

## Book Reviews

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***Recording Their Story: James Teit and the Tahltan.*** Judy Thompson.  
Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Gatineau, Quebec: Canadian Museum of  
Civilization; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007.

Recipient of the 2007 BC Lieutenant Governor's Medal for Historical Writing.  
207 pages, seventy-one rare historic photographs, three maps, six line drawings,  
fifty-one images of ethnographic artifacts, six appendices including lists of song  
recordings and artifacts, and a three page reference list, ISBN 13: 978-1-55365-  
232-8.

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Judy Thompson, curator of Western Subarctic ethnology at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, has to her credit numerous scholarly publications about the material culture and artistic traditions of northern peoples. She also comes to the writing and layout of this book with an extensive background of research and artistic accomplishment, having worked on curatorial teams for the major exhibits, "Threads of the Land: Clothing Traditions of Three Indigenous Peoples" (1997) and "The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples" (1988).

Thompson's newest book concentrates on the life of James Alexander Teit (1864–1922), who was one of Canada's earliest ethnographers. Her examination of Teit's correspondence, diaries, fieldwork notebooks, and other archival materials shows how Teit's everyday life was affected by his ethnographic work. Thompson illustrates how the requests and directives of the foremost anthropologists of the time, Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, greatly influenced the trajectory of Teit's life and the development of his career. As well, the needs of Teit's Aboriginal friends would also influence and dictate his life choices, and in this regard the book follows his involvement with the emerging Aboriginal rights movement in British Columbia (BC), on the west coast of Canada.

The book traces Teit's emigration in 1884 from the Shetland Islands to BC. Teit took great pleasure in the outdoor life and his associations with Aboriginal peoples. He became proficient in speaking several Aboriginal

languages fluently and became a trader, big game hunter, outfitter, guide, explorer, naturalist, and rancher. Teit fell in love with and married Susanna Lucy Atko, an Interior Salish woman, with whom he lived happily for twelve years until her untimely death in 1899. While little is said in the book (or perhaps not known) about Lucy's support and her role in the socialization of Teit into her culture, Thompson mentions that Aboriginal people lived with the couple and that many Aboriginal visitors frequented their home. In his close associations with these and other Interior Salish peoples, Teit became exceptionally well-informed about their social organization, material culture, beliefs, and customs.

In an engaging way, the book reveals the major turning points in Teit's life. In 1894, a meeting with Franz Boas in BC would change the course of Teit's life. Boas described the young man as "a treasure ... he knows a great deal about the tribes" (19). He recognized that Teit was a natural fieldworker who was meticulous in his collection of information and who had extensive knowledge and fondness of local Aboriginal peoples and their lands. Boas would become Teit's lifelong mentor and friend and, under his guidance, Teit carried out major ethnological studies and produced many significant publications.

While the thrust of the book concerns the details of Teit's fieldwork—his travels, and a history of his associations with diverse Aboriginal peoples—Thompson also sketches a picture of his family life and the endearing traits and virtues for which Teit was held in esteem by family and friends alike. In 1904, Teit's marriage to a Canadian-born BC woman, Leonie Josephine Morens, began a new stage of his life. Together they had six children and Teit worked hard and dutifully over the years to support his new family. His compassion and empathy for the Aboriginal peoples of BC would continue and later manifested itself in his devoting a great deal of time to activism on their behalf in matters of land claims and rights.

The heart of the book details Teit's first acquaintance with the Talhitan peoples, which began in 1903 when he took a hunting expedition into their lands. Subsequent autumn trips, usually of six weeks' duration, were taken up every year until 1912. During this time, Teit was able to establish good working relations with local people and make friends with them. On his own initiative, he began conducting ethnographic research on his first trips to the Stikine River region; his field notes from this time became the main resource for his first published ethnographic study of the Tahltan. In 1911, the Tahltan people themselves requested that Teit record their history as a tribe. His research with them developed under the supervision of Boas into a long-term and systematic study, and resulted in five published papers in his

lifetime, as well as a posthumous publication of the Tahltan manuscript and the “multi faceted collection” described in Thompson’s book (174).

Teit had no formal education as an ethnographer. However, his proven skills as a researcher and writer, his long years of association with Aboriginal peoples, and his collaboration with Franz Boas, brought him to the attention of Edward Sapir. When the new Anthropology Division of the Geological Survey of Canada (ADGSC) hired Sapir, he in turn recruited Teit for field service. In 1911, Teit joined the staff of the ADGSC, and so was fortunate to receive funding to work with the Tahltan during the years from 1912 to 1915. The correspondence and friendship between Sapir and Teit would last over ten years.

A fascinating part of this book is its chronology of the transformation of Teit into a fully-fledged ethnographer. The book traces the gradual development of his field work and methodology in the often challenging circumstances of harsh climate, geographic isolation, and lack of sufficient funds. Thompson refers often to the problems and tensions Teit experienced in trying to simultaneously satisfy Boas and Sapir, to whom he had promised the completion of certain studies and documents. At the

same time, there was also the necessity for Teit to attend to his family life and procure extra waged employment to provide for them. As well, his commitment to Aboriginal political organizations demanded much of his time and energy. Thompson sensitively explores these pressures, as well as Teit’s capacity to work out and balance his obligations as best he could. The author also documents the wonderful accomplishments Teit achieved, and his joy of life in the face of many struggles, including declining health.

Teit died in 1922 and left behind a prodigious body of Tahltan cultural information. He collected artifacts, transcribed myths, recorded songs, took photographs, and gathered extensive ethnographic information that is recognized today as “arguably the most important extant assemblage of the Tahltan’s heritage” (1). Teit’s estate included a valuable ethnographic archive composed of a large amount of miscellaneous data and some unfinished manuscripts gathered over the course of thirty years. Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and later Diamond Jenness, were able to bring some of this material to fruition in the form of published manuscripts.

This book could stand alone as a remarkable catalogue of Tahltan ethnographic material. It is also a visually attractive book that compels the reader to take the time in order to thoroughly enjoy the rare and beautiful photographs and images of artifacts. In addition, Teit’s life history is also a very good read— it is a compelling saga of an unusual man who played a part in Canada’s development as a country. Creatively interwoven with

a stunning presentation of heritage materials, Thompson's biography is an outstanding and memorable historical work.

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