

DRIVING, WANDERING, RECOLLECTING:

The Legacy of Coyote's Twin Brother

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THIS WAS A WRITING ASSIGNMENT with a difference. In exchange for a five-day excursion through southern British Columbia, we were expected to produce essays – “meditations of sorts” – that “connected, in one way or another, with the trip.”¹ Fair enough, and twelve of us turned up at the designated hour with sleeping bags and notepads in hand.

Although itineraries had been mailed to us, the extent of our co-editors' trip-prep only became apparent when our two state-of-the-art minivans pulled onto the Coldwater Road just outside of Merritt and stopped several miles later at the head of a small footpath. There, Austin Sterling, his sister Shirley, and their cousin Tim Voght sat waiting for us. With bunches of Indian celery and spring sunflowers in hand, they guided us to their sweatlodge by the river. It was an idyllic scene disturbed only by the hum of traffic on the Coquihalla Highway nearby – a reminder of the contradictions that the Nlaka'pamux people endure on a daily basis. Over the next four days our co-editors shepherded us through a series of such encounters all the way to the Slocan Valley.

Not until the final day did I encounter the “hook” for my essay. As we passed the Coldstream Ranch, I suddenly spotted two coyotes. Their appearance at that place – a bastion of British gentility – seemed no accident but, rather, a stark reminder that our tour must acknowledge Old Coyote. He was, after all, the creator of much of the landscape through which we were travelling. And he was integral to the stories of upheaval and injustice we were hearing: the Upper Nicola Band commonage claim, the Sugar Lake dam project, the

¹ Jean Barman and Cole Harris, *Memos*, 13 December 2000; 21 February 2001.



Photo 1: Harry Robinson at a Coyote rock near his home at Paul Creek, 1985. Coyote left his bait here while he fished. Photo by Robert Semeniuk.

Japanese internment at New Denver. Old Coyote might say that these were a big mistake. The history of British Columbia was not ordained to unfold in this way. It was his nasty twin brother's doing.

In the context of our field trip, it seemed important to tell the story as it had been told to me.² It is a powerful account that positions Coyote at the centre, rather than at the margins, of the colonial equation.

Harry Robinson (1900–1990), a member of the Lower Similkameen Band, was my source. An established storyteller, he was intimately familiar with *ShinkLEEP*,³ the Old Coyote of this region. I first met him on a hot August day in 1977 when I stopped at his place near Hedley

with friends (we were on our way to the Omak Stampede). A simple question about a local landmark triggered a Coyote story that lasted most of the evening. I returned to hear more whenever I could.⁴

² A verbatim transcript of part of this story appears in Wendy Wickwire, ed., *Write It on Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller – Harry Robinson* (Vancouver: Talonbooks and Theytus, 1989). The segment beginning with Coyote's encounter with the king has not been previously published. The original audiotaped recordings are in the author's possession.

³ This is a rough transcription of Harry's Okanagan term for Old Coyote. I use both terms throughout the essay.

⁴ Some of these appear in: Wickwire, *Write It on Your Heart*; and Wendy Wickwire, ed., *Nature Power: In the Spirit of an Okanagan Storyteller – Harry Robinson* (Vancouver/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/University of Washington Press, 1992).



Photo 2: Harry Robinson at the Coyote rock, Paul Creek. Photo by Robert Semeniuk.

As our *BC Studies* caravan made its way along Nicola Avenue towards downtown Merritt, I recalled my first trip with Harry along this same stretch. “Coyote’s house was right there,” Harry announced suddenly. All I could see was a standard low-rise apartment building. “It’s gone,” he said. “It was a special hill that you could see from all around. They dug it up and put that building on it.” As time passes, we lay more of our map on the landscape, such as the gargantuan Coquihalla Highway Connector that linked us to our field trip destinations.

