EARLY CULTURE CONTACTS ON THE NORTHWEST COAST

Early Russian Contacts in Alaska (M. Barbeau: *Totem Poles of the Gitksan*, p. 22).

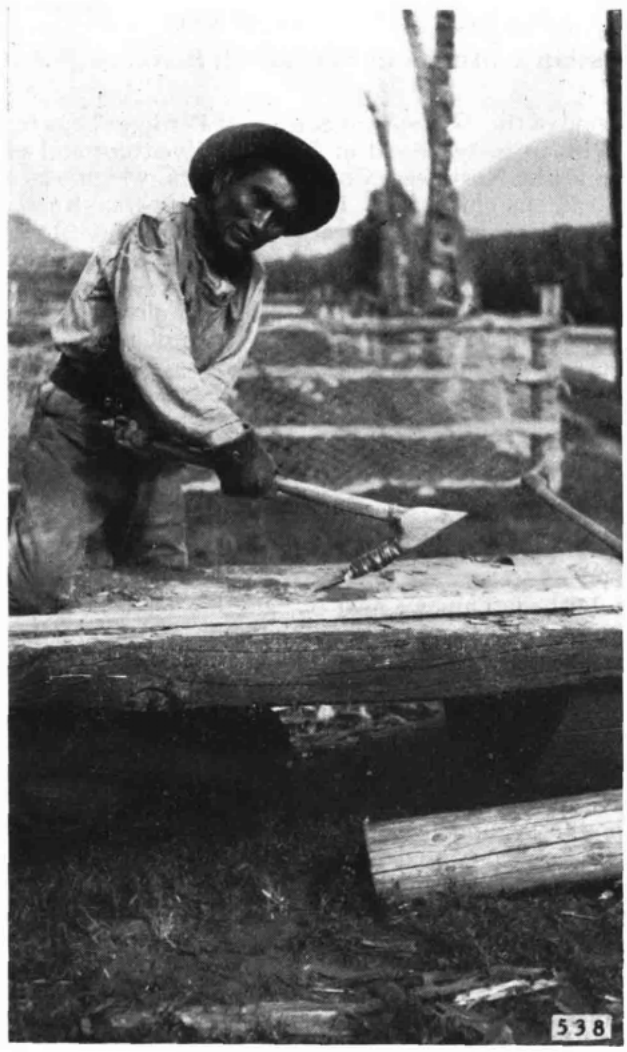
A publication of the Academy of Science of Petrograd has recently (1926) brought to light an early period of Russian adventure and exploration in eastern Asia and the Northwest Coast of America, which was not currently known even among historians and ethnographers. Russian Cossacks, trappers, and fur traders, it appears, penetrated the American fastness nearly a century before Bering started on his spectacular explorations. To use Sternberg's own words, "The reports of the Cossack Dezhnev, who discovered Bering strait a century before Bering, already contain a description of the American Eskimo." The discoveries of the second Kamchatka expedition were far reaching. The local fur traders, between 1745 and 1762, extended their activities from the Alaskan Peninsula to the main coast of America; and, as states Sternberg, "The Russians came into contact not only with the Eskimo tribes, but also with the northwestern Indians — the Tlingits and Athapascans." Among those pioneers and traders were found a few men whose studies of linguistics and ethnography are said to be remarkable, particularly Lisianski, Langsdorff, Khvostov, Davydov, and others. These men of science observed the northwestern American natives, even as far south as California, at a very early date, and left extensive records that are still unpublished. Thus we hear of "another resident among this tribe" (the Koloshes — or Tlingits) whose detailed description of the Tlingits was used by Lutke in his reports to the Russian Imperial Government.

From these records and a few others it appears certain that the Northwest Coast people were accessible to foreign influence for more than two hundred years, to say the least. When estimating the inroads of this influence upon their customs and manual arts and the rate of their progress, we must also consider how amenable the natives were to this change. The American Indians from the beginning were all more or less adaptable to European culture, and this is what caused the downfall of their culture taken as a whole. But nowhere in America did they show more avidity or greater skill to acquire and utilize whatever suited their needs from the sundry goods, tools, or crafts of the white man. They were naturally gifted with a sense of inventiveness and with manual dexterity, as may be seen in the activities of their craftsmen to the present day. These traits were often noted by visitors at various times.

Even before the Russians and the Europeans had any perceptible influence on the natives, it is quite possible that iron and foreign objects were casually obtained from the Japanese junks that for several centuries are known to have been wrecked and salvaged on the Northwest Coast. Several junks, with Japanese fishermen aboard still alive, were cast ashore on the coast within historical times, and survivors were kept as slaves by the natives. One of them, a blacksmith in the service of a chief, was observed by explorers and traders at the mouth of the Columbia, about 1808;[1] and two others were purchased from the Haidas in 1833 at Port Simpson and given their freedom.[2]

[1] W. D. Lyman, *The Columbia River*.

