

# THAT ALSO IS YOU

## *Some Classics of Native Canadian Literature*

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ONCE UPON A TIME there was one small island, nothing more. The gods were clinging to it, clustered together like bladderkelp and barnacles, so thickly they could scarcely breathe. And the Raven, tied like a baby in his cradle, was floating on the sea. A voice called out to him, and he wriggled up from his martenskin blankets and looked around. In the midst of the endless flexing and rolling of the ocean, his cradle thumped and scraped against something solid. It was tall and thin and stretched as far as he could see below the waves that broke over the top of it. It was stone, and the stone was full of faces he had never seen outside his dreams. He clambered down it into deep water. In the wet twilight in front of him stood a house, and a voice came through the doorway, saying in the Haida language, *Hala qách'i t'ak'in'gha*:<sup>1</sup> "Come inside, my grandson." *Digha dá gyasildaghásas danggha kúingagan*: "From me you will borrow, to you I will give."

In the house beneath the sea, he met an Old Man White as a Gull, who spoke to him again in Haida. But what the Old Man said to him next was something the Raven did not fully understand.

*Dí hau dang íji. Wáasing dang íji*: "I am you," the Old Man said, "and that also is you." He gestured as he said this toward something slender, blue as air and green as beachgrass, that was moving around the carved screens at the rear of the house, like a heron choosing a fishing hole.

"Bring me that box," said the Old Man, "from the corner behind you."

In the sides of the box which the Raven brought were faces, with faces in the eyes, and in the eyes of the faces in the eyes, another set of faces. Inside the box was another box, and inside that box was another. Five in all, and inside the fifth box, side by side, were two round objects, one black and one speckled. The Old Man wrapped a full five fingers around each of them and held them out to the Raven, like stones in a hawk's claws, one in each hand.

"Lay these on the water, the speckled one first," said the Old Man. "But before you lay them down, take a bite out of each one, first the black one, then the speckled."

When you lay them on the water, spit the pieces you hold in your mouth at the parts you have been holding in your hands.”

Squeezing the two round objects in his fists, the Raven climbed back to the surface of the sea. He bit the speckled object first, and then the black one, and set the black one down on the water and the speckled one beside it. And he spit out the bits he had chewed, but they bounced away. He picked up the two round objects, which were out-of-round now, and tried again. Black one first, bite, speckled one second, bite, speckled one first, float, black one, float, spit, and the speckled and black objects wrinkled and stretched across the water, becoming the Mainland and the Islands. Lichens blossomed over the rock. Forests of red cedar, spruce, hemlock and pine appeared, and blueberry bushes and cranberry bushes and ferns, and stands of wild apple and alder. And the gods swam up to make homes for themselves in the cliffs, the reefs, and the creek mouths, out of the endless expanse of the sea.

Much later on, when the Raven wanted some company at a feast, he introduced human beings onto the land. John Sky of Tanu used to say they were groping about in the darkness under the earth, and the Raven called them up to the surface by beating a drum, in the four corners of the house that belonged to his uncle Sghúlghuqúna. Others say he discovered the males and created the females by mating the males with shellfish he found on the beach at low tide. Those islands have been known since then as Haida Gwai — *Xáida Gwai*, as it is written in Haida. *Gwai* means islands, and *Xáida* has three concentric meanings. It means the Haida, as distinct from the Kwakiutl, the British, the Athabaskans, the Chinese; and it means human beings, as distinct from black bears, salmon, red-shafted flickers and killer whales. It also means the inner nature of everything living, because in the science of the Haida, not only the Raven but every creature possesses, in its inner life, beyond our superficial observations, human emotions and intelligence and form.

WHEN EUROPEANS FIRST SAILED into Haida waters, late in the eighteenth century, Haida Gwai harboured a wealthy and settled culture of mesolithic seahunters. Their language bore no obvious relationship to any other spoken anywhere on earth, but their mythology, their oral literature, their music and dance and visual art were intimately linked with those of the Tsimshian, the Tlingit, and the northern Kwakiutl, who populate the rest of the coast of northern British Columbia and southeastern Alaska. The archaeological record suggests that this pattern of life had developed in situ without radical change over some 2,500 years. The record of human habitation in the Islands extends at least 5,000 years beyond that,<sup>2</sup> and still earlier sites may exist, though they are likely to be under water.

For several decades after Europeans discovered the place, the visual art of the Haida and neighbouring cultures flared with exhilarating brightness. The primary reason was the sudden injection of wealth and new technology, in the form of metal tools; a secondary reason was the new cross-cultural market for souvenirs. While this brief light burned, silence descended. The intellectual and literary world of the Haida came abruptly to an end.

