

Haida Gwaii

TRADITION RESURRECTED

BY SUSAN NOYES PLATT

Part I: Haida Gwaii, Tradition Resurrected

When you visit Haida Gwaii you can feel the magic of 10,000 years of continuous history. Haida Gwaii (formerly Queen Charlotte Islands) is the homeland of the Haida. As you approach on the long ferry rides from Vancouver Island and then Prince Rupert, the mountains descend to the sea steeply, covered with uninterrupted forest; the sky expands; the sea stretches; the clouds dance high and low and the fog sometimes hangs below the mountains, sometimes enveloping us. The sun breaks through clouds of many grays, waters of many blues, greens and silvers. The rain pours out of distant clouds.

We see the flash of salmon leaping, and the incredible grace of huge whales surfacing as they blow out water in a big spray, and then dive with their tails sweeping up.

Many eagles fly in the sky, dozens of ravens and crows scavenge on the ground as we arrive.

On the islands we meet people (both First Nation and white) who live off the land, crabbing, fishing (catching the spring salmon or scallops, or halibut or cod), catching deer (introduced, of course, along with rats, raccoons, and squirrels), growing vegetables, and harvesting berries, just like the ancient Haida.

Along with this basic existence, which is increasingly crucial for survival today, given the expense of living on this remote island, the Haida also have survived by logging, working in canneries, and industrially-linked fishing.

But we feel the closeness of the natural world and the human world in the Haida myths — the people intersect with their animals and birds, and they intersect with each other, help each other, and collaborate to confront emergencies. Raven, the trickster, the most provocative of

them all, discovered human beings in a large clam shell on the beach, and because he had just gorged himself on the foods of the sea, he coaxed them out and let them flourish. He then intersected with them playing tricks, causing trouble, bungling his greedy ideas, and generally playing with right and wrong.

Eagle swoops from on high to grab small birds and fish, lands on high perches. He stands above us all. Bear is the caretaker animal, who often is seen on poles protecting people and other creatures. Killer Whale (Orca, actually a Dolphin) often is depicted with a human on his back, a woman kidnapped and then later recovered.

All of the stories are part of an oral tradition that has been passed on for centuries and is still being passed on although now there is also a written language (and only thirty fluent speakers exist today). Pansy Collison, in her book, *Haida Eagle Treasures: Tsath Lanas History and Narrative* (available to order at the Haida Heritage Center), describes the stories she heard from her grandmother and her mother, as lessons in how to behave. They all have a larger theme of understanding the results of your actions.

Today, Haida are closer than ever to their past — they raised a legacy pole on Windy Bay (Hik'yah GwaGa) on Lyell Island, on August 15, 2013. This is in the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve, also a National Marine Conservation Area Reserve and Haida Heritage Site. Raising a pole takes a long time and a lot of people.

The legacy pole celebrates twenty years of cooperation in managing this precious group of islands, between the government of British Columbia and the Haida. The cooperative agreement was the result of years of Haida resistance actions, starting on Lyell Island in 1985, continuing up to the present.

The legacy pole is the first pole installed in this southern area of the Islands in one hundred and thirty years. During those years the poles of the seven villages on the island (which lasted until the late 19th century) were removed to various museums, except for the mortuary poles. Some are in the museum near Skidegate, the Haida Gwaii Heritage Center. Since 2001, poles representing each of those villages have been raised at the Heritage Center

The long-inhabited villages were forced to be abandoned when their populations were decimated by smallpox introduced by European traders (in some cases intentionally). In addition to smallpox, there was also the time of residential schools, when many children were sent away and stripped of their identity. Christian missionaries also did a lot of purposeful destruction, although today many Haida are Christians. The descendants of those ancient peoples live in two villages on Haida Gwaii, Skidegate and Old Masset.

Among the historic villages in Gwaii Haanas, we visited Skedans, a site with beaches on both sides of a spit. Its sheltered mooring was full of bull kelp, another source of food. At its peak this village had twenty-six to thirty longhouses, fifty pieces of monumental sculpture (of which twenty-two were house frontal poles), eighteen single mortuary poles, three double mortuary poles, five memorial poles, and five mortuary figures.

