

“At Home with the Bella Coola Indians,”

by T. F. McIlwraith

Introduced and annotated by

JOHN BARKER

An anthropologist is a person who is crazy to study his fellow man.

— GLYDE KLUCKHOHN¹

T. F. McIlwraith would have appreciated the unintended irony of Kluckhohn's assertion in the early winter of 1923-24. At age 24, he was undertaking his second season of field work among the isolated Bella Coola Indians of British Columbia. The hectic conditions of his work this time, however, bore few resemblances to the rather calm and plodding interviewing of informants that occupied him in the spring of 1922. Now an adopted member of the tribe, McIlwraith found himself a key participant in the six-week-long winter ceremonials. Each night at six he returned to the crowded community hall to prompt singers, to dance, to make ritual speeches, pausing between these duties to scribble notes frantically, eventually making his way to bed in the small hours of the morning. Being “at home” with the Bella Coola Indians was no small accomplishment. In view of the importance of McIlwraith's *The Bella Coola Indians* (1948) in Northwest ethnology, the popular piece he wrote for a Toronto magazine in 1924 describing the “romance” of his field experience holds a special interest for the history of ethnographic research on the coast.

Thomas Forsyth McIlwraith occupies a central, if generally unappreciated, position in the history of anthropology in Canada, as an ethnologist of distinction and as an academic. Born in 1899 in Hamilton, Ontario, and educated at St. John's College at Cambridge University, he landed a contract in 1921 at the (then) Victoria Memorial Museum in Ottawa to carry out research in British Columbia. Edward Sapir, the director of the anthropology division, sent the young graduate to work among the Bella Coola Indians, an isolated Salishan-speaking group living at the head of a fiord 300 miles north of Vancouver. Franz Boas had previously

¹ *Mirror for Man* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1967), 16.

written about the Bella Coola, but they were at this time relatively unstudied, especially as compared to their culturally related neighbours.²

McIlwraith spent longer with the Bella Coola than any anthropologist had to this time spent with any single tribe on the coast,³ producing by February 1924 an awesome mass of notes which he proceeded to work into an equally awesome manuscript. Already dismayed by the length of the manuscript, the editors at the National Museum were simply appalled by the inclusion of some of the more earthy lore of the Bella Coola. They insisted that McIlwraith put sections of the book into Latin and delete other passages completely. These objections first delayed publication of the work and then the Great Depression sent it into limbo. McIlwraith was eventually able to publish his *The Bella Coola Indians* in an unbutchered form in 1948 through the University of Toronto Press.⁴ Although somewhat out of date by the time of its release, the ethnography was and still is recognized as one of the most comprehensive and authoritative of those published on Northwest Coast peoples.

Blocked in his development as an ethnologist, McIlwraith successfully established himself as the first full-time academic anthropologist in Canada.⁵ He was hired in 1925 at the University of Toronto and, until 1948, presided over the only department of anthropology in the country. McIlwraith guided the program at Toronto until shortly before his death in 1964. Like his contemporaries at the National Museum, Diamond Jenness and Marius Barbeau, McIlwraith was concerned that anthropological research be made accessible to as wide an audience as possible. "At Home with the Bella Coola Indians" was his first foray into popularizing anthropology in Canada.⁶

McIlwraith worked in Bella Coola from March to August 1922 and from September 1923 to February 1924. When he first arrived, the

² Franz Boas, *The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians*, "Publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition," ed. Franz Boas, vol. I, part 2 (Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History; New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1898). A comprehensive bibliography of published and unpublished materials on the Bella Coola can be found in Dorothy I. D. Kennedy and Randy Bouchard, "The Bella Coola Indians," *Handbook of North American Indians: Northwest* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, forthcoming).

³ Ralph Maud, *A Guide to B. C. Indian Myth and Legend* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982), 134.

⁴ John Barker, "The Publication of 'The Bella Coola Indians': T. F. McIlwraith and the National Museum" (typescript).

⁵ John Barker, "T. F. McIlwraith and Anthropology at the University of Toronto, 1925-1963," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 24 (2): 252-68.

⁶ In his later career, McIlwraith wrote popular articles on the Indians and the history of anthropology in Canada. *Ibid.*

village was almost empty with most of the people gone for seasonal work at the canneries. He was fortunate indeed to find three senior men who quickly befriended the anthropologist and shared their knowledge with him.⁷ McIlwraith's ethnographic luck continued to hold (though it probably did not seem like "luck" to him at the time). He had hoped to find work at a university but, when no positions could be found, he gladly accepted the Museum's extension of his contract and the promise of a second summer season in the field to fill the gaps in his notes. Personal circumstances forced him to defer his departure until September. Meanwhile, a respected elder who had adopted the anthropologist had died, and the Indians asked McIlwraith to take his place in the winter ceremonials coming up. It turned out that McIlwraith had recorded many valuable song texts the previous year and, because of a shortage of ritual experts, quickly assumed a central place in the ceremonials. By accident more than by design, McIlwraith came to share with Franz Boas the distinction of being one of the few ethnologists to participate in the traditional secret societies of the Northwest coast.⁸

