

## 'namala, Su Na chii k'chige, ?ems ta?aw: Indigenous-Academic Collaborative Histories

PAUL, Elsie in collaboration with Paige Raibmon and Harmony Johnson – *Written as I Remember It: Teachings (?ems ta?aw) From the Life of a Sliammon Elder*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014. Pp. 457.

RIDINGTON, Robin and Jillian Ridington in collaboration with Elders of the Dane-zaa First Nations. – *Where Happiness Dwells: A History of the Dane-zaa First Nations*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013. Pp. 401.

ROBERTSON, Leslie A. with the Kwagu'ł Gixsam Clan – *Standing Up With Ga'axsta'las: Jane Constance Cook and the Politics of Memory, Church, and Custom*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012. Pp. 569.

The shape of Canadian history is changing rapidly, especially due to provocative new works from scholars examining Indigenous issues. For instance, the popular and academic acclaim for James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, which rebuts the common conception that Canadian treatment of Indigenous peoples was benign, reveals how mainstream narratives are being revolutionized as scholars contrast these with critical analyses of the Indigenous experience of the past in this country. The irony of Daschuk's book winning the Canadian Historical Association's Sir John A. MacDonald Prize for a work which critiques MacDonald's policies was not lost on many. What is more remarkable, however, is that the year before, William Wicken received the same award for *The Colonization of Mi'kmaw Memory and History, 1794-1928: The King v. Gabriel Sylliboy*. Twice in a row, books focused on Indigenous lives won recognition as "the best scholarly book in Canadian history" published in that year.<sup>1</sup> Now, more than ever, Indigenous histories are provoking Canadian historians to re-examine our shared past.

As Indigenous histories are brought in from the margins of Canadian historiography, accompanying debate over how to best approach the Indigenous past has grown. Some works, like Daschuk's, take the broad range, while others examine particular nations, as Wicken's does. In his introduction, Daschuk references Theodore Binnema's call for historians of the Indigenous past to expand beyond the "culturalist preoccupations" of the recent trend towards tribal, or

1 Canadian Historical Association, "The Sir John A. MacDonald Prize," <http://www.cha-shc.ca/english/what-we-do/cha-prizes/the-sir-john-a-macdonald-prize.html#sthash.EPlzguPU.dpbs> (accessed 8 March 2015).

community-centric, histories.<sup>2</sup> While it is true that works in this category may not have the same immediate potential for reshaping national historical consciousness, for decades now, Indigenous communities, families, and individuals themselves have identified this “culturalist” approach as the most responsible and acceptable way for non-Indigenous scholars to approach the Indigenous past, especially in light of the legacy of colonialist research carried out by previous generations of academics. Today, we alternately refer to this work as “ethnohistory,” (or perhaps “new ethnohistory”), as “community-based research,” as “collaborative ethnography,” and recent works in this field are often influenced by Indigenous methodologies. Indigenous people develop the project ideas, guide the work along, and share authority (to a greater or lesser extent) with their academic partners.

Three recent books are strong examples of this type of work: *Standing Up With Ga'axsta'las*, jointly authored by Leslie Robertson and the Kwagu'ł Gixsam clan; *Where Happiness Dwells*, a collaboration between Robin and Jillian Ridington and Dane-zaa First Nations Elders; and *Written as I Remember It*, la?amin elder Elsie Paul's partnership with Paige Raibmon and Harmony Johnson. Far from mere atomizing “preoccupations,” these books are valuable for their presentation of Indigenous individuals' historical experiences on their own terms, for the model they set in terms of the dialogic process of working with Indigenous peoples to “do” Indigenous history, and for how both of these insights can contribute to, challenge, and even change the regional histories, thematic interests, and methodological approaches in Canadian historiography more broadly.

