

## Ron Hamilton: "A Biography of Sorts"

I was born and raised at Aswinis, on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. My mother was Nessie Watts, my father Clifford Hamilton. Through my mother, I trace my roots to the following groups: Huupachesath, Tsishaaath, and Hiikuulthath. Through my father to: Huupachesath, Aktiisath, and Waalas Kwaaquyulth. I am connected by blood to members of every West Coast tribe.

As a youth, I was impressed by the creative skills of countless relatives, on both sides of my family, as our lives were connected and we crossed paths from time to time. The elderly took their role as teachers quite seriously, and some of them executed story-telling as skilfully as any published author today. Among those I considered the best and influential to me were: Ayaat — my mother's aunt, Chaamaat — my mother's brother, Ivan — my elder brother, George Clutesi — my parental uncle, Auntie Lizzy — my mother's elder sister, Walter Elliotte — my elder sister's husband's father's brother, and, most significantly, Mama — my mother. She used to say, "I'm not going to quit talking until I die." I was the last person to see my mother before she died, and she kept my attention during that visit by telling stories.

In my later youth, I had the great good fortune to share stories with an ever-widening circle of relatives, some of them living in villages different from my own. Among this secondary, though just as important, group of "teachers" were: Auntie Dimp — my father's younger sister, Auntie Vi — my father's older sister, Uncle Bennet — my father's brother, Maanikin — my father's uncle, Chixchin — my father's uncle, Larry Sport — my mother's cousin, Mary Moses — my mother's aunt, and Alec Williams — my mother's cousin's husband.

In addition to story-tellers, among my teachers along creative veins were many individuals recognized in our community as composers, singers, dancers, painters, sculptors, actors, and formal speakers. I would be disrespectful not to mention these: Nanny Kate, singer/dancer — my mother's aunt; Jacob Gallic, historian/singer — my mother's elder sister's husband (also

my eldest son's namesake); Peter Webster, composer/songleader — my mother's cousin; Billy Yukum, dancer/singer — my mother's cousin; Effie Tate, historian — my parental grandfather's cousin; Ida Jones, historian — my parental grandfather's cousin; Master Touchie, painter — my mother's cousin's husband; Cecil Mack, dancer/singer — my parental grandfather's cousin; Earnie Chester, singer/speaker/painter — my Hiik-uulthath cousin; Joe Smith, speaker — my parental grandfather's cousin; Jimmy Codfish, sculptor — my parental grandfather's uncle; John Jacobson, actor/music historian/philosopher/sculptor — my most active and intense mentor.

All of the above-mentioned individuals, with the exception of Walter Elliotte, a Cowichan, are from my own community on the West Coast. I received, as well, in my youth, public schooling to the eighth grade. One single teacher from this period stands out, far and above all others, for having shown me some consideration. He was Art Olson, my grade 8 English teacher, and not insignificantly a vocal fan of coastal Indian carving and painting. He'd taught in an up-coast village and recalled to our class several anecdotes, extolling the virtues of craftsmen and athletes he'd known personally. I always felt he was teaching for more than just a salary. He never once made me feel that I didn't belong in the public school system — others often did.

The University of British Columbia is not a particularly welcoming institution; however, a few individuals do stand out from the uniform grey of this foreboding establishment. Dr. Marjorie Halpin has consistently encouraged me to work diligently at my writing — to craft it. She has also made me understand not only that do I have something to offer the world through my writing but also that there are many waiting to read what native authors have to share with the outside world. As well, Jane Flick, of the English Department, gave me good, honest, and constructive criticism on the papers I wrote for her while I was in her "Introduction to Canadian Literature" class. When the last class of the course was over, she generously gave me an old typewriter, explaining that her father had used it throughout his university career, and that she had done the same. As I left her office carrying the typewriter, she said, "I know you'll put it to good use."

