
Indians of British Columbia



British Columbia Coast

The story of British Columbia Indians is such a vast subject that many volumes would be required to do it justice, and only a fully trained research worker should attempt the task. In recounting my own experiences it is neither possible nor necessary to give more than a few details and only those which will interest the average reader. Our libraries and museums offer much opportunity for those who wish to pursue the study further.

Living in the midst of the greatest fish spawning grounds in the world, the Coast Indians had access to an inexhaustible food supply, obtainable with little effort. Nature was prodigal in her gifts, providing bountifully materials for handiwork. The all-important cedar tree, spruce, mountain goat wool, shells, stone, jade, horn and argillite were used with marvellous ingenuity for many purposes. Elaborate and involved rituals and secret ceremonies, with emphasis on wealth, prestige and prerogative calling for lavish display, were the very core of existence and provided fertile soil in which their bold, exciting and dramatic art grew and flourished.

The Indian was never a purposeless person—there was thought

and reason in everything he did. His art was part of the pattern of the whole design of life. It was the thing that gave meaning and direction to all Indian customs and ceremonies. Art was the outer symbol of a highly complex social and tribal existence.

The artist worked in constant collaboration with the songmaker, the dancer and the storyteller. He was absolutely indispensable to the rich culture of his race which indubitably accounts for the vigour and magnitude of his achievements.



British Columbia Coastal Scene

[probably an early view of Marine Drive between
Horseshoe Bay and West Vancouver]

Kwakiutl



Kwakiutl Woman Curing Salmon

The Kwakiutl Indians, living on the northern tip of Vancouver Island and part of the opposite mainland and their neighbours, the Haidas of the Queen Charlotte Islands and the Tsimshian of the Nass and Skeena Rivers, produced the finest totem poles that have ever been carved. Nootka Indians on the western coast of Vancouver Island and Bella Coolas on the mainland also made totem poles, but they were less numerous and not as spectacular as those of the above-mentioned tribes.

The Kwakiutl are said to have originated the secret society. Prestige, wealth and privilege were of paramount importance and it was with them that the celebrated potlatch reached extravagant proportions.

Ceremonial dances of the Kwakiutl Indians had their roots in much preoccupation with the supernatural and the mysteries of life. Everything had meaning to them. Dance masks, beautifully carved and painted with natural dyes, represented various creatures in this fascinating world of the supernatural that held such an important place in their interpretation of life. Cedar bark, dyed with the juice of the alder, had secret significance and was always worn with the masks. Blankets worn during the dances were ornamented with gleaming pearl buttons that outlined the owner's principal crests. Singing, the beating of sticks on wood, rattles and whistles of vari-

ous kinds accompanied the dances, each in its own place and to its own dance.

All the dancers “came out” from behind a large ceremonial curtain or screen. There was special meaning to this curtain. It was supposed to contain magic. No one was permitted behind it without permission of the chiefs or nobles. Every dancer had to make a right-hand turn before going back behind the curtain. If one turned left it would invite disaster and something would have to be done about it immediately to ward off evil.

Each person danced by himself or herself, never together. “We do not hug each other when we dance, as white people do,” said an old chief. “Always dance alone.”

Many creatures and subjects of the wild are represented in the dances. There are the salmon dance, the raven dance, the crab dance, the grouse dance, the spirit of the woods dance, the canoe dance, the hamatsa (or wild man) dance, the warrior dance and many others. There is the dance of the little bird that “ripens the berries.” The raven mask comes from above. It is a spirit from the skies with a very long beak. The spirit of the underworld is always in a crawling position.

Indians say that there is a cave on Gilford Island about eighty feet up from the ground where the animals dance. There is a hole just big enough for them to crawl through and when you get inside you see a large room in the rocks. On one wall is the figure of a man with his arms outstretched, palms up, to welcome everyone. This is the secret place where all the wild creatures meet for their ceremonies. When you get inside the cave you must have a branch of salal with you to brush away the evil spirits. If you didn’t do that you would be sick—“maybe die.” At the back of the big cave is a huge, flat stone like the ancient ceremonial screen of the Kwakiutls. You could not leave the cave through the same hole by which you entered but had to go out another way.

