BRITISH COLUMBIA INDIANS | ARE THEY BECOMING BETTER OR WORSE?

A Study of the Effects of Civilization on the Aborigines of the West.

by JOHN P. McCONNELL

Tsimpsian Chiefs in the full regalia of office. The British Columbia Indian has all the inherent love of the red man for trappings of state.

KLAH-HOW-YA, six." ("How are you, friend?") I saluted as I rode up to the camp of an old, old Indian, doddering about in front of his place of residence, part house or hut, and part tent, built of odd scraps of bark and old canvas.

"Klah-how-ya," came the response in the genial, kindly tone of a patriarch, expressive of the sort of childish pleasure one so often sees in the old Indians, but conspicuously absent in the young and middle-aged men.

"Kah tah mika skah klatawa o'coke sun?" (How far have you travelled to-day?)" he asked with the same kindly interest.

"Mox tah tlum pee ikt (twenty-one tillies)," I replied.

"Mika chah-co ti?" (Are you tired?)"

"Oh konas. Spose mika patlach mica konas kimi-kimick? (Oh, a little. Suppose I give you a little tobacco?)"

"Na-wit-ka. Ma-sah. Mika hyas kloshe tum-tum mika tik-eh mam-ook nucka-nuck? (Certainly, with thanks. You are very kind. Will you eat something?)"

Although I am not partial to Indian camp cookery I have a goodly share of the curiosity and thirst for information with which most of the newspaper tribe is endowed. So, forgetful of my own grub sack tied on my saddle, I dismounted, unsaddled and fed my horse from another sack, intending to pass a few hours with these very old people of the mountains hoping to learn something of interest from them. And in this I was not disappointed.

Lived Long in One Place.

A certain heartiness in my manner, perhaps, and the small gift of tobacco added to my rough appearance, so far as outward habiliment was concerned, had won the old man's confidence, not always an easy accomplishment.

Being introduced to his ancient klootchman I asked the old woman "Konsi lo-lo mi-ka mit-lite yah-kwa? (How long have you lived here?)"

"Kwon-e-sum ilka mitlite (All my life," she said.

"And how long is that?" I asked.

"Oh by-o yeeh ant moon. Spoze tah-tlum to-ka- mo-mok (Oh, many long moons. Maybe a thousand)," she said, laughing. And indeed, to look at the old lady she might easily have been a centenarian, though as to her exact age she could not tell, in which respect she was truly feminine.

In such manner I became acquainted with Kequilly Charlie and his old klootchman in their camp on the banks of the roaring Thompson one hot afternoon last summer.

I had ridden from the Fraser Valley above Lytton, heading for Spences Bridge, along the old Yale-Cariboo trail, and had spoken to several Indians living on the river bank, but old Charlie was the first one to offer me the hospitality of his camp.

Where They Caught Salmon.

This abode of Charlie's was a nondescript composition of lodges, built of bark, logs and scraps of old canvas, and sheet-iron. Nearby were the usual salmon-drying poles, and down at the water's edge was the long dip-net trap, used to catch the salmon on their way up the river to the spawning beds. The run had already commenced and a few score salmon bellies, red as blood in the brilliant sunlight, hung up to dry.

Soon a dish of these delectable dainties was served on the rough hewn table of the cabin and supplemented with bread from my own sack—I can never get used to Indian doughboys—we made a capital meal.

As the heat of the afternoon sun waned we sat outdoors smoking, I absorbed in the music of the rushing waters as the Thompson foamed and roared through its narrow bed below, and the mountains and valley saturated with the red, red rays of the setting sun, nowhere so red as in this red, red west.

Of Early Indian Days.

And as we smoked and watched, the old man told me tales of the old days—days before the white man, with his kuitan piah (fire horse) and shovel and gold pan came—days when only the Indians threaded the trails of the deep valleys and ever the snow capped divides. In summer he and his tribe would come down to the Thompson and the Fraser and catch and cure their salmon. In the fall they would take to the mountains to hunt the fleet-footed mowich (deer). Then when all the roots and herbs and fish and meat for their winter supply was gathered they would go to the Kequilly illahe houses, literally hole-in-the-ground houses. Then they would spend the winter trading with the Hudson's Bay Company stores, training their tenas tillicums (little folks) and living on the fruits of their summer toil.

With their furs they bartered for guns and traps, and later they used the white man's cloth and blankets.

