added or subtracted that is significant but the cultural processes and psychological factors involved."⁸

Such factors are, however, harder to evaluate. The growing preoccupation with non-traditional activities has already been noted. By the late 1850s, the Tsimshian spent most of their traditional hunting summer trading in Victoria. Furthermore, the increase in wealth and depopulation by disease, especially smallpox, led to a dramatic increase in both the number and scale of potlatches and feasts. Rather than stabilizing the social structure in an orderly way, potlatches became occasions for bitter confrontation and rivalry.⁹

The attitude required for the fur trade was also at variance with the traditional relation to non-human "beings" and violated many of the traditional taboos. The Fort Simpson Journal reported in 1843 that the Indians were not bringing in enough fish and added that

the reason they assign for it, is their having brought them so early to the Fort, they superstitiously imagine our mode of cooking them is the cause of the falling off.¹⁰

The traders were astonished that the Indians did not realize that the school of fish had simply passed, "they being so tenacious of their own superstitious beliefs."¹¹ Calvin Martin has argued that the close relationship between human and other "beings" was characteristic of all North American Indian hunter-gatherer societies. Reality other than human was not seen as an aggregate of exploitable resources but rather there

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷ Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, p. 47.

⁸ Philip Drucker, *Cultures of the North Pacific Coast* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), p. 190.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-64.

¹⁰ Hudson's Bay Company, Fort Simpson, Journal, 12 May 1842-22 June 1843, kept by John Work and Roderick Finlayson, entry 23 March 1843.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

was a “genuine kinship and often affection for wildlife and plantlife”; human and other beings were bound by a compact and fulfilled each other’s needs.¹² Hunting required certain rites and taboos so that the spirit of the being giving its life would not be offended. Failure to follow these prescriptions could lead to the withdrawal of the offended spirit’s species from the area, lack of success for the hunter and/or the onset of disease. The coming of the Europeans brought new material goods but also the punishments associated with improper dealings with non-human beings.

The crucial question concerning the fur trade is whether or not the changes it brought to Tsimshian culture had impaired their ability to exert some control over their way of life. The answer is perhaps not as clear-cut as implied by Fisher and Usher on the one hand and Martin on the other. Fisher is correct in pointing out that the Indians actively pursued the fur trade for its alleged benefits. He underplays some of the effects on Indian societies. Undoubtedly traditional assumptions and patterns were altered, but the Tsimshian had not become demoralized puppets, an easy prey for European treachery.

This fact is strikingly illustrated by the arrival of the Anglican missionary, William Duncan, at Fort Simpson in 1857. Duncan’s objective in coming to Fort Simpson was to establish a model Christian, Victorian village. During the first three years, he had virtually no converts. Between July 1861 and July 1862, of Fort Simpson’s 1,500 residents, he baptized fifty-eight Indians, of whom only nine were over the age of 30.¹³ The Tsimshian quite clearly felt that the strength of their old ways did not warrant a conversion to Mr. Duncan’s alternative. Usher notes that the Tsimshian were still confident in their traditional ways so that a move to Christianity was not attractive.

Before 1857, contact with Whites was on a regular, ordered basis. The Tsimshian appeared to be in control of their own society, and were coping remarkably well with the effects of guns, liquor and disease introduced by European civilization. Their reaction to a missionary who denied the bases of their society was not that of a disoriented people.¹⁴

The gold rush of 1858, she notes, changed all of this as more and more Tsimshian went to Victoria and fell victim to European vices and diseases. By 1860, she concludes, the Tsimshian were demoralized and

¹² Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 186-87.

¹³ Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla*, p. 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

had lost control over their society. Yet curiously, Duncan began his attempts at converting the Tsimshian in June of 1858, the time of Tsimshian demoralization. It is puzzling to understand how Usher can describe the Tsimshian as confident, curious people in their response to Duncan when she notes that demoralization and dissatisfaction with old ways occurred at the same time Duncan began his efforts at converting them. Indeed, Duncan's inability to convert a significant number of Tsimshian prompted him to move with his converts to Metlakatla. In 1862, this community was expanded when a smallpox epidemic led many to flee to Metlakatla for refuge. Only then was he able to establish his model community.

