The First Nations of British Columbia
An Anthropological Overview

THIRD EDITION

Robert J. Muckle

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As a non-First Nations person writing about First Nations, I open the door to criticism from First Nations. I am thankful that the vast majority of comments I have received on the two previous editions from First Nations people, including students, community members, and colleagues, have been overwhelmingly positive. Without that endorsement, this edition of the book would not have been written.

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While all the people mentioned in these acknowledgments have been important in the writing of this book, their identification here does not necessarily mean they endorse it in its entirety or specific parts. The choice of what to include, and how to include it, remains my responsibility.

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Preface

For this third edition of *The First Nations of British Columbia,* the book's primary objective remains unchanged. This book is for readers who would like a fundamental understanding of First Nations peoples, cultures, and issues in the province. Like the previous editions, the book uses a basic anthropological framework to cover the First Nations peoples and cultures of the past and present. It clarifies terminology, includes basic data, covers the ten thousand years before the influence of Europeans, provides an overview of traditional lifeways, describes the impact of Europeans through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and discusses the realities of First Nations lives and issues today. This rewritten edition includes totally new introductory and concluding parts, box features, new appendices, updated information and references, and many new illustrations.

First Nations peoples and cultures are a highly visible and important part of the fabric of contemporary British Columbia. Yet, misunderstandings and a general lack of knowledge about First Nations remain among many British Columbians and visitors to the province. This book seeks to address this lack of understanding by filling a niche between media stories and books for the popular or tourist markets on one side and scholarly publications and government reports on the other side. It provides more background and context for understanding the people, the diversity and complexity of cultures, and the issues than media stories can reasonably provide or books largely meant for the popular or tourist market can cover. The book also makes accessible important

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information gleaned from publications written by academics and those working for provincial and federal governments.

This book is written for the generally educated reader, whether academic or non-academic. University or college courses with a specific focus on First Nations of British Columbia are likely to use it as a jumping-off point to delve into information, themes, or issues from more scholarly perspectives. It may also be used as a supplementary textbook to provide background in courses that deal with specific aspects of First Nations peoples or culture. Professionals outside the academic world who deal with specific issues relating to First Nations, including such diverse areas as business, health, law, media, education, and the arts, may find the book valuable for the context it provides. Mostly, though, this book is designed for those who simply want to become more informed about the First Nations peoples and cultures of British Columbia, for reasons including (1) clarifying some complexities and reducing confusion about First Nations peoples, cultures, and issues, (2) wanting better context for understanding current events involving First Nations, and (3) contextualizing an area in which they already have an interest, such as art, history, or business.

The book provides a relatively normative anthropological approach to the study of First Nations. Not all anthropologists would necessarily cover the First Nations of British Columbia in the way they are covered in this book, but there is nothing radical about the coverage.

The book is written from the perspective and based on the experiences of an anthropologist with a passion for postsecondary and public education, all things anthropological, and a special interest in the First Nations of British Columbia. For more than twenty years, I have practised anthropology on behalf of dozens of First Nations in the province, and developed and taught postsecondary courses

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on First Nations at a variety of BC colleges, institutes, and universities. Many of the First Nations people I have met through my research and teaching have become friends. However, as a middle-aged male of European descent – a third-generation member of the settler or newcomer society – I make no claim of offering an insider's view of First Nations peoples' lives and cultures. My view is that of an anthropologist informed by many years of studying, working with, and interacting with First Nations peoples in both their home communities and educational settings.

A Note about Classification, Territories, Spelling, and Terminology

Not everyone will agree with the classifications, territories, and spelling used in this book. The classification of First Nations is problematic for a variety of reasons, and there is no consensus on which member groups may constitute a distinct First Nation or larger grouping. Nor is there always agreement on the demarcation of traditional territories or the spellings of names and places. The classifications, boundaries, and spellings used here tend to reflect recent research, but are subject to debate and change.

