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THERESA KISHKAN

## *QUERCUS VIRGINIANA: DEGREES OF SEPARATION*

### **Abstract**

Charles Frederic Newcombe was a doctor, field ethnologist, and naturalist who arrived in Victoria, B.C. in 1889. As well as becoming B.C.'s first psychiatrist, he was a prolific collector of coastal First Nations artifacts for many North American museums; his acquisitions eventually formed the aboriginal collections for the Royal British Columbia Museum.

As a child living in Victoria, I was taken with my Brownie pack to the home of an elderly man who had many Native artefacts. He lived on the Dallas Road waterfront. Years later I wondered who he was; I hoped he might have been Charles Newcombe or his son William, also a noted ethnologist. In "*Quercus virginiana: Degrees of Separation*," I attempt to find my way back to that house, to determine how much of my memory can be trusted, and to consider the ways in which the city of my birth and early childhood changed and didn't change.

During my investigations, I discovered that another house I had known in my childhood, where I watched an ancient man at work on a totem pole, and had believed then to have existed in Thunderbird Park since the beginnings of time, was in fact an "authentic replica of a Kwakiutl house of the nineteenth century." This discovery contains a series of paradoxes, both territorial and cultural, which proves that nothing is as permanent as change and the shifting boundaries of how we remember the past. Using some archival materials, photographic and textual, the essay mediates between history and memory, the aboriginal context of the place that became Victoria and the colonial reinvention of that place.

### **Key words**

*Autobiography; Charles Frederick Newcombe; trees; memory; Aboriginal peoples; Victoria, British Columbia*

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*To sum up the outward madness of nations, this is the land to which we drive out our neighbours and dig up and steal their turf to add to our own, so that he who has marked his acres most widely and driven off his neighbours may rejoice in possessing an infinitesimal part of the earth.*

—Pliny the Elder

I realized, as soon as we drove down Dallas Road, that this couldn't be the house. The numbers weren't right. I thought – I hoped – that the house I remembered from a Brownie field trip might have belonged to the Newcombe family. I know Charles died in 1924 but thought that William lived into the 60s. I imagined it would be somehow significant to know I had been shown the collections of two men so instrumental in gathering the various histories of our province: its botanical record, the material culture of its First Nations, and the artistic legacy of Emily Carr. So on a trip to Victoria, my husband and I drove over to Dallas Road and peered at house numbers. I had a copy of Martin Segger and Douglas Franklin's *Exploring Victoria's Architecture* with a photograph of the Newcombe house, and its address (Franklin 1996: 175). I was trying to wrestle my vague memories into something resembling fact.

But it became clear that the Newcombe house was too far west, near Ogden Point. The one we'd been walked to by our Owls from the church basement at Five Corners where the Brownie pack met weekly was further east, between Moss and Linden Streets, near Clover Point. Met at the door by a very old man, we'd been led into a dark hall, wood-paneled, and then into a large room where cases of spiders and butterflies were shown to us. I remember Native masks on the walls and a small totem pole. The man had been a missionary. We were also told he'd known Emily Carr, a name that stayed with me although at the time I had no idea who she was. In those years – I'm referring to 1961 or 2 – her work hadn't achieved the iconic status that it rightly enjoys now.

Victoria was a city of retired military men, and ladies in white gloves. W. J. Wilson's sold them tweed jackets and Shetland sweaters and Murchie's carried the tea they liked, measured from great tins with a metal scoop. The Bengal Room at the Empress Hotel knew how to mix their drinks – Singapore Slings, Pimm's Cup and Tanqueray G&Ts. On windy days, you could see couples dressed as though for church, walking the seafront along Dallas Road with dogs straining on leashes. My father called it their "constitutional," a word that puzzled me in this context because I thought it had to do with good government.

In those years I'm writing about, a child could ramble freely around Fairfield neighbourhood and the waterfront along the Strait of Juan de Fuca. I had a small blue two-wheeler, and I remember riding as far as Beacon Hill Park. There were trails known as Lovers Lanes, dense with snowberry, and once I accidentally knocked down a wasp nest, crying out as the angry residents stung my legs again and again. My pedal pushers had to be cut off and for days my calves were too swollen to move them much. Rather than fear, I remember extreme impatience that I had to pass the days inside when the whole world was going on without me.

Clover Point was nearby, a peninsula jutting out into the Juan de Fuca Strait. A road perambulates around its circumference and a grassy area in the middle is where we stood with hundreds of others watching the Queen being driven by slowly, her gloved hand waving, first to one side, then the other. In my family, it was insisted upon that she waved specifically at my younger brother but there is no way of proving this. In those years, he was skinny and all nose and I don't

imagine he stood out of the crowd to inspire special notice. Certainly we didn't present flowers. I remember standing in that grassy place with my family, feeling strange in my Sunday dress and coat. We often walked down to Clover Point on a Saturday morning to collect bark in grocery bags for the wood-burning stove in the kitchen of our house on Eberts Street. Our mother organized these outings, in any weather, insisting that we wear our oldest clothing – the patched dungarees and faded kangaroo jackets. We'd walk the beaches, choosing pieces that would fit in our stove, and we'd trudge home with the heavy bags of damp bark. It was piled on the back porch to dry, within easy reach of the kitchen.

It never occurred to me in childhood to wonder how Clover Point got its name. The grass in the area between the ring of paved road was short and wiry, shorn by flocks of geese that patrolled the waterfront. Their droppings were everywhere. Masses of broom on the cliffs above the water hummed with bees in spring. But clover was not much in evidence. There's a story here, I mused, and went in search of it. One of the voices was that of James Douglas, arriving at this point in 1842: "Both Kinds [of soil], however, produce Abundance of Grass, and several varieties of Red Clover grow on the rich moist Bottoms [...] In Two Places particularly, we saw several Acres of Clover growing with a Luxuriance and Compactness more resembling the close Sward of a well-managed Lea than the Produce of an uncultivated Waste" (qtd. in Turner 1999).

