

# **THE 1811 NASS RIVER INCIDENT: IMAGES OF FIRST CONFLICT ON THE INTERCULTURAL FRONTIER**

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## **Abstract/ Resume**

This paper examines American documentary evidence of an attack on a ship's party in conjunction with Coast Tsimshian oral tradition regarding an indignity suffered by a man at American hands and the consequences that flowed therefrom.<sup>1</sup> In question is the usefulness of the two sorts of records in writing history, as well as the images of international relations portrayed in the incident. This paper attempts to reconcile Tsimshian and American concepts of rational action, given a situation with less than optimal communication and no diplomatic structures for conflict mediation, and then place these concepts into a framework that addresses the present as well as the past.

Cet article réexamine la preuve documentaire américaine d'une attaque contre le complément d'un navire conjointement avec la tradition orale en ce qui concerne l'indignité dont un homme a souffert entre les mains des Américains et les conséquences qui en ont résulté. C'est une question de l'utilité de deux sortes de rapports en écrivant l'histoire, aussi bien que les images des relations internationales qu'on a décrites de l'incident. Cet article essaie de concilier les concepts d'actions rationnelle, étant donné une situation de peu de communication et sans structures diplomatiques pour la médiation des conflits, et puis mettre ces concepts dans un cadre qui a pour sujet le présent aussi bien que le passé.

## Violence on the Northwest Coast

British Columbia historian F.W. Howay wrote in 1925 that the "number of attacks made by the Indians of the Northwest Coast of North America upon the early trading vessels was much greater than is ordinarily supposed," attributing Native motives in great part to "the sight of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done" (Howay, 1925:287). Surveying a broad area and variety of cultures along the coast, Howay sought to identify some principles governing these hostile encounters: in particular, the small crews carried by the ships, the 'child-like' cupidity of the Natives to acquire goods, and the rising technological level of armaments available to the Natives. These, combined with the sharp trading practices on the coast that necessitated Native access to the ships' decks, and the occasional bad-faith seizures of goods or hostages by Euroamericans, led to volatile situations, although James R. Gibson noted that "as the Indians received more abuse and acquired more ordnance, trading 'at arm's length' was restored" (1988:386).

According to Howay "mutual suspicion and insecurity" brought about a cycle of violence with Natives taking every opportunity to avenge 'ancient, or anticipated, or vicarious' wrongs by storming vessels, and the captains all too ready in return "without a moment's hesitation" to fire on persons and settlements (1925:308). Rather than focusing on Natives as rational decision-makers, Howay painted a dramatic portrait of a perpetually insecure relationship, although the number of cases he examined and the motives he identified did not address more than a handful of encounters on the coast.

Writing about the relationships flowing from Chirikov's meeting with the Tlingit in 1741, Ema Gunther opined that "these earliest contacts lacked personal relationships, but at least one cannot consider them hostile" and that "It is unfortunate that it was the white man's firearms that broke the charm rather than a shower of arrows (1972:5). While ostensibly writing to "[establish] the continuity and depth of the principles of Northwest Coast Indian life" (Ibid.:xiv), Gunther mirrored Howay in reducing Native interests to simple reflexive responses to Euroamerican stimuli, noting Tlingit suspicions of Peter Puget (of the Vancouver expedition) "probably due to bad experiences with some 'civilized' visitors" (Ibid.:171). She further cited Richard Cleveland regarding the hostility of the Stikine Tlingits in 1799, apparently due to Beck of the *Cheerful* firing into a canoe with his cannon. Gunther continued, "This probably accounts for some of their behavior," although she omitted to note that the *Cheerful* had run aground and was under attack when the incident took place.<sup>2</sup> The question of Tlingit or other Native complicity in conflicts seems not to have engaged her interest.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in an examination of the Kitwanga Fort Hill in the Skeena River Valley of British Columbia, George MacDonald considered in detail

the ability of the Gitksans and other Tsimshians to organize and undertake large-scale military campaigns, without the benefit of European stimulus, combining a sophisticated technology with a strategy of sieges and fortifications along the Nass and Skeena River valleys.<sup>4</sup>

Robin Fisher recently questioned Howay's assertion regarding the efficacy of Euroamerican firearms, and more particularly examined the dynamic of the early trading relationship, claiming that Native hostility was "overemphasized" in the documentary record (1992:13; 1976). Fisher also questioned whether attacks were motivated by 'revenge only', as this was too dismissive of the Native as an independent actor (1992:15). Aside from addressing one incident at Clayoquot Sound, however, Fisher did not develop further the concept of *proactive* motivation. Stressing strategic parity between the two sides, he concluded that the maritime fur trade was marked by a "balance of actual power" (but presumably not perception of the same?) and that given the "considerable control over both the trade and the power relationship between themselves and the Europeans, they experienced *little cultural disruption* during the period of the maritime fur trade" (Ibid.:17). (Italics mine.)