Harry’s portrait of Coyote differed from that of the published ethnographic record.⁵ While the latter restricted Coyote’s movements to a timeless mythical past, Harry’s *shinkLEEP* moved easily between the deep and recent past, engaging freely with Whites along the way. Never static or abstract, he continually affirmed that living First Nations peoples are indeed the “first peoples” and rightful heirs of this landscape that my ancestors too had newly claimed as their own.

⁵ See, for example, the following, edited by Franz Boas: James A. Teit, “Traditions of the Thompson Indians,” *Journal of American Folk-Lore Society*, Vol. 6. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1898); “Mythology of the Thompson Indians,” *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* 12, 2 (1912); and James Teit, Marion K. Gould, Livingston Farrand, and Herbert Spinden, *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes*, Publication of the American Folk-Lore Society (New York: Stechert and Co., 1917).

Harry presented *ShinKLEEP* as his original ancestor. He was, after all, the one diver who had retrieved a grain of sand that then expanded in his hands to form the Earth that he was then – presto – standing on. He was also the only one of the five original beings created from rosebuds who established his home in this place. The others were sent or banished to distant continents. He was the only ancestor to be empowered directly by his creator. The other four were guided by, of all things, paper. And Coyote was the only one to achieve immortality. According to Harry, Old Coyote never died. He is still alive and hiding out in a boat somewhere, making occasional appearances, the last of which is slated to coincide with the end of the world.⁶

I felt Coyote's presence strongly at Spaxmn (Douglas Lake) on day two of our *BC Studies* tour. Maybe this had something to do with the recent passing of former chief and storyteller Herb Manuel, who knew Coyote so well you would almost think that he had met him: "Coyote was a show-off," Herb explained. "He was kind of always undernourished. He was, in human flesh, a skinny, tall man with drawn-in cheeks [who] ... spoke with a drawn-in voice. He spoke funny. You knew it was him when you heard his voice."⁷

Among Harry's Coyote stories was one that was a complete surprise because it incorporated *my* ancestry. It was about Coyote's younger twin brother who was the original ancestor of the Whites. Created from a double rosebud, the twins were separated by God (whom Harry also called "Big Chief"), their creator, when the younger one stole a written document intended to serve the two of them. When the younger twin lied about this act, God banished him (along with the paper) to a land mass across a large body of water. This is why, noted Harry, the Atlantic Ocean separates the home territory of Whites from that of the Indians. It also explains why Whites derive their power from writing and paper and why Indians derive their power directly from spiritual sources. "That's why the White man can tell a lie more than the Indian," Harry explained. "It's begin from that day til today." The irony, in his view, is that "now, if the White man tell a lie, it don't seems to be so bad. But if the Indian tells a lie, that's *really* bad."⁸

⁶ Wickwire, *Write It on Your Heart*, 31-52..

⁷ Darwin Hanna and Mamie Henry, eds., *Our Tellings: Interior Salish Stories of the Nlha7kapmx People* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 44.

⁸ Wickwire, *Write It on Your Heart*, 46.

Not surprisingly, the younger twin, the White twin if you like, was distressed about his predicament. But God did not leave him empty-handed. Before banishing him, he gave him the stolen “paper,” noting that it would help him return to his place of origin. “But not right away. A long time from now. You going to have a heck of a time. You’re going to lose a lot of people ... But you still going to make it.” This was all figurative, of course. God was referring here to generations of descendants of the younger twin. God told the younger twin that his descendants would “stay in this place till the end of the world.” But “*this* one [God pointed to the older twin] is going to stay here in this place. That’s *his* land.”

As we toured the Mackie’s “Lake House” on day two, I recalled the passion with which Mary Abel of the nearby Okanagan reserve articulated her sense of this connection. “Unlike you White people, us Indians, we are married to our land!”