In non-Indian Canadian society, an individual's school experience is looked at to determine something about the individual. In my community, who one's relations are and what roles one plays in one's extended family say much about who one is. Names, sometimes passed down through inheritance for many generations, take great significance. At the expressed

request of the editors of this volume, the following is a partial list of the names given to me in our potlatch system to date:

Hapkwachuu — “Hair all over,” “Covered with hair.” This name was given to me by my mother when I was a boy. It is something like a nickname, and it was the first Indian name I was given.

Kwaawiina — “Raven” in the Kwaakwaala language. This name last belonged to my parental grandfather’s younger brother, Robert George of the Huupachesath tribe. Its source was the Waalas Kwaaquyulth via Kyuquot. After my father was buried a feast was held that evening, and it was then that my great uncle, Tommy Hunt, and his son, George, performed the Haamaatsa. Two of my brothers and I were named then. I was given this name on that occasion by my late parental aunt, Grace Watts of the Tsishaa-ath tribe.

Kwayis — “Something else,” “Source of unusual births.” This name was given to me during a TluuKwaana “wolf” ceremony, held in the Skwaymaalt big house around the winter of 1969-1970. The host was Andrew Callikum, and he was the one who gave me this name. His parental grandfather was my parental grandfather’s uncle.

Wuuyaakiihtuu — “Someone very special.” This name was given to me by my parental great-aunt, Sophie Jules, wife of Chief Kapchaa, both late of Huupsitas, on the occasion of the memorial potlatch they hosted for their son, David, in the early 1980s.

Kwayatsapaalth — “Carrying a wolf on the back,” “Owning a wolf.” This name was given to me by my parental great-aunt, Josephine Tom, in 1979, at Victoria, on the occasion of her potlatch in honour of her late husband, Chief Mike Tom Sr. Josephine’s father, “Captain Jack,” held this name formerly at Yuquot.

Sha’tsiiyakib — “The one arm that holds up the world.” My parental great-aunt gave me this name on the occasion of a great potlatch, held in Balaatsad, to pass various ceremonial rights on to the next generation of her family. Chief Kelly Peters, her husband, was the source of the name.

Tlaakwaaqiikamay — “Copper Chief.” This title, actually the name of a seat, formerly held by my parental grandfather, was passed down to me by my parental great-aunt, Cecilia John, and Kwishmaats, on the occasion of the marriage of her daughter, Caroline, to his son, Billy Oskar, in the early 1980s.

**Ki-ke-in** — “Long sounding thunder.” This name was given to me by my mother’s elder sister, my Auntie Lizzy Gallic. Formerly my maternal great-great-grandfather, head chief of the Hiikuulthath tribe, held the name. In 1983 I gave a potlatch to name my two eldest sons, and it was on that occasion that she bestowed the name on me.

**Tliitlaalaadzii** — “Big fire that never dies down.” I received this name from my parental great-uncle, Chief Alvin Alfred, at the last-mentioned potlatch. He had received it from his uncle, Chief Dan Cranmer, of the Nimpkish people.

**Tlaaliis** — “Always a big whale on the beach.” From Chief Alvin Alfred, at my 1983 potlatch. The name was formerly his personal name.

**Hwunhwilaas** — “Where the thunder comes from.” This name was given to me on the occasion of my 1983 potlatch by my approximately 100-year-old great-aunt, Aaxua, Chief Alvin Alfred’s mother.

**Hiilthaamas** — “He fixes everything,” “He makes everything right.” Chief Jimmy Sewide, my parental great-aunt Flora’s husband, and author of *Guests Never Leave Hungry*, gave me this name on the occasion of the 1983 potlatch to name my sons.

**Tlaatsatsum** — “He feasts the people with whale blubber.” Chief Bob Martin of the Tla-o-qui-aht people, my parental uncle, gave me this name, along with a beautifully crafted traditional West Coast canoe, the handiwork of himself and his sons, on the occasion of his potlatch to name his children. I had, with much help from Lyle Wilson, of Kitimat, painted Chief Martin’s family crest curtain for the event.

Chuu,  
Ki-ke-in  
(Ron Hamilton)  
at Musqueam,  
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