The 1924 article allows us to glimpse McIlwraith's assumptions and methods as well as the historical conditions in which he carried out his field work. McIlwraith's concerns as a field worker shared several common traits with Franz Boas and his students, who dominate in Northwest ethnology. Like the Boasians, McIlwraith defined his work in terms of what became known as "salvage anthropology."⁹ His goal, as he says below, was "to record the life of the Indian as it was before the white man came." Given that the ancient cultures had largely broken down under white pressure and could be traced only in the fragmented memories of a few elders, ethnological analysis in practice became ethno-historical reconstruction. Participant observation played a relatively small part in ethnographic field work on the coast, because the anthropologists did not consider much of the contemporary Indian life to be of scientific interest.

McIlwraith lived in relatively comfortable quarters away from the centre of Indian life and worked primarily with a small number of

⁷ The three men were Joshua Moody, Captain Schooner and Jim Pollard, who are all mentioned in the article. Captain Schooner was confined to the village with a broken wrist and Pollard by the death of his wife. T. F. McIlwraith, *The Bella Coola Indians* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), I, x.

⁸ Margaret B. Blackman, "Continuity and Change in Northwest Ceremonialism: Introduction," *Arctic Anthropology* 14 (1977): 1.

⁹ For an historical analysis of the concept, see Jacob W. Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 72 (6): 632-35.

knowledgeable informants. The Bella Coola of the 1920s was of little interest in itself. From the viewpoint of salvage anthropology, the contemporary Indian settlement was not a living system, but instead like an archaeological midden, made up of fragmented and rapidly decaying pieces of an ancient society, waiting to be constructed by the expert scientist.¹⁰ Of these fragments, the surviving winter ceremonials proved to be most important. McIlwraith later wrote that, although "the old customs had broken down enormously, this actual participation enabled me to understand the winter dances in a manner impossible from mere description."¹¹

In some other ways, however, McIlwraith made important innovations in Northwest ethnology. He was a product of what has become known as the "Cambridge school," and took with him into the field A. C. Haddon's ideal of the "intensive study" of a single society.¹² McIlwraith understood this as meaning that one should seek not only a comprehensive knowledge of all aspects of a culture, a position also held by the Boasians, but one should also actively explore how the various elements are integrated to form a system. This second aim formed an inducement to remain with one cultural group for an extended period of field work: for research into one area of culture inevitably led to research in other areas; and each domain researched, in turn, shed light on other domains, leading toward a picture of the whole culture. This approach to cultural understanding shows up most clearly in the early chapters of *The Bella Coola Indians* in which McIlwraith weaves a web of myths, observations and informant testimonies to situate Bella Coola social organization, rank, potlatches, origins and religion.

Remaining with one cultural group, furthermore, encouraged working with a larger circle of informants than was usual.¹³ As he turned to

¹⁰ For example, McIlwraith, *Bella Coola*, I, xii: "... within a short time there will be no ethnological work possible in that tribe. A tithe of the people may survive, but their culture, the growth of generations, will have been swept away."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, xi.

¹² Alfred Cort Haddon, Reader in anthropology at Cambridge, was McIlwraith's closest mentor. On the development of fieldwork techniques at Cambridge and McIlwraith's interpretation of them, see James Urry, "A History of Field Methods," in R. F. Ellen, ed., *Ethnographic Research*, R. F. Ellen, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1985); and *Bella Coola*, I, "Introduction."

¹³ Boas and Barbeau extended their circle of informants by making use of literate Indian collaborators. Possibly because of his training at Cambridge, and because of a general distrust between the elder Bella Coola and the young men in the community (see below), McIlwraith apparently never explored this option. For better or worse, he was acquainted with all of his informants, and the ethnographic data in *The Bella Coola Indians* is presented through one researcher's lens rather than two. On indigenous ethnologists and their influence in Northwest coast eth-

different informants, collecting alternate versions of family histories and validating myths, McIlwraith was made aware of the secrets and rivalries that formed an essential part of traditional Bella Coola society. As Ralph Maud has said, the contrast between Boas' and McIlwraith's work on the Bella Coola is very striking. Boas' major work, *The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians* (1898), was based upon one informant whom he interviewed over a ten-day period. Although Boas was aware that the secretive ownership of legends by ancestral families led to considerable variations and contradictions in texts and informant testimonies, he allowed this one version to stand for the whole tribe. McIlwraith, on the other hand, cautiously dealt with all of the variants' testimonies and texts he recorded, placing them "within the context of events and activities of the Bella Coola as he witnessed them and participated in them," thus producing a much more nuanced ethnography.¹⁴

