Reply to Regna Darnell's "Toward a History of Canadian Departments of Anthropology"

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After a promising surge of interest in the 1970s, the project of writing a history of Canadian anthropology appears to have slipped into a state of somnolence. Regna Darnell has done more than anyone to wake us up to the continuing importance of reflecting upon our history, not least in a typically lively and provocative contribution to this journal (Darnell, 1998). I wish to respond to part of that comment here. First, I wish to protest Darnell's characterization of my attitude towards Edward Sapir's place in the history of Canadian anthropology. Second, I want briefly to review the evidence that convinces me that there were no direct Boasian influences in T.F. McIlwraith's field work among the Nuxalk (Bella Coola) First Nation and in the resulting monograph, *The Bella Coola Indians*. These are both very minor points Darnell touches upon in her paper. My comments are offered in the spirit of building upon a fine and useful summary of the state of our historical knowledge. I do not intend them as criticism of the article as a whole.

Darnell observes correctly that in the Introduction to the re-issued edition of *The Bella Coola Indians* I wrote that "Sapir retired in 1925" from his position as Head of the Anthropology Division in the National Museum (Barker, 1992: xxv). I am embarrassed that I wrote "retired" instead of "resigned," which is what I meant. All the same, there is no justification for lumping me in with the unnamed mass of Canadian anthropologists who, Darnell tells us, "have been reluctant to recognize [Sapir's] contribution" to Canadian anthropology (Darnell, 1998: 158). The Introduction is about T.F. McIlwraith and the Nuxalk, not Sapir and the development of Canadian anthropology. It is very clear from the sentence and the paragraph which contain the offending phrase that I am referring only to the undisputed fact that Diamond Jenness took over the Anthropology Division after Sapir's departure in 1925. It is beyond me how anyone could construe any part of that Introduction as denying or belittling "the continuing ties between the Canadian and American anthropologies," if by this odd

phrase Darnell means that Canadian anthropologists continued to be influenced by the writings of their American colleagues after 1925 (ibid.). Sometimes a slip is just a slip—not a slight.

I turn now to the question of American versus British influences upon McIlwraith's research and writing concerning the Nuxalk people. Franz Boas casts such a huge shadow upon Northwest ethnology that it is not surprising that minor figures, like McIlwraith, tend to get subsumed into the category of "follower." Suttles and Jonaitis (1990: 78), for instance, list McIlwraith along with Jenness and Barbeau under the heading of "Boas's Students and Their Students," solely it would seem because of their association with Sapir. As Darnell notes, I also initially perceived Boasian elements to McIlwraith's approach to field work, especially the attention he paid to texts (Barker, 1987: 255). Bruce Trigger, who began his distinguished career as an undergraduate student of McIlwraith's, provides some of the most compelling evidence of an American influence. After securing a scholarship to send Trigger to Yale, McIlwraith confided that he thought of himself as a Boasian and regarded *The Bella Coola Indians* as an example of a Boasian study (Trigger, personal communication; cf. Darnell, 1998: 158). Trigger was left with the impression that McIlwraith had spent a year at Yale's Peabody Museum after leaving Cambridge. That year inspired McIlwraith's keen interest in museum work and shaped his approach to the Nuxalk field work.

What I initially saw as Boasian influences dissolved upon a closer study of McIlwraith's detailed correspondence and the text of *The Bella Coola Indians* itself. McIlwraith was no Boasian, at least in the early 1920s. We can only speculate about why the professor would later insist to one of his most promising students that he was a "Yale man." It is easier to understand why we tend to class McIlwraith among the Boasians on the Northwest Coast. We expect to find "Boasian" traits. And so we do . . . or do we?

Let me first dispose of the alleged Yale connection. McIlwraith attended Cambridge for two years, from 1919 to 1921. Under the tutelage of A.C. Haddon, he gained a strong interest in museum work. In unpublished biographical notes, he remarks that he had his own key to the Cambridge collections and practically lived in the museum over the weekends. McIlwraith went almost directly from Cambridge to Bella Coola in the early months of 1922. In the summer of 1924, after completing his second stint of field work, he was looking for a temporary position to tide him over until he could take up a post he had long been promised at the University of Toronto. With the intervention of Hadden and Clark Wissler, McIlwraith received a seven-month graduate research position at the new Institute of Psychology at Yale. The grant allowed McIlwraith to continue writing up his Nuxalk material while working on a library project on shamanism around the Pacific. While at the Institute, McIlwraith wrote regular reports to Sapir on his progress writing the Bella Coola manuscript. He does not mention receiving any help on the Nuxalk material from anthropologists at Yale. In fact, he complains that the shamanism project tended to get in his way.

The most compelling evidence comes from the Preface to *The Bella Coola Indians* (McIlwraith, 1948). McIlwraith takes up one third of the Preface distinguishing his approach, which he identifies with the "English school of anthropology," from the "American school." More significantly, he acknowledges Haddon and W.H.R. Rivers as his mentors, while thanking Sapir for help on phonology. He acknowledges no other American scholars and does not mention Yale.

But what of the texts? At least half of the two-volumed *The Bella Coola Indians* is taken up with narratives in English translation. Darnell states that McIlwraith abandoned the "native-language text method associated with the Boasians" only when overwhelmed by the volume of material he was receiving, thus further suggesting that McIlwraith had appropriated "a core of the Boasian method" (Darnell, 1998: 158-159). This is fiction. All of the evidence, including McIlwraith's rough field notes, indicate that he recorded narratives in English mixed with Chinook Jargon and Nuxalk from the start (Barker, 1992: xxi). It may not have occurred to him to record texts in the vernacular. The subject never comes up in any of his correspondence. McIlwraith recorded a large number of texts, I imagine, for the same reasons that I did in the course of my own field work in Papua New Guinea. Narratives are relatively easy to record. And the Nuxalk insisted that he write down their stories and histories. Recording narratives does not a Boasian make.

And perhaps this is the main point. If there are few discernable Boasian influences in McIlwraith's approach to the Nuxalk, the Cambridge imprint is not that much bolder. McIlwraith had spent only two years at Cambridge studying undergraduate anthropology—a very brief introduction focussed mostly on museum work and African ethnology. He thus had minimal preparation for field work and very little knowledge of the Northwest coast peoples. Fortunately, the young McIlwraith (he was then in his early 20s) was energetic and resourceful. He quickly adapted to the possibilities that the Nuxalk, in

their declined numbers, presented to him. The dominance of the narratives in *The Bella Coola Indians* is testimony, I am now convinced, of the supreme importance of these sacred histories to the Nuxalk people, and not merely the product of this or that anthropological school.

References

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