However, the population at Fort Simpson remained considerably larger than that of Metlakatla. Most Fort Simpson residents chose not to follow Duncan and continued to adhere to traditional values. While it is likely that a number of Duncan's followers were attracted to the beliefs of Christianity, many more came to find refuge from smallpox and another significant group came to escape potlatch obligations associated with status, feasting and property rights. This latter factor resulted in many hard feelings towards the Metlakatlans and perhaps is one reason why Fort Simpson still had a larger population than Metlakatla by the time of Crosby's arrival in 1874.

Duncan nevertheless maintained the hope that his model utopia would attract all of the Coast Tsimshian. This hope was dashed in 1873 when a small group of Fort Simpson Tsimshian was converted to Methodism in Victoria. Responding to the pressure to westernize, and to the conversion of some of their number, the majority of residents at Fort Simpson decided that they wanted the western way of life and religion rather than the Tsimshian way, and issued a call for a Methodist missionary. The reasons for requesting a missionary were varied, ranging from a desire for western material goods to the attraction of Christian beliefs, particularly as seen in the Methodist religious services which appealed to the Tsimshian love of celebration and music. In addition, some were confused about traditional assumptions, others desired immunity from disease (through Christianity's alleged magical powers) and still others hoped for new prestige in the larger world of which they were becoming a part. But the crucial element in this decision was a conscious choice on the part of Tsimshian to convert. They may not have been aware of all the factors involved in such a decision but then Crosby, like most other missionaries, was not either.

When Crosby arrived at Fort Simpson, therefore, he had a warm

welcome, unlike Duncan, and was able quickly to establish a Methodist Victorian setting. His evangelical revivalism contrasted sharply with Duncan's sombre Anglicanism and thus appealed to the Tsimshian. Crosby had been born in 1840 in the heart of Methodism, in Pickering, Yorkshire, had emigrated to Canada in the mid 1850s, but did not consider himself "saved" until 1858 during the Great Awakening that swept North America that year. Revival meetings — at which fire-and-brimstone sermons were delivered, rousing hymns were sung, emotional prayers were offered and dramatic conversions took place — became for Crosby the mode in which Christianity could best be presented. In 1861, Rev. William ("California") Taylor, a missionary who spent ten years among the gold miners of California, inspired Crosby to become a Methodist missionary. Crosby's lack of formal education, a result of his working-class background, prevented him from receiving endorsement from the ruling body of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. In 1861 he paid his own way to British Columbia, and in the frontier setting his lively enthusiasm was quickly utilized by the small group of Methodists in British Columbia. By 1864 he had been appointed as an assistant to Cornelius Bryant, a Methodist missionary at Nanaimo. In 1871 he received formal recognition for his efforts and was ordained as a Methodist missionary, and in 1874 he was appointed to Fort Simpson.

One of Crosby's first moves at Fort Simpson was to build a pretentious frame church. In addition to Sunday services, he provided Sunday school instruction and held weekly prayer meetings and special services. Using the example of his own conversion experience, Crosby attempted to implement the lively, spontaneous and emotional revival mode of religious expression. When he arrived, the musical Tsimshian eagerly participated in worship and prayer. He also established an itinerancy system that allowed him to follow his parishioners to their spring and summer fishing and berrying grounds. The itinerancy system was broadened to extend his ministry over most of the northwest coast of British Columbia, a fact that would have a significant influence on his effectiveness at Fort Simpson in later years.

As well as introducing the whole array of Methodist religious practices and institutions, Crosby was successful in altering the patterns of everyday life. Education was the most important arena for social change, and Crosby was convinced that the key to future alterations in Tsimshian life lay with teaching the children the proper way of "civilization." In 1879 he opened the Crosby Girls' Home to "rescue" orphan girls from liquor and prostitution and to provide a stable setting for girls whose parents

could be convinced by Crosby that the girls would be better off in the Home. The Home taught such feminine occupations as cooking, embroidery, sewing, washing, mothering and serving. These girls, it was hoped, would provide the nucleus for future Christian, Indian homes. By 1890, a boys' home had also been established to provide Christian discipline and training. Medical aid was also provided, since Crosby believed that medicine and the gospel were inseparable. In medicine he felt that he had "one of the most effective agencies in spreading the glorious gospel of the blessed God."¹⁵ In 1890 a hospital was opened, funded partially by the federal and provincial governments.

