

*The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Disease
and Population Decline among Northwest Coast Indians,
1774-1874*

Robert Boyd

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IN ASSESSING, or re-assessing, the history of Native-non Native encounters on the Northwest Coast, no question is more basic than the demographic decline of First Nations in the century following initial contact. How many people were there in 1770? When and why did the population decline after contact? No one, over the last two and a half decades, has done more to grapple with these complex and often intractable issues than anthropologist Robert Boyd. In a doctoral dissertation and a series of papers, Boyd has built upon and revised the work of earlier scholars (e.g., James Mooney, Herbert Taylor and Wilson Duff) to provide a basic outline of the demographic history of the Northwest Coast culture area. Of course, the topic invites, and sometimes requires, excursions into neighbouring Cordilleran regions – something Boyd has done far more extensively in the Plateau culture area than in the Subarctic. Publication of the *Spirit of Pestilence* is doubly welcome, both because it offers a broader audience for Boyd's work and because it provides him with an opportunity to revisit his earlier work.

While retaining the basic structure of his 1985 thesis, Boyd has used this

new opportunity to incorporate subsequent developments into the literature. He begins with an informed review of the relevant epidemiological literature, including an expanded discussion of precontact diseases and ailments and a review of the evidence about tubercular and venereal afflictions. From here Boyd provides a broadly chronological analysis, epidemic by epidemic (primarily smallpox, malaria, and measles), from the 1770s to the 1870s. The account of the impact of malaria on the Lower Columbia is particularly good. Boyd then provides regional demographic histories for the North Coast and for the Lower Columbia, relying heavily on the Hudson's Bay Company "censuses" and the epidemic histories to construct demographic trajectories on a smaller canvas. The pattern Boyd presents is basically the same as that encountered in earlier works, although some important new evidence is included. Perhaps the best example of the latter is his discussion of the last major smallpox outbreak – the one that occurred between 1862 and 1863 in British Columbia and adjacent Russian America. His account represents by far the best description of this epidemic currently available. It is

regrettable, therefore, that Boyd limits his discussion to the boundaries of the Northwest Coast culture area, although, as he recognizes, the epidemic was not restricted to this area.

In the conclusion Boyd includes his revised estimates for the precontact population of the Northwest Coast. His approach is ethnohistorical, thus conservative and closely tied to the available empirical data. Using anchor figures (population estimates assumed to be reasonably reliable) and knowledge of the likely geography and impact of specific epidemics (per cent mortality), Boyd computes precontact populations for individual tribal groups. These figures yield a total population for the culture area of 183,661, some 5,000 less than he recorded in his Smithsonian article (188,344) of 1990. The unwary should be warned not to take the precision of Boyd's figures too seriously. He might have been better advised to have rounded his figures, or even to have given a range, in order to indicate the approximate nature of the data. Even so, some "tribal" components that contribute to Boyd's total seem rather peculiar. For the Halkomelem, Songhees, and Saanich speakers of British Columbia, Boyd reduces the figures given by James Mooney—a questionable interpretation, in my opinion. Putting such issues to one side, Boyd's findings may be contrasted with the superseded orthodoxy of Mooney, whose total was 114,000, and Henry Dobyns's fanciful projection, yielding a total population of c. 1,200,000.

The question about the estimates for the Halkomelem, Songhees, and Saanich raises my principal reservation about Boyd's work: his treatment of the BC section of the Northwest Coast. It is fair to say, I think, that Boyd is less sure-footed in dealing with

British Columbia than in dealing with American territory. In a brief review it is not possible to provide chapter and verse, but a couple of examples may help to illustrate some of my concerns about his use of both primary and secondary sources. One involves Boyd's argument for a coast-wide smallpox epidemic in the 1770s. To support his case Boyd cites a missionary account of a Tsimshian narrative about an encounter with Whites, during which the Tsimshian "died." Boyd thinks that this was probably a reference to disease. While applauding his greater use of Native narratives in the present work, the choice in this instance is unfortunate. The account is a third-hand version of a well known first-contact narrative in which "died," as William Beynon explains, is a metaphor for Tsimshian surprise at encountering "Ghost People." Moreover, the encounter took place in 1787, thus, even read literally, it is not evidence for a 1770s epidemic.

This may seem a trivial complaint, but the "evidence" assumes a not insignificant part in Boyd's argument for a coast-wide epidemic. Other than some ambiguous accounts of abandoned villages, this is the only evidence presented to document the posited epidemic for the mainland of British Columbia between the Fraser and the Stikine Rivers (Map 2). It should be added that, partly in response to criticisms of his earlier accounts, Boyd is now less certain about the date and extent of the initial smallpox epidemic and is entertaining alternative explanations (regional epidemics in north and south and at different dates). However, in later sections of the *Spirit of Pestilence* this uncertainty tends to disappear. In discussing the geography of the 1836 smallpox epidemic on the Central Coast, Boyd uses immunity

acquired from the 1770s epidemic as a partial explanation of breaks in the distribution. Later, in the conclusions, he states that "the Tlingit, the Haida, the Tsimshian peoples, the Haisla, and the Nuxalk (Bella Coola) experienced three important smallpox epidemics, in the late 1700s, 1836 and 1862" (p. 267). Finally, on this topic, Boyd takes no account of the negative evidence – the absence of evidence of prior smallpox for well documented areas such as Nootka Sound (1778-95). In a recent study, not available to Boyd, Christon Archer found no evidence in Spanish manuscript sources of a 1770s pandemic or its transmission to the North Coast by Spanish vessels.

More surprising, perhaps, is Boyd's apparent unawareness of the manuscript nominal rolls of the Canadian census for 1881. Not an easy document to use, this is the first tolerably accurate enumeration of the population of British Columbia, Native and non-Native. In my opinion it is the single most important source for interpreting the demography of British Columbia in the second half of the nineteenth century; it has been available and utilized by scholars for almost twenty years. Boyd, however, relies upon data published by the Department of Indian Affairs and mistakenly states, for example, that the "Gitksan were not formally enumerated until 1889" (p. 215). And of the Haida, he regrets that "we have only gross

numbers for late nineteenth century Haida population. Census figures could be converted into sex ratios that would give more specific information on available mates; determining the percentage of children would be a clue to the fertility of the population" (p. 217). This is unfortunate because the nominal rolls for the Haida permit the construction of age-sex pyramids, providing glimpses of demographic history stretching back to the first decades of the nineteenth century. Utilization of this data would have permitted Boyd to test some of his speculations about both the geography of various epidemics and his reconstruction of the demographic history of the Northern Coast.

In a topic where recourse to uncertain and fragmentary data is the norm, disagreements about relevant sources and their interpretation are inevitable. Reservations notwithstanding, Boyd's study is a valuable and very welcome addition to the literature. For anyone doubting the impact of settler society on Native worlds of the Northwest Coast, it should be required reading. It will certainly provide the basis for future discussions of the historical demography of the region. From a British Columbian perspective, what is needed now, I believe, is a series of regional studies that will test Boyd's findings and utilize a fuller array of sources.