Discovery, as the word is used in American history, has taken an odd meaning little connected with learning. The corresponding verb in Haida, *gáhl*, like its counterpart in Homeric Greek, *heurískein*, is tinged with wonder and fear. These words portend new visions, new knowledge, and with it the promise that the discoverer will be discovered in his turn: changed in ways that cannot be foreseen. In American history, these changes and their conscious realization have been repeatedly deferred and frequently aborted. To say that Haida Gwai was discovered in the eighteenth century therefore means both worse and less than it might. It means that a number of traders and entrepreneurs, Christian missionaries, naval officers, sailors and admiralty clerks learned of the Islands' existence as a source of raw materials and colonizable lands and souls, but not as a world inhabited by human beings whose knowledge and traditions differed instructively from theirs. None of the early European visitors undertook to investigate Haida culture, even for reasons of counterintelligence, as Bernardino de Sahagún had explored the culture of the Aztecs 250 years before.<sup>3</sup> The commercial, institutional and territorial frontier was discovered, while its implicit other side, the intellectual and spiritual frontier, remained unseen.

An assortment of imported names — Nova Hibernia, Washington's Isles, Islas Infante Don Fernando — was imposed on the Islands by competing colonial cartographers. The name that stuck is the one contributed by a British merchant seaman in 1787: the Queen Charlotte Islands. He knew, I suspect, that his name would be read as a gesture of patriotism — that he would seem to have christened the Islands in honour of England's non-English-speaking queen — when in fact he was naming them for his ship, the *Queen Charlotte*, in which, after the first season of trade, he carried away from Haida Gwai some 2,000 sea otter skins. The sea otter population of the Islands a century later could be measured not in thousands but in ones or tens. To discover, in this sense, means to strike it rich and leave it poor, and to leave the learning for later. The corresponding Haida word is not *gáhl* but *ch'is*, used of gamblers when they win.

Current maps show Haida Gwai, the Queen Charlotte Islands, as the westernmost extremity of Canada, but to some of us who live on that coast now, they are also the region's spiritual capital: nothing like Rome, and not much like Jerusalem, but something like a rainy, untouristed Cyclades, Eleusis, Delphi, Thebes.

Haida society as Europeans first encountered it was divided into two strictly exogamous sides — *g'wal* in Haida — known by their primary crests, the Eagle

and the Raven; but there is evidence in Haida mythology that this rigid bilateral structure was not the only social order the Haida had ever known. The sides were composed in turn of several dozen families or clans (*gwaigyaghang*) with names such as Qáiahllánas (Sealion People) and Q'únaqíghawai (Those Born at Q'úna), each sharing in the general body of Haida mythology and each with a tributary narrative tradition of its own. It was also a stratified culture, with *kilstl* (spokesmen or chiefs) and *ít'gha* (princes, both male and female) at the top, and at the bottom a class of humans treated as chattels: *xaldanga*, captives, or as it is usually translated, slaves.

The practice of slavery is often cited as evidence of Haida barbarism, and even as evidence that exploitation or missionization was just what they needed and deserved. I am not sorry that the institution has lapsed, and I am not promoting its revival, but I think it is worth remembering that, so far as we can tell, slavery among the Haida was never a racist phenomenon, like the slavery still practised in South Africa and formerly in the United States. Nor was it, as in feudal Europe or antebellum Georgia or the Transvaal, a structural feature of the economic system. *Xaldanga* appear in Haida literature more often in the role of trusted factors and managers than as victimized labourers. In the myths, their shamanic powers often exceed those of their masters, and they are usually treated with wary respect, like the swineherd Eúmaios in the *Odyssey*.

At the other extreme, there are also stories of slaves being publicly murdered in fits of ritual ostentation; but episodes of that kind never occur in the myths; they are confined to lesser genres — the soap operas and pop autobiographies that are also part of Haida oral literature. It is probable, on the evidence, that in Haida Gwaii in the nineteenth century the ceremonial murder of slaves was a fairly recent aberration, and clearly it was not routine, just as it was not routine for Hebrew patriarchs like Abraham and Jephthah nor Greek commanders like Agamemnon to make ceremonial offerings of their children. The captivity of most *xaldanga* was evidently temporary, and its motives were pride and greed: the social posturing of the captor, and the chance of collecting a ransom.

Power was also divided asymmetrically between the sexes in traditional Haida culture, and there were certainly cases of sexual oppression. Men frequently took precedence over their wives in daily affairs, while the underlying systems for the inheritance of wealth and worldly power were entirely matrilineal.

In short, Haida society at the moment of European contact was in several respects like ours: it was wealthy, and it was disfigured in particular by materialism, pride, and social ambition. It was not utopia, nor wilderness, nor a state of noble savagery. And it was not what Europeans have preferred to call it: a New World. Haida culture, with its foibles, cruelties, and peculiarities, had been thousands of years in the making. But its human failings — which, being little different from

ours, have few secrets to tell us — matter less in retrospect than its artistic and intellectual achievements, which differed from ours a good deal.

