

*Eagle Down is Our Law: Witsuwit'en Law, Feasts, and Land Claims*, by Antonia Mills. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994. xxi, 308 pp. Maps, tables. \$24.95 paper.

*Eagle Down is our Law* makes available to the public one of the expert reports presented by the Witsuwit'en in *Delgamuukw v. the Queen*, the landmark BC court case in which the Gitksan and Witsuwit'en took their argument for aboriginal title before the Canadian justice system. Mills's report on Witsuwit'en origins, laws and system of governance, which forms the core of the book, was commissioned by the Witsuwit'en Nation in order to help the court understand the testimony of their chiefs on these same subjects. The report was meant, in effect, to provide a translation of the detailed descriptions of Witsuwit'en society that the Witsuwit'en themselves presented before the court.

Publication of the report by UBC Press allows those interested in the case the opportunity to compare one part of the Witsuwit'en argument with Chief Justice McEachern's Reasons for Judgement. The ancient laws and institutions that Mills details in her report stand in stark contrast to McEachern's conclusion that traditional Witsuwit'en society was of a "low . . . even primitive order" (quoted in Mills, p. 16).

Included in the book are forwards written by two Witsuwit'en chiefs, prefaces by an anthropologist and a member of the Witsuwit'en legal team, and a prologue and epilogue by Mills herself, all of which help to place the expert report in its cultural, anthropological, and legal contexts. Mills's prologue provides an especially good summary of the academic literature that has developed as a response to the outcome of the case, and her epilogue details the efforts of the Witsuwit'en to advance their claims, through court appeals and other venues, up to mid-1994.

The book also includes an extensive index, making the work a useful reference for the study of both Witsuwit'en society and the court case. The maps and tables help somewhat in explaining the complex organization of Witsuwit'en territory and society according to clans and houses. More extensive use of such graphics might have further clarified some of the other complexities that Mills describes, such as the seasonal movements of Witsuwit'en Houses in the historical and prehistorical periods, and the inheritance of chiefly names.

*Eagle Down is Our Law* has an additional significance beyond its relevance to the court case. It marks the start of an era in which First Nations will increasingly produce their own representations of their social institutions and histories. Though Mills, a non-Native anthropologist, makes use of many of the methods and sources of information traditionally employed in ethnographic studies, the work that has resulted is not an academically oriented, "objective" study of Witsuwit'en culture from the perspective of an outsider. Rather, *Eagle Down is Our Law* is a careful documentation of a Witsuwit'en perspective on the nature and operation of their own feasts, laws, and

institutions. Though supported by historical and ethnographic evidence, the book is essentially the Witsuwit'ens' own description of central aspects of their society to the non-Native world — a world which has for too long held a monopoly on creating descriptions of Native societies.

Furthermore, *Eagle Down is Our Law* does not limit itself to a historical study of Witsuwit'en society. Mills' report details the ongoing operation of the feast system, which continues to play a central role in the organization of territory, the transfer of chiefly names, and the resolution of disputes in Witsuwit'en society. In addition, *Eagle Down is Our Law* documents the consistent, if yet unsuccessful, efforts of the Witsuwit'en to accommodate non-Native society through their system of law and governance. As Chief Mas Gak says in his forward to the book,

eagle down is used ritually in our system of conflict resolution and mediation . . . A prerequisite in any peacemaking process is the willingness of the parties to make peace and to commit themselves to keep the peace "until the heart is satisfied" . . . The Gitksan and Witsuwit'en have yet to use eagle down in their dealings with the Crown in Canada. (p. xi)

Mills's book provides an opportunity for non-Natives to begin to develop an understanding of the nature and operation of Witsuwit'en society. The extent to which we are able to take up this opportunity will indicate the likelihood of eagle down being used in the interactions of our two societies in the future.

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