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Article abstract

Le récent *Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend* signale la contribution de l'explorateur Robert Brown à la connaissance de la mythologie des Indiens de la Côte Ouest mais fait observer que ce dernier n'a publié aucun de ces récits. L'auteur du présent article fait valoir au contraire que Brown publia à la fin du siècle dernier, sous le titre de *The Races of Mankind*, une dizaine de ces récits tout en faisant référence à une dizaine d'autres.

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Robert Brown : an Early Collector of Northwest Indian Myth and Legend

John HAYMAN

In his recent survey, *A Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend,* Professor Ralph Maud notices that G.M. Sproat credited Robert Brown, "the active and observant traveller," with "extensive information" on Indian mythology, and he remarks further that "Brown's known publications do not include mythology."[1] The purpose of the present account is to draw attention to Brown's substantial contribution to this subject in one of his forgotten works, *The Races of Mankind* (1873-76). In the space of some twenty pages, Brown presents ten stories in some detail and refers briefly to about the same number[2]. The presentation is the more interesting because Brown collected his material at such an early date. More than twenty years before Franz Boas visited the Northwest, Brown was the commander of the 1864 Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition, and it was at this time that he acquired most of his knowledge.

A young Scot of twenty-two years, Brown had arrived in May, 1863, as a seed-collector for the Botanical Association of Edinburgh. From the outset, Brown's relationship with his sponsor was problematic. Brown justifiably viewed himself as a scholar and a gentleman, since he had studied botany with some distinction at the University of Edinburg. The Association, however, was interested only in the seeds that it planned to distribute to the expedition's subscribers. During the summer of 1863, Brown travelled on Vancouver Island in the Alberni area, but these travels did not result in a significant collection of seeds, and by the spring of 1864, the sponsoring committee in Edinburg was already threatening to dismiss him. He seems

1. Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1982, p. 44. Maud also remarks in a footnote : "Wayne Suttles in a personal communication corrects me on this point. One of Brown's publications which I have been unable to locate contains a "star-husband" tale." The reference may be to the tale noted in the present article.
2. London, Cassell, Petter & Galpin, I, 130-52. Subsequent page references are included in the text.

to have hoped that the committee organizing the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition would display a broader range of interest, but he was to be disappointed. It soon became clear that the committee saw the expedition as essentially a gold-prospecting party. Since Brown had not severed his connection with his Edinburgh sponsors, he now had the impossible task of serving two unsatisfactory masters. In 1865, the committee in Edinburg was just as displeased with his seed-collecting in Oregon and Washington — and in 1866, it refused to extend his appointment. Sadly, his career back in Britain was also disappointing. He failed to gain a university appointment, and following his marriage in 1875 he moved to London to take up journalism. In addition, he wrote such multivolume works as *The Countries of the World* (1876-81) and *The Races of Mankind*, in which he introduced recollections of his experiences in the Northwest.

In preparing the section of Indian myth for *The Races of Mankind*, Brown also made use of a publication by Sproat whose *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life* had appeared in 1868. Indeed, Brown would appear to be indebted to Sproat in a way that he does not fully acknowledge. In a brief paragraph, for example, Brown writes of the eagle's association with thunder and lightning :

> This bird, among the western Indians of Vancouver Island, is called Tootooch, hence *tootah* (the lightning). He is the survivor of four great birds, which once dwelt in the land of the Howchucklesahts, in the Alberni Canal, three of which were killed by Quawteaht.[3] These birds fed upon whales. Quawteaht, one day, desiring to destroy them, entered into a whale and gradually approached the shore, spouting to attract attention. The bird soon swooped down upon him, when he dived to the bottom and drowned it. This manoeuvre was twice repeated, and two more were destroyed. The fourth flew off into inaccessible regions, where it yet lives, causing thunder and lightning. It is not, however, so far off, because one of their stories tells about a man who found its nest. Captain Mayne informs us that after a storm they always search on the coast for dead whales, and seem to connect them in some way with thunder (p. 147).

Part of this paragraph paraphrases Sproat's account, and part quotes from it without acknowledgment[4]. For the following paragraph concerning the association of the cuttle-fish with fire, Brown is also indebted to Sproat :

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3. Brown has earlier noted that "among the Western Vancouver Island Indians there is a belief in Quawteaht as the Supreme Being — the Originator of all things" (p. 116), and he records myths that associate Quawteaht with creation. Brown remarks further that on the east coast of Vancouver Island, Quawteaht is called Haelse.
4. London, Smith, Elder & Co., pp. 177-8. Subsequent page references are included in the text.