In this secret place each animal had its own dance and its own dance mask. They came in one by one and each had its appointed part to play. There was the wolf who came in first, howling, and the raccoon who had to look after the fire. Then came the little mouse who was a sort of watchman. Occasionally he would be sent out to look around to see if any humans were in sight. Animals, fearing humans, could not dance if humans were around. The marten had

his dance as did the kingfisher, the sparrow, the owl, the deer and the fawn. When the wolf howls, the deer and the fawn drop down in terror until all is quiet again. The mouse is sent out a second time and, after being absent a long time, he reports that no humans are about so it is quite safe to proceed with the dancing. The bumblebee comes out with its own inimitable movements, then the mighty eagle and many others. Each had its own dance and the movement of each is uncannily like the creatures they represent when the Indians do the dances.

Chiefs Charley Nowell & Herbert Johnson



Chief Charley Nowell

It is thought that West Coast Indians first came into possession of pearl buttons when early Russian traders, seeking valuable otter skins, came to their shores. With the Indians' instinctive desire for beauty and decoration, they obtained the buttons through barter and used them to outline the crests on their blankets.

A chief's standing in the tribe was governed by the crests he was entitled to use. Additional crests were obtained through marriage. There were many other privileges that the Kwakiutl secured through marriage, such as the right to perform certain dances, to sing certain songs and to receive certain names.

Chiefs Charley Nowell of Fort Rupert and Alert Bay and Chief Herbert Johnson of the Hahwamis tribe were born when the old Native customs were in full swing. They grew to manhood with cen-

turies of traditional behaviour behind them to influence their thinking and their actions. Over a quiet meal in my home they discussed with me the old days and the old ways. Chief Charley spoke fluent English, but Chief Herbert was not entirely at ease except in his own language.

We talked at some length about the potlatch. Speaking for Herbert, Charley said: "He likes to do it, and has done it lots of times. As a chief he wants to be good to all the people—doesn't want to be selfish—doesn't want to keep all the money he earns. He wants everybody to have it. That is what every chief thinks. We don't think it is wrong. We think it is good. When a chief gives everything he has, he never thinks he is poor. He will always have enough. The first thing our parents told their children was, 'Don't spend your earnings foolishly, keep them 'til you get enough, then give them away to other people, and they will look upon you as a good man.' So we know it's good, for we have that advice from our parents."

Potlatch is a Chinook word and it means "to give a present." The Hudson's Bay Company used the word in the early days in connection with barter, but the Indians say they had the ceremony of giving long before the white man came. "Ever since the first man was living after the flood, the Indians have given potlatches," Chief Nowell said.

A potlatch might be given for various reasons: a marriage, a funeral, a coming of age, to raise a totem pole. When Chief Nowell's son died all the people came from different places to bury him. The chief gave a potlatch and gave much money away on that occasion. Later, when his brother died, the people came again and he did the same.

By that time the potlatch had been forbidden by the government as it was felt that it impoverished the Indians, so the chief was arrested and put in jail for breaking the law. But sympathetic friends in Victoria secured a speedy release for him. When his son Alfred was seventeen, he married the daughter of Chief Mamalilikula who gave him 1,000 blankets. Then Chief Charley Nowell gave a big potlatch for the lad and gave away the blankets to the assembled guests.

The last time he gave a potlatch was when his daughter became a woman. This is always a great occasion among the Kwakiutls and

many blankets as well as much money were given away to celebrate the event.

As a very special favour Herbert has given me his own totem pole, which is standing in front of his house at Simoon Sound. It is one of the really old and rare pieces of such art that is left and is in an excellent state of preservation. Money cannot purchase these things but the generosity of the Indians knows no bounds to those they trust and respect. The totem pole stands twelve feet tall and is nearly three feet across, Herbert says.

