

Follow the Drinking Gourd

RICHARD SLOBODIN

Where the great big river meets the little river
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
The old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom;
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

UNDERGROUND RAILWAY SONG

This paper is offered as a segment of regional history or legendry. Although research has been involved, the paper does not quite conform to the canons of scholarship. For one thing, I bring myself into the story to a degree. For another, I have followed the illustrious example of Thucydides in appearing to quote verbatim in some cases where there is no written record and certainly no taped version of what was said. In these instances I have relied upon memory or probability.

Some extraordinary people have lived on the frontiers of societies and have eluded the networks of literate documentation. Among these remarkable people are Blacks, many of them fugitives from slavery in the United States, who reached freedom in British North America just before, during, and after the American Civil War. In the middle decades of the 19th century, population clusters of American Blacks formed in Chatham, Hamilton, and Windsor, Ontario and in Victoria, Salt Spring Island, and the Cariboo district in British Columbia. The social history of these people and of their descendants has been well researched (e.g., Pilton 1951,¹ Winks 1971, Kilian 1978, Thomson 1979).

The third and fourth quarters of the 19th century saw a few Black fugitives pushing beyond the settled lands of Canada and into the Subarctic.

Sparseness of documentation on these remarkable persons has left room for persistent legendry, as for instance in the widely contradictory accounts of Daniel Williams in northern British Columbia; either he is a ruffianly rascal or a victim of bigotry and misunderstanding, depending on whose views are credited (Patterson 1954; Freuchen 1956; Kilian 1978:148-9; Bowes 1963:93ff, 143-4; Thomson 1979:61-9).

Of all who followed the Drinking Gourd northward, the most far-travelling and in some respects the most extraordinary — indeed, one of the most unusual outsiders ever to enter the western Subarctic in historic times — is a man I know only as Nigger Tom or, preferably, Black Tom. I learned of him in the Fall of 1938 and heard about him sporadically during the ensuing twenty-four years.

In November 1938, I had returned to Fort McPherson, N.W.T., from a dog-team trip to Arctic Red River, “thirty-three miles and thirty-three lakes.” I had made the return trip with an elderly Arctic Red River Kutchin man, a mine of local information. He had pointed out that a particularly steep slope bordering a frozen lake was called *firh steteltai*, “(Where) Firth Showed His Strength.” It was a place where, as a rule, teams with loads were carefully belayed down or toilsomely manhandled up, but John Firth in his heyday had driven a loaded toboggan straight down, checking the dogs by main strength.

On the evening of my return, I visited Old Man Firth. My travelling partner and I had rented a small cabin next to the large double cabin belonging to John Firth, the retired Hudson’s Bay Company post manager, a personage renowned in the region. He had already told us stories from his years on the Peel River and thereabouts. John Firth (1853-1939) was known to the Kutchin people as *Hakai Zho*, “The Bearded Master (or Boss),” a reflection of his authority and of his masterful ways during his prime. That evening, my chair was drawn close to the old man’s and I was speaking as clearly as I could into his rather fearsome ear-trumpet. At eighty-five, Mr. Firth was still tall and rugged-looking, with booming voice and patriarchal beard, but he was severely afflicted with rheumatism and impaired hearing. I told him of passing the place Where Firth Showed His Strength.

“I suppose, sir, that you were the strongest man in these parts during your active days” — days which stretched from his arrival in 1872 from the Outer Hebrides of Scotland as the most junior of clerks until his retirement as a Chief Factor in 1923. Although not vain, Old John possessed a reasonable meed of self-esteem. I hoped that my remark would set him off on tales of his prowess and other matters.

I was in for a surprise. With stiffened fingers he meditatively combed his beard. “Nay,” he rumbled, “I wasna. Naygur Tam was that. I was braw, ye ken, but Tam, he was as strong as three stout men.”²

And so I learned for the first time about “Nigger Tom,” or as he was also known, Black Tom. In time, John Firth told a good deal about Tom from a foreman’s or trail boss’s point of view. I was also to learn of him

from people, mainly Kutchin and Metis, who knew him as a trusted and admired friend. In the course of the next twenty-four years, there were at least fifteen informants. However, to call them "informants" suggests a much more systematic inquiry than I ever undertook on this subject. It was simply that from time to time mention of Tom would crop up in conversations with old-timers. The anecdotes were varied, but there was a consistency in their tone. In all cases it was one of admiration and some affection.

