

**Robertson, Leslie A.**, with the *Kwagu'l Gixsam* Clan, *Standing Up with Ga'axsta'las: Jane Constance Cook and the Politics of Memory, Church, and Custom*, Vancouver and Toronto, UBC Press, 2012, 569 pages.

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In May 2007, a potlatch to feast the name *Waxawidi* was held by Wedlidi Speck, marking the return of several Cook family potlatch names, after 70 years of ceremonial inactivity, to the Alert Bay Feast Hall or Big House (the 'Yalis *gukwdzi*). The family, a Kwakwaka 'wakw 'na'mima of noble lines, gave anthropologist Leslie Robertson a customary name. She had done well by the family. She had been asked in 2002, by fellow anthropologist Dara Culhane (a Cook great-granddaughter by marriage), to work with Pearl Alfred on a life history about her grandmother, Jane Constance Cook, *Ga'axsta'las*, the "Breakfast Giver." The resulting book would, following its release in August 2013, go on to win the 2013 Wheeler-Voegelin Prize for best ethnohistory by the American Society of Ethnohistory, the 2013 CLIO prize for BC History and the 2013 prize for Aboriginal History from the Canadian History Association. The University of British Columbia (UBC) Press itself added its K. D. Srivastava Prize for Excellence in Publishing. With her excellent 2005 oral history work *Imagining Difference* (UBC Press), on the curse cast on her hometown of Fernie, BC, and her 2004 award-winning book on the stories of marginalized women on the downtown eastside of Vancouver, co-edited with Culhane, Robertson appears well suited to take on the name of assistant professor of anthropology at UBC, in the tradition of Julie Cruikshank.

*Standing Up* is not just a history of a woman living on Vancouver Island between the years of 1870 and 1951, after 90 per cent of her community was decimated by diseases. It is a large, complex, layered and important book that will be required reading for scholars of the region for years to come. Jane Cook, like many biculturals and literate bilinguals, such as Nowell, Beynon and Hunt, served as an interpreter and interlocutor for community members, anthropologists, Christian missionaries and colonial officials. Daughter of a white fur trader and schooner captain and a Kwakwaka'wakw noblewoman, she had lived with Alfred and Elizabeth Hall, Anglican missionaries. She worked as translator and culture broker for Franz Boas, Edward Curtis, the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission and the courts. Excerpts from archival letters and petitions she wrote for members of her own community are woven with descendants' memories, for instance, helping to sell two poles to Stanley Park for elderly chiefs and getting medical care and relief set up for widows, divorcees and their children. Through the stories of grandchildren and photographs we see her as a Victory gardener, a member of the IODE and Red Cross, highly patriotic, buying Victory Bonds—and losing a son in World War I. We also see her active in the Anglican Women's Auxiliary, organizing, translating Sunday sermons and the Bible into Kwak'wala, reading everything she could get her hands on. We see how her blended cultural position allowed her to challenge traditional gendered political positions, becoming a founding and active member of the

Allied Tribes of BC, alongside the men, while remaining an active midwife and healer, married to the successful seiner, businessman and last *Hawinalat* (Warrior Dance) initiate 'Nage Stephen Cook, with whom she had 16 children.

The book is deeply—successfully—collaborative, with past and present lived stories intertwining. It truly feels like it is co-written with a clan. Presenting this photographic, archival and oral collection alone would have been a major contribution to the historical record. It would fit into the works and records of other Christianized indigenous rights advocates, such as the Reverend Peter Jones in Ontario. It presents an important female voice to contrast well with the life history of a man born the same year, Charles Nowell, in *Smoke From Their Fires* (1941), collected by Clellan Ford; Harry Assu's *Assu of Cape Mudge* (1989) by Joy Inge, and James Sewid's *Guests Never Leave Hungry* (1969), recorded by James Spradley.

What makes *Standing Up* even more interesting academically is its role as a cultural artifact of contemporary Alert Bay potlatching and its resurgent politics. The politics of "interested knowledge" of competing chiefs means there is never a truly "neutral" record (80), reflects a great grandson. Life history, notes Robertson, "is riddled with questions about subjectivity, interpretations and translation across culture ... mediated by the perspectives of the editors" (44). Like nearly a third of her community, Jane Cook did not potlatch, which was banned from 1884 until two months after her death in 1951. Her descendants felt they needed a book about her life, to explain her actions, as they repositioned themselves and their descendants back into Big House potlatch politics. All her life, Cook actively protested the role of the potlatch in the strategic marrying off of young girls to obtain bride price or dowry wealth. When an ambitious chief needed more wealth to give away to increase his status, she argued, he married again. "I was never paid for," she stated (328). A great grandson notes wryly, "The Native Women's Association of Canada would be Granny Cook" (234). Every time Anglican missionaries or politicians contemplated how to lift the potlatch ban, Cook would fire off a letter or protest at a meeting. She had also been hired to be the interpreter for the potlatch court cases, which eventually charged or fined 164 community members and sent extended family members to Oakalla Prison Farm in Burnaby. Her role was resented and criticized by those trying to maintain the customs. "I know you look on me as your enemy, you who love and stuck to the custom," she says to her village antagonists as they complained about her role (333). But, it seems, it was mainly her descendants who have felt the community sting, feeling outcast, barred from jobs and positions. Also, by not being children of a marriage recognized by a potlatch, it also meant that "My children are illegal in eyes of the potlatch system or custom ... the boys that are married are still not recognized" (328). Her grandchild stated prophetically that "we might have to pay that debt for her someday" (330). It seems such a debt can be dealt with, in part, by not only getting the regalia, dances and songs "right" but also by setting your family history "right" in the academic record. It is a debt being repaid—in the currency of history, knowledge and ideas—to the 'Yalis Big House, one family's "Treasure Box" being reawakened.