

Book Reviews

A Death Feast in Dimla-Hamid, by Terry Glavin. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990. xiii, 200 pp. \$24.95 cloth.

Terry Glavin learned a valuable lesson from the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en. Instead of a history that details the events of a few, he has learned that history is the story of nations, of people. And he has learned that history doesn't progress along a linear path beginning at some arbitrary date.

In the case of the First Nations, that arbitrary date has been the arrival of Europeans on the lands of the Americas. In this history, the peoples of these lands lived in some sort of suspended animation, "in the mists of time." In this history, First Nations only came into being when Europeans arrived to give us a purpose, that is to become Europeans.

In *A Death Feast in Dimla-Hamid*, history begins long before the arrival of Europeans. It begins in the origins of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en, and of the great city known as Dimla-Hamid to the Gitksan and as Dzilke to the Wet'suwet'en.

Dimla-Hamid, or Dzilke, was an ancient city state that existed at the meeting of the Skeena and Bulkley rivers. It was a city that was vibrant with people thousands of years ago, long before the Europeans say we arrived in these lands.

And though the streets and houses no longer stand, Dimla-Hamid is still with us today. The lessons of those days, the very names, the stories, have been passed across the ages, from generation to generation.

The story of Dimla-Hamid is especially important today. Dimla-Hamid was abandoned those many years ago because of wars and environmental upheaval, because the people no longer respected the living beings that sustained them. As Mas Gak says, "Dimla-Hamid is a physical thing, but it didn't occur just once or twice. . . . It's happening right now."

It is here that Glavin has learned his lesson well. He is able to understand that what is occurring within the territory of my people is a new Dimla-Hamid. He weaves the many strands of history together, juxtaposing the very ancient with the very recent, letting history echo through

today. What he has done is taken the oral history of the Gitksan and Wetsuetin and put it on paper.

I remember as a child sitting and listening to a gripping history of an ancient time, and suddenly being brought back to the now, only to be sent back in time by the mastery of the old people's oratory. They would always finish by bringing us back to the present, with the moral message, connecting the history with philosophy, impressing on us the lessons of the ancients, so we could learn from their folly and their achievement.

As such, *A Death Feast in Dimla-Hamid* is not a usual history book with a linear beginning, middle and end. The book is a tribute to the way in which the old people record and tell history, which makes it no less accurate. In fact, this book would be useful in schools as a history text book. It details the arrival of the Europeans and the legislation and other facts that outline the relationship between the First Nations and the Europeans.

The book is a window where one can glimpse the complex Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en court case around jurisdiction and ownership over our territory. Here it is made clear that our case is about our territories, but tied to that is our philosophy, our world view. We want to protect these territories and use them wisely, with all those that live within those boundaries.

At times I wept as I read the book. Especially when it tells of the injustice over the years. Glavin lists the many laws, legislation, and policies that have sought to hoard rather than share this land with the First Nations. For instance, "In 1889, as the Fishing Canning industry began its boom on the West Coast (of British Columbia) the fishing companies from the coast's indigenous peoples . . . were the only reliable fishermen . . . so the Fisheries Act provided that . . . Indians could no longer sell fish or own fishing licenses, they could only sell fish to those companies." Such information gave validation to the heavy feeling in my soul.

It is important to note that Glavin experienced and recorded the good humour that is an integral part of Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en daily life — including the most difficult and darkest of times.

Glavin also experienced and recorded the ignorance and misunderstanding of some local non-Natives about the issues that we are trying to deal with. The resulting racist attitudes are testimony to the failure of the education system to include the true history within its curriculum.

Glavin provides the reader with another way of looking at history and politics, and for this reason *A Death Feast in Dimla-Hamid* is a most important and useful publication.