The Peel River, principal thoroughfare of those who call themselves Tetlit Kutchin, "Middle River Dwellers,"³ flows east and north into the Mackenzie, joining the main river at the head of the Mackenzie Delta. One spring, apparently in the late 1870s, a large party of people was heading down-river toward the trading-post of Fort McPherson. Packed into the mooseskin boats were men, women, children, dogs, camping gear, weapons, meat, and pelts.

As the flotilla approached the place where the Bonnet Plume River pours a strong icy current into the Peel from the right-hand side, a raft swung out ahead of the boats. Balanced on it, handling a pole, stood a large man unknown to the people. As was customary, they hailed him and motioned him to the shore.

The man turned out to be not only unknown but strange in every respect. He was extremely tall and powerfully built. Many of the people are tall, as was John Firth, but everyone spoke of this man's height as well as his massiveness. He had very dark skin, tightly curled hair, and a broad low-bridged nose such as none of them had seen. Before the end of the century, they were to encounter Africans and Afro-Americans in whaling crews and in the Klondike gold rush, but this man was the first of his kind for them.

Where he had come from was a mystery. No one of whom they knew had been camped on the Bonnet Plume. However, there was no way of finding out about him, as few of them spoke much English.

The stranger indicated that he wished to go with the people. When they reached the Fort, he went to see the post manager. The acting post manager at this time was Joseph Hodgson. Perhaps this was fortunate for the Black man. Hodgson was about as unconventional as a trading post manager might be; he could accept with equanimity the unexplained arrival of a Black man. John Firth said he later learned that the stranger gave his name as Tom, said he had been a slave in the United States, and that on reaching British territory he had determined to put as much distance as possible between himself and the land of his birth and bondage.

"Well, you've reached the end of the line," Hodgson is said to have replied. "Any farther and you'd have to turn Husky — if they let you live. Head west, and you'll be back in American country."

Tom was soon put to work as a casual and part-time labourer for the Hudson's Bay Company, first as a packer and later as a dog-driver, transporting trade goods and furs between Fort McPherson and its outposts on the Yukon side of the Cordillera. Either he developed competence in handling a dogteam or he had already aquired these skills on his way north. He was certainly a good boatman. His sheer physical strength was useful, and in addition, he was said to be sure-handed and quick of movement. I think of him in this regard as something like John Ware, well-known 19th century Black rancher in southern Alberta. However, a more recent image comes to mind as well: that of Paul Robeson. In 1962 at Hay River, Harry Sanderson, octogenarian Metis who had been raised on the Porcupine River, could still remember Tom's deep resonant voice calling out the soundings as a barge neared the bank. The resemblance here is not only in voice; Robeson, the great basso, had been an All-American football player and was a remarkable person in many respects.

Reminiscences of Tom combine to form a picture of the way he lived among the Kutchin. He did not become a fulltime employee of the H.B.C. It is perhaps for this reason that there appears to be no evidence of his presence to be found in the relevant fur-trade records for the late 1870s and '80s.

Tom usually stayed in a tent when at Fort McPherson. At La Pierre House, then a busy entrepot across the mountains to the westward, he occupied a small cabin. At other times, he stopped at Rampart House on the Porcupine, another outpost of McPherson, or camped in the bush with parties of Kutchin.

As far as informants knew, Tom was celibate during his years with the Kutchin. At one period, he did take in and largely support at La Pierre House an aged widow who had few living kinfolk to assist her. From time to time, he also fostered orphaned children.

