Spuzzum: Fraser Canyon Histories, 1808-1939

Andrea Laforet and Annie York

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998. 282 pp. Illus., maps. $75 cloth.

By Lynne Jorgesen[1]
Nlaka'pamux Nation

IT'S KIND OF A FACILE REVIEWING device to begin by saying that Andrea Laforet and Annie York take up where James Teit left off 100 years ago, but, in its modest way, *Spuzzum: Fraser Canyon Histories, 1808-1939* presumes to do just that. For the first six chapters, Laforet is fully in command of her material, and the gentle, serene tone of the book is a fitting homage to the persona of the late York, whose presence permeates its heart. The pair slyly inverts the scrupulous methodology of their illustrious ethnographic predecessors (notably Franz Boas but also Teit) by cheerfully giving names, identities, even characters to those Nlaka'pamux whose lives as lived constitute the ethnographic insight presented. Laforet also successfully (ably assisted by York, it is assumed) and helpfully backtracks through Teit's material in order to reposition the community informants of a century ago beside the knowledge they shared with the world.

It seems a fitting vindication. In his zeal to present pure information as objectively as possible, Teit's editor, Boas, purged virtually everything from their published works that could identify Teit's informants. Teit left a legacy of thousands of pages of faithfully detailed field notes, but those notes directly related to published text apparently did not survive Boas's purge.[2] There is almost a sense of poetic justice contained in the image of two women, a century later, overturning the precedent so carefully established by two men (and being applauded for their audacity in doing so).

The title of the book is self-explanatory; but the book is also a warm, humane portrait of an ancient Spuzzum that is invisible to legions of heedless drivers passing through on Canada's national highway. Then there is post-contact Spuzzum, which cannot shake a lingering, faintly unsavory reputation derived from having been caught in the path of the onslaught of gold seekers from 1858 on. So completely isolated are these two realities from each other, however, that they never intersect in the book. That is not to say that the Nlaka'pamux did not successfully adjust to life in the new economy that descended upon them, and an important part of

[1] Before beginning, a caveat to the reader: this review is written entirely from a contemporary Scw'exmx-centric point of view. The Scw'exmx correspond to Teit's Cawa'xamux, or Tcawa'xamux, also referred to as the "Nicola Division" of the Nlaka'pamux. Here, the phrase is inclusive of all First Nations in the Nicola watershed, including the Syilx (Okanagan) people of Douglas Lake, from whom I trace my ancestry.

[2] Wendy Wickwire has discussed the mentor-editor relationship between Boas and Teit in a number of papers, most recently in "Storied History: A Case Study from the Similkameen Valley, British Columbia," 3-4 (unpublished paper in the author's possession).

Spuzzum is a compelling look at how tirelessly these people worked to get by from day to day. Even more compelling are the sections on Nlaka'pamux cosmology and thought that seamlessly weave insights gleaned from Teit with material from Annie York and others.[3]

For instance, ethnographers have grappled for decades with the difficult question of why Christianity was so readily embraced by Interior Salish groups like the Nlaka'pamux. The resulting, sometimes contradictory, theories usually lead to a similar conclusion – one that casts Indigenous peoples as either pawns or victims of external forces beyond their comprehension. Laforet recognizes that "the superficial similarities between the Nlaka'pamux and Christian concepts of prayer and prophecy were enough to act as a bridge between the Nlaka'pamux and the missionaries" (115). The point that has escaped so many in the past is finally made here: "the Christian message was *an addition* to the first converts' understanding of the world, *not a replacement* of what they had been taught from childhood" (108, emphasis mine).

Unfortunately, once the proselytizing foot was in the door, these once-parallel world views were on what, in hindsight, seems an inevitable collision course. Some historians have implied that conversion was merely a means to an end for the Nlaka'pamux. What they were really after, runs this line of logic, was help with land claims and access to European medical practices (which then became, by inference or otherwise, "superior" to cure by traditional means). There is lukewarm comfort to be found in the thought that those Nlaka'pamux who did benefit from Western medical interventions – like smallpox inoculations – were probably culled from the ranks of the Christian select rather than from the actively practising "Pagans" categorized as "Type 2" (of 4) by Teit in his unpublished paper on attitudes held by members of the Spences Bridge band towards missionaries.[4] In sum, as Laforet observes, "Annie York accepted both Christianity and Nlaka'pamux belief" (108). In this, York's views were consistent with those of Mourning Dove, novelist and autobiographer of Colvile and Nicola (Scw'exmx) descent, who wrote in the mid-1930s:

[3] A brief aside about orthography must be made. While *Spuzzum: Fraser Canyon Histories* offers both "a brief guide to pronunciation" and an "Orthography conversion table" (of the two orthographies used by Thompson, Thompson, and Bouchard), the Nlaka'pamux phrases found throughout the text employ symbols not found in the charts at the beginning of the book. As a consequence, although having heard Nlaka'pamux (and Syilx, its Interior Salish relative) spoken since at least the age of eight, I must confess to lacking Laforet's linguistic proficiency. Thus, in spite of much effort, capturing the elusive Nlaka'pamux words encoded in the medium of print at times proved beyond me, so one can imagine the impact on novice or casual readers.