While many might challenge the latter conclusion, there is also cause to qualify the premise of a rough equivalence in the ability of either side to inflict damage or pain; from the beginning there was a 'strategic' asymmetry that favored the more mobile Euroamerican interlopers, whose homes and possessions were beyond reach of a credible Native threat, thus making 'mutual assured destruction' out of the question. This dichotomization of means and intentions is a critical distinction to maintain in analyzing any political or trade relationship, as *perceptions* of a 'balance of power' tend to set the parameters within which policy is formed, whereas the actual relationship limits freedom of action. There is no inexorable determinism between available means and elective actions - only if a party is cognizant of asymmetry can it be expected to modify behavior. Furthermore, the 'official' explicit policy must be checked against the 'action' policy to determine whether means are actually employed in accordance with abilities or perceptions (or the distinction between what societies profess and what they do).

To attain desired ends was often problematic for parties on either side of the exchange, given the lack of common language, beliefs or protocol resulting in the classical 'prisoner's dilemma' of game theory, according to which actors will often minimize dis-utilities at the expense of sub-optimal attainment of ends; the uncertainties inherent therein are ameliorated in a system of nation-states by means of a diplomatic framework - through negotiation and mediation. As Thomas Schelling noted (1965:1):

But whether polite or impolite, constructive or aggressive, respectful or vicious, whether [bargaining] occurs among friends

or antagonists and whether or not there is a basis for trust and goodwill, there must be some common interest, if only in the avoidance of mutual damage, and an awareness of the need to make the other party prefer an outcome acceptable to oneself.

There were clearly more common interests on the coast than only a mutual desire to avoid pain, but to what extent did the use of violence substitute for communications that would normally have been made through 'diplomatic' means? Implicit in Schelling's analysis is the underlying belief that such violence, because it is purposive, is the result of rational considerations, the effects of which may be weighed and considered.

The manipulation of threats adds an important psychological variable to any international or intercultural mediation. As Schelling wrote: "It is the *threat* of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply... It is the expectation of *more* violence that gets the wanted behavior, if the power to hurt can get it at all" (Ibid.:3). To be effective, coercive violence need not be directed at the object of one's policy: "If *some* Indians were killed to make *other* Indians behave, that was coercive violence" (Ibid.:5). Needless to say, both sides could play that game, and Natives were just as capable of sending signals as were the Euroamericans - whether these signals were always interpreted correctly is a matter for reflection.

While Schelling was primarily concerned with Cold War strategic posturing, his study of the use of force in diplomacy, combined with the concept of *credible* threats, should be borne in mind when examining the Northwest Coast 'frontier'. It has become fashionable to characterize contact in a deterministic manner, ineluctably tending toward the genocidal, even though the limited means available combined with reciprocal interests tended to 'cap' the levels of violence. While measured movements up or down a ladder of deterrence seems bizarre in the context of potential strategic nuclear exchanges, in the case of the nineteenth-century Northwest Coast, the manipulation of threats was both very credible and good policy.

The major conceptual stumbling block to 'decoding' behavior on the coast is the tendency to view 'contact' as the epitomizing event in the clash of cultures. According to such a perspective, the arrival of the first European schooner off a Native village signals an end to Native time, and the commencement of 'history'. While Eric Wolf and others have established that non-European Indigenous peoples have their own histories, into which the Euroamericans blundered, it remains for students of the Coast to reconsider the usefulness of the *contact* situation as a turning point (Wolf, 1982). After all, Native societies were already engaged in a web of myriad cultures, as groups pushed along the coast, or up and down the river valleys. In reviewing the documents and traditions examined in this paper,

the actors involved had already crossed the conceptual threshold of contact, and were well-used to commerce and 'social' interaction.<sup>5</sup> The easy familiarity of the bargaining for peltry suggests a *modus vivendi* had been reached, but the accounts reveal that this was only the appearance of a status quo. In this respect, contact was static and ephemeral: as soon as it was established it was shattered as the actors moved on to define the bounds of their relationship. This dynamic resolution of interests established the framework according to which further relations proceeded. Contact opened all possibilities, but these possibilities were not engaged until interests were defined and conflicts resolved.

These texts detail a first conflict (explicitly in the case of the Tsimshian accounts) which imposed rules on a heretofore open interchange, interjecting an international political order into a purely economic relationship. While the Tsimshians and Euroamericans had already forged their own internal 'domestic' policy with the chiefs bargaining on behalf of the village, and the vessels employed specialized personnel for the trade, the conflict arising from the insult to Gamdzop transcended the purely commercial and broadened the interplay of interests into the abstract spheres of legal redress and even just war, moving from spheres of trade to spheres of influence. As is clear from an examination of the texts, the Tsimshians suffered an insult intolerable in terms of their own cultural practice, and attempted to extend their own notions of retributive justice to the visitors. The American participants viewed the situation as an unlawful breach of the peace, and in turn effected retributive action.

The interplay of these two attempts expressed itself through mutual metaphors of violence, the result of which did not resolve the original offenses, but rather served to establish heretofore unsurveyed bounds within which future international affairs would be conducted. The Tsimshian defined certain behaviors as unacceptable, as did the Americans. Neither side can be said to have attained optimal results, and it is clear that trade was placed on a new plane as a result. At the same time as this episode of violence was playing itself out, however, it also served to more precisely define what had previously been a vacuum, the allowable behavior in the conduct of trade, and paradoxically *lessened* the chances of future violence. As interests crystallized, actors could take steps to forestall future resort to arms.