Today we see only a few mortuary poles and indentations in the land where longhouses were located. The continuity of history and the earth reclaiming its own is deeply moving.

A watchman guide wearing a traditional cedar hat and a red jacket with the watchmen insignia (which appears on many poles) takes us through the site pointing out a fallen log that is actually a crouching bear; an eye on the side of a fallen pole with a tree growing out of it; a square indentation is a house where thirty people slept. We see a tall pole with simple indentations that becomes, when explained, a multilayered potlatch hat, one layer for each potlatch, suggesting enormous status; and another falling pole with salal actually keeping it from falling apart.

The Haida have survived, as have their stories of Raven, Eagle, Bear and Whale, their

songs, their dances, their potlatch tradition. Many of these actually belonged to specific people who died, but who gifted these traditions. While much has been lost, much is being gained, as these ancient traditions intersect with modern ones. Pole carving is one of those lively traditions that is practiced by several master carvers, assisted by many others. Robin Wright has just published a book on Northern Haida Master Carvers.

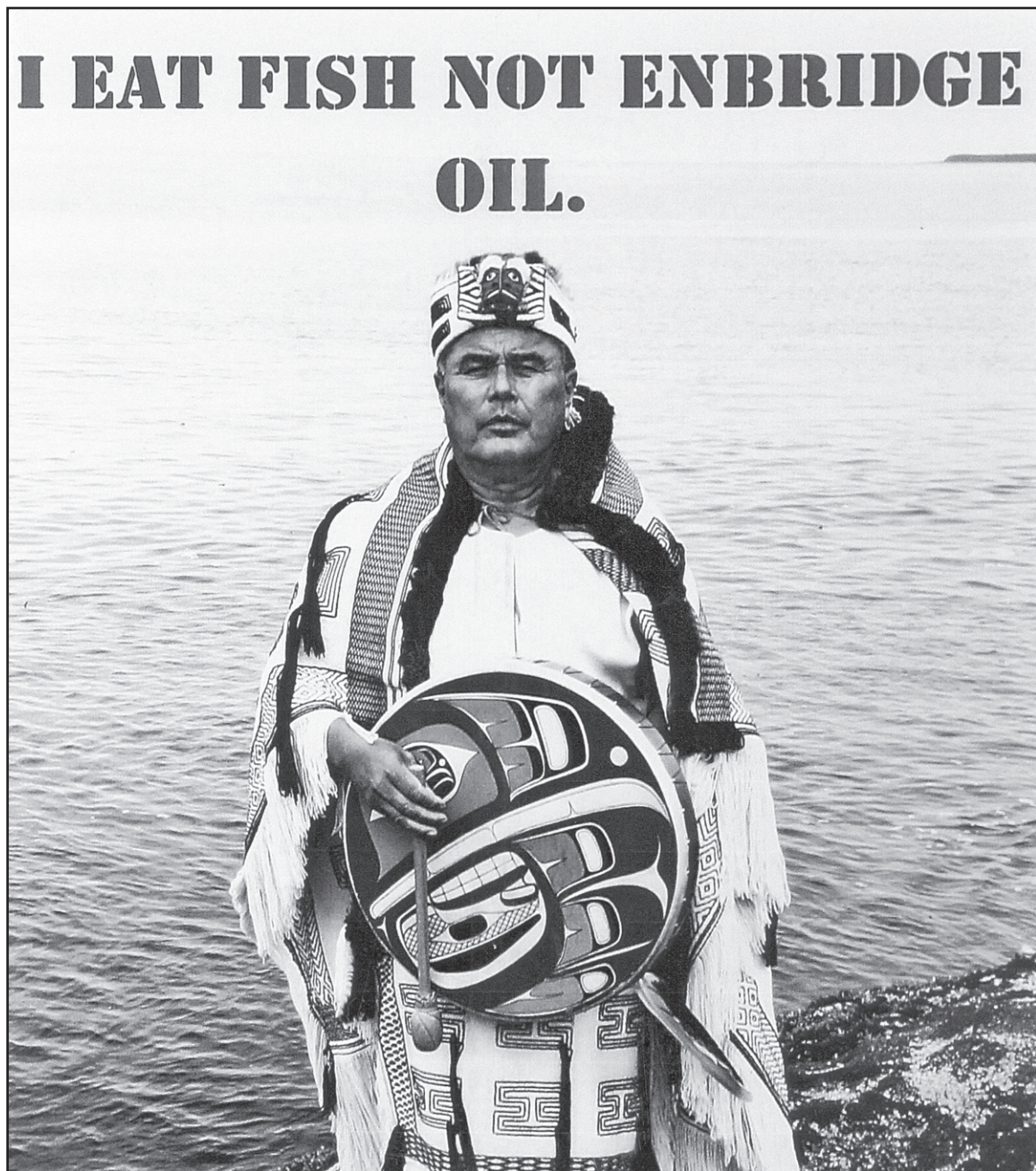
Part II: Haida Gwaii, Thanks, But No Tanks