Vocabulary dealing with First Nations and anthropology can be confusing. Readers may come across words that they are unfamiliar with or see words used in unfamiliar ways. To help alleviate confusion, the book includes a glossary. Words in the glossary appear in bold in the text the first time they figure in a main discussion.

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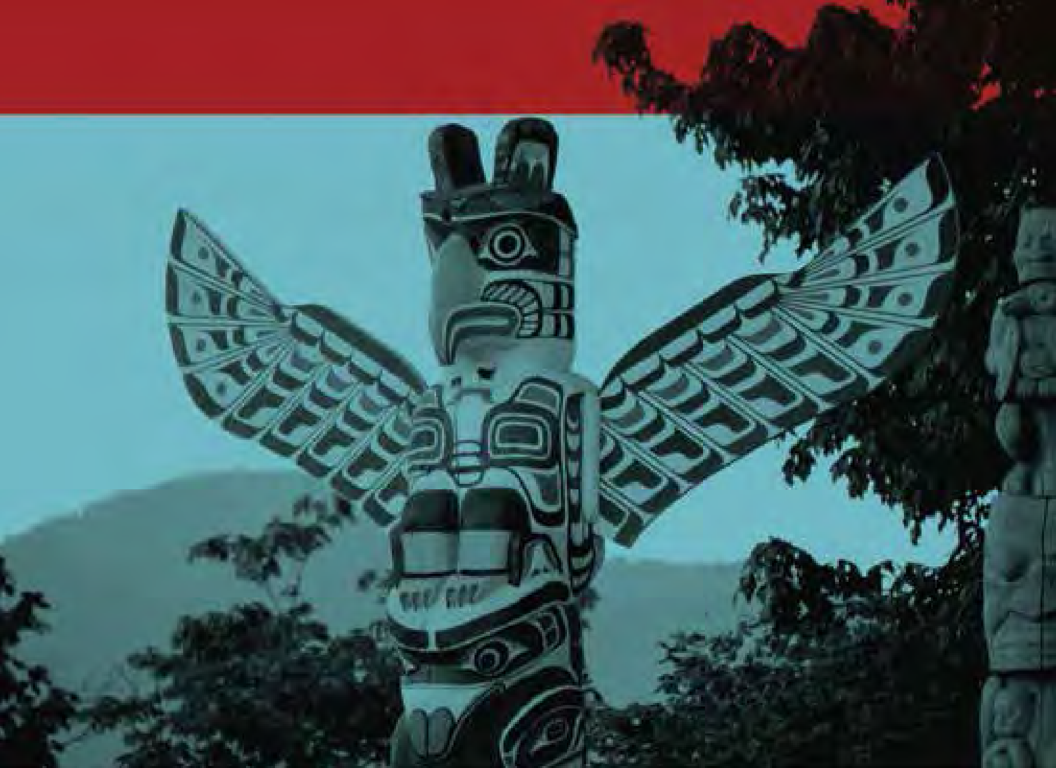

Part 1

Introducing First Nations, Popular Perceptions, and the Anthropological Perspective

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Popular Perceptions

Popular perceptions of **First Nations** in British Columbia vary immensely and depend very much on context. For many British Columbians as well as visitors to the province, art is what usually first comes to mind when thinking of First Nations. Totem poles and other forms of First Nations art are central themes of tourism marketing campaigns. First Nations public art abounds, including many kinds of art welcoming travellers at Vancouver International Airport, many placements of totem poles in public spaces throughout the province, and public displays in and around many museums, such as the Royal British Columbia Museum and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Of course, there are countless places selling First Nations tourist art, or kitsch, as well as galleries for connoisseurs of fine art and investors. The images in this part show art ranging from the historical and traditional styles used in totem poles and Bill Reid's sculptures to more modern, explicitly political works by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Sonny Assu.

