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# Myth-Making At Fort St. James

*The search for historical 'truth'*

By Frieda Esau Klippenstein

While historians in general have plenty of reason to reflect on how historic events are interpreted and realities constructed in order to suit specific purposes, perhaps public historians have more opportunity than most to encounter some of these issues on the ground. In my work as a fur-trade and native-sites historian for the Canadian Parks Service, one of my projects has been to study the role of the Carrier Indians in the fur trade at Fort St. James, British Columbia, where the nineteenth-century fur-trade post is now a national historic site. The Carrier Indians are an Athapaskan group who live in the mountainous north-central interior of the province on lake and river tributaries of the upper Skeena and Fraser rivers. In my study I came across an incident from the 1820s which is told over and over with a fascinating array of variations. An examination of various versions of this event and its aftermath show how it has been shaped and reshaped in telling — at the time, 100 years later, and today.

Both in the Carrier communities and in the history books, the event has acquired the qualities of a legend of sorts. It appears to be a pivotal one in the relations of the fur trade in what was then known as the district of New Caledonia, in present-day northern British Columbia. There the North West Company traders had established inland posts among the Carrier and Sekanie natives around the McLeod, Stuart, Fraser and Babine lakes beginning in 1805 through the efforts of Simon Fraser, James McDougall, and John Stuart. The traders pursued profits and exploration over a decade and a half despite the harshest of living conditions. In 1821 the North West Company amalgamated with its rival under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the business of the district was reorganized under the rigorous administration of the new governor, George Simpson.

The incident brings together two characters famous

in their separate circles: the Hudson's Bay Company clerk James Douglas (formerly of the North West Company), who went on to become the governor of the colony of British Columbia, and an influential Carrier chief and *deneza* (nobleman), Qua. Qua had become recognized as "fur trade chief" and as broker between the traders and the Carrier of the region soon after direct trade was established on the shores of Stuart Lake in 1806. The story, as it can be pieced together, begins in 1823 at Fort George, a trading post at the forks of the Fraser and Bulkley rivers. There two Hudson's Bay Company servants were killed by two Carrier when the master of the post, James M. Yale, was away. The Company was outraged and vowed to avenge the deaths. One of the Carrier was quietly killed under circumstances that remain a mystery, while the other remained at large for five years, evading the Company's efforts to capture him. Throughout New Caledonia the HBC men worked to discount rumours and defuse fears that they would take revenge on someone other than the particular Carrier in hiding. Indeed, the incident threatened to precipitate a cycle of indiscriminate killing and general warfare.

One day in early August 1828 the man was reported to be in the Nak'azdli Carrier village near Fort St. James while the district Chief Factor William Connolly was away. The many versions generally agree that the resident clerk James Douglas and his party pulled the man from hiding and killed him. Chief Qua, who had been absent at the time, became very angry upon his return, went with a party of Carrier to the post and confronted Douglas. Somehow Qua was appeased and he left the fort without further bloodshed, although relations were seriously strained after that. In response to the situation, Governor George Simpson paid a visit to the district and made attempts to restore peace to the



*"Sir George Simpson" and "James Douglas" enter Fort St. James in the 1928 pageant, a century after the controversial events of 1828.*

trade relations, and shortly after James Douglas was removed from New Caledonia.

