

comply with the important task of offering the introductory student and general reader an up-to-date survey of

the first peoples of British Columbia, unhindered by an old-fashioned and insensitive anthropology.

A Voice Great Within Us: The Story of Chinook

Charles Lillard with Terry Glavin

Transmontanus series. New Star: Vancouver, 1998. 116 pp.

Illus., maps. \$16 paper.

By Peter Trower, *Gibsons*

CHINOOK IS A GHOST language now, but once it was the creole of the far western wilderness – the esperanto of the Pacific Slope. An amalgam of French, English, and Indian words, it allowed communication between Europeans and many Aboriginal linguistic groups split into isolated enclaves by the rugged, mountainous terrain. Today Chinook lingers on only fitfully in a handful of colourful words and place names – “skookum,” “tyee,” “saltchuck,” “cultus,” “mesachie” – but throughout the 1800s, it was in everyday use.

The late poet and historian Charles “Red” Lillard developed a fascination with this all-but-vanished patois at an early age. American by birth, he moved from California to Alaska when he was six to marvel at the unfamiliar words still used by his father and the other loggers and fishers he met. Lillard would go on to author numerous books of both poetry and prose, but the interest in Chinook stayed with him. It became the subject of the posthumously published compilation he entitled *A Voice Great Within Us*.

This slim volume was Lillard’s final project. He undertook it after correcting the proof sheets of his ultimate

poetry collection, the marvelous and critically acclaimed *Shadow Weather*. Stricken with cancer, Lillard’s health was rapidly and tragically failing, but he devoted his final months to this endeavour, encouraged by writer Terry Glavin, editor of New Star’s Transmontanus series, who had initiated the undertaking. When Lillard succumbed to his illness in March 1997 at the untimely age of fifty-three, Terry Glavin carried on with the project. He shared Lillard’s love of language and the whole northwest mythos and was able to bring the project to a successful conclusion, as the late writer would undoubtedly have wished.

The resultant book is an attractive and informative addition to BC history and folklore. Well illustrated, it is divided into seven chapters, or sections, plus a bibliography. Glavin, in his foreword, describes poignantly how the book came into being.

Chinook was often used to create poetry and songs. In the first section, “Rain Language,” Glavin contributes to this tradition with an epic eighteen-page poem in both Chinook and English. The voices of the past ring through this work, creating a plain-spoken tapestry of words, unique and moving.

The second chapter is intriguingly entitled "Damned Rascal, Son of a Bitch: A Discussion." Here Glavin provides a thoughtful and well researched overview of Chinook's development and influence. He surmises that a form of the patois may have existed in pre-contact times, devised by the Indians themselves. He also debunks the commonly held belief that Chinook was deliberately created as a lingua franca for trading purposes alone.

Charles Lillard's "Scenes And Sketches" makes up the third section of the book. A series of nostalgic, frequently amusing, memoirs, it deals with his discoveries about Chinook, his wide travels, and his development as a writer. Lillard's first influences in poetry were the two Roberts – Service and Swanson – but he soon progressed beyond this sort of doggerel to the lithe, free verse of his mature work. His deep love for the Pacific Northwest is evident on every page.

In the next section, Glavin offers "A Chinook Lexicon," a brief dictionary of the most important terms. While it does not pretend to contain every Chinook word that was ever coined, it presents a good sampling of what the polyglot language looked and sounded like. It serves as an essential core for the book.

The following chapter, "Skookum: A Natural History," concentrates exclusively on this single term, perhaps

the best known and most widely used of all Chinook words. Lillard gives many examples of how it could be employed. While "Skookum" usually meant "good," "strong," or "brave," it also had a lesser-known use. Sometimes it referred to a mythical Sasquatch-like creature, greatly feared by the Indians.

The sixth section, Lillard's "A Chinook Gazeteer," lists the many BC place names that stem directly from the patois. He cites numerous communities and areas, Siwash Bay, Olalla, Potlatch Creek, Tillicum Lake, Klootch Canyon, Nanitch Peak, and so on. He also provides a map so that these places can be pinpointed geographically.

Lillard's final contribution, "West Words," originally appeared in *Vancouver Magazine* and is here rescued from obscurity. He does an amusing take on distinctive BC slang, largely work-derived. Such arcane phrases as "huckleberry grunt," "shack fever," "clam gun," and "man catcher" are trotted out and translated.

A Voice Great Within Us, in summation, is a colourful, informative, and highly enjoyable book. It stands, along with the splendid *Shadow Weather*, as a tribute to the humour and great talent of Charles "Red" Lillard. Terry Glavin is to be commended for completing a difficult task and bringing this sparkling collaboration to us.