Totem Poles

For many, totem poles are a symbol of First Nations in British Columbia. They are a common form of public art throughout the province, images of totems adorn many tourism ads, and miniatures (often manufactured outside the province) are a popular souvenir. Old totems remain, both fallen and standing, in First Nations communities up and down the coast, and new poles continue to be carved and raised as part of tourist attractions, at shopping malls and corporate offices, for museums and reconstructed heritage villages, as public art, and in First Nations communities. Although totem poles are now raised in many areas, traditionally they were restricted to coastal areas. The carving and raising of poles likely goes back thousands of years.

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Totem poles in British Columbia can be defined as large wooden poles, usually cedar, carved with images of animate beings. Some define totem poles to include a wide variety of wooden sculptures that may be attached to, or part of the actual structure of, buildings: items sometimes known as house poles or frontal poles, carved planks, grave figures, and welcome figures. A more narrow definition restricts them to free-standing carved poles.

Totem poles are primarily heraldic, rather than depicting gods or being objects of worship themselves. They often depict the crests of kinship groups, or a person's or group's encounter with a supernatural being. The images sometimes involve a transformation with characteristics of both human and animal forms.

As in other kinds of coastal First Nations art, the animals are depicted with certain identifying characteristics. Raven, for example, is always depicted with a straight beak, while Eagle's beak has a downturned tip. Thunderbird often has curled appendages on its head. Bear often has prominent teeth and large clawed feet, Frog has a wide toothless mouth, Wolf has a long snout, and Killer Whale has a dorsal fin.

Traditionally, totem poles were common in the communities of First Nations of the northern and central coastal regions. Poles on the north coast typically had few appendages and rather shallow carving. Poles on the central coast, on the other hand, often were deeply carved with pronounced features, and widely flaring wings were attached. The **Coast Salish** peoples, including those in the southwest portion of the province near Vancouver and surrounding areas, did not traditionally carve free-standing poles, although they produced many other forms of wood sculpture.

Because totem poles were not carved simply for aesthetic reasons, their full meaning is often lost outside of the First Nations culture that created them. Totem poles are intricately linked with other aspects of First Nations cultures: they commemorate important events and people, document histories, validate political and social positions, visualize myths, and assert rights and identity. Replicas made for mass-market sale as tourist items and images used by non-First Nations businesses raise concerns about authenticity and **cultural appropriation** for some First Nations.

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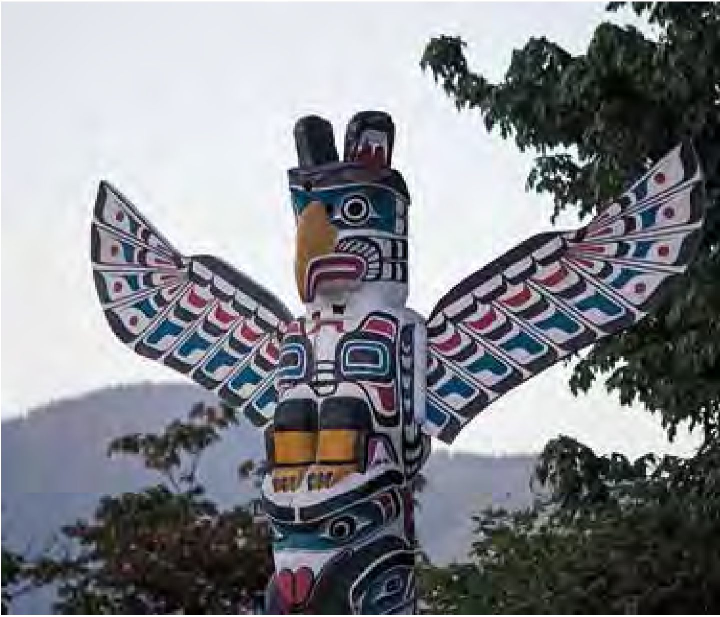

