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Introduction: The Northwest Coast in Perspective

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As Dr. Boas informs us, there are in all the tribes three distinct ranks – the chiefs, the middle class, and the common people – or as they might perhaps be more aptly styled, nobles, burgesses, and rabble. The nobles form a caste. Their rank is hereditary; and no one who was not born in it can in any way attain it. The nobles have distinction and respect, but little power ... The lowest class, or rabble, is therefore a veritable residuum ... [including] – in those tribes which practise slave-holding – slaves and their descendants.

– Hale 1890:4-5

When ethnographic examples of complex hunter-gatherers are given, they are almost invariably from the Northwest Coast of North America (e.g., Burch and Ellana 1994; Kelly 1995; Netting 1977, 1986; Johnson and Earle 1987; Fried 1967; Lee and Devore 1968). The Northwest Coast is commonly conceded to be second only to the Southwest in ethnographic importance among North American culture areas. The Northwest Coast has a correspondingly prominent place in theories about the development of social complexity (Fried 1967; Johnson and Earle 1987; Service 1971, 1975). This positioning of Northwest Coast cultures is partly the result of the rich ethnographic accounts, their many exotic aspects, and the lack of descriptions of equivalently complex hunters and gatherers.

In contrast to the prominent placement of Northwest Coast ethnography, Northwest Coast archaeology is rarely cited. The first book-length published account of Northwest Coast prehistory as a whole became available only recently (Matson and Coupland 1995), while A.V. Kidder's groundbreaking *Introduction to the Study of Southwestern Archaeology* was first published in 1924. The relatively low visibility of archaeology in the literature is not in accord with its theoretical importance (for if the ethnographic

pattern is important, then it follows that the record of its development will be a test of ideas about the development of cultural complexity). The same holds true of the visibility of the quantity and quality of archaeology carried out in the last thirty years along the Northwest Coast, and of the relatively important changes in our understanding of the nature of the ethnographic pattern that have occurred in the same period. This volume is an attempt to rectify this situation, reporting not only on the archaeology of the Northwest Coast and its implication for cultural evolution but also on aspects of our current understanding and the extent of the Northwest Coast ethnographic pattern.

Many recent archaeological investigations have assumed that the general pattern presented by Wayne Suttles (1951, 1987a, 1990b) is valid for the Northwest Coast as a whole, in contrast to the alternative views put forward by investigators such as Drucker and Heizer (1967) and Rosman and Rubel (1971). To many, the decisive research supporting Suttles's view is the ethnohistoric research presented by Donald Mitchell (1981, 1983, 1984, 1985) and Leland Donald (1983a, 1985, 1990, 1997) (see also Mitchell and Donald 1985, 1988; and Donald and Mitchell 1975, 1994). Almost all the chapters in this volume share this orientation, and almost all also make good use of early historic accounts.

It will also be noted that these archaeological chapters share an interest in anthropological concerns, like that maintained by Donald Mitchell throughout his career (Mitchell 1968, 1971a, 1979, 1988, 1990). The reason for these commonalities is that these chapters originated in a session (although they constituted only a small portion of those delivered) of the Canadian Archaeological Association Annual Meetings in May 1998 in Victoria, British Columbia, in honour of Donald Mitchell. This was the largest such session on Northwest Coast archaeology to date. At the same meeting, Professor Mitchell was also honoured with the Canadian Archaeological Association Smith-Wittemberg Award.

In order to provide a context for the following chapters, I give an overview of the culture area and the current important issues. I begin by briefly reviewing the area and the ethnographic pattern, and then turn to more specific concerns. By using a single set of terms defined in this book we hope to reduce confusion and unnecessary redundancy in the chapters that follow.