CONSUMPTION IS A RECENT SCOURGE

In those days that dreadful scourge, now so rapidly killing off the Indian, consumption, was unknown. Their life was a hard one to be sure, but they were a hardy race and inured to it. Instead of stiff leather boots they wore moccasins from the skins of the mowich, and the klootchmen dressed the skins and made them. Instead of cheap cotton underwear sold to-day in the white man's stores, they wore soft warm buckskin shirts and trousers, they had blankets and skins of the hyas puss puss (mountain lion), too. So they were warmly clad and amply fed.

And they lived in the kequilly houses. These were built underground with a sod roof above. In the centre of the roof was a notched pole down which the inhabitants descended. This hole also served to let in light and air and to draw off the smoke of the open fire on the floor. Of course the smoke of the kequilly houses made many sore eyes, sometimes it caused total blindness.

All up and down the valleys of the Nicola, Thompson, Fraser, and other rivers, the traveler will frequently note shallow circular depressions on the banks of the rivers. These were kequilly houses. But they were long ago abandoned and gradually fell in. I know of only one in the Nicola Valley with even part of its roof on, and it is now so decayed that it is quite unsafe to descend into it. It is just above Coutlee, and its domed sod roof and notched pole are visible from the road.

Gold Rush of Fifties.

Then Charlie told me of the big gold rush, more than forty years ago. He told me how the miners came up from the south from Granite Creek, and from the west down the Thompson, and overspread the Thompson and Fraser Valleys, how they tore up the banks and washed out all the hyas chicamin (fine metal).

Then trouble began for the Indians. The Siwash got his first introduction to piah chuck (fire water). After that he got much sick and coughed a lot. Bimeby he memaloose (die). Cultus white men too, stole their klootchmen and debauched their young girls. The old man's twisted and knotted hands spread tremblingly before him as he related how his sons and daughters in those old days one by one fell victims to the white man's whisky or lust.

But after awhile the mad rush of the gold seekers waned. They left behind them only long riven trenches in the gravel banks of the rivers. Charlie did not deplore the loss to the Indians of the gold. Had the white man killed all the game and despoiled the rivers of the salmon, that would have been a different matter. But chicamin! No man could eat it, and if it was worn it would not keep him warm. Chicamin, indeed—the white man could have it if he wanted to break his back digging gravel to get it. No Indian cared for it.

When the Railway Came.

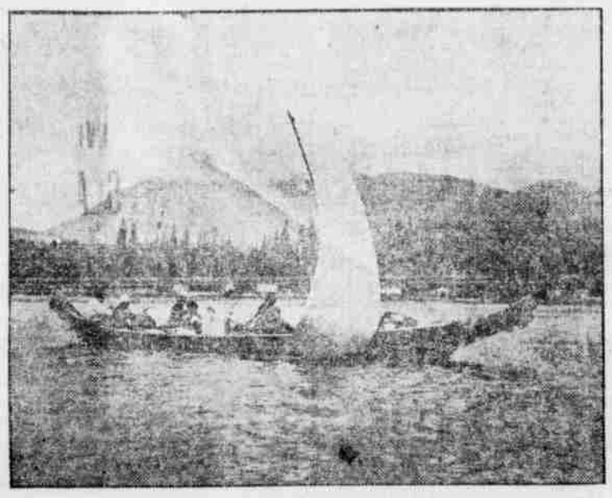
Many moons after the white man came again in crowds. And what strange things they did. They blasted out the face of the cliffs and they tore up the new Yale-Cariboo trail in so many places, the trail they had built over the Indian trail with so much pains and labor for the use of the gold seekers. But the new trail was different. It was level. And on it were too long rails of chicamin. Bimeby came a great smoking, snorting, kuitan piah, that screamed like hya tol-a-puss (many coyotes). And it was hyu skookum (very strong) for it pulled behind it many houses. No, no. Charlie had never been in one those houses.

Yet I could have tossed a stone on to the railway track over which for many houses and making hyu la-tlah (much noise).

CONTRAST IN LUXURY OF MODERN LIFE

Then as the shadows of evening descended and the mighty walls of the mountains grew purple, and then black, in the stillness of the valley, broken only by the purling, silvery rush of the swirling green Thompson, a long ray of ghostly white light crept across the face of the mountains, lighting in swift panorama forest and rock, canyon and crag, leaping like a huge spirit from one side of the cliffs to the other, touching as with a giant finger of radiance our squalid surroundings as it shot over and past us, making for one brief second a wall of dazzling light beneath which the river seemed to writhe in terror, then with giant stride leapt far up the side of a jutting mountain, as with a rumbling roar the Imperial Limited swept around a curve the blinding lens of her electric search light bursting upon us like an evil eye.