Through the windows of the Haida Gwaii Cultural Center, the beach and sea and sky and birds beckon us to embrace the stunning land that belongs to the Haida people today and has for the last ten thousand years.

Although their traditional communities were decimated by smallpox, by 1900 the Haida were reduced to only three hundred people concentrated in two villages — Old Masset on the northern end of Graham Island and Skidegate on the southeast — these villages today are active centers of Haida culture. And in 1985, Bill C-31 enabled First Nations peoples in Canada to regain their status, and Skidegate welcomed people to return there.

In the windows of the Haida Gwaii Cultural Center, curator Nika Collison has placed a succession of quotations from the Joint Review Panel Hearings on Enbridge's Northern Gateway Pipeline project — a proposal to construct twin pipelines, the westbound pipeline to export asphalt/bitumen, heavy tar sands oil, and toxic chemicals imported from China, from Alberta to Kitimat, British Columbia, and send giant tankers through these delicate shorelines and seas. The hearings were held all over British Columbia, as well as on Haida Gwaii, in 2012.

Tribal leaders testified eloquently, pointing out that the project failed to accurately measure the risks: "Northern Gateway does not appear to understand the responsibilities that flow from being inextricably linked with the natural environment" (as quoted in the *Haida Laas*, Newsletter of the Council of the Haida Nation). If you want to see the propaganda for the project from Enbridge you can read it. They even have a link titled "benefits for aboriginals,"



"Anti-Enbridge Campaign," Digital Print, 2012, by Michaela McGuire

which gives them a ten percent share!

Collison alternates quotes between tribal leaders and other opponents with the words of the oil company. In this particular setting we can sense the absurdity of the oil companies' perspectives to their fullest. We can understand the deep divergence of the two mind sets, one offering "jobs" and "economic opportunity," the other saying the land, sea and sky's health is more important.

The quotations provide the entrance to

"Thanks, But No Tanks," twenty-five striking works of photography, animation, cartoons, paintings, and sculpture by both native and non-native artists that protest the pipelines and tankers.

A young woman named Michaela McGuire was so affected by the hearings that she decided, as an amateur photographer, to make images about the significance of the threat of the tankers to Haida culture. The result was a series of staged photographs (developed in a collaborative

workshop) with Haida youth, men and women wearing traditional regalia, standing by the sea or in the forest, with a brief text that brings home the meaning of the destruction of these lands for Haida people.

In addition, McGuire created a potent self portrait of her oil-soaked hand reaching out toward the camera, her screaming face visible through her fingers.

As curator Collison told me: “the strength of the photos catalyzed the show.”

Another dramatic response to the threat of the tankers came from artist Janice Tanton, who had supported herself comfortably with sales to patrons from the oil community. When she came to Haida Gwaii for a residency, she completely changed her mind, and chose to oppose the Enbridge project.

Janice Tanton’s “State of Interdependence crossing Over at Alliford Bay,” her striking painting of “everyman” gazing out over Alliford Bay, shows the strength of her distress. As she crossed Alliford Bay on a small ferry she was crossing over not only physically, but also emotionally and mentally, to another way of understanding the world. It is easy to understand this change: these islands exert a magnetic force.