We cannot know why Tom did not work fulltime. It seems likely that the H.B.C. would have welcomed the fulltime services of so skillful and powerful a worker. The impression I got was that he spent a good deal of time in visiting and in conversation — possibly in religious exhortation. When not employed, he also passed time in reading the Bible he had somehow managed to carry with him, and in meditation. In summer, I was told, he sometimes sat under a tree or, when at McPherson, on the high bank overlooking the Peel, facing westward toward the snowclad

Richardsons. If approached quietly, he might be seen rocking to and fro with eyes closed, tears running down his cheeks. This behaviour did not seem strange to the Kutchin, among whom a man might for years occasionally weep in mourning. What near kin, what lost companions Tom may have been mourning will never be known. None of my informants could report his speaking of his past, either in the United States or in southern Canada. However, many people had seen the raised welts and scars criss-crossing his broad back, the badges of a recalcitrant slave and probably a persistent escaper.

Chief Julius held that Tom did not choose steady employment because he wanted time to read Scriptures, to think, and to pray. This was a perceptive comment, but I am inclined to believe that in addition, Tom simply had to be his own man. Almost all his life he had been driven, at first literally, by slave-drivers, then by his burning need to get away from "the land of Egypt." Now, far from the scenes of slavery, among these people who accorded him friendship and goodwill, he had to unwind, to commune with himself, and to search for a meaning to everything that he and his people had endured. The tears very likely were shed in mourning and longing, but I venture to think that they also signalized the gradual unclenching of his spirit in this strange and, for him, peaceful land.

Tom was not always solemn. Both Chief Julius and his mother Lucy⁴ stated that Tom attended band feasts, at which he was an active dancer. He also had a distinctive, and on at least one occasion, humorous way of making a point in social relations.

For a time, he stayed at the home of Murdo Montgomery, manager of Rampart House. Murdo came to fear that his Metis wife, considerably younger than he, was attracted to Tom. The atmosphere in the household became tense and unpleasant.

One Sunday morning, Murdo found himself being hauled out of bed by a huge hand grasping the upper front of his long-johns. It was Tom, brusquely motioning him out of the bedroom. Mrs. M, it seems, prudently kept her head down. Confused and frightened, Murdo stumbled downstairs ahead of Tom. He was curtly ordered to sit at the table. In front of him was a large breakfast. Tom sat down across the table with a mug of tea in his fist.

"Eat!" he commanded. Then, he burst into laughter. "The white man was pretty scared, I reckon. Bad thoughts."

How this story came to circulate, I do not know, but I learned of it from more than one source.

Another story is based on what was still public knowledge in 1938-39. One of those from whom I heard it, in a translated version, was "Old Chief's Mother," Lucy Martin. As a young woman, she had known Black Tom.

One summer during Tom's sojourn, disturbing rumours of Bush Men were prevalent. These *nana'i* are semi-supernatural beings who roam the forest just beyond human range. Frequently, stories about them begin with the disappearance or alleged disappearance of a boy or man, usually a stranger. They were not to be approached closely yet were regarded with pity and concern. Bush Man rumours were common in 1938-39 and in later years (Slobodin 1960).

That summer in the 1880s, people were jumpy. At freezeup, the feeling persisted. Then it was observed that Tom was not to be found. This heightened the tension, for he was the strangest of all strangers.

One day, said Old Chief's Mother, all the dogs at McPherson began to howl. Out of the trees along the cliffside path Tom emerged. He was carrying an unconscious man on his back. At first, children, then adults came running to them. Tom said nothing until he reached the mission house, where Archdeacon and Mrs. McDonald had now appeared. Easing his inert burden onto the mission porch, Tom addressed Julia McDonald in Kutchin, saying only, "He needs help." He then walked off to his tent.

Why did Tom speak to Mrs. McDonald rather than to the Archdeacon, and why in the native language? Julia, a local Metis, spoke English at least as well as Tom, by this time, spoke Kutchin, and for that matter, Robert McDonald was fairly fluent in Kutchin. It may be, again, that Tom was making a point. He and the missionary were not on the happiest of terms.

I learned this from John Firth when I remarked that everyone seemed to like Tom.

"No, not everyone," Firth replied. "The Archdeacon was sometimes fashed with him." It seems that the Black man had taken to informal preaching. He did not do this at Fort McPherson, but he did at bush camps. McDonald also travelled a good deal. Sometimes, he would arrive at a camp and find people singing hymns that Tom had taught them, and his catechists would report that Tom had been conducting prayer meetings. The missionary, it seems, did not like this at all. He would have been glad to see the last of Tom, but knew of no way to bring this about.