Botanist Dr. T. Christopher Brayshaw, Curator Emeritus of the Royal British Columbia Museum, suggested that the most likely clover species was *Trifolium wormskjoldii*, or Springbank Clover (qtd. in Turner 1999). This plant has long fleshy rhizomes which served as an important food source for many Native peoples, including the Lekwungen who managed extensive areas of rich growth along what is now Dallas Road. Notions of gardens and husbandry vary from culture to culture and it seems that colonists arriving on Vancouver Island didn't recognize these systems of maintenance and use (and of course it didn't occur to them that ownership of these lands might in fact be an issue). Once Fort Victoria was established in 1843, there was industrious clearing, and planting of those crops the new arrivals couldn't imagine a civilization doing without: carrots, turnips, potatoes, oats. What had been admired about the area – the parklike Garry oak meadows, the tall grasses, ferns, blue camas, "the several Acres of Clover" – was replaced with farms, a rifle range, hotels, and of course the Ross Bay Cemetery on the site of Isabella Ross's farm.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a young man biked down Cook Street, "a rutted, muddy roadway with a large pear tree in the centre" (qtd. in Ringuette 2004). (I close my eyes and try to see this. I wonder where the pear tree would have been. I'd like to think of it on the section of Cook Street where the small shops and fish and chip enterprises cluster now near May Street, and Faithful.) That same young man remembered Sikh cremations on the beach at Clover Point, six-foot log segments criss-crossed to form the funeral pyre, with the body placed gently on top (Ringuette 2004). And in the years I'm writing about, the early 1960s, one would have been hard-pressed to find an area of *Trifolium wormskjol-*

*dii* at Clover Point, though I remember finding condoms on the beach, washed in on the waves that also carried raw sewage from the outfall. I didn't know what a condom was and thought it was a sturdy balloon until my mother smacked me for putting it to my mouth. She refused to say why. Many years later I realized my error and cringed at the thought. But of course the salt would have long washed away the little sac's former contents.

My friends and I created elaborate bakeshops on that beach, cakes of damp sand frosted with glittering grains as white as sugar. We displayed our loaves and sweetmeats on logs, then waited for the tide to rise and take them all to sea. There was often a whiff of sewage. We were certainly never allowed to swim at Clover Point or Ross Bay. Some days my mother walked us over to Gonzales Beach, taking a shortcut through the cemetery and along Hollywood Crescent. Gonzales was a more protected bay and had the advantage of a small confectionary adjacent to the steps down to the beach. Sometimes we were treated to a popsicle for the walk home. I loved the root-beer ones best; there was something about the way they tasted in a mouth dried out by salt, for what child could swim for hours without taking in water?

Growing up, I remember the elderly couples at work in their gardens, tending neat English borders of perennials, watched by a cocker spaniel or Jack Russell. These were couples who were kind to children whose baseballs landed in their back yard. And there were also the widows. Invited into their houses, I was filled with the sense that time had stopped. Such still quiet. (I came from a home loud with four children.) I realize now that some of these women had lost their husbands in the Great War. Photographs of smiling men in uniform, many of them on horseback, filled the mantelpieces and tops of china cabinets. My mother knew them all, it seemed, and offered my brothers and me for chores, errands, and sometimes just for company. One of the widows (though not from that war), a Polish woman who spoke almost no English, lived on May Street in a tall ramshackle house. My mother befriended Mrs. Ciechanowski, maybe because my father could speak a few words of Polish (learned from his older half-sisters whose father was Polish; his mother's second husband, his father, had come from Bukovina and spoke Ukrainian).

We were timid about entering Mrs. Ciechanowski's house. It smelled strongly. She cooked food my father raved over, dishes his own mother must have cooked for her first husband and then continued making for her second family – cabbage rolls, soups with peppery sausage and potatoes, bowls of pickled beets that dripped and stained like blood. This contrasted so sharply with our macaroni and cheese, our roast beef on Sundays. Once my father drove us all to a cemetery in Colwood where Mrs. Ciechanowski's husband was buried and she arranged my brothers and me around his grave and led us in a song that I only realized half-way through was "Happy Birthday." Afterwards there was cake and juice served on a blanket she spread over the grass between graves.

These were the years when I was a Brownie in a Pack which met at the church at Five Corners, opposite Sir James Douglas Elementary School. When

I walked with my Pack to Dallas Road and into the missionary's house. When we no doubt received a badge to indicate we'd been courteous to an old man who showed us cases of hairy spiders, artefacts of dark wood and bone, masks featuring strange birds hung with hair that looked suspiciously human, and who hoped we might understand something of the dimensions of a life spent among the heathens, urging them to accept God into their hearts. Two years later, when my family moved to Halifax, I remember telling my aunt and grandmother that I wanted to be a missionary when I grew up. I don't think I was inspired by the man on Dallas Road but was trying to rehabilitate my image which I'd felt had been tarnished by my excitement at being allowed to choose a Barbie doll once we'd actually arrived in Halifax after a long camping trip across Canada. Barbies were new on the market and I wanted one badly. I suppose I must have expressed this to my grandmother and aunt. And when I was finally taken by my parents to Eaton's to buy one – an ash-blond model with a bubble cut – I was thrilled beyond imagining. But when I showed my prize off after returning to Walnut Street where my grandmother lived in a huge old house, her disapproval was immediate: “*This* is what you were so excited about? I expected a baby doll.” I suppose the doll's bust and worldly wardrobe were not considered appropriate to a girl of eight. Or those long long legs, and feet designed for high-heeled shoes, some of them trimmed with feathers and glitter. The house on Walnut Street was not one that had known contemporary children. “I want to be a missionary when I grow up,” I told them, desperate for their approval, their affection. Forgetting the doll for a moment, they smiled at me. My mother was visibly relieved.

