ANTHROPOLOGY'S DEBT TO MISSIONARIES

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A studio portrait of Rev. J. B. McCullagh dressed as a Nisga'a shaman (Moeran 1923)
Christian missionaries working on the Northwest Coast in what is now Washington State, British Columbia, and Alaska enjoyed a privileged position from which to observe and study aboriginal peoples. From the 1840s to the 1920s, missionary writers produced a stream of articles and books for church and secular audiences and established for themselves a reputation as experts on native cultures. This prominence proved fleeting. By the middle of the 20th century, anthropologists had completely eclipsed the earlier missionary authors, whose ethnographic works were mostly forgotten. In recent years, a number of the missionary books have been reissued and, in the case of Russian texts, translated and made available to scholars and the general public. In anthropology, a growing number of scholars have become interested in studying the effect Christian missionaries had, not just on indigenous populations, but on anthropological understandings as well (Harries 2005). The time is ripe for a reassessment.

This paper proceeds along two tracks. First, it identifies and provides an overview of the works of Northwest Coast missionaries who made what are clearly ethnographic contributions. These turn out to be few in number and, at its end, the paper turns to the question of why this is so. While turning out few ethnographies of note, however, missionaries did claim expert knowledge about the Native peoples on the coast. This paper’s second aim is to outline some of the political implications of this reputation, especially in regards to governmental policies concerning the potlatch and land. Before turning to these topics, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the history of the missions on the Northwest Coast during their heyday in the 19th century.
CHRISTIAN MISSIONS ON THE NORTHWEST COAST

Regular contact between Northwest Coast native populations and Europeans (and the Asians, Hawaiians, and Iroquois associated with the latter) date from the late 18th century. Missionaries were slow to arrive and at first had limited effect. Russian Orthodox missionaries began working among the Tlingit in 1834, and French Roman Catholics among Coast Salish speakers in what are now Oregon, Washington, and southern British Columbia, from 1838. During this early period, a handful of Catholic missionaries, under the protection of the Hudson Bay Company, traveled widely conducting mass baptisms. In the early years, they relied heavily upon assistants from the settler community and later among converts to establish a regular presence. Catholic missionary efforts among aboriginal populations increased markedly with the arrival in 1858 of the order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Sisters of Saint Ann on Vancouver Island. They developed permanent missions in southern British Columbia and in the interior (Grant 1984:123–28), but their presence was limited to Coast Salish and Nuu-Chah-Nulth (Nootka) populations on the coast and the southern regions of the mainland and Vancouver Island; that is to say, among the peoples most dramatically affected by European settlement and the establishment of colonial control.

Protestants made some small forays during this early period, but serious missionary efforts date from 1857 with the arrival at Fort Simpson of the layman teacher, William Duncan, on behalf of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) to begin a mission to the Tsimshian. As the autocratic founder of the Christian community of Metlakatla in 1862, Duncan became the most famous and controversial missionary working on the Coast. Over the succeeding years, agents of the CMS established mission outposts among the Haida, the Nisga'a, and the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwak'iutl) peoples. Duncan's authoritarianism led to increasing conflicts with fellow missionaries which came to a climax following the appointment of William Ridley as bishop of the new Diocese of Caledonia in 1879 and Duncan's dismissal from the CMS two years later. At loggerheads with his old church and increasingly with the provincial government over land
issues, Duncan abandoned Metlakatla in 1887 with over six hundred Tsimshian converts to found New Metlakatla on Annette Island in southern Alaska (Murray 1985, Usher 1974).

Meanwhile, Methodist missionaries from Ontario had been working since 1859 among small groups of Coast Salish speakers in the largely Roman Catholic south. In 1874, Christian members of a Tsimshian chiefly family invited the Methodists to set up their own mission at Fort Simpson, where Christianity had floundered since Duncan and his followers had left for Metlakatla. Under the leadership of Thomas and Emma Crosby, the Methodists began a vigorous program of itinerancy across the region that saw within the space of a decade new missions begun among the Tsimshian, the Gitxsan, the Heiltsuk (Bella Bella), the Nuxalk (Bella Coola), the Nisga'a, and the Haida (Bolt 1992). Most of the evangelical work was carried out by native converts working under the supervision of a handful of Europeans and in several cases independently of them (Neylan 2003). In 1894, the Salvation Army added the final piece to the mosaic of Protestant missions, establishing bases in Fort Simpson and among the Nisga'a.

The missions arrived on the northern coast in the midst of crisis. Although spared so far from the displacements of settler intrusions and the imposition of colonial control, the Tsimshian and their neighbors had seen their populations devastated by smallpox and other epidemics, and their political orders challenged by the wealth and firepower enjoyed by the Hudson’s Bay Company. The missionaries encountered stubborn resistance, especially in matters that concerned the power and privileges of chiefs, particularly the potlatch. But such resistance was often more than matched by a powerful enthusiasm not only for the new faith but also the revolutionary changes in lifestyle required by the missionaries. Metlakatla was only the most prominent of the planned missionary communities of the period which required members to reorder themselves into nuclear families living in Victorian-style cottages, to submit to regulations governed by native police forces, and to take up paid employment in new industries. Inside and out of the new mission settlements, excited converts threw themselves into emotional Christian revivals, often led by new volunteer organizations like the Anglican Church Army or the Methodist Band of Christian Workers, sporting smart uniforms and loud brass bands.
The missionaries, few in number, looked upon these developments with ambivalence, keenly aware that they were not entirely in control (Bolt 1983, 1992). Out of these developments grew distinctively indigenous forms of village-based Christian belief and practice, well established by the turn of the century (Barker 1998, Blackman 1973, Garfield 1939, Hawker 1991).

