

Oral
History
AND Public
Memories

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PARKS CANADA, THE COMMEMORATION OF CANADA, AND NORTHERN ABORIGINAL ORAL HISTORY*

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Parks Canada, established as a national government agency in 1885, is responsible for the protection and presentation of Canada's natural and cultural heritage through a network of National Parks and National Historic Sites. National Parks, originally selected for their natural beauty and recreational opportunities, are now understood to be a representative sample of the different eco-systems characterizing the country's environmental heritage. National Historic Sites address what are considered the significant themes of the country's history. Both parks and sites are powerful images of what Canada is.

The Story of Canada represented through these national heritage protected areas are, and remain, a concrete representation of a created place and a created past, both shaped and moulded to spawn and maintain a unified sense of national identity. The Euro-Canadian vision of common traditions emphasizes the heritage of the trans-Atlantic cultural ties to western Europe, the geography of the country, and the political history that established its boundaries, thus justifying both the country's existence and its difference from America. This vision was largely drawn from Harold Innis's pioneering analysis of the economic history of the country written in the 1920s.² Innis's work connected the economic exploitation of the country's originally abundant natural resources, including the development of an agricultural frontier, to the importance of trans-Atlantic communication links to the centre of the British Empire in England. This work focussed upon the St. Lawrence River as the core of the Canadian economic and political system. The resulting historiographic direction, described as the "Laurentian thesis," became the unchallenged analytical framework for the study and understanding of Canada well into the 1970s.

During the 1970s and 1980s, changing appreciations of social justice within the larger society supported increasing political and legal activism amongst aboriginal peoples dissatisfied with their position in Canadian society. At the same time the complexities of environmental issues and the

limits of related scientific knowledge were becoming more obvious. These social and environmental pressures affected Parks Canada and served to enhance the profile of aboriginal peoples in the strategic thinking of the organization's leadership. In 1985 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), the federal body mandated to sanction places, events, and persons of national historic significance, acknowledged the cultural imbalance of the country's national historic sites and recommended consultations with First Nations to determine their interest in the national commemoration of their history. Within National Parks, the possibilities of aboriginal traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) seemed to offer a shortcut to indigenous peoples' deep knowledge about the intricacies of eco-systems. Aboriginal peoples in Canada appeared about to get their due, or at least plenty of attention by well meaning, if naïve, civil servants such as myself.

In the early 1990s, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, a First Nation government, and Parks Canada jointly hosted a Yukon River heritage workshop in Dawson City, Yukon to advance this work. I hoped the workshop would provide an opportunity to discuss First Nations' cultural values associated with the river and the role that Parks Canada might play in protecting and presenting these values to Canadians. The program included representatives from a variety of river interest groups, including wilderness protection advocates, several First Nation governments, perhaps two dozen community Elders, and both territorial and national government departments. Parks Canada was represented by Daniel Tlen of the Kluane First Nation, the Yukon Territory's representative on the HSMBC. Tlen described his work on the Board and highlighted the importance of national cultural designations. As an example, he described the value of the national commemoration of the archaeological evidence uncovered in Beringia, the unglaciated portion of ice age North America linking Asia and America, for telling the story of the peopling of the Americas.

The audience of First Nation elders and political leaders listened politely. At the conclusion of his presentation, Irene Adamson, an Elder of the Ta'an Kwach'in First Nation, rose and thanked Daniel for his speech. She then went on, "I've heard about those people you are talking about. *My grandmother told me stories* about them. She remembered all these strange people walking around, they didn't have any good clothes, didn't know how to hunt, they were just lost and starving — we killed them, those are the people you are talking about."³ Explicit in her story was the primacy of aboriginal peoples in North America: "we" were created here and this is "our" homeland. Implicit was a challenge to the authority of western science, her grandmother's stories versus old bones scrutinized by archaeologists. She thus questioned the "truth" presented by academic perspectives on Canadian history and the authority and power of government agencies relying on this history. Ms. Adamson's use of First Nations oral tradition challenged the assumed distribution of social power inherent in the western understanding of the past and it articulated a different vision of how the world was made. She challenged the listeners to consider another way of understanding who we are and where we are going.

These early consultations with aboriginal peoples, both nationally and regionally, resulted in Parks Canada's recognition of oral history as a key element in the approach to aboriginal history and commemoration. The recording of oral history was seen as an opportunity to preserve at least some of the knowledge and wisdom from the last generation in the Yukon to have led a largely subsistence lifestyle - a life on the land. As the manager of a Parks Canada cultural research program for National Parks and National Historic Sites in the Yukon Territory, I have worked with a number of different aboriginal communities over the last twenty years in an attempt to incorporate their stories into what we had assumed was a "shared" national history. The three projects discussed here were viewed as successful by the host communities. Each project resulted in a collection of transcribed audio and video taped interviews with Elders. Each also spawned and supported the production of a variety of useful community-based products and activities including publications, school curricula, language instruction materials, films, and other art forms; as important, each project enhanced connections between generations. The role of Parks Canada in these projects varied but was generally limited to funding, professional staff support, and some technical resources. To a large extent the projects were organized and completed by community members. In the following paragraphs I trace participants' conscious efforts to shape the public memory of their communities and the efforts of these communities to advance First Nation engagement with the national narrative.⁴

But first I must note that despite these community successes, Parks Canada still faces significant challenges in meeting its own mandate - the protection and presentation of

expressed cultural values on a national stage. The passage of discovery we experienced through these projects highlights two continuing issues for Parks Canada. The first is the recognition of a parallel First Nation narrative that attributes meaning and power in the world. The second is Parks Canada's capacity to extend its mandate to preserve and protect the framework for this narrative as has been done for elements of the Laurentian thesis. That is, how can a national commemorative agency contributing to an existing unified national identity effectively serve the interests of disparate cultural communities included in our national community?