[4] James Teit, *Religion: Attitudes of Indians Towards Missionaries (Spences Bridge Band)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, Salish ethnographic notes, c. 1906-10.), no. 61, Boas Collection 372, roll 4, no. 1 (3-4). Typed facsimile in collection of author was obtained from Wendy Wickwire. In this paper Teit also observed that the typical "Type 2"

> also lives almost as moral and as good a life as "Type 1." He does not care about having his children educated, or, if he does, he wants it done under his own eye. Writing is one of the "mysteries" of the whites, and may therefore be "bad medicine" for the

> When I returned home from school in 1912 people said I was another Indian going back to the blanket because I saw no conflict in the old and new [creeds]. I used the sweat lodge and one day remarked to another woman that I was pleased to see such a staunch church member in the lodge. She was horrified at my suggestion that the two did not belong together and flung angry words at me in defense of her own beliefs.[5]

Additionally, Laforet is the first non-Native ethnographer I have encountered to accurately present the changes in Nlaka'pamux women's status as they moved through one life stage to the next, gaining more and more of what feminist theory has taken to calling "agency" with each transition: from maiden (surrounded by a web of constrictions, observing eyes, and duty at every turn) to powerful matriarch.

However, while there is much to praise, I cannot give an unqualified endorsement of *Spuzzum: Fraser Canyon Histories, 1808-1939*. One reason is the dilemma presented by Laforet's naming of Annie York as her co-author. Laforet herself explains that the book is the result of twenty years' intermittent "conversation" (19) with York:

> We wrote the information down because it was our way. She worked in an oral tradition because it was her way. Running through this book is a stream of information about Spuzzum families and the cosmology and social organization of the Nlaka'pamux that Annie and I came to share as a result of our work together, information that was, in the end, both oral and written, inscribed in my notes and always in her memory. It is this information that makes it possible for me, writing this after Annie's death, to provide an interpretive context for both the oral information contributed by Annie and other older people of Spuzzum and the archival information I have supplied. (xi)

Laforet's gesture is certainly intended to give York equal credit (and the accompanying status of co-author), but I tend to agree with David Murray's assertion that the conventions of writing define the form of expression, and "this is particularly relevant when one culture is expressing itself, or being expressed, in the literary and cultural forms – the texts – of another in a situation of political and cultural inequality."[6]

On the other side of the ledger, Annie York was a renowned oral historian and interpreter who had given a lifetime of service to her own people

> Indians. He does not care about giving his real name to a white man, and he hates to be counted by the Indian Agent or in the census. (4)

This statement lends credence to my long-held belief that indigenous populations of the day were scandalously under-enumerated not just in the Central Interior but throughout the province. This observation might also be interpreted as a trenchant self-comment on Teit's accomplishments as both ethnographer and federal enumerator.

[5] Jay Miller, ed., *Mourning Dove: A Salishan Autobiography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 114-5.

[6] David Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1991), 66.

in several languages. She was a seasoned member of the second wave of Nlaka'pamux informants by the time she worked with Laforet, and she could predict earthquakes. Surely she was aware of the implications, as she dispensed vital knowledge that would permit the world a glimpse into the Nlaka'pamux soul.

However, it is a pity York is not able to speak for herself because, paradoxically, Laforet appears to position herself and her co-author at odds with the theorists cited in the closing chapter, who appear to question the veracity and continuity of collective oral histories (presumably on the same basis as individual human memory can be challenged in the courts). I believe the ultimate error lies in not properly differentiating between individual and collective memory, but it is difficult to determine where Laforet herself stands in the midst of a dense thicket of theory. Consider:

> The principle that representations of the past function as charters for social reality in the present, with the implication that representation of the past is mutable over time, first articulated in 1926 by Bronislaw Malinowski, was underscored by Laura Bohannon's study of the genealogies of the Tiv people of West Africa, which were subject to revision through oral discourse even in the presence of a written record made at an earlier time. (198)

And: "Judith Binney has put it even more bluntly: 'the "telling of history," whether it be oral or written, is not and never has been neutral. It is always the reflection of the priorities of the narrators and their perceptions of the world.'" (198) Yet on the next page, Laforet writes: "Oral tradition is often spoken of as if it were monolithic, yet as work in ... virtually every other part of the world attests, orally transmitted forms of history are as diverse as the societies that generate them" (199). This creates a skewed balance between the first part of Laforet's (and York's) indisputable achievement and the book's conclusion. The result may be an uncomfortable and difficult final chapter for First Nations readers, but it is one worth the effort, if only to gain a critical appreciation of an important issue looming on the horizon in post-Delgamuukw British Columbia.