### 'namala

The earliest of these contributions, *Standing Up With Ga'axsta'las*, begins by asking “Who is Granny Cook?” (p. xv). This is the major research question of the project that Leslie Robertson undertook with the Kwagu'ł Gixsam clan, who are the descendants of Ga'axsta'las, Jane Constance Cook, to engage with the simplified ways in which colonial records, academic literature, and, influenced by these bodies of work, even Kwakwaka'wakw memory (mis)represented “Granny Cook”.

Ga'axsta'las was born in 1870. She was the daughter of William Gilbert, an English trader, and Gwayu'las (Emily Whonnock), herself the daughter of Kwagu'ł chief John 'Nulis. As a teenager, Ga'axsta'las attended Anglican Reverend Alfred Hall's mission school in 'Yalis (Alert Bay). There, she met Nage (Stephen Cook), who she married in 1888. While raising sixteen children and helping to run the family business, Ga'axsta'las also worked to improve her community's welfare through her involvement with several Indigenous and Christian organizations. Her identity as a highly literate Kwakwaka'wakw Christian made her a skillful cultural mediator; she helped anthropologists like Edward S. Curtis and Franz Boas, and translated Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs' testimony for the McKenna-McBride Commission. Ga'axsta'las' advocacy for women's rights sometimes

2 James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, x); see also Theodore Binnema, *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the North American Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), xiii.

challenged both colonial policies and customary Kwakwaka'wakw practices, especially those involving potlatch marriages, making her not only a bicultural but also a contentious figure in her community. However, she is most notoriously remembered in her own community for apparently informing on potlatchers and mistranslating during their trials in 1922, a historical legacy which has continued to inform the experience of her family members today vis-à-vis their relationships with other Kwakwaka'wakw individuals.

As Robertson and the Kwagu'ł Gixsam clan affirm in this book, Ga'axsta'las' story needs to be placed in its proper historical context; it was not solely her testimony, but rather the broader power of the colonial system, which resulted in potlatch prosecutions. They question why Ga'axsta'las' participation in the potlatch trials have become more prominently remembered than her decades of active political and social leadership. The authors of the book seek to rehabilitate Ga'axsta'las in Kwakwaka'wakw collective memory, but ultimately, they leave the final interpretation to their audience: "Readers will have to decide for themselves where they land in the debates her story rouses" (p. 17).

In order to approach this sensitive issue, they adopt the central tenet of 'namala, "having oneness on your face," a method which "works through stories rather than—or as—explanation and calls for contemplation rather than the acceptance of a truth" (p. 20). By asking their readers to be thoughtful about Ga'axsta'las's controversial legacy, instead of affirming a strong alternative interpretation of her story, the authors respect differing opinions that other Kwakwaka'wakw people might hold, and leave space for those perceptions, in the hope that the same generosity will be extended to this retelling of Ga'axsta'las' life within the history of their shared community.

The book itself does not follow a strict chronological pattern, but rather moves thematically through major moments in Ga'axsta'las' life. The narrative slips in and out of the present, reminding the reader of the contemporary social significance of the book itself and the motivations of its authors. Chapters reveal conversations between the authors as well as engaging sources about Ga'axsta'las' world: oral traditions, stories told by family members, photographs of people or of key documents, and whole primary sources often included. The affect is akin to leafing through an archive, and there is almost a sensation of participating with the authors in their efforts to better understand Ga'axsta'las. This ambitious, complex layering of the book makes it a rich work, amply deserving of the many awards it has received.

### **Su Na chii k'chige**

*Where Happiness Dwells* offers an informative and textured compendium of the history of Dane-zaa peoples from the Doig River and Blueberry River First Nations. The Doig River chief and council requested that Robin and Jillian Ridington write this history with a central focus on oral histories. The result is a book which reproduces Elders' knowledge shared with the researchers since 1960.

