

In reading Bulletin 61 of the National Museum of Canada Totem Poles of the Gitksan etc., by M. Barbeau, an otherwise valuable book on the totem poles of the North West is very misleading when treating on their origin and history.

Anyone who has made a study of the Early History of this section of North America, a great deal of which is founded on the works quoted by him, will note a number of errors in the identification of the localities referred to, errors, that place him in another linguistic group--thus making his deductions very unsound. He apparently does not realize the earlier traders and explorers seldom landed--doing their trading under sail, being afraid of treachery of the Indians and not knowing suitable anchorages in the most productive area of the "sea otter". Take for instance Captain Dixon, though he worked up and down the coasts of the Queen Charlotte Islands; when does he mention anchoring or landing at a village in this locality. He, like others of his day, depended on Captain Cook's charts and made wither for Nootka or Prince William's Sounds to replenish his supply of wood and water.

As for the origin of the Totem Poles among the Haida, nothing definite is known, though it appears to have been a well established custom by 1800--not only do we have the references given us by Douglas in 1789, Bartlett and Marchand in 1791, but also the interesting notes that the crew of the ship Jefferson, Captain Roberts assisted in smoothing and erecting a totem pole on North Island in 1794. When Camille de Roquefeuil visited the four Masset Villages in 1818, he notes that "the houses are better built than those further north and that they were particularly remarkable for the monstrous and colossal figures which decorated the houses of the principal inhabitants and the wide gaping mouths of which serve as a door."

The first totem poles to be referred to south of the Masset area are those at Skidegate, in 1829 when Jonathan Green a missionary on board the trader Volunteer, visited this village. In his journal he makes the following entry with regard to "Skidegas":- "The houses of which there were thirty or forty, appeared tolerably good and before the door of many of them stood a large mast carved in the form of the human countenance, of the dog, wolf etc., neatly painted."

I think the above references to the Queen Charlotte Islands sufficient to prove that the erection of totem poles by the Haidas was a common practice many years before 1830.

Though the coast villages of the Tsimshian were visited by traders in the early part of the nineteenth century, no entries in their logs that have come to light in recent years refer to totem poles, on this section. The Nass Indians who were often visited by ships lying at the mouth of the river of the same name, were greatly feared by the traders, and no mention is made of visiting their villages, so that we have to depend entirely on Indian tradition as to whether they had totem poles at this date.

It is apparent in the above work to one who has examined the totem pole villages of British Columbia, that the authors knowledge of Haida Totems has been acquired from photographs or from specimens to be seen in Museums, in neither setting do poles show to advantage, and it should always be remembered, when using the latter for comparative purposes that collectors had to consider the height of the building where the specimen was to be exhibited, which often made it necessary to refuse the finest carvings.

Then there us

Then there is a type of pole erected by the Haida (only one or two specimens have been secured for museums) known as the Mortuary Pole, where the coffin was placed in a hollow at the top, often boxed in by carved horizontal boards. The owners of this type of pole will seldom sell, they having the same reverence for them as was expressed to Mr. Barbeau by the Nisrae when he wanted to purchase a Memorial Pole. One visiting Queen Charlotte Islands today would find about one hundred poles in various stages of decay, nearly a third would be classified under the latter group.

The Kwakiutl poles cannot be judged by what have been recorded from Alert Bay, as this is a comparatively modern settlement, they having since the arrival of Europeans moved over from the mouth of the Nimpkish River. Poles, apparently old, are to be seen in photographs taken in the Knight Inlet Country about 1873, though I know of no similar records for the better known villages near the modern trade routes. These together with the Kwakiutl of the West Coast of Vancouver Island, originally seem to have had only carved "house posts". This agrees with Dr. Tolmie's findings in 1833 among the Milbanke Sound Kwakiutl, he making no mention of outside carvings or "house front painting", but describes carved posts supporting house beams.

Taking the Nootkans, the Webber drawing in Cook's 3rd. voyage, carved posts inside Macquinna's House, represents the only type of carved pole we know from this tribe. A few can be seen in Museums, the majority poorly carved. The same may be said about the Coast Salish with the exception of Comox, where photographs taken in the 60's show carved totem poles standing clear of the houses.

Not having visited Tlingit Villages I cannot speak with any authority on this group, though I have been informed that near Wrangel old poles were found, badly decomposed, at the time the United States purchased Alaska.

