

People of the Lakes: Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich'in Elders/Googwandak Nakhwach'ànjòo Van Tat Gwich'in

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Book Reviews

PEOPLE OF THE LAKES: STORIES OF OUR VAN TAT GWICH'IN ELDERS/GOOGWANDAK NAKHWACH'ANJÖÖ VAN TAT GWICH'IN. By Vuntut Gwichin First Nation and Shirleen Smith. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: The University of Alberta Press, 2009. lxii + 391 pp. Maps, color and black and white illustrations, notes, glossary (Gwich'in-English, English-Gwich'in), bibliography, index. \$34.95 Canadian (softcover). ISBN 978-0-88864-505-0.

The name *Gwich'in* means “people of the land.” The Gwich'in are the northernmost First Nations people, who currently live in small villages extending across vast areas including northeast Alaska, the northern Yukon, and the northwest corner of the Canadian Northwest Territories. Oral tradition suggests that the Gwich'in have lived in these areas for millennia. Gwich'in belongs to the Athapaskan language group, one of the main language groups of indigenous peoples of North America (for a language map, see <http://www.ynlc.ca/languages/index.html#ynlmap>). The people of the Yukon Gwich'in community of Old Crow call themselves the *Van Tat Gwich'in*, or “people who live among the lakes,” in reference to the lakes of the Crow Flats area. This wetland area, 6170 square km in size (2382 square miles), was designated a wetland of international importance by the Ramsar Convention in 1982¹. The Old Crow Flats area is also an exceptionally rich archaeological site.

The book, *PEOPLE OF THE LAKES*, arose out of a project to preserve the oral tales of the Gwich'in peoples. In January 1999, a community meeting was held in Old Crow, Yukon. Present that evening were Van Tat Gwich'in elders, community members, Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation (VGFN), Heritage Manager Megan Williams, and anthropologists Shirleen Smith and Muriel Nagy. It was agreed that stories should be preserved from all of the Gwich'in territories; that records that had been gathered in the past should be brought back to Old Crow; and that current elders should be interviewed as soon as possible. The primary goal of this exercise was to preserve the history and knowledge of the elders for future generations. The current generation of elders was the last to live entirely off the land, and they wanted their experiences to be passed down to the youth. Furthermore, the elders had known adversity in the past, and they were sure that difficult times would come again. The young people could learn from the knowledge and experience of the elders. With regard to this project, the Van Tat Gwich'in were also adamant that they would conduct and take part in as much of the project as they could themselves; it was primarily for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of outside researchers.

In order to further these aims, the Van Tat Gwich'in Oral History Project was conducted by community members from Old Crow from 1999 to 2004, followed by the Van Tat Gwich'in Cultural Geography Project (2004–2007). The collection of stories that has resulted is extremely valuable, and may be termed a cultural treasure. The stories are drawn from several generations of Van Tat Gwich'in who were born between the 1880s and the

1980s. The histories they relate reflect not only their own experiences, but also those of their own elders, and thus span almost the entirety of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to simply documenting events, in particular the changes that occurred after the coming of the white settlers, the stories also reflect the perspectives of the Gwich'in peoples with regard to these comparatively recent events. The histories also encompass mythological and supernatural tales of “long ago.”

The book begins with an introduction to Gwich'in oral history, which provides an illuminating context for the rest of the book. It also contains several examples of what are perhaps little-known facts in the history of indigenous-white relations. One such account illustrates the kindness and generosity of the Gwich'in peoples. The years around the Second World War were times of prosperity in the Crow Flats area due primarily to the high value of furs (e.g., muskrat, marten, mink, lynx, and fox). Subsequently, a Gwich'in chief named Peter Moses collected a sizeable donation to assist children in England who had become orphans as a result of the war. He later received a British Empire medal in recognition of this altruistic act.

As new interviews were being conducted for the Oral History and Cultural Geography projects, and previously recorded interviews assembled, a number of themes and a chronological framework were identified. After the Introduction, four main time periods are represented, and these form the background to the four main chapters of the book. They are: (1) “Long-ago” Stories; (2) The First Generation—The 19th Century; (3) The Second Generation—The Early 20th Century; and (4) The Oral History of Today.

The stories in the “Long-ago” chapter reflect explanations of the natural and social worlds, as well as exploits of legendary heroes and ancestors, both couched in a supernatural framework, in addition to general myths, sacred narratives, and secular folktales. The time period covers ancient times up to the time of early contact with Europeans at the beginning of the 19th century. The different sections are entitled: The Natural World; Supernatural Exploits; Legendary Figures; Stories of Heroic Roles and Archetypes; and Long-ago History.

Stories of early encounters with Europeans are included in the category of long-ago stories. The story of Tl'oo Thał or “Grass Pants” is a humorous story of such an encounter, and illustrates the confusion that may be engendered by different culinary practices.

Many times my dad told stories but I don't remember all of them. A long time ago the first white people came down the Yukon River in a wooden boat. At that time people around here had never seen a white person before.