Learning the Ropes:

The Chilkoot Trail and the Yukon North Slope

The Chilkoot Trail is a passage connecting two distinct ecosystems - the mild Pacific coast rain forest of Southeast Alaska and, separated by the rugged Coastal Mountains of northwestern Canada, the drier but much colder boreal forest of the Yukon interior. Its long use as an aboriginal trading route is still visible in the family lineages joining communities. However, in the 1960s the trail was identified as a National Historic Site for its use during the Klondike gold rush of the late 1890s. Tens of thousands of gold hungry stampedeers, mostly adventurous young men, moved across the trail leaving behind a colourful relict landscape of building remains and abandoned piles of what may well be the world's largest collection of early empty tin cans and broken bottles.

Commemorating the Chilkoot Trail was part of a larger effort to recognize the gold rush as an important event in Canada's history. Following the Laurentian thesis, history began with the onset of regional Euro-North American settlement and development, the incorporation of a far flung corner of the country into the Laurentian network, and its economic contributions to the centre. Implicit in the commemorations of the gold rush was the recognition of the importance of the economic development of northern Canada. The celebration of the first large-scale exploitation of northern resources thus not only recognized the pioneers of the gold rush, it also gave a stamp of broad public approval to the mining and transportation improvements that opened the frontiers to industrial development in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵

This vision of economic development and settlement as progress had significant implications for Parks Canada's initial understanding of the historic role of the Carcross-Tagish First Nation along the Chilkoot Trail. The three interpretive themes identified for this National Historic Site in the early 1980s were life on the trail, including the experience of the Stampedeers taken from their remains on the trail; transportation technology, that is, the evolutionary progress of freight movement into the north; and national sovereignty, or the role of Canada's Mounted Police in extending social order and establishing the political boundary. Cultural research by archaeologists

and historians initially addressed the material culture on the trail and the rich lore found in the personal diaries and letters of Stampeders, as well as the operation of horse packing companies, aerial tramways, and finally the railway; and explored the differences between stolid Canadian Victorian social values and the wild west of the American republic. The indigenous population of the region had a limited role in this story, recognized only in a transportation sub-theme as human pack animals who were contrasted to the white man's more technologically advanced modes of transportation.

As a result of the government's attention to aboriginal activism in the mid-1980s however, Parks Canada started to work to make the national story more inclusive, and the "Indian side" of the Chilkoot Trail story was identified as a research priority. Historical research, especially in archival photo collections, offered some limited access to the aboriginal experience during the gold rush. However, it was soon clear that the primary source would be the stories and memories of the local First Nation people.

Negotiations for a community oral history project occurred within a context of volatile land claims politics that inevitably shaped the project's outcome. Identification of the Chilkoot historic site had pre-dated the federal government's acknowledgement of aboriginal claims and no consideration had been given to aboriginal interests in the land set aside for the historic site. Parks Canada's first contacts with the Carcross-Tagish First Nation about an oral history project were thus linked to the community's demand for the return of their traditional lands. Recognizing the possibility of misunderstanding, Parks Canada established clear expectations with the First Nation for the oral history project: It was to obtain the "Indian" side of the story for presentation at the National Historic Site. Design and control over its products would remain with Parks Canada.

Not surprisingly, the Chilkoot Trail Oral History Project did not fulfil Parks Canada's initial expectations. The attempt simply to throw light on the previously unexplored "Indian side" of the presumed national story was a failure. The Carcross-Tagish were quick to challenge the project's assumptions about the past. In one instance, after an extended set of interviews the project anthropologist and a First Nation Elder were relaxing on a lake shore. The anthropologist found a stone hammer nearby and showed it to the Elder as proof of the aboriginal presence in the region. The Elder briefly examined the stone and then casually threw it back in the bushes, saying "What have I been telling you all week?" As the project progressed, we watched the First Nation similarly discard the Parks Canada notion of the project's objectives. It became clear there was no "Indian side" of the Chilkoot Trail gold rush story; the stampede was seen simply as an annoying but brief interruption of their on-going lives. Community stories instead put forward a parallel historical narrative describing their long use of the area and their connection to it as "home." These stories conveyed a significant message to Parks Canada

about how the Carcross-Tagish used their traditional territory to sustain their cultural identity. The First Nation also used the project to make powerful statements about their ownership of this territory, thus returning to the main issue they wished to raise with the federal government.

The Carcross-Tagish effectively used the oral history project as a platform to challenge a national understanding of the historical significance of the Chilkoot Trail, to confirm their interests in the lands of the National Historic Site and, with some sense of equality, to begin negotiating a relationship with Parks Canada that might benefit both. Today Parks Canada offers a modest public interpretation of the First Nation history for visitors to the trail.⁶ It demonstrates respect for the First Nation citizens who live and gain a livelihood in the National Historic Site, and community Elders visit the trail camp annually to meet with Parks Canada staff and orient them to this important piece of their homeland. While efforts to document the "Indian side" of the gold rush story proved to be a dead end, the oral history project was an important stepping stone in the development of positive working relationships between the First Nation and Parks Canada.

Ivvavik National Park has a distinctly different origin than Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site. Plans to develop oil and gas resources in the Beaufort Sea and the Mackenzie River in the Canadian western Arctic stirred up aboriginal protest in the early 1970s. In response the federal government set up the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Commission to hear complaints and present recommendations to guide development. To the surprise of both government and industry, Commissioner Mr. Justice Thomas Berger recommended a ten year moratorium on all development to allow settlement of outstanding aboriginal claims. He also recommended that lands in northern Yukon be set aside for a wilderness park to protect wildlife and allow resident aboriginal peoples to continue their traditional activities.⁷ The Inuvialuit Final Agreement, a treaty settling their claims on Canada, described a new relationship between the national government and the Inuvialuit. And two national parks, Ivvavik and Vuntut, were ultimately created through the negotiation of final agreements with two aboriginal groups, the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (1984) and the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation (1993).