Further north, Russian Orthodox missionaries had labored with modest results among the Tlingit since the 1830s. With the purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867, the Russian Church reduced both staff and finances to its missions. A few Tsimshian Protestants from British Columbia evangelized among the Tlingit in the early 1870s, preparing the way for the arrival of American Presbyterians under the leadership of Sheldon Jackson in 1877. The Presbyterians initially enjoyed great success but their muscular opposition to most facets of indigenous culture and abuses of power by prominent missionaries like John G. Brady, the future governor, resulted in a major shift of allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church around the turn of the century (Hinckley 1980, Kan 1999).

Around the time Jackson was planning the Presbyterian assault on the Tlingit, a lone Congregational missionary, Myron Eells, commenced a long and lonely mission among the Twana and Klallam Indians of Puget Sound. With the support of his brother Edwin, who served as the Indian Agent, Eells aimed to hasten the absorption of his charges into the burgeoning settler society through a mixture of mandatory schooling and cultural suppression. The people proved responsive to Christianity, but few managed to meet the very high moral standard Eells insisted on for membership in the church. Ironically, Eells’s puritanical streak almost certainly contributed to the circumstances leading to the emergence of the Indian Shaker Church, the only independent Christian sect to emerge on the Coast (Barnett 1957, Castile 1982).

Christian missionaries were most active through the region from the late 1850s into the first decade of the 20th century. By the end of this period, all but a few aging traditionalists among the aboriginal population had attached themselves to one or another church. By the 1890s, it had already become harder to fund and to recruit for missions in the area as both international and national societies turned their attention towards the larger unconverted populations of Asia and Africa (Grant 1984). In Canada, the churches accepted
government funding for education and hospitals, becoming active participants in an aggressive program of cultural assimilation based on edicts forbidding practices like the potlatch and forceful acculturation of children separated sometimes for years from their parents in a system of residential schools (Miller 1996). In general, the dwindling number of missionaries became more detached from native communities, far less engaged or interested in their cultural traditions or languages, all of which were supposed to die off in the near future. Happily, this supposition proved wrong. From the mid-1960s, the established churches began a long overdue process of reconciliation, committing themselves to the creation of native ministries, welcoming long suppressed ceremonial practices into the church, and speaking out as advocates for native rights (Barker 1998, McCullum and McCullum 1979). They also increasingly found themselves the targets of angry criticism and, most recently, lawsuits over the abuses in the residential schools. Ironically, even as the churches have begun to seriously address the past, a new wave of evangelists, mostly theologically conservative and very hostile in principle to indigenous spirituality and culture, have made great headway in many aboriginal communities.

NORTHWEST COAST MISSIONARY ETHNOGRAPHY

Missionaries to the aboriginal societies of the Northwest Coast produced a massive outpouring of letters, reports, journals, magazine articles, memoirs, editorials, and descriptive accounts (Barker 1988). Observations on the customs, languages, and contemporary conditions of local communities can be found scattered through this literature. Yet while most missionaries commented at one time or another on the cultures of the people they had come to save, very few took the next step of writing systematic appraisals. In most cases, missionaries were moved to write about local customs to provide some color to their accounts of the progress of work, to move mission supporters to provide funding, and to justify particular policies, such as the banning of the potlatch. While the ethnography in such works was superficial at best, it played an important part in cementing the reputation of missionaries as experts on native society and had
important political consequences both within the missions and without, particularly in the development of government assimilationist policies. This aspect of the missionary record is considered in the next section. First, I will review the much smaller subset of studies in which missionary writers consciously attempted objective, systematic descriptions of indigenous cultures.

There is, of course, no sharp line between these two types of missionary ethnography. Indeed, in contrast to missionary writings from New Guinea (Barker 1997), not a single one of the authors described here completely resisted the urge to provide editorial comment on the customs, myths, and belief systems they described. All the same, the distinction is heuristically useful. A handful of missionaries clearly became interested enough in the cultures of the area to indulge in extended descriptive accounts and, on occasion, attempts to interpret them within their own cultural contexts. The writers described here were able to immerse themselves for a time into the minutiae of native life for its sake alone and two (Harrison and Veniaminov) came tantalizingly close to transcending their own cultural blinders by entering into indigenous worldviews and experiences.

My procedure will be to move from south to north, arranging the writers in terms of the peoples they were describing, rather than by strict chronology or denomination. Specifically, six writers are dealt with here: Myron Eells, Charles Harrison, George Pierce, Ivan Veniaminov, Anatolii Kamenskii, and Livingston Jones.