Such things are not meant for the noise and bustle of city streets, but rather for the solitude and dignity of the woods and quiet waters. Just as soon as fortune favours me with a suitable place to put it, I shall send for the great totem—and who knows that I, too, may give a potlatch when it has been firmly set up in its permanent abiding place? [The pole remained at Simoon Sound.]



Chief Herbert Johnson

Chief of the Bella Bellas



Chief Moody Humchitt

Beautiful, beautiful is the meaning of Bella Bella, and Moody Humchitt, chief of the tribe, was reported to be the “hyas tyee” man of the British Columbia coast.

Hyas, in the Chinook jargon, means “big” and tyee means “chief”; therefore, Moody Humchitt was a “big chief”—not just a common ordinary brand of chief but something special. That was the reason why I wanted to paint him. Everywhere I went, it was the same. Everybody acknowledged that the chief was a very important man. He was a member of the Grizzly Bear clan of the Kwakiutl.

He well deserved his Indian name Wo-ya-la, which means “big potlatch house,” for he had given many a potlatch in the early days. They were grand affairs, too, by all accounts, famous for their size and displays of wealth. Tribes from villages all up and down the coast came at the chief’s call to attend those fabulous functions.

According to the Indian way of thinking Chief Moody Humchitt

came of royal blood. His mother was a lady, a princess, a chieftainess in her own right. His grandfather had been a mighty chief. His father had been a chief too, and, as a chief himself, he was compelled to marry a member of the nobility. It would have been an unforgivable breach of traditional etiquette for one of his standing to marry a commoner.

Chief Humchitt is one of the last links with the historic past of his people. As a boy he had worn clothing made of wool from the mountain goat or cedar cloth and eaten the food nature had provided so bounteously for the Indians. He had been initiated into secret societies and instructed in the honoured traditions of his tribe.

Long ago the Indians of Bella Bella lived on another site some distance away from the present village, in a sheltered bay with a wide, sandy beach. One can see where the great cedar houses once stood and where the mighty canoes had been hauled up over the sands to safety. The present village is built on muskeg; all the houses and streets are on stilts along a rock-strewn shoreline.

As became a chief, Moody Humchitt had a big house in the "old town" and it was there that he called the neighbouring tribes to his potlatches. There were other big houses in the village and huge totem poles proclaiming the wealth and prestige of the Bella Bellas.

A chief never carved his own totem pole but always employed someone else to do it. This was an acknowledged custom among the tribes, probably a safeguard against the illegal use of crests.

It is many years since the chief had the masks, blankets, coppers and totem poles so important in his youth. His speaker's stick and a small rattle or two are the only relics he has retained from the old regime. The beautifully carved speaker's stick, which is prized very highly, had been given to him by the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The speaker's stick of the coastal Indians is a symbol of authority. It is similar in concept to the mace used by Europeans in their councils and parliaments. Oratory was an essential qualification of a successful chief. When the chief spoke everyone listened with the deepest respect until he was through. Then, if someone else wished to speak, the chief handed him the stick and, so long as it was in his possession, he had the floor.

No Indian would ever be so rude as to interrupt a speaker. When

a speaker had concluded what he wished to say, he passed the stick onto someone else and he, in turn, had command of the audience.

Moody Humchitt's first wife died many years ago and he later married a "high woman" from Alaska. Her name, Sadahaim, means "treasure box" in the Tlingit tongue. Her mother was the daughter of a chief and she had to marry into nobility, so there was no loss of prestige either way when she married the chief of the Bella Bellas. She did not like to see him without any ceremonial regalia so she wove him a beautiful blanket which perpetuates a story from her mother's people.

Moody Humchitt died not so very long ago, possessed of many honours at the close of a rich and useful life. In accordance with tradition he was buried on Chief Island, a long, rocky, narrow island not far from Bella Bella, where repose the revered bones of the highest of the tribe. Big steamships pass by, unheeding, and passengers wonder at the tiny, weather-beaten frame houses that peer gauntly from beneath the sheltering trees. They do not know that this is a village of the dead—the last resting place of the highborn of the Bella Bellas.