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Norman Bancroft-Hunt and Werner Forman *People of the Totem: The Indians of the Pacific Northwest*

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People of the Totem is a slender, well-illustrated overview of Northwest Coast Indian cultures intended mostly for general audiences unfamiliar with the area or the extensive ethnographic literature on the subject. While the book has significant positive features, it is difficult to see how it creates a niche for itself among the plethora of works already available on Northwest Coast culture, myth, art, and, more recently, history. This is not to say that the work should be avoided. Quite the contrary; in fact, in spite of the predominantly derivative character of the text, it remains, in the end, a brief, though useful, introduction to Northwest Coast cultures that has the potential to introduce readers to a much broader array of works on the subject.

The text begins with a well-written portrait of the climate and geography of the Canadian and Alaskan coast, introducing, as well, the book’s strongest overall feature — its fine illustrations. Indeed, virtually all of the major ethnographers in this area have noted the cultural implications of the Northwest’s jagged coastline, measuring only five hundred miles from Vancouver to Alaska in a straight line, but comprising almost four times that distance in a shoreline dotted with inlets, coastal waters, and islands. Wooden constructions mark the man-made landscape, and these coastal peoples make use of both the forest and the coast for their material needs. Indeed, the first few pages of the book lack only a well placed map (found eventually on page twenty-one) to give the reader a clear idea of locations in which the Tlingit, Tsimshian, Bella Coola, Kwakiatl, Nootka, and Salish cultural and linguistic groups are found.

The illustrations give the general reader a sound picture of the material life of the Northwest Coast Indians, from clothing and weaponry to architecture and totemic carvings. Indeed, this is where the teaming of Norman Bancroft-Hunt, noted for his knowledge of North American Indian life, and Werner Forman, a distinguished photographer, is best seen.
Much of the book, however, remains quite derivative – even the illustrations, at least in the sense that there are numerous works available that more thoroughly cover various aspects of Northwest Coast art and architecture. Similarly, the vast majority of the work’s cited examples come from one source – Franz Boas’s *Ethnology of the Kwakiutl*. The examples are often memorable, but they do little to engage the ethnographic sources from which they are derived. Ultimately, it is difficult to find a clear picture of the readers who would use this text. Many ethnographic works are more thorough, historical accounts more detailed, and art books richer. If it serves as an entertaining introduction, however, it will have found a limited place. Still, there are several problems to bear in mind with this work, and it is to these that I will devote the rest of this review.

I wish I could be more positive about the text (beyond what I have already said about its usefulness as a birds-eye overview), but I will try to give the most constructive analysis I can of the work’s problems for those of us who seek to gain insight into comparative civilizations and cultural communications. In broad terms, the problems begin with the historical background section that directly follows the geographical introduction. Admittedly, many authors use such sections to provide nothing more than a “background sketch,” and this is hardly the worst case I have seen of such treatments.

Still, I would point out that it is just this type of “historical overview” that can lead authors and readers down a dangerous path. It is all too easy to fall into highly derivative and stereotypical cause-effect arguments when the brushstrokes are so broad, if not bold. I will point out a number of such problems of historical interpretation, again, not to criticize our authors so much as to point out what I take to be fundamental interpretive problems in many such works.

First, very little of the material to be found in this section is cited. Much of it is familiar (as is most of the remainder of the book) to those who have read the classic ethnographic literature. But even though the purpose of the book is not to engage such scholarship, there are numerous problems with historical inter-
pretation. For example, the following paragraph, I hope, will serve as a sufficient example of these historiographical problems: After 1930 the population began to increase and the problems of administration suddenly changed. Native numbers were growing at a faster pace than those of the whites; the Indian was regaining his confidence and asserting himself once more; he was demanding independence; and furthermore he was using his knowledge of white societies to fight back at them through their own legal processes....Indians once again felt proud of their race and strove to piece together the fragments of their societies, although they also realized that the traditional ways of life could never be regained. [22 - italics mine]

While the broad points are certainly in keeping with the records of the time, the imputation of thoughts to a people in this manner, even if meant innocently as a historical overview, contributes to the kind of scattered and disorganized historical thinking that is already too common in many areas of academia and popular culture.

This kind of broad brushstroke is all-too-common in the rest of the book as well. For a book published by a university press, there are too many examples of sentences beginning with “The Indian felt...” or similar patterns. Throughout the “Society” and “Supernatural” chapters, the author gives seemingly concrete answers to metaphysical problems. In just one example among many, when describing mythological accounts of water monsters, he adds the unnecessary entry: “The monsters gave a form of reality to unknown or unpredictable forces, thereby making them easier to understand and cope with.” While individual statements like this seem harmless, there is a cumulative danger of creating “two levels” of cultural and historical understanding — the rigorous academic engagement with primary and secondary materials found in good historical and ethnographic works and a shallower “layman’s” account that is “good enough” for general readers.

I would argue that it is especially in these kinds of works (as well as introductory history and culture classes) that an accessible but rigorous interpretation should start, perhaps all the more
discussing with the reader the manner in which the author came to particular conclusions. Such a work would be one in which a Winter Ceremonial dance could be described — with wide room for “strange” phenomena — without the need to editorialize for readers:

The power of the drummers, the drama of the masks, and the seemingly impossible supernatural events which took place, would have made an outsider wonder whether it had been an illusion. *The strength and sophistication of the events were such that those who watched were convinced of the reality of the dance.* [125 - Italics mine]

Although I have been critical of a number of items in this book that are no different than a wide variety of general books on historical and cultural topics, I do believe that there is a point to be made about rigor in thinking through these explanations. Whether they will ultimately rest on a coffee table or an undergraduate’s desk, such general works present an opportunity to not only present content to a wide audience but an introduction to critical thinking processes as well. If I have seemed overly harsh on this point, it should be viewed as a criticism of the way far too many of us — and I do mean all of us, at different times and places — take “basic” introductions to be an excuse to lighten our critical skills.

Robert André LeFleur