British Congregationalists in southern Polynesia and Americans in Hawaii had enjoyed enormous success in the earlier part of the 19th century, but Myron Eell’s long years of service on the Skokomish Reservation, from 1874 to 1907, netted only a handful of converts from the Twana and Klallam residents for the Congregational Church. Fervently believing that the Indians in his charge needed to be assimilated into the growing population of white settlers in the Seattle region, Eells did not bother to learn their language, communicating with them in a mixture of Chinook Jargon and English. He was, however, a keen observer of their lives and an enthusiastic collector of their material culture. And he was an amazingly prolific writer. Eells published well over one hundred articles and books on the Coast Salish tribes of Puget Sound and on the missionary history of Washington State. Many of these were published in small
circulation missionary magazines, but Eells also contributed to mainstream anthropological journals, like *American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal* and *American Anthropologist*, and in the annual reports of the Smithsonian Institution (e.g., Eells 1889, 1890, 1892). On top of this, by his own estimate, he published more than 1,250 newspaper columns, many of which dealt with Indian affairs (Castile 1985:460). Eells also prepared a full-length ethnography that incorporated published and unpublished material, but it was not published prior to his death in 1907. A full edition, wonderfully illustrated with photographs of artifacts from the missionary’s extensive collection, appeared in 1985 (Eells 1985).

Eells’s interests were broad. Among much else, he wrote on material culture (basketry, implements, weapons, houses, etc.), social life (warfare, marriage, treatment of children, slavery, government), rituals (potlatches, funerals, shamanism), and religious and cosmological ideas and practices (ideas of spirits, healing practices, myths, dreams, objects of worship). He also wrote extensively on how Indian society had been impacted by disease, the arrival of settlers, the removal of people to reservations, and by competing missions. William W. Elmendorf, who conducted anthropological research among the Twana from the 1930s to the 1950s, presents a mixed assessment of the ethnographic value of Eells’s writings. On the one hand, Eells was a keen observer whose detailed descriptions of material culture and a wide range of cultural practices provide an invaluable inventory of surviving and changing aspects of southern Coast Salish culture in the late 19th century. Many of Eells’s observations on potlatches and other social and religious activities are quite acute, allowing later investigators to better understand the details of local variations on these region-wide institutions. On the other hand, Eells’s lack of familiarity with the indigenous language, coupled with his antipathy towards shamans and native religious beliefs in general resulted in accounts of the indigenous worldview that are often sketchy and over-generalized, although still containing valuable information. In sum, Elmendorf reports, “I see the main anthropological value of Eells’s work in his eyewitness reporting rather than in the descriptive ethnography, which is sometimes good and detailed but sometimes vague or overgeneralized” (Elmendorf 1985:454). Ironically enough, Eells’s most lasting contribution, and certainly his best known, was his description of the genesis of the Indian Shaker
Church, which he described in great and surprisingly sympathetic detail. As the only eyewitness to publish on the event, Eells's account provided the foundation for Barnett's (1957) and subsequent studies.

One has to travel a long way north before encountering another missionary with Eells's breadth of interest in native cultures. That missionary was the Reverend Charles Harrison, an Anglican of an altogether different character. The son of a well-to-do Anglican cleric in England, Harrison's attempts to follow in his father's footsteps was disrupted by a severe drinking problem. Harrison joined the Church Missionary Society in 1882 and was immediately posted to the Queen Charlotte Islands to labor among the Haida. He and his new wife experienced a string of tragedies over the succeeding years—the loss of two children and a fire at the mission house that destroyed all of their possessions. Harrison's heavy drinking and his poor political decision to back Duncan caused Bishop Ridley to recommend his expulsion from the mission. He left for England in 1890 but soon returned to the Queen Charlottes where he lived out the remainder of his life as a part-time minister, a magistrate, and land speculator (Dalzell 1968).

Harrison appears to have gotten along well with the Haida, particularly some of the chiefs, who in 1899 petitioned (unsuccessfully) to have him reinstated into the Church Missionary Society. He became friends, for instance, with the powerful Chief Edenshaw, on whom he wrote an engaging profile appearing in his 1925 book (mentioned below). Harrison worked hard at learning Haida, wrote a grammar, and seems to have attained a degree of fluency (Harrison 1895). Upon returning to England in 1890, he presented two papers on Haida society and religion before the Royal Anthropological Institute that were subsequently published in its journal (Harrison 1892a, b). Harrison subsequently published a series of rambling articles on the Haida in a short-lived local newspaper, The Queen Charlotte Islander, between 1911 and 1913. Years later, these early publications along with some additional material were compiled into a volume, with editorial help from one C. W. Hobley. Ancient Warriors of the North Pacific appeared in 1925, a year before Harrison’s death.