The Yukon North Slope Oral History Project was initiated in 1990 as a partnership between the Inuvialuit Social Development Program (ISDP), the cultural branch of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, the Yukon government's Department of Tourism - Heritage Branch, and Parks Canada.⁸ In an arrangement quite different from that which governed the Chilkoot Trail project, the two park partners coordinated their shared interests through a common contract arrangement with the ISDP, which ran the multi-year project. Although the ISDP contracted with a project anthropologist at the request of the Yukon and Parks Canada partners, there was never any question that the project was run, and the results owned, by the Inuvialuit.

The community's interests became apparent during the course of the project, as participating Elders worked to prepare a legacy of traditional teachings. Their primary audience was, as in days past, their children and grandchildren. Recognizing that opportunities to pass stories on to the young at traditional hunting, whaling, and winter camps were increasingly unavailable, Elders were active and eager participants in a process that not only included nostalgic visits to their old camps, but also allowed them, through oral and video recordings and text, to address future generations about the importance of "being Inuvialuit."

Parks Canada had two objectives for the project: an Inuvialuit history of the post-contact period on the Yukon North Slope to support public interpretation of the Inuvialuit cultural resources in the park; and access to Inuvialuit traditional ecological knowledge to supplement the relatively limited scientific knowledge available for natural resource management. While Parks Canada had a fairly clear understanding of its goals, it only vaguely understood the oral history needed to address them. It had even less comprehension of the community's interests and purposes for the project.

The notion of "being Inuvialuit" did not directly address the Parks Canada interpretive agenda. Although it was expected that traditional life ways would be featured in the park's cultural interpretation, the nature of Inuvialuit identity challenged any simple presentation of Inuvialuit life. In a walk about Herschel Island with Victor Allen, an Inuvialuit Elder, I received a lengthy first person narrative describing his social relations with different visitors to the island. It took some time before I realized he was speaking metaphorically and that "his experiences" had taken place over the course

of somewhat more than a century. The passage of real time, the basis of history as a chronological, causal chain of events, was only incidental to his purpose. Rather Allen's story organized the past as object lessons on relations among family members, place, and neighbours or newcomers. These relationships all focussed on the enhancement of Inuvialuit identity and interests. Many of the narratives in the project tended to this kind of "life story." Parks Canada's role in the public presentation of this kind of cultural message was questionable, though Inuvialuit appreciated contributions to their own community-building processes.

Expectations of the scientific value of the oral history narratives fared no better. Although Parks Canada wished for specific details about Inuvialuit uses of natural resources and knowledge of animal behaviour, these subjects were only obliquely referenced in the interviews. Such information as was available proved to be of limited utility. In an attempt to access this Inuvialuit TEK for the park's computerized geographical information system (GIS), a primary management tool, we combed the interviews to find temporally and geographically delimited data suitable for entry. A detailed study of a single topic, fish, revealed the challenges facing the integration of knowledge sets. Approximately one hundred references to fish, fishing, fish species, and fish as food were identified in the roughly seventy-five project interviews.⁹ These references were then analyzed to determine how the Elders incorporated fish into their narratives and what these narratives contributed to the process of cultural reproduction. The results of this analysis¹⁰ indicated first of all that Inuvialuit Elders knew a lot about both fish species and habitat. In addition to detailed knowledge of most of the fish species identified by science,



Inuvialuit stories also noted the periodicity of fish numbers; good times and locations for meeting and harvesting the annual runs, often reflected in place names; the relationships between harvest fish and competing predators such as seals and killer whales; and, of course, a great deal of detail on effective methods of fishing.

Although rich in the expression of traditional knowledge, there were real problems using the elders' stories as science. In codifying their stories about fish, their knowledge was reduced to information. That is, the cultural context of the story was discarded. Narrator Lily Lipscombe identified two different species of arctic char.¹¹ However when she spoke of their difference she was not describing fish. *Iqalukpik* (arctic char) was a delicacy to the *Tariuqmiut* (people of the sea). *Iqaluaqpak* (land locked char) were caught only in springtime and only the *Nunamuit* (people of the land) would eat it. Lipscombe's story noted her grandparent's preferences for these different species as signs of their different ethnic backgrounds and to explain the social makeup of contemporary Inuvialuit society – a lesson in being Inuvialuit. From the perspective of park scientists, however, the Yukon North Slope Inuvialuit oral history project did not provide the hoped for bonanza of data to guide management. As in the Chilkoot Trail project, the expectations of the North Slope project, premised on the cultural framework of western approaches to the land, initially hampered an understanding of the different kind of knowing embedded in the elders' stories.

Nonetheless there were important lessons learned and regional Parks Canada staff adapted their working activities to reflect an enhanced awareness of aboriginal interests.



Above: Victor Allen, Inuvialuit elder, at Herschel Island (D. Neufeld)
Below: Renie Arey completing interviews on the North Slope. (ISDP)



A collaboration between a Parks Canada biologist and a Gwich'in cultural research worker resulted in the collaborative publication of an ethnobotany book. More recently Parks Canada completed two interpretive centres in the Inuvialuit region. In the planning these centres were assumed to be for visitors, albeit few in number. However during the course of community consultations, this initial assumption was altered to address the communities' interests in also developing the spaces for local exhibits, school projects and community functions. These activities were all set within a broadening engagement with the Inuvialuit communities to open up the management of the regional National Parks to their expertise.¹²

Thus, in growing co-operation with Parks Canada, the Inuvialuit were able to use the project to advance their own understanding of the greatest need for good management of their territory - the maintenance of an informed and engaged Inuvialuit population. More generally, both the Carcross-Tagish and the Inuvialuit used the projects to connect with a federal agency managing lands in their traditional territory. They used the power gained by political recognition and the coherence and meanings of their oral history to challenge the assumptions of western historiography and natural science, resulting in Parks Canada re-evaluating its understanding of national history and the way first nations and Inuvialuit might choose to engage with it. The Carcross-Tagish and the Inuvialuit were thus able to bring the government of Canada onto a middle ground where there could be a search for accommodation and the development of shared meanings and practices.¹³ Subsequent work with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in highlighted an even more important opportunity for Parks Canada to redefine its relationship with aboriginal communities.

