

Book Reviews

Wisdom of the Elders: Native Traditions of the Northwest Coast, by Ruth Kirk. Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986.

My comments on *Wisdom of the Elders* are based on my experiences among our people, the Kwakwaka'wakw, over a number of years. Since 1979, as curator of the U'mista Cultural Centre, I have been actively involved in cultural programmes, including language and oral history, primarily with our old people. I know much less about the Nuu-chah-nulth and Nuxalk and would be very interested in hearing the response of members of these groups to Ruth Kirk's work.

I object strongly to the use of the term "Southern Kwakiutl" in describing the people in our cultural area. It is not a modern term for us, as Kirk claims; rather it is very much a part of the series, *Our Native Peoples*, which Yorke Edwards, in his foreword, states had become dated by the 1970s. The U'mista Cultural Society does not "propose" the name Kwakwaka'wakw, as Kirk suggests — we use the name, as part of our efforts to educate the world that Kwagu'ł refers only to the people who live at Fort Rupert. Bill Holm, author of *Smoky Top: The Art and Times of Willie Seaweed*, is among the recognized Northwest Coast experts who use our term for ourselves. If Kirk readily accepts Nuu-chah-nulth and Nuxalk as our neighbours' terms for themselves, why persist in using an anthropological term for us, who are the Kwakwaka'wakw?

Both Yorke Edwards and Ruth Kirk explain that the reason for focusing on three particular groups is based on their similarities. As the same similarities are shared by all the other Northwest Coast peoples, this does not seem adequate justification for the selection made.

I have a little trouble with the title of Kirk's book. In our language, the word for "old people" is a perfectly respectable one, and we use it to refer to those on whom we depend to teach and support us in our various activities. There is no comparable word in Kwakwala for the English "elders," yet the latter term seems to be part of the modern usage which

also inaccurately describes our traditional big houses as "long houses." In her preface, Kirk acknowledges the help of a number of "Southern Kwakiutl" people who, given the title of her book, might be assumed to be "elders." Of the ten named, only four qualify as old people, according to age; the rest are younger than I am.

While it may not be necessary to consult any person who is quoted from taped interviews held by the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, one would expect that common courtesy would prevail. An example is a quotation from an interview with Agnes Cranmer, who was not consulted by Kirk.

There are a number of generalizations in *Wisdom of the Elders* which are unacceptable. Mortuary poles were not known among our people and, as far as I know, were used only among northern tribes such as the Haida. Kirk gives the impression that this burial practice was common on the Northwest Coast. She refers to the origin myth of my father's people, the 'Namgis, as if others shared this beginning. The fact is that all of our separate groups have their own myths to explain who they are. Nor is it correct to imply that all coastal people believe that Raven released the Sun, as Kirk states. Again, this legend belongs to some, but not all.

In using the Nuu-chah-nulth term for white people, Kirk gives the impression that all coastal groups shared this term. Our word, mama'la, comes from the Nuu-chah-nulth name, muh-mu'ni. However, people north and south of us have different terms, such as the Hiłdzakw word, kumsiwa, which has been anglicized in the name Cumshewa Inlet.

There are basic errors, such as the name of the man whose photograph appears on page 101. It is Coon, not Koon. Incidentally, herring roe is gathered either on kelp or hemlock boughs, not on seaweed, as stated in the caption and again on page 119. Mungo Martin died in 1962, not in 1965, as Kirk has it on page 29. In describing a potlatch in Alert Bay, Kirk says, "Inside, bleachers or folding chairs accommodate a few hundred people, or a thousand or more, depending on the occasion and location." In fact, the maximum seating capacity of our big house is about 650, although we have enlarged the building since its original construction in 1963. Among the many questions that I was left with after reading *Wisdom of the Elders* was: Did Ruth Kirk ever attend a potlatch in Alert Bay's big house?

A couple of Kirk's own statements about her book sum up my reaction to it. She says, "... there is enormous audacity in an outsider attempting to summarize anyone's cultural history" and "Culture comes from human

convictions and experience; it fits only partially onto paper." Perhaps if Kirk's audacity had not been so enormous, the result might not have fit so partially onto paper.

U'mista Cultural Centre

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Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth, by Doreen Jensen and Polly Sargent. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, in association with the UBC Museum of Anthropology. Museum Note no. 17. 86 pp., 49 figs., 25 colour pls. 1986.

Robes of Power is the first book about the button blanket. In fact, it is probably the first publication devoted exclusively to this distinctive form of native art. For too long the white world has expressed an archaic bias in its passion for Northwest Coast Indian art. Because they are constructed of trade materials — flannel and buttons — these ceremonial robes have gone largely undocumented and uncollected. But unlike Haida argillite, another of the region's "arts of acculturation," they are created for native use. Though their precise history is still poorly understood, button blankets were a creative and imaginative adaptation of exotic materials to traditional ceremonial practices, supplementing and eventually supplanting earlier robe forms of bark, fur, hide, and twined fibres. *Robes of Power* is thus of interest for its attention to history and change, a new focus in the scholarship of Northwest Coast native art, and it goes far in its revision of persisting scholarly biases. Moreover, it is powerful and exciting testimony to the lively union of tradition and innovation among contemporary Northwest Coast peoples.

Essentially an exhibition catalogue, *Robes of Power* was produced in association with a display which originally opened in Australia and was later (March 1986) installed at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. Both authors are associated with the 'Ksan cultural centre at Hazelton, B.C. Doreen Jensen, the Gitksan artist, appears to have been the senior author, assisted by Polly Sargent, listed as a "senior researcher for the Book Builders of 'Ksan," and one of the centre's founders. The volume is divided into three main sections (which the authors liken to the structure of a potlatch): "Requests," laying out the defining terms of the project; "Responses," comprising commentary from the blanket makers and historical statements from tribal elders; and "Results," a final summary review. Also included are seven brief essays