[2] *See* a lengthy list of Japanese junks found adrift or stranded on the coast of North America or on the Hawaiian or adjacent islands, by Charles Wolcott Brooks, in Proc. Calif. Acad. of Sciences, Col. VI (1875).



A Gitksan carver at Kitwanga

An influence which may not be without significance in some respects is that of the Kanakas on the Northwest Coast. Little has so far been said about it; yet some traces of its presence have come to our attention, such as small wooden carvings or statuettes in some of our museums that are undoubtedly of South Sea technique, some costumes, and possibly also some manual processes. We may wonder whether the insertion of abalone pearl segments as decoration for wood carvings — and this is a notable feature of many of the finest Haida, Tsimsyan, and Tlingit carvings — is not to be

Labourers on restoration work, 1928

traced to this source, since the large, deep sea shells themselves, from which they are cut, were imported, so we understand, from California and the South Seas in the course of transoceanic trade.

From 1785 to 1795, by George I. Quimby (83: 247–255).

A few extracts from this significant study—

A somewhat casual survey of published sources indicates that there were Chinese, Hawaiians, Negroes, and natives of the Philippines among the polyglot crews of European and American vessels trading on the Northwest Coast of America between 1785 and 1795. Researches by Heizer show that some Japanese were on the coast at this time and perhaps earlier.[1]

Thus many Europeans and some non-Europeans visited the Northwest Coast almost a hundred years before any anthropologist set foot in the region.

. . . Below, in tabular form, there are presented the approximate number of ships on the Northwest Coast by year from 1774 to 1794 [130 vessels in all] . . .

Previous to 1774 the Northwest Coast, at least the northern part, probably had been visited by Russians. As early as 1741, Bering and Cherikov made a landfall on the northern part of the coast.

Voyages to the coast before 1741 were likely apocryphal and hardly worth the listing. These voyages were those of Juan de Fuca in 1592, Admiral de Ponte (or Fuente or de Puente) in 1640, and Shapely in 1640.

The voyages to the coast between 1774 and 1779 were exploratory — Pérez in 1774, Heceta and Bodega y Quadra in 1775-76, Cook in 1778, and Arteaga and Bodega y Quadra in 1779. It was Captain Cook's voyage of exploration that showed the world the possibilities of the fur trade with the Indians of the Northwest Coast, but this trade was not begun until 1785. In the succeeding years, however, ships visited the coast in large numbers and this maritime fur trade lasted until about 1835.

[1] Personal communication from Robert Heizer. Japanese came to the Northwest Coast on disabled craft carried from Japan to the coast by wind and currents. Heizer has compiled considerable information on this subject.

A totem after it was re-erected; its inner support

. . . Non-European peoples were significant minorities among the personnel of trading and exploring ships on the Northwest Coast during this period.

. . . The non-European minorities carried by these ships were the Chinese, Polynesians, Negroes, and natives of the Philippines previously mentioned.

In 1788 Captain John Meares sailed from Canton to Nootka to engage in the fur trade. Included in his crews were fifty Chinese, among whom were smiths and carpenters. At Nootka, Meares built an establishment on shore, a two-storey house surrounded by a stockade. He also built a sailing vessel of forty or fifty tons. The construction of both the house and the vessel were undertaken by the Chinese carpenters and smiths, assisted by "divers natives of America."

The Chinese smiths and armourers were employed by Meares in the manufacture of articles for trade with the Indians. He said of them, "the Chinese armourers were very ingenious, and worked with such a degree of facility that we preferred them to those of Europe." The Chinese brought to Nootka by Meares were on the Northwest Coast from May 1788, until at least May 1789. Many of the Chinese were quartered in Meares' establishment on shore. There is no record of Meares having carried the Chinese back to Canton, and some of them, at least, may have been assimilated by the Northwest Coast Indians.

Some Chinese were brought to the Northwest Coast on the *Argonaut* and the *Princess Royal* in 1789. According to Meares:

. . . They had also on board, in addition to their crews, several artificers of different professions, and nearly seventy Chinese, who intended to become settlers on the American coast, in the service, and under the protection of the associated company.

In his "Remarks on the Argonaut's Outfit, 1789," Captain Colnett stated —

Besides the aforementioned Crew, being determined to form a Settlement at Nootka, build a fort and also craft to carry on the Trade on a large scale, the following Chinamen were put on board by me for that purpose: 7 Carpenters, 5 Blacksmiths, 5 Bricklayers and Masons, 4 Taylors, 4 Shoemakers, 3 Seamen, 1 Cook.

