

## Old Bella Bella, Genesis and Exodus

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Résumé de l'article

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# Old Bella Bella, Genesis and Exodus

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## Résumé:

*Dans cet article, la méthode de l'archéologie historique est appliquée à l'origine des Bella Bella, amérindiens qui vivaient sur la côte de la Colombie-Britannique. Une synergie interprétative devient possible si on intègre les connaissances tirées des sources documentaires du dix-neuvième siècle aux données obtenues à partir des fouilles archéologiques ainsi que des photos et des dessins d'archives. L'histoire débute en 1833 à la baie McLoughlin, au centre de la province, sur la côte, au moment où des représentants de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson choisissent une zone sauvage, où n'est installée aucune colonie de peuplement autochtone, pour construire un poste de traite fortifié. L'histoire se termine 66 ans plus tard, en 1899, quand une communauté autochtone en expansion est forcée d'abandonner l'endroit en raison du manque d'espace.*

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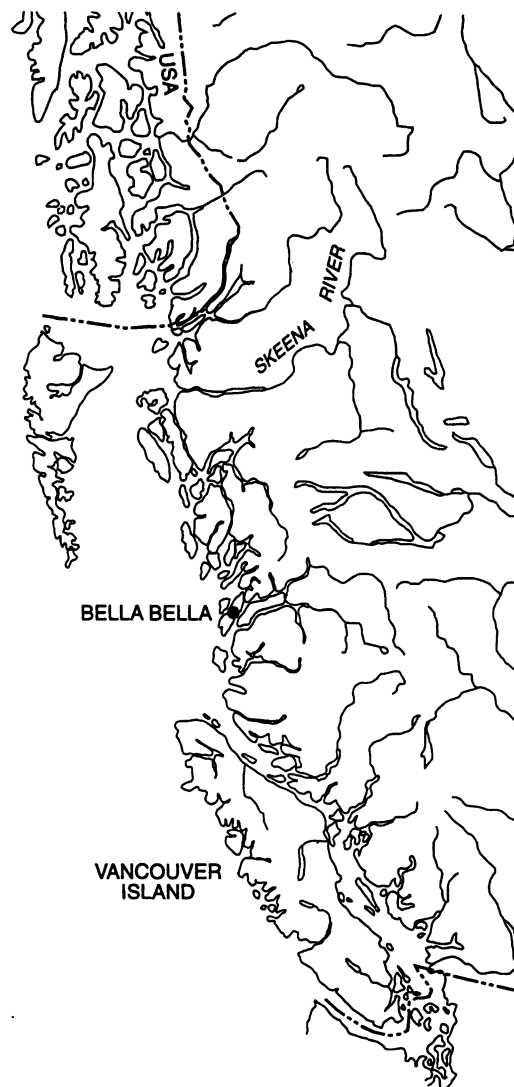
This is an account of 'Qelc or Old Bella Bella, the town site left by the Heiltsuk people 100 years ago and still known to elders as Old Town. This British Columbia coastal Native settlement — 525 kilometres north of Vancouver — begins and ends in the 66-year period from 1833 to 1899. For the Heiltsuk people the village serves as a bridge between an aboriginal life style and the modern town three kilometres away that is now their home.

The vigorous evolution during Old Bella Bella's short lifespan can be divided into three phases:

- (1) 1833–43: the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort McLoughlin and the fur trade;
- (2) 1843–66: a period after the fort's abandonment that is poorly known from written accounts;
- (3) 1866–99: a phase during which written records come largely from traders and missionaries. It is from this third phase that a large number of archival photographs provide a rich source of insight into the nature and evolution of the settlement.

After 1900 active use of the area ceases until the 1980s, when the Heiltsuk people return to the site: not for settlement but for economic development.

The pieces that go to make up this story are gleaned from a variety of sources. Published and unpublished material is available in several libraries and archives. The most comprehensive collection is in the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre at Waglisla (new Bella Bella).



Our archaeological work at the site in 1982 did not turn up any traces of a pre-contact Native occupation.<sup>1</sup> The builders of the fort in 1833 also observe no Natives resident at McLoughlin Bay when they begin construction. There is no doubt that the fort's site is known to the Heiltsuk of the area at the time. There are good salmon runs in the small creek at the south end of the bay and it may be assumed that at least a fishing camp existed there in pre-contact times. Families presently living in Bella Bella recall that an ancestral chief once held rights to the salmon resource in this creek. Today this creek is the site of a Heiltsuk salmon hatchery.

### Fort McLoughlin, 1833–43

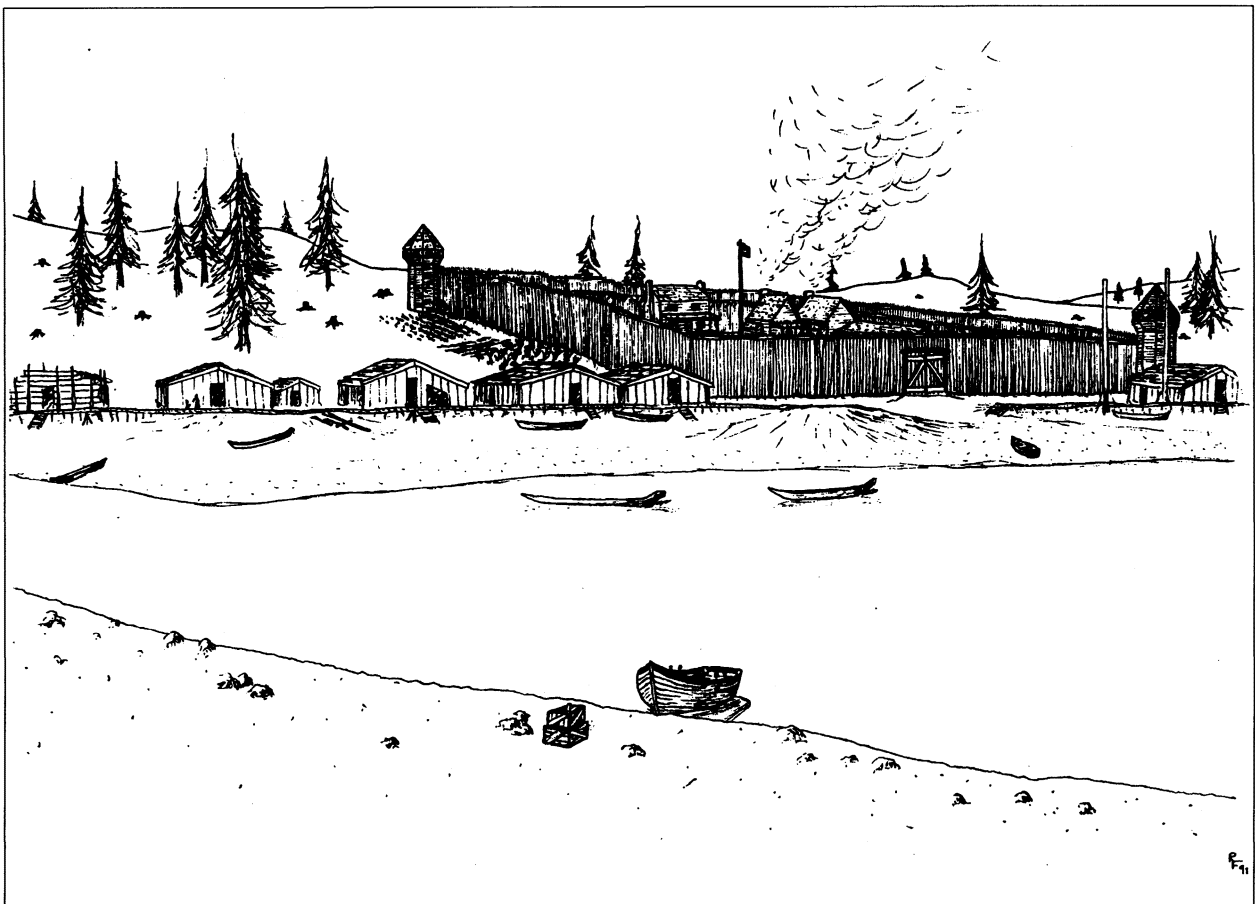
For a brief ten-year period from 1833 to 1843 McLoughlin Bay sees a flurry of European activity associated with the construction and maintenance of the Hudson's Bay Company's heavily fortified trading post. This successful although short-lived endeavour is named after John McLoughlin, the company's chief factor for the