The orality of this historical knowledge is central to the work. Archival documents provide background context but Dane-zaa voices are its core. Indeed,

many of the stories were told in Dane-zaa *Záágé?* and subsequently translated into English. Both these translations and the book's content as a whole were produced with an eye to maximizing the accessibility of the Dane-zaa stories, fulfilling the authors' mandate of ensuring the history will be available to popular audiences. However, in addition to the linguistic work of the translations, there is another challenge in making the stories readable by people from outside Dane-zaa communities. The authors describe Dane-zaa oral culture as a "highly contexted" discourse: Dane-zaa story-telling is predicated on a communal awareness of shared history as well as knowledge of social relationships, which means that extensive description of the particular context is unnecessary because these details adhere implicitly in the story itself (2-3). Much of the authors' work in compensating for the contexted nature of these stories is accomplished by providing helpful glosses interspersed throughout stories so that non-Dane-zaa people can better understand these narratives.

Two threads run through the book in its entirety: the role of the Dreamers, and the significance of *Su Na chii k'chige*. Dreamers are Dane-zaa individuals "who have shown the way when the trail ahead seemed unclear" (p. 5). Always prominent in Dane-zaa life, Dreamers helped their communities by communing with spirits, by learning and using songs, by envisioning successful hunts, and by dreaming ways for Dane-zaa to adapt to colonial changes (p. 9). One of the Ridingtons' main collaborators, Charlie Yahey, who passed away in 1976, was the last Dane-zaa Dreamer to date. His stories run throughout the book, and his relationship with Robin Ridington was clearly a major part of the latter's inspiration to engage with Dane-zaa history through oral tradition. The second recurring element is *Su Na chii k'chige*, "the summer gathering place where people from different bands met to sing and dance and renew their relationships," which Elders compare to heaven, and which is also translated as "Where Happiness Dwells" (p. 1) and even "Happy's place" (p. 262). *Su Na chii k'chige* features in many of the Dreamers' stories, as well as Dane-zaa colonial history. In 1914, Donald Robertson surveyed the site and it became Indian Reserve 172, which was officially assigned to the Dane-Zaa Fort St. John Band two years later (p. 229). After WWII, the Dane-zaa were forced to surrender *Su Na chii k'chige*, and the events around this loss and subsequent Dane-zaa efforts in the late twentieth century to be compensated for it constitute a major part of the book.

Chapters are roughly chronological. The book moves from an introduction of Dane-zaa origins to descriptions of how oral traditions and archaeology interact, to reassessing Dane-zaa fur trade histories including the 1823 Fort St John Massacre, and then to representing Dane-zaa perspectives on colonial events such as Treaty 8, and the 1918 influenza epidemic. These stories provide keen insight into how national phenomena played out in Dane-zaa experiences. Chapters 13 and 14 are of particular interest and serve in some ways as the climax of the book. They focus, respectively, on the loss of *Su Na chii k'chige* first to settlement and then to farmland for veterans after 1945, and on the Dane-zaa's successful suit against the Department of Indian Affairs for breach of fiduciary duty by separating Dane-zaa peoples from the revenue generated from *Su Na chii k'chige*. Next, Chapter 15,

which considers how the histories shared in the book continue to inform Dane-zaa lives in the present, reads as a strong conclusion. This makes Chapter 16, on anthropological literature and Dane-zaa history, feel slightly out of place, but as the authors explain, they wanted to separate this more academic section from the rest of the work (p. 359). This chapter, however, provided some necessary context which dramatically increased my ability to approach the Dane-zaa stories, and I anticipate this would be the case for many other readers as well. Chapter 16 might thus have been better placed at the front of the book, as part of the introductory section, which would signal that it might be better read first than last. This organizational blip aside, *Where Happiness Dwells* lives up to its name and to the decades of work that went into its creation.

### **ʔems taʔaw**

In *Written as I Remember It*, Elsie Paul works with her granddaughter Harmony Johnson and historian Paige Raibmon to share laʔamin teachings through the narrative of her life story. Paul had long been interested in writing the book, and Raibmon became involved when Johnson, a former student of hers, approached her with the request to help them with an early effort (p. 21). They ended up revising the book plans to focus on four intertwining narratives: Paul's life, teachings, legends, and stories in Sliammon language. The result is an excellent book for anyone looking to learn more about laʔamin history through the knowledge and experiences of a funny, remarkable woman, a gifted story-teller and historian in her own right.