Turning now to the historical light McIlwraith's article sheds on the Bella Coola, it is striking to find how vibrant the culture was in 1922-24. Captain George Vancouver and Alexander Mackenzie encountered the Bella Coola within a few weeks of each other in 1793. Between 1833 and 1843, the Hudson's Bay Company maintained a post in nearby Bella Bella, and from 1867 to 1882 had a post in Bella Coola itself. A large portion of the population embraced Christianity after inviting Methodist missionaries into the valley in the mid-1880s. During this same period, the Indian population was being decimated by imported diseases to the point that their population in 1922 was only, according to McIlwraith, about a tenth of what it had been a century before. By the turn of the century, the surviving Indians had been forced into a tiny reservation and shared the valley with a thriving Norwegian colony which had arrived in the mid-1890s. Their economy had changed from hunting, gathering and fishing to commercial fishing, canning and logging. Alcoholism was now a problem, and much of the old culture had broken down.¹⁵

It is surprising, then, to discover that in 1922 many of the Indians vividly remembered their traditional legends and still performed the win-

nology, see Jeanne Cannizzo, "George Hunt and the Invention of Kwakiutl Culture," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 20 (1983): 44-58; Marjorie Myers Halpin, "William Beynon, Ethnologist," in *American Indian Intellectuals*, Margot Liberty, ed. (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1978); and Maud, *Guide to B.C. Indian Myth*.

¹⁴ Maud, *Guide to B.C. Indian Myth*, 86-89, 139.

¹⁵ McIlwraith, *Bella Coola* I, 5. See also Cliff Kopas, *Bella Coola* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1970); and Kennedy and Bouchard, "Bella Coola Indians," 31-34.

ter ceremonials for the customary period.¹⁶ By the early 1920s, the ceremonials had been (publicly) purged of illegal potlatching, were attended by part of the white community and at least were tolerated by the local missionary and Indian agent.¹⁷ McIlwraith's participation appears to have sparked a brief revival in the winter ceremonials. They resumed their decline after his departure, but the dances and costumes were not entirely forgotten. In the early 1970s, for instance, members of the community put on a performance for a visiting anthropologist.¹⁸

Students of Northwest Coast societies have recently remarked upon the unexpected resilience of some cultural elements, particularly traditional dances and potlatching.¹⁹ The means by which these elements have survived and been modified through the years of suppression, however, are by no means clear. Given the concerns of their time, McIlwraith and his colleagues cannot be faulted for writing so little about the current conditions of the Indian societies they were studying. Nevertheless, as the present article shows, the non-professional publications and unpublished journals and letters of anthropologists may well contain much useful information on Indian societies in transition. They have become valuable historical documents in their own right.

McIlwraith published "At Home with the Bella Coola Indians" in the Toronto *Sunday World*, a supplement of the *Mail & Empire*, on 10 August 1924, in part to publicize the upcoming meetings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Toronto and, perhaps, also to publicize his own academic credentials (he was seeking work at this point of his career).²⁰ The magazine went out of print soon after, and,

¹⁶ To the exasperation of the anthropologist, however, some Christians, notably Joshua, insisted on trying to reconcile their traditions with Christian teachings, thus "tainting" his ethnological data. Given the growing interest in the study of conversion in indigenous societies, it is disappointing that McIlwraith was not interested in recording examples of syncretism.

¹⁷ Potlatching was still quietly, and illegally, going on in Bella Coola at this time. See note 40. Neither the Indian agent nor the missionary in Bella Coola appears to have taken much of an active interest in the ceremonies of the people, although Bella Coola had been the scene of vigorous missionary efforts in the past and government agents were, at the time McIlwraith was in the field, prosecuting Kwakiutl Indians for engaging in the potlatch. In his correspondence, McIlwraith describes the Indian agent as an old Norwegian who had lived in the valley for nineteen years, and the missionary as an "amiable idiot" who knew nothing of the Indians and had not even bothered to learn the Chinook Jargon in the four years he had lived in Bella Coola.

¹⁸ Margaret A. Stott, *Bella Coola Ceremony and Art*, Canadian Ethnology Service Paper, No. 21 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), 103.

¹⁹ See, for example, the articles in Margaret B. Blackman, ed., "Continuity and Change in Northwest Ceremonialism," *Arctic Anthropology* 14 (1977).

²⁰ Yet see note 22.

as far as I am able to determine, no copy of the 10 August issue ever found its way into the Toronto archives or libraries. Republication of the article will make it available to historical researchers. A draft copy of the manuscript was found among McIlwraith's papers, now housed in the archives of the University of Toronto. As I was preparing this version for publication, Professor Thomas McIlwraith coincidentally happened upon a copy of the 10 August 1924 issue of the *Sunday World* that had been misplaced among his father's possessions. Except for a few minor changes in punctuation, I have left the article in its published form.

I am most grateful to Ms. Norma Bliss of New College at the University of Toronto for her determined but unsuccessful efforts to track down the published version of McIlwraith's article in Toronto repositories. My thanks also to Professor Thomas F. McIlwraith for a copy of the published version of his father's manuscript and for his permission, along with that of Professor Mary Brian and Mrs. M. C. M. Matheson, to republish this important article. The McIlwraith family has also generously made available to me their father's unpublished correspondence from the field. I am indebted to Dr. Douglas Cole for bringing other letters and information concerning McIlwraith's work in Bella Coola to my attention. Where no citations are given in the annotations below, I have drawn upon this body of unpublished material.