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area at the time. The fort's purpose is to compete with the "Boston traders", mostly Americans who are carrying on a freelance maritime trade from the decks of their ships. Both sides complained about the adeptness of the Native traders and their skill at extracting top prices for their furs. The fort's location is selected because McLoughlin Bay provides a large well-protected anchorage. Particularly attractive to the traders is the central location of the bay in a region of high Native population.<sup>2</sup> A number of Native villages, some with populations exceeding 500 individuals, lie within a day's journey by canoe.<sup>3</sup>

No ground plans or site drawings of Fort McLoughlin have survived. Its details must be reconstructed from various written descriptions and from the fragmentary archaeological evidence uncovered in our excavations. Our attempt to sketch the fort shows the approximate position and appearance of some of the fort's features (Figure 1). It is accurate enough for the palisade, bastions and gates, but construction details and placement of most of the individual structures within the palisade are only estimates.

John Dunn reports that the fort is a substantial establishment with an 18-foot high palisade and a double gate. There are two bastions standing at opposite corners, "in each of which were four nine-pound guns with a quantity of small arms ready for action".<sup>4</sup> Within the enclosure are several buildings including the factor's house, an Indian Hall where visitors stay, the trading shop, residences for the other traders and men, storehouses and various workshops. Tolmie reports that "the houses are built of strong & massive material & make those at Nusqually [Fort Nisqually in Puget Sound] seem flimsy".<sup>5</sup> Up to 50 men labour with teams of oxen to clear the internal area of the fort. Explosives are used to level the rocky area at the back of the site. This may be the earliest use of explosives for construction on Canada's west coast. "Several thousand" canoe loads of gravel are hauled in to fill boggy areas. After completing the fort itself, an open area 100 yards wide external to the palisade is cleared for security reasons. From all this it would seem that the company expects the fort to last a long time and to be capable of withstanding massive or prolonged attacks. Nevertheless, correspondence between company



**Figure 1: Fort McLoughlin about 1843, artist's reconstruction. No original drawings have been found. The position of the fort with reference to the Heiltsuk village is relatively correct as are the palisade, gate and bastions. Village details and internal fort features are only estimates. Drawn by Remi Farvarque.**

officials reflects continuing unease, brought on by their distrust of the Natives. In the words of Charles Ross, "it was decidedly the most dismal and gloomy place I was ever in & surrounded by the most cut-throat looking rascals I think I have ever met with."<sup>6</sup>

Company policy was that the personnel at the fort should be self sufficient for provisions. In the first few seasons their gardens failed. Eventually in an 1841 letter Simpson notes: "the garden, which is now about three acres in extent with a soil principally formed of seaweed . . . produced cabbages, potatoes, turnips, carrots, and other vegetables."<sup>7</sup> Since the fort area enclosed by the palisade is only half an acre, it is clear from Simpson's observation that most of the gardens are outside the palisade.

Various archival and published sources recount daily life at the fort. The most detailed of these is the diary of William Fraser Tolmie, a young man of 22 who is employed by the Hudson's Bay Company at Fort McLoughlin as a physician and fur trader.<sup>8</sup> During Tolmie's stay in the Fall of 1833 and in the Spring of 1834 his diary makes no reference to Native settlement anywhere nearby. In 1835, after an absence of several months, he returns to the fort. Soon after his return his diary begins to note the presence of Native settlement in the immediate vicinity of the fort. On March 24, 1835 Tolmie treats someone for laryngitis who is "lodged in the house of an Indian who has encamped at the beach for some weeks."<sup>9</sup> On April 8 a chief who is trading at the fort seems concerned about an attack from other Indians: "On his last night he had three or four armed sentinels placed in different stations around his house".<sup>10</sup> This structure also seems to be located on the beach at the fort. Tolmie notes on April 28 that "several parties of [chief] Boston's people encamped in the bay and we are likely to have them as disagreeable neighbours during the summer."<sup>11</sup> Further, the May 7 entry relates the death of a man "in one of the houses at the beach".<sup>12</sup> Apparently by 1835 there are several Native houses and the "lodge" in question is large enough to shelter a fair number of people. Elsewhere Tolmie's complaints about carousing and noise in "the village" further suggest that by its third year of operation a significant Native settlement has formed close enough for the fort personnel to be kept awake by these nighttime activities.

All references agree that the Native settlement is along the beach. Unfortunately Tolmie shows little interest in the details of Native life not related to trapping or trading, and does not provide descriptions of the houses. At least some of the houses are probably full-sized dwellings. Tolmie's use of the term "camped" suggests that a few of the structures on the beach fronting the fort might be of the more informal kind of architecture employed at seasonal camps. Throughout the northwest coast such seasonal architecture is surprisingly little known considering that it constitutes the main type of residence for most of the people for a large portion of the year. With the large decorated houses at winter villages, one can understand why early travellers, ethnologists and even archaeologists have little interest in the more humble architecture of seasonal camps.

Whatever the exact form of the initial Native structures at Old Bella Bella, it is clear from Tolmie that as early as 1835 there are the beginnings of a permanent Native settlement virtually within the shadow of the fort. The phenomenon is not unique to Fort McLoughlin. Throughout the coast, early drawings and paintings often show Native houses in the immediate vicinity of early trading establishments. More than simply attracting brief trading visits by members of outlying bands, trading forts serve as focal points for a process of Native settlement nucleation. This happens despite the fact that at no time during the century do either the Hudson's Bay Company or the independent traders attempt to encourage or direct this form of social change among the Natives. In the last two decades of the century missions begin actively encouraging Native settlement nucleation, but they are only affecting the final stages of a process that was well under way long before their arrival.

It is not clear if smallpox contributed to Heiltsuk settlement nucleation during the fort period. Heiltsuk oral accounts suggest that nucleation may actually have begun much earlier in the century than Fort McLoughlin, and that the fort period is only a step in a long-term trend.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps early settlement concentration could result from poorly known late eighteenth-century epidemics introduced through visits by maritime fur traders. Certainly oral tradition meshes with archaeological studies that show settlement flexibility and relocation in pre-contact times.