Sometimes we visited the museum in the Legislative Buildings. There were stuffed animals with staring glass eyes, cases of textiles, and dust. In the basement was the ethnology collection. More interesting to me was nearby Thunderbird Park where a child could watch an old man at work on a totem pole while fragrant curls and chips of cedar drifted from his tools. Sometimes he talked to us, his words slow and almost foreign to our ears. I imagined he'd always been there, a relic from the days when all of Victoria was a Native village site; when the city had been developing, he'd somehow been allowed to keep his lodge. When the wind was right, he could smell the sea, and gulls whirled in the blue sky above. We knew so little about the people who had lived on Vancouver Island before Hudson's Bay Company Chief Factor James Douglas stepped ashore in 1842 and the wheels of change began to turn.

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### **What They Brought**

Japanese flowering cherries, dawn redwoods, monkey puzzle trees, blue Atlas cedars, English walnuts, Portuguese laurels, *Pinus negra* from Austria, Aleppo pines from the Mediterranean, Korean cedars, true and weeping cypresses, *Quer-*

*cus robur* (especially the Coronation oaks in churchyards and schoolyards, in public and private gardens), bigleaf lindens, Camperdown elms, catalpas and empresses, medlars, Tasmanian eucalyptus.

Brides, a hundred of them, sailing from England on the *Tynemouth*, the *Alpha*, the *Robert Lowe* and the *Marcella*. Some of them becoming the wives of prominent men – Emma Lazenby who married David Spencer, whose store on Government Street was where we always went for school clothes; Margaret Faussett who married John Jessop, both of them teaching the Colony's children, and John rising to the position of Superintendent of Education for British Columbia.

Cloth, seeds, race horses, fine English china, hats and woolens, cricket bats, boatloads of assorted dry goods for provisioning shops, surveying equipment, the language of litigation, roses and sabres and knighthoods.

Grey squirrels to displace their smaller cousins. Starlings. House sparrows. *Rattus norvegicus*.

Names. Victoria herself. Albert (for Albert Head), Saxe Point, James Bay and Langford and Colwood (nostalgic for home). The beautiful Selkirk Water and Finlayson Arm. Ross Bay and McNeill Bay, the long view from Mount Douglas and Mount Tolmie, their slopes blue with camas in spring, fringed with erythroniums. Streets named for architects and mayors and wives of merchants. Nods to the Native people themselves but in an orthography we can all pronounce.

Stories at every turn, to be remembered on maps (Glimpse Reef, for the shipwrecked barque off Clover Point in 1860; farms nestled within the names of bustling communities: Craigflower, Strawberry Vale, Broadmead, the ghosts of its horses galloping over golden grass where the smoke of burned Garry oaks hangs in the air like spiderweb).

Expectations of commerce, cotillions, academies of learning where Greek and Latin texts jostle the butterfly nets at the ready for species now extirpated or worse, extinct. *Euchloe ausonides*, the Large Marble, *Euphydryas editha taylori*, Edith's Checkerspot, and *Callophrys mossii mossii*, the nominate subspecies Moss's Elfin.

The shoemaker, John Fannin, with his menagerie of stuffed game animals, hungering for a museum.

\* \* \*

### A Version of Wawadit'la

The old man we watched carving at Thunderbird Park, a man with a soft voice and younger helpers, whose tools left curls of cedar behind – spicy *Thuja plicata*, or Western Red Cedar, and the skunkier pungent *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*, or Yellow Cedar – might have been Mungo Martin. The time was right. Mungo Martin and his son-in-law Henry Hunt worked on the Welcome Sign posts between 1960 and 1962, the same years I was riding my blue bike through Fairfield and into Beacon Hill Park. The ceremonial big house at Thunderbird Park is a smaller version of Martin's ancestral property at Tsaxis, or Fort Rupert, a house called

Wawadit'la which belonged to the hereditary chief Nakap'ankam. As the inheritor of that title, it was Mungo Martin's right to build the house and to display its associated carvings; the house was dedicated in a ceremonial way, with potlatches and dancing, in December, 1953. While the city buzzed and hummed with the electric wealth of the post-war years, a man patiently carved sea lions and grizzly bears in a smaller version of his home on the northern end of Vancouver Island, in Kwakwaka'wakw territory. And in any place, Tsaxis or Victoria, in any era, 17<sup>th</sup> century or mid-20<sup>th</sup>, there would have been children drawn to the smooth movements of his hands, fascinated but not surprised to see the strange animals emerge from the raw wood.

Lots to consider here. That a man who'd seen so much of his material culture disappear to anthropologists, museum collectors, missionaries keen to remove the vestiges of a spiritual life they couldn't begin to understand yet were not adverse to making money from afterwards, teams of authorities seizing ceremonial items used during potlatches or asking for their surrender as grounds for suspending sentences, well, that man given the task of recreating many of the poles and canoes and masks that had deteriorated beyond repair. (I think of the young men who carved with him: his son-in-law, his grandsons, others, all of whom learned by watching his hands, felt their weight over theirs as they used their adzes, their knives and chisels. How to work with an imperfection, how to judge depth and grain.) Given a small corner of the colonial enterprise on Victoria's Inner Harbour to build the scaled-down version of Wawadit'la and to bring together elements of the coastal cultures so assiduously removed from the city in its earlier days. (In Victoria itself, the Lekwungen village site at Songhees was relocated, the waterways and wetlands once used for travel filled in or directed underground through culverts, the languages discouraged, the spiritual practices vilified.)