Religion, education and medical aid, therefore, became the core of Crosby's program. On this basis Tsimshian society could be transformed entirely. This transformation was seen as an integral part of the Christian message.

The missionary who cannot teach the Indian or heathen how to build his home or cultivate his land, or is too lazy to do it, is not a practical or successful missionary. How can a man teach religion and not teach industry, cleanliness and thrift of all kinds, for the Bible is full of such lessons?¹⁶

The communal long-houses — "dens of iniquity" — had to be replaced with single-family dwellings if the principles taught in church and school were to succeed. By the late 1880s all the residents in Fort Simpson lived in single family dwellings, minus all the traditional totem markers. Orderly streets with lamps and houses with picket fences, gardens and shrubs testified to the radical change Crosby had effected.

Traditional practices such as dancing, conjuring, potlatching and gambling were eliminated. Ceremonial paraphernalia and totems were destroyed. The people were encouraged instead to adopt the Victorian virtues of thrift, hard work and self-reliance. The principle of private ownership and property replaced that of communal ownership. Traditional leadership was also replaced with a village council, led and controlled by Crosby, to regulate such matters as sanitation, road-working, street lighting and other public works.

Crosby thus appeared to be remarkably successful in the implementation of his mission program. Some native practices — such as the giving of hereditary names along with their property rights, the rules of exogamy and customs controlling marriage, and laws regulating funerals — remained operative beneath the veneer of western mores. Furthermore,

¹⁵ Thomas Crosby, *Up and Down the North Pacific Coast by Canoe and Mission Ship* (Toronto: Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1914), p. 302.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

the old tribal councils continued to meet to regulate native affairs not dealt with by the new village council.¹⁷ But these practices were not retained to deliberately subvert Crosby's work. There is little reason to doubt that their conversion to Christianity was sincere, and despite the often unconscious retention of centuries-old customs they made every effort to adopt the trappings of western society. It was easier, in many instances, to accept these trappings than change those patterns of living which, to them, were very personal and were often seen as being ingrained in the natural order. It was one thing to build a new house, for example, but quite another to marry someone from one's own phratry.

On the surface, the radical change of Tsimshian life appeared to be the result of Crosby's energy and drive. He seemed to have convinced the Tsimshian to give up their traditional cultural framework for a western one. However, a closer look at the mission indicates that the changes were as much the result of the eagerness of the Tsimshian to westernize as of Crosby's leadership.

The original request for a Methodist missionary is the first clue to the importance of the role of the Tsimshian in the success of the mission.¹⁸ A second is the response of the Tsimshian to Crosby's role as a religious leader. As early as 1876 Crosby reported that church attendance was down: "There was a falling off, which was very painful to us."¹⁹ From this time on Crosby had great difficulty in inspiring the revivalist level of enthusiasm he saw as a necessary expression of a living faith. In 1890 Rev. A. E. Green reported that

we have been very much grieved by some who years ago were leaders in the work of God but who, becoming cold, would lead the people back to the old customs that they gave up as bad, when they first received the gospel. Many have been drawn away during the past three or four years to take part in the old heathen practices.²⁰

Lack of enthusiasm for the leadership of the missionaries was usually interpreted as heathenism.

A particularly vexing problem for the missionaries was the Tsimshian failure to maintain missionary expectations of the Christian life. The Port Simpson Register is full of examples of members who shifted from full membership to "on trial" and then back again to full membership

¹⁷ Clarence Bolt, "Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian of Port Simpson, 1874-1897" (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1981), pp. 114-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-69.

¹⁹ Crosby letter, 16 February 1876, *Missionary Notices* 8, p. 129.

²⁰ Green letter, 5 April 1890, *Missionary Outlook* 10 (1890):109.

over the twenty-three years that Crosby lived at Port Simpson. From 1887 until 1896, in particular, there was a constant juggling of leadership positions in the church (local preachers, class leaders, leaders and exhorters) as well as a constant movement of people between the "on trial" and full-member status. Few managed to remain consistently in good standing for the whole period of Crosby's tenure.