Better documented is an epidemic in 1836–37 that sweeps the northern coast but may not reach as far south as Fort McLoughlin. Uncertainty as to whether it did affect the fort and the Heiltsuk settlement points out how little we know about activities at the fort after about 1835, compared with the wealth of information we have for the fort's first three years. Boyd makes an argument that moderate reductions in numbers in the regions surrounding the fort around this time are due to smallpox. By a complex analysis of estimates of coastal Native populations before and after 1836–37, Boyd infers that the epidemic did strike there.<sup>14</sup> However, a letter from John McLoughlin in August 1837, quoted by Boyd, indicates otherwise: "The smallpox is still raging at Fort Simpson . . . but it had not reached Port McLoughlin and as we have sent them cowpox I hope the Indians will allow themselves to be vaccinated."<sup>15</sup> Even at this early date vaccination for smallpox was an established and widespread practice elsewhere and was used in Alaska even earlier by the Russians. The Hudson's Bay Company clearly was carrying out a vaccination programme, sending out the cowpox vaccine from Fort Vancouver. This must have had the effect of preserving those Indians who would have themselves vaccinated. If there is smallpox on the Central Coast in 1836–37 it is clear that its effects are not great, certainly not as profound as the scourge that will hit 26 years later in 1862–63. If it influences Heiltsuk settlement nucleation at Fort McLoughlin it probably does so in a subtle way by impressing Natives from outlying settlements with the company's power over disease.

All over the coast the nineteenth century sees the final years of a long-standing Native settlement system in which independent bands each occupy their own well-defined territories. They reside in a number of small seasonal camps over most of the year and

come together in one or more large villages for the winter. By the end of the nineteenth century in many areas of the coast this traditional settlement system comes almost to a stop. Native populations nucleate into large year-around settlements, often in the vicinity of a European trading establishment. Both a cause and an effect of the development of the permanent year-around communities and the growing availability of wage work is that families are practising an increasingly attenuated seasonal round. For most coastal peoples such refocusing of economic activity does not imply loss of interest in or ownership of outlying territories, simply a shift in the intensity of their use.

In forming these new coastal settlements, bands that once occupied independent territories begin to live side by side. This requires a working out of differences between the once independent groups. At Fort McLoughlin there was an Indian Hall within the fort's gates where groups visiting to trade could spend a few days secure from possible conflicts with those Natives living immediately outside the fort's palisade.<sup>16</sup> Tolmie's observations from the 1830s reveal several internal conflicts in the Heiltsuk settlement. Nearly 50 years later the Bella Bella mission's journal records a Christmas day feast in 1882, given by Chief Humchit to reconcile the other chiefs who have moved into Bella Bella so that they may "live together in peace".<sup>17</sup> The Heiltsuk claim to have overcome these difficulties, but for many First Nations communities cleavages rooted in the historic amalgamation process continue to the present day and can be a persistent background theme in band politics.

Settlement nucleation of this magnitude constitutes a radical change for the people of the coast, a change for which there are only weak precedents. To begin to understand why nucleation took place one must recognize the primacy of economics as a determinant Native force in cultural stability and change. On the Northwest Coast aboriginal economic systems do not appear to be focused solely upon the problem of survival. The rich coastal environment, combined with a sophisticated subsistence technology, led to the accumulation of surpluses. Aboriginal cultural complexity is rooted in the economic arrangements that evolve for dealing with these surpluses. Thus simple subsistence survival responses alone are not sufficient to understand the distinctive parts of Northwest Coast culture, particularly the settlement system. For example, the author has examined the spatial correlation between distribution of archaeological settlements and the specific distribution of the salmon resources on the Central Coast.<sup>18</sup> This study is based upon a large archaeological site sample and includes spawning counts of all the Central Coast's productive salmon streams. In survival-level societies one expects clustering of settlement in the vicinity of the principal food resource. Instead, the results of the Central Coast analysis show no measurable tendency for archaeological sites to be located close to the most productive food resources. It seems that other more complex cultural factors may be at work. Shortly after completing the above statistical study, the author presented it at a meeting of Heiltsuk elders. They understood the problem posed by my results and suggested

that I examine access to trade as a more potent settlement determining factor.

The accumulation of wealth and its redistribution through trade is a pattern on the coast many centuries before the advent of the European maritime or land-based fur trade. Fisher argues that the Native settlements that grew up around many trading posts are economically motivated and have as their primary purpose the involvement in the trade.<sup>19</sup> He emphasizes the potentially lucrative nature of the Natives' role as middlemen in the exchange.

The Native settlement that begins around Fort McLoughlin within a year or so of its establishment must also reflect this involvement in the trade. Traditional Native trade on the Central Coast seems to be of two geographical patterns, trade parallel to the coastline and trade at a right angle to the coastline. Trade parallel to the coastline may not be vigorous, simply because of the lack of resource variety. One must travel extreme distances up or down the coast to encounter much variation in the raw materials or foods available. Such long distance travel did occur and there are accounts of canoe voyages as far as Alaska and California. At a right angle to the coastline, one finds major changes in environment and resources within relatively short distances. This explains the energetic well-established trade between the outer portion of the Central Coast (Bella Bella), the inner portion (Bella Coola) and the adjacent interior plateau (Carrier, Chilcotin). Maritime, riverine and plateau foods, raw materials and products seem to move freely in both inward and outward directions on this route. Elsewhere on the coast, similar systems exist wherever rivers connect adjacent zones of dramatically different resources. On the Chilcotin Plateau in 1793 Alexander MacKenzie observes the presence of a well-established "road" running westward from the Fraser some 500 kilometres to Bella Coola along which Native trade goods move.<sup>20</sup> This system extends outward by canoe on the saltwater inlets from Bella Coola to the outer coast. This network is extremely long-standing. Archaeological studies show that obsidian, a glass-like volcanic rock well suited to the making of stone tools, is traded via this route from the western Chilcotin Plateau to Namu in the outer coastal zone almost 10,000 years ago.<sup>21</sup>

In 1833 Fort McLoughlin knowingly appends itself on to this ancient trading system so that it can become the final station on the western or outer end of the two-way route. That they understood at least some of this dynamic is clear in an 1834 memorandum from Anderson:

In regard to the Interior tribes it is presumed that the best policy of the company will be to encourage them to come and trade at the fort instead of allowing the Millbank Indians [Heiltsuk] to secure their skins. At present the Natives of this place are in the habit of going on trading excursions to the tribes that inhabit the adjacent country . . . but were the original possessors of the skins to come out and trade at the fort it would be out of their power to wait for strange vessels, they therefore would trade at our own tariffs. By this means the Millbank Indians might be induced to hunt their own lands . . . which they will neglect as

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long as they can procure their skins by trading and afterwards selling them profitably.<sup>22</sup>

The fort usurps the role of the local Heiltsuk traders. For this reason the Native response to the fort is in part negative. Initially there are genuine hostilities and even bloodshed.<sup>23</sup> These stresses are best understood as an outgrowth of the 40 or 50 years of maritime fur trade that precede the establishment of Fort McLoughlin. During the maritime fur trade exigencies of weather and supply prevent trading vessels from keeping a regular schedule. For an interior trapper to get furs to a buyer on a ship they must be traded through Native intermediaries along the still-active trade route to the outer coast. The furs then accumulate in the houses of successful Native traders on the accessible outer coast, where sail-powered trading vessels can call without having to navigate through the difficult inner coast fjords. In addition to the long-standing trade in Native foods and materials, the maritime fur trade adds European items traded inland through intermediaries, thus further enriching Native traders along the way.