ONCE, IT SEEMS, there was scarcely a stream or a reef or a cove, or a species of fish or mammal or bird, that lacked its place in the multi-dimensional web, the narrative map of relations between the Haida and their world. Even now, abused as it is, the land is thick with images and stories, rich with meanings beyond the reach of history. But few of these remain in living memory.

On the heels of the fur traders and the military vessels came the missionaries, the smallpox, the whalers, then the miners, homesteaders, loggers. Each plague has had its effect. The native population was probably six or seven thousand at the beginning of the nineteenth century. By the end of the same century, it was six or seven hundred.

Just at that moment, when the old culture was breathing its last, in the autumn of 1900, a young anthropologist named John Swanton arrived in Haida Gwaii. On commission from Franz Boas, curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, Swanton spent nearly a year in the Islands, learning everything he could of Haida culture. And Swanton had a particular gift, rare among anthropologists, for putting oral poets and storytellers at ease. Like all the early anthropologists on the Northwest Coast, John Swanton was a man, and the stories he heard were told exclusively by men. The picture he gives us of Haida literature is inevitably incomplete, but most of the narratives he collected are uncommonly full and well told. He was also — so far as I can judge, after learning almost everything I know of the language from him — an extraordinarily scrupulous, graceful translator.

Franz Boas, an early refugee from German anti-Semitism and an ardent believer in racial equality, was nonetheless little interested in the contributions which individual tellers make to the tale. He repudiated the notions of Western supremacy and world progress popular among laymen, researchers, and educators alike during his time, but he was interested in art and oral literature purely as evidence for the variety and interrelations of the cultures from which they sprang. I think he found individual artistry little more than a distraction. Ambitious, impatient, proud, but relentlessly persistent, Boas nevertheless understood the rapidity with which the ancient cultures of the Northwest Coast were dying. His salvage operation, conducted with cold-blooded urgency by mail, by proxy and in person, ran from 1886, when he made his first trip to the coast, to 1942, when he collapsed in mid-sentence at the age of 84.

To Boas and to other scholars whom he provoked, promoted and funded, we owe most of our knowledge of Northwest Coast mythology: the most coherent and

intricate body of mythical thought that has been salvaged from the pre-colonial world of northern North America. To John Swanton — modest, patient, self-effacing, but similarly persistent, and a much better listener than Boas — we owe our knowledge of one crucial part of this heritage: the culture of the Haida, and in particular their oral literature. It is the most accomplished and best documented body of aboriginal oral literature from anywhere in Canada. The only other accumulations of native North American narrative which seem to me of similar breadth and intensity come from the American Southwest, where scholars like Bernard Haile, Gladys Reichard, and Ruth Bunzel have recorded the rich and durable oral literature of the Pueblo peoples and the Navajo.

There is no guarantee that the oral literature of the Haida, the Hopi and the Navajo was inherently greater than that of other groups, like the Squamish or Paiute or Tutchone. The recording of native American oral literature was necessarily haphazard. It required the coincidence of poets and storytellers — some better and some worse — with anthropologists — some interested but incompetent, some competent but impatient, and a few who were patient, well trained, and very lucky. John Swanton was one of these few, and out of the holocaust suffered by the Haida, the fruits of his skill, talent, and luck descend to us. No one of Swanton's calibre collected stories among the Squamish until Aert Kuipers's work with Louis Miranda in the 1960s — nearly a century too late. Nevertheless, on the evidence available, it seems clear that Haida oral literature had the monumentality, subtlety, gravity, restraint and the sly, involuted humour of Haida and Tlingit visual art: features far more conspicuous there than in the surviving art and literature from the interior of British Columbia or from farther south along the coast. The best of the extant Haida narratives, like the best of the extant rattles and poles, are, as the Haida say, *nágwighagwí q'itá*: they are fluently and deeply carved.

**A**MONG THE HAIDA POETS who told stories to Swanton during 1900 and 1901, two stand out as masters. They are Walter McGregor of the Qáiahllánas<sup>4</sup> and John Sky of the Q'únaqíghawai.<sup>5</sup> Both belonged to the Eagle side of the Haida, and both were probably born between 1830 and 1840. They lived at a time when European activity in the Americas was almost entirely predatory, and during their lifetimes the ancient world to which their stories belonged was destroyed. Yet those same years saw a powerful reawakening of archaic thought in Europe. Sky's and McGregor's contemporaries include Charles Darwin, Elias Lönnrot, Nietzsche and Yeats, Van Gogh and Matisse, the archaeologists Heinrich Schliemann (who excavated Troy and Mycenae) and Marcellino de Sautuola (who with the aid of his young daughter discovered Altamira), as well as anthropologists like E. B. Tylor, James Frazer, and Boas himself. Their spiritual children

include such students of the prehistoric as Carl Jung, Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso, and Joan Miró.