In this way, the first conflict situation much better defines the intercultural interstices. First contact defines only the infinite possibilities, as each side strives to render the other comprehensible in its own terms. In the first conflict situation, both sides mutually impose their concepts on each other, utilizing physical or psychic violence, reifying possibilities as *policies*. It is this process only that defines the situation as a predictable interaction, facilitating long-term relations. While the coastal situation seemed deterministic - an ineluctable march to American domination - the

transformation from contact to conflict delimited policies but entailed at the same time new opportunities, and moved the politics of the coast into the 'art of the possible'.

Thus Schelling's schema is relevant, as the two sides strove to establish mutually comprehensible protocol; first the general outlines had to be broadly established, which was accomplished by means of purposive violence. Students of international history should be cognizant of the role wars and conflicts have long played in *setting the tables* at which the diplomatists then arrive to negotiate their treaties and documents. Underlying all international relations (and indeed domestic order as well) is a threat - however remote - of force as a sanction. The degree to which it is employed shows the extent to which the parties have previously determined and delineated acceptable behaviors; the most peaceful situation may well conceal the most absolute forceful sanctions. Gunther's supposition that first contacts were not violent is little cause for satisfaction. As interests were only just in the process of formation, it is difficult to see how conflicts (as opposed to 'accidents') could have arisen. In the absence of a consensual international order, the emergence and resolution of conflicts of interest was inevitable and productive of better grounded relations.<sup>6</sup>

A detailed examination of several texts from Tsimshian oral tradition provides a clearer insight into the motives on both sides of one frontier encounter and the relations that developed therefrom. At this stage, American violence - while purposive - did not yield great benefits and the relationship did *not* rapidly dichotomize along racial or ethnic lines. Instead inter- and intra-tribal patterns of conflict resolution persisted, with the newcomers incorporated into existing structures.

## The Documented Incident

One concrete example of violence between the Tsimshian and Americans is preserved in the log of the ship *Hamilton* of Boston, commanded by Lemuel Porter. Trading at the mouth of the Nass River in May 1811, at the close of the oolachen (candlefish) season when thousands of Tsimshian, Tlingit and Haida people were still concentrated in the vicinity, the ship's boat with four men was sent ashore after water.

But just as they got the warter filled they Received a volley of Musquet balls from some Natives Consealed in the woods Which did unfortunately kill the islander died on the spot and shot [ ] Through the boddy & broke his left arm & he fell in the bote & the others got off with her safe with the assistance of the ship's Cannon.<sup>7</sup>

The log indicates that one other crewman, a Joseph Lawrence, was

wounded in the attack, and that the boat was pursued briefly by canoes. The *Hamilton* nevertheless remained in the area, and traded that day with the 'Clemal ceedy' Natives (Tongass Tlingits) before sailing out of the river down to 'Taddip Cove' (Datzkoo Harbor on Dall Island).

On 28 May the *Hamilton* returned to the Nass River in company with the *Otter*, and was approached en route by two canoes. One canoe dropped back while the other pulled alongside to sell halibut, whereupon the Americans attempted to seize the Natives in the canoe. Two of the men were captured, and the other three in the canoe were killed by gunfire as they tried to escape to shore; the second canoe pulled off with no losses.<sup>6</sup> Despite this skirmish, the vessel remained in the Nass area for the next three days, where a considerable trade in sea otter pelts was procured. The fate of the two captives was not recorded - presumably they were later sent ashore.

The *Hamilton* had already had an eventful cruise in the area. In May 1810 "the Natives stold sum small Things from us for which wee took one woman prizoner," although the woman was released the next day.<sup>7</sup> The previous August the vessel had also been the subject of an attempted takeover at the Nass, with over one hundred men on board or alongside the vessel armed with daggers and muskets, although timely action by the crew prevented bloodshed.<sup>8</sup> Since the *Hamilton* had previously engaged in kidnapping, there was presumably a connection between the attack on the ship's boat and the subsequent seizure of hostages (and killing of three other men). The journal does not speculate on a motive for the Native attack on the watering party, instead reinforcing the view of the Native peoples as treacherous, always looking for opportunities to 'cut off' small parties of Euroamericans.

While the *Hamilton* had previously encountered hostility at the Nass, in none of these cases did the journal keeper examine the cause of Native hostility, but detailed instead the remedial actions taken by the vessel. The most serious breach of security - the attempted takeover - was apparently not punished at all, least of all by seizing hostages or killing passers-by. Reports of the 1811 attack on the *Otter* by the Chilkat Tlingits (with the loss of forty Tlingits and several Americans) - received by Porter while at Datzkoo Harbor - contributed to a sense of insecurity among the traders, perhaps leading in turn to a greater readiness to employ harsh measures to repel attacks.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the ship's records make distinctly clear the fact that the canoes approaching *the Hamilton* were doing so to sell halibut; thus the master was either retaliating for the earlier attack on his boat, or construed his action as deterring future 'treachery'. In any event, the action undertaken by the *Hamilton* falls within the class - noted by Schelling - of actions taken against a third party to signal intent to the actual objects of that policy. This 'horizontal' escalation of the conflict - as the attack on the halibut fishermen did not exceed in degree the immediate

action taken by the *Hamilton* in firing on the Native settlement - shifted hostile intention onto another party.