The instability, more severe in Crosby's later years, indicated that Indian expectations of Crosby were not being realized. By 1885 the Indians were expressing widespread disillusionment about the mission. One of the natives, David Swanson, complained that although it had been eleven years since "we gave up our old way . . . no one has visited us to help us in anything connected with the improvement of our village."²¹ He pointed out how the people had spent all of their money improving their village and building new homes, a school and church. Money and work were now scarce. Others noted that Crosby's work load kept him away often and prevented the kind of training they felt was necessary. They noted:

You have opened up God's word to us . . . and our hearts are happy. We want you to lead us in other things. In old times we had a way of our own; but we have put that away, and want to follow in the way that is taught to us. . . .²²

Chief Albert Nelson reported that although not all had gone as they expected, they were not sorry that they had followed the Methodists. However, expectations had not been fulfilled: "We would like a missionary who could teach our children all things (trades, etc.). Mr. Crosby does not stay at home; he goes to visit other places."²³

The issue that most clearly demonstrated that Indian expectations would not be met was the federal and provincial governments' handling of the Tsimshian land question. In 1876 the two levels of government had reached an agreement, based on a suggestion by William Duncan, that a commission be appointed to allocate reserves on the basis of each tribe's particular situation rather than on a set acreage. The federal government gave up the idea of extinguishing land title because of the probable expense. As long as the Indians remained quiet, they would not be inclined to raise the issue.²⁴ The federal strategy also avoided confron-

²¹ A. E. Sutherland, "Notes of a Tour Among the Missions of British Columbia," *Missionary Outlook* 6 (1886):3.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, p. 188.

tation with the provincial government, which had jurisdiction over the provincial crown lands. This position guaranteed that the two levels of government would throw the problem of Indian land title back and forth while the Indians waited without satisfaction.

The problem predated Crosby's arrival and as early as 1874 he reported that

we need the land reserve question settled here, and hope that the Indian commission will visit us soon, and let us know where the Indian land is to be; then we hope the people will build a better class of house.²⁵

A year later he stated that the Indians expressed great fear because of rumours that they would be driven from their land.²⁶

These fears were somewhat alleviated in 1876 when the Governor General, Lord Dufferin, visited Fort Simpson and stated that the government of Canada did not distinguish between citizens on the basis of race or colour but was determined to do justice for all. He pointed out that Canada was especially proud of the Indians as Canada's ancient inhabitants and saw them as equal beneficiaries of Canada's good government and of the opportunity for earning an "honest livelihood."²⁷ In 1879 Indian Superintendent Powell came to Fort Simpson and assured the Tsimshian that they would not be cheated about their rights, especially since the area had "long been their home."²⁸

These assurances were undermined in 1881 when the Indian Reserve Commissioner, Peter O'Reilly, was sent, without notification to the Indians, to lay out reserves for the Tsimshian. Few Indians were home at the time, and at a meeting on 5 October the Indians handed O'Reilly a written petition laying out what they saw as necessary land for their reserve. O'Reilly flatly rejected the petition yet later reported that he had made no reserve without consulting the Indians and had given them every fishing station and cultivation plot they had requested.²⁹

During the next few years the Indians made little progress in getting either the federal or provincial governments to listen to their claims. The

²⁵ Crosby letter, 20 January 1875, *Missionary Notices* 2, p. 38.

²⁶ Crosby letter, 16 February 1876, *Missionary Notices* 8, p. 130.

²⁷ Molyneux St. John, *The Sea of Mountains, An Account of Lord Dufferin's Tour Through British Columbia in 1876*, vol. 1 (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1877), pp. 321-22.

²⁸ Indian Superintendent I. W. Powell's report, Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1879, p. 121.

²⁹ O'Reilly to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 25 October 1882, RG10, vol. 3605, file 2806.