It was Tl'oo Thał, “Grass Pants”. He went down to the river. He had a fire along the river when the white people came down in wooden boats. ... When the white people arrived, Tl'oo Thał was afraid. He had never seen people like this before. Then the people lived on ground squirrel, caribou, moose and small game. Tl'oo Thał did not know of any other food besides meat. The white people poured flour; he said it looked like *cheezrilchit* (ashes). ... The mixed flour was cooked in the black pan with a long handle.

¹ For information on designated Ramsar wetlands, see <http://www.ramsar.org/>.

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When rice was poured into the pot, he didn't know what it was. He thought it was *daatsoo trin* (mouse droppings), and then they put raisins in the rice. He said it looked like *ddhab dee* (mountain berries). All this food was cooked. The bannock was served with yellow grease on it. The mouse poop with raisins was given to him. He was told to eat it. He was afraid so he ate it all (p. 56).

The second chapter of the book, "The First Generation—The 19th Century," describes a time when, although radical change was beginning, there was a backdrop of continuity as life was still lived primarily according to the old ways. The stories in this chapter are grouped around two main sections. The first is entitled: "Life Lived from the Land," and encompasses such topics as travel, hunting, and fishing; caribou; the seasons; tools and techniques; values; relations with neighbors; leaders; and celebration and music. The second is: "Newcomers and New Things" and includes topics such as Gwich'in long distance traders; the Hudson's Bay Company; new tools; private traders; beliefs and missionaries; education and schools; and the settlement of Old Crow. The emphasis in this chapter is on how people made a living without recourse to goods bought from a store. It highlights the ingenuity of people who lived in the past and describes, among other things, the techniques for boiling meat without kettles; washing without soap and cloths; making drinking vessels; preserving food; making fire with flint; making clothing and tents with skins; making snares and fishhooks; making knives of caribou bone or stone; and making birchbark canoes. The accounts also emphasize the fact that, although times were hard, people helped each other, and that enabled them to survive. Paradoxically, while life was more difficult in many ways before the arrival of Europeans, it was also easier in others, not least because there were also many more people before the Europeans brought unfamiliar and devastating diseases.

In the winter all the people travelled together. The leader came with us; he told us what to do. All the people worked together as one. It was really good. All the people did what the leader wanted; they listened to the leader. When we killed caribou, the meat was given out to everybody. The people who killed the caribou were not the boss of the meat. It was good this way. Any small animal that was killed was for all the people. And when we travelled, if there was an old man or old woman, we took care of them. They couldn't hunt so we took care of them. That was how they lived. And people worked together (p. 61).

Stories in the third chapter, "The Second Generation—The Early 20th Century," come from people who were born primarily in the early 1900s. They were interviewed from the 1980s up to the time of the compilation of this book. The main sections in this chapter are: "Hard Work and Prosperity," "Neighbours, Newcomers and Visitors," and "Events and Trends." The topics covered in the first section are hunting, trapping, and trading; the Crow Flats area as it used to be; and the nearby mountains and other features of the landscape. The second section focuses on the Inuvait people in the Crow Flats area, white trappers and other visitors, and ministers and the Church. The third section focuses on the effects of the border with Alaska, some specific anecdotes, and endurance and change.

Most of the people belonging to the generation represented in this chapter spoke Van Tat Gwich'in as their first language. In their lifetimes they saw tremendous changes. In the early part of their lives people still made their living primarily from hunting and trapping, and most of their food (meat, fish, berries, plants) and

their heat (firewood) was acquired by their own efforts. They were still traveling across the breadth of the traditional lands. Towards the latter part of their lives much food came from the store rather than from hunting, and they remained in one place for the greater part of the year. There were similar changes all over Canada as, in the 1950s, the government introduced a number of social programs and benefits which required First Nations people to give up their nomadic way of life and to move to permanent settled communities. Part of the rationale for this was the idea that children must attend school, and hence their families must be living in one place. There was also a drive to consolidate smaller communities with larger ones. Consequently, a recurring theme of the accounts given by this generation is the difference in the way people live in the present, compared to the way they lived in the past (p. 161). However, they also emphasized that, until relatively recently, there was not much food to be had at the trading posts, so people were still very dependent on the traditional activities of hunting, fishing, gathering, and trapping. The major changes seem to have come around the middle of the 20th century. Up until that time, drying meat and fish was a major economic activity.

When it was hard times people would come here to Van Tat for small animals. There were lots of rabbits and ducks, too. That's why people would come here to Van Tat. Fish, they made ... fish traps and put those in the water and fished. That is the way our elders made their living long ago. From not that long ago, we also did that ourselves (p.176).

It's like this: that's why from the beginning of time, they took the kids around (on the land). It would be a big help. Long ago, our fathers told us all this. They went with us children on the land; we travelled all around. That's how we know the land (p. 177).

