

Culture



**Julie CRUIKSHANK, *Reading Voices: Dan dha ts'edentth'e*,
Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991, 158
pages**

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Julie CRUIKSHANK, *Reading Voices: Dan dha ts'edentth'e*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991, 158 pages.

By Derek G. Smith
Carleton University

Julie Cruikshank's *Reading Voices* was prepared in conjunction with the Council for Yukon Indians, the Yukon Department of Education and the Yukon Teacher's Association, who together established a working committee to collaborate with the author in the preparation of materials. The book was written in response to a felt need by Yukon First Nations peoples for texts inscribing Yukon First Nations histories that would give priority to the voices of First Nations Peoples. Their voices are certainly present in Cruikshank's work, and rightly have priority of place; but her voice is not (and cannot) be absent.

A committee of six elders reviewed the first draft of the work. Their suggestions were incorporated in the final draft. In a real sense, therefore, this work by an outstanding Canadian anthropologist is truly collaborative, and gives priority to First Nations voices. It provides a splendid opportunity to reflect on the role of the anthropologist in collaborative community-directed ethnographic projects and on "reflexive ethnography", although the book engages in none of the posibilities commonly associated with such reflections. The elders involved emphasized firstly the "continuing importance of words" (p. 8) (the value of long-standing oral traditions), and secondly of *things* ("the visible material heritage") (p. 8). Their hope was to provide Yukon young people with instruction in both, by cultural transmission in a new way, indeed (my words) of *catechesis* in the ways and values of their heritage. The medium for this transmission, in oral tradition of the past and present now made accessible in print, is "stories", that wonderfully burdened word of peoples of the North.

The book is arranged in eight sections, each with a brief passage by Cruikshank, consisting of "stories" (historical and mythical narratives, songs, accompanied by poems, photographs from archival and contemporary sources, extracts from published works as well as diaries and letters of outsiders, maps and diagrams, etc.). Section 1 reflects on oral tradition

from a Yukon point of view; section 2 with climate and geology; section 3 with the time before written records; section 4 compares and contrasts what oral and written records can tell by noting the inconsistencies, lapses, and differences of accounts of events in this century. Section 5 deals with the fur trade period; sections 6 and 7 with the first major influx of outsiders in the Yukon gold rush and how this event is understood by Native peoples and outsiders; section 8 reflects briefly on the varieties of history and its narration.

Alongside the main block of narrative on each page is a column in smaller print providing exceptions, references, comments, brief technical explanations, thoughtful quotes, small sketches, and references. The effect is to problematize the clichés of linear authoritative texts and creates thoughtful (I would say contemplative) dialogue between various points of views. I admire this simple, effective textual strategy very much.

Cruikshank's own narrative presents technical terms and concepts as well as her own understanding of historical narratives. Her generally brief commentary is interwoven with Native peoples' narratives and other materials. She too tells a "story" — unaffected, modest, and *very* engaging. The overall tone of this truly elegant book is that of a contemplative dialogue.

There are some problems in presentation. For example, there is almost a simplistic essentialism in some characterization of traders, gold seekers, explorers, missionaries, and other outsiders. It is really difficult to capture the range of intentions and motivations of outsiders in the frontier North. I am certain that Cruikshank is as aware of this as anyone. It is really time, however, for anthropologists to tackle the problematic representations implied by such assertions as "traders had little interest in changing the cultures of northern peoples" (p. 102), despite massive disintegrative changes introduced by the fur trade and mercantile monopolies in the North and by the deliberate cultural manipulation of traders wishing to ensure that as much time was spent in trapping for trade as in hunting for subsistence. Assertions that "missionaries... came to the Yukon with a clear assignment to change Native peoples" (p. 102), that "Christian theology during this period was concerned with fixed meanings" (p. 102), obscure immense differences among missionaries in background, temperament, theology, religious denomination, social class, nationality, and

social ideology. Many were arguably as marginal in the North as at home. Marginality likely provided an incentive for many to enter mission work or to go North in the first place. Native peoples were in a position to know such marginal people as well as anyone. Stories of them are an integral part of the oral tradition of Native peoples, as Cruikshank herself has shown. These often astute accounts reflect the *complexity* of northern frontier communities and motivations of frontier people.

This is an arresting and exciting book, with much to admire. It is thoughtful, compassionate, focused in intention, effective in presentation, and goes a long way to achieve the Yukon elders' goals. I was *moved* by it, by the experience of 'reading the voices', and by the evidence of such caring collaboration in research and preparation.

David NEEL, *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992, 192 pages, 60 duotone photographs, \$35.95 (hard-cover).

By Derek G. Smith
Carleton University

Neel's book is a handsome essay in black-and-white photographs made by Neel between 1988 and 1991 of British Columbia Native chiefs and elders. These are accompanied by verbatim edited transcriptions of statements by those whose portraits appear in the book.

The statements appear in the first part of the book (pp. 11-120), the photographs in the second (pp. 121-183). Statements range from brief paragraphs to several pages, recording a variety of things: traditional oral history; experiences in the Canadian armed forces and in politics; thoughts about the potlatch and the renewal of Native spirituality; the activities of police and missionaries; the pain of poverty and political oppression; reflections on celebrations and victories; and cries of pain about residential schools.

My constant craving was to hear more (some of the statements are so brief), to have a much clearer sense of how the tellers were situated in their social contexts, and to have a more immediate connection between words and photographs.

The photographic portraits of the second part are *stunning* — sometimes emotional, often monumental in grace and dignity, almost always memorable. Many of the subjects are represented first by a photograph in everyday activities and dress, and second by a (usually more formal) portrait in traditional dress or ceremonial regalia. This almost invariable order is problematic too. Neel has a loving and compassionate gaze for his subjects, especially visible in the portraits in traditional regalia. This tends to attract the eye of the reader more emphatically and frequently (clearly intentionally) but detracts from significant representations of people in their day-to-day lives.

There is a perceptive sense of inner character, of dignity and "presence" in subjects lovingly seen and caringly portrayed by a fine artist. Many of the portraits admit the reader to very private moments between photographer and subject. I truly admire Neel's capacity to share these moments without a sense of privacy violated or trust betrayed. It produces powerful images.

While there are difficulties in the book's arrangement, which could have been much more adventurous, one sympathizes with the difficulty inherent in such presentations. Placing verbal material first and visual material second establishes a peculiar emphasis on verbal statements (some rather ephemeral, perhaps), a peculiar contrast to the monumental and enduring sense of many of the portraits. The opposite arrangement could have been equally possible.

Neel's arrangement is intended to emphasize oral tradition. For this reason too the texts "appear as unedited as possible" (p. 11) — fair enough, but many of the statements could either have been yet more judiciously edited for publication, or more fully presented. It would have been possible to offer the portraits (or even more of them) and the statements (considerably lengthened and more deliberately edited as valuable pieces of life-writing) in a more deliberately interwoven presentation so as to maintain their connection.

This is a *very* beautiful book to look at, to touch, and to contemplate — a splendid celebration of the artist's kindly view of his own Native leaders. Its anthropological value is that it blends visual image and word (if somewhat awkwardly in my estimation), provides valuable life-writing by Native persons, and asks us to examine some of the priorities