With the establishment of a permanent Hudson's Bay Company post at the western terminus of the Central Coast-interior trade route, Natives can eliminate the Heiltsuk and other middlemen and sell directly at the fort. In some localities on the northern coast the establishment of European trading posts is not at all welcomed by the Natives, who correctly view them as competition for their own fine-tuned trade systems. Native reaction to Fort McLoughlin is still strong as late as 1835 as noted in the following observation by John Work, a Hudson's Bay Company employee. Work is returning to Fort McLoughlin aboard the *Lama* when the ship becomes becalmed only a short distance from the fort. Since there is no immediate prospect for a return of favourable winds or tides, it is suggested that the furs be moved down to the ship from the fort in rowboats. This is vetoed by Manson, who is in charge of the fort at the time. He considers it to be too dangerous due to the Heiltsuk,

who have for a considerable time been very insolent and daring, indeed so much so that a row with them is momentarily expected ... The disturbed state of the Indians and their discontent arises from their being under the impression that our being established here is the cause of their not getting such high prices for their furs as formerly, in consequence of the Americans not visiting them so frequently, and also the loss of the interior trade or a considerable part of it, as the Interior Indians dispose of their furs themselves at the fort, and they do not pass through the hands of the others as formerly.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these initial difficulties, the Heiltsuk do soon adjust to the presence of Fort McLoughlin. It seems from the growing size of their settlement that they learn to profit in various ways from the fort's activities. As with the company's other northern coastal posts, Fort McLoughlin's original purpose is to out-manoeuvre the other maritime traders. Once that is successfully accomplished, Hudson's Bay Company officials begin to question the consider-

able cost of maintaining and staffing the large posts originally set up by John McLoughlin. From his base at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River, McLoughlin argues with his superior Simpson for the northern posts' continued existence.

Unquestionably it is more economical to trade from a ship which can move from village to village. It is a familiar story that with the advent of steam power Hudson's Bay Company officials acquire the *Beaver*, a paddle wheel steamer and the first of its kind on the B.C. Coast. The *Beaver's* purpose is to serve existing company establishments but also to re-establish the maritime aspects of the trade. The *Beaver* begins service in 1835. Initially her boiler is fired with wood, which causes serious drawbacks. Her six woodcutters require two days to cut enough wood for one day's travel. Once sufficient wood is loaded aboard the little ship there is no room left for cargo. The addition of a locally built barge for cargo later helps solve this problem. The real advantage of a steam vessel is that it can move freely through the inlets in areas where unpredictable winds and strong tidal currents seriously discourage trade by sailing vessels. The *Beaver* potentially can open up much greater areas of the coast to direct trade. The ship eventually becomes fully serviceable. Once reliable coal sources are developed, the company can finally begin to take advantage of her potential. In 1843 the orders to close Fort McLoughlin and Fort Taku north of Wrangell are issued.

Heading north aboard the *Beaver* early in the Spring of 1843, James Douglas — the chief factor — arrives at the newly-chosen site of Fort Victoria on southern Vancouver Island. A small crew is put ashore to lay out the fort. Douglas then steams northward to close Fort McLoughlin and Fort Taku. He returns with between 40 and 50 men from the two forts to assist in the construction of Fort Victoria.<sup>25</sup> Bancroft further notes that "Douglas gathered in the stores and men from Fort McLoughlin as he had done at Fort Taku".<sup>26</sup>

As for the Native attitude in 1843 to the closing of the fort, company officials anticipate some resistance on the part of the Heiltsuk. Company officials remember the resistance from the Natives when they closed the original Fort Simpson on the Nass nine years earlier in 1834. At that time there are gunshots and fisticuffs but no serious injuries.<sup>27</sup> By 1843 the Heiltsuk have built the fort-based trade into their own economic system. They are in the process of altering their settlement system in accordance with the new economics when the decision to close the fort comes down. In an 1844 letter written shortly after closing the post, Charles Ross says:

On the abandonment of Fort McLoughlin & the rest of it, I need not dwell further, than to observe that all was managed very quietly. The greater part of the Indians of Millbank (Bella Bella) were out at their fisheries when the event took place — and thus no doubt, we escaped a good deal of annoyance from them.<sup>28</sup>



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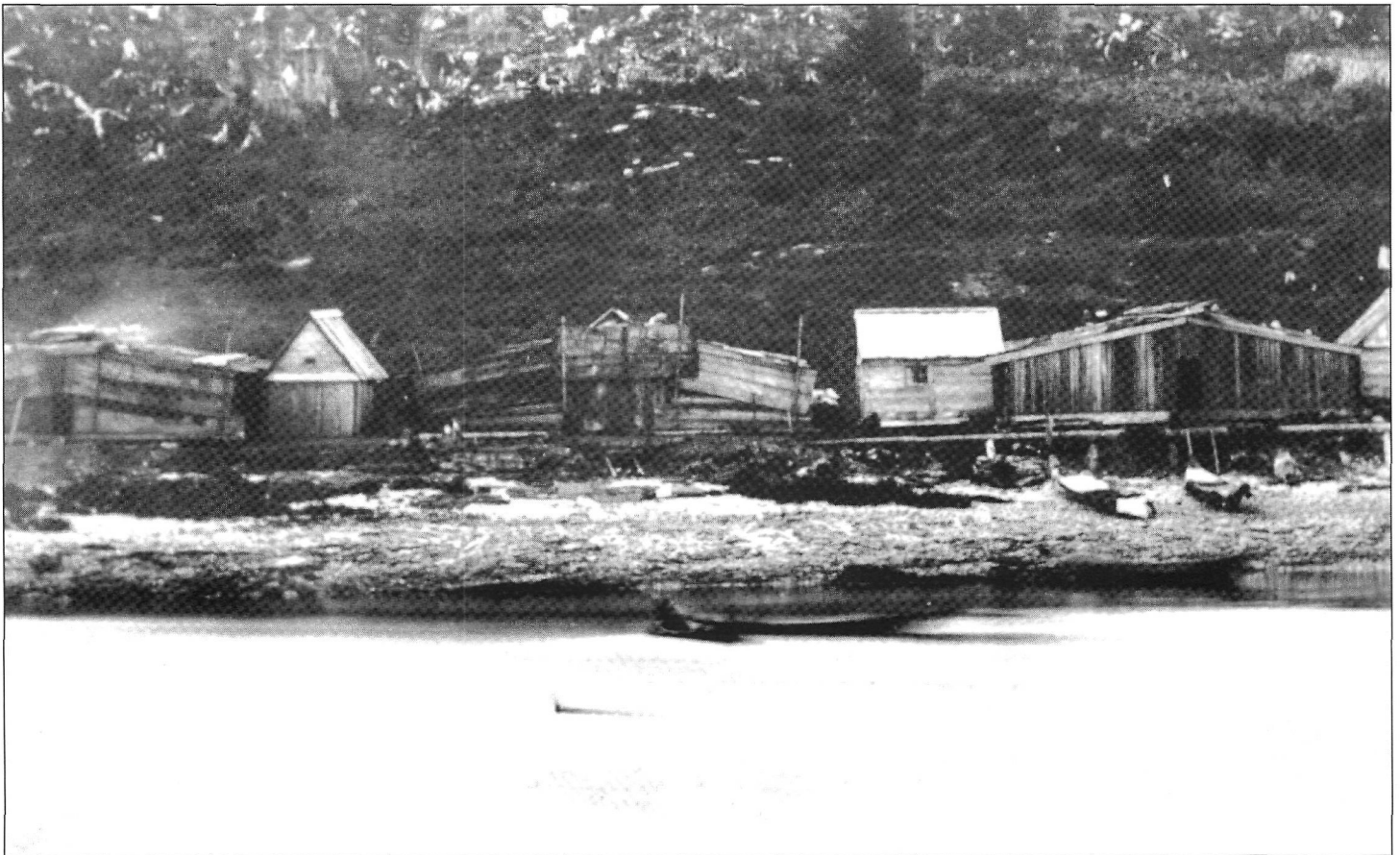
The details concerning the abandonment and the ultimate fate of Fort McLoughlin's buildings and palisade are sparse and partly contradictory. Stories variously relate that:

- 1) the Natives subsequently set fire to the fort to recover nails and other iron used in its construction;<sup>29</sup>
- 2) the structures and palisade are left to rot;<sup>30</sup>
- 3) some of the buildings are dismantled and shipped to Fort Victoria for reuse.

