

*Aboriginal Slavery on the
Northwest Coast of North America*

Leland Donald

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379 pp. Illus., maps. us\$40 cloth.

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The early history of the Northwest Coast often presents historians and anthropologists with complex enigmas that make conclusions tenuous at best. One of the last remaining major ocean frontiers of European exploration, the Northwest Coast was a place where late eighteenth-century Russian, Spanish, British, American, and French voyagers and maritime fur traders encountered culturally advanced Indigenous coastal peoples who, in many respects, baffled and intrigued them. Anxious to open commerce, to gain access to iron and copper, firearms, textiles, and other trade goods, the Natives shared with Europeans a highly developed concept of private ownership. This extended from possession of real estate to access to fisheries, beaches, foreshore food resources, fresh water, grass, lumber, firewood, and even to intangible property such as songs and symbols. While Britain, Spain, and Russia competed for sovereignty, searched for a navigable Northwest Passage, and engaged in the trans-Pacific fur trade in sea otter pelts, the explorers and fur traders gathered data and artefacts, and sometimes kept detailed journals. Without much success, the visitors attempted to penetrate the mysteries of Northwest Coast societies; these societies presented one face to strangers and scrupulously withheld many

secrets about their culture and rituals. Despite the best work of Enlightenment scientists who accompanied Captain James Cook, the Comte de la Pérouse, Alejandro Malaspina, George Vancouver, and many others, even the most careful observers failed to answer perplexing questions. Part of the problem was that many observations occurred in the summer months, away from the winter village sites where annual ceremonial and ritual activities took place.

Following the maritime fur traders, Hudson's Bay Company men, missionaries, and, beginning in the 1880s, professional ethnographers and anthropologists such as Franz Boas arrived to undertake the difficult tasks of penetrating Native societies, learning languages, and posing answers to questions of critical importance concerning religion, social organization, ceremonial life, and ritual activities. As Leland Donald notes, however, the period between the end of the maritime fur trade and the arrival of the first anthropologists was an epoch of terrible demographic disasters and dislocations induced by disease epidemics that altered traditional Native cultures. Even with interviews of the oldest informants, there were gaps that living memory could not fill.

It is important to know that Donald came to his study of Northwest Coast

slavery from earlier research on slavery in Africa. While previous historians and anthropologists acknowledged the existence of slavery in Northwest Coast societies (and there is another recent study on the subject by Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown), no previous scholar has made Donald's claims about the critical importance of slavery as a central feature in Indigenous coastal cultures from Prince William Sound, Alaska, to the Columbia River in Oregon. Indeed, Donald anticipated that his conclusions would spark controversy and that some specialists might continue to downplay the importance of Aboriginal slavery. He argues that many ethnographers, from Franz Boas to Helen Codere and Philip Drucker, produced what became the orthodox view that slavery was relatively unimportant. Although a few scholars, such as Viola Garfield, dissented, the Native titleholders (chiefs) from the late nineteenth-century forward downplayed the significance of an institution that they recognized had become thoroughly unacceptable. Working with an enormous body of existing ethnographic, historical, and archaeological sources, Donald divides his book into four broad sections: an overview of Northwest Coast culture, a description of slavery during the first one-third of the nineteenth century, a study of the historical context of Northwest Coast slavery, and an examination of Northwest Coast slavery in perspective. While this approach tends to be repetitive, Donald illustrates his arguments from different points of view in order to build themes and conclusions concerning the ubiquity and central impact of slavery.