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Although I know the Newcombes – Charles and his son William, I mean – weren't missionaries, I somehow wish that the man my Brownie pack had visited had been one of them. William, I suppose, because Charles died in 1924. I have a clumsy theory about degrees of separation working vertically as well as horizontally. That we can trace our relationships down the rich road to the past, like an archaeologist examining the layers of Troy, the same way we can connect ourselves to others through the present. I'm not sure that six degrees will always take us somewhere significant but in many cases it can.

When I was a young teenager and my family lived at Royal Oak, I had a horse. I often rode him down our street to a series of trails on Colquitz Creek. There was a house tucked back off the road, a sort of colonial-style bungalow; two more of a similar design occupied the front part of the lot nearer the street. At the end of the driveway leading back to that house, I'd sometimes see an elderly man out for a walk with his daughter and wife. They were the Footners. The man liked my horse. I remember him telling me I had a fine animal. Once I was



helping my mother go from door to door in our neighbourhood on behalf of the March of Dimes and the Footners invited us in while they found a contribution to our collection. It was an interesting house with photographs and chintz curtains, I remember, and sat in its privacy with old roses and apple trees around it. Many years later, while engaged in research for a novel I'd set in the orchard settlement of Walhachin, I was astonished to discover that elderly man, Bertram Chase Footner, had been responsible for designing and building the houses of that settlement. I'd been there for research and had been taken by the remnants of the old community, a few of the bungalows with their steep-pitched roofs, high ceilings, and wraparound porches attesting to careful attention to climate. His own house there – for he'd lived for a time at Walhachin, his daughter Mollie had been born there (the middle-aged daughter I'd known a little in my teen-aged years) – was built of river-stone, still quietly elegant on its height above the Thompson River.

If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have asked Mr. Footner questions; I'd have asked about his life after the Boer War when he built bridges in the Sudan, a time and place so far away from our semi-rural street in Royal Oak. But he died in 1972 before I knew any of this – that I would go on to write books, that I would become passionately interested in the history of the province I'd been born and raised in and took for granted until my own middle years. I've tried, not hard enough perhaps, to find out if he had built the house he lived in at Royal Oak and perhaps the other two that resembled it on what might have been a larger lot that he'd subdivided. (One archivist I spoke to insisted that the street hadn't existed before the 50s. Yet there was an ancient farmstead across the road when we first moved there, with an equally ancient apple orchard and cider press. The man who owned it said it was the oldest house in Saanich. It was torn down in the late 70s for a subdivision. Well, maybe not under the current street name, I suggested, but the road itself certainly existed well back into the century and maybe before. He dismissed me as a crank.)

That single degree of separation (albeit tenuous) between myself and Walhachin, the Boer War even, was something to ponder. Growing up, my brothers had received *Boys Own Annuals* from their former Cub Master at Christmas and these had been full of stories of the struggles between the British and the Afrikaners as the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned over to the 20<sup>th</sup>. The names – Transvaal, Mafeking, Natal – entranced me. Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scouting movement, had distinguished himself during this war which was probably the reason that my brothers received the books as gifts. But still that history had its resonance for a girl growing up in Victoria with its own traces of colonialism, its majors at the Bengal Room gazing mournfully into their gin. My mother scoured the Goodwill on lower Yates for riding breeches and boots for me, a worn trace of those soldiers. Tags on the jodhpurs might hark back to India or Jermyn Street and sometimes the aging leather boots had old-fashioned shoe trees within them to keep them shapely. I imagined someone – maybe a widow or a landlady – collecting up all the old garments and putting them in a carton to be taken to the Goodwill, for who else but a girl whose allowance didn't stretch to proper riding

clothes would want such things? They were impossibly cheap. \$1.29. 75 cents. The detritus of lives passed and now forgotten.

Of course it makes no difference that the house my Brownie pack entered to gaze upon the spoils of colonial hyper-confidence and activity was not the Newcombe house. I knew nothing of this then. I knew no Native people. When we took a Sunday drive out past Brentwood Bay, we'd pass the tidy old farms on West Saanich Road, the fancier houses near the water, and then we'd come to the Reserve. Small noises would come from my parents' throats. They disapproved of the unpainted houses, the untidy yards, the dogs everywhere. It wasn't until much later that I learned anything of the history that allowed for such discrepancy between the communities. Paved sidewalks and prosperity on one side of the line; poverty on the other. Yet no one pointed out that each of those homes on the Reserve had a smoke-house behind it, that in spite of education policies that almost exterminated the cultures and languages of the original inhabitants of the coast, there was evidence of pride and dignity. Or that there was no need to clear out the wild plants in order to have gardens. Gardens were an attempt to mirror Eden. But what if you already lived there? What if you could step out your door and pick huckleberries, salal, the new tips of thimbleberry to steam like celery? What if you could dig the roots of the blue camas to dry, Springbank Clover tasting like young peas, wild onions to flavour your stew? Or climb down to the beach to the clambeds, carefully terraced over the centuries. That walking in the woods was like wandering through a vast and beloved place of abundance? Why clear the earth of all these life-giving plants in order to have ... grass? Once, years later, I was riding my bike from a temporary residence out on Ardmore Drive to my summer job near Brentwood Bay, passing through the Reserve, when a very old man came out to call off a dog that was lunging at me. "Here," he said, "try this," passing me a knife with something speared on its tip. And I ate a slice of warm salmon right out of the smokehouse. It tasted of the sea, and campfires on cool evenings, buttery and smoky. It was utterly of the place and time. And no one I knew was eating it. Except there.