Another person who told a lot about Tom was William Smith. In 1939, he was the oldest living band member of mixed European-Native

descent. He was an interesting man in many ways; for one thing, he had the appearance of a handsome elderly northern European, but in manner, speech, and way of life he was an old-fashioned Dene, a man of the woods. At the age of eighty or thereabouts, he was tall, lean, and limber; he was also gentle, softspoken, and courteous. A deeply religious man, he held the memory of Black Tom in respect amounting almost to reverence.

He related a curious incident of which a simplified version is given here. On a warm summer day at McPherson, Tom was sleeping peacefully in the shade of a tree. Some big boys, having nothing better to do, decided to see if they could rouse Tom to anger. No one had ever seen Tom angry. Apparently they thought the fury of so huge a person would be a sight worth beholding.

Standing at a safe distance, they shied small stones at him. Eventually, one struck the side of Tom's head. He sat up with a start and looked around. Then he rose slowly, blood trickling down the side of his face. The boys backed away, prepared to flee. Tom looked at them reproachfully, shook his head, and in his deep voice remarked, "You shouldn't do that, boys."

"They didn't mean to harm Tom," William explained. "they were just playing in a bad way..."

"Were you one of those boys?" I asked.

He looked shocked. "Me? Never! I am a Christian. Tom was a very good man."

It seems that Tom was always interested in young people. One summer, he decided to teach local boys to swim. He located a lake behind McPherson that was shallow enough to be warm by mid-August and which had an island with a good shelving shore that would be reached by canoe and was fairly free of insects. After some of the boys were swimming a little, Tom tried to expand the project by recruiting Inuit boys from the encampment across the Peel. In that era, Inuvialuit or Mackenzie Eskimo came up from the coast each summer to trade at the Fort.

Tom had overreached himself here. Relations between Dene and Inuit were strained; violence between them was barely averted as late as 1904. When Tom approached them, Inuvialuit parents refused to allow their children to cross the river without adults, and at this point the Kutchin parents put at stop to the swimming lessons. If Tom's efforts, so far ahead of their time, had been successful, twentieth-century anthropologists would have encountered the puzzling situation of Arctic and Subarctic people who knew how to swim.

In 1888, Archdeacon McDonald was to be relieved of Tom's presence. In July of that year, there appeared at Fort McPherson the man who, according to traditions about Tom, provided the impetus for his departure from the scene. To this point in the narrative, several interesting persons have been mentioned. Besides Tom himself, such figures as Lucy Martin, Julius Martin, Joseph Hodgson, William Smith, Robert and Julia McDonald, and John Firth each had a personal history worthy of record. In fact Hodgson, Firth, and the Archdeacon are mentioned in travellers' accounts, mission and fur trade histories; Lucy and Julius Martin are memorialized in a painting at the Fort McPherson primary school.

As colourful as any of these, and in his heyday incomparably better known, was the person who came onto the scene at this point. Hugh Cecil Lowther (1857-1944) had, on the untimely death of his elder brother in 1882, become Fifth Earl of Lonsdale, heading "one of the most powerful and aristocratic houses in England" (Beckett 1989:10). In the course of a long life, Lonsdale outlived youthful scandal and became a famous sportsman, donor of the Lonsdale Belts in boxing, a formidable heavyweight fighter himself, proprietor of a large racing stable, and for decades pre-eminent as an M.F.H. on the hunting field. To a wide and affectionate Edwardian and Georgian public he was known as "the Yellow Earl" from the colour of his racing and hunting liveries and of the coach in which he, his countess, and their cronies attended race meetings.

It has long been supposed or guessed that Lord Lonsdale had made a lengthy trip in the Far North of the New World. Friends and acquaintances had only vague notions of this. The Duchess of Westminster tells of visiting Lowther Castle, the family seat, as a child in the 1920s and of being shown "an iron sledge" on which the Earl jocularly claimed to have "travelled to the North Pole and back. I only discovered years later that in the days of the Gold Rush he had actually been to the Klondike and into the Arctic Circle. If only he had told us about some of his real adventures instead of inventing imaginary ones!" (Westminster 1961:92).