As the long line of brilliantly lighted cars roared past us, I could see the passengers in various attitudes at the windows. I caught the glint of silver and cut glass in the diner, the luxurious colorings of the sleeping cars, with their occupants. I thought of the times I had traversed in those self-same cars the breadth of this continent, and recalled the names and faces of many of those who had been fellow passengers. What a contrast between the plush and brass and fine wood of those palaces on wheels and the miserable hut of poor old Charlie. What an almost immeasurable difference between the elegant appointments of the dining car and the crude utensils and bill-of-fare I had that night supped from. I smiled to myself as I twenty years had shuttlecocked the palatial trains of the C. P. R., symbolic of a century's progress, propelled by a power which one might almost say was the keystone to our modern civilization. Over its chicamin rails many times a day had passenger and freight trains borne before his eyes the commerce of a nation, of many nations. Yet to Charlie, living in his aboriginal past, it was only a kiutan piah pulling imagined the figure I should cut in that car accoutred as I then was. Yet within twenty yards of me, for a brief instant, had been the life that was mine, to which I belonged. Here within daily view of him, old Kequilly Charley lived his life, the only one he knew or wanted.



With all their worldly goods.

Only As a Memory.

In that train was symbolized the force of modern civilization, the invincible march of the progress that will eventually in logical course of the present trend of events, eradicate as a race, from this continent all of the aboriginal tribes. Only a few more years comparatively and Charley and all his passive people will disappear in the swirl of modern progress, swallowed up in the roar and rush of the vaunted twentieth century civilization, or rise with it and become part of it. First it debauches the Indian, then it brushes him aside and soon, as the history of races goes, unless he be given a chance for manhood and self respecting existence, he will be only a memory.

But surely the Indian has his place in the scheme of things. Why should his race be obliterated? Is the sacrifice necessary to the white man's progress or happiness? Or is the extermination of the Indian to be regarded as merely the working out of the natural law of the survival of the fittest? If so, then logically, not only the Indian races, but many of the Caucasian races too, are doomed to extinction. That barbarous law can surely have no place in the affairs of the human race if the Golden Rule is to apply.

Is Capable of Development.

Nature made it for the lower animals but man was created only a little lower than the angels and he should be a co-operative being, not a competitor and destroyer of the weak of his own kind. The Christian code goes farther and commands him to succor and relieve the weak. Or again has the Indian fulfilled his destiny as a race and is he now passing away as have empires and nations before him?

I shall present in this article figures and statistics and convincing facts to prove that the Indian is capable of development, that he has latent possibilities with which he is not generally credited, and that he has a place in the scheme of things, and a future in the progress of this province. It is easy to say that the Indian is unprogressive but the facts show that he is making good headway with odds of paternalism and the evil influences of bad white men against him.

Registering a resolution to pursue this subject further on some future occasion I knocked the ashes from my pipe and as the moon was now risen, I announced my intention of saddling up and proceeding to Spences Bridge, nine or ten miles farther on.

Old Charley had been wetting his finger and testing the wind and otherwise manifesting keen interest in the weather signs, so when I spoke of pulling out he earnestly entreated me to stay.

"Sah-ha-le piah hyu snass chaco hyak" (literally high or sky, fire and great rain come quick), he said gravely; but seeing me bent upon going, said nothing more. I was well provided for a change in the weather, wearing leather shaps and having an oil-skin slicker tied to my saddle. I knew the trail well and, barring several rough and narrow places and a few gravel slides, had nothing to fear. I bade him farewell, and leaving him the remainder of my tobacco, pulled out.

Dangerous Ride Along the Cliffs.