Before banishing the younger twin, God made him promise that when his descendants encountered the descendants of the older twin/Coyote, they would “show [them] what’s on that paper” – the stolen written document.⁹

With the younger twin out of the picture, Harry began filling in the details of the older twin and his transformation to *Shinkleep* – a powerful “half coyote and half Indian” figure who transformed the landscape to its current form.¹⁰ Until he met an old man (God, in disguise) whom he challenged to move a mountain, Coyote had had free reign. Annoyed by the latter’s inflated sense of power, God stripped him of his special abilities and banished him to a boat in a far-off place. “Just like he put him in jail,” notes Harry.¹¹

God, meanwhile, continued to oversee the full sweep of history, making appearances, usually in times of crisis. He turned up, for instance, many years ago at Lytton, a place well known to my *BC Studies* colleagues. Disguised as an old man, his goal was to alleviate starvation and to reiterate what he had told the younger twin at the beginning of time – that “white-skinned” people would arrive someday to “live here for all time.” Their “hayfields” and “gardens” would give the land a patchwork appearance. He told the people at Lytton, as he had told the younger twin previously, not to worry about their land: “This island supposed to be for the Indians,” God explained.

⁹ Ibid, 49–50.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ibid., 53–122.

¹¹ Ibid., 119–22.

"This is your place." As a testament to his words, he left behind a patchwork blanket that turned to stone. It is known today as the "spotted rock."¹²

The younger twin's descendants eventually reached the older twin's homeland, transforming it to patchwork just as God foretold. Instead of following the rules laid out in God's "paper," however, they seized Indian land, established their own rules of governance, and "scared" and "killed" its inhabitants. Angered by this deviation from his plan, God snatched Coyote out of seclusion and instructed him to meet with the king of England. Coyote did so, outlining the details "king to king." The king responded that he was not prepared for a war with "Coyote's children." Coyote was elated: "Okay that will be your word from now until the end of the world." "That's the second time," noted Harry. "The first was when he jumped over the large body of water at the beginning of time." Coyote and the king then worked out an agreement that the king promised to turn into a book. "When you are finished all the writing," Coyote explained, "that'll be the Indian Law."¹³

It took a century and several monarchs to produce the book. Entitled *The Black and White* to reflect its dual authorship – Coyote (black) and the king (white) – there were four copies. One was to stay in England with the queen; the others, at her instruction, were to be hand-delivered to Ottawa, Winnipeg, and Victoria where they were to be shown to Indians as soon as they could read. "That is now," notes Harry. "But before this time they hide it. They never show the Indians unless they ask."

According to Harry, *The Black and White* reached his people only in the 1940s. Edward Bent of Shulus (near Merritt) was the source. Educated at the Kamloops Residential School, he had tracked the book down in Victoria.¹⁴

And so, on this field trip, here we were – all of us, students of some aspect of British Columbia – in the very place where Harry and his colleagues had assembled some fifty years ago to receive the book Coyote and the king had worked out.

Harry told this story early in our friendship to convey that he and I were products of very different worlds. He saw it, I think, as a necessary backdrop to his many stories about antagonisms between

¹² For the full story, see *Ibid.*, 168–7.

¹³ Wickwire/Robinson collection in author's possession.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

"Indians" and "Whites." I needed to know that they began with a simple white lie, a lie that spawned two contrasting forms of power, one "the power of nature," the other "the power of paper and writing." "You know," he explained, "God put the Indians in the head, in the heart for the things to know. [T]he White people, they got the paper ... But there's a lot of these White people ... they think that we don't know anything til the White people come."¹⁵ Harry's object was to dispel this notion. I was to serve as his scribe.

Harry viewed this as serious history. Indeed, the very concept of fiction was foreign to him. I wondered, however, how traditional historians of my world would react to it. My hunch was that most would deny outright that a story about a Coyote who works a deal with a British monarch had anything to do with "real" history. Clearly this was myth.