Before that there was no school, so the first year (there was) going to be school (1950) that's when Whitestone and Johnson Creek Village, all those people moved down here (to Old Crow). Since then, nobody goes back there. Just once in a while some winter we go up there trapping, while (the children) go to school. The mothers have to stay home and look after the kids. They go to school today yet. That's how we left the country (p. 246).

The relationship between the Gwich'in people and the European trappers and settlers and later the Canadian government appears to have been more harmonious than many other meetings of different cultures in Canada and in the United States. However, that there was some resentment on the part of the Gwich'in is clear.

[There] used to be lots of white men fool around that place, lots of them ... They stole the country in those days. They used that medicine – poison. They bugger up the country (for the) last 40 years. (It's) getting good now. Everything died off. They spoiled that country so they won't let no white men fool around there no more now (p. 227).

However, there were also many white trappers who married into the community, and who were well regarded by the Gwich'in. One trapper named Schaeffer is described thus:

Schaeffer was a good man; he was a man with a good mind. He would tell stories. When they went for muskrats, he had to go there, that's all! ... What a good man, my friend Schaeffer was a good man. There are lots of stories about him (p. 228).

This third chapter of the book also contains an interesting reference to the arctic explorer, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson (1879–1963). He was born in Manitoba of Icelandic immigrant parents. The family later moved to North Dakota. Stefánsson is known for his prolific writings and for his suggestion, unusual for the time, that the Arctic was not a desolate wasteland but, with the right attitude and a willingness to learn from local people, could be seen as a *friendly* environment².

The reference to Stefánsson is found in the following account from a white Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer who had become part of the Gwich'in community.

It was the year 1918. I barely remember. My dad was a carpenter and he was building whenever he was hired. So this William Stefansson (Vilhjálmur Stefánsson) came down the Porcupine River. I don't know how he got there but he landed at the New Rampart (House) and the only one that had a rowboat was my dad. My dad was an old ex-policeman. His name was Archie Linklater. His parents came from Aberdeen, Scotland. He was born in Canada (p. 229).

The fourth and final chapter of the book is entitled "The Oral History of Today: Van Tat Gwich'in Commentary on the Past, Present and Future." The two main sections in this chapter are: "The Present and Future" and "Oral History from Ancestors to Youth." Topics covered include stories and relationships between people; relationships in the future; attitudes to the future among the youth; collecting and communicating oral history; and other, non-historical elements of the Van Tat Gwich'on oral tradition. While most material in the Gwich'in Oral History collection reflects information from elders, in this last chapter there is also information based on interviews from people who were in their forties and fifties at the time the book was compiled, as well as even younger people. They comment on the more recent way of life of the Van Tat Gwich'in, and also suggest values and directions for the future.

The present-day Van Tat Gwich'in may be said to inhabit two worlds. One is the modern world of computers, satellite television, politics, and the popular culture of the day. The other is the remembered world of caribou migrations, salmon runs, dog teams, and a life of hardship mitigated by a close-knit social framework based on cooperation. It is emphasized several times in the book that the primary reason for assembling this history of Van Tat Gwich'in is for the benefit of future generations. The young people appear to be well aware of the importance of remembering the past and learning from it.

Today I had the opportunity to visit a few places with the Van Tat Gwich'in traditional territory ... It's phenomenal to think that I have walked in the footsteps of my ancestors because it was their strength and knowledge that allowed me to be here. These places are very important to our culture ... The land has provided us with food and a home so that we can carry our culture on to future generations ... this

experience ... also strengthened a lot of my hopes for the future (p. 299).

Many of the stories in the book reflect the seasonal round and fluctuations in the diversity of natural resources, as well as how people in the past coped with the challenges of climate, geography, and biology. "The way people moved on the land in response to fluctuating resources and times of shortages was an important theme, emphasized repeatedly by warnings of the return of hard times in the future" (p. 306). At a time when there is considerable concern regarding changing seasonality in the Arctic, and elsewhere, this book will be of interest, not just to linguists and anthropologists interested in First Nations languages or cultures, but also to scholars from a wide range of disciplines. The way the book is arranged is pleasing to the eye, with narratives from the stories interspersed with explanatory texts. The book also contains many excellent black and white and color photographs, from both the present and the recent past, which greatly enhance the text. At a time when languages and stories are being lost all over the Arctic, and around the world, as rapid change occurs, this book is an inspiring example of what may be done to preserve such treasures before they are gone forever.

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² *The Friendly Arctic* is the title of one of Vilhjálmur Stefánsson's books, as well as the title of a recent exhibition on his life and works which opened in Iceland in the year 2000 and has subsequently traveled to such venues as New York and Copenhagen (see <http://www.svs.is/english/travellingexhibition.htm>). The Stefánsson Arctic Institute (Stofnun Vilhjálmur Stefánssonar) in Akureyri, Iceland, founded in 1998, is named for him (see <http://www.svs.is/english/index.htm>).