3.0 Working on the Middle Ground ***The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in and Tr'ochëk NHS***

Known to early fur traders as the *gens des fous* (people of passion) for their exciting dances and pleasing songs, the Hän, the ancestors of today's Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, are one of the numerous Northern Athapaskan peoples whose lives and culture are shaped by their continuing connection to the cultural landscape of the Yukon River. The spine of the sub-arctic boreal forest ecosystem characterizing much of Yukon and central Alaska, the Yukon River rises in the southern lakes of the Yukon and northern British Columbia, arcs northwest to the Arctic Circle in Alaska, then turns southwest draining into the Bering Sea.¹⁴ It follows a serpentine course through a broad valley of its own making. In some areas the valley floor has been cut down 250 metres in the last five million years, creating a dramatic wooded landscape of rugged cliffs, volcanic basalt flows, and ancient rounded mountains. The regular arrival of spawning salmon moving up the river from

the Pacific Ocean in through the summer and the migration of caribou herds in the fall sustain the Athapaskan communities of the basin. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in regard these natural rhythms as part of an established compact between the human, natural, and spiritual inhabitants of the Yukon River.

The onset of European contacts in the mid-nineteenth century introduced a set of stressors that, over a century, threatened the cultural identity of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. Initial contact with fur traders brought new diseases that ravaged Yukon River aboriginal populations, while the Klondike Gold Rush of the late 1890s brought tens of thousands of Euro-Americans into the heart of their traditional lands. Although dislocated by the newcomers from Tr'ochëk, their seasonal camp at the mouth of the Tr'ondëk (Klondike) River, the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in managed to relocate to a new camp not far down river at Moosehide, where they re-established a form of independence and managed their integration with white society. However, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the collapse of fur prices and a significant increase in government regulation of land use served to redefine the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's relationship to the land that had supported them. A concurrent federal program of aggressive cultural assimilation through the establishment of northern aboriginal residential schools only furthered their separation from the land. Children were removed from their families and ultimately the community was forced to abandon Moosehide, thus breaking important linkages between generations, separating the past from the future. Finally, beginning in the mid-1950s and continuing into the 1990s, government and the tourism industry's emphasis on commemorating Klondike Gold Rush history effectively buried the aboriginal past, hiding it and the people associated with it from the public mind, separating the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in present from their own past, and contributing to the separation of all Yukon's First Nations from the larger community of Canada. Through the course of the first half of the twentieth century the aboriginal peoples of the Yukon were transformed from people into objects of study and wards of the state.

Parks Canada was the agent for the Canadian government's commemoration of the Klondike gold rush and thus a player in this objectification of aboriginal people. Like the Chilkoot Trail commemorations further south, the work in Dawson, the service town for the Klondike goldfields, was set within the national narrative dominated by the Laurentian thesis. Extensive -- and expensive -- restoration work completed on dozens of buildings in town and a mining camp and dredge in the gold fields helped ensure Dawson's survival as a viable newcomer community and made it a major seasonal tourist destination. One of the tourist highlights is Discovery Day, the annual celebration of the initial discovery of gold in mid-August 1896. The stories told by Parks Canada at Dawson and the town's principal public event thus validated the government's northern development strategies and facilitated the replication of this national vision of Canada in



Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in dancers celebrate National Aboriginal Day, Danoja Zho Cultural Centre in Dawson, Yukon, 2004 (D. Neufeld).

the Yukon.

In the early 1990s, Parks Canada made tentative contacts with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, seeking their participation in the gold rush commemorative program. However, the intent of these commemorations offered little of interest to the first nation. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, already committed to a community program of restoring their history and identity and immersed in negotiation with the government over their final agreement, or treaty, demurred.

Understanding the reason for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in's disinterest in commemorating the gold rush again requires a long view. The call for a final agreement by Yukon First Nations began surprisingly as a reaction to the social justice and human rights movements of the 1960s. Aboriginal people in Canada, like indigenous peoples across North America, had participated in the demand for equal treatment. In response, the Canadian government in 1969 issued a *White Paper* on Indian Affairs that proposed rescinding the special status of Aboriginal people under the Indian Act of 1876¹⁵ and the absorption of the Aboriginal people of Canada into the mainstream national population. However, First Nations people were not pleased to find that becoming full members of the Canadian community meant that while their common humanity would be recognized, their distinctive cultural identity would not. In the Yukon, First Nations worked together to respond.

Together Today for our Children Tomorrow - A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by Yukon Indian People resulted. A brief document with two messages, it provides an aboriginal recounting of recent Yukon history and describes the need for a middle ground between aboriginal and newcomer cultures. The first part describes how the original

peoples of the Yukon had been left out of history, concluding that "public holidays now have little meaning to the Indian. August 17 - Discovery Day means to the Whiteman the day the gold rush started. It means to the Indian the day his way of life began to disappear."¹⁶ The second part describes the need to establish a joint Yukon society. While problems in housing, education, land regulation, and social services are noted, the document sought a framework for a co-operative governance model, inclusive of both cultures in the Yukon, one that would allow First Nations to both regain their humanity and retain their culture. As Roddy Blackjack, an Elder of the Carmacks/Little Salmon First Nation, said, we must become "two cultures side by side."¹⁷ The Parks Canada recognition of this parallel path in the late 1990s provided the middle ground necessary for the eventual recognition of a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in national historic site.