I had traveled scarcely more than three miles when the moon was hidden behind intensely black masses of clouds. The wind rose to a gale while blinding flashes of lightning fitfully lit up in ghostly pale green tints the rocky cliffs, the river and the distant snow-caps. The rain came down in torrents, and soon little streams were tearing down the gravel banks. Crossing a small slide my pony slipped, and for a moment it looked as though we were going to take a plunge into the river, a hundred feet or more below. A gravel slide is not a very bad proposition in dry weather. It looks worse than it is. But in a heavy rain the trail is quickly washed out and the whole surface gradually moves. A very little thing will sometimes start a terrific movement and precipitate thousands of tons in an avalanche of rock and gravel and woe betide the living thing that stands in the path of its terrible rush. But I got safely over this one, only to remember that there was a much worse one a couple of miles farther on. It was steeper and broader and much higher. Almost a hundred feet above the river it ended at the edge of a perpendicular cliff beneath which the Thompson formed a mighty whirlpool. The lip of the cliff was not more than fifty feet below the line of the trail. Once a horse slipped or misstepped, it would be the whirlpool for him and his rider. The thought was not comforting.

While speculating as to my chances of negotiating the slide in safety, I observed a window light ahead, and presently came up to a cabin. I determined to stop there overnight if the householders would accommodate me. It proved to be an Indian family and I soon arranged to stay overnight with them.

Results of Civilization.

This family was typical of the modernized Indian. They spoke English well had a comfortable, roomy cabin, rough furniture, cook stove, sewing machine, etc. The house was clean and had a split-log floor. A child about five years old, a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked little chap, was playing about the room that served for all purposes except sleeping. This Indian had a fairly good ranch, a number of horses and cattle, raised vegetables, cut hay and raised his own pork. He and his wife were both full-blooded Indians, healthy and strong. He told me he had always lived in houses and was born in one. He and his wife had been educated in one of the boarding-schools. One of his brothers had died of consumption and so had his mother. His father in his time had lived the nomadic life that old Charley had described. This Indian made a business of catching and curing his salmon supply every summer and of going to the mountains for venison in the fall.

Traveled and Observed.

Of course his ranching operations were not extensive. He had traveled a good deal, and was well acquainted with the country as far east as the Okanagan and north to Lillooet. He had even been once or twice to the coast by train. He also understood prospecting to some extent, and had some mineral claims and he could read and write and had a few newspapers and old magazines in the house.

Their one child, as merry a little elf as I ever met, was bright and intelligent as any little white kiddie of his own age. His name was Joe and we had a splendid romp together. I found in my pocket a small mirror, and the zest and glee with which he chased the dancing ray which I flashed over the floor for him, was delightful. Afterward when he grew tired, he crept on to my knee and went to sleep while I talked with his parents. And while the little rosy-cheeked, olive-skinned chap slept with his face nestled against my shoulder there was no thought of race differences in my mind.

Two Extremes Represented.

In the condition of this Indian family and that of old Kequilly Charley are represented the two extremes of Indian prosperity and intelligence fostered by education on the one hand and poverty and ignorance on the other.

Viewed from the point of the old man's experience the Indian race is doomed to speedy extinction. But considering the condition of the younger family there appears to be a hope that the race can and will survive under same treatment. It is not a case of competition for life among themselves or with the whites. Fish and game are quite as plentiful as in the old days, the sun shines as brightly, and conditions of living have changed but little for the Indian in this province. But it seems that when the Indian adopts the white man's mode of life his constitution at first degenerates. Inquiry as to the results of housing Indian children in boarding or industrial schools would seem to show that for the first year or so the little ones droop, but, afterward, having grown used to that sort of life, they grow strong and robust again.

HOW THEY DIVIDE IN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In religion the twenty-five thousand Indians of this province are roughly speaking divided as follows: About twelve thousand Roman Catholics, the balance Protestants of various denominations, and a couple of thousand pagans. The pagans cannot be said to have any distinct form of worship. In this respect they differ from the Indians of the plains, who were sun worshippers. The Siwash religion is rather a form of sorcery or witchcraft. A fakir who can impress them with his alleged power by means of mysterious rites and high-sounding incantations becomes the hyu medicine man around whom centres what passes for religious rites among them. There is a paucity of legend or tradition in their religious exercises—little that appeals to the imagination. Heathenism is practiced principally in the North, where the potlach still flourishes, where the totem pole erects its uncouth length into the air, telling its strange story in mystic carvings and colorings.

It was in the late fifties of the last century that the first Roman Catholic missionaries penetrated from the south into the interior of British Columbia, to bring the Christian gospel to the Indians. Since that time about twelve thousand converts to Catholicism have been made. The entire province outside of Vancouver Island is in the diocese of Westminster of which Rt. Rev. Bishop Dontenwill is the ecclesiastical head.