We have names for very few pre-colonial Canadian poets and storytellers, and for none before the nineteenth century. Even then, their native names are almost always lost to us, like the rich sounds of their voices. We know them instead by bizarre colonial labels like Moses and Abraham, Albert and Charles, Stevens and Sydney — gifts of a missionary culture that promoted European social conventions as zealously as it promoted the Christian religion. But the names of John Sky of the Q'únaqíghawai and Walter McGregor of the Qáiahllánas should be known to students of Canadian literature as the names of Homer and Sappho, Aeschylus and Sophocles are known to all who study the literature of Europe. Yet another among their contemporaries was one of the greatest Haida visual artists, and again the earliest of the great carvers for whom we have a name: Charles Edenshaw (1839-1924).

Like all Haida of that period, Sky and McGregor led difficult, dislocated lives in a decomposing world. Soon before or after their birth, smallpox epidemics halved the Haida population. A further epidemic during their youth halved it again. As the population collapsed, villages were amalgamated or abandoned until, by 1900, only two Haida communities remained. McGregor was born at Qaisun, on the northwest coast of Moresby Island, and probably raised, with other refugees from that village, at Haina, on Maude Island, in Skidegate Inlet. John Sky came from Tanu, on Tanu Island, off the east coast of Moresby, but he probably spent the late 1880s and early 1890s at a temporary settlement called New Kloo, on the north coast of Louise Island. Like the other surviving Haida from throughout the southern archipelago, both Sky and McGregor had moved to Skidegate Mission<sup>6</sup> by 1900, when John Swanton came collecting.

Swanton published the fruits of his year with the Haida — two volumes of stories, a volume of songs, a general ethnology and a preliminary grammar — between 1905 and 1912.<sup>7</sup> He left in manuscript the rough beginnings of a very small bilingual dictionary. But he was able to publish bilingual texts of virtually all the stories told to him in the northern (Masset) dialect. He prepared his full collection of Skidegate dialect stories for bilingual publication as well, but only thirteen of the seventy were actually printed in Haida, and the others issued simply in English translation. The Haida texts of these stories survive in manuscript — except for one very important missing page — in the library of the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia. Added to the published texts, these manuscripts double the extant body of classical Haida literature. I hope there are more of Swanton's Haida transcripts to be found, since there are many odds and ends still unaccounted for. But among the unpublished materials at Philadelphia are half a dozen stories by John Sky and nine by Walter of the Qáiahllánas. These include Sky's version of the

Raven epic, *Xúya qagángas*, and his story of the weather god of Hecate Strait, *Nangldástlas*, “the Slender One Given Away,” two masterpieces of oral literature and models of anthropological transcription. The same manuscript hoard includes the Haida text of Walter McGregor’s beguiling story *Ghángghang lanágha gha nang xilit ch’inhlgwangxhidághan*, “One Who Hunted Birds in His Father’s Village” — well known to students of native American literature in Swanton’s English translation, thanks to a book-length study by Gary Snyder.<sup>8</sup>

These titles, incidentally, are not museum tags affixed to the stories by Swanton. In literature as in visual art, the Haida distinguished between themes central to the culture and themes with which it was acceptable to mess around. Swanton’s findings suggest strongly that each important story possessed a discrete identity, a title, and at least an approximate place in an ideal, if unrealized, hierarchical order. The myths were named and seated with care, like important guests at a Haida banquet or houses in a Haida town. Lesser yarns, including those which comprised the “young man’s” portion of the Raven epic, could be strung together more haphazardly.

Much as I revere the work of some of my elders and colleagues among colonial Canadian writers, I do not see that any of us has produced anything better — anything more deserving of close contemplation, discussion, and praise — than those stories told by ancestors so close I can touch their graves, I can drink from the streams and eat from the waters and forests they knew — and yet so far away I do not even know how their friends and their children addressed them. If there is such a thing as Canadian literature, actually distinct from the literature of Europe, John Sky of the Q’únaqíghawai and Walter McGregor of the Qáiahllánas are two of its earliest and greatest classical authors.

It would be a great pleasure, therefore, to publish the unpublished texts from Swanton’s files — hundreds of pages of some of the most enigmatic, poignant and beautiful narrative I have ever encountered — but the pleasure would be tempered slightly by the knowledge that at present no one could read them.

During the early decades of this century, children from all the native nations of the Northwest Coast were forced into boarding schools, where they were generally forbidden to speak their own languages, to maintain the traditional proprieties of moiety separation and clan distinction, or to draw, carve and paint in native forms. Their elders, during the same years, risked imprisonment for celebrating traditional winter ceremonies. The law which forbade native Canadians to perform the central rituals of their culture remained in force for more than sixty years, lapsing only in 1951. What remained of traditional Haida culture, after the population had suddenly shrunk by a factor of ten, was effectively stilled by this means.