With regard to the Nass River Indians being on the whole the best carvers in the country; they were no doubt in certain classes of work, especially in portraiture, but I quite agree with C.F. Newcombe (The Haida Indians in Congress International des Americanists XV, session 1906) that "the Haida excelled in the size, quality and finish of their work in wood". Carved horn spoons, bone, horn and tooth charms collected on the Nass equalled anything I have observed in this class of carving of the Haida, but for intricate, artistic work on charms one goes to Tlingit collections for the finest specimens. Another group which has been given little consideration, are the northern Kwakiutl, chiefly centered about Milbanke Sound. Of the few old pieces I have been fortunate enough to examine from this tribe, chiefly masks, the craftsmanship equalled that of any found on similar material further north. I cannot compare Nootkan carving with the above, having seen few old authentic pieces, but for artistic adzed designs I know no finer pieces than those formerly found in their villages.

Geographically speaking the mouth of the Nass was about the center of the North West Coast Art, but as I have stated above facts that can be corroborated by any one having the opportunity of examining the old collections made in this area, other tribes equalled or surpassed them in certain classes of carvings.

In the following pages corrections are made to some of the more noticeable errors in the geographical names and the accepted interpretations of many of the quotations from early journals. Page numbers refer to Bulletin 61, "Totem Poles of Gitksan."

p.14. A positive statement that "no totem poles were at Port Simpson in 1857" based on a fanciful picture published in "Arctander's Apostle of Alaska", is made on very weak grounds especially if one critically examines the picture in question. Take for instance four bastions, when records only mention

two; pallisades 40 feet high, if one take the average Tsimshian house to be 20 feet to the gable--sixteen houses shown adjacent to the fort, the town extended well to the right of the picture, and many of the wealthy indians lived on the island from which the view of the fort was made.

Ten years later (1867) George Davidson states that "The habitations numbered about 100 and that before most of them there is a tall thick post, carved with grotesque figures (see Alaska Coast Pilot 1869 page 18 and two illustrations.)

p.15.Paragraph4. "Striking lack of evidence of the existence of totem poles proper----several villages of the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl and Nootka were often visited by mariners in the early days."--

In paragraph three on the same page he mentions Cook, Dixon, Mears, Vancouver, Marchand and la Perouse. Cook only visited Nootka and Prince William's Sound, neither place has ever been credited with totem poles, other than carved house supports.

Dixon though trading with the Haida does not mention landing at a single village.

Mears himself did not visit any village later known to have had totem poles.

Vancouver first came in contact with what we know as totem poles in Johnson Channel near the mouth of Roscoe Inlet, a village of the Bella Bella Kwakiutls. He did not land on the Queen Charlotte Islands but named and roughly charted from off shore some of the leading features of the west coast of this group.

Marchand who is quoted extensively, examined a very small portion of the West Coast of Queen Charlotte Islands from Langara to Hippa Island and neither he nor any of his officers were in the Tsimshian or Kwakiutl country.

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~~Pa Pa~~ Perouse though sighting Queen Charlotte Island and Vancouver Island made no landings in either locality.

p.15. Note 3.A Vancouver quotation page 16. "This village must of been northern Kwakiutl etc." The drawing mentioned is of Cheslakee's Village which was situated on the north side of the mouth of the Nimpkish River, Vancouver Island--Menzies in his M/s calls the chief Cathlagees--The village name was Whannock (Whulk of recent writers) and was Southern Kwakiutl.

p.15. Note 4. The Mears, picture quoted is--The launching of the "North West America" at Friendly Cove, a locality which as far as any records or photographs show did not have an outside pole until 1915.

p.16. The earliest drawing of a carved pole is found in Bartlett's Journal 1790. This is probably one of the great wooden images seen and recorded by Capt. Douglas of the Iphegenia in 1789, and Ingraham in the Voyage of the Hope 1790-92, where he says they were about 40' high and had carvings of men, frogs and birds. The latter also mentions carvings before the grave houses on North Island. The point here is where to distinguish between the house frontal pole and grave poles and the totem poles as we know them today.

p.17. Top of page, "Nootka houses were also visited and described

by Vancouver as follows"---This opening paragraph is quoted from Vancouver's Journal Vol.2, page 272 and refers to a Bella Bella Kwakiutl Village in Johnson Channel not far from their present town. The carvings mentioned here are the first totems to be noted by Vancouver.

p.17. The Marchand references are to Haida villages, the first to a house on the west end of Lucy Island and the second to the Village of Dadens on Langara Island, both of which places are on the Northwest corner of Queen Charlotte Islands, 100 or more miles from a Tsimshian or Kwakiutl Village.

p.18. The Vancouver quotation is the same as that quoted above which refers to the Bella Bellas and is not Nootkan. As for the conclusion that memorial poles did not exist at this time on the Queen Charlotte Islands all of the above references to carvings on the Queen Charlotte Islands, lead one to believe to the contrary. The Marchand extract on the top of page 18, might well refer to a memorial totem and Ingraham distinctly notes grave carvings.