Presented to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1972, *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow* was accepted as the foundation for the negotiation of a comprehensive final agreement for Yukon First Nations. Twenty-six years later, in 1998 the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in signed their agreement with the Canadian government. The negotiations for the agreement had been long and often confrontational and the signing was an important symbol of cultural strength for the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. It was time to advance their narrative, to challenge the old national narrative that had stripped their lives of meaning. In community meetings to discuss the future of their new heritage site at Tr'ochëk, a site laden with the history of both aboriginal people and newcomers, some felt that a clean platform for the representation of the Hän presence was needed and that it was time to take the white history of

the place “and throw it all in the river.”¹⁸ While this cultural cleansing did not take place, the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in actively worked to bring the narrative expressed in their oral history and embodied in their continuing use of their traditional lands into the discussions with Parks Canada about their relationship to the national story of Canada.

The Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in share the Athapaskan oral tradition, a spoken literature framed by their language and cemented to their land by evocative place names, the whole describing a sophisticated set of relationships to place and their human and non-human neighbours. The traditional territory of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in is created, understood, described, and explained by their stories; they set a people within an understandable world. Or as Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Elder Percy Henry puts it: “Our land is our history book.”¹⁹ To visit and use places in their lands, even if only in the imagination, is a trigger for the stories and the values and knowledge encapsulated in them. And the catechetical repetition of this place-based spoken literature at camps and on the move throughout the annual round of subsistence activities has been an important part of the trans-generational transmission of cultural identity. This oral tradition incorporates instruction in the practical skills needed to sustain life in the northern boreal forest, provides a moral code for the maintenance of proper relations within their lands, and includes exemplars of wisdom to guide choices made in daily life. They remind listeners they have both the ability and the responsibility to contribute to the dynamic equilibrium in the world.²⁰ The stories are also potent statements of an interest in place that western understanding might characterise as ownership.

As explained by these stories, the Yukon River, and time itself, were created by an Athapaskan hero figure, variously known as Smart Beaver Man on the Upper River, Tachokaii (the Traveller) in the Dawson area, and K’etetaalkkaannee (the One who paddled among the people and animals) amongst the Koyukon of the lower river. The story cycle describes the mythic Traveller’s adventures on a journey from the river’s origin to its mouth, adventures that transform the world from chaos, a time of limitless possibilities when humans and animals spoke with each other, in fact regularly changed from one form to the other, to its present more fixed, more reliable, but still dynamic form. As the Traveller moves down the river, he reworks the landscape by removing obstacles to his journey. He also captures and kills, or tames, bad animals that threaten good relations. Then, at the end of his trip, he vanishes, closing off his influence and transferring responsibility for the world to its inhabitants: “So he went down the Yukon until he got to the ocean. Then he paddle and paddle. Pretty soon he come to a mountain, and there’s a channel going through there. That’s where he went in. Before he went through, he left a note there that said he was not to be followed.”²¹

The Traveller story cycle is one of the most important in the Athapaskan oral tradition. The story not only explains how humans fit into a dynamic world that he has balanced, it

also challenges the listeners to be conscious of their specific and detailed responsibility for the maintenance of this balance. Anthropologist Frederica de Laguna characterizes the Traveller episodes as serious stories that serve “as indirect conveyors of knowledge about the natural (and supernatural) world, of man’s place in it, and of how he should behave.”²² Mida Donnessey, an Elder of the Kaska Tribal Council, in her telling of the story episodes said the purpose was to “Make the world good for baby.”²³

While the Traveller stories deal with a largely spiritual world, they are also firmly grounded in the familiar riparian landscape of the Athapaskans. Henry’s version of the story explicitly links the Traveller’s tricking and killing of the monster *Ch’ii Choo* and the construction of the first birch bark canoe to the sandy flats of the Yukon River as it meanders into the south end of Lake Laberge. Villages along the lake are noted as the scene of rescues. Another story is set at Old Woman Rock below the confluence of the Fortymile River, while the Traveller’s adventures with the *deedaii* (a big bear) in yet another version of the story takes place about ten kilometres below *Clavath* (Calico Rock) at *Clavath mon* (Ford’s Lake). The geography of the story is explicit as the Traveller moves down past the Ramparts and through the Yukon Flats to the very mouth of the river.²⁴

The story cycle also appears to be fixed in time. In Dawson the stories were told in the fall, during the move down river from the summer fishing camp to the winter hunting grounds to the northwest. As they travelled, stories linked to the places where they camped were repeated, reminding the audience of the moral lessons of the Traveller’s experiences in that place and the subsistence knowledge appropriate to that place and time of year. The regular use of particular places for specific purposes at the same time each year reinforces the cultural value of the landscape, and layers of meaning become laminated together by the stories. In this way the world is re-created every year and people are continuously reminded of their ongoing responsibilities in the world.²⁵

These intangible cultural constructs – language, oral tradition, practical skills fitted to place, and relationships among both human and non-human neighbours – reflect those values rising from the long Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in experience in their traditional lands and remain important elements of aboriginal civilization of the Yukon basin. Thinly veiled stories describe the arrival of the barbarians who so disastrously upset Hän life during the gold rush, the character of their contact, and the adjustments the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in made to maintain their culture over the last century. Stories about Chief Isaac, leader of the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in during the gold rush and other historic figures remain vital exemplars for youth, remind citizens of their obligations, and guide contemporary leadership. The mythic stories about Tachokaii also remain vibrant, providing a powerful moral framework through which traditional Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in traditional knowledge is transmitted. The Athapaskan oral tradition, rooted in



Victor Henry, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Elder. (D. Neufeld)

place, thus creates a sense of both personal and community identity, establishes a moral framework binding together the members of that community, evokes a set of ethics describing a responsible approach to the resources of their homeland, provides information on the effective use of those resources, and highlights the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in interest in and rights on these lands to others. In many ways the visible cultural landscape of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in is simply a shadow of the far more vibrant and meaningful parallel intellectual and spiritual landscapes that live in the hearts and minds of these people of the river. This intangible heritage that is passed from one generation to the next contributes to the richness of human existence only as long the people who continually re-create it through the celebration of their spoken literature retain their traditional relationship with the Yukon River as a cultural landscape.