One group of scholars far from this place would disagree. For over a decade, Jonathan Hill, Terence Turner, Emilienne Ireland and others have been systematically studying indigenous histories in South America.¹⁶ They insist that history and myth be analyzed as "complementary and mutually informing" genres.¹⁷ Ireland, who focuses on White man stories among the Waura people of South America, has found, for example, that myth "can transform the very perception of reality not only in the sense of rewriting the history of specific events in the past, but in the sense of making statements about the present and the future as well."¹⁸ Through their myth about the White man, the Waura took "a historic tragedy of monstrous proportions and transformed it into an affirmation of their own moral values, and of the destiny to survive as a people."¹⁹

Harry's story about the legacy of the younger twin fits this pattern. Unlike the dominant historical narrative of our culture, Harry's is not a tragic story of death and demise. His Indians are never passive recipients of White actions; rather, his is a story of success and survival against huge odds. It characterizes Indians most positively – as God's chosen people who were given this land as their own along with a

¹⁵ For the full passage from which this quotation was taken, see Wickwire, *Nature Power*, 14.

¹⁶ Jonathan D. Hill, ed., *Rethinking History and Myth: Indigenous South American Perspectives on the Past* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

¹⁷ Terence Turner, "Ethno-Ethnohistory: Myth and History in Native South American Representations of Contact with Western Society," in Hill, *Rethinking History and Myth*, 237.

¹⁸ "Cerebral Savage: The Whiteman as Symbol of Cleverness and Savagery in Waura Myth," in Hill, *Rethinking History and Myth*, 172.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

form of knowledge that would enable them to survive. They were never “in the dark”; rather, they knew about the impending arrival of Whites. Their ancestor Coyote will show up someday to put things right just as he did in the old days. Whites, on the other hand, are presented negatively – a banished people who colonized this country through fraudulence associated with their assigned and alienated (literally) form of knowledge. Their most distinguishable cultural trait is their inability to share. They had, and will always have, a transient presence on this continent.

Others heard similar stories. In 1930 an Okanagan man named Suszen told anthropologist Walter Cline that “God created the world ... [H]e took away one land from the top and put it to one side for the Indians-to-be. God took the laws with the Indian land and left the other land without laws. Then God built an ocean to separate these lands: one land was for the Indians, another for the white people. Indians did not need books because they knew things in their minds that they learned from the creatures.”²⁰ Ethnographer James Teit recorded related accounts, for example, this one from an unidentified Nlaka’pamux individual:

The great chief led us to this country, and placed us in it to occupy it, multiply in it, and be happy. He gave us a rich country, with plenty in it for us to eat. He did not give this country to the whites or anyone else ... We know about our origin ... Our traditions tell us that even in mythological times our ancestors lived here ... This is why our chief Cexpe’ntlEm, in talking to the whites [in 1858] told them they had entered his house and were now his guests. He asked them to treat his children as brothers, and they would share the same fire. He did not know that they would afterwards treat his people as strangers and inferiors, and steal their land and food from them.²¹

Many will assume the “God” or “great chief” in these stories to be Christian imports. The old mission churches along our *BC Studies* tour were early sites of such cultural exchange. Cline assumed this connection after his summer’s fieldwork among the Okanagan in 1930.²² Teit, who was far more immersed in the cultures of the region, thought as much about this figure (also known as “Old Man,” “Great

²⁰ Walter Cline, “Religion and Worldview,” in Leslie Spier, ed., *The Sinkaietk or Southern Okanagan of Washington* (General Series in Anthropology, no. 6, Menasha, 1938), 177.

²¹ Teit et al., *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sabaptin Tribe*, 49–50.

²² Cline, “Religion and Worldview,” 167.