Consequently the "near seventy" Chinese settlers stated to be on the *Argonaut* by Meares dwindle to twenty-nine when counted by Colnett . . . .

The plan of Meares to exploit his friendship with Comekela in obtaining advantages in trade was frustrated. In June, 1788, Meares naïvely complained that —

> Comekela was, at first, very active in forwarding our commercial arrangement; but he had become very deficient in his native tongue, and he now spoke such a jargon of Chinese, English, and Nootkan languages, as to be by no means a ready interpreter between us and the natives . . .

In addition to having spent some time in China, Comekela (a Nootka) had visited Hawaii. This fact, plus his relations with Tianna, an important Hawaiian sojourning on the Northwest Coast, is recorded by Meares . . . .

Thus the evidence of Meares indicates that in 1788 there was a Nootka Indian who had been to Hawaii and China and who spoke a jargon of Chinese, English, and Nootkan . . . .

Captain George Dixon reports the introduction of Hawaiian tapa cloth in June, 1787. He says —

> One of the Chiefs who come to trade with us, happening one day to cast his eyes on a piece of Sandwich Island cloth, which hung up in the shrouds to dry, became very importunate to have it given him . . . and the Indian was perfectly overjoyed with his present.

One of a group of sixty Indians who visited Captain Vancouver in September of 1793 may have been a native of the Philippines who had become a naturalized Nootka.

Negroes on the Northwest Coast

The sources for this period show that the ship's crews interbred freely with Northwest Coast Indian women. Thus any physical anthropological study of Northwest Coast Indians must recognize the probability of Chinese, Japanese, Negro, Filipino, and diverse European strains in the physical types of the Northwest Coast. Any interpretation based upon the recognition of these strains in Northwest Coast Indians must take into account the interbreeding during the period of the early maritime fur trade.

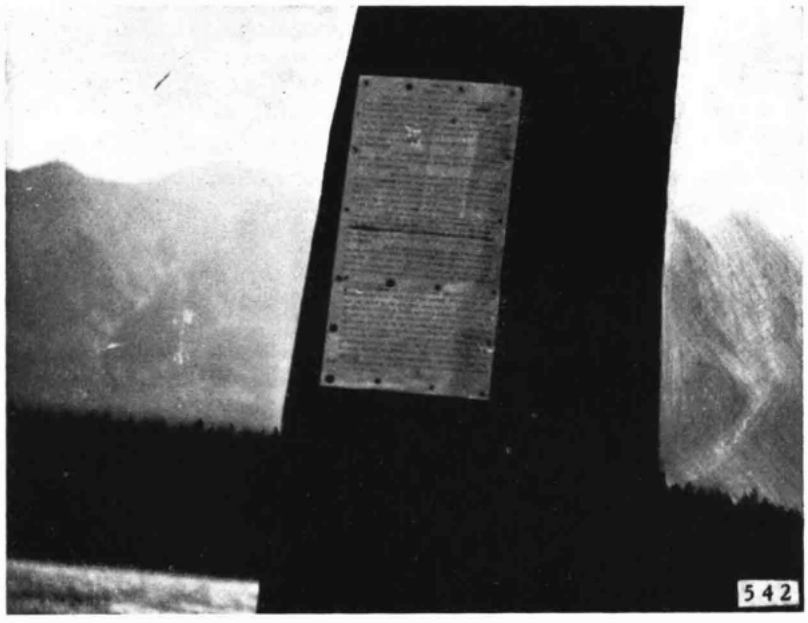
Similarly, in the framework of Northwest Coast Indian culture, any recognition of Chinese, Japanese, African, and Polynesian influences should be examined in terms of the ethno-historical records of the maritime trading period.

Parts of Northwest Coast culture, as it existed in the period of ethnological examination, may have had its roots in the stimulus of culture contact during the time of the maritime fur trade. The published and manuscript sources for this period may offer significant evidence. In the field of material culture, for instance, it is possible to show that the twisted iron collar was introduced by Captain Ingraham of Boston, that sails were first successfully adapted for use on dug-out canoes about 1790, and that the totem pole made its first appearance in 1791.