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AT HOME WITH THE BELLA COOLA INDIANS²¹

By Thomas Forsyth McIlwraith²²

Government anthropologist finds romance in studying history of earliest Canadians and present customs of their descendants.

The following article was written for *The Sunday World* by a Professor of Anthropology, who was commissioned by the Dominion Government to make a study at first-hand of the life and traditions of the small tribe of Indians living in the Bella Coola River District, British Columbia. The professor will lecture on the same subject during the present convention in Toronto of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.²³

²¹ *The Toronto Sunday World*, 10 August 1924, 21. The manuscript bears the more general title of "Among British Columbia Indians."

²² For reasons unknown, McIlwraith is not identified by name in the article but instead, incorrectly, as a "Professor of Anthropology" (he was still a year away from attaining a position at the University of Toronto).

²³ The article is illustrated by a line drawing of two Indians dancing while a rather weary-appearing anthropologist looks on, and by four photographs depicting a

ROMANCE, even in this busy twentieth century Canada of ours is still to be found by anyone willing to leave the beaten trails for the northland where pioneers are even now blazing the way for future settlements.

Adventure, hope of gain, love of the untouched spaces where Nature still holds sway, all these tempt the foot-steps of the wanderer. Though the casual traveller may or may not have unusual experiences, these come in the daily work of government anthropologists who are striving to record the life of the Indian as it was before the white man came. The customs and beliefs of these first Canadians are of supreme interest not only to historians but to scientists who, as they work in all parts of the world upon the problems of man's mental evolution, find this can be most readily investigated by comparing the habits of primitive men. Nor is it too much to hope that in Canada, as in other parts of the world, it will be found that the easiest way to educate the native is to build on the foundation of his own culture rather than to attempt to bridge, too abruptly, the huge gap between his civilization, whatever it may be, and our own.

NO Indian is able to sit down and give a logical and detailed account of his social or religious beliefs. How, then, can the investigator study these? Romance lies in penetrating to the vision of a people whose outlook on life is as different from ours as would be that of the ancient Britons were we able to speak with them across the chasm of time.

Two years ago an anthropologist landed in Bella Coola, at the head of a long fiord penetrating far into the mainland of British Columbia, some three hundred miles north of Vancouver. Here it was that MacKenzie first reached the Pacific after his momentous journey across the continent. Then, as now, the snow-capped mountains rose in rugged grandeur surrounding the Bella Coola River as it winds, snakelike in many rapids to the sea. Then, as now, the clouds must have formed fleecy belts around the barren peaks as if resting on a solid mass of conifers, while high in the sky floated the ever-present eagle. At that time Indians came swarming forth from their houses to gaze at the white man whom they thought a spirit returned from the other world;²⁴ now

traditional canoe, the Indian village, the Bella Coola River, Jim Pollard and Lame Charlie — members of the "choir" (with their names reversed in the caption) — and Tallio Charlie wearing the mask of the enormous mythological "How-how" bird (the article's rendering of *hao hao*, see *Bella Coola Indians*, I, 64).

²⁴ Kennedy and Bouchard record a similar recollection of the arrival of "Makanca" told by Bella Coola informants in 1970. "Bella Coola Indians," 32.

their descendants buy clothing and goods in white man's stores, and are more interested in his prices than in any queries about his celestial origin.

In Bella Coola there is now a community of thrifty Norwegian settlers who some thirty years ago carved out their houses in the virgin forest where previously the Hudson Bay Company's post had been the only mark of the white man. These Scandinavians work in the salmon canneries in the summer, raise their own fruit and vegetables on their farms and live happy, contented lives far removed from the turmoil of cities. The anthropologist soon established himself with a hospitable Norwegian family,²⁵ but to make friends with the Indians was another matter.

THE descendants of the once numerous Bella Coola tribe, now reduced to some three hundred individuals, live on a reserve about a mile and a half from the Norwegian town-site. He would be a rash individual who would dare to refer to the twenty or thirty houses as a "village." The investigator walked over to the Indian settlement through the huge cedars, rather wondering how to commence conversation. It was March, and the long row of Indian houses, built in the white man's style with many queer relics of native art, looked bleak and uninviting as it faced a sea of mud. Nor did an occasional Bella Coola, dressed in shoddy white man's clothes, seem a promising subject. Only yapping curs welcomed the stranger.

Early travelers have described the groups of noisy Indians clustered around the central fire in some big, log-built house where dried salmon hung from the smoke-grimed rafters, giving the pervasive smell that lingers in one's memory of the Northwest Coast. Instead of this, our anthropologist found each family living in its own small house, and the strains of "Tipperary" from a creaking gramophone did not suggest that this would be a favourable place for investigations.