Lonsdale's actual route, a decade earlier than the Klondike Gold Rush and not including the Klondike region, was until recently almost impossible to ascertain from published records. The Earl's "authorized life" contains many inaccuracies on this score (Dawson 1946). Details of his northern trip were, however, very well remembered in the 1930s and later, by oldtimers along the western Subarctic waterways. I have discussed them with John Firth, Fred Camsell at Hay River, and Archie

Linklater at Old Crow, all now deceased.⁵ The facts of Lonsdale's entire journey are now public property as a result of Shepard Krech's editing and annotation of Lonsdale's travel journal and his letters home (1989).

It was a common belief among my informants or collocutors about Black Tom that during the six weeks between Lonsdale's arrival at Fort McPherson in July 1888, and his departure westward in early September, he and Black Tom had become well acquainted. William Smith seemed to think that Tom had accompanied the Earl on his excursion to the Arctic Coast.⁶ At any rate, both William Firth and his brother Fred, sons of John, had heard that these two big men, so contrastive in background, did converse on several occasions.⁷

A topic said to have been discussed by them was American slavery. Tom was aware that the British upper classes favoured the Confederacy. In reply, Lord Lonsdale pointed out that the British were opposed to slavery, had been the first nation to abolish the Atlantic slave trade, and that most Britons favoured the Union in the American Civil War. Perhaps so, Tom would reply, but not the Queen and the lords. His belief that Queen Victoria supported the slave-owners was a cause of distress to Tom. Like millions around the world at the time, he greatly respected the Queen.⁸

In early September 1888, shortly before Lonsdale and his party were to leave for the Yukon, Tom remarked that he wished he could talk to the Queen about slavery.

"Do you really want to talk to Her Majesty? You shall do so," the Earl expansively declared. He invited Tom to join him on the Yukon and to travel with him to England. Once there, Lonsdale would arrange an audience with the Queen.

A few weeks after Lonsdale and his party had left, Tom set out westward from Fort McPherson. He is said to have arrived at Rampart House and from there headed down the Porcupine toward the Yukon. At this point, Black Tom disappears. Like all heroes of Kutchin myth and legend, he departs westward, into the sunset.

The only further rumour about him was that he had indeed caught up with Lord Lonsdale and had died on the voyage to England.

The foregoing represents a good deal of the oral tradition — history? folklore? — concerning Black Tom's life with the Kutchin. The incidents vary in credibility. That Tom had extensive conversations with the Earl of Lonsdale stretches credulity. That he had any at all is not to be ruled out in the circumstances of that time and place. It is interesting how persistently Tom was associated with Lonsdale in the stories.

As for credibility, it must be borne in mind that Tom's very existence, his presence and life with the Dene in the western Subarctic, is quite improbable. So are a great many well-authenticated historical events. It is at least as improbable that fifteen or more widely differing but in all cases responsible persons, Native and European, in the course of 24 years and in various localities, were retelling as facts what were actually parts of a myth.

Since 1973, I have from time to time examined relevant records at the Public Archives of Canada, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, and those of the Anglican and Roman Catholic mission services. In none of these is there mention of a Black man or an outsider named Tom sojourning in or around Fort McPherson in the 1870s and '80s. Recently, Shepard Krech III has enriched Americanist and northernist studies by careful editing and annotation of the Yellow Earl's travel journal and letters home from the Far North, and by meticulous description of the peer's collection of artifacts. On receiving a copy of *A Victorian Earl in the Arctic* (1989), I lost no time in looking for Tom in it. After all my archival failures, I was not very much surprised to find no mention of any such person in Lonsdale's writings.

Black Tom, it seems, has completely escaped the written record — although, it is true, something may yet turn up. Nevertheless, I feel sure that Tom was there. For a few years, between his emergence from the western mountains and his disappearance back into them in 1888, Tom presented a life and personality which led Chief Julius to remark, "Tom was the only one who never wanted anything from us. He only helped people." Whether this comment was entirely fair to all other outsiders I would not venture to say, but that was the chief's opinion.