Setting

The Northwest Coast has been defined in a variety of ways over the years, but the first detailed description, given by Wissler in 1917, holds up well today. Both the judgmental evaluation made by Kroeber (1939) – and, following him, Drucker (1955b, 1965) – and the statistical evaluation made by Jorgensen (1980) support the same basic classification that was followed by Suttles (1990a) in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Volume 7, *Northwest*

Coast. In all these cases the Northwest Coast is seen as extending from the Tlingit at Yakutat Bay to at least the Tolowa in northern California. The place of the Eyak north of the Tlingit, and the Karok and Yurok south of the Tolowa, remains problematic. The region south of the Columbia River has long been recognized as having less complex cultures than the region further north. Some (e.g., Mitchell and Donald 1988) have in fact defined it as being outside of the Northwest Coast. Matson and Coupland (1995) called this section the “South Coast,” and that is the term we will use here (Figure 1.1).

In the last chapter in this volume Leland Donald investigates whether the “South Coast” area can be fully considered an integral portion of this culture area. Whatever the evaluation, Donald points out that the South Coast is clearly distinctive in a number of important ways. Matson and Coupland (1995:259) suggest that the Northwest Coast pattern was still spreading south at contact and that contact may well have terminated the southern spread.

Somewhat more arbitrarily, Matson and Coupland (1995) defined the “Central Coast” (Figure 1.1) as extending from the Columbia River to the north end of Vancouver Island, and the “North Coast” as the area from the north end of Vancouver Island to Yakutat Bay. The commonalities in settings from one end of the Northwest Coast to the other, though, include a coastal environment with a generally mild but wet climate and year-round access to coastal resources. Fish, particularly Pacific salmon, are clearly the most important resource. It is no accident that the inland penetration of the Northwest Coast cultures is along such major salmon streams as the Columbia, Fraser, Skeena, and Nass rivers. Other fish, particularly cod, herring, rockfish, halibut, and other flat fish are also important. Shellfish, both burrowing clams and rocky-foreshore-dwelling mussels are also often major dietary items. Marine mammals are also locally significant, including, at some places on the outer Central Coast, whales, as is detailed in the contribution by Monks. Large trees of splitable wood are also a common presence, with redwood in the south, red cedar on the Central Coast, and red and yellow cedar on the North Coast. Douglas fir is abundant in the south, and is joined by hemlock along the Central Coast and replaced by Sitka spruce on the North Coast. Donald gives a much more detailed look at the distribution of some of these important trees and their geographical correlation with cultural traits.

The importance of these resources varies from place to place, but the large-scale processing of salmon in late summer and fall for preservation and use in the winter is a near constant. Low values for land mammals and birds are typical, although this is variable. Except for berries, vegetable foods do not contribute significant calories beyond the South Coast, where acorns are abundant.