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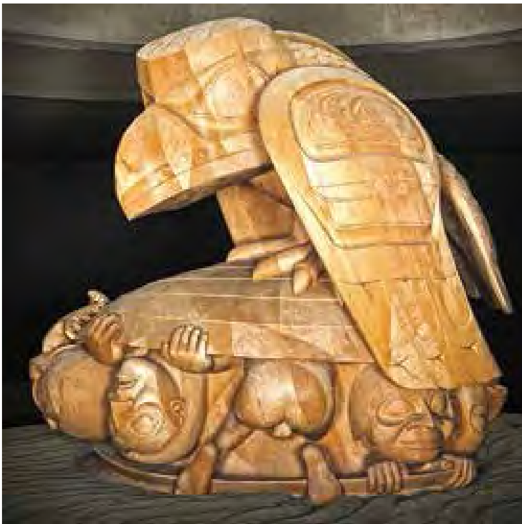
Counterclockwise, from top:

Totem poles are among the most visible and well-known representations of First Nations of British Columbia, often used to promote tourism and situated in public places. This is the top of one of several totem poles in Vancouver's Stanley Park, and depicts Thunderbird. Although carvers were traditionally male, this pole was originally carved by Kwakwaka'wakw member Ellen Neel in the 1950s and later refurbished by her son Robert Neel. *Courtesy of Matthew Chursinoff*

The Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Jade Canoe. This sculpture by Bill Reid is located at the Vancouver airport. Public displays of First Nations art are common within and beyond the borders of British Columbia. This sculpture is a different casting of *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Black Canoe,* which sits outside the Canadian embassy in Washington, DC. *Courtesy of Gillian Crowther*

The Raven and the First Men. This sculpture by Bill Reid illustrates a Haida origin myth. Carved in yellow cedar and on display at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, the sculpture tells the story of how Raven, a prominent character in First Nations myths, coaxed the first Haida out of a giant clamshell. *Photo by Jessica Bushey. Nb1.481, courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, Canada*



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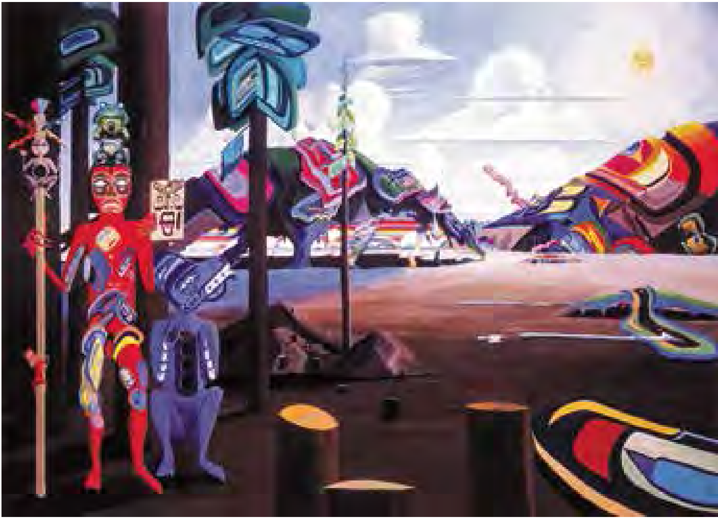
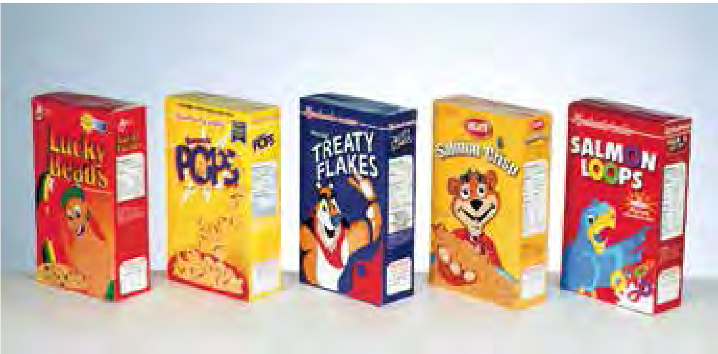


Scorched Earth, Clear-Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix. Painting by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (1991). *Reproduced with the permission of the artist and the National Gallery of Canada*