But back to the house on Dallas Road. I'd seen a photograph of the Newcombe house in *Exploring Victoria's Architecture* and I wanted to try to recover that moment in my childhood when I might have been a degree closer to the history I have always gravitated towards. 138 was the number. We parked our car and stood on the other side of the road. I was gesticulating with my hands in my usual excitable fashion and my husband said, "Someone is waving to you." And sure enough, two men in the glassed-in veranda were smiling and waving. An elderly woman waiting at the bus stop beside where we stood said, "It's a Halfway House, you know."

I didn't know. I asked her if she knew it had been built for Dr. Charles F. Newcombe, a man indirectly responsible for the Provincial Museum. "No," she said, "how interesting. The neighbourhood has changed, of course."

As had the house. That verandah hadn't always been glassed-in, though the balusters, generous eaves, and angled bay windows hadn't been altered. I was re-

mind of 18<sup>th</sup> century houses, Italianate in design, that I'd seen in leafy boroughs of London. A huge tree, with a crown of at least fifty feet, spread over the front yard of the Newcombe house. It was February the first time we parked opposite the house and though a few snowdrops and crocuses were in bloom in some of the protected gardens, it was still winter and not even local forsythias were in bud. So I was surprised to see that this tree was fully in leaf. But it wasn't a conifer or any evergreen that I recognized. It had vaguely elliptical leaves, glossy on top and slightly downy on the undersides. It was very lovely. Was it some kind of eucalyptus? It had no odour. I pinched off a small branch so I could try to identify it at a later point, placing it in my copy of *Exploring Victoria's Architecture*, the book that had alerted me to the possibility that this might be the house of my Brownie memory by providing the wrong address: 1381 instead of 138. (Small typo + big hope = inevitable disappointment.)

I kept the house in mind and the sprig of leaves tucked into *Exploring Victoria's Architecture*. Periodically I'd look through my reference books and try to figure out what kind of tree shaded the south-facing veranda with its Georgian-Revival influenced windows and the balustraded roofline of the house built in 1907 for Dr. Charles Newcombe and his family. A tree reaching deep to anchor itself to the earth, reaching for water and nutrients, as I tried to anchor myself in the rich loam of history and narrative. I wondered what it might mean that the tree was not a native species but something chosen for its exotic qualities, its reminders of foreign travel, its ability to conjure a landscape with resonances perhaps now mute to our century.

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As a child I was impressed that Beacon Hill Park featured the tallest totem pole in the world, carved by Mungo Martin. It was erected in 1958 and was 127 feet tall. Sometimes I'd ride my bike over to the park and sit at the base of the pole. I could see the Juan de Fuca Strait and often there was a cold wind coming off it. I remember leaning my head back and trying to read the story in the totem's elements. No one talked about its imagery. To refresh my memory, I've checked the newspaper reporting of the time and find no mention of the symbolic elements of the work. Its size was emphasized, the method of placing it in a skirt like a huge candleholder so that guy wires weren't required.

The cedar tree that became the tallest pole grew at Muir Creek off the West Coast Road near Sooke. Brought to Thunderbird Park, it became graphic with Mungo Martin's family stories. Beginning with Geeksan wrapped in a blanket at the bottom, followed by the cannibal bird Huxwhuck, the crest animals rise one by one – killer whale with its formidable teeth, sea lion, eagle, sea otter clutching a fish, another whale, beaver, a man, seal, wolf, crowned by three men, two of them wearing blankets against the chill winds off Juan de Fuca Strait. And perhaps against loneliness. Beacon Hill Park is far from Fort Rupert on the northern edge of Vancouver Island where the stories had their origins.

I saw the world as an animated place. Walking the beach in search of bark for our stove on Eberts Street, I'd find long lizards of rootwood tangled in amongst the logs with the faces of ravens peering out of the grain, ovoid knots forming the eyes. The monkey-puzzle trees with their serpent-like branches dropped cones scaled as the garter snakes my brothers would drop down my t-shirt, leaving me frozen in horror as the dry terrified animals slithered out above the waistband of my shorts. It wasn't that I was frightened of the snakes themselves. I could spend ages looking at one sleeping on Moss Rocks, even touching the pattern on the scales with a tentative finger. But feeling them against my bare skin was enough to make me pee my pants. Which I suppose was the idea. I learned to pretend indifference as I got older, which meant that I lost the knowledge of reptile skin against my own.

I saw the tired heads of elk in the bare branches of Garry oak and black bears nosed their way from the burned wood of old bonfires. So looking up into the faces of Mungo Martin's crest animals staring steadfastly out to sea from their perch on the tallest totem was akin to reading a story from a culture adjacent to my own but which shared elements, a sense of the numinous, and to recognize the familiar amidst the strange. These were not my crest animals but they were part of the landscape I loved and some of them had formed me as surely as they formed any child born into its locus, aboriginal or white.

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I was reading *Trees of Greater Victoria: A Heritage* and was completely surprised to come across this information: "A rare heritage evergreen species, known as live oak, *Quercus virginiana*, at 144 Dallas Road, 36 inches (91 cm) in diameter, 22 feet (6.7 m) tall, has an amazing spread of over 50 feet (15.2 m). It is on the old homesite of C.F. Newcombe, outstanding Haida Indian authority for whom the Newcombe Auditorium at the Provincial Museum is named" (Chaster et al. 1985: 43).