The master of the *Hamilton* was probably not sufficiently acquainted with Tsimshian society to know whether or not he was attacking the same or a related people, but it does not appear that he had declared general war upon the Native peoples of the coast: Porter certainly saw his action as limited and self-contained, with no further ramifications to the trade. It also appears that this was not a vengeful 'parting shot', as the vessel remained on the coast to trade and attained good results. Porter's motives thus remain somewhat obscure, and no more comprehensible than those of the 'perfidious and treacherous savages'. An examination of Tsimshian tradition illuminates the events of the Nass Incident from a radically different perspective.

## The Traditional Record

Several Tsimshian texts - in this case *ma'IEsk* or stories, rather than *adawx* 'true traditions' - appear to deal with this event, and an exegesis is essential to fill in the undocumented causes of the event and its consequences, as well as to trace the development of the narrative with selection and the introduction of cliches and stereotypes as the texts address the present-day political reality of the Coast Tsimshians.

One early text dealing with the Nass incident was recorded from Joseph Morrison of the Gitando village by William Beynon in 1927, and can be parsed into three subplots.<sup>10</sup> The first occurred at the Nass River during the oolachen fishery, involving Gitando chief S\**qagwet* and one of his hunters, *Kyil'asgamgan*, who were trading sea otter with the ship's master. While the bargaining continued, *Kyil'asgamgan* sat down on a skylight, whereupon a clerk came up from below and knocked him to the deck for obscuring his light. *Kyil'asgamgan* seized the clerk and threatened to throw him into the ocean, whereupon the latter attempted to 'draw his gun'. *Sqagwet* intervened, advising the ship's master to restrain his man, as *Kyil'asgamgan* "cannot be frightened" and would kill the clerk. After resolving this dispute the Gitandos left the vessel.

The second sub-plot began with the *Gitzaxtets* coming aboard to trade, among whom was the renowned sea otter hunter *Gamdzop*. This hunter too made the error of sitting on the skylight, and was knocked off by the clerk, but unlike the conciliatory Gitandos, his "followers" called upon him to retaliate, which he declined to do although he was greatly ashamed by the incident. *Gamdzop* removed himself to a small creek near *Knogwali* (*Kincolith*) where he and his nephews fired on three men coming ashore for water in a boat, killing one, with the survivors withdrawing to the vessel. The Tsimshians in the village then joined in and fired an old cannon at the ship:



There being nothing but powder in the canon no damage was done but the next time they loaded the canon with shot and shot at the ship.

Thereupon the ship weighed anchor and left.

The third sub-plot commenced as the ship proceeded 'downstream' into a bay where it was repainted, giving it a different appearance; Gamdzop saw this and informed the Tsimshians at Knogwali.

Returning from the oolachen fishery, some people of the Gitsis village were fishing for halibut in Kton (Work's Canal), when they were approached by the ship. Having no knowledge of Gamdzop's intelligence they came abreast of the ship when the crew waved at them with a red flag, thinking the sailors wished to buy fresh fish. The vessel did not come to, but passed by the canoes firing twice and killing two men.

Then the ship went away and in this way became revenged for the murder of its crew by Gamdzop, by retaliating on the [Gitsis].

In William Beynon's 1953 notebooks, there appears another version by the same informant, with several variations on the 1927 account, which expanded on the sub-plots and drew a different interpretation of the consequences of the incident.<sup>11</sup> In this text, Morrison placed the initial confrontation at Laxku - present-day Georgetown? - on the western coast of the Tsimpsean Peninsula and far removed from the Nass River mouth.

The Gitandos and Gitzaxtets were trading together on the vessel, including the foremost hunters Gil'asgaemgan (Kyl'asgamgan, here identified of the royal Eagle [Laxskik] clan and hence a relative of chief Sqagwet) and Gamdzu.p (Gamdzop). Morrison examined the role of the nobles in some detail, noting that the chiefs did not hunt and were present during the trade as this "added prestige to the dealings"; if the deal was not approved by the chief, then bargaining would continue.

Here Morrison did not mention any insult offered to the Gitando hunter, but rather the actions ascribed to Kyl'asgamgan in the 1927 text are here performed by Gamdzop. While the Gitandos were occupied with the trading, Gamdzop was seated on what he thought was a box, but was a companionway hatch, from which he was knocked inadvertently when a crewman came above decks. Gamdzop took up his musket and threatened to shoot the man, whereupon Sqagwet intervened, assuring the hunter that it had been an accident and no insult was intended. While this defused the immediate situation on the ship, Gamdzop had still been publicly humiliated and would have to give a feast (a *yaakw* or 'potlatch') to 'cleanse' his name. He returned to shore and was asleep when the others came back from the trading. No one mentioned the incident for fear of shaming him, and early

next morning he removed himself to the water hole and lay in ambush for the sailors.

The second sub-plot is marked by significant differences from the earlier text, as Gamdzop did not act in concert with his nephews, and shot the sailor while the Americans were ashore. Gamdzop's dignity was appeased, the dead man was taken by his two companions to the vessel, and the other Tsimshians, learning of the murder, fled their village. Morrison made no mention of the village firing on the vessel, but rather the "schooner" opened fire with its cannon on the Tsimshian camp and then sailed off.