Nevertheless, about the time that the Potlatch Law expired, a few young whites and Indians were beginning to rediscover the vocabulary and grammar of the



visual art of the Northwest Coast. One artist in particular, Bill Reid of the Q'ádasghuqíghawai,<sup>9</sup> and one scholar in particular, Bill Holm of the University of Washington, have resuscitated that art, partly through contact with those who remembered it, but chiefly through study of works preserved in museums.

There is now a substantial resurgence of the traditional visual art — at least in its outward form. More recently, there has also been a political reawakening in Haida Gwaii, provoked by the threat of continued logging. But the literary legacy of the Potlatch Law, the boarding schools, the smallpox epidemics, and the white colonization of the Islands remains. There seem to be no fluent speakers of the Haida language among the young or middle-aged, and no one alive speaks the rich, archaic language in which John Sky of the Q'únaqíghawai and Walter McGregor of the Qáiahllánas sang their songs and spoke their tales.

Perhaps the art of telling the stories can be relearned, like the visual art, from library specimens. The language itself can also be studied, like Sanskrit, Latin, Greek and archaic Chinese, and I can testify that it repays the labour a thousandfold. But to rekindle it from such slender remains into living form, like Hebrew or Gaelic, would require a major miracle. A native carver can now make a living by recreating traditional forms, either in European media such as bronze, precious metal or silk-screen prints, or in the native media of red cedar, alder, argillite and abalone shell. No artist now makes a living by way of his mastery of a native Canadian language. These economic facts help to explain why Charles Edenshaw has at least one eminent successor, the sculptor Bill Reid, while Sky and McGregor, to the best of my knowledge, have none.

In some of the Algonkian and Athabaskan languages, and in Inuktitut, where the number of living speakers is much larger and their median age lower, the situation is potentially much different. In many communities, stories are still told in the native languages, and at least in Inuktitut, Cree, and Ojibwa, radio programs are broadcast, newspapers published, documents written. These are all cause for hope, because they are agents as well as signs of linguistic survival. But even where native literacy is widespread, years of religious and commercial missionization have pushed the ancestral languages to the edges of the field. In written form, they are rarely used except for ecclesiastical and Christian liturgical texts, or for journalism, public relations and administrative tasks. (I remember, for instance, that in 1987, when a Cree and Ojibwa publishing house seemed about to take form in northern Ontario, the Canada Council was persuaded to open its funding programs to writers and publishers of literature in aboriginal languages. This proved to be a false alarm, and no writer or publisher working in a native language has yet applied for the funds.) Writing is not literature, literacy is not culture, and the continuation of storytelling also does not signify the survival of an oral literature in the developed sense of the term.

WE KNOW ALMOST NOTHING about the training which myth-tellers like Sky and McGregor received, and very little about the training even of visual artists like Edenshaw. That they were trained is obvious nevertheless in the character of their imagination and the quality of their craftsmanship. The difference between the handling of sacred stories by poets like Sky and McGregor on the one hand and, on the other, the spinning of yarns or summarizing of myths by raconteurs on the margins of the tradition is a glaring and categorical difference, difficult to miss even when the style is masked by translation. In the original transcriptions, these differences are not only obvious but confirmable to skeptics by cold stylistic analysis.

How much such analysis can teach us about traditional Haida prosody still remains to be seen,<sup>10</sup> but a few lines even in silent transcription will show some of the surface features typical of traditional Haida narrative. Here the poet is John Sky, and the context is the episode from the Raven epic, *Xúya qagángas*, with which we began:

- Gyanhau l qáahlaiwas.  
 Hlqyáma qáji sq'asting hlghít l gáighaghadángdyis.  
 Gyanhau gut la qágaiyasi.  
 T'ís gyaghang qáji sting gut t'aghaní la qágyas.  
 5 Gyanhau gut la qát'álasí.  
 Sagái lághan ghíidas ghangáxan chighan'gai lághan ghíidasi.
- Gyanhau nai q'yúgi la gyáxatl'xasi.  
 Gyanhau laghan la gháguyingch'aiyaghan.  
 "Hala qách'i t'ak'ingha.  
 10 Dígha dá gyasildaghásas danggha kíngagan."  
 Gyanhau gíla qách'áasi.  
 Tajxhwá nang q'áiyaga sq'in gangáng ghída q'áuwas.

This is to say, in a fairly strict though sometimes uncertain rendering:

- Then he sat up.  
 A kelp with a double head: against it he was floating.  
 Then he stepped onto it.  
 A stone housepole with two heads: on it, you see, he was standing.  
 5 Then he descended it.  
 How it was to him above is how it was to him below.
- Then a house: in front of it he was standing.  
 Then out of it a voice came to him calling.  
 "Come inside, my grandson.  
 10 From me you will borrow, to you I will give."  
 Then he went in.  
 At the back an elder, white as a gull, was sitting.