A colleague had advised him to talk with one Joshua,²⁶ whose house was easily found. Joshua turned out to be a smiling Indian of about sixty, who readily interrupted his carpentry at the sight of a visitor. Con-

²⁵ McIlwraith stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Andy Christenson, who ran a general store in Bella Coola. He somehow found time to become thoroughly involved in the life of the white community, going to dances, intervening in marital disputes, offering first-aid when the local doctor became too drunk to cope, and taking on the challenging duties of a best man in this rough frontier settlement.

²⁶ Moody was recommended by Harlan I. Smith, an archaeologist with the Victoria Memorial Museum who worked throughout the Bella Coola area during the summers of 1920-1924. Smith estimated that Moody was fifty-four years old in 1922. Smith, "A Bellacoola, Carrier, and Chilcotin Route Time Recorder," *American Anthropologist* 26 (1924): 293.

versation was difficult with a man who knew some twenty words of English.

"What you come for?" asked the Indian bluntly.

To explain the quest of an anthropologist seemed impossible in broken English, so the investigator tried flattery: —

"To talk with you, Joshua."

"Then you one velly [very] wise man," was the somewhat disconcerting answer.²⁷

The first problem was that of language. Bella Coola is spoken only by the members of that tribe,²⁸ and though some of the younger men know a considerable amount of English, they are ignorant of the ancient practices of their people and therefore useless as informants. Nor were they of much use as interpreters, because the old men, scornful of the younger for having forgotten their own mode of life, felt indignant at having to explain these matters to them. So the investigator fell back on the Chinook jargon which serves as a *lingua franca* up and down the coast.

Its history dates back to the early trading posts of Oregon where the pioneers carried on conversation with the natives in a mixture of their own language, eked out with French and English. As posts were established further north, Chinook Indians were taken along with the whites as interpreters, until in course of time this "jargon" evolved. Some two-fifths of the words are Chinook in origin, another two-fifths belong to Indian languages of the west coast of Vancouver Island, and the remainder is degraded French or English. The history of British Columbia is implanted in this jargon; an Englishman is still a "King George man," as the traders in the reign of George III called themselves; and an American is a "Boston man," that city being the home of the early Yankee adventurers.

A FEW weeks served our anthropologist to master Chinook, which simplified the collection of information.²⁹ Like all Indians, intensely proud

²⁷ As Northwest Coast languages contain no "r" sound, the Indians approximated this sound with an "l."

²⁸ The Bella Coola speak a Salishan language, cognate with that of the Interior Salish and Coast Salish, but separated by a considerable distance. Bella Coola elders, however, place their origins in their present location and the group is culturally far closer related to their coastal neighbours than to other Salishan-speaking peoples.

²⁹ Although he started with Chinook, McIlwraith added Bella Coola words to his vocabulary until he and his informants were speaking a mixture of Bella Coola, Chinook and English. White speakers of the jargon, McIlwraith adds, found this invented language quite incomprehensible. *Bella Coola*, I, x.

of myths describing the adventures of his own ancestors in the Golden Age, Joshua was only too willing to talk when convinced that his listener was genuinely interested, and not disposed to treat what was sacred to him with amused contempt. The words of the old Indian began to open to his hearer's conceptions of the manner in which the natives regard their country and their life.

"See that mountain over yonder. That was where Kaliakis came to earth in the beginning of time, when the supreme god made him in his house above and sent him down to this world as an eagle. He doffed his eagle cloak; it floated back to the land above, where we were all created. When I was a young man, and strong, I wished to show my friends this history, so I made an eagle mask and called them to my house. The ghost whistles sounded; the eagle entered; we said that it was my father who had returned to pay a fleeting visit to his children; the young men believed and were afraid."³⁰

Steeped in the lore of his people and endowed with a graphic power of description, Joshua was in many ways an ideal informant. Philosophically and religiously minded he had been among the first to embrace Christianity, and did so with a fervour that many white men might envy. To him the Old Testament was a living reality, the events described therein were such as he expected to occur at any time as he had carried with him from his old religion the firm belief in the omnipresence of the supernatural.³¹ Nothing was an accident; a sudden thought was a vision, and more than once did the investigator have to sit patiently when Joshua interrupted a conversation by saying that a vision had come to him. He would then stand silent in the corner of his house hoping for some divine revelation, and always sadly saying that its failure to appear must have been due to his own frailty.

The Indians live in an atmosphere of the supernatural; not only are the forests tenanted by mythological animals, which Joshua admitted he had never seen, though he had heard them, but the birds, the animals, and the fish, all are capable of assuming supernatural form. Long ago, in the Golden Age, when man was more powerful than at present, he

³⁰ This is a summary of a myth owned by Moody's ancestral family. *Kaliakis* is said to have descended to earth from the house of *Atquntam*, the supreme deity, in the form of a raven. He is credited with bringing light to the Bella Coola valley. *Ibid.*, I, 4.

