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Short stories—and tall tales

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The Haida myth—*by Nick Doe*

"Vikings of Vancouver Island"—the Haida. It's a curiously common myth, the origins of which are perhaps as interesting, and as worthy of further research, as the myth itself. The Haida, so the story goes, used to plunder and pillage everywhere, Viking-style, and there are on Gabriola, cave-burials of Haida warriors slain in battle.

It is not impossible that these tales do indeed refer to the Haida, but it is also unlikely. Hundreds of them certainly travelled down to Victoria on occasion during the 19th century, but they did so in the company of their women and children.[1] If the Haida were in the habit of raiding the local Coast Salish communities, their logistic-organizing abilities command the utmost respect. Not only would they have had to regularly traverse hundreds of miles of treacherous open ocean, they would regularly have had to make their way through the traditional territories of one or other of their formidable enemies—the Kwakiutl (*K^{w}ak^{w}aka'wak^{w}*) of northeast Vancouver Island and adjacent mainland, or the Nootkans (*Nuu-chah-nulth*) along the outer west coast.

But alas, it is probably but a myth. The Haida were not particularly tall,[2] which is the reason usually given for identifying unusually large skeletons as theirs. And although the Haida were certainly renowned for their bellicosity, they mainly warred against peoples much closer to home—the Coast Tsimshian, Nishga, Bella Bella, and Southern Tlingit. In earlier times, they also clashed violently with American fur traders. John Hopper puts it thus:

> "Today it is commonly believed that the Haida, were, if not the scourge of the Seven Seas, at least the scourge of the seven coastal sounds from Frederick Sound in the north to Puget Sound in the south. However, when one delves into written reports and oral legends, one finds, not stories, sagas, and epics of Haida conquest, but rather, the reverse.
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> "Other tribes tell of their victories over Haida raiding parties. The Kwakiutl used to have

[1] Hubert Bancroft, *History of BC*, p.428, 1887.

[2] Jerome Cybulski, *Human Biology*, p.54, Table 2, Handbook of North American Indians Vol. 7, Smithsonian Institute, 1990.

on display the bladder of the great Haida Chief Gitxan whom they killed in 1856. They also tell of a Haida group, which, upon escaping from the smallpox epidemic in Victoria in 1862, were ambushed and slaughtered by the ferocious Euclataw [Lekwiltok], a southern Kwakiutl tribe.

"There is no doubt that the Haida raided other tribes, but they were usually those close to the Queen Charlotte Islands, and defeat appears to have been as likely an outcome as was victory."

John Hopper, *Indian Wars in the Old Pacific North West*, p.6, Artarmon Publishing, 1996.

The villains behind the Haida myth are the Lekwiltok, the southernmost of the Kwakiutl, who at some uncertain date moved south from the Queen Charlotte and Johnstone Straits into the area around Campbell River and Desolation Sound. This was possibly with a view to controlling the increasing traffic to and from the north after several Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading posts were established. From sites at the north end of the Strait of Georgia, the Lekwiltok, according to many HBC records and recorded oral histories, terrorized the Coast Salish people.

"It is impossible to describe their [the people of the Fraser River] continual alarm at the very name of this formidable foe [the Yewkelta (Lekwiltok)]: and [this fear] can only proceed from the little mercy they have to expect from those atrocious villains when any of them unfortunately fall into their hands."

Archibald McDonald, *Fort Langley Journals*, March 13, 1829.

"Throughout the region [the Georgia Strait], during the first half of the nineteenth century, the principal enemy [of the Coast Salish] was the Lekwiltok [band of the] Kwakiutl, who raided as far south as Puget Sound."

Wayne Suttles, *Central Coast Salish*, p.457, Handbook of North American Indians Vol. 7, Smithsonian Institute, 1990.

"Kwakiutl external relations were even [more violent] than their internal relations until 1865, which is the last date of any intertribal hostilities. The kind and degree of violence ranged from the sort of mourning or revenge raid that could take place among the various Kwakiutl tribes themselves to the outright predatory warfare of the southernmost Kwakiutl, the Lekwiltok, waged against the Comox, driving them out of their lands and villages between the Salmon River and Cape Mudge. The Lekwiltok also raided the Central and Southern Coast Salish groups, taking heads and captives."

Helen Codere, *Kwakiutl: Traditional Culture*, p.359, Handbook of North American Indians Vol. 7, Smithsonian Institute, 1990.