So not a eucalyptus at all! Instead, it was a tree I'd read about in southern American literature, a tree associated with William Faulkner and Walt Whitman, a tree ancient and gnarled, draped with Spanish moss. In fact, the tree became a code for Whitman's robust homosexuality in the much-discussed "Live Oak, with Moss":

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,  
 All alone stood it, and the moss hung down from the branches,  
 Without any companion it grew there, glistening out with joyous leaves of  
 dark green,  
 And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself;  
 But I wondered how it could utter joyous leaves, standing alone there  
 without its friend, its lover – For I knew I could not . . . (lines 1–5)

But why did Newcombe choose a live oak, I wondered. Living in a city surrounded by wonderful native species – and himself a man who knew the value plants

and how a culture utilized them for medicines, commerce and the practical business of everyday life – why choose a tree from the south-eastern United States? Although common in southern cities, it is a tree happiest in parks, large estates and on river banks where it can access damp sandy soil and where it can spread. The widest crown of any live oak is more than 150 feet, belonging to a tree in Florida. I tried to figure out why that tree, in that place.

Next time I'm in Victoria, I drive over to Dallas Road (144 is next to 138; the lot was no doubt larger in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when Newcombe built here) and park across from Ogden Point breakwater. All those huge granite blocks were brought from Hardy Island, near where I live on the Sechelt Peninsula. I want to walk out on it as I did as a young girl with boyfriends on dark Friday nights. We'd pause to kiss as waves crashed against the exposed side. I always felt like I might fall – into the deep cold water of Juan de Fuca Strait or the more mysterious waters of human affection. Perhaps it was that fear of the deep that kept me from loving any of those young men, or even having them matter to me much, for I have a hard time remembering a single one of their names. I pinch off another small branch of live oak with its deep green leaves, their undersides downy as a boy's face, and tuck it into my notebook, a small accordion pocket at the back provided for mementos. I don't see any of the acorns nestled in their deep cups but this is a neighbourhood of squirrels, plentiful and industrious. The nameless branch at home is still pressed in a plant book, my efforts to identify it unsuccessful. Though now I can put a tiny bit of tape around its stem and write on it, *Quercus virginiana*.

No, not eucalyptus with its pinch of menthol but a tree to grow quickly to a size large enough for shade, and tolerant of salt-winds. 138 Dallas Road is very exposed. There were fortified village sites along this part of the waterfront, beginning 800–900 years before contact, with moats and stockades; and it was kept shrub-free in order to encourage camas, Hookers onion and other food plants of the Lekwungen people. Later on the whole area was known as Beckley Farm, producing meat and vegetables for the Fort. Cattle and pigs ate the camas flowers before they could seed and the pigs even dug up the bulbs, eager for their sweetness. Little by little, exotic and introduced species took over from the delicate wild grasses and herbs. A live oak in soil once nurturing Garry oaks or arbutus.

\* \* \*

The squeak of the wooden wheels of change, carts dragged by sleepy oxen to and from the Fort, bringing turnips, potatoes, slabs of bloody meat.

Squeaking as they brought food to the pesthouse where a five-year old child was taken from the Prince Alfred in 1872, “the house formerly occupied by Mrs. Nias on Beckley Farm, which is now Government property and which was fitted up yesterday for the reception of the little sufferer. The yellow flag waves over the house” (*British Colonist*, 15 June 1872).

Ploughs turning and opening, carts waiting to take away the stones, gulls wheeling in their wake in the clear blue skies over the fields of Beckley Farm.

Imagine Lekwungen families watching as their own cultivated patches of common camas and Great camas disappeared without any consultation. A child in the shadow of a Garry oak, digging stick in hand, puzzled by the sad turning away of a parent while pigs rooted and feasted on broken bulbs turned up by the plough. The smallpox patient taken to the pesthouse died and was buried somewhere on the waterfront, marked now with a small plaque, though the exact location of her grave has been long forgotten. That little sufferer, bones under the foreign grasses and Scotch broom of Holland Point.

\* \* \*

Charles Newcombe, doctor, natural historian and anthropologist, was commissioned by Kew to collect Aboriginal artefacts from British Columbia. The objects, including fish nets and hooks, ropes, garments, baskets, wood-working tools and gambling sticks, reflect the daily life and industries of the Aboriginal peoples and hint at their extensive knowledge of the natural environment and its resources.

(“Canadian Aboriginal Artefacts”)

He was an intrepid collector, not just for Kew but for the Field Museum and other institutions all over North America and abroad. He wanted Canadian institutions to recognize the value of the materials but had only intermittent luck for years, though received encouragement from George Mercer Dawson of the Canadian Geological Survey. It became a deplorable competition, boats going up and down the coast carrying fervent hunters for the authentic object. Poles, bentwood boxes, rattles, masks, even something called “osteological collections” – in other words, skeletons. Some museums wanted to have characteristic materials from the discrete cultural areas. Some went for quantity over quality. Some were generous with funding and urged their agents to go to extreme measures to procure trophies of special interest.

The missionaries were involved, of course. At first they encouraged their converts in the Native villages to burn totem poles and other aspects of traditional life. But then they realized how valuable these items were. In Jan Hare and Jean Barman’s *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast*, there is a telling passage in one of Emma Crosby’s letters home to her mother. It is 1875 and the Crosbys have been visited by James Swan, erstwhile Indian Agent from Washington and agent for the Smithsonian Institute who is also collecting for the upcoming Centennial Exhibition: “Another stray str. visited us a few weeks ago & a U.S. revenue cutter having on board a U.S. Indian agent looking up Indian curiosities for the approaching Centennial Exhibition. He took dinner with us & I should say was a fair specimen of the U.S. Indian agent as reputed to be – not inconveniently high-minded” (Hare et al. 2006: 85). This visit was further elaborated upon in Douglas Coles’ *Captured Heritage*: “Inducing the Indians to give up their heathen ways, Methodist missionary Thomas Crosby had

persuaded many to remove poles from outside their houses, and, though some of these had been burned, others were collected ‘in a sort of museum.’ Swan bought one, a finely-carved forty-foot specimen, and he hoped for more. Both Crosby and C. E. Morrison, the HBC trader, agreed to gather a collection for Swan which they would send to Victoria” (Cole 1985: 22–23). Realizing how potentially lucrative the objects were, Crosby began to collect for himself as well and was ideally placed to persuade those under his pastorate to give up their cultural wealth.