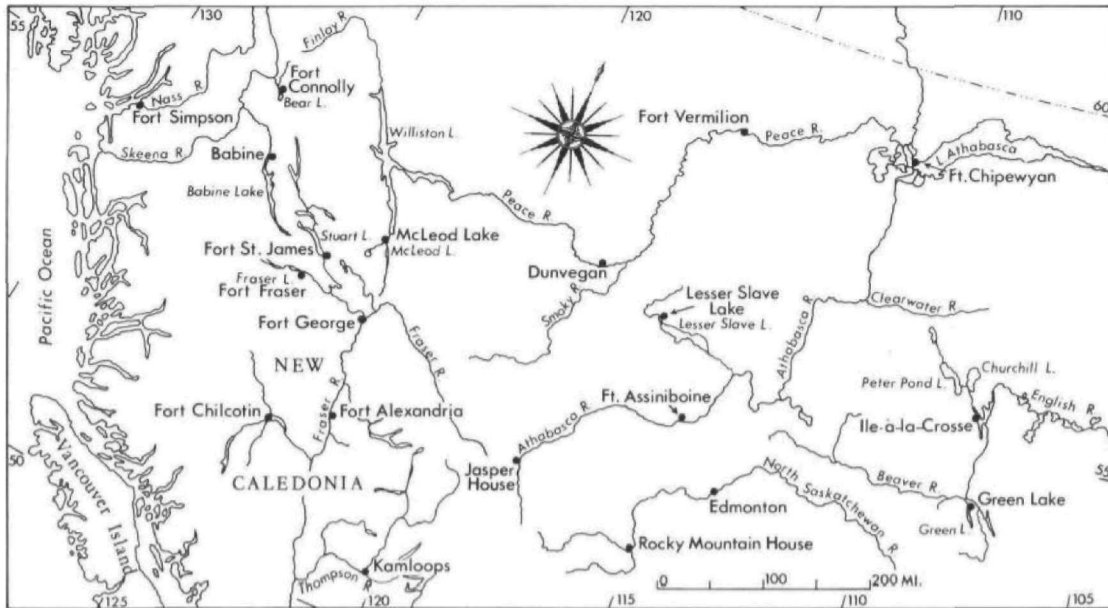
While this is the basic storyline, particular versions of the story contribute a variety of different emphases. Some of the accounts underscore the treachery of the Carrier in their confrontation with Douglas. According to fur trader John McLean in his 1849 published memoirs, Qua "resolved to employ Indian stratagem," by proceeding to the fort alone, gaining admittance, conversing calmly about the matter so that "Mr. Douglas was led to believe that the matter could easily be arranged." When another knock was heard at the gate the chief is recorded to have said, "It is my brother ... he told me he intended to come and hear what you had to say on this business." When the gate was open "the whole Nekasly tribe" rushed in and overpowered Douglas.

Douglas's narrow escape is the focus of many of the accounts. A newly arrived Fort St. James journal writer recorded shortly after the event that the "old Rogue Qua, with as many other of his Tribe as he could muster, entered the Fort and made their way into the House all armed." Although Douglas tried to defend himself, he and his men were outnumbered. "And," the writer concluded, "nothing but the determination Mr.

Douglas evinced of defending himself to the last, saved him from being pillaged and perhaps from being Killed." Likewise, in a version of the story by Oblate missionary and anthropologist A.G. Morice, Douglas is described as a hostage with a knife to his throat, and Qua's nephew begging Qua for permission to do the deed. "A word from 'old Qua' ..." wrote Morice, "would have cut short [Douglas's] incipient career and sent his ghost to the present abode of his ancestors."

In the accounts of Douglas's escape, Qua's restraint is often congratulated. In fact, an interesting contrast to the more common accounts of Douglas's "extreme peril" is a version by John Tod, a contemporary of Douglas who was in charge of another New Caledonia post at the time. According to Tod, the Carrier bound Douglas and his men only in order to subdue them:

Mr. Douglas was first seized, bound and carried away to the mess room of the fort. All this time Douglas kept struggling and swearing, but what could he do. They laid him flat on the table; he kicked and plunged exhausting himself. The Chief looked at him, saying 'You are tired; now I can talk to you'. This only exasperated Mr. Douglas the more, and he renewed his struggle, damning and swearing, calling them big rascals etc.



Historian Charles Bishop, who wrote about the character and life of Qua (1980), wrote that Qua saved Douglas's life by calming the "angry mob" and asking his followers "to have pity on Douglas and not to shed any blood." Bishop attributed Qua's involvement in the scene as part of his duty and as face-saving: "... as chief, Kwah had little choice but to confront Douglas ... . Whether or not he actually meant Douglas any harm is difficult to say. He must have realized that if Douglas were killed, he himself could be killed." Bishop concluded that this ability to appraise the long term consequences of the situation was evidence of Qua's wisdom and leadership. This theme is reinforced by the sign on Qua's grave which declares, "Here Lie the Remains of Great Chief Kwah Born About 1755 Died Spring of 1840. He once had in his hands the life of James Douglas, but was great enough to refrain from taking it."