Little dismantlement seems possible at the date of the abandonment, simply because of the lack of time and space. With 40 or more men plus the *Beaver's* crew, together with fuel and the stores from the two forts, there would be little room for anything else. Why would it be necessary to ship the logs from a ten-year old palisade all the way to southern Vancouver Island, where timber is locally abundant? The individual buildings are another matter. It is possible that on later trips more of Fort McLoughlin's

buildings are taken down and loaded onto the barge. Since the company's favoured post-on-sill buildings are labour intensive in their construction, their removal and reassembly probably makes sense at least for the smaller structures. Sill timbers in contact with the ground often rot quickly, but the grooved posts and fitted wall timbers have a long life. Doors and window frames with associated hardware and glass can also be removed and loaded on the barge for the trip south.

After abandonment by the company some of the smaller buildings may be moved 100–200 metres down to the Heiltsuk village on either side of the fort gates. Archival photographs taken 30 years after abandonment show a number of small buildings in the Heiltsuk settlement with post-on-sill construction, steep European type roofs, and small windows (Figure 2). These are integrated into the Native village and each one is seemingly associated with one of the large plank houses. Another photograph shows that the Heiltsuk carpenters have learned the company's post-on-sill building



**Figure 2:** *Detail of Figure 3 showing Native-style houses, each with small associated structures of distinctly European appearance, which may have been moved to the village at the time of the abandonment of Fort McLoughlin in 1843. The two plank houses on the left show horizontal removable siding. The one on the right shows more permanent fine vertical siding.*

technique and apply it in the construction of a large Native-style gabled roof house.

As for the burning of the fort, our extensive archaeological excavations turn up no evidence of large-scale burning of buildings or palisade. Such evidence would surely be encountered if wholesale burning had taken place after abandonment. The oral accounts of burning for iron recovery heard from Heiltsuk elders suggest that at least some such activity took place. At the abandonment of the old Fort Simpson on the Nass River in 1834 the Natives were keen to recover iron construction materials. Tolmie describes the fort staff's somewhat undignified exit from Fort Simpson: "As soon as the gate was opened the armed Natives collected around. I went out first and stood at the threshold until the last person had issued. The Natives then rushed in to pillage & we reached the boats unmolested." They could not sail until the morning and so stayed at anchor nearby in the two ships: "All night a constant hammering was kept up in the deserted fort & dawn revealed several gaps in the pickets made by those who were intent on procuring the iron spikes which attached the pickets to the bars."<sup>31</sup> It is safe to assume that something similar happens with the closure of Fort McLoughlin. Had the whole establishment been left to rot, one would expect considerably more archaeological evidence in the form of sills and base logs. The most probable fate of the fort's palisade and those buildings that are not moved is that they become a ready source of iron and of pre-cut timbers for building and for firewood, either for use in the village or for sale to passing steamers.

A contrary statement concerning the fate of the Heiltsuk settlement after 1843 comes from McKelvie, who claims that the Indians who formerly "clustered about the post on Milbanke Sound" move south to Fort Rupert when it is constructed in 1849.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps some families do move south across the Queen Charlotte Sound to settle with relatives in the Fort Rupert area, because of the coal mining work and the new store there. Due to linguistic and other long-standing differences, it is not likely that a major influx of Heiltsuk population would be welcomed by the well-established bands already resident in the Fort Rupert area. Also, such a move would imply abandoning long-held family and band territories in the Heiltsuk homeland, an unlikely event.

As for the land within and around the fort following its closure, we know that cleared land on the Central Coast is always hard-won. Descriptions of clearing and stump removal in the construction of Fort McLoughlin relate the massive energy expended by a crew numbering close to 50 men, assisted by teams of oxen and explosives. These activities, as well as the large-scale gardening by personnel at the fort, permanently affect the landscape.

After the fort's closure in 1843 the cleared area probably remains open. Some of the cleared area may be put to use by the resident Heiltsuk for their own gardens. They have ample opportunity to observe Hudson's Bay Company employees' farming techniques. Heiltsuk knowledge of the white potato may significantly predate the 1833 construction of the fort, although I have seen no specific evidence that they are growing them. On the Nass and the Queen

Charlotte Islands the acquisition of potatoes and instruction in their cultivation seems to have come close to the beginning of the nineteenth century, if not before. In assessing the Fort's capability to feed itself in 1834, Anderson lists local Native foods and concludes that there is enough to feed their people, "with the proviso always that a schooner annually makes a trip to Skottgetts [Skidegate in the Queen Charlotte Islands] or another place for a cargo of potatoes."<sup>33</sup> By 1870 the Bella Coola are selling potatoes for eight dollars a ton, a ton being considered a canoe load.<sup>34</sup>

### **Old Bella Bella between 1843 and 1866**

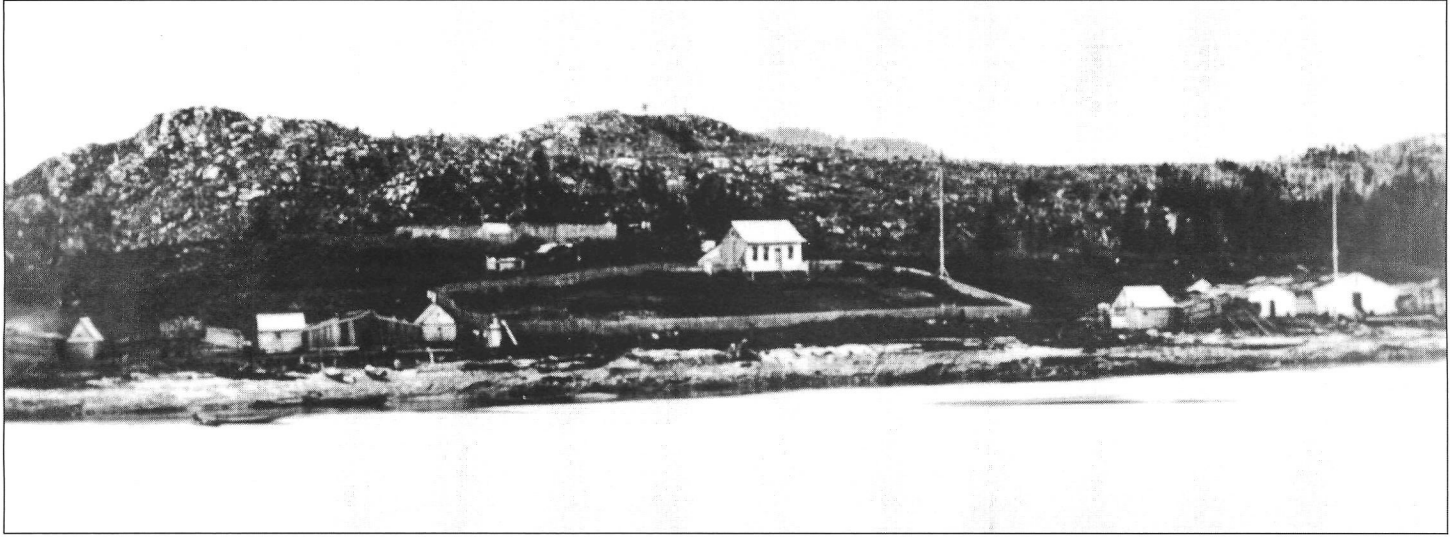
This time period is the least known in the settlement's history. The post-Fort McLoughlin period sees the survival of the Native community and the adjustments involved in taking advantage of the withdrawal of the Hudson's Bay Company. Written records between 1843 and 1866 provide little information on Bella Bella after the closing of Fort McLoughlin. It is the Hudson's Bay Company's intention to carry on the trade at Bella Bella by means of calls by the *Beaver* or other ships. We know from ships' log books that this does take place and that fur buying continues. In addition, various other ships' logs indicate intermittent stops at Bella Bella. By the early 1860s the Cariboo gold rush changes transportation and communications in British Columbia radically. Bella Coola becomes the head of navigation for pack trains to the Cariboo gold fields. Early in the 1860s private traders establish themselves in the Bella Coola valley and at its mouth. These traders begin trading in furs, thus cutting off much of the supply of interior furs which once went out to Bella Bella.