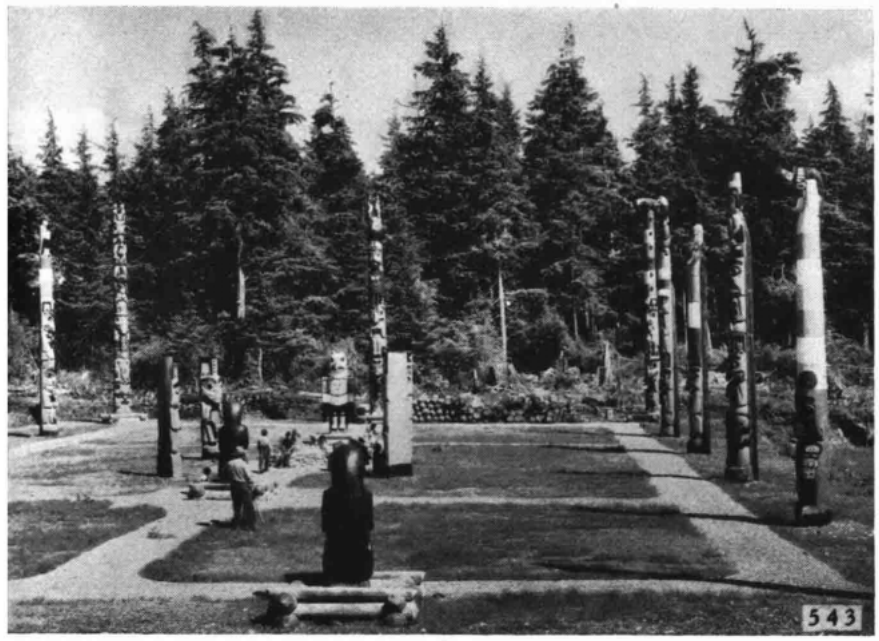
As early as 1778 Captain James Cook hinted that some aspects of Northwest Coast culture were changing because of the stimulus of culture contact. For instance, of wood-carving he said —

> Their great dexterity in works of wood, may, in some measure, be ascribed to the assistance they received from iron tools. For, as far as we know, they use no other . . . And though, originally, their tools must have been of different materials, it is not improbable

The cement base of a restored totem pole



Label on a restored totem pole



Restored and newly carved Tlingit poles

that many of their improvements have been made since they acquired a knowledge of that metal, which is now universally used in their various wooden works. The chisel and the knife are the only forms, as far as we saw, that iron assumes amongst them.

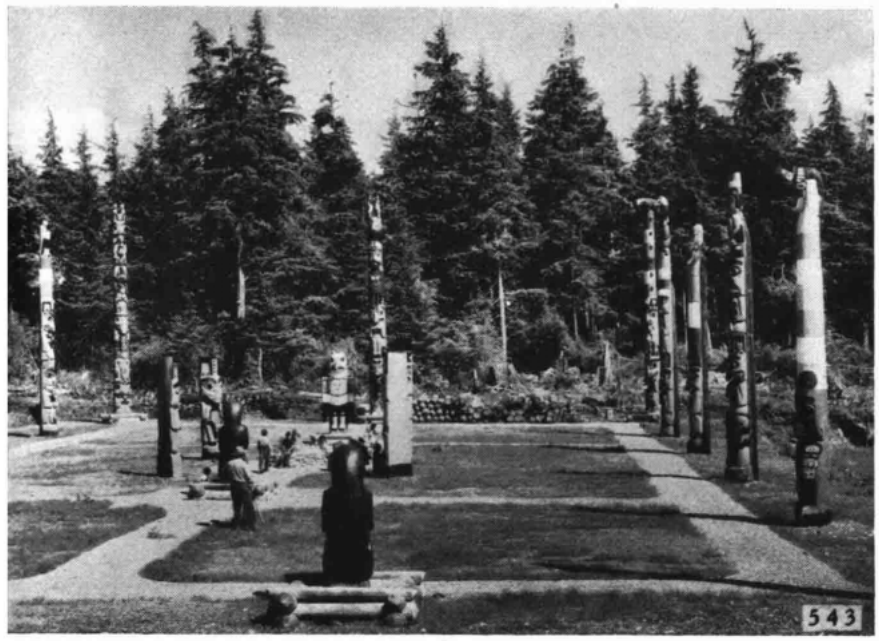
Haida carvers widely travelled, according to Mrs. E. C. Stevens, of Skidegate, Queen Charlotte Islands, in 1947.

Walter Kingego (a sub-chief of Massett) was one of the sailors of Captain Hann, the mate on Jack London's *Flying Dutchman* (?). He went up to the Aleutian Islands and Japan. He and the other Haidas took very well to Japan; they ran up big bills. He stopped at the Hawaiian Islands (in the Pacific), then at Monterey (California), before coming back to Victoria, and to his home islands. The crew of the *Flying Dutchman* (?) were almost all Haidas. Such trips happened year after year, and Jack London actually went on one of them. At Monterey the Haidas took part in a show. Kingego sang a war song on the stage: "This is the song we sing when we kill the whole business" (meaning the white people). And the Haidas then sang other songs in their language.

