

# A Note on the Contributions of Wilson Duff to Northwest Coast Ethnology and Art

MICHAEL M. AMES

Wilson Duff, Professor of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and a leading Northwest Coast specialist, died 8 August 1976 in his fifty-second year. He was well known and widely respected for his work, both by professional scholars and by the British Columbia native peoples about whose history and cultural tradition he wrote and taught.

Duff spent his entire professional career on the Northwest Coast — a “home-grown anthropologist”, he once described himself — moving freely between museums, universities and native Indian communities. He obtained a B.A. degree from the University of British Columbia in 1949 and a Master’s degree in anthropology in 1951 from the University of Washington, under the direction of Dr. Erna Gunther. Associated with the British Columbia Provincial Museum as Curator of Anthropology from 1950 until 1965, Duff then accepted a teaching position in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of British Columbia. He pursued a successful career in teaching and research at the university until his death. His course on the Indians of British Columbia was one of the most popular ones offered by the department.

Duff played a pioneering role in the development of anthropology in British Columbia. Obtaining his baccalaureate only two years after the first anthropologist, Dr. Harry Hawthorn, was appointed to the faculty of the University of British Columbia, Duff was a founding member of the British Columbia Museums Association — one of the most active museum societies in Canada. He served as its vice-president from 1962 to 1963 and its president from 1963 to 1965. He chaired the provincial government’s Archaeological Sites Advisory Board from 1960 to 1966, and served on the provincial government’s Indian Advisory Committee from its inception in 1963. He also edited the Provincial Museum’s important *Anthropology in British Columbia* series from 1950 to 1956.

Wilson Duff was proud to be a close friend of Indian peoples as well as a student of their history and culture, and he endeavoured to make his knowledge serve their interests as well as those of the museums and uni-

versities in which he worked. The "Indian point of view" was important to him. He served from 1960 as a consultant for the Kitwancool tribe, and was an expert witness in the Nishga land case before the B.C. supreme court in 1969. He also convened and chaired a symposium on Ethics in Anthropological Fieldwork at the 1969 Northwestern Anthropology Conference, in which he and other participants expressed concern about the relations between anthropologists and those whom they studied. He was critical of anthropologists and museums.

Duff served on the joint B.C. Provincial Museum and UBC Totem Pole Preservation Committee that in the 1950s purchased and salvaged some of the last remaining poles in the Queen Charlottes. He surveyed totem poles of southwestern Alaska for the Alaska State Museum and the Smithsonian in 1959, and in 1971 directed a project to record Indian history of southeastern Alaska for the Alaska State Museum.

Throughout his career Duff maintained a close association with museums and galleries, helping to plan important exhibits and new buildings. He participated in the planning and design of the new B.C. Provincial Museum, though he left that museum before the new building was completed. He also participated in the early planning of the new Museum of Anthropology at UBC, which opened to the public slightly more than two months before his death. Since joining the faculty at the university, Wilson Duff participated in the design and execution of two major exhibits that have helped to change our interpretations of Northwest Coast art and culture.

Duff's concern with the native history and culture of British Columbia never wavered, but his interests did gradually change from empirically oriented ethnography and ethnohistory to a more subjectivist appreciation and analysis of artistic forms. His first major publication was a 1953 monograph on the Upper Stalo Indians, a meticulous piece of ethnographic reconstruction based on his Master's thesis. One of his final and most ambitious publications was the 1975 catalogue for his stunning exhibit of prehistoric British Columbia stone sculpture. He apparently experienced some difficulty reconciling this transition in his work. Duff's next major publication after *Upper Stalo Indians* was a 1956 monograph on prehistoric stone sculptures, a work that foreshadowed his 1975 exhibition and catalogue, *Images: Stone: B.C.* In 1960, he edited a modest volume entitled *History, Territories and Laws of the Kitwancool*, a pioneering attempt to make anthropology more useful to the people who normally are its subject matter. The authors of this 45-page volume were the Kitwancool themselves, a Gitksan group. Duff coordinated the

collection and publication of their traditions as one of the services the Kitwancool requested in return for allowing their old poles to be removed to the B.C. Provincial Museum for preservation. Exact copies of the poles were also to be returned to the Kitwancool for installation in their villages. Duff remained a respected friend of the Kitwancool for the rest of his life.

The first (and only) volume of his projected work on the Indian history of British Columbia was published in 1964. It is in continual use to this day as a standard text and reference work. That same year, Duff's tribute to and analysis of Marius Barbeau's contributions to West Coast ethnology appeared in *Anthropologica*. Duff had a number of personal reminiscences of Barbeau which, unfortunately, he never committed to writing. He had also obtained a copy of Barbeau's *West Coast Field Notes* and made these available to Dr. Marjorie Halpin for her doctoral thesis on Tsimshian crests (*The Tsimshian Crest System: a study based on Museum specimens and the Marius Barbeau and William Beynon Field Notes*, 1973, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of B.C.). His last major ethnographic works were his 1969 Alaska totem pole survey and his *BC Studies* paper on the Fort Victoria treaties. In the latter he characteristically attempted to "take a hard look", in the light of Indian history and culture, at the eleven Fort Victoria treaties of 1850 and 1852 by which James Douglas extinguished the Indian title to land surrounding Victoria, Vancouver Island.

Duff's developing interest in Northwest Coast art, both as "high art" and as a subject for deep analysis, was represented by his instrumental role in two major exhibitions in 1967 and 1975, by the publications that resulted from those shows, and by his university teaching and off-campus lecturing in recent years.