In the third sub-plot of this text the vessel was repainted, but Gamdzop did not witness this event. Instead when the vessel returned to exact revenge, the people paddling out to trade recognized the captain and returned to shore with the schooner in pursuit but unable to catch them. Thereupon the vessel proceeded up to Work's Canal, where it encountered the Gitsis, and the latter (not knowing of the existing hostilities) came off to trade. A crewman shot one Gitsis man to death and the schooner then made off, with the Gitsis pursuing but unable to catch the vessel due to a favorable wind.

Here Morrison then developed an additional sub-plot: when the Gitsis became aware that their man was killed in revenge for the sailor's death, they held Gamdzop accountable for their loss. The bad feelings engendered thereby nearly brought about a war between the two villages, but eventually the Gitzaxtets, fearing retaliation by the Gitsis, made an unspecified settlement, although their relations were strained for some time as a result. Morrison characterized this as the first known conflict between the Tsimshians and Whites, given which it is interesting to note that the immediate result of the incident was *intra-tribal* hostility.

A third account of the incident is structurally more complex and was collected by William Beynon from John Tate of the Gispaxlots village in 1948 (MacDonald and Cove, 1987). Setting the occurrence at the Nass mouth, Tate examined the techniques of sea otter hunting, and noted the inter-village aspect of the hunt, accounting thereby for the joint trading of the Gitandos and Gitzaxtets, Tate also placed the event in history, noting that it occurred after the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company post at Ma'ksgum ts!uwa'nql (White Point) on the Nass River (1831) but prior to its removal in 1834 to the site of present-day Port Simpson on the Tsimshian Peninsula.

Tate paralleled Morrison (1927) in noting the initial insult to Gilaskamran (Kyil'asgamgan), who was knocked off a skylight by an irate clerk, and then took up his gun to redress the insult whereupon Sqagwet intervened. The Gitandos (including Sqagwet) then left the ship, and the Gitzaxtets came aboard to trade, and Gamdzop was knocked off the skylight, but did not take revenge, not having his gun with him. Gamdzop then resorted to the creek near Knerwali (Kincolith) and ambushed the

ship's party, killing all three men and revenging his humiliation in the process. In this account, the Tsimshians at the camp apparently were not warned of the danger, and the bivouac was destroyed by cannon fire, although no loss of life was suffered.

The schooner then proceeded down to Dundas Island where it was repainted and then returned up the inlet to an unspecified location. The Gitsis people did not recognize it as the same vessel and came out to trade, whereupon the ship opened fire killing one person, and having revenge for the three men they lost: "The schooner immediately set out to sea and was never seen again."

Tate expanded on the motif of Gitsis animosity toward the Gitzaxtets developed in Morrison (1953), noting that after many years that Gamdzop finally compensated for the death of the man by granting the Gitsis his "extensive" hunting grounds on Dundas Island. In yet another sub-plot, Tate introduced a seemingly unrelated account of a Kitselas man among the Gitsis who felt due some compensation for the schooner's attack, and speculated that relatives of this man may have been responsible for the murders of Gitzaxtet chief 'Nieslaws' (Nieslus; Raven phratry) and his nephew Kaogyahl while trapping on Dundas Island, in "retaliation for their tribesmen [?] who had been killed by the white traders over the fracas which was originally caused by Kamtsoop, though the feud was ended."

Table 1 compares the accounts, demonstrating correspondences among the documentary and traditional accounts. It seems that Joseph Morrison has streamlined his retelling of the account in 1953 as the plot line involving Kyil'asgamgan has been truncated, while at the same time some feedback may also have taken place with the apparent development of the plot involving compensation paid to the Gitsis following hostility between that village and the Gitzaxtets.

A comparison of these accounts suggests an ongoing process of verification of the testimony contained therein, while the documentary record is 'immutable' (although engaging its own contemporary world-view).

It is striking that none of the oral traditions are recounted here by co-villagers of the protagonist Gamdzop. In the case of Joseph Morrison, the perspective is that of a village connected with the incident through the actions of Sqagwet and Kyil'asgamgan, both of the royal Eagle house (and thereby lineage relatives of the Gispaxlots chief Legaic). The second Tsimshian informant - John Tate - was a member of the Gispaxlots village, and it is he who noted Gamdzop's phratry (Raven), thereby establishing a plausible connection to the subsequent murder of Nieslus. In all accounts the Gitandos played the role of mediators between the Americans and the Tsimshians, who having attempted to de-escalate the conflict, then withdrew from the action.

**Table 1. Comparison of Documentary and Traditional Accounts**

(Correspondences between document and tradition are marked with a \*.)

	event	1811	1927	1953	1948
<b>Affront</b>	first action at Nass River		•		•
	Kyil'asgamgan affronted		•		•
	Sqagwet intervenes		•		•
	Gamdzop affronted		•	•	•
	Gamdzop threatens sailor		•	•	
	Sqagwet intervenes		•	•	
<b>Gamdzop's</b>					
<b>Ambush</b>	site at Nass/Kincolith*	y	y		y
	nephews present		•		
	sailors killed	1	1	1	3
	Tsimshians fire cannon		•		
	ship shells camp*	y		y	y
<b>Ship's</b>	vessel repainted		•	•	•
	<b>Revenge</b> deception discovered by canoes out to trade*		Gamdzop halibut	people trade	trade
	hostages taken	2			
	Gitsis killed*	3	2	1	1
	ship leaves area		•	•	•
<b>Compensation</b>					
<b>to Gitsis</b>	Gitzaxtet compensation			unspecified grounds	
<b>Other parties</b>					
	Kitselas complicity				•