Hanging from the ceiling in one room, is a paper maché head of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. It is one prop for a multimedia video called, “Haida Raid 2: A Message to Stephen Harper.” An animated video includes a rap song performed by JA\$E El-Nino that begins,

“I met a Native man that did a span in Afghanistan
He even toked hash with a clan of the Taliban”

The animation, by Haidawood, includes Raven reprogramming the computer so that the oil is redirected into Stephen Harper’s face.

The curator also included a 1977 cartoon book, *Tales of Raven, No. 1: No Tankers, T’anks*. Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas and John Broadhead created it to oppose a previous disastrous project that would have brought oil through Hecate Straits — the body of water between the BC mainland and Haida Gwaii, aptly named after the Greek Goddess associated with crossroads, entrance-ways, fire, light, the Moon, magic, witchcraft, knowledge of herbs and poisonous

plants, necromancy, and sorcery. That protest successfully moved the Exxon Oil project to Alaska, and we all know what happened next — the Exxon Valdez oil spill that still has not been cleaned up. Leaking tar sands out of old tankers could never be cleaned up at all, so thick is the tar coming from the Alberta fields.

Kayoko Daugert was accustomed to making joyful watercolors about nature, so this dark subject was a challenge for her. “Catching Swarms of Invasive False Promises” is a delicate watercolor that appears to be lighthearted until you look closely and see that the children are picking up globs of tar from the beach.

Photographs by Natasha Lavdovsky look at underwater life; Pierre Leichner created tableau of toy soldiers in a delicate marine environment, possibly futilely trying to clean up, or suggesting that the tankers are like a war on the world under the sea.

Betsy Cardell’s hanging felted wool appears to have been eaten away by toxins; a big multimedia sculpture created collaboratively by eleven artists suggests all the forms of life under the sea: “The forest and ocean conceal little known secrets. While we sleep a symphony of cacophonous life explodes — if we don’t hear it, does it exist? Invisible, palpable, ruckus, rich . . .”

One of the most striking works in the exhibition is by Gwaii Edenshaw. “Hollow Promises: Two Hundred Years of Pain and Exploitation” is cast of a fragment of a face mounted on a rusty oil can. Edenshaw’s work addresses the theme of prostitution: oil boom territory leads to a six-hundred percent increase in transient workers and transient prostitution. This ragged face exposes those ravages. I also read the piece as a reference to the renewed threat to the Haida from the tar sands tankers. It is accompanied by a short poem:

A hollow torn form smudged with greasy fingers.
A worn soul under the heel of “away from home”
The price of money . . . we cannot bear it.
The price of oil we will not carry it.

The irony is that at the same time as the exhibition, the Haida were creating the legacy pole honoring twenty years of cooperative management protecting Gwaii Haanas, “from the

bottom of the sea to the top of the sky.” Gwaai Edenshaw was an assistant along with Tyler York on the legacy pole, with lead carver Jaalen Edenshaw. At the dedication, the Haida declared their “responsibility to conduct ourselves in a way that honors our ancestors.” Since those ancestors have recently offered fierce and successful resistance to destruction of their land, we know what to expect next if Enbridge continues.

The plan is to fight in the courts because the First Nations have never given up their lands in treaties in Canada, and they still have title to their land. But Stephen Harper, as Prime Minister, is doing everything he can to turn back the clock and take away indigenous rights, while talking as though he is providing economic progress. Raven’s action in fixing the pipeline programming so that the tar sand squirts right in Harper’s face is a great idea. But Haida will be fighting with their bodies, minds and spirits, as will other First Nations groups, alongside U.S.-based tribes, and many other groups who are also fighting the tankers and pipelines across the continent.

Stephen Harper is trying to “reset” the relationships with First Nations, meaning apparently to revoke their rights under cover of providing increased “opportunity.” The absurdity of these



“Stephen Harper’s Head,” detail, 2012, by Dr. Ken Leslie

opportunities, to allow the complete destruction of the land in return for some temporary jobs in a toxic environment, is obvious from the vantage point of Haida Gwaii. ☺

Note: Part I and II of this article are posted on Platt’s blog / website at <www.artandpoliticsnow.com>. Part I was posted on August 13, and Part II on August 28, 2013.