The book is a mixture of travelogue, geography, and ethnography. Harrison provides readers with a description of the geology, natural history, and post-contact history of the islands. Most of the pages
are devoted to an overview of traditional Haida society and the synopses of some myths. It ranges over a large number of subjects providing a great deal of interesting observations but little depth. A chapter, “Haida Customs,” for instance, forms a compendium of loosely related facts, each getting at most a couple of paragraphs: the manner of making fire, the main diseases people suffered prior to contact, the fact that each clan had a chief who used his authority to resolve disputes and other details on chiefs, a description of camp fires, family relations, seasonal movements, house-building, types of potlatches, gambling, burial customs, totem poles, slaves, the rather charming mouse ceremony, and aspects of ceremonial dancing. Other sections are compendiums of types, rules, and procedures. Harrison’s discussion of medicine, for instance, is made up of a list of remedies (“A bruised leg or arm was relieved by placing it in hot sand, quite a sensible practice” [Harrison 1985 (1925):161]). One gets the impression that Harrison generated much of the data appearing in his articles and book through the application of a questionnaire, perhaps the venerable Notes and Queries in Anthropological Research (Urry 1993).

Although Harrison unfortunately has little to say about ceremonials, the sections on religious persons and cosmology stand apart from the other ethnographic chapters. They are both more detailed and systematic. Harrison’s discussion of “The Sa-ag-ga or Shaman,” for instance, presents a fascinating and remarkably perceptive overview in which he discusses the means by which individuals became shamans, their relationship with the spiritual world, their connections with various natural features in the islands, their authority within the clan, their role as healers, and their centrality in life crisis rituals. He says that he gained most of his information from one Ku-te, a shaman he got to know during the first three years of his residence on the islands. Although Harrison like his fellow missionaries opposed shamans (who returned the favor), he seems to have made a concerted effort to understand them, acknowledging that the “Haidas under the control of their Shaman had a moral code which commands respect” (Harrison 1985 (1925):102). He likely received much of his information on Haida cosmology from the same source. This treatment is less satisfying. While providing several early texts of important Haida myths (particularly concerning the Raven) and an extended rendition of the
Haida creation story, Harrison failed to recognize the connections between such histories and the inheritance of ancestral names, dances, and other properties that formed the cosmological basis of Haida society. Instead, he treats the cosmology as a self-contained system, standing apart and above human society, in a moral relationship analogous to that imagined for Christianity. Harrison’s sympathetic yet highly ethnocentric misreading is particularly clear in his construal of Haida notions of the afterlife. As Maud (1982:16) observes, “it is curious how precisely [Harrison’s understanding of the Haida afterlife] reflects his own; for it is a world of the good and bad injun. . . . [It] seems a wee bit High Church.”

Although his contribution was minor, the Methodist minister William H. Pierce, the third of the writers to be considered here, is one of the more intriguing authors who wrote about traditional Northwest Coast cultures. Born in 1856 to a Scottish father and Tsimshian mother living at Fort Rupert on Vancouver Island, Pierce joined the Methodist mission in 1877 and evangelized many of the more remote villages along the north coast. He was ordained as a minister in 1887. Like some other indigenous clergy, he later became involved in native land rights and helped to organize native fishermen into a union (Neylan 2003:147–51). Toward the latter part of his long career, Pierce wrote down his recollection of the pioneering days as well as sketches of traditional Tsimshian life and several brief myths. The manuscript was edited by the Reverend J. P. Hicks and published in 1933 as From Potlatch to Pulpit (Pierce 1933). The little book is divided into two sections, the first containing ethnographic information and the latter his memories of the early mission period. The ethnographic descriptions are too thin and generalized to be of much interest. But the book is significant as the only published account to emerge from the pen of an indigenous missionary working on the Coast.

The three remaining missionary ethnographers all worked among the Tlingit in Alaska. The first, Fr. Ivan Veniaminov, was also the most skilled and sensitive observer of any Northwest Coast culture. Veniaminov provided a rare mix of talents as a “charismatic priest, an outstanding scholar with a variety of interests and talents, and an astute politician” (Kan 1999:89). Veniaminov first came to the (then) Russian territory of Alaska in 1824 to work as a parish priest among the Aleut. He quickly mastered the language and settled into the work
of teaching and preaching to a responsive population. During the next ten years, Veniaminov also engaged, as time allowed, in a far ranging study of Aleut language and culture.

His interest in studying the culture of the people whom he served, not only grew out of his scientific curiosity but was also a product of a particular Orthodox missionary tradition that emphasized the need for the missionary to learn the local vernacular and understand the religion of the people being converted (Kan 1999:91).

In 1834, Veniaminov was reposted to Novo-Arkhangel'sk (Sitka) where he resided for the next four years. His administrative duties prevented him from engaging in as deep an involvement with the Tlingit as he had with the Aleut—he never mastered the language, for instance. Still, he made the effort to visit Tlingit in their homes, treating his informants with respect, and they in turn shared their cultural knowledge with him.