Between 1843 and 1866 there do not appear to be European traders actually resident at Bella Bella. An important question is whether the Native settlement continues to grow in the absence of a permanent trading post, especially once Bella Coola traders begin siphoning off some of their fur supply. Until the 1860s Native traders would have reacted to the withdrawal of the Hudson's Bay Company with a return to their advantageous role as trade middlemen, accumulating furs, foods, crafts, firewood and other goods for resale to the company trading vessel during its calls. Native commerce probably also has an aspect internal to Bella Bella. Near the end of the century missionaries note retail stores operating out of homes at Old Bella Bella, probably a long standing tradition even then. A particular irritant for the mission is an "Indian trading store" that is open on Sundays in competition with the church.<sup>35</sup> Even today at new Bella Bella (Waglisla), private stores co-exist with a modern co-op supermarket offering the advantage of specialized goods and extended hours.

If Native involvement in trade continues or is revitalized after the abandonment of Fort McLoughlin in 1843, we may assume that the community continues to grow and prosper. By mid-century the economic base broadens beyond trade in furs and Native foods. With increasing numbers of steam-powered vessels on the coast by the 1850s the sale of firewood becomes a cash source to many Native villages. It is ironic that the fate of some of Fort McLoughlin's structures could be that their timbers are burned in the boilers of the *Beaver*, the ship that brought the end of the



## *Old Bella Bella, Genesis and Exodus*



**Figure 3:** *The earliest known photograph of Bella Bella, taken about 1874 and showing Moss's 1866 store. Any of these Native-style houses that are 30 years or more in age, date to the time of Fort McLoughlin. Their split distribution shows the approximate position of the water frontage of the original fort. View is to the west at the south end of McLoughlin Bay. Photo courtesy of Canadian Museum of Civilization.*

northern forts. Throughout the coast early dry plate photographs show large quantities of cord wood stacked along the beaches and boardwalks of Native villages. This commercial wood cutting is responsible for the barrenness of the hills surrounding Native villages that can be seen so clearly in the photographs taken up to about 1890 (Figure 3). By the last decade of the century, coal burning has become nearly universal for coastal steamers, and fish canneries have become a better source of cash income than wood cutting. With the decline in need for cord wood by the end of the century, the archival photographs begin to show some re-growth of the forests around villages.

There is some basis for inferring the nature of the Native settlement at Old Bella Bella in the 1843–66 period following the demise of the fort. Early photography might have provided a way of doing this but unfortunately the wet plate photographic process used prior to the 1870s is too cumbersome for use in remote areas of the coast. The earliest dry plate photographs of Bella Bella are from the 1870s and show several traditional style Native houses. Most look as if they could be 30 or 40 years old when photographed and thus date to the time when the fort is still in use. The earliest photos show a split distribution of houses with a gap of about 75 metres in width in the centre (Figure 3). This gap represents part of the original water frontage of the fort. Our archaeological project located this area photogrammetrically by reference to still extant rock outcrops. This helped guide our efforts to locate the fort palisade. The split distribution of the houses, combined with the apparent age of some of the houses, confirms that the village seen in the 1870s photographs is indeed the Native settlement that clusters around the fort late in the time of its occupation. The photos verify that Old Bella Bella does survive if not prosper during the intervening years. They provide ample reason to reject

assertions of a wholesale Heiltsuk move elsewhere following the fort's closure in 1843.

In the years following the abandonment of Fort McLoughlin, steam power makes the calmer waters of the inside passage a practical and preferred route. Virtually all inside passage shipping to the North Coast and Alaska must pass directly in front of Old Bella Bella. While there is a definite shift in fur availability to Bella Coola during this period, Bella Bella's residents in the decades after 1843 still see an ever-increasing access to European goods and ideas as well as greater opportunity to visit the growing towns of the southern coast and to obtain employment there.

The winter of 1862–63 brings the most devastating smallpox epidemic to strike the Central Coast in the century. The Hudson's Bay Company has been gone from the Central coast for nearly 20 years and it is a few years too early for the Methodist medical missions, leaving no one resident to conduct a programme of vaccination. The epidemic brings about radical population decline with one estimate being 69 percent.<sup>36</sup> Smaller bands are wiped out entirely. Most are so decimated that remaining numbers are insufficient to carry out traditional economic or social activities. Wherever the epidemic strikes, survivors of decimated communities tend to nucleate in central locations. Following the 1862–63 epidemic Old Bella Bella, still clustered around the site of Fort McLoughlin, becomes a focal point for resettlement and is the recipient of remnant Heiltsuk populations from several but not all outlying bands.

### ***Missionaries and Traders, 1866 to 1899***

It may be because Old Bella Bella continues its growth through such population increments that its commercial potential is recog-

nized and in 1866 a small store is constructed there. Hudson's Bay correspondence notes with some irritation that an unnamed "petty trader" established a store on the site of their old fort in 1866.<sup>37</sup> This is the earliest date supported by primary sources for a store on the site following the fort's abandonment, some secondary sources to the contrary.<sup>38</sup> The 1866 trader is Morris Moss.<sup>39</sup> Archival photographs at first show the Moss establishment as a single small white frame-built building of two rooms, standing about 60 metres back from the beach in a fenced clearing. The photographs show Native-style houses in a village plan probably little different from the latter days of the fort (Figure 3).

The growing population of Bella Bella and the increasing numbers of vessels using the inside passage should have assured profits for Moss. Despite this, in a few years Moss becomes so in debt to the Hudson's Bay Company that they are able to force him out of business. Moss himself left for the interior in 1870.<sup>40</sup> Concerned that another outsider might attempt to take over at Bella Bella, Hudson's Bay Company officials decide to occupy Moss's buildings and continue the trade. By this time it has long ceased to be necessary to fortify trading posts on the coast. The company runs their new establishment on the site of their old fort at minimal cost, with only a single trader and a small stock. It is run as an outpost of their newly opened store in Bella Coola. Soon they lease it to John Clayton and then sell it to him in 1890. The store seems to have done well under Clayton's management. Compared with the mission, the store is a stable element in the lives of the Heiltsuk.