Canadian Pacific Railway was by this time planning to establish a west coast terminus at Port Simpson, and in 1883 a number of white land speculators were able to secretly pre-empt land around the proposed harbour — land that O'Reilly had excluded from the reserve two years earlier.³⁰ In 1883 as well, an Indian agent was appointed despite the fact the Tsimshian had clearly indicated that they neither wanted nor needed one.

In 1884 a government inquiry into the land problems of the Tsimshian, at Metlakatla as well as at Port Simpson, concluded that the basic problem was that the missionaries were giving the Indians bad advice. The missionaries were blamed for the fact that the Indians would not accept the surveys by O'Reilly or submit to the *Indian Advancement Act* by accepting an Indian agent. The inquiry report noted that the Indians had been told that "Indian agents are for the good of Indians, The Indian Agents tell us what the Indians want."³¹ Apparently it was insufficient for the Indians themselves to tell the government what they wanted.

Two years later the Indians managed to persuade a reluctant Crosby to accompany them to Victoria to plead their case. The substance of their demands was that their rights be guaranteed by treaty. They acknowledged that they lacked legal expertise or advice, so all they could do was appeal to the provincial government in the name of Canadian or British justice. Their demands were simply dismissed. They were told by the provincial authorities that the difference between them and whites is that being still Indian, or . . . in the position of children, you are not permitted, so far, to exercise the franchise. . . . You are like children. We don't give our children the right to vote until they have come to manhood — to be taught to read and think properly.³²

It was pointed out that all land belonged to the crown and that the crown only gave Indians land because "they do not know so well how to make their own living . . . and special indulgence is extended to them and special care shown."³³ White settlers received no such benefit. One of the natives, Charles Burton, pointed out that all they wanted was some land

³⁰ Bolt, "Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian," pp. 125-26.

³¹ British Columbia, Metlakatla Inquiry, 1884, *Report of the Commissioners Together with the Evidence* (Victoria: R. Wolfenden, 1885), p. iv, Evidence.

³² British Columbia, *Report of Conferences Between the Provincial Government and Indian Delegates from Fort Simpson and Naas River* (Victoria: R. Wolfenden, 1887), p. 255.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

so they could be free and that their ultimate goal was to become good British subjects, like white people.³⁴ This desire lay at the bottom of their initial request for a missionary, their change of lifestyle, and their hope for a resolution of the land question.

The only positive result of the trip, as far as the Tsimshian were concerned, was the promise of a joint provincial and federal commission to examine the issue. However, good feelings disappeared when more surveys were done before the commission arrived in the middle of October 1887. Few Indians were home at the time and the commissioners had been instructed to "be careful to discountenance . . . any claim of Indian title to Provincial lands."³⁵ The few that were home complained bitterly that subjection to the *Indian Advancement Act* and acceptance of an Indian agent were actually reactionary steps because they had advanced beyond such tutelary devices. The commission merely concluded that Tsimshian demands demonstrated the need for stricter enforcement of legislation concerning Canada's native people, namely by means of the *Indian Advancement Act*.³⁶

Increasingly, the governments blamed the missionaries for the problems, believing that the Indians were incapable of the sophistication required to make demands about such matters as land title and federal and provincial law about Indian affairs. In 1888 there was talk at the federal level of putting pressure on the Methodist Church to have Crosby removed from his post.³⁷ In 1889, in an attempt to clear his name and to make the federal government aware of the real problem, Crosby went to Ottawa, armed with affidavits and statements from white residents, traders and Indians, laying out clearly the nature of Indian grievances. In their statements, several Indians intimated that they were considering following William Duncan to Alaska where they could get decent schooling and proper government support. As had been the case with the commissions earlier, Crosby's efforts were unsuccessful in resolving any of the issues.

Following Crosby's failure, the Tsimshian decided to take another approach. In January 1891 over two hundred residents — most of the adult male population — signed a letter addressed to the local Member

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

³⁵ British Columbia, *Papers Relating to the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the State and Condition of the Indians of the North-West Coast of British Columbia* (Victoria: R. Wolfenden, 1888), p. 416.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Special Appendix # 2, p. cvii.

