

REVIEW

RECORDING THEIR STORY: JAMES TEIT AND THE TAHLTAN

By Judy Thompson, 2007. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, and University of Washington Press, Seattle.

xi + 207 pp. maps, b&w and color illus., appendices, notes, references.

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Here is a book that is like a fine dessert, a cheesecake extraordinary ladled with blueberry sauce, a sliver of key lime pie, a second spoonful of crème brûlée. It is so attractively designed and presented that its contents are irresistible. There is much to like about this large format volume, carefully researched and clearly written.

The Tahltan are an Athabaskan tribal group living around Telegraph Creek and Dease Lake, along the tributaries of the upper Stikine River in northern British Columbia. The book's title, nonetheless, is somewhat misleading. I came to it expecting to read an ethnography of the Tahltan written by James A. Teit and edited by Judy Thompson. What I found instead was a biography of Teit written by Thompson, with ethnographic data on the Tahltan squeezed into the quotes, endnotes, captions, and appendices.

That does not mean the book is a disappointment. To the contrary, readers will be held spellbound by the quiet and unassuming personality of Teit, his hard work, his handsome good looks, and his competence. He was born James Tait, a Shetlander, in Lerwick in 1864. He emigrated to Canada in 1884, arriving in the small southern British Columbia community of Spences Bridge at the invitation of his maternal uncle.

After arriving in Canada, he mysteriously changed the spelling of his surname to Teit, much to the chagrin of his parents. Working in his uncle's country store, he met and socialized with many Thompson River Indians and learned both Chinook jargon and their Native language, Nlaka'pamux. Within three years he fell in love with Su-

sanna Lucy Antko, a local Indian woman, and began living with her. Teit made ends meet by working in his uncle's store and supplemented that with sundry other jobs such as mining coal, cutting firewood, fur trading, and guiding big game hunters. Teit married Antko in 1892, only to see her die of pneumonia seven years later.

A chance meeting with Franz Boas near Spences Bridge in 1894 inspired Teit to undertake a series of ethnographic projects in the region, changing his amateur's interest into a distinguished professional career. And what a career it was. Teit used his linguistic talents to inform himself systematically about all aspects of Athabaskan culture, and his easygoing manner helped him build great rapport and trust with the people he studied. He eventually produced a wealth of monographs and essays on not only the Tahltan, but the Lillooet, the Thompson River Indians, the Okanagan, the Kaska, the Shuswap, the Chilcotin, and others. Article after article began to appear in *American Anthropologist* and the *Journal of American Folklore*, many of them edited and annotated by Boas. One of Teit's wealthy hunting clients, Homer Sargent, soon became a patron of his fieldwork.

Boas also recommended Teit to Edward Sapir, who promptly hired him to work for the Canadian Geological Survey, parent organization of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, where Judy Thompson is now employed as curator of ethnology for the western subarctic. For the rest of his life Teit was torn between his allegiances to Boas and to Sapir, both of whom piled project after project on him, far more fieldwork and writing than he could

handle. Sometimes Teit deferred the interests of both masters in order to advance the political interests of the British Columbia First Nations. He advocated for their hunting and fishing rights and for their territorial homelands.

In 1904 he remarried, this time to Leonie Josephine Morens, a young French woman born in Spences Bridge. With the assistance of Boas and Sapir, Teit acquired both a camera and a wax cylinder recording machine and began using these tools to showcase Indian life. He became enamoured with Tahltan songs and took detailed notes on each recording, recorded during major field trips to north-west B.C. in 1912 and 1915. These notes are reproduced in appendices to the book; it is unfortunate that a companion compact disk of the songs could not be included to go with them. The many portraits Teit took of the Tahltan are vivid and revealing, perfectly exposed and focused. He took a keen interest not just in his key respondents, such as Dandy Jim, but in the entire community of young and old, male and female.

In the U.S., many wax cylinder recordings of North American Indian singers have now been digitized and remastered by the Library of Congress and the Archives of Traditional Music at Indiana University, and it is hoped that the Canadian Museum of Civilization will likewise proceed to make at least some of these songs available to the First Nations they came from, if not to scholars and the general public. Students of Athabaskan material culture will be delighted to find appendices devoted to Teit's description of the Tahltan artifacts he collected for the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The main text contains many photos of these artifacts, some of which are reproduced in stunning color. The continuity of northern Dene material culture from British Columbia to Alaska,

from the Tahltan to the Gwich'in, for instance, is little short of astonishing.

Although the book's title is *Recording Their Story*, a significant drawback is that very few of the stories Teit recorded have been included. If two appendices can be devoted to listing the Tahltan songs he recorded and another two can be devoted to listing the artifacts he collected, it is pity that there is no appendix listing the titles of the Tahltan stories he collected and published. Since wax cylinders were limited to a running time of approximately two minutes, it is understandable that this medium was not the ideal way to record stories. Still, folklorists interested in comparative study of tribal group narrative repertoires should not be forced to look up each of Teit's publications individually just to find out what traditional stories he published. When Teit died in 1922 of prostate cancer, a good portion of this work was left in manuscript form. Boas steered much of the unfinished corpus into scholarly journals, although Teit's Tahltan field notes did not find their way into print until 1956.

The book has a couple of other small flaws that should have been caught in peer review. One is that the list of references does not contain all of Teit's publications. Although this volume understandably focuses on his Tahltan writings, where else can we find a full bibliography of his life's work? A key word index is also conspicuously missing.

Despite these minor flaws, the book can be highly recommended. It elevates Teit's largely unrecognized fieldwork and advocacy efforts to heroic status and brings him out of the shadows into the bright sunshine. It is a book full of substance and style, extremely well-written, and a delight to hold and behold. Very sweet indeed.