³¹ Elsewhere, McIlwraith writes of Moody: "Not particularly practical, subject to fits of anger or moroseness, but with a meditative temperament which delights in seeking biblical parallels and synonyms for Bella Coola practices, his is the kind of mind which, in other walks of life, would have produced the professor of philosophy." *Bella Coola*, II, 525.

was able to penetrate the disguise of the animals, but now, alas, mortals have no such ability.³² Bella Coola mythology has many points of resemblance to that of the ancient Norsemen. But we Anglo-Saxons consider ourselves advanced beyond the point of belief in such tales, while the Indians consider they have degenerated, and that is why such experiences are no longer to be expected. None the less, the older Bella Coola firmly believe that supernatural animals still exist could one have the power to see them.

NEWS that a white man was collecting stories from Joshua soon spread through the village. At first it was only a matter of interest, but when it became known that Joshua's information was to be published in a book and so preserved for posterity, jealousy was aroused.

"Why should the adventures of Joshua's ancestors be recorded and not ours?" ran the comments.

At times this desire to talk became embarrassing. It was found that the best results could be obtained by working with one man at a time, yet if Joshua were neglected he intimated plainly that he would regard it as a slight to his veracity and would have nothing more to do with the investigator. Tact, flattery, and a willingness to exchange jokes on all occasions soothed this difficulty, for the British Columbian Indian has a merry disposition.

After a time it was found advisable to work with Captain Schooner, one of the few surviving heathen. Dirty and unkempt, this old man lived in the old village, among the ruins of the native houses. In his younger days he had been assistant to the Hudson's Bay Company's factor, who had placed the greatest confidence in him. Now, in the evening of his life, he was glad to talk on the days that had been, but always with a touch of sadness at the decay of his people and the abandonment of their rich ceremonial life.³³ There were no chiefs among the Bella Coola,³⁴ but

³² For an insightful analysis of a similar religious world view among the Tsimshian, see Marie-Françoise Guedon, "An Introduction to Tsimshian World View and Its Practitioners," in *The Tsimshian*, edited by Margaret Seguin (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 137-59.

³³ In *The Bella Coola Indians*, McIlwraith writes that Schooner, "perhaps, came nearest to the original, uncontaminated Bella Coola type. Heavy in build, coarse in humour and expression, he had a heart of gold and was a fine example of a native gentleman. He was glad to assist most patiently in recording ancient lore, being intensely proud of the traditions of his ancestors. A friendship developed from this which is one of the writer's happiest memories. Often in the evenings life in general was discussed, the war, the rush of progress in big cities, the quest for wealth, the spread of white civilization, and the problems raised by the contact of peoples. . . . With sadness, but without bitterness, he used to speak of the

Schooner had been a man of influence and was well versed in ancient practices. The investigator found him a gentleman in the truest sense of the word, a man of honour, and a very real friend. Schooner, for his part, was wont to speak of the anthropologist as his son. Ready to help on any occasion, the old man provided information about many ancient rites, so that much of the value of the investigator's report is due to his friendship with Captain Schooner, Komanukwila.

By mid-summer the anthropologist had collected a huge amount of notes requiring analysis and correlation impossible in the field. Much remained to be done, especially with regard to the ceremonial dances and feasts held only during the winter. So he returned to the east, but last October found him back again in Bella Coola.

But there was one change. Schooner was dead.³⁵ His spirit had gone to the land where he felt sure there would be an abundance of salmon and berries, and where the spectre of change would not be forever before his eyes as it was in his beloved Bella Coola.

Joshua and the other Indian friends of the investigator welcomed him cordially and invited him to be present at the dances which were to start the next month. These are dramatic representations of mythical experiences of an ancestor of the performer, and, as such, the right to perform one is an Indian's most valued possession. As the elders discussed the coming ceremonies they asked one another who was to take Schooner's place.

"Why not his son?" said one man.

SO the investigator found himself, by popular consent, established as a leader in the ceremonial dances.³⁶ In the old days these used to take place

approaching end of Bella Coola culture, and his words brought home the tragedy which the spread of civilization brings to so many, and the responsibility resting upon the white people as a whole." II, 525-26. Smith (*op. cit.*) gives Schooner's age as approximately seventy-four years in 1922.

³⁴ In his ethnography, McIlwraith indicates that the Bella Coola traditionally had chiefs but that their status was contingent upon their prowess in the potlatch rather than upon hereditary rank. Easy access to Western goods undermined the exclusive nature of potlatch sponsorship and the basis of the chief's power in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The last Bella Coola chief died between 1870 and 1880. *Bella Coola*, I, 173-75.

³⁵ Some Bella Coola believed that Schooner was killed by retaliatory witchcraft after he willed to death a man who had magically murdered his daughter. The incident is described by Harlan I. Smith, "Sympathetic Magic and Witchcraft among the Bellacoola," *American Anthropologist* 27 (1925): 120-21; cf. McIlwraith, *Bella Coola*, I, 697-98.

³⁶ When he first took Schooner's place, McIlwraith was presented a name which

in a native house, illumined only by the flickering light of the central fire; now they are held in a hall built in the white man's style and furnished with kerosene lamps.³⁷ Even so it was intensely interesting to watch the Indians drift in by ones and twos with their wives, their children, and their dogs, even the latter apparently taking a keen interest in what was to come.