In the last paragraph on this page--that the only large carvings were house posts, short, stumpy and crude is not born out by the early references. The Bartlett picture is of a pole double the height of the house and Ingraham says poles 40' high, which is about the height of the average pole as we know them. Whether crude or not is hard to prove; this term is used today by many people viewing our finest specimens!

p.19. The poles described by Cook, Dixon, Bartlett, might be called "transitional poles", as it is noted even at a later date that the Tlingit preferred to fell their trees with stone implements rather than with the iron axes in their possession at the time. The carving was probably done with metal tools, either secured by trade or from wrecks as has been suggested. It might be well to note here, that few bone or stone celts and knife blades, suitable for fine carving, have ever been collected from the Haida though a great many heavy hammers and adzes are preserved.

p.19. Previous to 1774 there are no records of the North West Coast having been visited by whites as far south as the Queen Charlotte Islands.

p.20. On reading the third paragraph on this page i.e. "For although the Russians live amongst them". This is not an extract from Captain Cook in 1778, but are from Captain Vancouver Journal Vol.111 p.199., 1794 and refer to the natives of Cook Inlet and Kodiak Island.

p.20. The white man left at King George's Sound was; Mr. Mackay from James Strange Expedition which visited Nootka with the vessels Captain Cook and Experiment in 1786. He remained at Nootka with the object of cornering the fur for Strange on his next visit.

p.21. The Marchand description of a house at Dadens, Langara Island has always been considered by Ethnologists familiar with the Queen Charlotte Islands to have been either a "pitted" house with the pit boarded over, or a house, with the front overhanging a bank, making long front posts and flooring necessary. There is nothing in the reference to show that they had imitated a type of dwelling, they could possibly have only seen in pictures.

p.22. La Perouse did not visit the Queen Charlotte Islands.

p.22. The publication of the Academy of Science of Petrograd I have not been able to secure, but the few quotations used by Mr. Barbeau can be found and discussed in the following works: G.H. Muller, Voyages from Asia to America etc., Translated by Thomas

Jefferys 1761.

Wm. Coxe's--Account of the Russian Discoveries between Asia and America Etc., Published 1780.

James Burney's--Chronological History of the North Eastern Voyages of Discovery etc., Published 1819. These authors evidently having access to the papers recently rediscovered by Messrs Berg & Sternberg.

The information that the Russians had come in contact with the Tlingit and probably the Athapascan previous to 1790 is generally known to the Students of North West Coast History, but the Russian Scientists quoted by Mr. Barbeau were on the Coast after 1800. Some of whom visited California at the Russian Settlement of Fort Ross, established in 1815.

From the above records there is nothing to prove that any of the North West Coast people south of Cook Inlet had more than fleeting visits of one or two ships up to the time of Captain Cook's arrival in 1778, these visits could not have influenced them in their methods of living with the exception; the use of metal that was most likely traded.

p.23. Wrecked Japanese junks and pieces of wreckage were most likely the original source of iron on the North West Coast.

p.24. The abalone found among the Tlingit, Hadia and Tsimshian, is a Californian species of Haloetis, easily secured at low water. It has been generally understood that they were traded up the coast in prehistoric times, but that the fur traders soon added them to their trading stores when calling at California ports. A sketch in Capt. Dixon's Voyages, shows a labret inlaid with abalone. This was drawn before the fur trade was fully established.

p.24. Note 3. Kanakas were paid servants of the Hudson Bay Company, and were used many posts west of the Rockies doing similar tasks as the French Canadians. Governor Douglas retained a number in Victoria as a bodyguard. Many of the earlier fur traders also signed them on as sailors while they remained in these waters.

p.26. Note 1. This information was given Dr. Newcombe by the head chief of the village of Ninstints. The poles were placed at the end of the village, which was soon after burnt. The fine row of poles in the main village, which are still standing have no connection with the saying.