All observers of Northwest Coast history agreed that the Native peoples

were aggressive in defence of their territories and often extremely warlike in their relations with their neighbours. Most slaves – men, women, and children – were captured in wars and raids against neighbouring villages, and the aggressors made every effort to utilize surprise and stealth. Slaves might also be obtained through trade networks, as gifts from one owner to another, through common people enslaving themselves due to poverty or debt, and through chiefs enslaving orphans and other members of their own bands. Donald argues that the possession of slaves relieved chiefs from the drudgery of common labour and contributed to their wealth and prestige. Slaves could be killed by their owners for any reason, including ritual celebrations connected with funerals, whale hunts, new houses, and other sacrifices. In addition, Donald states that slaves were probably the source of human flesh consumed in cannibal performances. He establishes the existence of a well developed "aboriginal slave trade network" (139) and provides readers with tables and arrows to point out the directions of the trade. These tables are somewhat reminiscent of similar charts that describe African slave-trading patterns. One table illustrates the traffic in slaves for a southern region that Donald calls the Columbia River Slave Trade Network; it encompasses the coastal littoral from the Nuuchahnulth of Nootka Sound to the Shasta and Klamath of Oregon. The Northern Slave Trade Network extended from the Chugach of Prince William Sound southward to include the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Bella Bella, Nawitti, and other tribes, extending to Vancouver Island and even inland to Athapaskan groups.

What can one make of all these claims? What new evidence has Donald

produced through his research to back his views? While some of the author's conclusions are convincing, too much of this study is based upon supposition, sincere hopes, and repetitive narrative. In many sections Donald rakes over the same sources as have previous researchers and crunches figures that he admits are of "low confidence" (186) and that cannot be taken as conclusive. Readers will wonder if the results of this quantitative effort merit serious consideration or if the findings are more a case of "garbage in/garbage out." This point is crucial, since Donald uses this evidence to "suggest" that many Northwest Coast communities in the nineteenth century possessed enough slaves "to merit consideration as large-scale slave systems" (194). Even by combining detailed quantitative work, linguistic and archaeological evidence, and historical data, some aspects of Donald's analysis and conclusions do not bear careful scrutiny. For example, this reviewer wonders how so many slaves could have been controlled during the annual migration round of small bands from one seasonal village site to another.

In the historical record that commenced in 1774 with the Spanish voyage of Juan Pérez to the Queen Charlotte Islands and Nootka Sound and carried on through the period of Spanish activity and the maritime fur traders into the nineteenth century, researchers have a significant body of observer evidence upon which to establish the nature and prevalence of slavery. It should be noted that modern historians are careful to weigh European evidence and to acknowledge the chronic frustrations and difficulties of evaluating documentation concerning the Native peoples under observation. Misperceptions and contemporary

biases crowd the records of European visitors and have fostered numerous errors and popular legends. Enlightenment biases, misunderstandings caused by poor or non-existent language comprehension on both sides, and the negative propaganda of competing sea otter fur traders combined to spread rumours and to entrench premeditated lies. However, for all of their faults the historical sources are more comprehensive than is the linguistic and archaeological evidence about slave trading. Over the past few decades, British, Spanish, and American archives have been scoured by researchers looking for new documents, and it seems unlikely that there will be many major new discoveries.

Given the wealth of published sources available today, Donald's historical research is sometimes cursory and uncritical. Without actually working through the available primary sources, the author adopts a conclusion advocated by some eighteenth-century writers; that is, that the Natives practised not only ritual cannibalism, but also, quite possibly, gustatory, gastronomic, or epicurean anthropophagy. Such a view underscores the argument that some band chiefs traded for or engaged in war and raids to capture victims for cannibal feasts or ritual functions involving the consumption of human flesh. Donald accepts a story, discredited by most historians today, that vilified the Nootka Sound Mowachaht chief Maquinna, who was said to have fattened eleven children and then brutally killed and eaten them. This report originated with English fur traders such as John Meares – known to some contemporaries as "Liar Meares" – who published unsubstantiated tales that each moon Maquinna barbarously murdered and devoured a child slave raw, sharing the

reeking flesh with selected guests. Although other contemporary Native and European observers debunked these tales as outright lies, in some respects this general storyline appeared to predate later cannibal performances of the Kwakwaka'wakw *hamatsa*, as recorded by Boas and others. Donald also makes much of the dried trophy severed hands and skulls that were sometimes offered by the Natives as items of trade. While most historians and anthropologists today readily accept at least the possibility of ritual cannibalism, such as the tasting of blood or flesh of a fallen enemy or an executed captive, the more outrageous stories circulated among the competing fur traders and also recorded by some rather gullible Spanish observers who interviewed Europeans without actually visiting the Natives do not merit much attention. Indeed, more thoughtful English, Spanish, and other commentators who actually studied the question of indigenous anthropophagy dismissed the idea of gustatory cannibalism.