"Music" was provided by six old men who sat at the head of the hall and beat on the floor with short sticks, accompanying the beating with a song. The tune and text they had composed previously,³⁸ and when they began to sing the performer appeared from an enclosure behind them. His face was blackened with soot; eagle down was in his hair; around his neck was a collar of cedar-bark; and from his blanket hung an apron decorated with bear claws.³⁹ The women droned in a peculiar high-pitched key, and while the choir beat time and sang the dancer paced to and fro in time to the music, his hands shaking furiously. Long, long ago, an ancestor had seen some supernatural being act thus and ever since it had been the prerogative of a member of this family to do the same, a social matter entirely independent of religion. To the watcher it was easy to visualize how it must have seemed a scant thirty years ago when such ceremonies were held in the old-fashioned type of house, and a large number of uninitiated persons did not understand the meaning of the dance, so regarded it with awe.

"Then, indeed," say the Indians, "was there power to our dances."

carried the (theoretical) prerogative of killing anyone who made a mistake in the ritual, along with the duty of tasting all foods and giving the people permission to eat. Once the novelty wore off, and McIlwraith took up his new duties as prompter, the Indians allowed these former functions to lapse.

³⁷ This also functioned as a community hall at which the local Indian brass band performed on special occasions.

³⁸ At the conclusion of the ceremonial season, McIlwraith recorded about 120 songs on 50 wax cylinders, now in the National Museum archives. Jim Pollard sang most of the songs, the texts of which can be found in volume II, *Bella Coola*.

³⁹ The Bella Coola traditionally supported two secret societies: the *sisook* and the *kusiut*. Members of both societies validated their social and ritual statuses by taking up the names, songs, dances and other rights that formed part of the estates of their ancestral families. *Sisook* ceremonies were traditionally performed only at potlatches and funerals. Because the ceremonies involved large transfers of wealth, they were controlled primarily by chiefs who could afford to take *sisook* names. The taking of *kusiut* names, on the other hand, involved relatively little wealth and, at the time of McIlwraith's field, all Bella Coola including infants belonged to this society. The *kusiut* dances were performed during the six-week winter ceremonials. The costume described here is probably *sisook*, given the characteristic bear claws. McIlwraith himself participated in both types of dances. Almost 400 pages of *The Bella Coola Indians* is devoted to the rich and complex ceremonialism of the Bella Coola.

In those days the goal of a man's ambition was to dramatize an ancestral myth, to invite people from far and near to see it, and to recompense them for their attendance by lavish gifts of dried salmon, dried berries, mountain goat wool, deer skins, copper plaques and such like. Thus did a man spread the fame of his name up and down the coast and attain a position of influence. Nowadays, lacking the distribution of presents,⁴⁰ the dances are mere shadows of what they were formerly; but if a white man can gain the Indian viewpoint it is not difficult to provide the missing setting.

The investigator had been instructed in his duties. He was to make a ritual speech in the Bella Coola tongue, inviting the guests to partake of the food provided, and to eat the first mouthful himself. As the meal was brought in, he was led to the enclosure at the back of the hall where he donned such a ceremonial costume as the dancer's, inwardly wondering from how many diseases the Indian suffered who had last worn it. His face was blanketed with soot. Meanwhile one of the elders had announced that Schooner's successor would appear, a statement which caused considerable speculation among the audience.

Out came the disguised white man!

"It is Weena!" ran the cry, for that was the Indian name of the investigator.⁴¹

THE Bella Coola language abounds in "kicks," but the anthropologist managed to splutter through his ritual speech and then joined the singers, from whose dish, a tin wash-pan, he was to take the first mouthful from a large wooden spoon painted like a whale. Alas, the food was a mixture

⁴⁰ McIlwraith is being cautious here, for potlatching still remained an important part of the ceremonials, as he well knew, having participated in them himself. Potlatches were outlawed in an amendment to the Indian Act in 1884, although the law was only sporadically applied in succeeding years. Around the time McIlwraith was beginning his fieldwork, however, the government arrested and charged twenty-nine Kwakiutl from Alert Bay with violation of the law. The Bella Coola carried out their own exchanges following each night's dances, after any white guests (excluding the anthropologist) had left. As a government official, McIlwraith could have caused the National Museum considerable embarrassment had he made it publicly known that he had wilfully encouraged the Indians to break the law.

⁴¹ McIlwraith is still remembered by this name by elderly Bella Coola. It translates as "raid" or "raider" and is associated with one of McIlwraith's favourite legends, in which Winwina leads a raiding party of various birds against the salmon and the berries. *Ibid.*, II, 188-89; Maud, *Guide to B.C. Indian Myth*, 135. In his first season of field work, McIlwraith received three other honourable names along with a collection of foul nicknames by which his Bella Coola friends affectionately addressed him.

of rancid fish-oil and crab-apples!⁴² Closing his eyes and hoping that he would not be ill on the spot he swallowed a mouthful. It tasted as it smelt, horrible. But details of this kind must be experienced by any anthropologist as part of the day's work. Though he never grew to like this Indian delicacy, after a few meals the investigator was able to eat it without experiencing the stomach-ache which followed his first taste.