The Haida had many kinds of song, and they borrowed or purchased lyrics freely from the Tsimshian, but their narrative poetry, so far as I can determine, was always spoken or declaimed instead of sung or chanted. The narrative verse, if we should call it that, is syntactically rather than metrically patterned — but in this, as in its terseness and laminar progression, it resembles the narrative poetry of several, possibly all, other indigenous Northwest Coast languages. By far the most common thematic unit is a short sentence or clause which begins nonchalantly with a continuative particle — usually *gyan* or *gyanhau* (“and then”) — and builds to a greater or lesser semantic crescendo in the sometimes simple, sometimes highly elaborate agglutinative verb. Many other devices, including symmetrically paired predicates (as in lines 6 and 10 above) and balanced but asymmetrical pairs constructed of noun phrase and predicate (lines 2 and 4 above), are used to vary this general texture of “verb-stopped lines.” As even this modest sample shows, in the hands of an artist like John Sky, these duple forms and other variations on the standard verse-sentence may be cunningly and closely fitted to the theme. (The two-headed kelp appears in a two-headed sentence, and so on.)

These crisp, economical clauses, like Charles Edenshaw’s ovoids and Homer’s hexameters, are the fruit of a long and well-tended tradition still urgently alive in the hands of an individual artist. The narrative language to which they belong permits continued improvisation and invention, but the fruit depends upon the vine. The reticence and formality of these narratives is as foreign to the world of bedside and campfire storytelling or impromptu reminiscence as it is to the world of the naturalistic novel or the descriptive, impressionistic first-person poem.

NO TRADITION OF NATIVE LITERACY ever developed in Haida Gwaii, so the question of how or whether the oral style might be adapted to written Haida never arose. But written literature had an early start among the neighbouring mainland cultures. Franz Boas, not surprisingly, served as a kind of midwife at its creation. Nevertheless, the lives of the early native writers remain almost as obscure as the lives of the oral poets — and again we know them only by substitute, acculturated names. The earliest and, I think, the most important native writers of the Northwest Coast are George Hunt, writing in Kwakwaka, and Henry Tate, writing in Tsimshian.

Hunt was born at Fort Rupert, British Columbia, in 1854 and died in 1933. His mother was Tlingit and his father Scots, but Hunt was raised among the Fort Rupert Kwakiutl and spoke Kwakwaka as his mother tongue. He was also an initiated hamatsa — a member of the Kwakiutl winter dance society. Boas met him on one of his early field trips, probably in 1888, and a few years later hired him to assemble an exhibit for the Chicago Exposition. Along with a collection of

Kwakiutl artifacts, Hunt was asked to bring to Chicago several villagers to serve as a "living ethnology exhibit."

In Chicago, therefore, in the summer of 1893, while Hunt stage-managed something between a theatrical troupe and a human zoo exhibit, Boas trained him in ethnological field techniques and linguistic transcription. Hunt then returned to the coast, where he wrote texts in Kwakwaka'wakw and supplied them to Boas, with rough interlinear English translations, for more than thirty years.

Much of Hunt's writing is published in bilingual form, edited by Boas, with collaborative translations. (Hunt is listed in each case as co-author.) Much of his work is also translated and analyzed in Boas's several studies of Kwakiutl culture and religion, but still more remains in manuscript.

Henry Tate, a contemporary of Hunt, Sky, and McGregor, was born and raised a Coast Tsimshian. I do not know the date or place of his birth, but it cannot have been much before or after 1850, and I suspect it was near Port Simpson, where he spent his later years and where he died in 1914. His people were the Gitzaklalth, whose ancestral territory centred on Dundas Island.

Tate learned to read and write his native tongue in the orthography devised by Bishop William Ridley for his Tsimshian translation of the Christian gospels, and like Hunt, he could write rough English as well. He began to sell Tsimshian stories to Boas about 1902, sending his manuscripts to New York by mail, and continued to do so until his death twelve years later. Like Hunt, he earned a steady rate of fifty cents per page.

