

# **The First Nations of British Columbia**



# The First Nations of British Columbia: An Anthropological Survey

2ND EDITION

*Robert J. Muckle*



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper. ∞

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### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Muckle, Robert James

The First Nations of British Columbia : an anthropological survey  
/ Robert J. Muckle. – 2nd ed.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7748-1349-5

ISBN-10: 0-7748-1349-0

1. Indians of North America – British Columbia. I. Title.

E78.B9M82 2006

971.1004'97

C2006-903955-0

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### Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and of the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

604-822-5959 / Fax: 604-822-6083

[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)

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# Preface to the First Edition

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This book is for readers who would like a fundamental knowledge of First Nations people, cultures, and issues in British Columbia. Relatively few books treat the First Nations of the province collectively, and those that do lack the broad scope of topics covered here. Synthesizing information from diverse sources, *The First Nations of British Columbia* defines and describes First Nations of today and provides overviews of their prehistory, traditional lifeways, and change over the past 200 years. It also outlines government relations, significant court cases, negotiations in the 1990s, and some outstanding First Nations issues.

## **An Anthropological Perspective**

Much of the information presented here is based on anthropological research, and brief descriptions of the nature of that research in British Columbia are included. The work is also based on the premise that understanding First Nations issues and initiatives of today depends on a knowledge of the history, diversity, and complexity of those nations. It should be appreciated that this material is based largely on external perception: the information has come primarily from publications written by non-native scholars and government sources.

Major areas of interest in **anthropology** include the study of the **prehistoric** past (**archaeology**) and the study of traditional lifeways (**ethnology**), and these provide the focus of Parts 2 and 3 of the book, respectively. Culture change, particularly identification of the mechanisms and impacts of change over the past few hundred years, is another key area of interest in anthropology and is the central theme of Part 4.

### **A Note on Classification, Territories, and Spelling**

Not everyone will agree with the classification, territories, and spelling used. As outlined in Part 1, the classification of First Nations is problematic for a variety of reasons, and there is no consensus on the distinction of major ethnic groups or the demarcation of traditional territories. Similarly, there is no consensus on the spelling of various First Nations names. The classifications, boundaries, and spellings used here tend to reflect recent scholarly research but are subject to debate and change.

### **Acknowledgments**

Thanks to UBC Press. I am particularly indebted to Peter Milroy for seeing a place for this book outside of the classroom, to Jean Wilson for her patience and general guidance, and to Camilla Blakeley for her exceptional editing abilities. I thank René Gadacz, Rick Blacklaws, and Patricia Shaw for their thorough reviews of the manuscript. I have incorporated some, but not all, of their suggestions. All errors and omissions are mine.

## Preface to the Second Edition

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The first edition of *The First Nations of British Columbia* was published in 1998. Much has occurred since then, leading to this second edition: new data on First Nations, progress in treaty negotiations, and changes in First Nations names and spellings. Significant anthropological research projects in British Columbia have continued into the twenty-first century and the results have been incorporated into this edition.

This edition contains information on significant archaeological sites not discussed in the previous book, including Ninstints, declared a world heritage site in 1981, and Kwayday Dan Ts'inchi, the preserved remains of a man who died about six hundred years ago, discovered in 1999. Some of the most compelling ethnological research in recent years has focused on traditional uses of plants, and I have incorporated some of this into the new edition, especially the management of plant resources. Discussions on First Nations wage labour in the historic period and the assertion of First Nations identity through art are significant additions to the last part of the book.

Several people deserve recognition for the completion of the second edition. I am again indebted to my editors: Jean Wilson, for encouraging me to tackle a new edition; Gail Copeland, for identifying inconsistencies in the manuscript; and Camilla Blakeley, for her exceptional ability to see where and how the book could be improved. Tamara Parizek at Capilano College was an immense help with computer technology and logistical issues related to the production of the manuscript.

I have had read published critiques of the first edition and have had many discussions about it with First Nations people, members of the general public, students, academics, and

teachers. I have listened to what they have said they would like to see stay the same and what they would like to have added to a second edition. In this regard, I am particularly grateful for the many hours of discussions about First Nations cultures and contemporary issues with my colleagues in anthropology, Gillian Crowther and Tad (Thomas) McIlwraith, both of whom have extensive research experience with First Nations in British Columbia, teach anthropology courses about First Nations at BC colleges, and have graciously allowed some of their photographs to be used in this edition. I am also grateful to the people identified in the photographs for their permission to reproduce them. I am particularly indebted to Gillian for the parts of this edition pertaining to art and artists, including the new section on public art and assertions of identity. I have also benefited from discussions with linguist Dwight Gardiner on matters pertaining to language and spellings and with Robert Campbell on BC history. I remain responsible for omissions and errors.