> These western Indians think that the Prometheus who gave them fire was the cuttle-fish (Telhoop). After the earth was made, fire only burned in its dwelling, but in those days Telhoop could live both on sea and land. "All the beasts of the forest went in search of the necessary element (for in those days the beasts required fire, having Indians in their bodies), which was finally discovered, and stolen from the house of Telhoop by the deer (Mouch), who carried it away, as the natives curiously describe it, both by words and signs, in the knee-joint of his hind-leg." Why the cuttle-fish of all animals was fixed upon as the owner of fire, in this curious myth, is not at all apparent, and would admit of some very curious speculation (p. 147 : Sproat, p. 178).

Here, the quotation marks suggest indebtedness, but curiously enough there is no reference to a specific source. Even more curious is Brown's apparent indebtedness to an extended account of a myth relating to "a great flood" in Barclay Sound. The story itself tells of the withdrawal of water from the Alberni Inlet, Wish-pe-op's preparation for the return of the water by the weaving of a long cedar bark rope, and his hold on familiar regions by means of this rope when the waters return — all of which incidents are familiar motifs in Indian lore. In introducing this myth, Brown achnowledges that "the tale has already appeared in print" and he continues : "Yet, as I heard it long ago, I think it is worthy of being given here in the words of my note-book" (p. 145). Granted that Brown's subsequent version differs from Sproat's in only minor stylistic features (Sproat, p. 183-5), it would be agreeable to suppose that Brown lent Sproat his notebook and indicated that he did not expect acknowledgment. But this is not really a plausible explanation. A professional writer with multi-volume enterprises, Brown needed his notebooks for his own exclusive use. Furthermore, his unacknowledged borrowings from Sproat in other sections of *The Races of Mankind* force one to conclude that the reference here to a notebook is a polite fiction. Fortunately, this indebtedness to Sproat — both acknowledged and unacknowledged — accounts for only about a page of Brown's account.

For the rest, Brown was indebted to Indian informants. In *Illustrated Travels* (1869), he wrote of Kakalatza, a joint chief of the Somenos, who accompanied the 1864 exploratory party from Cowichan Harbour to Cowichan Lake : "Every dark pool suggested a story to him, every living thing had a superstition, and hour after hour we lay awake listening to the strange story of Kakalatza, Lord of Tsamena."[5] Primarily, however, Brown gathered his information from Tomo Antoine, who is described by Brown as "a half-bred Iroquois [sic] and

5. H.W. Bates, ed. London, Cassel, Petter & Galpin, I, 276.

Chinook."[6] Tomo was to serve as hunter and guide throughout the four and a half month expedition, and he was well qualified for the position. According to Brown, he had for some years been James Douglas's "constant factotum," and he had also accompanied several expeditions prior to that of 1864. He had been especially active in the Cowichan area, and this is reflected in the myths Brown records, but Ranald Macdonald, a member of the 1864 exploration party, had earlier known Tomo at Fort Langley on the Fraser River, and two of the myths recorded by Brown are explicitly related to this region. In his journal, Brown several times refers to his interest in Tomo's narratives. "Miserable wet stormy day," he notes on September 8. "Spent it as I spend most stormy days, in drawing from Tomo's extensive store of Indian lore and tradition and committing them to paper." And a few days later (September 13) : "Sat round the fire till late, [Tomo] telling me stories of Indian life and warfare."

In his presentation of Indian mythology, Brown is not systematic. In fact, he remarks on his intention merely to provide "the unedited and unwritten tales" that are "scattered" throughout his notes (p. 131). All the same, it is possible to discern Brown's interest in motifs that are repeated in different myths and to outline some of his underlying notions about Indian mythology.

Brown is clearly fascinated, for example, by accounts of a youth "seeking his medicine." In an explanation of this phrase (and practice), Brown writes :

> A hunter will wander for a long time, fasting and weary, until he dreams of something which is to be his guardian angel through life . . . This fasting is called in Chinook "making *tomanawas,*" and the young man ambitious of this distinction must pass night after night away from his father's lodge, in some lonely place, without food, and with strict attention to chastity and personal cleanliness, until he dreams of something which is to become his *tomanawas* (p. 134).