Boas edited some of Tate's work with a Tsimshian assistant, Archie Dundas, making dialectical alterations and transliterating the texts into his usual orthography. Six stories were published bilingually in this form in 1912.<sup>11</sup> The bulk of Tate's work, however — including his version of the Raven epic, *Txamsem* — has, like most of the work of Sky and McGregor, only been published in English translation.<sup>12</sup> Not one in a hundred students of Canadian literature would recognize Tate's name, but few Canadian writers have received more scholarly attention. Boas's largest book, *Tsimshian Mythology* (1916), is nothing less and little more than a comparative study of the writings of Henry Tate. It is also, I believe, the first substantial study of the work of any Canadian writer, regardless of language.<sup>13</sup>

Boas complained that Tate suffered from Christian scruple, and his stories do sometimes seem pale. But where no overt sexuality is involved, his prose often possesses considerable verve. Hunt's work, on the other hand, suffers from cynicism. Throughout most of his writing career, Hunt also worked for the American Museum as a buyer. Overall, he purchased and shipped to New York some 2,500 works of Kwakiutl art, including some that the Kwakiutl were not anxious to part with.<sup>14</sup> There is something of this subversive disdain in his writing as well. Tate, like Hunt, consulted his elders for stories, but he had no pretensions, as Hunt did, to be an apprentice anthropologist. He did not take dictation, and he had no

ethnological training. He preferred to listen in public and write in private, as writers usually do.

I know of earlier native writers — translators and journalists for the most part — in eastern and central North America, and there is no shortage of early documents. The technology of writing, introduced by missionaries, was very widespread in native North American communities in the nineteenth century. Indigenous writing systems were introduced among the Cherokee by Sequoya in the 1820s, and among the Cree by James Evans in the 1840s, and there were missionary translators at work with the roman alphabet two centuries before that. I do not have the linguistic credentials to assess the resulting Bibles and Gospels (many at least partly by native hands) as works of literary translation. But I have begun to develop a sense of the work of Hunt and Tate, who are both aboriginal writers in the full sense of the word. They committed directly to paper works in a native Canadian language and a native Canadian tradition. They are the first such that I know of — and, to date, they are very nearly the last.

I read Sky and McGregor now in preference to Tate and Hunt, as I read Homer in preference to Virgil. But I want to see the works and the languages of all four of them studied and taught, as Greek and Latin and Anglo-Saxon language and texts are still studied and taught, at least in a few of our universities — not because that is the purpose for which they were made, but because that is the best response and acknowledgement we can now offer them. But no university in the world has yet regarded them in this way. University courses in Native Studies are scarce; courses in native Canadian languages are far scarcer. There is no Centre for the Study of Oral Literature, or Centre for the Study of Aboriginal Literature, anywhere in Canada. And nowhere in the world, so far as I know, is Canadian literature taught with more than a token aboriginal component.

Overall, it seems to me, we have tried very hard to do to ourselves what we did to the Haida. We have tried, that is, to discover everything and to learn nothing: to win big now and to leave the losses for others or save them for later. To burn up the world, and by its furious light, to make fortunes, and even great art, in prodigious quantities, leaving voicelessness, emptiness, storylessness — which is vastly worse than illiteracy — behind.

**Q**'AHLGÁW, THE LOON, is the Raven's mother and daughter. And once upon a time the Loon came up to the surface of the endless sea and gave her piercing, mournful call and went back under. The Loon lived with the Old Man White as a Gull, under the sea, and when she returned to his house the Old Man lay where she had left him, facing the wall, with his back to the fire. Without turning to look at her, the Old Man asked, "Why are you calling?"

"Not on my own account," the Loon said. "But I hear the gods saying they have no place to live. That is why I am calling."

"I will make something," said the Old Man White as a Gull, but he didn't budge. He lay there, facing the wall, with his back to the fire.

Soon thereafter, the Raven was flying over the surface of the sea. In that country, we call the sky *yán qa'án*, the bottom of the cloud, because that is what it looks like most days. But this day, overhead, the Raven saw a clear blue opening. He flew straight up, driving his beak into the luminous roof of the air. It made a sound like a musselshell knife biting into clear red cedar and stuck fast. The Raven pulled himself up over the sky's rim and stepped onto the beach in front of a town. The sky ebbed and flowed in front of the houses just as the sea does here against the land.

In one of the houses of that town, a woman had recently borne a child. That night, the Raven entered the house and skinned the newborn child and threw his bones away and dressed himself in the skin. Then he lay down in the cradle, waiting.

Next day, he played with his new grandfather and drank from his new mother's breast, and he cried for solid food, but they offered him none. That night he wriggled out of the cradle and walked through the town, filling his basket. Just before dawn he returned, roasted his food in the embers and ate it, quietly laughing. His food made a popping sound as he ate it, as if it were fish roe. But no one saw him or heard him except an old woman standing in the corner of the house, who never slept and never moved. Her name was *Nangt'íjhlghágas*, Halfstone. She was stone from the waist down.

Each of the sky people lost one eye that night, and the cries of their grief echoed through the village in the morning. When silence fell, the old woman coughed lightly, wiped her hand on her stone thigh, and told what she had seen.

The sky people dressed at once and gathered on the beach to dance and launch their canoes. They paddled the newborn child out to the middle of the sky, where they wrapped him in a martenskin blanket, laced him back into his cradle and dropped him over the side. He turned round and round to the right as he fell, and as they watched, one-eyed, from up above, his cradle splashed into the sea.