³⁷ Todd to Powell, 12 June 1888, RG 10, vol. 3776, file 37373-2.

of Parliament, Robert Hanley Hall, complaining that the land question had not yet been settled. They reviewed the whole history of the problem, from Powell's assurance in 1879 to the commission of 1887. They pointed out that government inaction seemed calculated to "provoke us to break the law."³⁸ They expressed the desire to be like Canada's other citizens, with a simple form of municipal government so that they could manage their own affairs. The Crosby-directed council was no longer seen as an effective instrument for directing their concerns. Hall requested the Department of Indian Affairs to change the provisions of the *Indian Advancement Act* for the sake of the Port Simpson people. The request was denied by Deputy Superintendent Vankoughnet because, as he pointed out, there was a prevailing sentiment among government officials that the Indians had received enough from Canada, "the sentiment being to curtail the privileges and concessions already granted rather than in any way to increase them."³⁹

Meeting failure here as well, the Tsimshian decided at the end of 1893 to ask for "an elective Indian council under the provisions of the Indian Advancement Act" as "a large number believe that the time is come when we should have an organized council."⁴⁰ This council would be directed by an Indian agent rather than by Crosby. The request was made, however, not in acquiescence to the federal government and its Indian policy but as a means to bring their struggle to a new level. As soon as the council was established in 1894, they used it to press their demands on the Indian agent. Obtaining no success, and fed up with what they perceived to be their Indian agent's incompetence and patronizing attitude, the council petitioned Ottawa in 1896 for his removal.⁴¹ Shortly afterwards, the council reopened the land question, asking the federal government to make a fair settlement of their requests.

While the Tsimshian failed to have their land problem resolved, the ways in which they sought to deal with the problem revealed much about their goals and aspirations between 1870 and 1900. They were not hankering for a return to traditional mores. By the mid-1890s they were employed in a wide range of activities:

Salmon canneries, procuring and rafting saw-logs, hunting, fishing, boat-

³⁸ Residents of Port Simpson to Hall, 8 June 1891, RG10, vol. 3852, file 76586.

³⁹ Vankoughnet to Vowell, 28 April 1891, RG10, vol. 3852, file 76586.

⁴⁰ Chiefs of Port Simpson to Todd, November 1893, RG10, vol. 3862, file 83121.

⁴¹ Chiefs and Council of Port Simpson to Vowell, 30 January 1897, RG10, vol. 3853, file 78547.

building, trading, working at saw-mills and steamboats, cultivating patches of land, carrying freight and passengers from place to place, (etc.).⁴²

Visitors and government officials reported that the Indians appeared to be wealthy, with good, well-furnished homes. James Woodsworth, Superintendent of Methodist missions in western Canada, visiting in 1896, pointed out how eager the Indians were to have their own canneries, steamboats and sawmills as well as control over their political, social and religious lives.⁴³ They wanted power over their own destinies and did not want to be dependent on others — either whites for employment or missionaries for religion. Their goal seemed to be assimilation into white society as quickly as possible. Port Simpson, already the projected terminus for the Canadian Pacific Railway, became the seat of the government and police for the region in the 1890s. The Port also became an important stop for steamers to Alaska and the Nass and Skeena Rivers' territories. The Indians wanted a larger role in the developments affecting their village and the region.

The role of Crosby in everyday affairs was thus diminished. The new village council, established under the *Indian Advancement Act*, meant an end to the council Crosby had established twenty years earlier. But his loss of control in everyday affairs was also paralleled by a decline in the religious aspects of the mission. The dissatisfaction expressed in 1885 about the poverty of the village and the lack of progress in the land question was accompanied by a desire for more control over the religious expressions of the people. In 1885, Thomas Wright pointed out to Alexander Sutherland, Secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society, that it was the Tsimshian and not the whites that had first brought the gospel to Port Simpson and that, therefore, the Society ought to train native teachers.⁴⁴

In 1888, in response to the desire of the Tsimshian to have more power over their religious expression, Crosby permitted the formation of the Band of Christian Workers, whose primary purpose was evangelism. While Crosby at this time had great difficulty channelling native enthusiasm into revivals, the Band had little problem gathering enthusiastic support. The Band members preached in the streets and conducted open air services that were punctuated by prayers and shouts and accompanied by lively music complete with a band of drums, horns and tambourines.