The strength of the work lies in its commitment to representing Paul's life and knowledge in the way she expresses it herself. Growing up, Paul learned the ʔems taʔaw, "our teachings," from laʔamin Elders, and they anchor the book, with the other stories reflecting the themes in these teachings (p. 4). Her approach in the interviews was to situate her life story "within the interpretive context of the teachings" (p. 8). A brief summary of three chapters will offer an illustration of how this works. Chapter 6 discusses Paul's marriage to her husband William, as well as the struggles and joys of bringing up their family. Additionally, the chapter includes Paul's memories of the deaths of her daughter Jane as an infant to an undetermined illness, of her daughter Sharon at seventeen in a car accident, of her husband from heart failure at 45 years old, and of her grandparents in their old age. Subsequently, in Chapter 7, Paul tells her friend Mary George a story in Sliammon, presented bilingually, about having heard a baby crying from some bushes near to where she was hanging laundry one summer day, and her grandmother informing her later that this was a message from the spirits that something was going to happen to one of her children. Paul concludes this story by explaining that she heard these phantom cries right before Jane first became ill. The next chapter is devoted to Paul explaining the ʔems taʔaw on grief, a meditation on self care, embracing loss, respecting your deceased family members, and regaining spiritual and emotional equilibrium. In this way, Paul's life story and the ʔems taʔaw inform each other, helping the reader gain a better appreciation of both.

Raibmon's introduction to Paul's narratives describes "transformational listening," defined as "listening in ways and to voices that have the power to unearth sociopolitical assumptions and intellectual transformations" (pp. 4-5). She recounts her own difficulties with developing the ability to listen deeply to oral traditions especially as someone more familiar with print culture (p. 5). Working towards transformational listening, Raibmon argues, means resisting the impulse to find connections between oral histories and our own lives; rather, we should seek out difference. Following Julie Cruikshank, Raibmon asserts that especially for settlers listening to Indigenous autobiographies, zoning in on similarities can create an artificial sense of closeness between otherwise divergent experiences, producing a "disproportionate sense of commonality" which ends up impeding deeper historical understanding of Indigenous peoples' lives (p. 7). Instead, Raibmon advocates listening "in the spirit of an ongoing relationship, an open investigation towards further insight." She affirms that this "active, open-ended listening has the potential ... to bring into relief otherwise hidden suppositions that undergird twenty-first-century colonial attitudes and power imbalances" (p. 7). To say that such an approach is difficult is to state the obvious, but it is a worthwhile challenge for the reader, and the stories in this book more than merit the attempt.

*Written as I Remember It* is an inspiring book: the content is informative, textured, and full of affect, and the approach sets a strong example for future collaborative works. It could benefit, however, from one addition and one subtraction. Although she is one of the three authors, we do not get to hear from Johnson directly. Paul's engaging stories fill the book, and Raibmon's introduction is strong, but while Johnson is mentioned in both of these, a contribution in her own voice would have strengthened the themes of familial relationships, intergenerational learning, and Indigenous-settler histories which run through the rest of the volume. I'm left feeling curious about how she understood her role in its creation, and a few pages on this would enhance the work overall. Conversely, the life cycle metaphor Raibmon uses in the introduction to frame her discussion of the collaborative writing process seems unnecessary. Raibmon's decision to describe the project's evolution as stages of conception, infancy, toddlerhood, and adolescence and adulthood may be motivated by a desire to reflect the content of the book, which takes us through the successive stages of Paul's life. However, the metaphor's usefulness is unclear; the discussion reveals the book's various phases without requiring a device the author herself terms a risky "conceit" (pp. 26- 27). Its use also invites questions about the final stage of the book's life cycle: does it die? In the context of the introduction's otherwise compelling description of the authors' collaboration, this artifice distracts in a book that does so much other experimental story-telling so well.

