TOTEM POLES—

Their Significance and Modern Origin

By MARIUS BARBEAU

The finest totem poles in existence, near the Nass River, several of them will soon topple over from old age. They were carved from large cedar trees carefully selected and sometimes hauled from a long distance, and erected in commemoration of the dead, in the course of elaborate ceremonies. Now that the villagers have moved to new quarters, to keep up with the times, the poles seem forsaken in the old deserted abodes of the past, among cabins where some of the natives customarily smoke salmon in the summer. Some of them have already fallen and decayed, while others lean precariously or totter in the wind, soon to come down with a resounding crash.

It is a mistake to say, as is often done irresponsibly, that totem poles are hundreds of years old. They could not be, from the nature of materials and climatic conditions. A green cedar cut and re-set without preservatives in the ground, cannot stand upright far beyond 50 or 60 years on the upper Skeena, where precipitation is moderate and the soil usually consists of gravel and sand. Along the coast, it seldom can endure for much more than 40 years in the dampness that prevails most of the time, and in the muskeg foundation in which it is set.

A POLE was left to stand as many years as nature, unopposed, would permit. Sometimes two or three poles belong to the same family and commemorate the same name as borne in as many succeeding generations. They stand side by side in front of the owner’s house. It is not the custom to mend or transplant a pole, however precarious its condition. Once fallen, the pole is pushed aside, if it is in the way, and decays gradually or is cut up and burned as firewood.

The art of carving poles is not really as ancient as is generally believed. The growth of this art to its present proportions was confined to the 19th Century; that is, after the traders had introduced European tools—the steel axe, the adze, and the curved knife—in large numbers among the natives. The lack of suitable tools, wealth, and leisure in earlier times precluded the existence of elaborate structures. The benefits that accrued from the fur trade, besides, stimulated ambitions and rivalries between the leading families. Their only desire was to outdo the others in wealth and display. The totem pole became, after 1830, the fashionable way of showing one’s power and crests, while commemorating the dead or decorating the houses.

The size of the pole and the beauty of its imagery published abroad the fame of those it represented.

The native accounts of the earliest carved poles lead to the conclusion that carved house-front poles and house-corner posts were introduced first, many years before detached memorial columns to honor the dead became the fashion. However, this style of house decoration was superseded as soon as the natives gave up building large communal lodges of the purely native type; memorial columns standing away from the houses became

Row of totem poles at Kitwanga, on the Skeena River, restored. Above: Carved grizzly bear atop pole, executed by Haesem-hliyawn
The new fashion. It is fairly safe to say that none of these monuments existed on the coast before 1820 or on the upper Skeena before 1840.

The remarkable west-coast custom of carving and erecting house poles and tall mortuary columns or of painting coats-of-arms on house-fronts is sufficiently uniform in type to suggest that it originated in a single center and then spread in various directions.

There is a striking lack of evidence in the memoirs of the early navigators—Cook, Dixon, Meares, Vancouver, and so on—as to the existence of totem poles proper; that is, of detached funeral memorials, either south or north. Yet several villages of the Tlingit, the Haidas or the Tsimsyan, the Kwakiutl, and the Nootkas were often visited by mariners in the early days. The casual descriptions or sketches that appear in some of their records of exploration fail to give us any hint of their presence, still less of their actual appearance. For example, Dixon examined several of the Haida villages on the Queen Charlotte Islands; yet there is no mention of totem poles in his records. He, however, described small carved objects, trays and spoons, and left some illustrations.

But there were already—from 1780 to 1800—some carved house poles in existence. The custom of carving and erecting memorial columns to the dead is therefore modern; it may exceed slightly the span of the last century.

Pecisely where did the totem poles or mortuary columns first appear and at exactly what moment? The presumptions boil down to two. These heraldic monuments first became the fashion either on the Nass River or among the Haidas of the Queen Charlotte Islands. At first sight it seems more likely that the Tlingit, of the southern Alaskan frontier, might have initiated the custom of erecting memorials to the dead. They were closer to the Russian headquarters, and must have been among the first to obtain iron tools. There is no doubt, also, that they were most skillful carvers and weavers, through the whole local evolution of these crafts. Yet there are good reasons why the credit for originating totem poles should not fall to their lot. We know that the early circumnavigators that called at some of their villages made no mention of large carvings, not even of such house or grave posts as they observed among the Haidas to the south. The custom of planting poles is not widespread among the Tlingit. Most if not all the Haida and the Nisrae tribes, on the other hand, were totem pole carvers and owned many poles in each village. The concept is more typically theirs than it is Tlingit.

The Haida poles, as we know them, are partly house poles and partly totem poles proper; the house poles are far more numerous in proportion among them than among the Tsimsyan. Indeed, none of the present Nisrae carvings were house poles. The two large posts observed among the Haidas by Bartlett and Marchand, in 1788-1792, were house portals. Though the Haida villages were often visited at the end of the 18th Century and in the first part of the 19th, we find no other reference to large poles; not even to the famous rows of poles at Massett and Skidegate which were photographed about 1830. They were presumably from 10 to 30 years old when the Haidas became converts to Christianity and in consequence gave up their customs, cut down their poles and sold them to white people about the year 1890 or afterwards.

There is no evidence of mortuary poles among the Haidas antedating 1840 or 1850, though a few earlier and transitional ones may have served to introduce the fashion.

The probabilities are that totem poles proper originated among the Nisrae or northern Tsimsyan, of the Nass River. It seems that a few mortuary columns were erected on the lower Nass at a fairly early date, that is, a few generations ago. It is otherwise evident, from traditional recollections, that the custom of thus commemorating the dead is not very ancient among them, and it is far more likely that the Haidas and the Tlingit imitated them than the reverse.

The estuary of the Nass was the most important thoroughfare of Indian life in all the northern parts. This is in British Columbia south of the long southern leg of Alaska. Ulaken fishing in the neighborhood of what is now called Fishery Bay, near Gitkatan—the largest Nisrae center—was a dominant feature in native life. The grease from the ulaken or candle-fish was a fairly universal and indispensable staple along the coast. For the purpose of securing their supply of it, the Haidas, the Tlingit, the Tsimsyan, and the Gitksan traveled over the sea or the inland trails every spring and camped in several temporary villages of their own, from Red-Bluffs eastwards on the lower Nass, side by side, for weeks at a time. During these yearly seasons, exchanges of all kinds, barter, social amenities, or feuds were quite normal. As a result, cultural features of the local hosts—whether they were willing hosts or not—was an open question—they were constantly under the observation of the strangers and were often a cause of envy or aggression.

It is accepted among specialists that the Nass River carvers were on the whole the best in the entire country. Their art reached the highest point of development ever attained on the northwest coast, and their totem poles—more than 20 of which can still be observed in their original locations—are the best and tallest seen anywhere.