

Preface

It was in the spring, approximately a year ago, that we began work on this project. The year 1990 was being heralded as the dawning of a new decade of communication. The Berlin wall was coming down, and the East and West German people were celebrating joyously. In South Africa Nelson Mandela was being released from prison and the hopes for peace in that land were soaring. Mikhail Gorbachev was recognized for his efforts to end the Cold War. It seemed there was much to celebrate in the world, and as we watched the German people tearing down the Berlin wall and gathering in the streets, we wondered what the aboriginal people had to be glad about. As we thought of our history and what is happening today, it came to us that even after decades of colonization and attempts at assimilation, First Nations People have survived as distinct and dynamic cultures with great prospects for the future. Our very survival is cause for celebration. So we started with the title, "In Celebration of Our Survival." Then, as is customary in the feast halls and gatherings of our people, we called upon the learned speakers, the orators from many locations and walks of life to document the business of this celebration with their words. It had to be a special invitation as we were not only asking them to witness this occasion; we were challenging them to do it in a new way. Many of these people are known for their ability to stand in a gathering and extemporaneously speak for hours with clarity, logic and emotion, but to write it down would be a new experience. We assured contributors that we were not so much looking for the ability to flawlessly apply the non-traditional tool of writing as we were seeking the knowledge and wisdom of the true experts on aboriginal issues.

Aboriginal people have been the subject of much study and comment by the academic community for many years. Indeed, *BC Studies* itself has published two previous editions — Autumn 1973 (no. 19) and Spring 1983 (no. 57) — devoted to the topic. This special issue is, however, distinguished from its predecessors because all of the contributions have been written and the compilation and editing have been done by aboriginal

peoples from British Columbia. It is further distinguished by the fact that the contributors are not all academics; most are native individuals who are recognized by their own people for their knowledge and experience. The other major difference is in the form of presentation: the authors have not striven to present only objective and factual information but have described the human emotions and reactions to the events and situations described. While readers will learn a lot of new facts, they will also, it is hoped, acquire a greater insight into intangibles such as the spirits, hopes, and dreams that are an integral part of aboriginal life and aboriginal issues in British Columbia.

In the invitation to contributors we said:

For years and years we as aboriginal people have been studied, observed and written about, generally by non-aboriginal writers. We have been portrayed in a variety of ways, from being ignorant savages to victims of the dominant societies and sometimes even as fascinating anthropological specimens. While all of us who have been in the feast halls and have been involved in Indian organizations have heard the correct versions of our history and our leaders' plans and visions for the future, many people have not had the opportunity to be there and to hear this information first hand, without the biases and slants of observers and interpreters. . . . This letter is to invite you, as an aboriginal person from British Columbia with a lot of knowledge, experience and credibility, to help create a self-portrait of our peoples. A portrait that will tell people who we really are, what we are doing, and our plans, hopes and dreams. We want to portray our strengths, accomplishments, contributions and visions. We need to educate people about the multiplicity of issues we are addressing, the challenge to regain control of our destinies, and the struggle to maintain our culture and perhaps even to tell others how they can support us in our efforts.

As the months passed, events transpired which made it even more clearly imperative that we as aboriginal people communicate and create dialogue with the dominant society through whatever vehicles are available. The failure of the Meech Lake constitutional accord to bring Quebec into the Canadian constitution was largely attributed to the refusal of Elijah Harper, a native member of Manitoba's legislative assembly, to support the accord until commitments were made by the government to Canada's aboriginal people. This created much animosity against natives. By the summer of 1990 the Mohawk people of Kanesatake and Kanawake, seeking government commitment to resolution of aboriginal issues and the prevention of the construction of a golf course on traditional lands, became embroiled in an armed standoff with the Quebec and Canadian governments. Supportive road blocks and information blockades were put in place by other natives, particularly in British Columbia. The standoff lasted

three months and left a bitter aftertaste of covert hostilities, resentment, anger, and misunderstanding among natives and non-natives alike.

As we planned for this publication, we debated how we should limit and focus the content, but ultimately decided that perhaps that has been part of the problem in the past: native people have always been asked for their comments on and contributions to established agenda topics rather than simply being requested to tell their own story. So our contributors were invited to write about what they personally felt was important in painting a portrait of our people. What we learned as the articles were submitted and as we talked with many people who were not able to contribute because of other commitments is that it is not possible to paint a fully detailed portrait in a single volume. We hope, however, that we have at least provided a window through which viewers will see enough points of interest that they will be motivated to go outside into direct contact with B.C.'s aboriginal peoples and to learn for themselves what is not included in this portrait.

Walter Harris, well-known Gitksan artist, contributes a three-tone print representing the centrality of life and importance of family. The print, a product of the period when the artist was awaiting open-heart surgery, depicts a whale giving birth while watched by her mate.

Daisy Sewid-Smith relates the events of her people's earliest contacts with the Europeans. While conveying the first hand observations of her ancestors she also quotes from the records of the visitors. Her article is a poignant reminder of the long history of suffering by her people which also conveys the strength and resiliency of the people.