### **Collaborative Indigenous Histories and Canadian Historiography**

Works like *Standing Up With Ga'axsta'las*, *Where Happiness Dwells*, and *Written as I Remember It* have much to bring to the study of Canadian history: the emphasis on collaboration in research, the primacy given to Indigenous voices,

and the potential these narratives hold for reshaping colonial narratives. While thus hoping for the widest possible audiences for these books, it is clear they are especially relevant for the fields of Indigenous history, the history of British Columbia (and, in the case of *Where Happiness Dwells*, Alberta as well), and oral history. I anticipate they will be widely read by scholars in various fields, but especially those in anthropology, First Nations studies, history, and women's studies. Having taught excerpts from each of these books in a recent 400-level history seminar, I can also speak to the way in which upper-level undergraduate students respond positively to these narratives, which generated strong discussions and response papers, especially on the themes of identity, memory, and resistance.

These works reveal that productive collaborations between Indigenous and settler authors do not need to follow a strict model. Indeed, the level of shared authority demonstrated in these works varies, but each set of authors worked together to negotiate the nature of the partnership. *Where Happiness Dwells* most closely follows the more conventional "told-to" model, where oral history shared by Indigenous Elders implicitly guides the academic authors. *Standing up with Ga'axsta'las* involved significant and explicit discussions throughout the research and writing process, with numerous family members of Jane Cook's, especially her granddaughter Pearl Alfred. In the final stages of *Written As I Remember It*, Elsie Paul had executive authority over the content in the book. While there is a clearly a range of collaborative possibilities, the level of shared authority is not necessarily relative to the success of the book: each set of authors has different aims, and each partnership was negotiated to better meet those goals. Rather, the measure of collaborative success lies in the co-authors' ability to work together across cultural difference and through disagreements that arise in terms of content and analysis. In this emphasis on collaboration and the primacy of Indigenous voice, these works are indebted to other previous literature, but especially the collaborations between Julie Cruikshank, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned; and between Wendy Wickwire and Harry Robinson. While *Where Happiness Dwells* follows this pattern quite closely, both *Standing up with Ga'axsta'las* and *Written As I Remember It* break exciting new methodological ground. The partnerships in the three books surveyed here offer strong models for Indigenous research, but could also be productively adapted to other oral history work, biographical history, or community history projects.

Since relationality so fundamentally pervades these three works, it is worth mentioning a new avenue for research reciprocity and enhanced accessibility that is pioneered by the Ridingtons and their Dane-zaa partners. Though the Ridingtons maintain the physical files, they have worked with the Doig River First Nation to digitize their archive, which has been online since 2003.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous methodologies scholarship has helped non-Indigenous historians understand that returning research materials to the community is an important aspect of academic-Indigenous partnerships.<sup>4</sup> Further, as Raibmon reminds us by sharing

3 Amber Ridington, e-mail message to author, 5 March 2015.

4 Indigenous methodologies scholarship is growing; for two outstanding sources on the issue of research reciprocity see: Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*

an anecdote about a near-conflict between Paul and another researcher about rights to interview recordings, ensuring that Indigenous peoples maintain at least some level of control over research materials is highly significant when doing this type of collaborative work (pp. 24-25). Although some First Nations might have community libraries or archives which would accept research materials, the virtual archive provides an alternative if there is no such institution in a particular community. While they come with these benefits, the capacity of digital archives to facilitate greater access to the interviews and other materials produces some issues as well. Accessing the Ridington/Dane-zaa Archive requires a password, which provides an initial protection to the Dane-zaa knowledge shared by Elders over decades. Although Elders who worked with the Ridingtons gave their verbal consent for the interviews,<sup>5</sup> I wonder about whether and how Dane-zaa Elders, some of them interviewed in the 1960s, assented to the sharing of their intellectual property on the internet, and what protocols are in place to allow living Dane-zaa individuals to limit access to the content if they so desire. These are challenges that all oral historians will face as we increasingly add digital humanities aspects to our research. As it is, the archive itself is a testament to not only the labour involved, but the strength of the relationship between the Doig River First Nation and the Ridingtons.