Head-chief Harry Weeyæ of Massett likewise went several times to Japan and to the Hawaiian Islands.

WORKSHOP ITEMS

The bulk of the information in the present monograph was gathered by the author at first hand in the course of field work on the north Pacific Coast, mostly among the Tsimsyans, from 1915 to 1947, for the National Museum of Canada. Native informants were hired by the day. They were consulted, and they gave their information in their own language, usually



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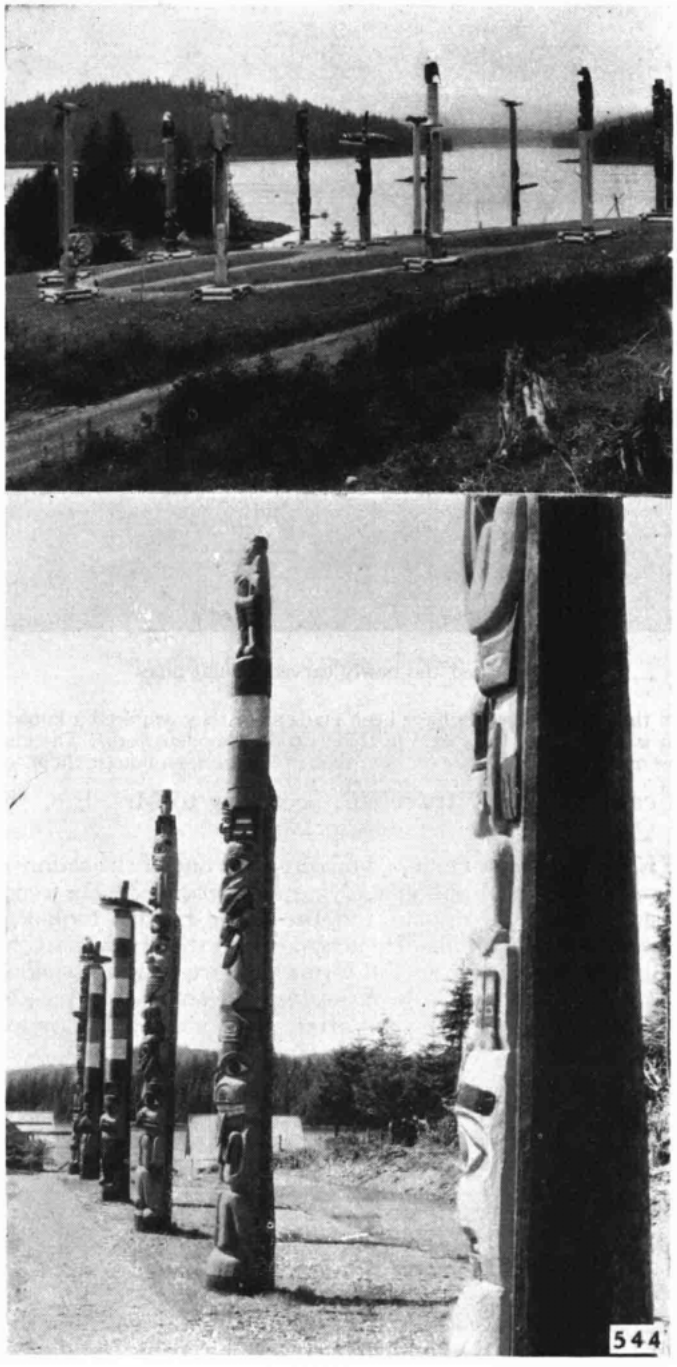


