

Book Review

Christopher Bracken

The Potlach Papers: A Colonial Case History,
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Gananath Obeyesekere

The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

The delights of voyeurism are there for all to see. Or, maybe not. It may depend on what object excites the gaze, or what gaze excites the subject. For me, almost nothing is as ambrosial as a good knock-down, drag-out, intellectual squabble, complete with obscure argument, esoteric evidence, professional snipes, personal scorn, withering wit and risible ripostes all flung in the interest of some smashing important principle.

This admission will win me few points from those who cherish sweetness and seek to disarm antagonists whatever the issue, but I cannot help myself. I would have loved to have been at the canonical version of the 1860 Oxford summer encounter between Bishop Wilberforce and T. H. Huxley over who was truly a monkey's uncle or to have witnessed William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow's likewise fictitious 1925 Rhea County Court House scrap over the teaching practices of a small-town science teacher named Scopes. Turning to what poses for reality, I have loved following the actual thrust and parry over topics as diverse as "big bang" versus "steady state" cosmology or fossil versus Mitochondrial DNA evidence for the study of human origins, and I remain enchanted by the debates Richard Dawkins stirred up about the purportedly "selfish gene" or that Steve Pinker has more recently provoked about the putative human "language instinct."

I, of course, claim little if any expertise in these matters; however, I know that they do profoundly matter and that the resolution of these and other questions about the nature of the living and the non-living universe, what Jung called *creatura* and *pleroma*, are crucial to the understanding of the most important philosophical issues with which the human mind is equipped to deal. So, it is not out of a sense of loss arising from the political incorrectness of contact sport but rather out of a belief that truth is best pursued in open contest that causes me to honor hard-fought debate among people for whom the notion of truth retains some salience.

What is more, deep philosophical questions (the meaning of life and all that) aside, academic disputes are rarely merely academic: they can have momentous implications for practical problems of public policy. Take, for example, aboriginal self-government. For centuries, native peoples in Canada (and almost everywhere else) have endured a relationship with European colonists in which power relations were, generously speaking, asymmetrical. Although stories differ according to place and time, it is fair to say that the majority of "first Canadians" have been subjected to social, economic, political and personal discrimination that

has, in some cases, amounted to physical extermination (famously the Beothuk) and at least attempted cultural genocide. In the past few decades, though, some victories have been won by native peoples in the official political and, perhaps more importantly, the official judicial systems. Aboriginal rights have been affirmed. Native issues have gained some support from "liberal" non-natives. Nunavut has been proclaimed. The future, if not unequivocally bright, seems at least not unendurably baneful.

So, what remains to be done? As a non-native who counts among his proudest public moments sharing a speaker's platform with Kahn-Tineta Horn (so much for objectivity!), I suggest that there is much left to do. After all, almost every encounter between native and non-native societies exists mainly in the language and the historical interpretation of the Europeans. As a consequence, even when legal games are won by native peoples, the rules of those games are defined outside traditional native cultures and can be unilaterally changed if native peoples win too much or too often. Serious work needs to be done by non-native Canadians to learn about the language rules that have been imposed upon native people from outside. Only then will the cultural assumptions of non-native Canada be laid bare, the rhetoric of the authoritative political discourse exposed, and the path to mutual respect opened.

Where to begin? For the time being, the starting points are remote, difficult and obscure - but they exist. One lies in the understanding of a furious debate about some magical islands that were once far away: Hawaii.

For about fifteen years, Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere have been "at it" on the subject of what happened to Captain James Cook in the third week of February, 1779. On one level, the answers are simple enough: Captain Cook was killed on the 14th, his body was dismembered and his bones were distributed to various Hawaiian chiefs on the 15th, and under threat of massive retaliation from the British navy, identifiable portions of Cook's flesh and some bones (possibly substituted) were returned and subsequently buried at sea.

What remains at issue is the "meaning" of the rather grisly tale. Was Cook thought by the Hawaiians to be an incarnation of their great god Lono and is his death best interpreted within the mythological structure of traditional Hawaiian religion? Or, put crassly, was Cook a fairly standard imperialist who broke one too many taboos and paid the price? Are there other explanations? Whatever the case may be (and we shall probably never know exactly who killed Cook nor for what precise reason), the subject certainly put Sahlins and Obeyesekere on a crash course. Sahlins supports the first version; Obeyesekere opposes it. Over the years Sahlins and others have characterized Obeyesekere's work as "absurd, blundering, misrepresentation pidgin anthropology" and accused Obeyesekere himself of proffering "kookie congeries of images," "spurious anthropological clichés," "pop nativism," "wholesale fabrications of Hawaiian ethnography" and a "stratified palimpsest of confusion and contradiction." More restrained in rebuttal, Obeyesekere has limited himself to charging Sahlins with "political and ethical insensitivity, authoritarianism, stonewalling," and behavior "very much like Cook with his 'stampings in the Deck in the paroxysms of passion...'" Heady stuff and certainly enough to attract my gaze!

