

T'EKILAKW AND WUXWUTHIN:

Or, How We Got the Northwest Coast's "Wilderness" So Wrong

COLL THRUSH

*Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use
and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America*

Douglas Deur and Nancy J. Turner, editors

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005. 384 pp. Illus. \$44.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Clam Gardens: Aboriginal Mariculture on Canada's West Coast

Judith Williams

Transmontanus 15, series editor Terry Glavin

Vancouver: New Star Books, 2006. 112 pp. \$19.00, paper.

IN INTRODUCTORY ANTHROPOLOGY classes throughout the twentieth century – and likely in many places in the twenty-first – we have often been told the same story: that the people of the Northwest Coast were special. Blessed with the natural abundance of a temperate coastal ecosystem, these peoples, unlike virtually all other hunter-gatherers, had established complex, hierarchical societies based in large, permanent settlements. Salmon, eulachon, berries, clams, deer, camas, and so on: these people had it good, and to observers academic and otherwise, often seemed somehow more “civilized” for it. Although scholars have been working for decades now to break down two of the assumptions at the core of this rather persistent misunderstanding of Northwest Coast societies (first, that there is a hierarchy of cultures ranging from “simple” to “complex” and second,

that the region’s natural resources are uniformly distributed in both time and space), a third assumption – that the Coast Salish, Tlingit, Chinook, and other Northwest Coast peoples were in fact truly hunter-gatherers (or, more correctly, hunter-fisher-gatherers) has remained largely unquestioned.

The publication of *Keeping It Living* by Douglas Deur and Nancy J. Turner and *Clam Gardens* by Judith Williams is, however, going to change that. In these books, the authors have collected the results of research throughout the region that appears to confirm something that, for those who believe in the hunter-fisher-gatherer story summarized above, will come as quite a surprise: from the Columbia River to Southeast Alaska, from the intertidal zone to mountain meadows, the Northwest Coast was as much garden as wilderness, and its Aboriginal

inhabitants were less passive collectors of resources than they were active managers, and even enhancers, of ecological abundance. Deur, Turner, Williams, and their collaborators, indigenous and otherwise, have brought together here a body of material that has the potential to transform not only our understanding of indigenous societies of the Northwest Coast (and elsewhere) but also our understanding of the nature of Nature in the region. In short, they point out just how wrong most of us have been about this place and its first peoples.

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At the heart of *Keeping It Living* is a series of detailed case studies examining the human ecology of specific resources and places. The late Wayne Suttles contributes one of his final pieces of writing, providing strong evidence that Coast Salish people managed plants such as camas and rice-root lily and that individuals, families, and communities often owned specific plots of land. He then examines whether such practices should be considered agriculture and, if so, whether or not particular practices were introduced along with new plants, such as the potato. Ultimately, he finds evidence both for and against an indigenous Coast Salish agriculture. Melissa Darby, meanwhile, examines the rich documentary record regarding the harvesting of wapato along the Columbia River and suggests that here – as well as along the Fraser River – Aboriginal peoples actively intensified the growth of the potato-like wetland tuber through dispersal of rhizomes and seeds and the control of predators such as muskrats and waterfowl.

Dana Lepofsky and her colleagues provide an extremely detailed examination of anthropogenic fire in the

upland huckleberry meadows of Stó:lo territory, while James McDonald's case study of the Tsimshian community of Kitsumkalum documents the importance of intensively managed plant resources to the people there, contradicting most outsiders' convictions that the Tsimshian were fishing people who did not practise cultivation in any meaningful way. Madonna L. Moss finds evidence of horticulture and gardening even among the Tlingit, whose territories are far less suited to such activities than are those of other Northwest Coast peoples but who nonetheless found ways to make intensive use of specific plants and sites (including, again, the introduced potato, for which some Tlingit were famed). Finally, co-editor Douglas Deur describes the estuarine gardens of the Kwakwaka'wakw, using both archaeological and linguistic evidence to show how community gardeners created new shoreline habitats for edible plants such as silverweed and springbank clover. Such places were known as *ʔekilakw* ("place of manufactured soil") in Kwak'wala, an indigenous word that itself makes the book's point: that the Kwakwaka'wakw and other peoples of the Northwest Coast actively created abundance through their own labour.

Taken together, these case studies not only make a very clear case for the pervasiveness of plant cultivation on the Northwest Coast and for the diversity of environmental management practices throughout the region, they also serve as fine examples of interdisciplinary research. In each case study, the researchers make use of a wide range of evidence – including oral tradition, linguistics, archaeology, soils analysis, historical documents, climate data, and more – to document what are often extremely subtle impressions left on the land by Aboriginal practices.

Anyone interested in learning or teaching the methods of indigenous or environmental history would do well to visit these chapters, which are models for finding traces of human activity amid the background noise of a dynamic environment.