There is a rather romantic twist in a version which seems to have captured the imaginations of several writers. In this version Douglas is saved by the bravery of his wife, Amelia Connolly, daughter of a Cree woman and the Chief Factor of the New Caledonia district. These generally describe how she pleaded for Douglas, threw goods down from a balcony of sorts and thus won her husband back. Admiral Moresby, who met Douglas in Victoria in 1852 later gave this rendition:

Douglas ... the centre of a horde of maddened Indians, was at his last struggle, when, like Pocahontas herself, an Indian girl, the daughter of a chief, tore her way to his side, held back the savages, and pleaded his cause with such passion that the red men granted his life to her entreaties. She lived to share his honours, and to become Lady Douglas,

wife of the Governor and Commander-in-chief of British Columbia.

In variations of his story, credit for saving Douglas's life is given to "Nancy Boucher, the interpreter's wife", "the daughter of trader James McDougall", or to "the women of the post" in general.

Along a similar line, many of the accounts emphasize that Qua's motivation in the confrontation was for some material compensation for the affront. John Tod wrote that the Carrier came to the post to negotiate for "some food to give the friends of the dead man in return for the body," and "clothing, axes, tobacco, guns etc. for the father, mother, brother and sister of the deceased." He says that "Douglas agreed, was set free, and having promised, he gave the goods to quiet the matter." Archibald McDonald's report says simply that the Indians "all assembled, and made a clandestine entry into the Fort, and insisted upon getting a blanket."

While noting these variations in the renditions, it is interesting to ask whose purposes are served by them. Clearly to the Company the Fort George "murders" represented a kind of savagery and lawlessness that was threatening to get out of hand in New Caledonia, where the newcomers in small, isolated posts were vastly outnumbered by the Carrier, Sekanie and Chilcotin. Rarely is the Carrier referred to by name, which according to A.G. Morice was "Tzoelhnolle." Instead, the Company accounts celebrate the idea that the "murderer" or "the criminal" was finally brought to justice as if taking for granted the likelihood that this was an unjust, savage act. They imply that avenging the Fort George deaths was a necessary act which brought an end to the situation, effectively downplaying the volatile aftermath of Douglas's action. The versions of the story emphasizing

the possibility that the situation could be closed by paying compensation have the effect of trivializing and reducing Qua's anger and his action into a quest for practical, simple compensation afforded by a few store items. The versions emphasizing Douglas's narrow escape through the women's actions or other means make a good story, but also worked to give Douglas a certain legendary quality that may well have contributed to his later success as governor of the colony. This event was, after all, James Douglas's ticket out of Fort St. James. Derek Pethick in his book on Douglas (1969) says that before the confrontation "there seemed little sign that he was marked for greatness."

The written accounts are notably devoid of explanations or understanding of Carrier motivations and behaviour. Why the Carrier killed the two Fort George men in the first place, for instance, receives remarkably little attention. In their biography of James Douglas (1909), Robert H. Coats and R.E. Gosnell comment in reference to the killings at Fort George, "The motive of the deed is

unrecorded." However, while the HBC correspondence and journals are vague on the topic, there is some suggestion that the action was related to improprieties or anxieties caused by newcomers marrying Carrier women. According to John Stuart, district Chief Factor at the time in 1823 and one of the founders of New Caledonia, the situation involved a Carrier woman who was recently taken as country wife by Mr. Yale, the absent master of the post, while, it appears, having a continuing connection to one of the Carrier men.

Although James Yale contradicted it, Stuart made an interesting report shortly after the killings at Fort George. He identified the Fort George natives as "the most peaceable and best disposed in the Department," and stated that he believed the killings "proceeded from fear and arose from the impulse of the moment." Apparently "the most creditable of the natives" had told him that:

the evening preceding the murder one of the men Beaquort had discovered the principal perpetrator in

*Indian chiefs greet "Sir George Simpson", Fort St. James, 1928. One Indian later commented "Them white people speak foolish".*



HBC Archives



*Indian chiefs dance during the pageant celebrations.*

criminal conversation [*i.e.* having sexual relations] with a woman Mr. Yale had in keeping and cautioned both to be more circumspect in future as in the event of his perceiving(?) any thing more of the kind he would inform Mr. Yale. [I]t appears that both got alarmed but in course of the night the young man returned accompanied by another and perpetrated the horrid deed.

Stuart reported that rather than fleeing, those connected with the two Carrier had shown judicious and conciliatory behaviour. They “had themselves buried the deceased and some of them encamped at the Fort to take care of the property until the arrival of Mr. George McDougall in the fall.” They “obeyed the first summons issued by him on arrival and appeared without arms.” Stuart emphasized that “not five pounds worth of property was taken by the whole of the natives including murderers and all, but the Guns and Ammunition they had secreted under the flooring under an apprehension [that they] might be turned against themselves and that general massacre would be committed on the arrival of our people in the fall.”