The oral tradition of the Snunéymux^{w} is that it was warfare, almost certainly with the Lekwiltok, that led to the abandonment of their villages on Gabriola Island. When this happened is not certain, but it was probably in the 1840s.[3]

The Lekwiltok were eventually defeated by the combined forces of the Coastal Salish, including the Snunéymux^{w}, in the epic battle of Maple Bay (1850–1860?). At least two lengthy accounts of this battle by Salish informants have been published; one by Charles Hill-Tout in 1907, and the other by Edward Curtis in 1913.[4]

[3] Loraine Littlefield (personal communication).

[4] The notion of "combined forces" probably gives an over-simplistic impression of the complexity of the relationships that existed among various Native peoples. Their politics were every bit as complicated as that of the countries of 19th-century Europe. There are stories of individual members of groups supposedly at war with each other visiting and socializing; and there are stories of supposed allies (the Coast Salish) raiding each other's territory. The Cowichan ,and to a lesser extent their allies the Snunéymux^{w}, frequently made raids on various Coast Salish communities along the Fraser River in the first half of the 19th century.

The Hill-Tout version, although obviously strongly edited for a European readership, is unfortunately too long to quote here, but it tells a stirring story of how the Coast Salish ambushed a major Lekwiltok war-party. The Lekwiltok were lured into the ambush, so the story goes, by three Cowichan canoes containing warriors wearing "big hats" in the manner of women. The battle raged "…without intermission for four days and nights, and the waters of the bay became red with the blood of the slain."

In the Curtis version, "…only a few stragglers ever returned to tell the news of the slaughter, but the allies lost not a single man…". The Curtis version has Kuper Island as the place where the Coast Salish forces assembled. There is talk in both versions of "secret codes" the participants used to coordinate their manoeuvres; in Hill-Tout, the cry of the owl, the wolf, and the dog (by the Cowichan); and in Curtis, the cry of the loon and the horned owl (by the northerners). All grist of course for the good-story mill.

Charles Hill-Tout, *Report of the Ethnology…*, reprinted in *The Salish People*, Vol. IV, pp.160–162, Talonbooks, 1996.
Edward S. Curtis, *The North American Indian*, Vol. 9, pp.32–35, reprinted by Johnson Reprint, 1970.

The defeated Lekwiltok were pursued back into the territory of the Comox (a Coast Salish group) that they occupied where there were evidently further battles. The defeat was so painful for the Lekwiltok that they prefer not to talk about it (reports Curtis); a contention that appears to be backed up by Chief Harry Assu of the Lekwiltok when he claims:

> "It was in Gowlland Harbour [on Quadra Island] that we had a big battle with the Haida. They came down this way, and our people [the Lekwiltok] were always watching out for them.…It was a big victory for the people, and it has never been forgotten."

Chief Harry Assu with Joy Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge*, pp.31–2, UBC Press, 1989.

As Chief Assu's co-writer Joy Inglis notes, the suggestion that the Haida were involved has no support in other, older records:

> "According to an account given by Chief Billy Assu [Chief Harry Assu's father] of Cape Mudge to R.I. Walker, [it was] the Lekwiltok who attacked the Comox fort on the cliffs in Gowlland Harbour…".
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> "A fuller version of what may be the same battle [as that described by Chief Harry Assu] is found in Curtis…[That] version pits the Lekwiltok of Tekya [Topaze Harbour] against the Comox in the mouth of the Campbell River. The latter [the Comox] had been forced to move from their village on the river to a fortified position at *Qeqakulis* (Gowlland Harbour) to escape the wrath of the Lekwiltok, who had sought sanctuary with them [the Comox] from the mass attack of the southern allied tribes of the Salish, but had been betrayed [by the Comox]…".

Chief Harry Assu with Joy Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge*, p.126, UBC Press, 1989.

Like all good stories, there is a happy ending. It is reported that today the Kwakiutl and their Salish-speaking neighbours at the north end of the Strait of Georgia are good friends, "closely linked through marriage and custom".[5]

There are also, I might add, no reports of Haida lawyers seeking damages for libel.[6] ◊

[5] Cheryl Coull, *A Traveller's Guide to Aboriginal BC*, p.55–60, Whitecap Books, 1996.

[6] J. Henry Dunant's *A Memory of Solférino* describes the horrific reality of the battle fought in Italy in 1862, not long after the battle of Maple Bay. This unforgettable account is required reading for anybody about to write about warfare, no matter when, where, and between whom the battles took place. "There's nothing wrong with war except the fighting", Evelyn Waugh, quoted in John F. Hutchinson's *Champions of Charity—War and the Rise of the Red Cross*.