The outcome of these efforts was a short but ethnographically rewarding essay on the Tlingit, published in 1840 as part of a much larger work on the lands and people of the Aleuts (Veniaminov 1984 [1840]). After outlining Tlingit social structure, the largest part of Veniaminov's essay is taken up with religious matters, including mythology, shamanism, and memorial feasts; the essay then goes on to consider the national character of the Tlingit and to provide an outline of the language. Veniaminov's understanding of Tlingit religion (like Harrison's of the Haida) was informed by a theological assumption that it "contained within itself kernels of divine truth and goodness" (Kan 1999:107). Like other missionaries on the Coast, he looked for evidence of biblical truths (most notably stories of a great flood). More generally, Veniaminov tended to picture Tlingit cosmology as "much more monotheistic, centralized, and hierarchical than it probably was," to over-systematize Tlingit notions of "dark" spiritual forces; and to misleadingly characterize the religion as a whole as "shamanistic" (Kan 1999:109). All the same, Veniaminov is very good on the details of Tlingit myths, shamanic practice and authority, memorial feasts, and the highly integrated nature of society and religion. Like Harrison, he turned to a practicing shaman, one Kooxx'an, and members of the aristocracy for information, thus assuring that he received the most authoritative versions of central traditions.
While condemning shamanism, "sorcery," and other practices deemed incompatible with Christianity, Veniaminov is mostly positive about the character of the Tlingit, praising the bravery of warriors, the women's skills as mothers, the people's artistry, and trading skills, among other things. Like the other missionary ethnographers examined here, he limited himself to observations and information reported by his informants, occasionally attributing some particularly violent or exotic behavior to "immorality." But in places, Veniaminov attempts explanations in terms of the logic of the cultural system itself. For example, he attributes the murdering of slaves at the funerals of high ranking chiefs as a form of sacrifice meant to show devotion to the ancestors. Kan (1999:113) notes that this is consistent with modern anthropology.

Sixty years after Veniaminov's departure, Fr. Anatolii Kamenskii arrived at Sitka to become parish priest and Dean of the Sitka District, at the beginning of a period when the Tlingit were turning to the Orthodox Church in large numbers. Kamenskii lacked Veniaminov's scholarly training and connections and, reflecting the changed situation of the Tlingit in the years following the American purchase of Alaska, he was resolutely opposed to many aspects of the culture, including shamanism, potlatching, and most ceremonials. All the same, he found much to admire in the people's "industriousness, hunting, fishing and commercial skills, excellent craftsmanship, physical stamina, and oratorical skills" (Kamenskii 1985 (1906):9). Kamenskii did not have an easy time in Sitka, getting into regular clashes with the government, the rival Presbyterian missionaries, and his congregations, and he departed after only three years, in 1898, to work at an Orthodox school and orphanage in Minneapolis. In 1899, he began to publish articles on the Tlingit in the Russian Orthodox American Messenger, which formed the contents of Tlingit Indians of Alaska, published in Russia in 1906. In the Introduction to the book, Kamenskii informs his readers that he had made "short notes" on Tlingit customs and beliefs while in Alaska, with particular attention to religion. His understandings were enhanced through acquaintance with the writings of several authors, including anthropologists like E. B. Tylor, but Kamenskii gives particular credit to Lewis Henry Morgan, whose Ancient Society (1877) he describes as "fundamental" (Kamenskii 1985 (1906):24).
About a third of *Tlingit Indians of Alaska* is devoted to a discussion of social life, dealing with topics including warfare, language, social organization, exchange marriage, and family life. The descriptions in these chapters shift, often abruptly for modern readers, from generalizations about the culture to very specific accounts of events witnessed by the author, and from often speculative generalizations about the precontact society to accounts of contemporary adjustments to the White authorities. The chapters on religious themes make up most of the rest of the book. Like Veniaminov, Kamenskii looked for traces of “true religion” in Tlingit beliefs, seeing the present-day configuration of beliefs as a degenerated form of the original revelation. He also perceived Tlingit religion as shamanistic, tracing its origins back to Asia. Strangely, Kamenskii has little to say about mortuary feasts and nothing at all about potlatching, although these occurred frequently at the time, but says a lot about shamanism, which he insists was in its death throes. His discussion of deities, while perhaps over-systematized, includes the texts of several important myths. This may have been Kamenskii’s most lasting contribution. Kan (1985:14) finds his treatment of religion comparable in terms of detail and insight to that of John Swanton, a trained anthropologist who was researching the subject around the same time.

Very little has been recorded by historians concerning Livingston F. Jones, the last of the missionary ethnographers to be considered. Jones arrived in Alaska at the same time as Kamenskii. He shared with his fellow Presbyterians a devotion to the full assimilation of the Tlingit and other native peoples into White society, an attitude perhaps most vividly displayed in the chapter of his book devoted to the Tlingit language, which moves through a hackneyed description to the conclusion: “The sooner, therefore, that the natives drop their stunted and dwarfed language for the liberal English, the better” (Jones 1914:41). Unlike his colleagues, whose interests in the indigenous culture appears to have been mostly restricted to collecting artifacts, Jones was moved to write a descriptive account based primarily upon his own observations but also drawing liberally from the literature of the time.