Not surprisingly, the story of Qua and Douglas lives on in the Carrier communities, though also without much consensus. While the written accounts present the view that the deaths were a symptom of the general savagery and lawlessness of the Carrier, native versions of the story bring a completely different sense to it. The first recorded account from native informants was published by the Oblate missionary A.G. Morice in 1904.

In it he graphically recorded an astonishing degree of brutality in this “justice,” from the man being found and dragged out of Qua’s lodge by Douglas and his men, hacked to death with garden hoes until he was “a shapeless jelly,” and dragged by a rope back to the post to be offered to the dogs. A contemporary Carrier woman, whose version of this event was recorded in 1966, added that most of the men of the village were absent and that this gruesome scene occurred in the midst of the terrorized women and children of Qua’s own and other families. In her version the fugitive was not simply “apprehended and killed,” he was ripped from his desperate refuge — from under the blankets where a woman (perhaps one of Qua’s wives) was lying, having recently given birth.

A statement in William Harmon’s *Account of the Indians Living West of the Rocky Mountains* written years earlier (1811) may shed some light on Qua’s response to this scene at his lodge. Harmon wrote:

An Indian ... who has killed another, or been guilty of some other bad action, finds the house or tent of the chief a safe retreat, so long as he is allowed to remain there ... and if he should [be attacked] the chief would revenge the insult, in the same manner as if it were offered directly to himself ... The revenge ... would be to destroy the life of the offending person, or that of some of his near relations.

Douglas had apprehended the man in Qua’s lodge. In hiding there, he was considered as being under Qua’s

protection. It becomes understandable that to the Carrier, it was Douglas who was lawless and savage in this event.

Nick Prince, local Carrier historian from Fort St. James, and great-great-grandson of Qua, tells a version of the story that is an intriguing contrast to the written accounts. According to him, it was not Qua or Amelia Connolly who saved James Douglas's life. In fact, Qua was so angry that Douglas had "taken the law into his hands" that he entered the house with the clear resolve to kill him. While Douglas's wife *did* attempt to compensate for the deed by "throwing stuff down," Qua forbade anyone to accept the goods. According to Prince, it was "two young guys," Qua's grandsons, who stopped Qua from killing Douglas. They did this because in Carrier custom it was not for *him* to kill — that was the job of the warrior chief. If Qua had killed Douglas, he would have been banished by the Carrier communities and he would have lost his hereditary title. It was to protect him from this, that his grandsons stopped him — a not illogical act, as they may well have stood to benefit from this title some day. Apparently before the present sign on Qua's grave there was one, in Carrier syllabics, that named the two young men who kept Qua from killing "one man," who remained uncelebrated and unnamed.

Shortly after the confrontation between Douglas and Qua, Governor George Simpson had his chance to solidify the HBC's interpretation of the incident in a way that suited Company purposes. The record of Simpson's visit to Fort St. James and his interaction with the Carrier survives in the HBC journals and in the diary of an eyewitness, Archibald McDonald, who was part of Simpson's entourage in 1828. McDonald recorded that on 17 September with "the most imposing manner we could, for the sake of the Indians" the group made a ceremonial entrance into Fort St. James, with the governor on horseback, guns saluting, the British flag flying, the bugle sounding, and a piper in full Highland costume playing "*Si coma leum cogadh na shea*" (Peace: or War, if you will it otherwise). A few days later (20 September) McDonald wrote:

The principal Indians of the place have been sent for, and introduced to the Governor as the Great Chief of the Country. After exhibiting before them our various musical performances, etc., ... an address was made to them through Mr. Connolly and the Linguist [Interpreter], in which the Governor laid great stress upon the conduct of the Carrier of late.

McDonald recorded that in his "harangue," Simpson brought up several recent events involving grave "mis-



Carrier Indians enter the fort, September 1828.

conduct” of the Carrier, including several “murders” of Company men, and most recently, the rebellion they displayed when one of these murders was avenged.