Breakfast Series, 2006. A series of cereal boxes by Sonny Assu, reflecting a fusion of traditional First Nations design with popular culture and clever commentary on colonialism. *Image courtesy of the artist and the Equinox Gallery. © Sonny Assu. Photo by Chris Meier*

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It isn't uncommon for First Nations to be characterized by stereotypes. Popular negative stereotypes include the drunken Indian, the lazy Indian, the violent Indian, and the noble savage. Other stereotypes include whiners, complainers, the rich Indian, and the corporate Indian. As most people know, or should know, stereotypes are a dangerous thing, especially stereotypes based on ignorance and misconceptions. Such perceptions of First Nations are often perpetuated by people, corporations, and governments with ulterior motives. For example, governments may benefit from negative stereotypes that perpetuate a culture of dependency by First Nations on government. Similarly, organizations in resource development may benefit from stereotypes of First Nations as impediments to progress.

The Imaginary Indian, the Textbook Indian, and Chief Dan George

A considerable scholarly literature exists on the images of the Native peoples of North America, including the First Nations of British Columbia. *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture,* by Daniel Francis (2nd ed., Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011) outlines several popular perceptions, images, and stereotypes: the noble savage, the vanishing Indian, performing Indians, celebrity Indians, aggressive and bloodthirsty Indians, the spiritual Indian, the environmental Indian, and the cigar store Indian. To these can be added the lazy Indian, the drunken Indian, the angry Indian, and many more, including the relatively recent corporate Indian.

These stereotypes and images are constructed and maintained largely by non-First Nations people, sometimes simply through ignorance, but often with self-interested motives. As motives change, so do the popular stereotypes. In the early years of European interaction with First Nations, such as during the fur trade, the stereotypes and images were usually positive; First Nations people were accommodating hosts, excellent traders, and noble. When people of European descent began coming to British Columbia in significant numbers to seek gold

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and lands to settle, goals for which First Nations were largely viewed as a hindrance, the stereotypes began to turn negative, in a sense rationalizing the appropriation of lands and resources from the First Nations.

Relatively few British Columbians learn much about First Nations in their schooling. When First Nations are included in the curriculum, stereotypes often remain the norm. In recent years, many British Columbians have been asking why they were not made aware of the atrocities of the **residential school** system, for example. It is an excellent question.

In an article called "Colonizing Minds: Public Education, the 'Textbook Indian,' and Settler Colonialism in British Columbia, 1920-1970" (*BC Studies* 169 [2011]: 101-30), Sean Carleton addresses the representation of First Nations in BC school curriculum. He states, "Authorized textbooks were one tool used by the state to school children in the logic and legitimacy of settler colonialism" (109). The article illustrates how First Nations have been depicted as animal-like, inferior to Europeans, and having a violent disposition, images that reinforce government policies of assimilation and separation to **reserves**.

Carleton identifies Chief Dan George, a member of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation and well-known activist and actor, as among the first to challenge racist stereotyping and textbooks as an important source of colonial power. As part of a celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Canadian Confederation in 1967, Chief Dan George spoke a "Lament for Confederation" that said, in part: "Oh Canada, I am sad for all the Indian people throughout the land ... When I fought to protect my land and my home, I was called a savage. When I was neither understood nor welcomed his way of life, I was called lazy ... My nation was ignored in your history textbooks" (101).

Fortunately, there have been improvements in recent years. The BC Ministry of Education now provides some good resources for educators, and has published a secondary school textbook called *B.C. First Nations Studies* by Kenneth Campbell, Charles Menzies, and Brent Peacock (Victoria: BC Ministry of Education, 2003). But based on the stereotypes and images still perpetuated among many non-First Nations people, there remains a long way to go.

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Misconceptions about First Nations peoples and **cultures** are also common. Popular misconceptions are that all First Nations people receive free housing and postsecondary education, and don't have to pay taxes. Other common perceptions are that First Nation cultures are inferior to Euro-Canadian ways, that people of European descent know what is best for First Nations, that with the adoption of modern technologies First Nations cultures cease to exist, and that although First Nations may claim they are trying to protect their land and resources, what they really want is money. The short answers are no, not all First Nations people receive free housing, free postsecondary education, and tax exemptions; First Nations cultures are in no way inferior to other cultures; people of European descent do not necessarily know what is best for First Nations; First Nations cultures remain distinct, even with the adoption of modern technology; and First Nations seeking to protect lands and resources are usually sincere.