Joe Mathias and Gary Yabsley review the legislation that has enabled government to suppress Indian rights in Canada. They strongly refute the popular misconception that Indian people gave up their rights in order to enjoy the benefits of the white man's lifestyle, and provide clear evidence of the endurance of the aboriginal people.

Richard Atleo summarizes a study of aboriginal educational achievements and the external and internal factors which effected those achievements. He suggests that improvements in educational achievement by native people coincided with a major attitudinal shift in society whereby the dominant society stopped excluding natives from the general milieu. In his examination of factors positively affecting Indian education he provides a fresh perspective on this much studied topic.

Shirley Joseph evaluates the government's efforts to assimilate aboriginal people through legislation dealing with government regulations regarding the definitions of who is Indian. She outlines the continuing problems

that result from flawed and intrusive legislation that tries to tell aboriginal people who is permitted to be included in their family backgrounds.

Theresa Jeffries provides an overview of the Sechelt band self-government arrangement. She focuses on the traditional and contemporary roles and contributions of Sechelt women to self-government and expresses much optimism for the future.

Ron Hamilton has been writing poetry in private for many years about people and events in the aboriginal community. His article talks about his writing, while the poems themselves appear throughout the collection.

Richard Atleo, in a second contribution, maintains that museums that house aboriginal collections need to incorporate First Nations viewpoints in their policy development. Richard submits that repatriation is the issue which will create the greatest controversy in museum policy, and he suggests some guidelines to be considered in developing such policy.

Steven Point and David Neel examine the rise of militancy and the expressions of rage and frustration by native people engaged in the struggle for change. They summarize the milestones that have led to this situation and stress the urgent need for serious dialogue and commitment to resolving the many outstanding grievances of aboriginal people. David has also contributed a print he created to serve as a reminder of the struggle of all First Nations people.

Patrick Kelly's article on First Nations languages stresses the importance of language as a vehicle for creating understanding in a world where change is the norm. He describes the challenges of ensuring language survival and articulates the importance of the survival of the many aboriginal languages for native and non-native people alike.

Ernie Crey also discusses education, but in the context of the impact of residential schools and in terms of the way removal of native children from their communities created apprehension. He describes the devastating consequences of these actions and then tells how and what improvements are being made by B.C.'s native people.

Leonard George provides some insight into the contrasts between the value systems of natives and non-natives. By sharing information about native spirituality and traditional practices he puts forward some easily understood ideas for improving the lives of both individuals and societies.

Now, as we have been taught in our feast halls and gatherings, we must recognize and thank all those who have assisted us and contributed to the celebration of our survival. We first thank the Creator for the gift of life, then thank our ancestors for the strength and vision they passed to us. We thank the contributors who have given their writings to this publication.

We thank our leaders past and present for their tenacity and work on our people's behalf. We thank those of you who wanted to contribute but could not because of other pressing commitments. We also offer special thanks and recognition to the many non-native people who have assisted and continue to assist us in our struggle for survival: Drs. Allan Smith and Michael Ames of *BC Studies*, who offered us the opportunity to guest edit this special edition; Henny Winterton of *BC Studies*, who provided administrative support; and Thomas Berger, Paul Tennant, Stephen Hume, Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin, who, among many others, have advanced the understanding of our people through their writing. We also thank you, the readers, for participating in our first written celebration. Finally and most importantly we thank our families for their patience, love, and support as we took time away from them to work on this project.

It is true, as you will have learned, that our people have suffered tremendous assaults on their very being, but, as the late George Manuel, author of the *Fourth World*, (1974) said, "It is time that we as Indian people declare victory, that we have survived."¹

We welcome you to our Celebration.

Doreen Jensen and Cheryl Brooks

¹ Quoted from a speech by Mr. Manuel, in the film "The Land is Our Culture," produced by the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, 1975.

Preparing To Fly

I was thrilled speechless,
Excited beyond words.
Tongue thick, numb, dumb
Rushing thoughts to no-one in particular.

The wall was coming apart!
Men strained muscles.
Children pecked with fingernails,
Pencils, screwdrivers, hammers and spikes.

Women wailed and railed,
And beat bare fists
Until raw.
The wall was penetrated!

Here and there holes appeared,
Just pin holes at first.
The windows and doorways
Let light through one side to another.

People perched along the top,
Preparing to fly,
Scratching with their clawed feet.
Dust, pebbles, boulders, slabs.

The wall, a trembling victim,
Crumbled in living rooms around
The world.
A victory for the whole world.

We all rejoiced without restraint.
Restraint had no role here.
We celebrated openly.
Some few perhaps celebrated privately.

The wall was standing still,
But around the world its demise
Was cause for celebration, tears, joy!
It swayed, buckled, prepared to fall.

Distant friends, strangers to prison,
Thought holes through the wall.
Friends loved cracks in cement,
They wished the foundation to pieces.

One full year later, I still tremble.



Celebration of Life

by Walter Harris