

## Book Reviews

*The Curtain Within: Haida Social and Mythical Discourse*, by Marianne Boelscher. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989. Pp. 234; 12 plates.

The Haida, like most Northwest Coast native groups, have a special interest for anthropologists. Unlike other hunter-gatherers who were highly mobile and egalitarian, traditional Northwest Coast peoples lived in permanent villages and had elaborate systems of social ranking and ceremonies. They lacked institutionalized government, but political office existed in the form of hereditary town and lineage chiefships. Much of the struggle for and maintenance of power took place in the context of ritualized exchange of material goods and symbolic property—the system usually referred to as potlatching.

*The Curtain Within* is an ethnography about the Haida, based on fieldwork done with the Masset Haida from 1979 to 1981 and again in the fall of 1983 for the author's doctoral thesis in anthropology at Simon Fraser University. The book explores the "ongoing function of Haida political life, expressed not so much as formal institutions, but as a style of discourse and symbolic action" (vii).

The "content" of Masset political culture, according to Boelscher, is the battle for the entitlement to tangible and intangible property, not simply the amassing of property for its own sake or the validation of rank, as is often thought. This battle for rights to property is shown to permeate marriage choice, adoption, and the values by which people conduct their lives. It also burdens the relationships of Masset lineages and moieties with constant factionalism and disputes over legitimacy of rank and leadership. This tendency was aggravated by the severe population depletion that occurred during the nineteenth century and the clustering of the tattered remnants of distinct villages in Masset.

Lineages and branches are described symbolically as having "something like a curtain hanging between them" (44), closable yet flexible. It is an ambivalent symbol acknowledging both tension and interdependence.

The rhetoric of these tensions carries into the realm of myth and names and, by the act of recording, into the realm of ethnographic literature and land claims. For instance, the origin of the territory name K'aawas, as reported by anthropologist John Swanton in 1905, according to people affiliated bilaterally to K'aawas, was said to have been derived from the story of a woman who had many children, "just like herring eggs" (47). Rev. Charles Harrison, however, wrote in 1925 that the name was due to the fact that K'aawas men were small of stature and thus were called the "herring spawn people" (47). Boelscher interprets this later, contradictory account as reflecting the rhetorical aims of a politically competitive lineage in K'aawas.

Chapter 4 presents us with intriguing instances of chiefs who would describe themselves as slaves in an effort to enhance the prestige of their audience and, by association, themselves. Even the answer, "we are all chiefs," to questions about chiefly rank is interpreted as a way of increasing the status of one's lineage in front of strangers or an opposing lineage. One is particularly struck by the possibility that early explorers and naïve anthropologists were taken in by such politically laden talk.

Unlike more traditional ethnographies, the voices and debates of the anthropologists and their models are highly audible amidst the stories of the Haida themselves. By answering Bourdieu's challenge to anthropologists to focus on the role of process and practice in its concepts and models of culture, Boelscher is critical of the symbolic structuralism so prevalent in Northwest Coast studies. In addition, the works of early ethnographers such as Boas and Swanton are seen to be overly concerned with the recording of myths and oral culture (5). This early "salvage anthropology" meant that the political and social aspects of culture, "how actors use symbols consciously in seeking social goals" (5), were often ignored. By analyzing the recorded myths of the Masset elders and hereditary chiefs and by linking them to the dynamics of contemporary political life, Boelscher attempts to move away from a decontextualized structuralism to a more general political economy of knowledge.

Boelscher never tells us how Masset Haida entitlement to political rank or role is ever decided. Amidst all the conflicting claims, someone eventually does become chief or moves up a rank. Is it the supernatural encounters, potlatching, parents' potlatching, quality of potlatching goods, public scrutiny or the social order that decide political legitimacy?

Amidst the description of a highly dynamic cultural life, Boelscher feels that the symbolic and social interaction of the Haida "remains the same" through "decades of oppression by white society." Perhaps the work's reli-

ance on discussions with the elderly hereditary chiefs and their relatives has elicited a particularly "traditional" perspective, one which Boelscher extrapolated to all forms of symbolic and political life. Viewing any culture from "the top down" might also contribute to the emphasis on Masset culture as a forum in which claims to hereditary rank and lineage hierarchy are played out. The voices of the Haida Masset's young people and the descendants of commoners, slaves, and minor-crest groups are missing in this work.

The frequent use of Haida words in much of the book's analysis will daunt the general reader, as might some of the anthropological vocabulary. However, *The Curtain Within* is well worth the extra work. The various tables of kin terms, calendars, and names are excellent and the conclusions intriguing. Readers, moreover, will never be able to read or listen to a Haida story again without questioning its meaning or the message it conveys.

*University of Toronto*

ANNA DE AGUAYO

*Trail to Heaven: Knowledge and Narrative in a Northern Native Community*, by Robin Ridington. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988. Pp. xv, 301. \$29.95.

How are we best led to understand the normal experience of radically different peoples? We may listen to what they say; but without a deep grasp of the premises they use to frame their experiences, we will miss the intentions behind their words. We need an interpreter of premises, and the interpreter needs an extraordinary ability to translate not words but an idiom of experience characteristic of the cultural "other" into our own idiom. Even more, the translation must speak to us in terms that will engage our interest, suspend our disbelief, and open up to a widened universe of human discourse.

It is no wonder, then, that this effort at translation is a very difficult book to describe in the brief compass of a review. Like the traveller's accounts of past centuries, it is a romance, written for a broadly educated reader more than for professional colleagues, inviting us to vicariously participate in their observational experiences. Unlike these earlier accounts, it is also an experiment in modern reflexive ethnographic *reportage*, with emphasis on the subjective experience of the author. It could be labelled post-modern, though this halo may not be helpful and is in any event