SOURCES: 1811 Hamilton log; 1927 - Morrison (B-F-28.17); 1953 - Morrison (B-F-132.3); 1948 - Tate (MacDonald and Cove)

In all three Tsimshian texts the Gitzaxtet protagonist declined to pursue the more acceptable course of face-saving by holding a feast, but instead elected to take revenge on the ship's crew and set up his ambush. It is this less-desirable yet still 'traditional' approach to conflict resolution that brought bad consequences, as the vessel inflicted immediate short-term damage on the camp and then returned to exact a further measure of revenge by firing on the Gitsis. This had the unintended effect of widening the conflict. (The documentary record implies such a connection but does not address it directly.)

It is noteworthy that the action of the ship is seen as the cause of inter-village strife, rather than offering justification for a revenge attack on another trading vessel. This contradicts the very unflattering portrait Howay and others have painted of Native peoples: unable to sublimate their drives for revenge and pouncing upon the first hapless trader to come along. The accounts of 1948 and 1953 make explicitly clear that the Gitsis nursed this inter-village grudge and eventually received considerable compensation.

Finally, Tate introduced a plot that seems not to belong in the account, perhaps reflecting his own search for an explanation to an unresolved crime. The Kitselas do not feature in the other two accounts, and Tate does

not explain how both the Gitsis and the Kitselas could have suffered compensable damage if only one man was killed by the ship.

One must not assume that earlier or later texts of a tradition are somehow more authentic, or that later versions have been compromised and that earlier versions are 'pristine'. Given the variables of transmission, performance and interviewing circumstances and the fact that no one *performance* encompasses the entire *tradition*, there are many opportunities for omissions in earlier recounting that are redressed in later performances. In the case of Joseph Morrison, it cannot be assumed that his earlier version is more accurate than his later account; although we cannot verify his testimony against that of Tate, it can be seen that elements from both the early and late texts of Morrison's narrative are present in the Tate account. It is not possible to reconstruct a 'proto-narrative' by projecting back in time, nor is there a social dynamic ineluctably pushing a particular line of plot development. Nevertheless, the accounts here have present-day social uses and we can look for those clues that reveal contemporary concerns, one example being Tate's interest in the murder of Nieslus.<sup>12</sup>

It appears that the actions of the visiting Americans recounted in these texts have been rendered into a stereotype, the traditions focusing instead on the falling out between the Gitzaxtets and the Gitsis. This ongoing dispute - which was omitted in the 1927 text- had apparently been resolved by the middle of the century, with said resolution incorporated into newer versions of the text. The actions of the schooner recorded in the accounts, which are undoubtedly factual in nature, are peripheral to the plot in comparison to the actions of the Gitando, and Gamdzop in precipitating a crisis. The historical actions of Whites were largely beyond the concerns of twentieth century Tsimshians, and the behavior of strangers would not have been as noteworthy, especially since this was *not* a 'first contact', but rather a 'first conflict' story. At that, the conflict portrays the Americans as the agents of Native goals, precipitating a conflict, but acting as adjuncts to named Tsimshian persons.

The competence and diplomatic acumen of the *sem-o'iget* (chief) Sqagwet is drawn in sharp comparison to the intemperate behavior of Gamdzop (not to mention the apparent *absence* of the Gitzaxtet chief Nieshot); had the Gitzaxtet hunter displayed proper behavior, the ensuing conflict would never have arisen.<sup>13</sup> Thus the account is also didactic, examining the perils implicit when Whites and Tsimshians engage in trade and political relations, and also very striking in that it develops a theme of *White treachery*, remonstrating the 'dominant' culture for its own shortcomings and dishonest dealing with Native peoples. This is not, however, a manifesto meant to rebuke Whites for their ignoble actions. Rather the texts remain part of the Tsimshian culture, for internal consumption. It remains for others to draw implications and make evaluative judgments.

## Conclusion

The traditions and documents examined in this paper demonstrate one problematic of practicing 'frontier history' - that chronologies of past events are difficult to reconstruct from a dynamic oral tradition. Oral tradition fulfills social functions, which in the case of the Tsimshian tradition does not coincide with the purposes of the American journal keepers. It is usually impossible to establish beyond all doubt that documents and traditions refer to the same events. This is not to say that one of the other view of history is imperfect, but rather that the *uses* of history vary between cultures - events which signal weather changes for one party may pass apparently unmarked by another. Oral tradition has preserved this event as a significant 'first conflict' which in turn touched off a long-standing 'feud', while the traders testified to no long-lasting change of state (save for the slain Sandwich Islander), and the short-run trade continued normally. Whether or not the document and traditions examined in this paper refer to the same event, they do indeed examine the conduct of international relations on the nineteenth-century coast, and examine the motives of the parties and the consequences of their actions, detailing the process of contact transformed into conflict. Both the document and the traditions may be seen as cliches embodying historical truths, illuminating the processes of history and cultural interaction.