*Part 1*  
**First Nations Defined**

## What Is a First Nation?

In British Columbia there is general agreement that the term **First Nation** refers to a group of people who can trace their ancestry to the populations that occupied the land prior to the arrival of Europeans and Americans in the late eighteenth century. Nomenclature for such groups, however, depends on context. Although they were commonly referred to as “nations” from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, in recent decades they have routinely been referred to as “Natives,” “Aboriginals,” “Indigenous Peoples,” “**Indians**,” and “Indian bands.” “First Nations” customarily describes groups formerly known as **bands** (the Squamish Band, for example, becoming the Squamish Nation) as well as affiliations of distinct bands and/or nations (the Sto:lo Nation, for example, comprising more than a dozen separate, smaller nations). In some situations the **community** itself may be referred to as a First Nation.

Proponents of the descriptor “First Nation” cite several benefits. First, it alleviates the derogatory and primitive connotations often associated with such terms as Natives, Aboriginals, and indigenous. Second, it corrects the misnomer of “Indians,” which resulted from the mistaken belief that Christopher Columbus had reached India. Third, it emphasizes that the ancestors of today’s First Nations were in the region prior to the arrival of Europeans. The term “nation” reflects original sovereignty, and its plural, “nations,” accentuates the multitude of distinct groups.

Although there is an increasing tendency to use “First Nation,” it has not totally displaced the other terms. “Aboriginal,” “Indian,” and “band” have specific legal meaning – as described in the **Canadian Constitution** and the **Indian Act** – and are still widely used by the provincial and federal governments. Some people with ancestral ties to prehistoric populations in the area see “First Nation” as another label applied by Euro-Canadian society and reject it, instead

describing their groups with names from their own languages or using such terms as “people,” “council,” “community,” or “village.”

### **Two Kinds of First Nations People**

There are two broad categories of First Nations people in British Columbia: **registered** (or **status**) **Indians**, and **non-status Indians**. The terms “registered” and “status” are used interchangeably to distinguish a person whose name appears on a register maintained by the federal government. The criteria for being recognized as a registered Indian have been revised several times by the federal government, with eligibility including such things as ancestry, marriage, education, and occupation.

While most registered Indians have ancestral ties with prehistoric populations, biological relationships have not been necessary to achieve “status.” A person with clear biological ties to prehistoric populations may not necessarily be “registered.” Historically, status was lost if a registered Indian woman married a non-Indian man. Status could also be lost if a registered Indian obtained a university education, joined the armed forces, or became a Canadian citizen. Some people who fit the eligibility requirements may simply have been missed during the registration process.

Being registered brings many benefits, especially for those working and living on a **reserve**. Registered Indians do not pay tax on income earned while working on a reserve or sales taxes on goods purchased on a reserve. Other benefits include comprehensive medical coverage and support for housing and education. Housing and money for education is not unlimited, however, and the First Nation usually determines its members’ eligibility.

In 1985 the federal government passed **Bill C-31**, which enabled people who had lost their status, and their descendants, to become registered. At the same time, the government

legislated that First Nations would be allowed to create and maintain their own “band list” of members using their own criteria for establishing membership. As a result, it is now possible for registered Indians to have no affiliation with a specific First Nation and for non-status people to have band membership.

### **Population, Reserves, Settlements, and Lands**

There are approximately 120,000 status and 75,000 non-status Indians living in British Columbia. These figures account for about 5 percent of the total population of the province and about 17 percent of the total First Nations population of Canada.

About 45 percent of the registered Indian population lives on one of the more than 1,500 reserves in the province. The reserves range in size from less than one to more than 18,000 hectares, total about 3,500 square kilometres, and account for less than 0.5 percent of the land in the province. The



Iskut First Nation member Feddie Louie and her niece, Diamond Louie, riding an all-terrain vehicle in northern British Columbia. Family bonds are usually very strong in First Nations communities. *Courtesy Thomas McIlwraith*

majority of reserves are uninhabited. Most of those living on a reserve reside in one of about 350 settlements, with an average population between 100 and 200 people. About 25,000 non-registered Indians live on various reserves, most often through lease arrangements with the appropriate First Nation.