Apparently, the speech then became a series of threats. McDonald wrote:

The Governor could not do less than deprecate such proceedings. He represented to them how helpless their condition would be at this moment were he and all his people to enter upon hostilities against them, that a partial example had already been made of the guilty parties, but that the next time the Whites should be compelled to imbrue their hands in the blood of Indians, it would be a general sweep; that the innocent would go with the guilty, and that their fate would be deplorable indeed ... and that it was hard to say when we would stop; never, in any case, until the Indians gave the most unqualified proof of their good conduct in future. The chief that headed the party which entered the fort in the summer was pointed at with marked contempt, and it was only Mr. Douglas’s intercession and forgiveness that saved him from further indignities.

The speech was closed with a glass of rum, a little tobacco, a shake of the hand for the Carrier chief and the *Song of Peace* by the piper. Clearly this was a confrontation of powers. The Company was surely realizing how helpless *they* would be if all the natives of the area decided to enter upon hostilities against them. Simpson was attempting to put the Carrier in their place — a place of submission and co-operation.

Whether the gradual dissipation of hostilities that followed had more to do with this rather theatrical display or the conciliatory nature of Qua is impossible to know. But one hundred years later the theatre returned to Fort St. James in the form of the “Sir George Simpson Centennial Celebration.” At this celebration, held at Fort St. James on 17 September 1928, the significance and meaning of Simpson’s visit was again recast and elaborated on. There were hurried renovations to the old fur trade fort, an impressive group of visiting dignitaries, and a large gathering of natives from various reaches of New Caledonia. There was a costumed pageant celebrating Simpson’s ceremonial entrance into New Caledonia. Following that were speeches, native dances and games such as horse racing, and the unveiling of a plaque at Simpson Pass on the high road from Banff to Windermere, British Columbia.

Clues to the meanings and purposes of the celebration are revealed in the scripts of the various speeches given by the visiting dignitaries, later printed in a commemorative pamphlet of the event. None of the speeches mentioned Simpson’s specific business in Fort St. James, focussing instead on the general goals of Simpson’s 1828 voyage from York Factory to the Pacific Slope. The addresses celebrated Simpson as “a

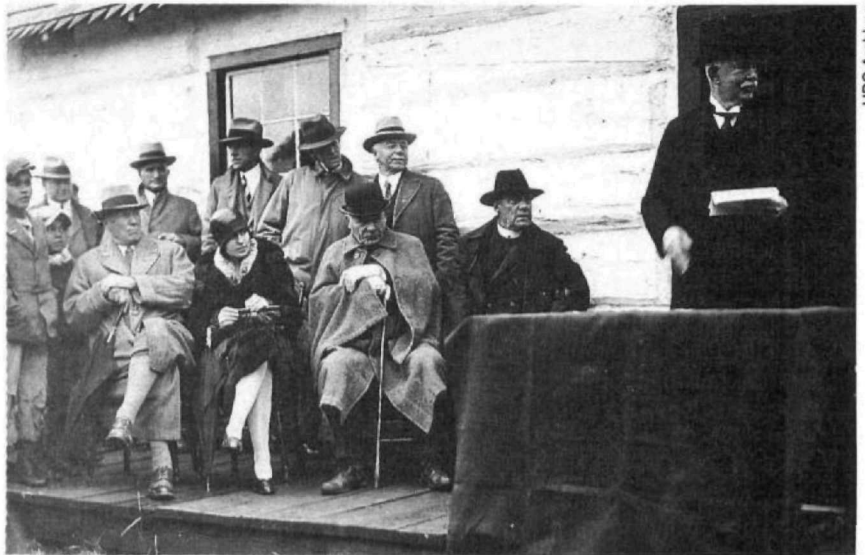
pioneer,” a “great statesman” and an “empire builder.” Charles V. Sale, Governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and others dwelt on the “courage, endurance and fortitude” of Simpson and the other Hudson’s Bay Company men. According to R. Randolph Bruce, Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia, they were “sentinels ... who at great self-sacrifice tenaciously held this great domain.” Fort St. James was presented as “the outpost of an empire; the visible sign of British occupation; [and] a centre of government.” The essence of the messages given that day were encapsulated by Lieutenant-Governor Bruce who declared, “To-day’s pageant gives us courage for the future.” Bruce expressed confidence that in the “new era” that was “dawning” the Hudson’s Bay Company would “lead the van in the march of progress, thus helping to fulfill that great destiny which a benign Providence has provided for this great and glorious country.”