There were rivalries to see which collectors could acquire the most poles, whole houses, coppers, and feast dishes. On one collecting trip for Franz Boas, Newcombe sailed to Ninstints, off the tip of Moresby Island in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Chief Ninstints himself accompanied Newcombe as pilot. Newcombe reported to Boas that the Chief “is half-blind and I hope to acquire many interesting things in that almost wholly deserted village for you.” (The population of Ninstints had been decimated by smallpox earlier in the century.) One of the crew diverted the Chief’s attentions while a few “osteological” items were located, though not what had been hoped for. However, other village sites were visited and mortuary areas raided while the “half-blind” Chief Ninstints was kept busy in other ways (Cole 1985: 191).

Yet the collection at Kew takes us from grave-robber and villain (of a sort: these things are never black and white and, at the time Newcombe was in hot pursuit of artefacts, it was an acceptable practice) to a passionate advocate for the importance of ethnobotany. A beautiful set of gambling sticks carved of pacific crabapple is as lovely as anything sold in a contemporary craft shop. And a halibut hook, formed of western yew and strong enough to bring up the weight of one of those bottom-dwelling denizens weighing in excess of 400 pounds, is graceful and practical. There is some suggestion that collections such as these work to educate those whose cultures have lost their traditional practices. The carefully wrought baskets and implements hold the lessons of their makers, the way their hands worked the fibres, the marks of the adze on the wood, and do much to help us recover the past.

And the Royal British Columbia Museum keeps hundreds of photographs taken by Newcombe showing village sites in all their intact dignity, houses gazing solemnly to sea with canoes pulled up in front and a few people purposefully digging clams or sitting on logs in sunlight. For all that he removed from those locations, Newcombe preserved a complex codex of place and culture in that photographic record.

\* \* \*

### **The Salvage Paradigm**

I read whatever I can about Wa’waditla. Wilson Duff, the anthropology curator at the Provincial Museum who encouraged the construction of Wa’waditla, said, “This is an authentic replica of a Kwakiutl house of the nineteenth century. More

exactly, it is Mungo Martin's house, bearing on its houseposts some of the hereditary crests of his family. This is a copy of a house built at Fort Rupert about a century ago by a chief whose position and name Mungo Martin had inherited and assumed – Naka'penkim" (Duff 1963: 20). Yet it seems there was no single house on which Mungo Martin modeled his Thunderbird Park version. Rather, there are several.

The house where Mungo Martin was born was the home of his mother's uncle, the old chief Naka'penkim (Nuytten 1982: 86). It appears this house was never finished – it had no frontal painting. In what seems to be a homage to his father, who had come from Gwayasdums on Gilford Island, Martin uses an image from a house there for the frontal painting of the Thunderbird Park Wa'waditla, though with some stylistic changes. Martin reverses figures on the houseposts from those on Naka'penkim's house, and synthesizes other design elements. In a paper given at the 1987 annual general meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago, Ira Jacknis considers the various sources informing Mungo Martin's concept for Wa'waditla and the way the house both reflects the ideal and the pragmatic in terms of its influences: "[...] the non-native context of Martin's house may have encouraged the artist to synthesize diverse Kwakiutl forms into a kind of 'super-artifact'" (Jacknis 1990: 7).

And what is a copy, what is authentic? Can the house of a Kwakwaka'wakw chief, built far from the village of its origins, in Lekwungen territory, built with the sense that everything it represented must be commemorated because so much of that culture was disappearing, can this house truly be called a copy? Houses, like songs and stories and other aspects of culture, exist across time and place, in a moment that is everpresent. When I saw that old man, who might have been Mungo Martin, working in Thunderbird Park, it did not occur to me that he had not always worked there, had not always lived in the house with some sort of sea-creature painted on its façade. A child leaning her blue bike against a rock and watching was taken into that moment. The ravens in the trees knew this, their vocabulary unchanged over the centuries, in a city where the bodies of Native children and the young passenger from the Prince Alfred who died in the pesthouse at Holland Point lie under the ground in proximity. Where the charred stones from the pits where Springbank Clover was steamed can be found in the sand. Where the buried streams remember their routes to the Inner Harbour, under what's now the Empress Hotel, and where the old lodges at the original Songhees village site, though vanished, still give off the faint scent of cedar if the wind is right.

Anthropologists might disagree about what is authentic and what isn't, made anxious by preoccupations of contact and culture and the "salvage paradigm."<sup>1</sup> This isn't surprising: careers are built on fine distinctions. There is evidence that Mungo Martin felt that he was the last of his kind in some respects, working against time and oblivion. Wilson Duff wrote to a friend, "Mungo is convinced: (a) that this will be the last 'house-warming' potlatch and (b) that nobody else but him knows exactly how to do the whole thing properly" (Wilson Duff to Ri-



chard Conn, 4 December 1953. BCPM Correspondence, GR 111, box 8, file 39, BCARS). A house recreated and adapted and given new meaning, then; a repository of both memory and history, those duelling conspirators.

What is particularly interesting is that anthropologists can engage in considerations of authenticity so many years after the plundering of the Kwakwaka'wakw villages and the loss of so much of their material culture in part because Charles Newcombe took hundreds of precise photographs documenting the villages. One can look at them, a single degree of separation, and approach something of the experience of gliding onto the beach at Kalokwis among the canoes where the housefronts stare out to sea, their imagery and context intact. Or walk up to the group of people standing in front of Kwaksistala on Harbledown Island in 1900, children and adults wrapped in blankets, a few of them in headdresses. That house's sculpin front informed, in memory, some of Mungo Martin's work in Thunderbird Park, as of course did Gwayasdums. We can almost remember, looking at these photographs; almost trace the trajectory of the artist's work back to his original home at Fort Rupert where clams were dried by the fire and elegant hooks of yew might bring up a halibut. We can almost stand there in our otherness, our clothing slowly absorbing the smell of cedar smoke and salt.