Through the Lens of Anthropology

This book has an explicitly anthropological perspective. It draws on information from First Nations, provincial and federal governments, and other academic disciplines, but at its core, it is anthropological. **Anthropology** is the organizing framework used here to choose, describe, and discuss information from various sources. The book is structured around key areas of anthropological interest such as **prehistory**, traditional lifeways, languages, the processes and repercussions of **colonialism**, assertions of rights, and cultural appropriation.

An anthropological perspective also means that a few basic premises underlie the work, namely that (1) understanding contemporary cultures is dependent on knowing their past, (2) all aspects of culture are related, meaning that a change in one element of culture will inevitably cause changes in

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other aspects of cultures as well, and (3) there are multiple ways of adapting to circumstances and no one way is necessarily better than another. In other words, (1) a good understanding of contemporary First Nations peoples, cultures, and issues is dependent on knowledge of those cultures over the past several thousand years, (2) First Nations technology, diet, economic systems, social and political structures, ideology, and art are all intricately connected, and (3) European and Euro-Canadian ways are not necessarily what is best for First Nations.

Anthropology is broadly defined as the study of humans. This includes humans of the past as well as the present, and it includes the study of both human cultures and human biology. A core concept in anthropology is culture, which may be defined as the learned and shared things that people have, think, and do. The things that people have are physical, such as houses, clothes, tools, and jewellery. The things that people think are commonly referred to as ideology, and include beliefs, values, and morals. The things that people do are what many consider customs or behaviour.

All societies have culture. Major components of culture include subsistence, settlement patterns, technology, communication, economic systems, social systems, political systems, ideology, and art. In British Columbia today, there are many distinct First Nations cultures, most easily inferred by different languages, but also by differences in other elements of culture as well.

One important thing to know about cultures is that things, ideas, and behaviours are constantly changing, because no culture evolves in isolation. Core structures, ideology, and other aspects often remain central, however, meaning that First Nations can adopt technologies, behaviours, and ideologies from other people and still maintain their First Nation culture. This is explored more fully in Part 6.

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The four main branches of anthropology are **archaeology**, **cultural anthropology**, **linguistic anthropology**, and **biological anthropology**. In British Columbia, archaeology is primarily focused on documenting the physical evidence of human activities in the region before the arrival of Europeans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The nature of archaeology and the results of archaeological research are the focus of Part 3. Cultural anthropology focuses on traditional lifeways and contemporary cultures. Linguistic anthropology involves the study of languages, and biological anthropology is the study of human biological characteristics.

Anthropology emerged as a professional discipline globally in the 1800s, and British Columbia became a focus of attention for many anthropologists in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Some came primarily to collect **artifacts** for museums and private collections, which is why some of the finest examples of First Nations objects are in the British Museum in London, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and other museums around the world.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s British Columbia became what some have referred to as the most "anthropologized" area of the world. Whether the area does indeed qualify as one of the most anthropologized areas is subject to debate, but substantial research was certainly undertaken. Since the area was the last in North America to have been directly influenced by Europeans, many anthropologists studied the First Nations under the guise of what is known as **salvage ethnography**. Some anthropologists were specialized in one of the major subfields, but many were generalists. It was not uncommon, for example, for anthropologists to immerse themselves in a First Nation, learn the language, document

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traditional lifeways as described to them by people in the community, excavate **archaeological sites**, and measure the physical characteristics of individuals. In addition to collecting artifacts for museums, some anthropologists also excavated and collected human skeletal remains, and arranged for some First Nations people themselves to travel to Europe and fairs in the United States as a kind of living museum exhibit.