Tlingit totems in public parks in southern Alaska

Tlingit totems in the totem park at Saxman

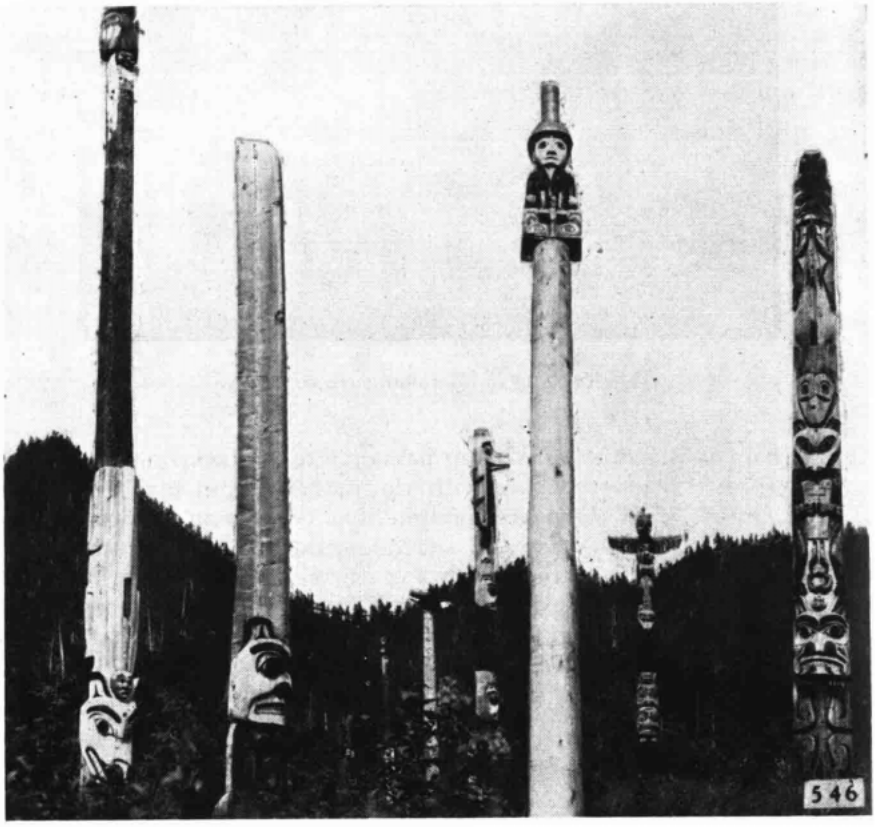
with the help of interpreters. William Beynon is a unique instance of a bilingual interpreter whose training with the author began in 1915 at Port Simpson, and who, in the course of time, has become an authority on all native subjects and has assisted several anthropologists in their later investigations, among them Dr. Franz Boas, Dr. Susman, Dr. Viola Garfield, and others. Some of the later records were taken down on an Edison Electric phonograph, just as hundreds of Indian songs had been, on the older Standard Edison.

To avoid technicalities in printing and reading, the phonetically recorded native words were rendered here in plain spelling, which perforce remains incomplete. But full linguistic studies are to be kept apart.

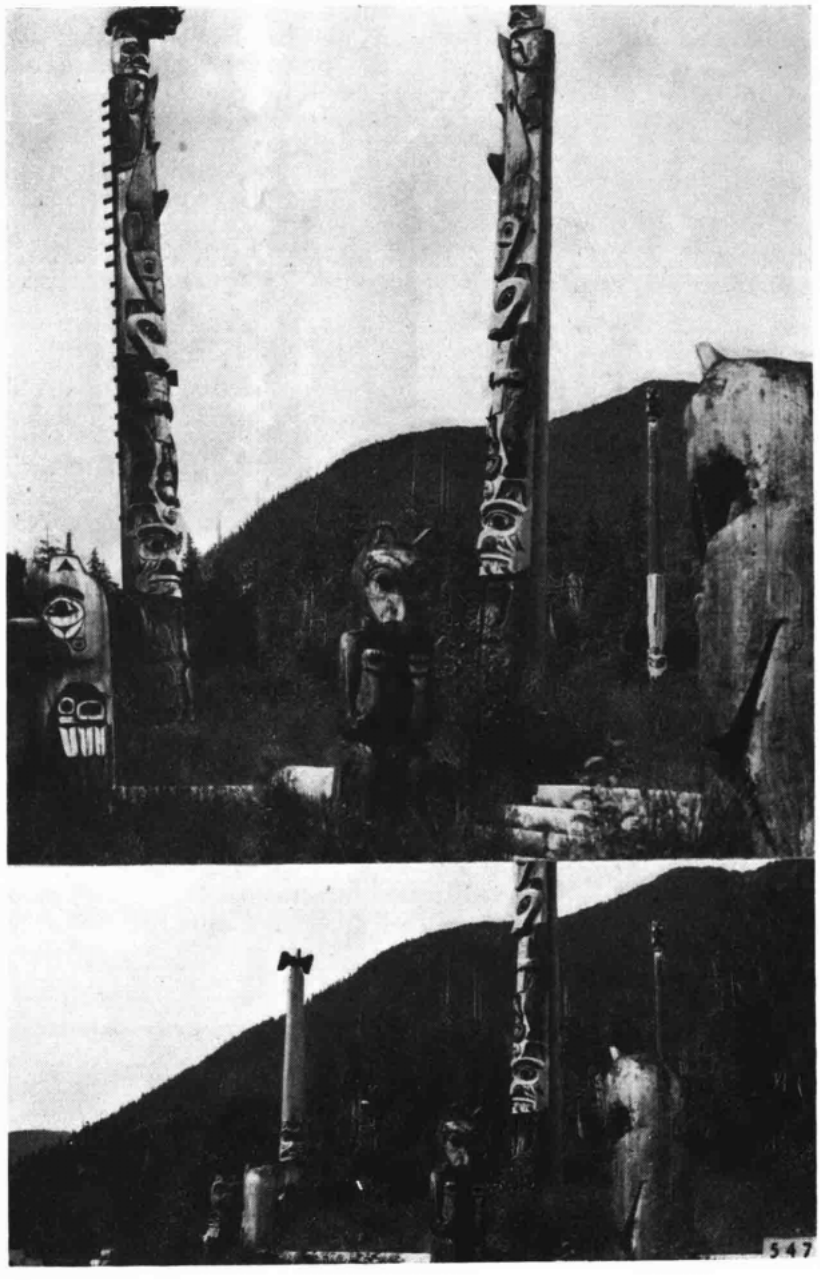
Indian names and words were written phonetically by the author. They varied slightly according to the informants and the tribe. No attempt at forcing uniformity was made here, as an impressionistic approach allowed for greater accuracy.