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A natural historian like Charles Newcombe would surely have known about the useful qualities of *Quercus virginiana*. Is this why he planted one? He would have known for instance it was an important tree for ship-building (the US Navy had large tracts of live oak for this very purpose), the massive arching limbs finding their way to the ribs and knees of ships, the wood itself heavy, strong and hard.

The Houma people who lived in Louisiana cherished the live oak. After their own language was absorbed into French, they called it "chéne vert" or the green oak. Its bark provided red paint for the post on the Mississippi River that marked their hunting territory in what is now Baton Rouge (or red post). The acorns were an integral food supply, live oak acorns being high on the list of palatability; they were pressed for their oil and were soaked (to leach out the tannins), dried, and ground to make meal.

The anthropologist John Swanton wrote extensively on the aboriginal peoples of two geographical areas in his long career – the Pacific Northwest and the Southeastern United States. Charles Newcombe met Swanton at Skidegate in 1900 when Newcombe was on a collecting trip for Stewart Cullin and the University of Pennsylvania. The two men got along quite well (Cole 1985: 85). After his work with the Haida and Tlingit, Swanton went on to study the Muskogean peoples of the Southeast (the Houma are included in this linguistic group).

It's a fanciful stretch, I know, but I like to think that maybe Swanton inspired Newcombe to plant his live oak when the latter built his house on Dallas Road. Maybe he even sent a root, an acorn, a small sapling, knowing that the species

could withstand the salt-laden wind off the Juan de Fuca Strait. Potatoes, turnips, and the broom which so drastically changed the face of Victoria, graveposts and houseposts and the entire regalia for winter ceremonials travelling by train across America to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, gambling sticks of crabapple wood destined for the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew ... In such ways cultural and botanical knowledge travel the well-worn roads and rivers of human experience, participating in exchange, small acts of mercy and theft, and larger ones of kindness and exploitation.

In 1906, Charles Newcombe sold a portion of his private collection of artefacts to the Canadian Geological Survey for \$6,500; this paid for the house he built the next year at Ogden Point, the house I'd hoped was the one I'd visited as a Brownie, the same house now sheltering paroled inmates from federal prisons. It no longer even carries the Newcombe name but rather that of a deceased chaplain of one of the local penitentiaries, its original owner forgotten by the neighbours – who maybe even wonder why the large tree on the corner of their property is protected by heritage status and can't be cut down.

Increasingly Newcombe devoted his attentions to the British Columbia Museum of Natural History and Anthropology which had opened in 1887 but which had concentrated on stuffed animals under the direction of its curator John Fannin and not on the cultural riches of the province's Native peoples. If this omission had resulted in the materials being left in villages of their origins, then one could commend Mr. Fannin from this century to his own. But alas, as a visitor to New York observed in 1900, there is "a veritable forest of totem poles" (Ward 1996: 58) at the American Museum of Natural History in Central Park. And the Field Museum in Chicago, through the collecting tenacity of George Dorsey and others, had the contents of many Haida burial caves and gravehouses. Rising to the heights of umbrage, the *British Colonist* featured this bold headline on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, 1903: "LOSS TO BRITISH COLUMBIA – Through the Depredations of United States and Other Foreign Collectors of the Province's Most Valuable Indian Relics." The piece goes on to say, "The government might take a leaf out of the book of the universities of the United States. Several of these have collectors constantly in the field collecting and cataloguing relics and collating their histories. The province could do likewise and appoint some one [*sic*] to conserve what rightfully belongs to us." Of course the little matter of ownership goes unmentioned upon. Newcombe continued to do some collecting as well as writing and publishing on historical and zoological topics.

Memory provides a curious and unreliable template. In an attempt to fit a house into a specific memory, I found another house, its gracious rooms and veranda given over to the healing of men released from prison and trying to find their way back into the world. I discovered that another house I had known in my childhood and had believed then to have stood in Thunderbird Park since the beginnings of time, whatever that meant to me then, contains a series of paradoxes, both territorial and cultural, which proves that nothing is as permanent as change and the shifting boundaries of how we remember the past. A house is

more than those who live in it, its secrets encoded in its architecture and domestic history long after its residents depart from this earth.

\* \* \*

That child on her small blue bicycle explored the fringes of a time and place on the cusp of change, though she didn't know it then. Stepping into the home of a missionary, it didn't occur to her (how could it have? She was seven years old . . .) that the masks on the wall and the rattles used by a shaman somewhere on the coast of the province had been gathered improperly. She had no idea the place where she lived had been colonized so thoroughly that even the namesake plant of her own playground at Clover Point had been supplanted by invader species. Yet she grew up with such clear maps in her mind of that beloved terrain – the snowberry bushes of Lovers Lane hung with the treacherous nests of wasps, the location of the beautiful fawn lilies on Moss Rocks that turned their faces to the world after pollination, a small park where curls of cedar drifted to the ground to be collected by children – that as an adult, sleeping far from those familiar streets, her dreams were often filled with their houses and their trees, the waves washing onto the shores of Ross Bay a distant sacred music.

## Note

- 1 This term comes up in both anthropology and cultural studies to denote the kind of collecting mentality that was so prominent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when ethnographers felt compelled to “save” whatever aspects of material culture they could find, preferably the oldest and most authentic, in the belief that colonial influences would result in the disappearance of indigenous cultures.

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