Brown recorded three tales that relate to this practice :

i. *The Wolf-hunter seeking his Medicine (pp. 134-5)*

A youth of Quantlin [Fort Langley], seeking his medicine in the mountains, is attracted by the light of a great fire and comes upon a circle of wolves. "They had taken off their skins, and were drying them on sticks. Our hunter sprang within the light of the fire, and instantly the wolves jumped into their skins again, and howled round him, but the hunter moved not, and lay down and slept uninjured. That night he dreamt of his medicine, and next day he began to travel

6. Unpublished Journal, in Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Victoria, entry for June 9, 1864. Dates of subsequent entries are included in the text.

with the wolves, now his guardian." After a long time, the hunter's friends discover him and bring him back to Quantlin — "but he could not speak, only howled like a wolf, and had lost all human attributes." He soon escapes and returns to the wolves — and nobody attempts further to reclaim him.[7]

ii. *The Indian Cyclops (pp. 135-6)*

The eldest of three sons of a widow seeks his medicine. He arrives at a lake and is ferried across it by a crane who is servant of Netsachen, or Coquochem, a one-eyed giant. The giant kills the youth, takes out his heart, and places it on a bench. In succession, the two other sons set out and come to the same end. The mother weeps at this loss, and from the moss with which she wipes away her tears a child emerges. In three days, her "medicine-son" matures into a man, and he sets out to reclaim the lost sons. On arriving at the giant's house, he refuses to enter it, and when the giant comes towards him, stooping in order to pass through the doorway, the youth cuts off his head. He then replaces the hearts in the bodies of the widow's sons, and breathes life into them. Together they return joyfully to the widow. Later, however, the sons cease to feel gratitude for their deliverance, and the "medicine-youth" is saddened. He disappears — and his place is found "only the tuft of moss with the tears from whence he had sprung."[8]

iii. *Skelechun, the Lightning-eyed (pp. 137-8)*

Skelechun, an ill-favoured orphan ("full of vermin and scabs"), seeks his medicine in the mountains. Eventually, during a terrible storm, he achieves this end. "The lightning-birds took out his eyes, and put in the lightning-serpent's instead, and every time he opened his eyes he burnt up everything before him." After displaying this power to disastrous effect back in his village, he and his grandmother achieve positions of importance. "He built a house on the top of Salt Spring Island — a mighty lodge it was, and there daily trains of slaves (once chiefs) toiled up, carrying bear and beaver, salmon and porpoise, and gamass [camas] and clams — everything good — to this Skelechun the Lightning-eyed." Outraged by such upstart behavior, Squemet, a Taitka, and his cousin, Clem-clem-alut plan to kill Skelechun. Since Skelechun is forced always to look downwards, lest

7. Charles Hill-Tout, *The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout*, ed. Ralph Maud. Vancouver; Talonbooks, 1978, IV, 153-5. Subsequent references in notes to analogues are restricted to those collected close to Brown's time — specifically, by G.M. Sproat, Franz Boas, and Charles Hill-Tout.

8. Hill-Tout, IV, 135-7. The animation of mucus occurs frequently in Indian tales, as noted in Boas, *Tsimshian Mythology*. Washington, 1916, p. 734.

he kill by a glance, the assailants are able to strike at his bended neck and kill him.[9]

Another group of myths, described by Brown as "myths of observation," offer explanations for natural phenomena. For two of these myths, Brown is indebted to Sproat. In a reference to "the wild, romantic tale of how the Alberni Canal came to be explored to the top by two hunters," Brown remarks that the canal seemed to close behind the hunters as they ascended it — "a very natural appearance . . . as you round the bends and points of this long narrow inlet of the sea" (pp. 142-3 : Sproat, p. 179). Again, almost verbatim from Sproat, Brown continues with a brief account of the origin of the loon's cry. In this tale, a halibut fisherman steals the catch of another and cuts out his tongue so that his guilt cannot be disclosed. The tongueless man is then transformed into a loon, and the bird's "lonely cry. . . is the mangled fisher trying to tell of his wrongs" (p. 143 : Sproat, pp. 182-3).

For some of these "myths of observation," Brown went further afield. He remarks, for example, that he heard a myth concerning the formation of cascades on the Columbia River in Washington, while in that region in the summer of 1865. In this tale, a medicine man schemes to convert the falls of the region to cascades so that salmon might ascend the river's upper reaches. Since the falls are guarded by two medicine women, he gains their protection by transforming himself into a child, and changes back into his manly form each day when they leave to gather berries, so that he might set about his massive task. One night he forgets to transform himself into a child prior to their return, and as they pursue him the falls give way and his work is completed (p. 142).