According to a current method explained at the heading of the Bibliography, the numerous references to printed information have been systematized and simplified.

The illustrations have been numbered, and a descriptive list explains them; often fuller comments may be found in the various chapters through which they are dispersed. Photographs taken by the author do not bear his name; otherwise, credit is given either to the institution or to the photographer to whom they belong.



Tlingit totems in the park at Saxman



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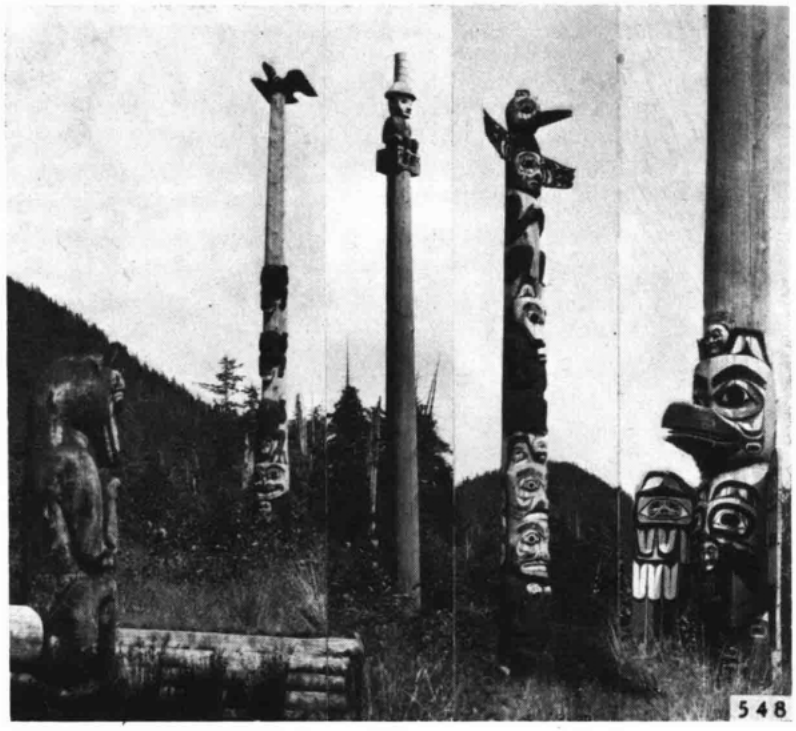
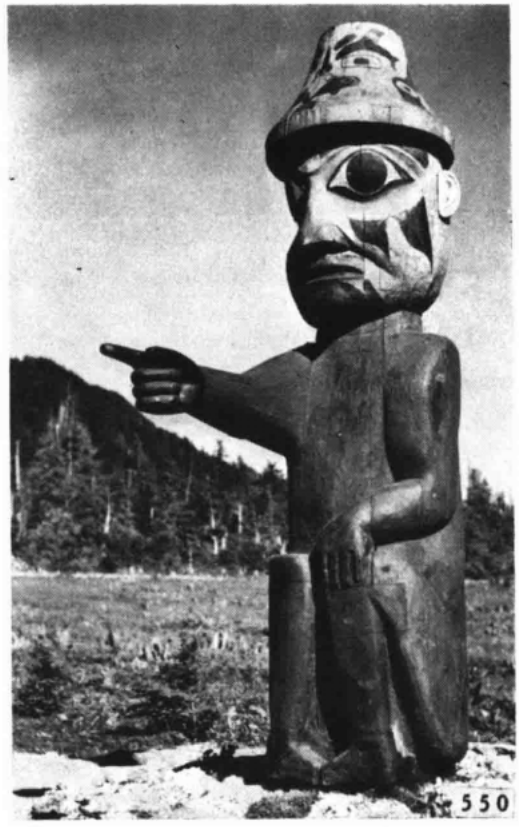


