

Book Reviews

A Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend: A Short History of Myth Collecting and a Survey of Published Texts, by Ralph Maud. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1982. Pp. 218; illus.

The reader interested in B.C. Indian literature who has found Murdock and O'Leary's *Ethnographic Bibliography of North America* intimidating — or has not found it at all — will find Ralph Maud's *A Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend* an entertaining introduction to the field. This book is a popular guide with an academic format. It also has an academic theme, i.e., that in the written presentation of myth, both in scholarly and popular contexts, much of the character of the original performance has been lost. In surveying works belonging to four genres of myth presentation — scholarly collections published by ethnologists, popular anthologies compiled by laymen, anthologies and other works authored or co-authored by Indian people, and text analyses presented by linguists — Maud looks for “reliable texts which are interesting *in themselves*” (p. 16; Maud's emphasis).

It is a very complex act of translation which is required to bring a myth from oral performance to written text, from one language to another, and from one aesthetic tradition to another. Maud is aware of the recent work in ethnopoetics and he clearly favours the approaches to myth used by Dennis Tedlock, Barre Toelken and Dell Hymes. Everyone who writes down a myth engages in an art of translation, and while Maud is disappointed with what has been done in the past in regard to Indian mythology in British Columbia, it is not always clear what his criteria for successful translation are. He finds Boas' 1897 report of the Kwakiutl winter ceremonial magnificent, but criticizes it (justly) for being relatively impenetrable by the uninformed. He appreciates Clutesi's artistry in *Potlatch*, but would have preferred “a stark documentary.”

It is the subtitle of this book, however, which actually sums up its approach. It is not a survey of the thematic or poetic aspects of B.C.

Indian mythology, but a brief history and assessment of the collecting of myth in British Columbia. Maud has used the collectors themselves as principal points of entry into the corpora, in some cases giving as much weight to their biographical characteristics as to the scope of their work. In consequence, the reader often just gets comfortably into consideration of one author's work before moving on to the next. This, in itself, is not serious, but Maud has approached aspects of his topic with a certain insouciant bias, which can make what he has written not only superficial but also unjust. This is particularly true in the case of Franz Boas.

Maud gives space in several chapters to consideration of Boas' work, for as co-ordinator of the Jesup Expedition Boas initiated, supervised, collected, collated or edited most of the scholarly compilations of myth which exist for British Columbia Indian people. In an earlier publication Maud brought together the works of Charles Hill-Tout, whose ethnological work Maud considers was unfairly condemned to obscurity by Boas' refusal to find a place for Hill-Tout in the Jesup Expedition. This concern is expressed again in the present book.

Ancestor worship makes for pretty dry reading, and Boas can take a little criticism. Many an ethnologist has lamented Boas' persistent refusal to synthesize; others have regretted his dry and heavy English prose style, and no doubt some have privately wished he had been a little more frivolous. But to say, as Maud does (p. 47),

He resisted Hitler propaganda on the racial question with all the power of his mature authority; but the world does not associate the name of Boas with "racial equality," as it does Darwin's with "evolution," Marx's with "communism," and Freud's with "the unconscious."

is flatly unfair.

Boas was 75 years old when Hitler came to power. He had for many years fought against antisemitism in the United States. But if Darwin's business was evolution and Freud's was the unconscious, Boas' business was anthropology and its development. It would have been possible for him to concentrate on topics with anthropology (such as myth) which did not demand that he write specifically on the subject of racial equality. However, Boas gave as much energy to the study of physical anthropology as he did to myth scholarship, and between 1890 and 1915 he pursued studies which established, in scientific terms, that there was no basis for the theories which assigned different potential to individuals on the basis of race. He published his findings in both scholarly journals and popular articles.

Boas, and the reader, would have been better served had Maud placed Boas' writing within its own context, which was early twentieth-century anthropology, for in collecting myth Boas was interested in resolving questions pertinent not only in folklore scholarship but in anthropology at large. These interests had significant effect on the form in which the myths were published.

It is perfectly valid to wish that Boas and others had paid more attention to aspects of performance, but this underlines a perennial problem in ethnology. We are often forced to address today's questions to yesterday's data, and when we do we find that yesterday's data were gathered to answer yesterday's questions.

Maud is not afraid to consider the motives of scholars in recording myth or in choosing one text over another, but in place of analysis there is often freewheeling speculation. Some of it is very hard to accept, e.g., that Morice avoided full recording of Carrier mythology because "the old imaginative cosmology [was] too powerful. With their own epic intact, the Carrier would not be a lost tribe, needing to be saved" (p. 16). Surely when missionaries went to work among a people, their principal concern was not that their people had no cosmology but that they did not have the right one.

The history of anthropology in B.C. may have to await a treatment of greater balance and depth, but this book is intended to be a guide as well as a history. The interested reader will find references to virtually all of the salient collections of B.C. Indian myth. The emphasis is on collecting and presentation rather than on analysis, and while some analytical papers are mentioned, others, particularly the works of Lévi-Strauss, are omitted.

One of the major problems with the ethnological literature of British Columbia is that it is largely inaccessible to the layman. Ralph Maud's *Guide* will certainly help to correct this. There is no comprehensive bibliography, but publication data for the many works which are cited are given in the text and footnotes. The summary of the Jesup Expedition publications midway through the text and the summary of field trips and resultant publications at the end will also undoubtedly be useful.