The distinction typically drawn between written documents and oral tradition is not as clear as one might think, as the traditions refer to the *consequences* of the conflict as well, clearly demonstrating an understanding of history and causality in the unfolding of events. Finally, the tradition refers to the present with an implicit examination of protocol in a nascent conflict situation. The Gitandos, represented by their chief Sqagwet, acted with restraint in dealing with the foreigners. Gamdzop's intemperate behavior thrust the Tsimshians into an international dispute that spilled over into a 'domestic' political crisis.

Different observers seek explanation at different levels of analysis - the oral texts of the Nass Incident locate causation primarily at the individual level, which then escalated to the systemic or international level before settling into a 'national' dispute. It is not clear that such a progression of perceptions took place among the Americans, although the events were transformed by, and then transformed Tsimshian society. Nevertheless, the weight of the conflicts on the coast gradually set up new rules according to which relations were conducted. To a striking extent, the oral tradition examined here mirrors Kenneth Waltz's 'images' explored in a 1957 treatise on international relations, which sought the bases upon which to construct a theory of politics that would explain war and other conflicts. Waltz examined causation at the individual, national and international level, positing a constant dynamic interplay between the three, with a preponderance of systemic-level forces driving international affairs. (The latter is not a surprising result for an academic schooled in the mechanics

of international relations as a nation-state based enterprise, based on Western notions of legitimate governance and international order.)

Waltz characterized his approach a 'realist' paradigm of international relations, with its implications for policy formation, based on the parameters restricting choices and possibilities at each of the three levels. For Waltz the underlying constraint on international actors is the degree of 'anarchy' present in the international system. In other times and places, more emphasis has been placed on the other 'images'. As Waltz concluded (1957:238):

Each state pursues its own interests, however defined, in ways it judges best. Force is a means of achieving the external ends of states because there exists no consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy. A foreign policy based on this image of international relations is neither moral nor immoral, but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us. The third image describes the framework of world politics, but without the first and second images there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy; the first and the second images describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results.

Schelling examined the dynamics and limitations of violence as a tool of diplomacy, while Waltz defined the arena within which diplomacy is carried out. The Gamdzop tradition is striking because it examined an early confrontation, casting it as an archetype and viewing the confrontation in these same terms of levels of analysis and rational actor motivations.

The Nass River Incident shows both sides manipulating violence in a rational manner, directed toward desirable goals, but also demonstrates the perils of escalation and unintended consequences. For the Tsimshians the encounter - despite the exotic characters involved and the novel weaponry employed - followed the outline of encounters long familiar. An insult redressed by homicide spirals out of control, before coming back to visit the original protagonist. Gamdzop, in asserting himself with respect to the American traders, became the cause of greater suffering for the Gitzaxtets in particular and the Tsimshians in general. In an age of primitive weaponry, conflicts were quite capable of escalating out of control, and burned themselves out over time. The rational actor model applied in this case of non-state actors shows some of the same results one would expect even from a highly centralized state in a conflict situation. The difference is largely one of degree than of kind, and suggests that other non-state interactions might be profitably examined using international relations concepts. At the same time, there are important factors at work not often found in international conflicts, with a heavy emphasis on individual actions

more typical of a 'duel' than a war.

The Tsimshian style of international relations places a higher emphasis on Waltz's first and second images, those of individual and 'national' causation. It is clear that Gamdzop acted out of self-interest in redressing his offended honor. His actions, however, then escalated and spilled over into the intra-tribal sphere through the agency of the American interlopers, and the dispute was then resolved by means of traditional mediation and compensation. The informants relating these texts discriminate clearly among these levels of analysis, and characterize this first conflict story in terms of consequences affecting primarily the Tsimshians, reducing the Americans to the supporting cast. This conceptualization of cultural conflict militates against past and present Euroamerican academic interpretations that lodge the interlopers firmly in the midst of swirling conflicts, directing or dictating the changes brought about, typically to the detriment of the Tsimshians.

Contrary to the view of the Native as an international political naif, an examination of Tsimshian practice shows that the *smkiket* (chiefs) were accomplished diplomatists. As Boas and others have recorded, the arrival of a foreign boat at a village was accompanied by the host chief or representative dancing down to the beach to welcome the guests. The leader of the dance would then take his supernatural power (*haley*) and throw it to the people in the canoe (Boas, 1916:539). The chief in the canoe would wrestle with the power, and throw it back to the greeter on shore, after which the guests would be welcomed ashore. As Garfield noted, "Once, long ago ... visitors neglected this formality and there was strife between the guests and hosts as a result" (1939:202). This dramatic harnessing of power suggests a functional analogy to nation-state diplomacy, with the specific conduct of protocol in order to restrain those powerful forces which could be unleashed and result in insult or even war. In the above traditions, chief Sqagwet was the holder of a very powerful *haley* (the *xgedomhalait*, or 'cannibal power'), and as such exemplary conduct would have been required of him; as the accounts demonstrate, his resolution of the immediate situation was in keeping with his personal qualities of excellence. The contrast with the intemperate Gamdzop highlights the abilities of the Gitando chief even more.

The accounts examined here suggest that it is possible to conceptualize international relations as a process not driven exclusively by Euroamerican actions. While the traditions address the past, they also speak to an attitude that is very much part of the present - one must question, given the persistence of the ability to construct a different means of social and international reproduction by members of a 'domestic dependent nation', what other paradigms persist among those non-Western nations that have retained greater measures of cultural autonomy. What are the implications of such cultural features for the discipline of international relations?