*A Study of the Thlingets of Alaska* weaves a rambling path through a vast variety of subjects beginning, logically enough, with a discussion of the origins of the Tlingit, and their language and
society before veering off into a mix of subjects including (in order of presentation) basketry, native character, extinct and waning customs, shamanism, law, music, morality, diseases, religion, and mission education. The tone throughout the 254 pages is chatty, as Jones jumps from general descriptions of cultural practices and beliefs to anecdotes to brief commentaries. Not surprising, the latter include many highly ethnocentric statements and defenses of the work of the mission. Yet Jones expresses admiration for aspects of Tlingit temperament (particularly their industry and dedication to their families) and works to correct common misperceptions such as the idea that the crests on a totem pole were “idols.” While seeing the Tlingit as occupying a lower stage of civilization than Whites, he insists that their society possesses a strong ethical basis, even going so far as to hint at a position of moral relativism. In general, Jones’s study is too superficial and ethnocentric to be of much use or interest in understanding the nature of the indigenous society. However, as was the case with Eells, Jones provides an invaluable account as witness to the changes and adjustments occurring in Tlingit society at the time, providing useful descriptions of such things as the contemporary status of slaves, changing marital practices, and the evolving authority of the chiefs.

THE MISSIONARY AS APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGIST

In one of the early issues of *Applied Anthropology*, Homer Barnett (1942) paid tribute to William Duncan as a pioneering figure in the field. Barnett attributed to a sound grasp of the indigenous culture Duncan’s success at convincing a large segment of the Tsimshian population to abandon Fort Simpson and much of their traditional lifestyle to live in the planned community of Metlakatla in 1862. In the first secular biography of Duncan published 30 years later, Usher (1974) made much the same claim, while allowing that the Tsimshians who renounced their cultural past also had their own motivations. Duncan actually had at best a fairly thin grasp of traditional Tsimshian culture. Indeed, he was much more modest about his expertise than his many ardent supporters. Yet the claims on Duncan’s behalf serve to remind us that early missionaries
working on the Northwest Coast, as elsewhere, were regarded by many as experts on both indigenous cultures and the contemporary problems faced by native peoples in situations of rapid change. They wrote with some authority on both subjects. This assumed ethnographic authority, in turn, served to bolster programs of planned change, so long as that authority went unchallenged. This section surveys the ways in which that ethnographic authority was conveyed in missionary writings, and reviews some of the historic implications.

As elsewhere along the missionary frontier, the bulk of missionary publications from the Northwest Coast served two purposes: to report on progress and to secure continuing financial support from sponsoring churches. Written descriptions along with illustrations and photographs of the traditional ways of native peoples formed an important component of such writings. They served to anchor the missionary narrative of conversion—the movement from pagan “darkness” to Christian “light” that structured, directly or implicitly, most missionary accounts. Just as importantly, they added spice, inviting readers to gaze (safely) into the strange and dangerous practices and superstitions of “savage” life and to share vicariously in the heroism of pioneer missionaries. Missionary authors of the period both benefited from and contributed to a rising popular fascination with the exotic subjects of the expanding Empire (Street 1975), as reflected in the mass popularity of explorers’ accounts, such as Henry Stanley’s How I Found Livingstone (1887) and adventure fiction like H. Rider Haggard’s King Solomon’s Mines (1885).

In most of the literature I have surveyed from the Northwest Coast, descriptions of indigenous customs and ritual practices appear rather piecemeal in the context of travelogues, memoirs, or mission histories. They tend to be brief and superficial, although not necessarily not of ethnographic or historic interest to modern readers. Brabant’s (1900) rambling account of his work among Nuu-Chah-Nulth (Nootka) peoples on Vancouver Island, for instance, includes an interesting eye-witness description of a potlatch. Collison’s (1915) memoirs include important descriptions of the appearance of Haida villages and the organization of the society, while the traditional order was still functioning. Crosby’s (1907) popular book on the early years of the Methodist mission also contain a number of capsule descriptions of such things as house styles, dancing, and
self-decoration, although he can rarely resist turning these into mini-sermons about the transforming power of the Christian Gospel.

Some common themes emerge through the particulars. First and foremost is an ardent opposition to the potlatch (e.g., McCullagh 1899). The various masked dances and secret societies associated with the potlatch were condemned out of hand as inherently incompatible with Christianity. The potlatch proper, however, was opposed mainly on health, moral, and economic grounds. Along with most secular observers of the time, the missionaries argued that potlatches had greatly increased in frequency and scale with the arrival of traders and settlers. They worried that the concentration of large numbers of people during potlatches facilitated the rapid spread of diseases; objected to what they perceived as the prostitution of native women in Victoria as a means of raising funds for potlatch goods; and warned that the energy native peoples put into potlatches came at the expense of social improvement through education, the acceptance of wage labor, and building personal savings (Cole and Chaikin 1990). If the potlatch was seen as a sign of the failure of native peoples to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the present, shamanism, initiations, and the more flamboyant forms of ceremonialism were all condemned as vestiges of a cruel pagan past ruled through superstitious fear. The missionaries regarded shamans as their main competitors, and wrote about them in some detail. These descriptions are not entirely superficial and dismissive. While harshly critical, many contain details about the appearance of shamans and of healing ceremonies. One suspects that missionaries recognized common elements of identity with the shamans, as they did with chiefs. Indeed, one of the most arresting photographs in a biography of J. B. McCullagh is a studio portrait of him dressed in the style of a Nisga'a shaman (Moeran 1923).