That Donald has resurrected old stories circulated by the fur traders to advance his theories about slavery, without having added any new evidence, does nothing whatsoever to advance either historical or anthropological knowledge. Moreover, the impact is extremely negative for Northwest Coast Indigenous peoples today, whose memory record does not extend back to the eighteenth century. Donald states: "The eighteenth-century Mowachaht material is important because it suggests that cannibalism was a fully developed cultural practice at the time of the first European contact" (177). In fact, the evidence referred to was most certainly not Mowachaht but European, and the use of qualified suggestion does

little to modify the stigma of these stories or to place them in a proper perspective. As a result, readers of the present study who lack much background in Northwest Coast history may well adopt a calumny advanced by late eighteenth-century writers and dismissed by most modern historians.

There are other worrisome aspects of Donald's large-scale slave systems that require further examination. First, there were few eighteenth-century eyewitness reports of Natives engaged in activity that could be described as a major slave trade. During the 1780s and 1790s, fur traders and explorers in coastal waters were ubiquitous from Alaska to California. Although the traffic in human beings may well have increased dramatically in the first half of the nineteenth century, this took place at a time when the Indigenous cultures had begun to suffer major dislocations caused by epidemic diseases such as smallpox. Incidentally, despite the claims of some historians there is no evidence (as Donald argues) of the Spaniards introducing smallpox in 1775 at Bucareli Sound, Prince of Wales Island. Second, while the Spaniards did purchase Native women and children with the intention of using them later as translators and to save them from imagined cannibal banquets, there were few healthy Native men on offer. Frequently, the Spaniards stated that the Native children and women they purchased were captives taken in wars rather than slaves. The Spaniards wrote quite a bit on this topic because there were some concerns among senior Spanish officials in New Spain that marine officers, soldiers, and seamen might have purchased Indigenous women and children with the intention of reducing them to peonage or even slavery. Investigations satisfied officials that this

was not the case. In a word, most Spanish officers acted with high motives in mind and had no intentions, as Donald intimates, of becoming slave owners.

Despite its controversial aspects and flaws, Donald's book is bound to be of interest to specialists in Northwest Coast history. They can decide for themselves the importance and place of Aboriginal slavery; the existence or non-existence of cannibalism; and whether or not, as a statement on the dust jacket proclaims, the book

will be a classic. Everyone will agree that there were slaves in pre- and post-contact Native Northwest Coast communities. Few will discount the possibility of at least some ritual cannibalism connected with warfare or other ceremonies. Throughout his book, Donald employs a methodology and approach to studying slavery that will serve as the basis for future discussion and debate among historians and anthropologists. Aboriginal writers and researchers in many fields will have more to say on this subject.

*The Pleasure of the Crown:
Anthropology, Law and First Nations*

Dara Culhane

Burnaby: Talon, 1998. 406 pp. \$24.95 paper.

BY JOANNE DRAKE-TERRY, *Lillooet, BC*

The *Pleasure of the Crown* invites readers to feast on an array of unorganized information about the role of anthropologists as expert witnesses, their testimony in *Delgamuukw v. The Supreme Court of British Columbia*, and First Nations legal battles to have their Aboriginal title and rights recognized. Unfortunately, Talon decided to call Dara Culhane's musings a "history of the Aboriginal title issue in British Columbia," which it is not.

The author's manuscript was in press on 11 December 1997 when the Supreme Court of Canada rendered judgment in *Delgamuukw v. The Queen*. The court decided seven major issues and ordered a new trial. Talon's

failure to halt publication of *The Pleasure of the Crown* until Culhane's opinions could be weighed against the ruling of the Supreme Court is unfathomable. For example, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized the strength of the oral history evidence of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en chiefs and elders. Yet their testimony was largely ignored in *The Pleasure of the Crown*. Culhane chose instead to elevate the importance of "expert witnesses" in page after page of her book. As one instance, the testimony and credentials of Crown anthropologist Sheila Robinson are referenced on at least seventy-five pages.

Culhane's commitment to a particular position prevents her from