Interestingly enough, none of the speeches mentioned the Fort George murders or the incident between Qua and Douglas. Several of them did, however, mention the relationship with “our good friends the Indians,” Governor Sale described the relationship between the Company and “the Indian and Esquimaux population of Canada” as “for many generations all that both sides could desire ... Between us and them,” he said, “is a common interest in the good of the fur trade, the country, and the people. This spirit of goodwill and friendship has never been broken ... Since we both desire the same good, we shall never quarrel.” Oblate missionary Father Coccola addressed the native guests directly, calling them “to carry on, to commemorate the work started so many years ago,” and “to follow the spirit displayed by [Sir George Simpson].” Judge F.W. Howay, of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, referred most directly to the events a hundred years earlier, saying:

Whenever an opportunity offered, Governor Simpson called the Indians together and spoke to them of the trade, congratulating them, if they deserved it, upon their good conduct, or threatening to withdraw the post if they were indolent or criminal. He made them feel that the Company was really interested — as indeed it was — in their welfare, and that co-operation would be mutually beneficial.

At the plaque unveiling, Judge Howay spoke more of Simpson’s “scrupulously fair” treatment of the Indians, emphasizing that when an Indian “committed an offence,” Simpson “made the punishment to fall upon the individual transgressor and not upon his tribe, thus teaching the ... new doctrine of personal responsibility.”

After the 1928 Centenary, the headlines in the *Victoria Colonist* read, “Great page in story of B.C. related at pageant and historic ceremony,” and the *Victoria Times* announced “History lives again in



*Governor Sale's address, September 1928. Onlookers are (seated, left to right), G.W. Allen, Helen Mackenzie, R. Randolph Bruce, Rev. Coccola; and (standing, left to right) Chief Factor Angus Brabant, John Hosie, A.K. Graham, Judge F.W. Howay.*

pageant," and "Celebration at Fort St. James great success." At this event, myths were expressed and perpetuated that did not reflect the reality of the natives at the gathering. Why would they have been interested in celebrating the dawning of a "new era" where the Hudson's Bay Company "leads in the march of progress?" Why would they "follow the spirit displayed by George Simpson" or celebrate movement towards that "great destiny" of a "Providence" who likely did not seem to them so "benign?" According to Nick Prince, his grandfather, one of the relatively few Carrier in attendance who understood English, responded to the speeches of the 1928 Centenary with the comment, "them white people speak foolish." While the commemorative pamphlet would have us believe that native people gathered from great distances for this event, Prince remembers hearing that the Carrier each received fifty cents to take part in "the play," but they were not there primarily because of that event — they had gathered from Takla, Babine, McLeod Lake, Hazelton and elsewhere for a potlatch in town which, of course, they would have kept quiet because the anti-potlatch law was still in effect. Even the dances and games that were photographed as an attraction of the centenary celebration were actually a scheduled part of the potlatch.

This is not to suggest that by giving an aboriginal person's version of the story, we have now "gotten to the bottom of it." There is no reason to believe that any of us are free of the tendency to "invent traditions," or shape with conscious or unconscious purposes our version of an event. But it is a reminder to the historian to be critical of sources and aware of purposes. It is a

reminder that the historical interpretations that survive in the mainstream are written by those in positions of power. In the telling, events can be cast and recast, by different parties and by the same party over time. At the 1828 gathering, Simpson made speeches to the native people, intending to effect a more peaceful relationship between the Carriers and the traders. But it used the tactic of threatening them into submission. A hundred years later, the visit of George Simpson was commemorated and "rewritten" as a positive event, one worth celebrating. It applauded the conquest of the land while emphasizing the congenial relationships between traders and natives. The Carrier were being asked to commemorate a person who had humiliated them and to celebrate the anniversary of an event which was not in any way a happy one for them. Besides commemorating what happened in 1828, the Centenary celebration also in a way paralleled it in purpose — the 1928 event, too, was about fostering peace and eliciting cooperative behaviour from the Carrier.

The meaning of historical events and experiences is continually rewritten. The recorded events from literary traditions are labelled "history," and those from oral traditions, "myths." It becomes increasingly clear to me that writing the history of native peoples with disregard for their own perspectives on their lives can very easily make the university trained, public historian another of "them white people" who "speak foolish." ♦

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*This article was first presented as a paper at the Fifth Biennial Rupert's Land Colloquium in Winnipeg in February 1992. Frieda Esau Klippenstein is an historian with the Canadian Parks Service, Calgary.*