The anecdotes about Tom, of which a fair sampling has been presented, share a quality, at any rate a negative quality, that differentiates them from almost all regional stories, Dene, Euro-Canadian, or Euro-American. In the Black Tom anecdotes there is no greed, no sexual motivation, no violence, and no bigotry⁹ — although, of course, Tom's presence reflects the monstrous racial exploitation of American slavery. Hence the anecdotes about Tom may seem to some, habituated to "gamier" fare, rather innocuous and tame. Tom was simply a kind, gentle, considerate man, one on whom brutal violence had been wrought and who had a physique capable of great violence, but with a character incapable of it.

After his disappearance, some people did have an explanation for Black Tom. William Smith told of it with diffidence.

"Those my old people," he remarked, "were mixed up in those days. Lots of sickness, lots of people dying. Minister and priest tell us different stories about true religion. Who is right?"

"Archdeacon told us *Atochokai* same as John the Baptist, breaking the trail for Jesus."

Atochokai, "He Paddled a Different Route," is the eastern Kutchin culture-hero.

"Preachers said Jesus suffered for us. He was coming back some time to help us . . . People mixed up. After Tom was gone, some people think it's Tom, he's John the Baptist. But some think, Tom, he's Jesus Christ."

More than a half-century since I first learned of Black Tom, I am setting down these memories; first, that they may not be lost to the lore of the Dene and the region; secondly, in the hope that some readers or people with whom readers may be in touch will have further family or community traditions about Tom.

He deserves to be remembered.¹⁰

Dr. Richard Slobodin is Professor Emeritus, Department of Anthropology, McMaster University.

NOTES

¹ As master's theses are sometimes undervalued by later researchers, I wish to join Kilian (1978:179) in commending Pilton's important work.

² The disclaimer about following the example of Thucydides does not apply to John Firth's initial remark about Black Tom. Every word of it is etched in my memory after half a century.

³ Ritter (1976) glosses the name of the band as "people of the head of the waters." There is some tendency, possibly influenced by Ritter, to substitute the more literally accurate "Gwich'in" for "Kutchin" as the name of the tribe or collectivity of bands. I have retained the older spelling, as it has been the standard for a number of years (Slobodin 1981).

⁴ Lucy Martin (died 1948) was a daughter to T'ok Tsul, sister of Francis Tsik, and mother of Julius Martin (died 1949). All three of these men were chiefs of the Tetlit Kutchin. Julius was the last hereditary band chief. The descent group to which they belonged is partially charted in Slobodin 1962:71 and 1969:65. A band member semi-humorously called it "the royal family." Certainly Lucy, when I knew her, was treated like a dowager queen.

⁵ No one with whom I talked seemed to know of Lonsdale's travels much beyond Fort Yukon.

⁶ In a letter to his wife, Lonsdale writes that on his trip to visit the "Esquimeaux" at Liverpool Bay, "we are 3 Englishmen, 8 Indians . . . and 2 Huskies" (Krech 1989:58).

⁷ The Firth brothers were born after Tom and Lonsdale had left the region, but they had heard many stories about these notable sojourners.

⁸ Dan Williams is said to have "recognized only two authorities: God and Queen Victoria" (Thomson 1979:61).

⁹ The epithet "Nigger" applied to Tom by some oldtimers is not, to my mind, an expression of bigotry. The word has long since been completely unacceptable, but people like John Firth and

Archie Linklater, raised in the 19th century, knew no other term for an African or an Afro-American. It was clear that these men respected Tom. What David Breen writes of John Ware (1845-1905) applies here: "his commonly used nickname 'Nigger John' was not used pejoratively" (1988:2277).

- ¹⁰ A generation ago, Tom was alive among the Peel River Kutchin not only in memory but as a reborn identity. In 1938-39, I estimated that one-tenth of the Peel River community was deemed to possess reborn souls and personalities. Belief in reincarnation was still current in the 1960s and may exist at present. Black Tom was among the reborn. "The mother of the reincarnation of the American Negro, the legendary Tom, was a granddaughter of Tom's freighting partner, who had regaled his descendants with many stories about this remarkable ex-slave" (Slobodin 1970: 72).

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