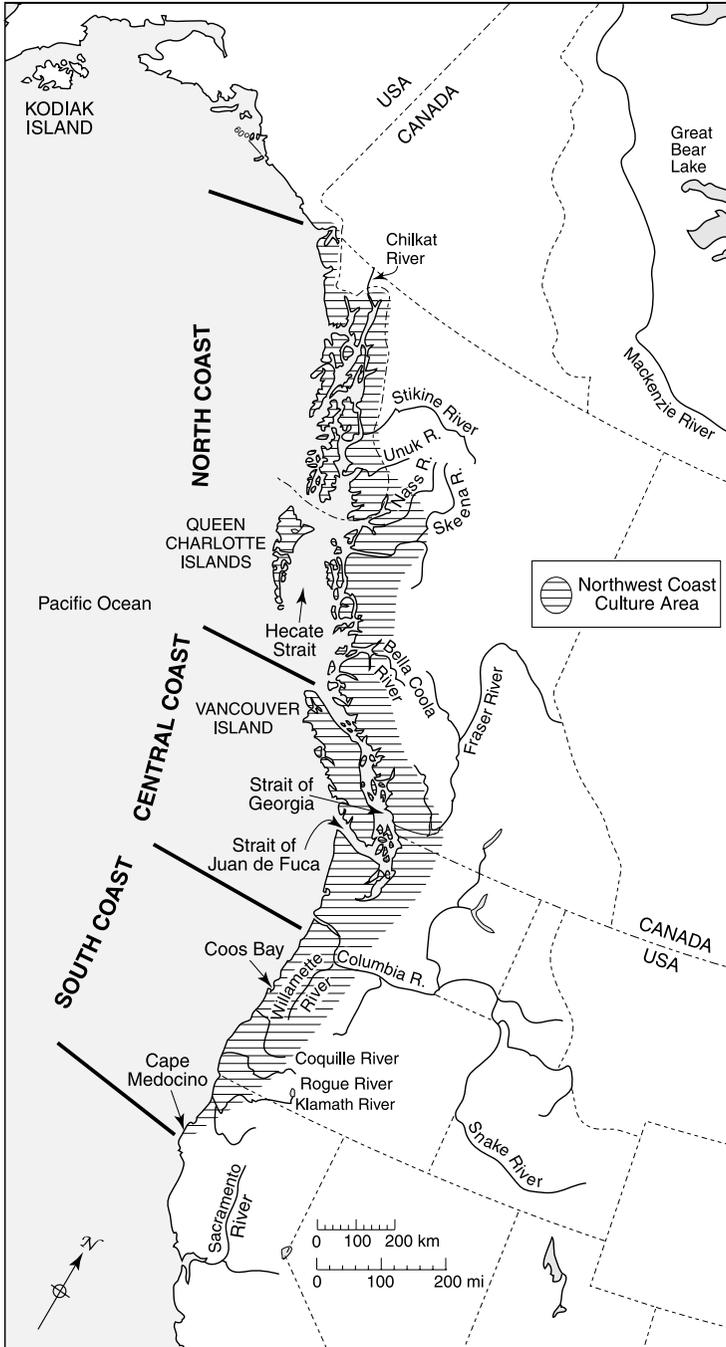


Figure 1.1 Northwest Coast culture area according to Kroeber (1939), with Matson and Coupland (1995) subdivisions.

Cultures

Spread out along this coast are very unusual hunters and gatherers; the numerous large households lived in spacious planked permanent houses in large villages, displaying intricate ceremonies and elaborate decorative arts, all reflecting a complex society with inherited social statuses. All these attributes contrast with the usual pattern seen for people making their living without agriculture.

In our training, many of us received as conventional wisdom the fact that these cultures were “rank societies,” in Fried’s (1967) term, that there were statuses present that were limited by heredity and not open to all but that real inequities in access to the material means of life did not exist. Further, these status differences existed mainly within kingroups/households and not between them. That was not the view of such earlier workers as Wissler (1917) or Hale (1890), as the quotation at the top of this introduction indicates, nor is it the understanding that has developed in the last twenty years, following Ruyle (1973); Suttles (1973, 1987a); Suttles and Jonaitis (1990), and Donald (1985, 1990, 1997). Work by Mitchell (1985) and Donald (1983, 1997; Mitchell and Donald 1985) has shown that numerous slaves existed in early historic times in some of these groups, and it is very difficult to see slaves, whose very lives were at the whim of their owners (as discussed in Donald’s contribution to this volume), having “equal access to the material needs of life.” Close inspection indicates that even groups without numerous slaves had inherited inequities with regard to access to the material needs of life, indicating that, in general, the ethnographic Northwest Coast cultures should be more properly thought of as low-level “stratified,” “class,” or “class divided” societies in Donald’s (1985, 1997) terms, rather than as “rank” societies (Ames 2001).

Although this image of the Northwest Coast appears solid for the ethnographic present (i.e., the situation inferred to exist immediately before contact) – at least until the next time the pendulum swings – the situation for the last 2,000 or 3,000 years is not nearly so clear. Matson and Coupland (1995) report on several lines of evidence that indicate that the ethnographic pattern is either a recent development or unstable. This is a common theme in this volume, a recognition that we cannot assume that something approximating the ethnographic pattern was present on the Central and North coasts for the last 2,000 years – a view that would have had significantly more support twenty years ago. Matson and Coupland further suggest that the South Coast might best be viewed as a “rank society” in contrast to the socially stratified Central and North coasts, a position consistent with Donald’s contribution.

In contrast to the undoubted high degree of social stratification, Northwest Coast political complexity is generally low. The Northwest Coast “chief” is better thought of as “head of household” or “head of kinship group.”

