

*Glyphs and Gallows: The Rock Art of Clo-oose
and the Wreck of the John Bright*

Peter Johnson

Surrey: Heritage House, 1999. 254 pp. Illus., maps. \$18.95 paper.

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THE ROCK ART OF North American First Nations, because of its visibility and cultural secrecy, has provided a fertile ground for the imagination and speculation of non-Natives and has spawned a literature with little consideration of First Nations perspectives and, as a consequence, little grounding in empirical reality. Following this genre is Peter Johnson's book *Glyphs and Gallows: The Rock Art of Clo-oose and the Wreck of the John Bright*, which attempts to interpret a particular set of tliiy'aa'a (Nuu-chah-nulth rock writing, or petroglyphs) found near the Ditidaht village of Clo-oose on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Following the lead of a 1926 newspaper article, Johnson tries to connect events surrounding the 1869 wreck of the *John Bright* 150 kilometres north at Hesquiat with specific images, particularly those of European sailing ships, found at the Clo-oose site.

The book is an example of what happens when a theory, based on false assumptions, is allowed to spin wildly out of control. Johnson's argument is convoluted and consists of a textual hodgepodge of colonial history and amateur archaeology juxtaposed with a "personal journal" that records the author's quest to fathom the meaning of the Clo-oose petroglyphs. The latter component of the book contains a lot of unfortunate language, such as:

"The glyphs recorded much of the culture and spirituality of these ancient coastal peoples and, not surprisingly, marked some of the events that were to bring about their demise"(7). And then there is: "Think of it – ingenious lines, compelling circles, and sparse archetypal images – ancient indentations, crafted on coastal shelves, that could actually represent something so momentous as the passing of a race"(104). Or how about: "Petroglyphs: What do they mean? How can we crack their silent codes? How do we get at meaning? Do they have meaning beyond that contained in the beauty of their mysterious shapes?"(105). These comments, and there are many more, underline the book's major flaw, which is the complete lack of any First Nations input into the subject. Indeed, as the language Johnson uses seems to indicate, First Nations peoples are invisible. Invisible, that is, except for one telling scene at the Nitinat River where the author waits impatiently for the ferry service provided by the Edgar family, a Ditidaht family with ancient ties to the area: "There was no way to cross the Nitinat River save with the aid of a local Native who ran the aluminum skiff ferry for hikers. We waited, and waited, and waited. And then we waited some more. When he finally came, the next day, our numbers had swelled to a merry band of intrepid hikers from all over the world

... I had been thinking about the glyphs all morning after finally being ferried across" Too bad he didn't take the time to speak with the Edgars, who have intimate knowledge of the area and the tliiy'aa'a of Clo-oose.

Serious students will find little of value in this book, and it is unlikely that the general public, at whom the

book is aimed, will be able to critically assess its lack of scholarship. This can only lead to entrenching preconceptions about, and ignorance of, First Nations in British Columbia. The sad thing is that, although this result is no doubt the furthest thing from Johnson's intention, it will be the legacy of his book.

Transmission Difficulties: Franz Boas and Tsimshian Mythology

Ralph Maud

Burnaby: Talonbooks, 2000. 174 pp. Illus. \$16.95 paper.

*Potlatch at Gitsegukla:
William Beynon's 1945 Field Notebooks*

Margaret Anderson and Marjorie Halpin, Editors

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000. 283 pp. Illus., maps. \$29.95 paper.

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BOTH VOLUMES REVIEWED here explore the present utility and quality of Tsimshian archival and published materials. There the resemblance ends. The scholarly methods and standpoints are diametrically opposed; a rhetoric of continuity and respect for tradition contrasts sharply with one of revolutionary discontinuity. Let us examine each product in turn.

The long overdue publication of William Beynon's four field notebooks from two weeks of potlatch and totem pole raising at the Gitksan village of Gitsegukla in 1945 reflects over two decades of collaboration between the editors and Tsimshian, Nisga'a, and Gitksan peoples. Their commentary

respects the integrity of Beynon's participant-observation documentation, simultaneously reassessing and contextualizing it relative to other extant work on the Gitksan and closely related peoples. Beynon was invited to the potlatches primarily in his chiefly capacity, although he was also an ethnographer bringing thirty years experience to describing how the feast system organizes Gitksan daily lives through a great variety of publicly witnessed transactions. Beynon's fieldnotes are followed by a brief history of the Gitksan "encounter with the colonial world" (193) by James A. McDonald and Jennifer Joseph – particularly poignant given recent denigrations of