Tlingit totems at Saxman

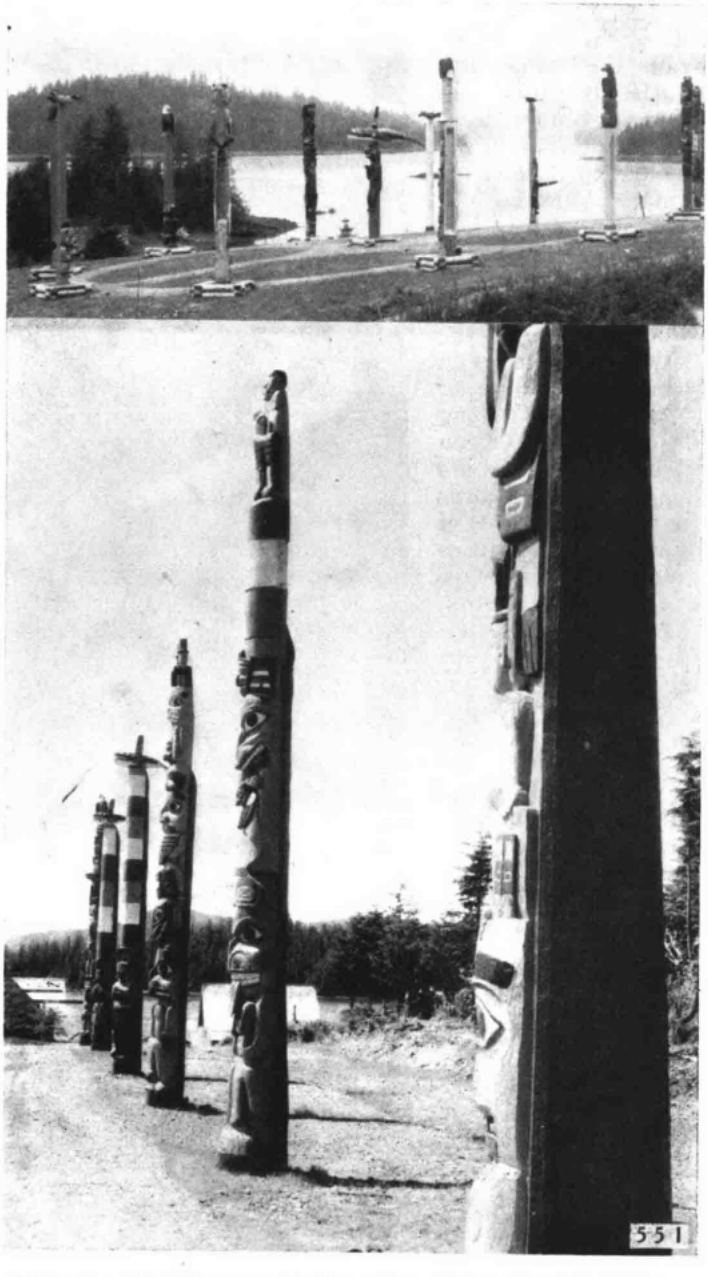
Frogs in the totem park at Saxman

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The bulk of the material on the Tsimsyans, the Haidas, and the Kwakiutls, as utilized in this book, was obtained at first hand by the author in the course of field expeditions for the National Museum of Canada, between 1915 and 1947, and during the same period, by his assistant William Beynon, of Port Simpson, now chief of a Wolf clan of the Niskæs. Although research work was carried out for brief periods in 1939 and 1947 among the Haidas of the Queen Charlotte Islands, the Tlingits in Alaska, and the Kwakiutls and the Nootkas of the coast of British Columbia (Arthur Price assisting among the last two), the author here had to rely to a greater extent on the literature in print, as quoted, wherever it was available. The most important outside contributors to whom the author gratefully acknowledges his debt, are Edward L. Keithahn, James Deans, James G. Swan, Dr. Franz Boas, Dr. J. R. Swanton, Lieut. G. T. Emmons, A. P. Niblack, Dr. C. F. Newcombe, W. A. Newcombe, and Dr. Viola E. Garfield.



Carved Tlingit figure at Saxman



Kaigani and Haida totems in the parks at Klawock and Hydaburg

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Compiled by JAMES H. JOHNSTONE AND MARCEL RIOUX

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