Parks Canada's problems associated with this perplexing parallel narrative were addressed through the 1990s. A Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,²⁶ negotiated treaties and recognized Aboriginal title to land all pointed to distinctly

different narratives of meaning than the national story could carry. The development of new analytical tools of cultural recognition allowed Parks Canada to successfully engage with Aboriginal peoples.

The HSMBC began discussions to address “the challenge of designating subjects related to Aboriginal Peoples' history which do not conform to the traditional definition of national significance. Parks Canada and Aboriginal Peoples are striving to develop a more positive working relationship at the community level, ... [including] acceptance for oral history and traditions to explain why these sites are significant to Aboriginal People.”²⁷ These concerns were addressed in July, 1999 when the HSMBC accepted the concept of “Aboriginal cultural landscape”²⁸ as a framework for the national recognition of Aboriginal culture.

At the same time Parks Canada sought to address the erosion of national park ecosystems through a broader appreciation of both regional and cultural factors affecting the health of the land and animals in national parks. A national panel, reporting on the ecological integrity of national parks reported in February, 2000, noted the importance of engaging Aboriginal peoples in the management of national parks within their traditional lands. With an emphasis on the shared vision to protect these “sacred places” there was also the hope that these examples would inspire other Canadians to acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples in Canada.²⁹ As a result of these changes Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in became more comfortable that Parks Canada could recognize the existence of a parallel path and Tr'ochek was designated as one of the first aboriginal cultural landscapes national historic sites in November, 2001.

4.0 Conclusions

As a national narrative, the Laurentian thesis addressed Canada's need to affirm its national identity in North America through much of the twentieth century. By reinforcing trans-Atlantic linkages with France and Britain, it acknowledges the “two founding nations” concept that has been the basis of Canadian national politics and has justified the existence of a Canada in North America that is distinct from the United States. The idea also gave meaning and thus distributed social power to the staple industries of the country – fur trade, fishing, agriculture, and mining – by recognizing the role they played in developing the economic and demographic heart of the country, the St. Lawrence Valley.

The ability of this national story to address the concerns of Euro-Canadians, to explain why what they were doing was important, continues to inspire a vision of Canada's future. However, this national story also created and perpetuated a vision of a dying indigenous culture, leaving an empty land waiting to be developed. The story thus reinforced the social and political structures that developed and implemented policies of Indian assimilation and destruction, thereby

confirming the original vision. Broad acceptance of how Canada became a country and a national community within which aboriginal people did not fit made it possible for Canadian society to minimize any sense of either individual or national responsibility for the destruction of the distinct cultural identity of aboriginal peoples. Because the boundaries of the community did not include those under threat, there was the sense that they could be safely ignored, as they fell outside the protection of the state or often even national consciousness.³⁰

In spite of the national story, aboriginal people and their stories have not disappeared. First Nations remain a vital cultural force within the country, vigorously contesting the national story in which they are rendered powerless through political and social actions directed by sets of powerful oral traditions that give meaning to their lives and forward their vision of the future. In her study of Yukon First Nation storytelling, anthropologist Julie Cruikshank notes Mikhail Bakhtin's recognition of "the transformative power of oral storytelling to destabilize official orthodoxies" and "to challenge conventional ways of thinking."³¹ First Nations have used the oral history projects with Parks Canada to undermine the constructs of the "Story of Canada," to challenge the authority of western cultural and scientific explanations of the world, and to advance their claims to the landscapes, both the shadow landscapes of the natural world and the intellectual and spiritual landscapes of meaning directly tied to them. Their history is not rationally understandable within the Laurentian thesis, but it doesn't try to be. All that is required is the acknowledgment that it exists.³²

The root of the difficulties in reconciling the commemoration of aboriginal identity across the cultural divide with the unified national narrative thus appears to be the different ways that cultures frame meaning. John Gray's notion of "value-pluralism, that ultimate human values are objective but irreducibly diverse, that they are conflicting and often uncombinable, and that sometimes when they come into conflict with one another they are incommensurable; that is, they are not comparable by any rational measure,"³³ suggests the need for a middle ground where these multiple meanings can be acknowledged and accommodated. Rather than attempting to compare or integrate "by any rational measure," perhaps we need to communicate differences and respect alternative visions of the future. For Parks Canada this means a broadened understanding of commemoration.

However, the effects of the Laurentian thesis are not simply limited to the national narrative. The Laurentian thesis was borne of a distinct set of political and intellectual conditions that have shaped the entire warp and weave of our broad social understanding of Canada. Innis, his students, their students, and their students' students have sat as members of the HSMBC which identifies places of national significance, they have been the frontline staff, the managers, and the senior administrators of Parks Canada, myself among them.

It is no simple matter to accommodate alternative or parallel narratives. Although Parks Canada's responsibilities are broadly defined as protecting, presenting, celebrating, and serving Canadians using "nationally significant examples of Canada's natural and cultural heritage," the policies, programs, and infrastructure of the agency arise from the fabric of the pervasive unified national perspective.

In his reflections on the tortured history of twentieth century Europe, Modris Eksteins, a Latvian-Canadian intellectual historian, notes the "thousand deaths [of] history as a progressive vision and imperial dream." Eksteins is not concerned that this loss signals an intellectual crisis; rather he feels it signifies escape from totalitarianism, a recognition of diversity, an appeal for humility and respect. "We must accept a variety of histories," he continues, "but we must also accept variety within our history. It is not possible to write history without preconception. It is possible, however, to write history with layers of suggestion, so that history evokes, history conjoins, it involves. History should provoke, not dictate meaning. It should be a vehicle rather than a terminus."³⁴

Is it possible for a national agency, responsible for the promotion of a unified Canadian identity, to become a useful tool in the middle ground? Can it assist communities as they negotiate their way into a national narrative of shared meanings? Is there a way it can become a vehicle for the presentation of incommensurable human values? The facile recognition of diversity and multiculturalism does not address the deep-seated concerns of Aboriginal peoples over their participation in Canada. The notion of national identity as a bounded set of meanings has denied participation by others. As the country incorporates the other it must also accept a more complex, less linear story. As James Clifford suggests we need to embrace a notion of identity as the "nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject."³⁵ This approach sets us on the path to a middle ground where diversity is recognized, respectful relations are fostered, and differences acknowledged. Without discounting the value of existing commemorations for the culture that established them, it is important to both recognize that other cultures have parallel ways of ascribing meaning and that a refusal or determined inability to acknowledge this fact weakens the social fabric that defines our country. To avoid this Parks Canada must not only continuously re-evaluate its objectives, but craft new analytical tools in an ongoing way to meet the evolving understanding of what is taking place on the middle ground.