The ceremonial life of the Bella Coola is crowded into six weeks in the early part of winter, the time when formerly food was most plentiful. Soon after six every night the Indians would gather in the hall to watch the performer of the evening. After the latter had done his part the singers would take charge of events and beat out the tune of some man or woman who had danced in previous years, whereupon he or she would perform again. Sometimes an assistant would dance in some other part of the hall; but never with any interplay of movement between the two. As for any dancing together of men and women, that would be unthinkable; in fact the Bella Coola regard the white man's dance as indecent!

In the old days, the position of a singer was one of high honour; several men would devote their attention to remembering the proper text which one of their number would call out line by line to the audience who were expected to join in. Last winter there was only one old man, Jim Pollard,⁴³ capable of doing this, and even he found it was too great a strain to hold all the texts in his mind. So he appealed to the anthropologist;—

“Would Weena write down the texts in his note-book and join the choir as prompter?”

The investigator who previously had found difficulty in obtaining the much-desired texts promptly accepted.

IT was a strange occupation. Night after night as the Indians were assembling, the anthropologist would enter the hall, nod to friend after friend, and take his seat among the singers at the head of the hall. There

⁴² The oil, highly prized by the coastal Indians, was made from the small oolichan or “candlefish,” which had their annual run in the spring.

⁴³ In *The Bella Coola Indians*, McIlwraith presents Pollard with the following words: “Essentially practical he has devoted his energies to keeping abreast of changing conditions. He is the best singer and composer in Bella Coola, the best canoe man for miles; he has learnt to handle a motor-boat engine, to aid prospectors for minerals, and has succeeded in amassing and saving a considerable amount of money. Jim excelled all other informants in clearness and logical presentation of his explanations, though he showed a slight tendency, intelligible enough, to gloss over aspects which he knew would be considered unpleasant. If Jim had been a white man, he would undoubtedly have made his mark in the world of business.” II, 525.

he sat from six till midnight or later nightly for six weeks, his eyes glued on his note-book as a dance was taking place, waiting for the frequent nudge in the ribs signifying that Jim Pollard had forgotten the next line. The Indians soon took his presence as a matter of course; in fact speeches were made thanking him for his help.

Insight into the dances was at times dearly bought. The atmosphere of the hall was stifling, and the constant repetition of the same dance, night after night, monotonous. Sometimes the investigator was asked to dance to assist the leading performer,⁴⁴ and he has painful recollections of the first time that he did so, following a feast of fish-oil and crab-apples. Feeling none too comfortable in his ceremonial costume, he found it extraordinarily difficult to keep shaking his hands, jerking his head, and growling, without losing time with his feet to the frenzied beating of sticks on the floor. Still worse was it when the music changed and he tried to squat on his haunches and in this posture leap about the floor like a kangaroo. After about ten minutes of this he was reduced to a limp rag.

To represent the mythical beings seen by an ancestor, on occasions grotesquely carved wooden masks were used and the Indians wearing these danced with considerable dramatic effect. The investigator once took part in such a performance, disguising himself as a supernatural mosquito! He was expected to hop lightly around the hall, but found the holes of his mask so far above his eyes as to make hopping difficult, also uncomfortable when he collided with a stove.⁴⁵

AS the older Indians die so will it become increasingly difficult to study the lives of these earliest Canadians. That such lore is of interest and importance to scientists is shown by the existence of a flourishing anthropological section of the British Association. At the coming meeting in

⁴⁴ McIlwraith danced six times in all. The ethnographic details of the difficult Cannibal Dance, the first one he attempted, are given in *Bella Coola*, II, 71-117. The dance entailed the simulated biting of a spectator. A few years later, after McIlwraith described his experience at a conference in England, a wag for *Punch* was led to comment, "We don't see anything extraordinary in Professor G. F. [*sic*] McIlwraith's description of the supernatural influence which impels him, as a member of a secret society of Indians in British Columbia, to rush about biting people. Professors are often like that." (19 September 1928, p. 309).

⁴⁵ This dance forms part of a larger *kusiut* series associated with Thunder. Mosquito comes as a messenger of Thunder to taste the flesh of mortals. McIlwraith, *Bella Coola*, II, 207-08. In a letter to his father describing this episode, McIlwraith says that in playing his part he had to keep up a steady buzz and carry a small stick in his mouth with which he would occasionally rush one of the spectators in the audience; "this job of mine certainly is a queer one." Barker, "Publication of 'The Bella Coola Indians'."

Toronto, several papers will be read by Canadian anthropologists on Indian beliefs and practices.⁴⁶ To the casual listener such records may appear dull, but if he uses his imagination, he can sense not only the life of the Indians, but the conditions under which the information has been painstakingly collected.

⁴⁶ McIlwraith read at the meetings a paper entitled "Certain Aspects of the Potlatch among the Bella Coola," which was not subsequently published.