Chief," "Big Chief," "Father Mystery," and "Great Mystery").²³ As he learned more about the latter, he decided otherwise: "I am inclined to think that he is a personage belonging to their ancient mythology and not the God of the whites."²⁴ Christine Quintasket, an Okanagan writer who collected Coyote stories in 1916, insisted, like Teit, that her people believed in the "great spirit chief [long] before they ever heard of Christianity."²⁵

Whatever his origins, the peoples of the region have invoked "God" repeatedly over the years to prove their basic sovereign rights. With the aid of an interpreter, Chief Daniel of the Siska-Skuppa Band told the members of the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission on 16 November 1914 that "God made you and I out of the same flesh ... When God made the world he expected us all to share and share alike ... God is my father and your father ... The Queen is our guardian – The Queen represents us just like a setting hen with a flock of chickens."²⁶ One after the other, chiefs and others referred the commissioners to God's promises. "God Almighty put me here," explained Patrick the following day. "[He] gave us the birds and animals for our food ... and he went back from here and went back to his own home in heaven; and before God left he never meant to have any gaols or policemen to restrict us."²⁷ Chief Paul Heena spoke on 18 November: "I would like to have the things that were given to us originally by the Lord ... You know that God created this in the beginning and that is why the white people say [stay?] to the west and to the north."²⁸

Perhaps the commissioners chuckled with each mention of what they thought must surely be *their* God's ordained plan. But Harry's story places these accounts on an entirely different plane that probably included, for example, Old Man's testimony at Lytton, Coyote's meetings with the king, and so on.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to link Harry's story to the official historical record. *The Black and White* may well represent a string of important documents that oral tradition has carried forward and rolled into one. On the other hand, there are suggestive points of

²³ Teit, *Traditions of the Thompson Indians*, n. 156, 109.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mourning Dove, *Coyote Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), n. 3, 17. (Originally published in 1933).

²⁶ Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia, *Evidence*, hearings of 16 November 1914 at Cisco Indian reserve.

²⁷ *Evidence*, hearings of 17 November 1914 at North Bend.

²⁸ *Evidence*, hearings of 18 November 1914 at Spuzzum.

convergence – for example, links between it and the Royal Proclamation of 1763, a legal document established under King George the Third that recognized Aboriginal sovereignty. The latter was similarly shrouded in secrecy, coming to public attention as recently as 1909. Harry's concern, which he had until his death in 1990, that *The Black and White* was still out of reach mirrors political scientist Paul Tennant's concern in 1992 that, "despite its constitutional importance the proclamation has been largely ignored in Canadian education and ... has not been allowed to influence general non-Indian historical or normative understandings."²⁹

But Harry's story is important for reasons beyond its relationship to so-called events of contact. As a case in which "historical narrative and a bounded social group merge to create a collective historical consciousness," some would argue that it operates at "the highest and most meaningful level" of what counts as "real" history.³⁰ At the very least, the story infuses new life into a BC historiography that, to date, has paid little attention to Aboriginal interpretations of the past.

A highlight of our field trip was listening to presentations at Spaxmn (Douglas Lake) by Scottie Holmes (on the Upper Nicola Band Commonage Claim) and Lynne Jorgesen and Geraldine Tom-Dennis (on the Upper Nicola Band Aboriginal Interest Project). All three oozed with pride and excitement as they unravelled the results of their ethnographic mapping. They were truly of this place – Coyote's people.

But what about us? We were a delegation of White come-from-aways obsessed with writing and books. We must have looked like the very embodiment of Coyote's twin brother's descendants. Fortunately, one of our group provided us with a small out. He had just presented the Upper Nicola Band with his new book manuscript on the Indian Land Question. And surely this was what Harry explained that we, the descendants of Coyote's twin brother, were meant to do on this continent.

The story continues.

²⁹ Paul Tennant, "Aboriginal Rights and the Canadian Legal System: The West Coast Anomaly," in *Law for the Elephant, Law for the Beaver: Essays in the Legal History of the North American West*, ed. John McLaren, Hamar Foster, and Chet Orloff (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1992), n. 2, 124.

³⁰ Michael Harkin, "History, Narratives, and Temporality: Examples From the Northwest Coast," *Ethnohistory* 35, 2 (Spring 1988): 101.