Parks Canada celebrates and justifies the distribution of social power in the country by highlighting meanings drawn from the past to explain the present and envision futures. These activities establish boundaries for a national community. In the initial approaches to aboriginal people in the Yukon, Parks Canada struggled to recognize the limits of its own history and its role as an agent of the Government of Canada.

A new approach for Parks Canada is the surrender of

its role as the steward of the national story, as government negotiator, and instead look to being a creature of the middle ground. That is, to be a service for the articulation and presentation of multiple histories, to be a vehicle for the journey to a more complete recognition of the whole community of Canada. Much of the agency's policy and programming of the last two decades tends to this direction. Parks Canada is being transformed into a broadly accessible cultural tool available to the communities of Canada, as it begins to recognize identity as the network of relations and actions between peoples. The periphery - the point of contact with other – is becoming the centre, initial concerns over the unity of the national story are being rendered meaningless and we are instead constructing a national community of cultural accommodation and shared respect. Surely this is the lesson to be gained from the oral tradition of all our Elders.

5.0 Endnotes

¹ Much of the research and learning for this paper was completed over the last fifteen years while I worked with the several Yukon aboriginal communities to preserve and present their cultural heritage. The success of this work came about only through the support of the citizens and governments of these communities. I must acknowledge those who guided me through a growing understanding of the aboriginal oral tradition. From the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in homeland, where the bulk of my work has taken place, I am primarily indebted to the people of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in. They have generously shared their knowledge, exercised considerable patience, and celebrated my small advances in understanding. Percy Henry, a Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in leader and elder, has invested much time in my education at his "University of the Bush." Other elders, notably Ronald Johnson, Julia Morberg, Victor Henry, Peggy Kormendy, Edward Roberts, and Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in citizens Georgette McLeod, Freda Roberts, Ed Kormendy, Edith Fraser, Debbie Nagano, Margie Kormendy, and Angie Joseph Rear amongst many others have also guided my work and inspired me through their kindness and personal dedication to their community's heritage. Others who have deserve thanks for their active support and involvement in our joint work with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in include Tim Gerberding, Jody Beaumont, Glenda Bolt, Wayne Potoroka, Lue Maxwell, Sue Parsons (all employees of Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in), Helene Dobrowolski, Gary McMillan, TJ Hammer, and Ruth Gotthardt. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in contribution to my understanding is deeply appreciated and impossible to fully acknowledge. I hope that my continuing work makes some small contribution to the future they have described to me so fully and continue to work towards with such diligence.

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On the Yukon North Slope, Gloria Allen of the ISDP ensured the project stayed in touch with the Inuvialuit interests while Cathy Cockney, Parks Canada, provided ongoing grounding in the Inuvialuit communities of the delta. Doug Olynyk, Yukon Heritage Branch, made our shared partnership an easy one. Murielle Nagy worked always with grace and diligence to meet everyone's expectations of the project.

Parks Canada provides a supportive environment for thoughtful reflection upon its work. My many colleagues within the Agency have always been interested in reviewing,

David Neufeld (E. Neufeld)



and often challenging, my work to make it better. In the academy, the erudite work and thoughtful personal communications of Dr. Julie Cruikshank and Dr. Patrick Moore, both of the University of British Columbia, Dr. Paul Nadasdy, University of Wisconsin – Madison, Dr. Laura Peers, Oxford University and Dr. Michael Bravo, University of Cambridge, have always been appreciated. Parks Canada, and the congenial and stimulating atmosphere of Clare Hall and the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, are also gratefully acknowledged for their support in the preparation of this piece.

² Harold Innis was an internationally recognized economic historian whose seminal work is *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (London: Yale University Press, 1930). His work spawned a school of Canadian historiography best known for its study of the nation's staple industries.

³ The italics reflect Ms. Adamson's own emphasis on where authority arose. The story of these killings is recognizable from an Athapaskan myth cycle. A version of a similar story is reproduced in "*K'oyeedenaa Yoo*" *Little People* in Catherine Attla, *K'etetaalkkaannee: The One Who Paddled Among the People and Animals* (Fairbanks: Yukon Koyukuk School District and Alaska Native Language Centre, 1990), pp. 140-145.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993) notes that "narratives of emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest form were also narratives of *integration*, not separation... [Excluded] people fighting for a place [in the main group]. p. xxvi.

⁵ Additional background on this commemoration is available in D. Neufeld, "Parks Canada and the Commemoration of the North: History and Heritage," in *Northern Visions: New Perspectives on the North in Canadian History*, K. Abel and K. Coates, eds. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), pp. 45 – 79.

⁶ The project and related research produced two publications: D. Neufeld and F. Norris, *Chilkoot Trail: Heritage Route to the Klondike* (Whitehorse: Lost Moose, 1996) supports the interpretation of the historic trail by Parks Canada and the United States National Park Service; S. Greer with Carcross-Tagish First Nation, *Skookum Stories of the Chilkoot-Dyea Trail* (Whitehorse: Parks Canada, 1995) addresses the interests of the Carcross-Tagish First Nation.