It was dark then, and he slept, and when he woke, he heard a voice saying, *Dang chin'gha qúnigai gwáhláng dang qách'ixalga*, "Your illustrious grandfather asks you in." But when he looked, no one was there.

Again he heard the words and looked and saw nothing. And he heard them a third time and looked and saw nothing. Then he peeked through the hole in his martenskin blanket. This time he saw the Pied-bill Grebe come to the surface and speak the words and go under again.

He untied himself from his cradle and looked around. The cradle was washing up against something solid, slippery with kelp and sharp with barnacles, reaching up from the floor of the sea. He climbed down it into the water. You know the rest of the story.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I am quoting John Sky's version of the story as recorded by John Swanton, from the unpublished Swanton manuscripts at Philadelphia, described in greater detail in the body of this essay.

There is no standard spelling for Haida, and none is likely, because of the wide dialectal differences in the extant texts and in the usage of the ever fewer surviving speakers. Franz Boas's orthography, which Swanton dutifully maintained, is too cumbersome for continued use, and its palette of vowels, as Swanton himself pointed out, is simply inaccurate. The alphabet devised for Kaigani Haida by Michael Krauss and Jeff Leer at the Alaska Native Language Center is blessedly simple, but it requires writing all the long vowels twice, which for extended texts, or even for quoting the titles of clans and mythcreatures, makes it far too greedy of space. The system I have come to use is a modified version of Krauss and Leer's.

In this system, long vowels (which more often than not carry a pitch accent as well) are marked with an acute. The sequence *ng* is a velar nasal, as it is in English, but when a plosive follows the nasalization (as in the English word *bingo*) the plosive is written as an extra letter (the Haida spelling would be *binggu* or *binggú*). When nasalization does not occur and the two phonemes remain distinct (as in English *barngate*), they are written with an apostrophe, *n'g*. Otherwise, the apostrophe following a consonant always indicates glottalization. An apostrophe after a vowel means a glottal stop. *Ch* is pronounced as in Spanish; *dl*, *hl* and *tl* are lateral affricates; *x* is a velar fricative, like the *ch* in Bach; *g* is a uvular *k*; *gh* and *xh* are pharyngeal (or uvular) *g* and *x*.

- <sup>2</sup> The archaeological research is conveniently summarized in George MacDonald, *Haida Monumental Art* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983).

- <sup>3</sup> Charles Harrison's *Religion and Family Among the Haida* (Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland XXI, 1892).

- <sup>4</sup> Qáiahllánas (Sealion People) is a clan of the Eagle side. Its members traced their descent from Qáilnagái, Sealion Town, near what is now called Second Beach, at the south end of the Skidegate Reserve.

- <sup>5</sup> "Those Born at Q'úna," another Eagle clan. Q'úna is the Haida name for the abandoned settlement now called Skedans. Members of this clan were not necessarily themselves born at Q'úna, but all would claim ultimate descent from a house in that village.

- <sup>6</sup> On the site of the old Haida village of Hlghaiulnaghái, "Pebble Town."

- <sup>7</sup> Swanton's Haida publications are these:

1905a *Haida Texts and Myths: Skidegate Dialect* (Washington, DC: Bureau of American Ethnology).

1905b *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida*. Publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, vol. v.1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill).

1908 *Haida Texts: Masset Dialect*. Publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, vol. x.2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill).

1910 *Haida: An Illustrative Sketch* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office).

1912 *Haida Songs*. In one volume with Franz Boas, *Tsimshian Texts (New Series)*. Publications of the American Ethnological Society, vol. III (Leiden: E. J. Brill).

The published works of Sky and McGregor appear in the first of these volumes and are summarized in the second.

- <sup>8</sup> Gary Snyder, *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth* (Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox Press, 1979).
- <sup>9</sup> "Those Born at Q'ádasghu," a Raven clan. Q'ádasghu is a creek on Louise Island.
- <sup>10</sup> The pioneer in the prosodic analysis of Native American texts is Dell Hymes, who has worked primarily with texts in Clackamas Chinook. See for instance his *In Vain I Tried to Tell You* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).
- <sup>11</sup> As *Tsimshian Texts (New Series)*, in the same volume with Swanton's *Haida Songs* (Leiden: E. J. Brill).
- <sup>12</sup> As section 1 of Boas's *Tsimshian Mythology* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1916).
- <sup>13</sup> Louis Dantin published a study of the poems of Émile Nelligan in 1903, and James Cappon a study of Charles G. D. Roberts in 1905, but the former is merely an extended preface and the latter a pamphlet, not expanded to book form until 1925.
- <sup>14</sup> See Aldona Jonaitis, *From the Land of the Totem Poles: The Northwest Coast Indian Art Collection of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: AMNH, 1988).