Despite some exceptions, relations between First Nations and anthropologists during the past 150 years have been reasonably good overall. However, anthropology has been criticized as part of the colonialism that has been detrimental to First Nations, and many First Nations people throughout North America had little use for anthropologists. This feeling was articulated most eloquently by Native American scholar Vine Deloria Jr. in a 1969 piece called "Anthropologists and Other Friends," of which the following is a short excerpt:

> Into each life, it is said, some rain must fall … But Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists … The massive volume of useless knowledge produced by anthropologists … has contributed substantially to the invisibility of Indian people today … it would be wise for anthropologists to get down from their thrones of authority and PURE research and begin helping Indian tribes instead of preying on them.

Around the same time, Native American musician and activist Floyd Red Crow Westerman recorded a song called "Here Come the Anthros," which included the lyrics

> *And the Anthros still keep on coming*
> *Like Death and Taxes to Our Land;*
> *To study their feathered freaks*
> *With funded money in their hand.*

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Overview of the Book

Part 2 brings some clarification to the often confusing terminology associated with First Nations in the province. A key theme is what constitutes First Nation identity. The part distinguishes the meaning of labels such as **Aboriginal**, **Indian**, **Indigenous**; provides basic data on population and reserves; and puts the First Nations of British Columbia into the larger context of Indigenous peoples in Canada, across North America, and globally.

Part 3 focuses on the nature of archaeological research in British Columbia and the conclusions that can be drawn from 50,000 recorded archaeological sites and millions of known artifacts spanning the last 10,000 years or more in the province. The part also includes sections on the legislation governing archaeology, some of the most significant sites, and tracing ancestry through archaeological sites, artifacts, and DNA.

Life immediately before the arrival of Europeans in the region is the focus of Part 4. The core elements of culture, sometimes known as traditional lifeways, are described as they are known or assumed to have existed in the late 1700s. The descriptions include general overviews of the cultures in three major regions of the province – the coastal area, the southern interior, and the northern interior. The part also covers estimates of the First Nations population prior to the arrival of Europeans and the diversity of First Nations languages.

Part 5 covers the period from the late 1700s to the end of the twentieth century, focusing on the impacts of fur traders, gold seekers, missionaries, settlers, and government officials on First Nations peoples and cultures. The part also includes sections on residential schools; government policies, practices, and acts; resistance by First Nations; major court challenges, the beginning of modern treaty negotiations, and the nature of anthropological research in the late twentieth century.

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First Nations in the twenty-first century are the focus of Part 6. Sections include an overview of some of the basic realities of contemporary First Nations life (as reflected in census and survey data); modern treaty negotiations; economic and cultural initiatives; major issues within First Nation communities and between First Nations and non-First Nations populations; and the nature of current anthropological work with First Nations.

Recommended Readings and Resources

For more information on totem poles, the following are recommended: *Totem Poles: An Illustrated Guide*, by Marjorie Halpin (Vancouver: UBC Press and the UBC Museum of Anthropology, 1981), *The Totem Poles of Stanley Park*, by Vickie Jensen (Vancouver: Westcoast Words, 2009), *The Totem Pole: An Intercultural History* by Aldona Jonaitis and Aaron Glass (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2010), and *Totem Poles*, by Hilary Stewart (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990).

Good books on perceptions, stereotypes, and images of Indigenous peoples in North America include *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, by Daniel Francis (2nd ed., Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), *Playing Indian* by Philip Deloria (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), and *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, by Robert Berkhofer Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1978). Sean Carleton's "Colonizing Minds: Public Education, the 'Textbook Indian,' and Settler Colonialism in British Columbia, 1920-1970" is in *BC Studies* 169 (2011), 101-30. *B.C. First Nations Studies*, by Kenneth Campbell, Charles Menzies, and Brent Peacock (Victoria: BC Ministry of Education, 2003) is a secondary school textbook.

Vine Deloria Jr. is perhaps the best-known Indigenous critic of anthropology. His piece "Anthropologists and Other

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Friends" is a chapter in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, first published in 1969 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press).

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