From closer to Brown's home base in Victoria comes the myth relating to the formation of the Gulf Islands. By this account, a dispute arose between Cedar Hill (Mount Douglas) and Point Roberts, on the mainland, and the two eminences began hurling the stones at each other that fell between them and formed the islands (pp. 140-2).

In some instances, Brown's use of the term "myths of observation" may seem inappropriate, since the myth (or legend) he records may not seem primarily intent on explaining natural phenomena. The Indian story of "Jack and the Bean Stalk" (pp. 131-4) provides an illustration. The narrative tells of two girls who imagine the stars as

9. Hill-Tout, IV, 142-6, and Boas, *Indian Legends of the North Pacific Coast of America*, unpublished translation by Dietrich Bertz (1977), p. 82, of *Indianische Sagen von der Nord-Pacifischen Küste Amerikas* Berlin, A. Asher & Co., 1895.

their lovers. They are then transformed to "Starland" and marry a star-person, but eventually tire of life there, and twist a rope of cedar bark by which they may descend to earth (more specifically, to the Gorge in Victoria). The rope itself, after their successful descent, is coiled up and transformed by Haelse into a hill (Knockan Hill).[10]

Similarly, a tale of Cul-cul-aith, an evil woman of the Fraser River flats, seems rather radically reduced when interpreted simply as an account of the origin of mosquitos in the region (pp. 139-40). In this tale, Cul-cul-aith carries off children in a basket woven of water-snakes, with the intention of cooking and devouring them. In preparation, she orders the children to dance around her with their eyes closed. However, the older children secretly continue to peep, and they manage to push her into the fire she has prepared. "But her evil spirit lived after her," Brown writes, "for out of her ashes, blown about by the wind, sprang the pest of mosquitoes, which even now troubles mankind."[11] In a companion tale of Slal-acum Slane, the evil woman is drowned by two young men who tip her out of their canoe (p. 140). "The Indian thinks that she yet lives as the bottom of the sea," Brown writes, "and devours drowned men. This story, in one form or another, is found among all the northern tribes, as far as Queen Charlotte Island, or further."

In emphasising the prevalence of "myths of observation," Brown displays an understanding of myth common in his day. Similarly, he reflects Victorian expectations in his concern with the moral import of myths. The Indian version of "Jack and the Bean Stalk" is not simply an attempt to explain the formation of Knockan Hill; by Brown's understanding, it also "teaches us not to wish for things that are out of our reach" (p. 132). Similarly, the tale of the hunter who joins a pack of wolves is finally glossed rather disappointingly: "Moral — 'Evil communications corrupt good manners" (p. 135). But Brown is not simply reductive. He clearly responded to the power of Indian legends, as evidenced by his fascination with accounts of youths "seeking their medicine." Within a few days of setting out on the 1864 exploration, Brown was already displaying this interest in Indian lore, in a way that took him beyond the confines of his own culture. Impressed by the Indian and the Arabian connection between "constellations and known objects," Brown notes in his journal:

> The handles of the plow are two men in a canoe. The Plaeides [sic] are a collection of fishes . . . The Moon they think travels and has a frog inside of

10. Boas, *Indian Legends*, pp. 100-2. Boas notes that the legend "has an extraordinarily wide distribution" (p. 573).
11. Boas, *Indian Legends*, pp. 93-4 and 145.

> it (Is this worse than our Man in the Moon ?) The stars are little people. A strange people are these Indians. The more you know of them the more can you appreciate their shrewdness[,] the curious store of lore and traditions they possess ; to judge them as you see them "loafing" about the white settlements is like judging a man by the coat on his back. Few ever take the trouble to learn about them and still fewer know anything bad about them to" loudest in their general dogmatic denunciation of them. (June 10)

In taking trouble, Brown was indeed exceptional in his time — and he deserves recognition as one of the earliest collectors of Indian mythology in the Northwest.

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Résumé

Le récent Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend *signale la contribution de l'explorateur Robert Brown à la connaissance de la mythologie des Indiens de la Côte Ouest mais fait observer que ce dernier n'a publié aucun de ces récits. L'auteur du présent article fait valoir au contraire que Brown publia à la fin du siècle dernier, sous le titre de* The Races of Mankind, *une dizaine de ces récits tout en faisant référence à une dizaine d'autres.*