There is very little evidence for a formal position for chief of the community and almost none for a political position incorporating several communities. Mitchell (1983a) and Miller and Boxberger (1994) have looked at some of the best known claims for these and soundly rejected them. There are, though, several exceptions that appear to be tied to postcontact developments, and Chapter 2, Martindale's contribution, is a careful and full examination of perhaps the best known counter-example in early historic times along the Skeena River (Figure 1.1).

A Northwest Coast "chief," then, had the allegiance of his household, but beyond that, political power rested in his own abilities and alliances with other household leaders. This lack of political complexity contrasts with the much less socially complex California "tribelets" but is clearly a distinctive feature of the Northwest Coast. Coupland (1988a) points out that communities did frequently act as cooperative groups in defence of their members and of community-controlled resources; but beyond this, community-wide corporate activities are typically not seen.

The high degree of social stratification and the low degree of political complexity is a reason that the Sahlins-Service-Earle (Service 1971, 1975; Sahlins and Service 1960; Johnson and Earle 1987) political evolutionary scheme involving "chiefdoms" is little used in this area, although, as pointed out above, the common alternative (Fried's [1967]), also needs major modification in order to fit our current understanding of the ethnographic present. One wonders about the dominant scheme if it does not allow for the Northwest Coast case, yet this scheme is frequently used as if it is the only process by which cultural complexity can develop. Arnold (1993:77), for instance, defines "complex" as including a hierarchical political organization on a multicomunity scale and seems to believe that, without this, other aspects of complexity cannot exist among hunters and gatherers. Can one turn around and say that the Northwest Coast case invalidates this popular scheme? At the UCLA symposium on Complex Hunter-Gatherers of the World (1994) my impression was that there was a general disbelief among those unfamiliar with the Northwest Coast that social complexity could exist without political complexity, and an apparent willingness to force archaeological data into the Sahlins-Service scheme, which, at the very least, is not validated for the hunting-gathering case.

Another contrast between the Northwest Coast and most of its surrounding areas involves the number of languages present. This was recognized early (Hale 1889, 1890) and appears to be a result of very high population density and stability of subsistence, which allows groups of sufficient size to be biologically stable and to exist in relatively small geographical areas (Martin 1973). The pattern of many distinct linguistic groups also occurs to the south, in California, probably for the same reasons along with the additional factor of ecological diversity.

The Northwest Coast cultures are clearly “logistic collectors,” moving resources collected at specialized processing sites to the winter village site for use during the winter. It is not generally recognized that these same societies can also have a high degree of residential mobility (Mitchell 1994). The “permanent” winter village structures are often only frames from which the planks are removed for use in spring, summer, and fall camps. Curiously, the structures are larger and less permanent on the Central and North coasts than they are on the South Coast. The exploitation and processing of salmon are the most important of the resource activities, and this has continued at least for the last 3,000 to 3,500 years (Matson 1992) on the Central Coast, which is consistent with the evidence collected by Moss, Erlandson, and Stuckenrath (1990) for fish weirs on the North Coast.

In Chapter 3 Dale Croes focuses on what the perishable remains from the Hoko River site on the Washington shores of the Strait of Juan de Fuca (Figure 1.1) indicate about the development of subsistence technology. Most archaeology investigations of subsistence patterns – which are crucial to understanding the Northwest Coast – are based on faunal and floral remains, and that is true for the coast as a whole. Equally important, but not usually as visible, is the technology involved. The presence of numerous wet sites on the Northwest Coast allows a unique way to explore this topic, and Croes’s chapter points to how these remains can be used to evaluate subsistence issues.

Households and Household Archaeology

The main economic organization for these activities is the household. The household has been traditionally seen as consisting of twenty to twenty-five individuals (Mitchell and Donald 1988) for the Central and North coasts. Families and individuals of different social statuses were said to be located in different areas of the house. This structure was also used for the large-scale storage of food, which was necessary to surviving the long, wet winters. On the South Coast, a smaller household of perhaps eight to twelve individuals lived in a smaller planked house. On the Central Coast, a number of households may be present in a single shed-roofed house, which might be several hundred feet long (Suttles 1991).