⁴² Todd Report, Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1897, p. 87.

⁴³ James Woodsworth, *Thirty Years in the Canadian Northwest* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1917), pp. 192, 194.

⁴⁴ Sutherland, "Notes of a Tour," p. 2.

Banners and flags with various slogans and texts were displayed and band members wore showy uniforms. The Band engaged in Sunday services outside of the regular Sunday worship services and during the winter held services during the week as well. The Band embraced almost all males at Port Simpson and often seemed to be the only element of the mission still religiously alive. Band members were also given permission to accompany Crosby on his missionary tours. But Crosby made no attempt to begin a training program for native religious leaders, and the Indians began to realize that permission to form the Band had only been granted because the missionaries did not see it as a threat to their power.

Indeed, missionary response to the group indicates that they saw it as a harmless safety valve through which Tsimshian religious enthusiasm could be displayed, while church services were conducted according to the manner prescribed by the missionaries. In 1891 the Band of Christian Workers requested that Crosby's municipal council give them permission to build their own worship centre. The request was, of course, turned down, for Crosby continued to control the council. The Band also sought permission to send out missionaries and to use their musical instruments in regular church services. Permission was granted on condition that Crosby's approval be obtained in each specific case.

By the end of 1893 the Band of Christian Workers, ignoring Crosby's objection, had erected its own building. In 1894 the missionaries, responding to the growing assertiveness of the Tsimshian, stated:

We reaffirm the resolution of last year in regard to the use of musical instruments and recommend to each missionary the organization of Band of Christian Workers to be *controlled* by the missionary in charge.⁴⁵

But at the end of 1894 Crosby conceded that for the previous three years the Band had not been under the control of the church. The Band members had been successful in obtaining control of their own affairs while still belonging to the Methodist Church.⁴⁶ It is most significant, moreover, that the request of the Port Simpson Tsimshian to have their own village council under the *Indian Advancement Act* came immediately after the old municipal council, controlled by Crosby, had turned down the Band of Christian Workers' request to have their own building. Just as the Band sought independence from Crosby in the affairs of the

⁴⁵ Methodist Church of Canada, British Columbia Conference, Port Simpson District, Ministerial Sessions, 1894, p. 221.

⁴⁶ Crosby to Raley, 29 November 1894, G. E. Raley, Correspondence Inward, Raley Collection.

Methodist Church, so the Tsimshian sought independence from Crosby in the affairs of their village. Paternalism was no longer acceptable. The Port Simpson Tsimshian were now charting their own direction.

Nevertheless, rejection of missionary control was not rejection of the values the missionaries stood for. The issue in the 1890s was the matter of power and control. The Tsimshian frustrations revolved around the fact that they could not become full members of Canadian society. They had adopted the external features of western society such as clothing, shelter, food, social relations and even Christianity. But religious organizations and governments would not allow them to become part of western society. They could attempt to think, act and live like other Canadians and forsake their past, but white Canadians would not accept them as equal partners.

Traditional analysis of missionary activity, when assessing the success or failure of the missionaries' program of conversion, has tended to place its emphasis on either the role of the missionary or on native loss of faith in their own culture.⁴⁷ The situation at Port Simpson indicates that the key to understanding Crosby's transformation of Port Simpson lies in recognizing the willingness of the Tsimshian to westernize. Most evaluations of missions place very little or no emphasis on the active role of the natives in their own conversion.

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It is unfortunate that the ethnocentrism of the missionaries, who treated the Indians as "children" who needed "nursing," the "care, kind, loving Christian hearts can give them,"⁴⁸ is also a part of the historical literature on missions. The nineteenth-century view of missionaries, of the belief in the superiority of their culture and way of life (including religion), is unwittingly adopted by students of missions and of Indian-European relations in general.⁴⁹ The inability of Indian societies to combat the destructive power of western technology, particularly with the onset of settlement, has tended to lead most students of this interaction to overlook the nature of Indian response of European mores. As Freerk Ch. Kamma has pointed out, there has been

⁴⁷ See Bolt, "Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian," pp. 164-74, for a detailed discussion on these two positions.