Less than two decades following the 1862–63 smallpox epidemic, cultural change at Bella Bella accelerates dramatically due to the influence of the new Methodist mission. Fisher argues that the fur traders themselves are not interested in changing the Native way of life.<sup>41</sup> Nowhere is this difference in attitude more clearly stated than by Father Morice, a Catholic missionary working in the interior of British Columbia, who complains of the Hudson's Bay Company employees:

Instead of lifting the lower race up to the standard of Christianized Europeans, the latter in too many cases stooped to the level of the savages they had come to as the representatives of a wonderful civilization. Gambling, Indian fashion dancing, face painting, potlatching, or heathen feasting, rendering murder for murder, the lax observance of the Lord's Day, disregard for the sanctity of the marriage tie. . . . even polygamy. . . . were not only countenanced but were actually practiced by the company's officers and servants.<sup>42</sup>

The Bella Bella mission journal relates that on September 22, 1880 a permanent missionary, C. M. Tate, accompanied by W. H. Pierce and Thomas Crosby, arrive at Old Bella Bella. They come at the invitation of Heiltsuk chiefs and bring with them with a shipload of lumber. Soon they begin the construction of a mission house and a school. Within a month the two buildings are completed. These two neat Victorian buildings, with their white painted clapboard siding and frame construction, are made with milled lumber from an early saw mill on the Skeena. They serve as mod-

els for the beginning of a progressive community based upon a blend of Christian beliefs and Victorian material values.<sup>43</sup> One of the aims of the mission is to teach the Natives how to build houses. Confidence in both the religious correctness and also the technological superiority of Victorian civilization is never more clearly stated than in this intention to teach the Natives of the Northwest Coast how to build houses! Despite this resolve, culture shock must sometimes have overwhelmed the missionaries. Shortly after his arrival, having attended a ceremony — possibly an Hamatsa dance — at a nearby village, the Reverend C. M. Tate confides to his journal: "May the Lord send revival showers that reach the hearts of these poor degraded man-eating savages."<sup>44</sup>

The new community grows slowly in the first year. Milled lumber remains scarce but some Heiltsuk do begin new houses in 1881. By 1883 a building boom is underway on the poor land on the north end of the bay. The archival photographs show the rapidity of this process (Figure 4). Equally rapid is the decline and disappearance of the large traditional plank houses. The big traditional houses are targeted by missionaries throughout the coast as they are seen as the seat of heathen practices.<sup>45</sup>

The mechanism of these changes is complex. The Heiltsuk may be receptive to the new order introduced by the Mission because of the destabilization of their traditional way of life, brought about by two factors.

First, the fur trade and later wage work, together with parallel government actions, result in serious disruption to the aboriginal economic pattern. A significant consequence of this for the people of the Northwest Coast is the erosion of the system of land tenure and resource use. Government interventions include the establishment of small reserves, the banning of the potlatch with its complex economic meanings, the sale of commercial fishing licences to non-Native fishermen with the resultant decimation of the resource, the use of the Schools Act to eliminate seasonal subsistence settlements, the availability of welfare payments, the issuance of trapping licences to non-Natives for Native owned traplines, and the sale of exclusive logging rights in Native traditional territories to large non-Native corporations. By comparison, in the Native Pueblo cultures of the Southwest, subsistence and land use practices remain essentially intact, with the result that comparatively little of their traditional life changes over centuries of European contact.

Second, a central theme in traditional life on the coast is that of ancestral names, dances, songs and stories. Most of these are private property, owned and passed down from generation to generation through rules of inheritance. With the loss of almost 70 percent of the population through smallpox in 1862–63 many whole families are wiped out. The inheritance rules are seriously impacted. This throws open the question of who has rights of ownership to these important things.<sup>46</sup> This loss strikes at the root of traditional Heiltsuk beliefs. It is difficult to appreciate the stress and sense of disorientation this must cause.



**Figure 4:** *Old Bella Bella looking south at the peak of the mission period, 1893–96, shortly before abandonment. The former Hudson's Bay Company store, built by Morris Moss in 1866 on the old site of Fort McLoughlin, is on the hill to the left of the church. The new Heiltsuk settlement of small milled lumber cottages more than fills available land on the rocky slope north of the store. Source: Mary Moody collection MM 08. Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre.*

The missionary Duncan typifies the attitude of the time, asserting that the unsettled character of life in Native settlements of the mid-nineteenth century should make an orderly Christian community seem attractive.<sup>47</sup> One wonders if life was any worse in 1880 than 200 or 2,000 years earlier. An element of raiding, rivalry and individuality probably characterize Native life on the coast long before European contact. The uncertainties of life in 1880 may not be greater than in pre-contact times, when Native fort sites, fortified villages, and weapon-caused fractures to the head, arms and body are common and bespeak the recurrent reality of inter-group war, raiding and slave taking.<sup>48</sup>

To understand the rapidity of the change, and the apparent metamorphosis in Native life at Bella Bella under the influence of the Methodist mission, one must consider not only the things that change but the things that seem at first impervious to change. Ostensibly the missionaries promote the Christian religion. That they

enjoy some success in that endeavour is undoubted. Perhaps their widest achievement is not in the introduction of new religious ideas to the exclusion of older Native ones, but in the substitution of the elements of a Victorian technical, material and stylistic catalogue for their outdated Native counterparts. These are the areas of Native life where change occurs so rapidly, so thoroughly and so irreversibly. Victorian civilization provides a new catalogue of wealth and practical items, and thus a new set of material representations of status. These things, the houses, clothing and manufactured material items, may serve only as a new set of props so that the old Native drama can continue to be played out according to a script that may have changed far less than the missionaries think. By the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century many of the coastal Natives want to acquire the material aspects as well as the Christian moral order that they see in Victorian English life. These things are not forced upon them against

their will. When they go to a photographer's studio to have their portraits done, they dress and pose as they wish themselves to be seen by the world, in suits, ties, and holding canes. Women wear voluminous black dresses and often have bibles in their hands.<sup>49</sup> I believe that if the photographer Edward Curtis had shown up on the coast around 1885 and asked the Natives to pose in bark clothing, holding spears or digging clams, he might not have found the willing subjects he did 30 years later.

The key to unlocking the puzzle of the apparent overnight transformation of Native culture is to examine that part of Native life that seems so impervious to change: the potlatch (a festive Native American gift-giving ritual). The missionaries of the time often express wonder and frustration at the intransigence of the Natives in the matter of the potlatch. After all, mission work is so effective in almost all other areas of Native life. If anything, potlatching may actually have increased under the missionary-led transformation of Native life. It is no longer oolachan oil, smoked fish and blankets. With the introduction of Victorian material culture the Native potlatches begin seeing sewing machines, good furniture, repeating rifles and numerous other valuable items being "frivolously" given away. Where have the missionaries gone wrong? For the missionary the limited nature of the changes in Native belief systems are obscured by the vigorous participation in church activities and especially by the obvious and profound physical change in their settlement. They fail to realise that the outward physical forms implying conversion to Methodism and Victorian culture are more readily adopted than the spiritual or theological ones.<sup>50</sup> Soon coastal missionaries come to support the use of legislation in order to eradicate the potlatch. In some coastal areas this ends up involving confiscating ceremonial items and the threat of imprisonment for offenders.