The size and nature of the household are not clear for the contact period, let alone for the past. How the household came to be is another question that is not understood. These questions can be answered only through household archaeology; thus many of the chapters in this volume deal with aspects of the prehistoric household.

In Chapter 4 I examine the remains of a relatively recent Coast Salish shed-roof house on Valdes Island in the Strait of Georgia (Figure 1.1) and look not only at its architectural structure and possible social organization but also at likely household sizes. In the Coast Salish shed-roof house, a

number of households may share the same structure. In Chapter 5 Al Mackie and Laurie Williamson present new information about the physical makeup of similar early historic houses on the southern west coast of Vancouver Island (Figure 1.1). This is the first detailed description, including measurements, of these houses and will undoubtedly be much used by future researchers. Of particular interest is the very large size of these structures and the variety of their architectural features.

In contrast to the very large shed-roof houses, on the North Coast the usual rule was a single household to a smaller gable-roof house, although sometimes a single "household" might include two "houses." My investigation indicates that the common "household/compartment" size within the shed-roof house is about the same size as are many North Coast houses.

In Chapter 6 Coupland, Colten, and Case look at the differences in remains found in front of and behind houses at McNichol Creek, near the mouth of the Skeena River (Figure 1.1), as well as some suggestive differences between houses of varying sizes and even limited information on differences within a single house. Although these findings need to be confirmed elsewhere, they indicate significant differences in activities and access to resources – all in accord with the general "Suttles" model.

The full package – ascribed status differences; large, permanent winter households and villages; logistically organized economy, usually centred around stored salmon – found in the ethnographic accounts is what Matson and Coupland (1995) have referred to as the "Developed Northwest Coast Pattern." One of the outstanding issues in the development of the Northwest Coast pattern is the establishment and nature of the large household. Matson and Coupland (1995) found surprisingly little evidence for the antiquity of large houses on the North Coast, given the conventional archaeological wisdom that the ethnographic present was established there 2,000 years ago. Coupland points out that the evidence on the North Coast is more in accord with a smaller multifamily household, with perhaps ten to twelve individuals. Matson and Coupland (1995) found that, even on the South Coast, the archaeological houses were smaller than one would expect from the ethnographic record. This evidence casts doubt on the common archaeological assumption that the Developed Northwest Coast Pattern has been present for the last 2,000 years. In the chapter by Coupland, Colten, and Case it is interesting to note that most of the houses are much smaller than one would expect from ethnographic accounts and what is present on some early historic sites. What features of the ethnographic present are the results of early contact (Acheson 1995)? One of the houses at McNichol Creek is much larger than the others, possibly indicating a different social organization than present ethnographically on the Northwest Coast.

In Chapter 7 Grier looks at the possible advantage of having a large household 1,500 or 2,000 years ago. In the Gulf of Georgia area large households are found at that time, and Grier has been investigating one at the Dionisio Point site (very near the Valdes Island site upon which I report). It is, though, in an area without significant salmon resources today, and Grier explores the possibility that the ethnographic pattern of moving seasonally to the Fraser River for access to salmon occurred at this time as well as why that might have been allowed by the Fraser River inhabitants. He argues that “labour for salmon” exchange may have been occurring with benefits for both groups. This would be a different pattern than that seen ethnographically, again indicating a willingness to move outside of ethnographically recorded patterns to explain the archaeological record.

Unique Northwest Coast Activities

Two of the most unusual characteristics of Northwest Coast peoples were whaling and the use of metal. In Chapter 8 Monks looks at the archaeological remains of sea mammals found in excavations carried out by McMillan, St. Claire, and himself on the west coast of Vancouver Island as well as at those recovered from Ozette (Samuels 1994) to see how whales were used. At the very least, this chapter contains useful data for further investigation; however, its conclusions that the archaeological use varies from the ethnographic description and that this has been the case for a substantial length of time are very interesting. In particular, the ethnographic descriptions of the ownership of different parts of the whale and sources of oil need to be re-evaluated.

Metal using appears to go back at least 2,000 years on the Northwest Coast, and the early explorers were impressed with the amount and range of metals in use at first contact. In Chapter 9 Acheson analyzes these accounts for information about the nature and extent of precontact metal use and arrives at the conclusion that this technology has deeper and broader roots than is conventionally recognized.