Lease arrangements with First Nations have also resulted in many businesses locating on reserves. Many First Nations themselves also operate businesses on reserves. Consequently, reserves support a wide variety of commercial enterprises, ranging from sawmills to shopping centres.

In 2000, ownership of reserve lands was transferred to the Nisga'a Nation and included with other crown lands to form part of a negotiated treaty. Close to 2,000 square kilometres of land in the Nass River area of northeastern British Columbia now belong to the Nisga'a and are widely known as Nisga'a Lands.

### **Bands, Ethnic Groups, Tribal Councils, and Other Affiliations**

For most registered Indians, the primary unit of administration is the band. As defined by the Indian Act (1989), "band" means: "a body of Indians ... for whose use and benefit in common, lands, the legal title to which is vested in Her Majesty, have been set apart." The governance of most bands follows the Indian Act, which calls for an elected chief and council, with the number of councillors dependent on the number of band members: one councillor for every 100 members, with a minimum of two and a maximum of twelve.

Reserves and most funds from the federal Department of Indian Affairs (also known as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) destined for the registered Indian population tend to be allocated to bands. The bands are therefore the most direct channel for First Nations people to obtain their benefits and entitlements as registered Indians.

In many cases bands do not reflect past social and political organization. Due to a lack of understanding by Euro-Canadians, some traditional groupings were deemed to be separate bands while in other cases distinct groups have amalgamated to form a single band. In the past the federal government has also arbitrarily declared some bands extinct. New bands have continued to emerge in British Columbia throughout the past few decades, through either amalgamation or division. Examples since the 1970s include the Kwakiutl, Doig River, Blueberry River, Prophet River, Halfway River, and West Moberly bands.

There are many reasons for the changing number and nature of bands. In the nineteenth century the government created the bands largely for its own benefit, making it easier to administer and control the First Nations. The creation of new bands through amalgamation in the early twentieth century was also often for the benefit of government, in the form of administrative efficiency, particularly as First Nations populations were declining. Recent creation of new bands, however, has most often been at the request of First Nations, usually reflecting more traditional groupings or more efficient administration. Section 17(1) of the Indian Act (1989) states:

- The Minister may, whenever he considers it desirable,
- (a) amalgamate bands that, by a vote of a majority of their electors, request to be amalgamated; and
  - (b) constitute new bands and establish Band Lists with respect thereto from existing Band Lists, or from the Indian Register, if requested to do so by persons proposing to form the new bands.

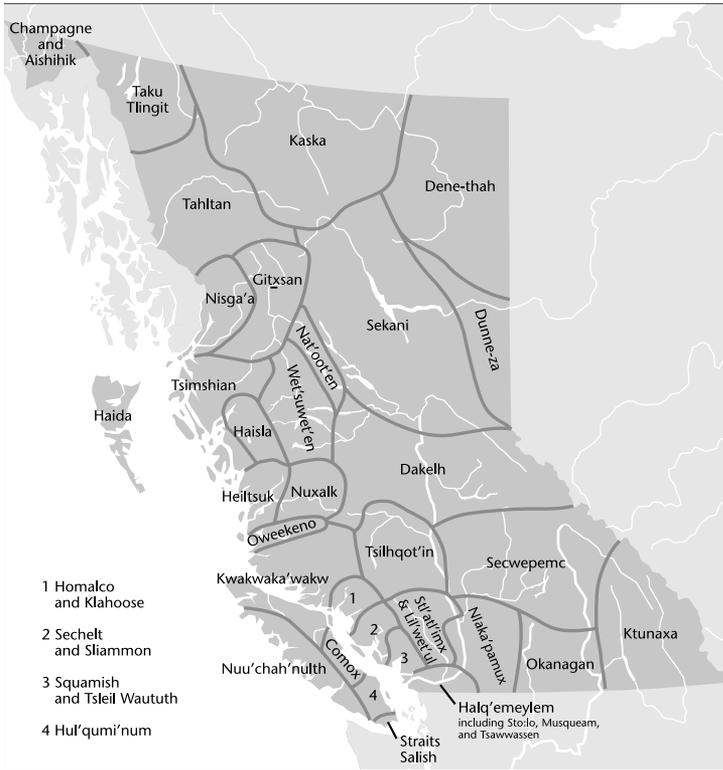
Depending on how one defines a nation, there may be as few as ten or more than 200 First Nations in the province. There are about 200 bands based in British Columbia (see

Appendix 1) as well as a few bands based in the Yukon and Northwest Territories who claim part of British Columbia as their traditional territory. For those who believe that a band equates with nation, there are therefore about 200 First Nations in the province.