Conditions of Acceptance.

The conditions of membership in the church were laid down to meet the peculiar requirements of the Indians' moral stature and his besetting weaknesses. He must abandon absolutely, sorcery, drink and immorality, and he is not admitted into the fold of the church until he has proven both his willingness and ability to do these. Polygamy is not, nor has been, a common practice, except among the chiefs. An Indian who is addicted to strong drink is a hopeless proposition. A drunken Indian has no more sense of responsibility than a brute. Once the appetite is acquired, no considerations of family, morality or decency will deter him from liquor. He will barter his wife or daughter for liquor. On this point one prominent worker in the Indian cause says that he believes it is a mistake to impose fines upon those who supply liquor to Indians or upon Indians having it in their possession. The penalty should be imprisonment. Of course, imprisonment is optional with the magistrate, but the fact that a fine is a source of revenue to the province while imprisonment is an expense, furnishes a motive to impose a fine instead of a term in jail.

Vulgarity of Potlach.

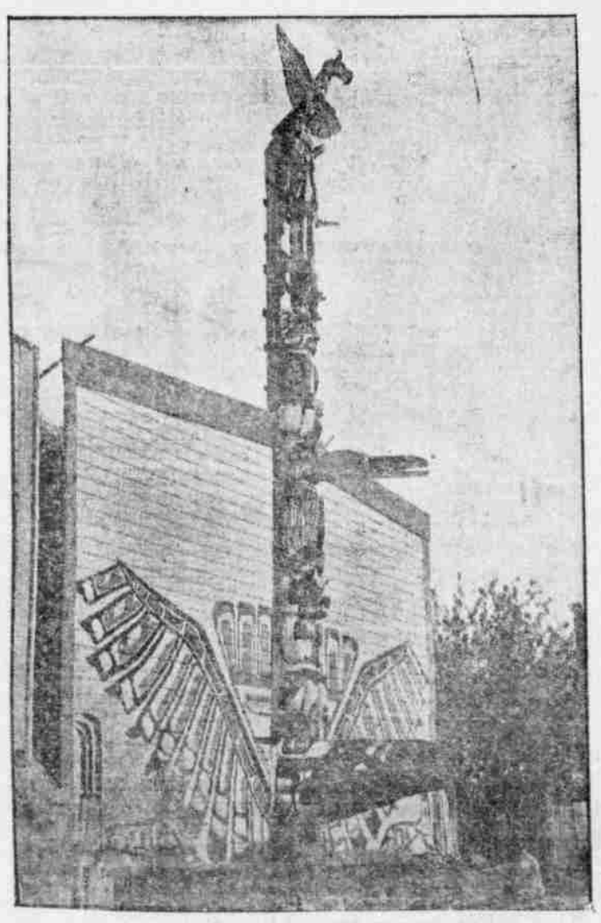
The potlach as it is practiced up the coast is claimed by some authorities to be in no sense materially different in its effect upon the Indians' morals from that of the drink curse. Originally the potlach had a commendable object, but it has deteriorated into a vulgar show of wealth and vanity. Ostensibly it is a gathering of a tribe, each of the members of which brings presents which, when collected are afterwards divided among the old, infirm and poor. So far, so good. But a rivalry to be the greatest giver, to make a reputation for large wealth and lavish display in an Indian way, has led the Indians to great lengths of extravagance. It is even claimed that the desire to appear wealthy has been the main cause of the traffic in young girls among certain of the tribes up the coast.

So far as my observation of the potlach goes, in the interior its most objectional features have been gambling, drink, and a certain amount of indiscriminate intercourse among the sexes. I have, however, been assured by an eminent authority on Indian affairs in this province that the institution of the potlach as a general thing like many other pagan ceremonies is on the wane, and that only a few years will pass ere it is a thing of the past. Only in one or two pagan communities does it still flourish with the eclat that marked it twenty or twenty-five years ago.

WHAT HAS EDUCATION DONE FOR INDIANS?

What are education and religion doing for the British Columbia Indians. The two go hand in hand for all the schools are denominational, receiving Government support according to the sort of school it is.

The total native population of the province, according to the Dominion Government report for the year ending June 30, 1906, was 24,997. Of these 11,270 are given as Roman Catholics,



Totem Pole at Alert Bay.

Daisy, a familiar figure among the Siwashes of North Vancouver.