⁴⁸ Jennings Letter, 30 April 1889, *Missionary Outlook* 9 (1889): 128.

⁴⁹ This view is reflected by Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, in his conclusion that Indian societies were enhanced by the introduction of western technological innovations. He assumes that the introduction of new technology, even one with a radically different philosophical and religious basis, allowed for change in Indian societies along existing directions.

a too facile tendency to suppose that so-called primitive peoples are not capable either of discursive thought and reflection about their own cultural heritage or of adopting a critical attitude towards the great problems of life that will always exist, even with a relatively high degree of integration. The assumption appears to be that it is only through contact with Europeans that these people become aware of their problems.⁵⁰

Undoubtedly, contact with Europeans presented new problems but native peoples dealt with these using in large part their traditional cultural framework.

This European ethnocentrism has resulted in the lack of a clear definition of the conversion experience. There is often an emphasis on the reasons for conversion rather than an understanding of the "act" of conversion. Most analysis has been correct in noting that religion and western mores came as a unified package. However, conversion is frequently defined only in religious terms and understood as the acceptance of a new religious framework. But as K. E. Read has pointed out, religious beliefs are not simply a logical set of ideas but are integrated into the life, the practices and being of a people. They are more than a "logically inter-connected system of ideas about the supernatural."⁵¹ They are part of a whole way of looking at the world and reflect an approach to life. While conversion is frequently seen as the replacement of one set of religious symbols by another, it is in fact the acceptance of a whole new cultural framework. If we define culture as "the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments,"⁵² then religion is the network of symbols which give tangible expression to the orientation to life rooted in the cultural context. Conversion involves the adoption of a new cultural basis and thus includes a changed social structure as well as new religious symbols and experience.

Many Indians were aware of this complexity and of the radical implications of their conversion. Marius Barbeau's *The Downfall of Temlaham*, a somewhat over-romanticized account of Indian life, illustrates some of the soul-searching and complexity involved in the decision to become Christian. The Indians faced a choice between the familiar security, tradition and wisdom of their old ways and the risk of a new

⁵⁰ Freerk Ch. Kamma, *Koreri, Messianic Movements in the Biak-Numfor Culture Area* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1972), p. 243.

⁵¹ K. E. Read, "Missionary Activities and Social Change in the Central Highlands of Papua and New Guinea," *South Pacific* 5 (1952): 229-38.

⁵² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 44.

way, one that brought new forms of wealth and prestige, new ideas about life, liquor, disease and a confusing morality.⁵⁸ The Tsimshian at Port Simpson were aware of many of these factors and over the years often made reference to the fact that in becoming Christian they had not only forsaken Tsimshian religious practices but also adopted new styles of living, clothing, education and work. They made a connection between God's "written word" and the white man's way of living as contrasted to their traditional religious practices and their way of living by hunting, gathering and fishing. Conversion was thus a radical new orientation to life rather than the mere acceptance of new religious symbols and expressions.

In making their decision to accept the western cultural heritage, therefore, the Tsimshian had turned their backs on a way of life in which their religion and social institutions had been integrated with underlying cultural values. In becoming western it became imperative for the Tsimshian that their cultural values and everyday lives reflect the fact that they had forsaken their old culture for that of white Canada. The land issue was the most dramatic, poignant and painful demonstration of the fact that the rights of full citizenship would not be theirs. Political and economic power, the measure of worth in Canadian society, was denied. The fragmentation of Indian lives in the twentieth century is largely due to the fact that they have forsaken an integrated cultural framework for one in which they could not be full participants.

While most analyses of missions have exhaustively studied the background, personalities, goals and programs of missionaries, too few have looked at the nature of Indian response and have instead stereotyped most groups of natives in the manner described above. The paucity of sources describing the Indian viewpoint is perhaps the main reason for this deficiency. What is needed in future studies is a sensitive awareness of the nature of *both* Indian and western cultures, taking great care to be aware of ethnocentric biases, and a close look at the motives and responses of *both* parties in their interaction with one another.

⁵⁸ C. Marius Barbeau, *The Downfall of Tsimshian* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1973), pp. 6, 12-13, 68, 76-77.