The 1967 *Arts of the Raven* show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in which Wilson Duff collaborated with artist Bill Reid and artist-anthropologist Bill Holm, was seen by many, including Duff, as a turning point in the appreciation of Northwest Coast art as "high art". "The shift in focus from ethnology to art," Doris Shadbolt noted in her foreword to the exhibit catalogue (Duff, Holm, Reid, 1967), "has been slower of accomplishment in the sculpture, painting and related arts of the Indians of the Northwest Coast than in other primitive cultures." It was this exhibit, Wilson Duff wrote eight years later (1975:13), that was "the threshold over which Northwest Coast art has come into full recognition as 'fine art' as well as 'primitive art' ". (One should also mention in this context the Audrey Hawthorn and J. A. Morris "People of the Potlatch" exhibit

at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1956. Duff also assisted in that exhibit.) We can never see Northwest Coast art the same again because of those exhibits.

This process of "redefinition" or "discovery" of high civilization on the Northwest Coast, to which Duff contributed so much, reflected his deep respect for native peoples and cultures. It is "part of the long overdue granting of recognition," Duff observed in reference to the *Images* exhibition (1975:24-5), "to the full and complete humanity of the people who originally lived here. . . . With the 'Arts of the Raven' show, we granted their artists credence as producers of high art. Perhaps our eyes were not even then completely open." With the *Images* exhibition, he continued, "we come a step further, and begin to grant their artist-philosophers credence as people of intellect and mature wisdom. To the existing proof of the prior claim in Indian presence in Canada may be added, however poorly understood, the evidence of thirty centuries of hard thinking."

The *Images* exhibition, which travelled east after its showing in Victoria and Vancouver, was a tour de force. It was a retrospective show of "the best surviving work of the artists of the last thirty centuries" prior to the arrival of the white man in British Columbia. Just as "Arts of the Raven" documented the high artistic qualities of 19th and 20th century Northwest Coast art, so this exhibit was to unequivocally demonstrate the same truth for Northwest Coast prehistoric stone sculpture. The exhibit was spectacular and Duff's analysis penetrating and audacious. It was a great success. There no longer could be any question about the "high art" and "hard thinking" qualities of Northwest Coast Indian culture during both prehistoric and post-contact phases.

"A study of the text which follows," said Richard Simmins, originator of the exhibition, in his foreword to the catalogue (Duff, 1975:8-9), "gives only a partial insight into the contributions of Wilson Duff . . . who was the professional consultant to the exhibition. It was only after seeing a few of the prehistoric stone sculptures of British Columbia and studying his early researches (*Anthropology in British Columbia*, No. 5, 1956) that I knew the exhibition could be assembled. Duff has given it form and coherence, tempering my enthusiasm with scholarly caution. His understanding is based upon more than 25 years of exposure to the art and culture of the Pacific Northwest; mine upon excitement of the unknown art I discovered for myself."

*Images: Stone: B.C.* was Duff's last major publication. It reflected his growing interest in the deep analysis of the logic of Northwest Coast art, an approach that benefited from both the structuralism of Levi Strauss

and the psychosexual theories of psychoanalysis, and which he characterized, reflecting his own empiricist background, as "anthropology with a great deal of artistic licence" (1975:12). The task Duff set for himself was to break through the surface meaning of objects to their "deeper" or "inner" meanings. "What do the images mean?" To attempt an answer is a "hazardous enterprise for one who values a reputation for scholarly discipline". But it is an attempt one nevertheless must make "to burst the chains of long-felt frustration".

This stone art, he said, Northwest Coast art in general, and, indeed, all other primitive arts equally remote from our own experience, have "remained as closed books for all too long, resisting our efforts to find the deeper meanings which we feel intuitively to be there. The best that I can offer are my own audacious imaginings about the meanings of the images. Imagination creates images in the first place; perhaps imagination and hard thinking are the keys to what they mean."

Duff had been searching for some years for that "additional level of meaning" in Northwest Coast art which lay beyond the manifest one of crests and mythological heroes. Perhaps it is to be found, he said, in a "system of inner logic" residing in the style and in the internal structure of individual works of art. "It is as though each is an equation wrapped as a single bundle. It constructs its statements upon the interplay between its parts, and between the literal and metaphoric meanings of its images." It uses inherent structural and conceptual dualism in the artifacts and images, such as outside-inside, head-body, front-back, part-whole, male-female, penis-vulva, and life and death (1975:14).

If Levi Strauss is correct in saying that the "savage mind" is really a scientific mind that uses natural images to create a "science of concrete", then, Duff maintained, the sophisticated primitive "artist-thinkers of the Northwest Coast" have developed an "advanced mathematics" of the concrete. In addition to the well-recognized representative and decorative functions of Northwest Coast art, this art had come to be "an arena for abstract thinking, a half-secret dialogue, a self conscious system for diagramming logical paradoxes, and therefore a medium for exploring by analogy living paradoxes in myth and life" (*Ibid.*). Duff had come closer than most others to cracking the code of that inner logic.

Duff's recent work on stone sculptures was actually a brief interlude, though a brilliant one, from his more lengthy researches into the work of Charles Edenshaw and other great Haida artists. He reported to the university in 1973 that he had by then accumulated enough material "for several books and many articles" on Haida art, and this past year he

advised colleagues and friends that his book on Edenshaw was "almost finished". Duff was never to complete that work. He was as uncertain about the value of his recent interpretations as he was sometimes audacious in their statement. Though he had developed a deep knowledge of Northwest Coast cultural traditions, he was never at ease with the comparative and theoretical perspectives that would have enabled him to place this knowledge in a wider context of discourse.

Wilson Duff left his personal mark upon many people and a scholarly legacy for us all. He will be long remembered. Future generations of students will build upon the foundations he provided.

#### PUBLICATIONS OF WILSON DUFF

From 1950 to 1956 Wilson Duff was editor of *Anthropology in British Columbia*, a publication of the Provincial Museum, Victoria, B.C.

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