Along with the criticisms, the missionaries found much to admire in indigenous society. Even reliably harsh critics like Crosby expressed admiration for the technical ingenuity of native architecture, the fine artistry displayed in carving, the high level of knowledge and skill required for subsistence activities, and so forth. Collison (1915), among others, made a point in his writings to correct popular prejudices about totem poles, pointing out that the figures were not objects of worship but crests representing family histories. There is no reason to doubt these expressions of admiration. All the
same, in the context of missionary propaganda they served an important function. As Nicholas Thomas has pointed out, missionary writings frequently present mixed, ambivalent assessments, illustrating not only pagan savagery but also the essential humanity of the people to be saved. "If savages are quintessentially and irreducibly savage," he notes, "the project of converting them to Christianity and introducing civilization is both hopeless and worthless. The prospect of failure would be matched by the undeserving character of the barbarians" (Thomas 1994:128). In missionary writings from the Northwest Coast, we thus frequently find condemnation of indigenous ceremonies and shamanism mixed with praise for the artistic and technical skills of the individuals to be converted.

During the last half of the 19th century, missionaries working on the coast exercised influence out of all proportion with their small numbers. Conversion to Christianity was marked in many places by orgies of destruction (Neylan 2003:255–57). Totem poles were cut down and shamanistic paraphernalia publicly burned. Victorian cottages rapidly replaced most of the old longhouses as increasing numbers of men sought and found jobs in the new canneries and other industries. All along the coast (at Sechelt, Metlkatla, Kincolith, Aiyansh) missionaries gathered converts into new Christian communities away from the temptations of pagan life, and educated them in trades and European values (Lemert 1955, Patterson 1982). Those who joined—and many did enthusiastically—agreed to abide by the strict constitutions set up by the missionaries and enforced by community police. In part, missionaries operated in a political vacuum prior to the effective establishment of colonial administrations and arrival of large numbers of settlers seeking land. Both Duncan at Metlkatla and McCullagh at Aiyansh served as magistrates. But the greater source of support was undoubtedly that of native converts themselves who, in the wake of epidemics and other disasters, had elected to throw their lot in with the glowing new possibilities the missions seemed to offer (Bolt 1992, Neylan 2003).

To the outsiders reading about the rapid progress on the coast, the early successes appeared as testimony to the ability of the missionaries. Success, it could be assumed, rested in no small part on intimate knowledge of native culture and character. For the most part, missionaries and their supporters felt no need to demonstrate that knowledge. William Duncan, however, provides an interesting and
revealing exception. In the case of Metlakatla, ethnography was explicitly drawn upon in support of a missionary enterprise. The ethnography in question derives from a report Duncan prepared in February 1858, four months after his arrival at Fort Simpson, and subsequently published in the Church Missionary Society Intelligencer (Duncan 1858). In the space of ten pages, Duncan touches upon a wide variety of subjects including house styles, marriage rules, dress, notions of a supreme being, and a tale of a great flood. Much of the article is devoted to a description and denunciation of shamanism and various “superstitions.” The most vivid sections, however, concern the society of “cannibals” and “dog-eaters,” on which Duncan dwells at some length. He claims to have witnessed many of their activities and attests to the great fear they stir in the community. In particular, he tells of watching from the safely of the Hudson’s Bay Company fort as a slave was murdered and then apparently torn to pieces by the “cannibals.”

The fame of Metlakatla and notoriety of its founder generated a huge literature (Piff 1983). Many if not most of the publications refer to Duncan’s ethnographic sketch, in some cases reproducing it in full and often elaborating upon it, making this by far the most influential and visible of any ethnographic piece written by a Northwest Coast missionary. From a very early period, while Duncan’s star was still rising in the Church Missionary Society, the sketch served as part of a before-and-after narrative, demonstrating the progress made by Tsimshian converts in their march towards “civilization.” The story of the miracle of Metlakatla was readily conflated with a heroic portrayal of the missionary himself, especially as the rift grew between Duncan and the Church Missionary Society. The sketch became a key object of contention in the battles over Duncan achievement. Duncan’s critics acknowledged his achievement but saw in the picture of pre-Christian Tsimshian society the foundations of the new Christian order. Cannibalism and other excesses were, in their view, a matter of theater more than character and thus quickly abandoned by converts when offered an alternative. Duncan supporters, most notably the pharmaceutical magnate Henry S. Wellcome (1887), responded by playing up the most exotic and savage elements of the sketch, stressing the dangers their man faced stoically in the early days and afterwards. Ironically, in their urge to defend Duncan, writers like Wellcome conveyed the impression that
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despite appearances, the conversion of the Tsimshian went only skin deep. Without the strong guiding hand of the brave missionary, they suggested that the Tsimshian would soon succumb to the evils of the bottle and prostitution in the fleshpots of Victoria or, worse, fall back into heathen debauchery, murder, and cannibalism. Duncan’s abandonment of British Columbia with several hundred of his followers for New Metlakatla in Alaska ended the debate, but it re-emerged in much the same form towards the end of the missionary’s life when his autocratic control was again challenged, this time by some young Tsimshian backed by the United States Department of Education (Murray 1985).