⁷ Thomas Berger, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland: The Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry*, Vol. 1. (Ottawa, Minister of Supply and Services, Canada, 1977), pp. 46-48.

⁸ Murielle Nagy, *Yukon North Slope Inuvialuit Oral History*, Occasional Papers in Yukon History No. 1 (Whitehorse: Yukon Tourism, 1994), pp. xi-xii.

⁹ M. Nagy, *Transcripts of the Yukon North Slope Inuvialuit Oral History, Vol. 1 and 2* (Inuvik: Inuvialuit Social Development Program, 1994).

¹⁰ D. Neufeld, "A Level Playing Field" The Synthesis of Scientific and Traditional Knowledge: A Meeting Ground for Successful Co-management," internal report (Whitehorse: Parks Canada, 1995).

¹¹ M. Nagy, *Transcripts of the Yukon North Slope Inuvialuit Oral History, Vol. 2* (Inuvik: Inuvialuit Social Development Program, 1994). Interview Lily Lipscombe, Roland Bay, 18/07/1991-25A:10/11.

¹² Alestine Andre and Alan Fehr, *Gwich'in Ethnobotany: Plants Used by the Gwich'in for Food, Medicine, Shelter and Tools* (Inuvik: Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute and Aurora Research Institute, 2002), Robert Coutts, Parks Canada Project manager for Sach's Harbour and Paulatuk Visitor Reception Centres, personal communication, May 15, 2006 and D. Neufeld, "Traditional Knowledge as a contribution to National Park Ecological Integrity", *Research Links*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Winter, 2001, pp. 17-19.

¹³ The concept of the middle ground is drawn from Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ The Yukon River, ~3200 km. long, drains a basin of some 855,000 square kilometres. Major tributaries include the White and Tanana, glacier-fed rivers from the south, and, entering from the northern permafrost taiga flats, the Porcupine and Koyukuk. T.B. Brabets, B. Wang and R.H. Meade, *Environmental and Hydrological Overview of the Yukon River Basin, Alaska and Canada. Water-Resources Investigations report 99-4204* (Anchorage, AK: US Geological Survey, 2000).

¹⁵ The 1876 Act consolidated legislation on Indian matters dating back to 1850. "History Of The Indian Act (Part One), *Saskatchewan Indian*, March, 1978, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 4 reproduced at <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/SaskIndian/a78mar04.htm>.

¹⁶ Council for Yukon Indians, *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow - A Statement of Grievances and an Approach to Settlement by Yukon Indian People* (Brampton, Ontario: Charters Publishing Co., 1973), p. 17.

- ¹⁷ C. McClellan, *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987), pp. 95, 101-102. Roddy Blackjack quote from Amanda Graham, "Spawning Run and Gold Rush: Is a Multicultural History of the Yukon Within Our Grasp?", Alaska Anthropological Association Conference, Whitehorse, Yukon, 11 April 1997.
- ¹⁸ Tr'oju-wech'in Heritage Site Steering Committee, Minutes, Winter, 1999, Parks Canada, Yukon & western Arctic Historian Collection, Whitehorse, Yukon.
- ¹⁹ Percy Henry, personal communication, field trip, spring, 1999.
- ²⁰ Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places - Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) describes this phenomenon amongst the Athapaskan diaspora in the American southwest.
- ²¹ Joe and Anne Henry story, interviewed by Percy Henry, transcribed by Jackie Worrell, nd., Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Heritage Office oral history collection.
- ²² Frederica de Laguna, *Tales from the Dena: Indian Stories from the Tanana, Koyukuk, & Yukon Rivers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), p. 288. de Laguna recorded Traveller stories in 1935.
- ²³ Donnessey made this comment at the 2003 Yukon International Storytelling Festival in Whitehorse, Yukon.
- ²⁴ de Laguna, pp. 130, 159-160.
- ²⁵ For examples of similar traveller stories from the Mackenzie River valley, see Chris Hanks, *Bear Rock, Red Dog Mountain and the Windy Island to Sheldon Lake Trail: Proposals for the commemoration of the cultural heritage of Denedah, and the cultural history of the Shu'tagot'ine*, unpublished manuscript (Ottawa: Parks Canada, National Historic Sites Directorate, 1994); and George Blondin, *Yamoria - The Lawmaker: Stories of the Dene* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1997).
- ²⁶ Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs, Canada, 1996). Available at http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sg1_e.html#0.
- ²⁷ Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, *Minutes*, July, 1998. Parks Canada Intranet.
- ²⁸ The HSMBC accepted the following definition; "An Aboriginal cultural landscape is a place valued by an Aboriginal group (or groups) because of their long and complex relationship with that land. It expresses their unity with the natural and spiritual environment. It embodies their traditional knowledge of spirits, places, land uses and ecology. Material remains of the association may be prominent, but will often be minimal or absent." at their July, 1999 meeting. HSMBC Minutes, July, 1999, Parks Canada. This definition came from Susan Buggey, *An Approach to the History of Aboriginal Peoples Through Commemoration of Cultural Landscapes*, a report submitted to the HSMBC for that meeting. Text of the report available at http://www.pc.gc.ca/docs/r/pca-acl/index_e.asp.
- ²⁹ Parks Canada Agency, "Unimpaired for Future Generations"? *Protecting Ecological Integrity with Canada's National Parks: Report of the Panel on the Ecological Integrity of Canada's National Parks, Vol. I "A Call to Action", Vol. II "Setting a New Direction for Canada's National Parks"* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 2000). Quote from Vol. I, p. 15.
- ³⁰ Victoria Brittain, review of Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, in *Manchester Guardian*, April 7, 2001, at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/politicsphilosophyandsociety/0,,469459,00.html>.
- ³¹ Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), pp. xvii - xiii.
- ³² Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 27-32.
- ³³ John Banville, review of John Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* in *Manchester Guardian*, April 9, 2004, at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1295980,00.html>.
- ³⁴ Modris Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of our Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999) pp. 15-16.
- ³⁵ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1988).