Some Central Coast communities hold out against these missionary-influenced changes. A census in 1890, tallying the Bella Coola speaking residents of Kimsquit at the head of Dean Channel, notes that all are pagans. A description of Owekeno well after 1910 also indicates few changes from the traditional style of village. The archival photographs of Old Bella Bella confirm that the Heiltsuk are the first to adopt in a wholesale manner the architectural style of their English mentors. The Nuxalkmx of Bella Coola on the inner coast 110 kilometres away remain conservative with both Native and European architectural forms in use at the turn of the century.

From an archaeologist's perspective the transformation that takes place at Bella Bella in the last quarter of the century is virtually instantaneous. It should be seen in the light of the long-standing Native tradition of settlement flexibility in which different locales and different architectural forms are in use over the course of a year. The pre-contact Heiltsuk practice an aboriginal seasonal round that involves moving about between several settlements or camps annually.<sup>51</sup> Archaeologists recognize that many of these sites change function over the centuries, at times serving as winter villages, then as seasonal camps and often experiencing long periods of disuse or use only as cemeteries. Oral histories contain numerous references to the founding or abandoning of villages.

The instability of the maritime and coastal riverine environments over the millennia often necessitates the moving of whole villages. For example, because of flooding, the village of Bella Coola has been in three locations within less than a century. The exodus from Old Bella Bella must be viewed in this light.

### ***The Exodus***

Two factors contribute to the departure of the Heiltsuk people from Old Bella Bella. The only suitable building sites on McLoughlin Bay are on its southern half. Because of the original location of the fort and later the store on the south end of the bay, that area is claimed by the Hudson's Bay Company. The fact that the south end of the bay is also the locus of the initial Heiltsuk settlement seems to be overlooked when establishing the boundary between the reserve and the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>52</sup> Later a deed is issued to the company for the sale to Clayton. Clayton's store and farm property block any southward expansion of the growing Heiltsuk community. The church, mission house and school also cluster close to the store property on the south end of the bay. By the 1890s, with population growth from outlying settlements, the Bella Bella people are out of room for further residential building.

The site of the instant community of small milled-lumber houses on the north half of the bay is rocky and cut by numerous small drainages. It is unsuitable as a building site from the beginning. Gardening there is impossible. The north end is also exposed to winter winds from the southeast. Some of the Heiltsuk with whom I have spoken say that the southeast storm pattern is always a consideration for winter settlement location.

The European residents at Old Town apparently cannot see that the end is coming. Christmas 1892 sees the first service in the large new church above the village built by the Reverend Mr Hopkins. Within six years it has to be dismantled. The photographs show that John Clayton's store undergoes repeated renovations and expansions right up until the end of the century. Not long before the exodus of the Heiltsuk people a new store building and wharf are constructed on the waterfront. Neither John Clayton nor the church officials seem to understand the Native tradition of settlement mobility. They are probably quite surprised by the Heiltsuk's decision to move from McLoughlin Bay.

It is difficult to appreciate how great a challenge it was to the people of Bella Bella to have to leave their new little town, the most progressive on the Central Coast at the time, and to start over again in a different location. Yet, most look back upon the move in a positive light. We can hear it in the words of Willy Gladstone, an elder who was present for the 1898–99 move and who gives the following account in Heiltsuk:<sup>53</sup>

[The owner of the store] at that time would not agree to give up any of the land that the old fort had fenced off, so the decision was made to move. When the factor realized that the Heiltsuk were really going to move he tried to stop them by saying that we could have part of the land that we wanted. The people refused his request and moved anyway...

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Another reason that people wanted to move from 'Qelc was the time the house of the late Auem Dencxstalaqs was destroyed by the wind and wave one stormy night. The villagers helped him to move his belongings so that he did not lose them but his house was lost.

As for the move itself, Gladstone says:

I will tell you of the big time when the Heiltsuk moved to this location from 'Qelc . . . a plan of action was agreed upon with the head chief at that time being the leader. It was agreed that none of the workers would be paid for the work on the individual houses, but that the owner of the house being worked on would feed the persons who were helping him. The head chief told the people that it was a great undertaking they were doing and that they should work hard for the benefit of all. It was a good time for that reason. . . . At that time they did not sleep but worked hard, they helped each other to move. Six men worked on one house until it was finished, they moved the lumber on two canoes, the lumber of one house. The lumber was piled crossways on two canoes [the traditional Heiltsuk way of moving houses]. All who were not otherwise occupied helped move the lumber to where the house was to be rebuilt. . . . House building was going on everywhere, those who wanted to invite did it at supper time. It was a time of happiness and co-operation, there was no sadness or trouble.

We know that the move three kilometres to the new town takes place quickly, with many new homes completed by 1900. It seems that as soon as housing becomes available, families move up to the new town. The move is essentially complete within two or three years.

After the move a few people may maintain houses at Old Town for a short while, but virtually all are torn down and the lumber reused for building the larger houses that typify the new site. No houses were moved intact although this was technically possible at the time. One holdout was a chief known as Charlie, who refused to move and lived out his days in a small house by the river, the sole remaining resident of Old Bella Bella.

Clayton's store persists at Old Town for a few years, a trading post without any Indians. It operates at least as late as 1908. By this time Clayton's health is failing and he is running the Bella Bella store from his store and home in Bella Coola, 110 kilometres distant. By 1914 a cannery is established on Denny Island about 3 kilometres across Lama Pass from the new town of Bella Bella (Waglisla). The post office in Clayton's Old Bella Bella store is moved to the site of this B.C. Packers cannery along with the long low building that houses it. This structure is there today, the last standing building from Old Bella Bella. The moving of the post office bearing the name Bella Bella to one location, while the Native settlement that everyone knew as Bella Bella moves to another location, is the origin of a confusion in town and post office names that continues to plague the area. It results in modern Bella Bella opting to use the name Waglisla for its new post office. With the

closing of the B.C. Packers store in the 1980s the post office called Bella Bella is moved once again, this time to Shearwater even further away from the present town that most still know as Bella Bella.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Today***

Today the Heiltsuk live about three kilometres from Old Town. While they officially call their new town Waglisla many still know it by its old name Bella Bella. Some argue for the continuance of this historic name.<sup>55</sup> The settlement has grown exponentially in the 30 years the author has known it. Nearby at McLoughlin Bay the half of the site of Old Bella Bella that is reserve land is cleared for economic development. Where the mission and the sweep of new white frame cottages once stood there is now a large fish processing plant as well as a ferry terminal and a growing tourism facility.

The southern half, once deeded to the Hudson's Bay Company and John Clayton, is now owned by the Heiltsuk. The land on the south end still contains the essentially undisturbed archaeological remains of old Fort McLoughlin and three or four of the old traditional houses. It is now 100 years since the Heiltsuk exodus from Old Bella Bella and nearly 170 years since the original clearing of the fort. That part of the settlement where the fort stood just south of the reserve boundary has not yet fully surrendered to the encroachment of the surrounding forests. Parts of it remain open and grassy. Plans for its development are uncertain.

Among the Heiltsuk there is growing appreciation for Old Town's remaining heritage values. Heiltsuk sentiment about it still runs deep. With the new road from Waglisla the people can now visit there easily. They recognize it as an ancestral place, not located in a distant past like much of their oral history but a special kind of origin place, a bridge as it were, that links their modern world to a past of some ten thousand years. It is for them a past peopled with ancestors whose deeds and achievements still liven the tales of a few elders and fill a large archive of tapes, notebooks and photographs in their own cultural centre.

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