Historically, bands were commonly divided into ten major groupings: Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, Nootka, Coast Salish, Interior Salish, Bella Coola, Athapaskan, Inland Tlingit, and Kutenai. Although many First Nations people and students of First Nations view this system as very simplistic and an inaccurate depiction of ethnic diversity, it remains widely used.

It is now held that there are about thirty or forty major **ethnic groups** among the First Nations of British Columbia today (Map 1, Appendix 2). The criteria for distinguishing the groups include shared territory, language, and **culture**. Most of these ethnic groups have further subdivisions – including nations, community, or family group – to which individuals have a stronger bond. Some scholars, however, prefer to classify First Nations solely by language. This alternative tends to be less problematic than classifying ethnic groups by shared territory and culture as well as language, but it is also subject to debate.

The distinction and mapping of major ethnic groups is constantly changing. First Nations people and anthropologists, often in association with each other, are continually working to clarify traditional groupings and territories, but there are many problems: historical records offer contradictory information; Euro-Canadians have often misunderstood language and organization; many First Nations have been known by a variety of names and disagree among themselves; and there are no consistent criteria for distinguishing the groups. As a result, there is no consensus on the number and names of major ethnic groups, let alone territorial boundaries.



First Nations in British Columbia. First Nations are largely self-defined. Identified here are major ethnic groups, based on shared territory, language, and culture. Some are represented today by a single nation; others comprise many smaller nations, sometimes known as bands.

Similarly, identification of the specific nations that belong to the larger ethnic groups is problematical, largely because communities have changed, particularly as the boundaries of traditional territories have altered and populations have mixed. It is not unusual for nations to be linked with more than one ethnic group.

About 90 percent of First Nations are affiliated with tribal councils, which are associations of bands formed to deal with administrative, economic, political, or other matters. There are currently about thirty tribal councils in the province. They



Iskut First Nation elder Mabel Dennis collecting pitch from a jack pine, near Iskut Village. Elders are important figures in contemporary First Nations communities for several reasons, including their knowledge of traditional lifeways. *Courtesy Thomas McIlwraith*



Freddie Louie cutting moose meat at Iskut First Nation camp Kati Chô. Wild foods continue to have great importance among many First Nations people in the early twenty-first century, especially in rural parts of the province, and resource utilization camps are scattered widely within traditional territories, beyond reserves. *Courtesy Thomas McIlwraith*



Community members in button blanket robes. Garments such as button blanket robes typically depict family groups and are often worn for ceremonial occasions, such as depicted here in the Haida community of Masset. *Courtesy Gillian Crowther*



Jim Hart, a hereditary Haida chief (Chief 7idansuu), carving a totem pole in the Great Hall at the UBC Museum of Anthropology. For many non-British Columbians, well-known artists are the public face of First Nations. They also often have significant roles within their own nation, where they are more commonly called carvers than artists. *Courtesy Gillian Crowther*

tend to be regional, and although they are usually formed by nations within a single ethnic group, they may cross ethnic boundaries, as the Carrier-Sekani Tribal Council does, for example.

First Nations people in British Columbia may have many other affiliations, including to organizations that support arts, economic development, health, education, and politics. Many First Nations have also formed affiliations to negotiate treaties. Some prominent umbrella organizations include the **Assembly of First Nations**, the **First Nations Summit**, the **Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs**, and the **United Native Nations**.

### **Suggested Reading**

*A Traveller's Guide to Aboriginal B.C.* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books 1996), by Cheryl Coull, provides a wealth of information

about First Nation communities throughout the province and is highly recommended. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada ([www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/](http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/)) and the provincial Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation ([www.gov.bc.ca/arr/](http://www.gov.bc.ca/arr/)) are both good places to obtain basic data about the First Nations of British Columbia, including profiles of each nation. Lists of First Nations affiliations, organizations, and agencies are published by the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation in an annual *Guide to Aboriginal Organizations and Services in British Columbia* available from the ministry in print or on-line versions.



*Part 2*  
**Archaeology and First Peoples**