In addition to emphasizing Indigenous authorship and collaborative work processes, another feature which unites these works is the privileging of Indigenous voices in the content of the books as well. This emphasis on Indigenous peoples' perspectives offers one way for Canadian historiography to transform; by listening to the experiences of people marginalized, both historically and historiographically, old narratives are reassessed, creating a more detailed awareness of the past. A striking example of this is in the ways that these books differently approach residential school histories. While the government did not implement residential schools in Dane-zaa territory, Indian Agent Joe Galibois threatened parents that their children would be taken away from them if they were not sent to the day school at Peterson's Crossing (p. 290). Memories from the school were enmeshed within the context of family life, such as May Apsassin's recollection that her mother packed bannock in her lunchbox, while her father gave her bologna to eat at school (p. 293). Residential school students' experiences as shared in *Standing Up with Ga'axsta'las*, and *Written as I Remember It* offer a sharp contrast to those of students in *Where Happiness Dwells*. It is heartbreaking to hear Paul describe herself as "lucky" that she was not sexually abused (p. 191), though it is clear from the rest of her description that physical and emotional abuse and neglect were commonplace. Though there are difficulties piecing together a record of Ga'axsta'las' education at Reverend Hall's "Indian house," her time there may have fuelled her insistence on the value of education and literacy, and her commitment to a Christian faith which did not

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(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books; Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1999).

5 Jillian Ridington, e-mail message to author, 3 March 2015.

negate her spiritual beliefs. Reading these divergent accounts helps affirm the diversity of experiences of colonial education, encouraging us to see the injustices of the system and Indigenous resistance not as the oppressor-victim stereotypes so often shared by the media, but rather as profoundly inflected by the contingencies of time, place, and circumstance.

Reading these books, I was struck by the power of this new scholarship holds outside the academy as well as within it. In the past month, St. Michael's Residential School at Alert Bay has been demolished,<sup>6</sup> and the Blueberry River First Nation filed a lawsuit citing Crown-authorized development in their territory as a violation of their Treaty 8 rights to continue traditional practices.<sup>7</sup> The connections between these two events and the historical narratives of *Standing Up with Ga'axsta'las* and *Where Happiness Dwells*, respectively, reveal the usefulness of these books for popular as well as scholarly audiences. Indeed, these works, along with *Written as I Remember It*, show us that collaborative Indigenous historical research with a narrow focus can not only broaden Canadian historiography and model compelling methodological approaches, but may have meaningful contemporary effects as well. Therefore, arguing against the "culturalist preoccupations" of works examining the histories of particular communities, families, and individuals is thoroughly unproductive. Books predicated on such an approach have just as much to offer as do wide-ranging analyses which can more obviously (but not necessarily more effectively) help us reframe Canadian historiography. Indeed, a dynamic Indigenous historiography should be able to offer both sweeping interpretation as well as acutely-focused insights. Ultimately, through their resonant content and exemplary collaborative methods, the works reviewed here compellingly bring the margins to the center of what is increasingly becoming a shared Native-newcomer historiography.

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6 Wendy Stueck, "Alert Bay residential school survivors gather for demolition ceremony," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 February 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/alert-bay-residential-school-survivors-gather-for-demolition-ceremony/article23067233/> (accessed 8 March 2015).

7 "Blueberry River First Nations lawsuit threatens Site C, fracking in B.C.," *CBC News*, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/blueberry-river-first-nations-lawsuit-threatens-site-c-fracking-in-b-c-1.2981820> (accessed 8 March 2015).