The claim of expertise on native character and culture, as well as the challenges faced by indigenous peoples during a period of rapid change, bolstered missionary political influence. That influence was for a time immense. From Washington State to Alaska, missionaries exercised a monopoly over Indian education and intervened into native lives in myriad ways. Perhaps their greatest triumph was the passage of a federal law in 1882 banning the potlatch and associated societies and dances in the Canadian territory (LaViolette 1961). Yet the political clout of missionaries rested on grounds that were already shifting. The waves of Christian revivalism that swept through places like Fort Simpson were often followed by a resumption of potlatching and ceremonialism. Never completely defeated, potlatching declined through a combination of direct police intervention and (probably most importantly) changing economic conditions rather than direct missionary opposition. It would make a big comeback, with the blessings of the former missionary churches, after the 1970s. The missionaries proved equally ineffective in resisting the massive government theft of native lands in British Columbia through the 1880s. By the turn of the century, missionaries on the coast had in effect become partners or even, in the case of residential schools, partial employees of their governments. With few exceptions, their expertise was no longer sought or even recognized.
CONCLUSION

During the 19th century, the modern missionary movement produced outstanding ethnographers and played a direct role in the creation of anthropology as a discipline (Harries 2005). Missionaries to the aboriginal peoples of the American Northwest Coast benefited from a popular perception of them as experts on native societies, but they collectively wrote very few ethnographic studies of lasting value. The record stands in sharp contrast with other missionary regions such as the Pacific Islands, India, and sub-Saharan Africa, and is surprising given the keen interest in metropolitan populations, including scholars, in the vibrant artistic cultures of peoples like the Tsimshian or the Tlingit. Explanations of what might have been are rarely satisfactory, but two factors that worked against the appearance of a tradition of missionary ethnography in the region seem compelling.

First, most of the missionaries arrived when the indigenous cultures were already under terrible stress from devastating epidemics, which may have killed off 80 percent or more of the population in less than a century (Boyd 1990), followed by the government’s confiscation of most of the land, the banning of the potlatch, restriction on political assembly, the imposition of the residential school system, and other calamities. It is perhaps telling that while the first generation of missionaries labored to learn the vernacular and to translate Christian works, they mostly did not bother to teach converts how to read or write their own languages, assuming that these would soon be replaced by English (Edwards 2001). The work of helping local people survive the transition and thrive in a new world in which they formed a dispossessed minority left little time or inclination for ethnographic inquiry. Inadequate staffing and the shift of interest to new mission fields in Asia at the turn of the century reinforced such tendencies.

The second factor has to do with the form that scientific anthropological work assumed on the Northwest Coast. Although British anthropologists were responsible for kick starting anthropological research in the area, the hiring of Franz Boas by the British Association for the Advancement of Science to carry out a regional survey over the course of almost a decade from 1888 was fateful (Cole 1973). Boas developed a style of fieldwork that was radically
individualistic: the lone anthropologist transcribing texts taken down in the vernacular. The approach was very different from that adopted by the members of the famed Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898, which encouraged the use of a broad range of research methodologies by a team of collaborators. Beyond this, the senior members of the team, A. C. Haddon and W. H. R. Rivers, made extensive use of local missionaries, who were valued for their knowledge of vernacular languages and familiarity with local customs (Barker 1997). No such pattern developed on the Northwest Coast.

Such explanations, however, cannot entirely satisfy. The general absence of missionaries’ interest in cultures that they regarded as doomed to rapidly disappear may just have been the luck of the draw. Had the Oblate missionary, Father A. G. Morice, been assigned to the Northwest Coast rather than the interior of British Columbia, this fine missionary anthropologist would have certainly made a substantive contribution to the documentation of Coast Salish or Nuu-Chah-Nulth cultures in the Catholic area. It is also possible, given the paucity of research on the work of the early missionaries in the region (apart from William Duncan and the Russian Orthodox mission) that ethnographic texts still await discovery in the archives.

NOTES

1. Many of the first generation of missionaries also studied indigenous languages, producing a stream of vocabularies, grammars, and translations of scriptures, hymns, and other Christian works (e.g., Hall 1888, Harrison 1895, Ridley 1895). The Anglican missionary James Benjamin McCullagh for a brief time produced a newspaper in the Nisga’a language (Tennant 1990:85). While the missionary predecessors are acknowledged by modern linguists on the coast, their pioneering work does not generally figure in contemporary studies (Kinkade 1990).
2. For an extensive but still incomplete bibliography of Eells’s writings concerning Puget Sound Indians, see Eells (1985).
3. Harrison claims he was the first to attempt to reduce Haida to writing and commented on the importance of fluency in the language for understanding the native culture: “Native interpreters, at the best, can only give garbled versions from the slight knowledge they have of the English language or through the medium of the Chinook jargon” (Harrison 1985 (1925):6)
4. Lillard (1984) published a heavily abridged version comprising about half of the Harrison original text along with selections from other missionary authors.

5. “What would shock us they regard as eminently proper. On the other hand, what we approve they would condemn” (Jones 1914:212).