The case studies in *Keeping It Living* are preceded by four conceptual essays that provide context, both intellectual and ecological. In the first, Bruce D. Smith summarizes – and in many cases, criticizes – the various theoretical models that have been used by anthropologists and others to define, measure, and describe horticultural and agricultural practices around the world, and he examines the extent to which the case of the Northwest Coast supports, refutes, or simply confounds those models. Next, Kenneth M. Ames argues that researchers should examine the archaeological record more carefully as many forms of resource intensification (such as labour reorganization) leave little physical trace and that plant foods were likely one of the only ways in which Northwest Coast peoples could directly and predictably create new resources for themselves. Co-editor Nancy Turner and her colleague Sandra Peacock provide an overview of what is currently known about cultivated plants and cultivation practices in the region, providing a synthesis that will no doubt be a standard reference point for environmental and indigenous historians of the region for years to come. Last in this section, Turner, this time with Robin Smith and James T. Jones, offers compelling evidence for both extensive and intensive systems of land and resource ownership among Northwest Coast peoples and discusses the interactions between these systems and those of the newcomers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In both its conceptual chapters and case studies, *Keeping It Living* builds significantly on Robert Boyd's *Indians, Fire, and the Land in the Pacific Northwest* (1999), which reprinted a number of older works, as well as M. Kat Anderson's magisterial *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources* (2006), which treats a neighbouring region's terrestrial environments. While this growing body of scholarship on the environmental history of Aboriginal North America can be controversial in that its findings sometimes run counter to the noble savage stereotype – witness the vigorous and even rancorous debates over Shepard Krech's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (2000) – I am convinced that the notion that indigenous peoples transformed their ecological surroundings does not diminish their present-day claims to land, water, and resources. On the contrary, this history in fact strengthens those claims by drawing attention to their wealth of ecological knowledge and their labour – their “improvement” of the land, to borrow from the homesteaders' lexicon. My sense is that the authors in *Keeping It Living* would agree; many of them highlight the centrality of seemingly narrow and arcane subjects (“Were they or were they not true agriculturalists?” “Did they or did they not manage the huckleberry meadows?”) to issues as enormous and practical as the BC treaty process. At its core, the extent to which indigenous people created the landscape of the province is inextricably linked to their continuing claims to that landscape.

There are perhaps even larger implications of this research. In his article on Coast Salish agriculture, for example, Wayne Suttles questions the utility of

using a European (or, more broadly, an Old World) model of agriculture as the measuring stick for peoples in other places. As a corollary of sorts, Bruce D. Smith notes simply, “Not all roads lead to agriculture” (59). Suttles, Smith, and others in this volume are thus not only documenting the rich traditions of plant use and cultivation on the Northwest Coast, they are also using the evidence of those traditions to question the persistent teleology of “civilization,” in which human societies necessarily progress from one phase (e.g. hunter-gatherer) to the next (e.g., agriculturalist). It is here that *Keeping It Living* has lessons for those whose work has nothing at all to do with the Northwest Coast.

Breaking free of the narrative of progress can be challenging, however. Note, for example, anthropologist Eugene Hunn’s comment on the back cover of *Keeping It Living*: “A most welcome addition to the literature on the nature of the evolutionary transition from hunting-gathering-fishing modes of production to those based in great measure on agriculture.” Like many in his discipline (and, ironically, like most of the Indian agents whose records I have worked with as a historian), Hunn, like a few of the authors in this volume, continues to struggle with evolutionary models that may not be particularly useful in describing peoples and places. These models clearly still shape the perceptions of most non-Aboriginal people in the region, from university historians and elementary school teachers to environmental managers and stakeholders in the treaty process. To use a pun, coming to terms with this region’s human and ecological history may require nothing short of an *unsettling* of such models, which at the end of the day relegate Aboriginal peoples to the category of “hunter-

gatherer,” which for many people is just another way of saying “primitive.”

Part of the always interesting Transmontanus series edited by journalist Terry Glavin, Judith Williams’s *Clam Gardens* is in many ways the perfect companion volume to *Keeping It Living*. First, it focuses not on terrestrial landscapes of berry meadows and camas prairies but on the coves and inlets of the BC coast. Second, it more pointedly addresses the inability of non-Aboriginal observers to see evidence of Aboriginal labour on the landscape.

Williams begins her book by recounting a conversation she had with Sliammon elder Keekus (Elizabeth Harry) about a place called Waiatt Bay on the east side of Quadra Island. She then describes her first visit to the place, where she and her guides saw a great wall of boulders and stones that had clearly been built by human hands, creating a shallow embayment that was full of clams. Thus began Williams’s almost obsessive search for more such “clam gardens” throughout British Columbia, working with First Nations up and down the coast and with other scholars, most notably archaeologist John Harper. The result, in Williams’s own words, is “a new story” that is “rife with speculation” (12) but that is also remarkably convincing. The sheer number of gardens she describes in the region stretching from the Strait of Georgia to Desolation Sound is almost overwhelming (and at times a bit repetitive); readers would do well to have a detailed map or nautical chart handy. In addition to describing in detail her own visits to the sites, she includes evidence of significant surviving oral traditions regarding

such places, from creation stories to firsthand memories of harvests, and references to sites in Tsimshian territory and Washington State's San Juan Islands. We learn the words for clam gardens in the languages of the people who built them: *wuxwuthin* in Island Comox, *lo xwi we* ("place of rolling rocks together") in Kwak'wala, and the wonderful "fluffy beaches" in local English. Having focused earlier in her career on other Aboriginal markers in the landscape, Williams writes, "I see pictographs and petroglyphs as a sign of the mind at work in what, if Native mariculture is as extensive as it seems, I can no longer completely refer to as *wilderness*" (78, emphasis in original). Williams effectively repopulates a region that, for most visitors to it, looks like empty Nature; all those summer people with their yachts and their island getaways, in other words, are in for a bit of a shock.