## NOTES

1. Gunther, 1972:175. See Howay, 1973:36-37, entry for the *Cheerful*. Gunther's practice of constructing 'straw men' "to inspire and guide [the descendants of Native peoples] who are facing a modern world" seems counterproductive, as it distorted the historical record by reinforcing, rather than shattering, deterministic stereotypes of Natives and Euroamericans locked into inevitable struggle and conquest.
2. See, for example, Gunther, 1972:175. This approach is little better than that of Howay in casting Natives as reacting to Euroamerican actions, as if Native peoples were an amorphous mass waiting for the arrival of outsiders to catalyze social and political changes.
3. MacDonald (1984) characterized recent Tsimshian oral tradition dealing with contact with Europeans as *adawx*, rather than *ma'IESk*. Boas seems to have been one of the few scholars to draw any distinction between *sacred* and *secular* oral tradition.
4. The Euroamerican document employed in this analysis is the logbook of the ship *Hamilton*, William Martain keeper (held by the Peabody Museum of Salem, Massachusetts), operating from 1809 to 1811. The Tsimshian oral accounts include two files from the Marius Barbeau "Northwest Coast Files" (microfilm): B-F-28.17 'Murder of White Trader by Ganidzop [Gamndzop]'. Complete narrative. M. Barbeau typed copy, 1927, informant J. Movuson [Morrison] and B-F-132.3 'An Adventure with Traders'. Complete narrative, W. Beynon original fieldnotes, vol. 6, 1953, pp. 13-16, informant Joseph Morrison, Gitando. The third Tsimshian text is #56 'The Massacre of White Traders by Kaintsoop', in MacDonald and Cove, 1987:204-205.
5. The Tsimshian people of the northern coast of British Columbia are divided into four tribes: the Gitksans, Nisga'as, Coast Tsimshians and Southern Tsimshians. (My references to "Tsimshians" pertain to Coast Tsimshian people, unless otherwise noted.) Each tribe is spatially divided into villages (*galdzaps*), which occupy traditional areas and enjoy certain localized prerogatives, while the society as a whole is divided into four exogamous phratries (*ptaaxs*), with subordinate 'houses' (*walps*) each associated with one of the phratries. The phratries of the Coast Tsimshian include: Gispewudwada (Killer Whale), Laxkibu (Wolf), Laxskik (Eagle), and Ganhada (Raven).  
The villages of the Coast Tsimshian include: Gitzaxtet, Ginaxangik, Gispaxlots, G\*itando, Gitwalgots, Gitsis, Giludzau, Gitlan, Ginadoix, Kitsumkalum, and Kitselas; depending upon one's source materials,

these villages were roughly ranked according to the prestige of the chief (*sem-o'iget*). Although the relative prestige of these figures rose and fell over time, at the time of Viola Garfield's visit in the late 1930s, the primary position was held by Wiseks of the Ginaxangiks. According to tradition, the Gispaxlots chief Legaic was the most prominent chief leading up to and during the early years of the Euroamerican fur trade.

Houses were matrilineages of persons nominally related, and were typically dispersed among dwellings or 'households' (*tse walbs*). The households (which were also corporate matrilineages) in turn joined to form villages. Tsimshian society distinguishes among clan opposites, who are required to perform important functions in the ritual life of the community, and supply suitable marriage partners. For a comprehensive discussion of Tsimshian society, see Durlach (1928) and Garfield (1939:173-175).

6. Michael Howard's brief work *War in European History* (1976) suggests that past wars have brought about changes and movements today held to be positive, such as wars of unification or mass movements which mobilized entire populations; at the same time it is undeniable that war is a vehicle for much human suffering and destruction.
7. Log of the *Hamilton*, entry for 21 May 1811. According to Gibson, two crewmen were slain in the attack (1992:167).
8. Howay, 1973:89. According to Howay, the vessel was in the company of the *Katherine* rather than the *Otter*.
9. Log of the *Hamilton*, entries for 14 and 15 May.
10. *Ibid.*, entry for 15 August. According to James Gibson the events of 1810 and 1811 were part of a "two-year feud" between the "local Tsimshians" and the *Hamilton*. While the Americans may have perceived these attacks as related, it is questionable whether the same villages or even tribes were involved in the two events (Gibson, 1992:167).
11. The Chilkats were at that time in the process of forming a union to assault the Russian trading post at Sitka, although they were dissuaded in their intentions by manager Ivan Kuskov, whereupon the combination dissolved.
12. B-F-28.17 'Murder of White Trader by Ganidzop [Gamdzop]'.
13. B-F-132.3 'An Adventure with Traders'.
14. Rolf Knight noted of the 'romantic' school of Native Studies:  
 "Even more problematic, a disproportionate bulk of the information which went into writing the classic [ethnographic]

accounts appears to have come from the chiefs and notables, from the old and new dominant sectors of native societies. There are very few accounts by and contributions from members or descendants of the lower rungs and slave classes of coastal Indian societies. Such sectors of native Indian societies may have been involved quite differently in many of the 'central' social institutions than popular accounts would lead one to believe" (Knight, 1978:25).

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