It is only very recently that ethnic groups have been traceable with any reliability in archaeology. Two chapters look at this subject from very different perspectives: Kathryn Bernick (Chapter 10) focuses on the identification of a particular basketry technique that will aid ethnic identification of recent Coast Salish material; Alan McMillan (Chapter 11), explores the old question of the spread of Wakashan (ancestral Nootka and Kwakiutl speakers) people along the west coast of Vancouver Island and finds that some rethinking is in order to account for the latest archaeological information. Dale Croes's chapter also uses basketry to look at some of these issues, although he employs a rather different style of analysis than does Bernick. Together these chapters show that tracing ethnic groups is becoming much

more feasible than it was in the past, and they point to the future development of culture history.

All the above chapters use relatively conventional assumptions and techniques, fitting within the “Suttles” and “processual archaeology” paradigms as followed by Donald Mitchell throughout his career (although he would probably disagree with the latter placement [Mitchell 1998]). In Chapter 12 Quentin Mackie points to a future, albeit a complementary one, with new assumptions, new paradigms, and new techniques. He looks at the settlement patterns on the west coast of Vancouver Island but in terms of “central place” or “travelling salesman” perspectives and links this to the post-structural idea of practice theory (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). He is able to show that, if one looks for the five to nine most “central place sites,” they turn out to be much larger than expected. This is explained as the result of long-term “practice” rather than as a result of cultural or ecological reasons. I believe this approach is even more complementary to the rest of this volume than the author indicates. For instance, he contrasts practice theory with “culture” but with a “culture” of “norms” and “intentionality” that is not very prominent elsewhere in this volume. Further, while the investigator cites settlement pattern investigations from Alaska that do not find correlations between resources and sites and, particularly, site size, Eric McLay (1999), who also presented a paper at the 1998 symposium in Victoria, found both relationships on Valdes Island, off the east coast of Vancouver Island. Finally, although Mackie argues that his large central places cannot be explained by traditional central place notions, it was commented at the Victoria symposium, that good “base camp” locations would be expected to have these characteristics. Are these five to nine “central” places particularly good base camps – or number of local groups? What advantages do these new techniques and theories have over the “old” ways, and how do they link to these more “grounded” ideas about settlement patterns and more traditional ideas of culture? I see some interesting research ahead as these questions are investigated from both directions.

Chapter 13, by Leland Donald, reviews the Northwest Coast as a culture area, reexamining Kroeber’s (1923, 1939) definition and description in light of current knowledge. It is interesting to see that Kroeber early recognized the high degree of social stratification and low degree of political complexity emphasized in this introduction. Perhaps more important, Kroeber (and Donald) stress the uniqueness of the Northwest Coast among North American culture areas, a point often overlooked by those of us immersed in its wonderful complexities. Although Kroeber’s ideas of historical development – as Donald points out – are no longer relevant, both because of the emergence of Northwest Coast archaeology and developments in the understanding of cultural processes, many of his other ideas are still relevant, as this chapter demonstrates. Donald’s discussion of the distribution of several

important cultural and ecological “traits” gives support to both the idea of the Northwest Coast as a group of cultures sharing important characteristics and to the validity of the “culture area” concept. As he points out, though, neither the shared characteristics nor the area involved are constant, with the culture area likely expanding to the north (De Laguna 1972) and to the south (Matson and Coupland 1995:259) at the time of European contact. However, Donald suggests that the spread to the north was probably reaching the limit possible with the technology present in the seventeenth century.

This book ends with Donald’s “Epilogue,” which gives his perspective on the other contributions. Although most of the chapters do share many assumptions about the nature of Northwest Coast society and, therefore, about what are the important questions, there are many topics that are not touched. Still, our understanding is now dramatically different from what it was twenty years ago, which leads to the prominence of new questions and, therefore, different sorts of research. It is clear that our knowledge of Northwest Coast society is much better grounded now, and this, as represented by the chapters in this book, has allowed for the rapid, interconnected progress we have made in our understanding of the past.