In addition to documenting clam gardens, Williams also explores the reasons that clam gardens have gone unnoticed by the institutions that oversee British Columbia's archaeological and ecological heritage. After all, the butter clams that grow so well in the gardens, many harvested by Aboriginal people, were the backbone of a local industry until the 1980s (and are still one of the main ingredients in the chowder on BC Ferries). And, as she describes, numerous scholars, local historians, and First Nations people had begun documenting clam gardens; however, she notes that only recently have such accounts begun to be compiled into a larger whole and taken seriously. Williams suggests several reasons for this. First, she notes that anthropologists, including Franz Boas, tended to be transfixed by the spectacle of the coast's salmon and oolichan fisheries, and to ignore the

work of women, who appear to have played a major role in maintaining clam gardens. Second, she points towards the problems inherent in bureaucracies that kept clam garden investigators from finding each other and building a convincing case. But she also suggests that it is settler society's perceptions of Aboriginal peoples and places – "hunter-fisher-gatherers" living in a "wilderness" – that have most blinded us to the realities of the indigenous landscape.

Compared with *Keeping It Living*, *Clam Gardens* is the far more readable of the two; Williams is a gifted writer, and her accounts of the places and people she encounters on her quest are evocative, often playful, and occasionally quite moving. Whereas much of *Keeping It Living* is probably best targeted at advanced undergraduates, graduate students, other academics, and tribal and environmental professionals, *Clam Gardens* raises many of the same questions but in language that will be accessible to community members, undergraduates, and perhaps even advanced high school students. Williams's story – and it is written as a story – draws the reader into her journey in a way that *Keeping It Living* does not; it also demonstrates more explicitly and intimately the ways in which non-Aboriginal researchers can engage First Nations communities ethically and in a spirit of true collaboration. It is in many ways the perfect introduction to the more detailed and technical analysis of Deur, Turner, and their co-contributors. For example, I can easily see myself using these books in tandem in my course on Aboriginal environmental history, both for their methodological contributions and for the questions they raise about how the region and its peoples have been perceived by settler society.

Williams's detailed naming of specific sites in the islands and on the coast, along with her inclusion of fairly detailed maps and photographs, does raise some concerns. She notes, for example, that clam gardens seem to become unproductive due to compaction and overcrowding if left untended for long periods of time, as has happened with several sites she describes. The risk now could be the opposite: should the story of the clam gardens really get out, it seems to me that overharvesting could easily strip and destroy the gardens that have until now been ignored by non-Aboriginal people. The nature of her relationships with Aboriginal collaborators, though, suggests that they have given permission to reveal these sites in *Clam Gardens* as a way of documenting traditional uses in the broader public arena. It would not be the first time this has happened: Williams includes the example of Kwiksootainuk Chief Johnny Scow, who in 1914 provided a detailed list of "clam stations" to the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs (the McKenna-McBride Commission) in the hope of maintaining access to those places. Williams makes it clear that the story of the clam gardens is closely linked to Aboriginal claims to territory and resources. Her final sentence states that "this primary mariculture technology of the Northwest Pacific should be protected for the descendants of those who created it" (119).

In the late eighteenth century, George Vancouver marvelled at the landscapes he saw around Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia, noting the ways in which they resembled the gardens and parks of England, almost as though they had been created by a human hand. Of

course, Vancouver was thinking more of the work of British landscape architects like Capability Brown, the pursuits of Georgian gentleman-farmers, and the hand of Providence. The irony is that his description, it turns out, was more accurate than he could have known, even if the hands involved were those of Coast Salish women and men rather than the Christian deity. And, of course, Vancouver had not the slightest inkling of the clam gardens (although two of his crew did die from paralytic shellfish poisoning).

How a settler society perceives the original inhabitants of its territory, and its perceptions of that territory itself, fundamentally shapes power relations and the policies that undergird them. On the Northwest Coast, Vancouver's initial misapprehension of this region and its peoples continues to resonate into the present. A detailed, comprehensive accounting of the history of this seeing-but-not-seeing on the Northwest Coast, in which colonial observers of Aboriginal peoples and ecological systems have so often overlooked the cultivation practices taking place all around them, is perhaps beyond the scope of *Keeping It Living* and *Clam Gardens*. But Deur, Turner, and Williams, along with their colleagues and collaborators, have begun moving us in that direction in their accounting of *t'ekilakw*, *wuxwuthin*, and other traditions, and they remind us that such misperceptions have very concrete ramifications for land claims and ecosystem management practices. Their work, meanwhile, has intellectual ramifications well beyond the Northwest Coast, suggesting that long-standing and pervasive concepts such as "wilderness" – along with "hunter-gatherers," "agriculture," and even "civilization" itself – may be in need of a bit of pruning.