Something serious is plainly at stake. In this new edition of his original 1992 publication, Obeyesekere includes a fascinating 57-page "Afterword" to the original 188-page text in which

he expounds eloquently on the dispute with Sahlins and explains carefully how it is no silly school-boy spat. The historical importance of Cook's death is largely to be found in the manner in which it has become interwoven in Hawaiian lore and the European version thereof. By deconstructing the notion that Captain Cook was idealized by the natives and made the object of a ritualized killing with its motivation in native pagan spiritualism, Obeyesekere has held the mirror of primitivism up to the European and demonstrated effectively that it is not the simple-minded savages but the enlightened travelers from across the sea who fabricated a mythological structure within which to understand the death of their heroic Cook. The apotheosis of Captain Cook is, according to Obeyesekere, an example of European mythmaking for European purposes, and those purposes are little different from the ones that inspired the images of Prospero and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Whose version will prevail is still open to question but this much is certain: traditional anthropology, which has helped to define and too often to attempt to justify the exploitative relations between colonials and natives throughout the world, is on the block for examination in this conflict as much or more than are the particulars of who made too much of the ill-fated Captain Cook.

Closer to home, anthropology has also been at the center of a longstanding dispute between colonials and native peoples along the coast of British Columbia. The issue there has been the "potlatch."

In *The Potlatch Papers*, Christopher Bracken has produced a dense and occasionally difficult text which, for those with the fortitude to stay with it, reveals a tale of misinterpretation somewhat broader than that which focused on James Cook. The potlatch has been a subject of controversy since soon after the unpleasantness in Hawaii. A ritual exchange of gifts and sometimes the conspicuous destruction of property among and by leaders in the relatively prosperous and hierarchically organized west coast tribes, it was found to be offensive to colonial clerics and administrators alike. Banned and driven underground, it was retained as part of native culture. Perceived by the Europeans as the wanton destruction of property and blamed for the poverty and moral degeneracy of the Indians, the potlatch was criminalized. In 1884, it was made an indictable offense and it remained so until 1918 when it was reduced to a summary offense not, as might be imagined, because potlatching was considered less detestable but because, as a summary offense, jury trials were not required and so prosecutions could be expedited.

Apart from the law, anthropologists played a significant role in ascribing meaning to the potlatch ceremony. The great Franz Boas, himself a victim of ethnic discrimination, a dedicated advocate of tolerance and a vocal opponent of the ban, nonetheless inadvertently contributed to the systematic colonial misinterpretation of the ceremony. Boas chose to explain the potlatch largely in economic terms as a ritualized method for redistributing income and, at the same time, a system for making interest-bearing investments (for those who received gifts were expected to repay them and more). As such, Boas regarded the potlatch to be not only pragmatic but wise. Fixing on the competitive interpretation but giving it a psychological "spin", Boas' student, the now equally famous Ruth Benedict, reworked the interpretation in the diagnostic language of psychology and declared that the practitioners of the potlatch displayed as a society the symptoms of paranoid megalomania. The native people's fixation on power, status and property seemed to her to approximate a kind of group psychosis. As she wrote in her 1934 classic,

Patterns of Culture, "the object of all Kwakiutl enterprise was to show oneself superior to one's rivals." This she considered to be a species of collective madness.

Christopher Bracken has tirelessly assembled and attentively analyzed government documents, diaries, letters, missionary reports and anthropological analyses in an elegantly argued narrative which demonstrates, as effectively as Obeyesekere did with respect to the Cook-Lono myth, that the allegedly pathological potlatch ritual was largely "invented by the nineteenth-century Canadian law that sought to destroy it." Mythmaking by the colonial again emerges as the core of the story.

Bracken's exposition is not always easy. He fashions his theoretical instruments from a variety of sources not always easily appreciated by less abstruse Canadian minds. Thus, a cursory knowledge of Martin Heidegger's treatment of language and Jacques Derrida's contemporary philosophy of deconstruction would do the reader no harm. Still, Bracken is sufficiently accessible to ensure that those unschooled in European theories of communication and meaning need not be timid, and their efforts will surely be rewarded.

If nothing else, non-native readers of either book will come away a little more humble. It will be apparent that even the most well-intended experts and functionaries who were entrusted with the oversight of Indian affairs most likely "just didn't get it." At the root of all conflict and, for that matter, all attempts at cooperation between native and non-native peoples has been a systematic rhetorical structure of misinterpretation. Even more critical is the recognition that mythmaking, which the colonial assumes to be primarily an activity of non-western societies, is equally prolific in historical and contemporary non-native thought. The current myth of globalization, itself merely the latest instance in what Thurman Arnold famously called the "folklore of capitalism," is but one of many tales we tell ourselves in the attempt to make sense of the world. It should be unsurprising, then, to discover that it was European hagiography and not Hawaiian superstition that made a god of Captain Cook and European blindness to the mirror image of their own commodity fetishism that made a pathology of the potlatch.

Only the most thorough and sustained process of self-examination will disclose other myths and only such a disclosure will do as a precondition to truly salutary innovations which might allow future good relations to flourish.

About the author:

Howard A. Doughty: Faculty of Applied Arts and Health Sciences, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology, 13990 Dufferin Street, King City, Ontario, Canada L7B 1B3