



ACROSS THE SHAMAN'S RIVER

JOHN MUIR, THE TLINGIT STRONGHOLD, AND THE OPENING OF THE NORTH

Daniel Lee Henry

At a time of great cultural upheaval among the Tlingit Indians of Southeast Alaska, naturalist John Muir acted as an agent of Manifest Destiny, opening the floodgates of the Klondike Gold Rush.

For more than a thousand years, the Chilkat and Chilkoot Tlingit controlled a 2.4 million acre homeland called Jilkaat Aani at the terminus of North America's largest fjord. Seated at the confluence of glaciers, vertical mountains, forested valleys, and Inside Passage seas, the tribes thrived in a realm that they stewarded and defended against intruders.

Enter John Muir, father of the American environmental movement, whose Alaska expedition of 1879 may have forever altered the destiny of Jilkaat Aani residents while transforming his own relationship with Native America.

The first book to trace Muir's journey from racism to respect for indigenous people, *Across the Shaman's River* shows that as Muir's attitudes evolved, so did his vision for wilderness preservation—a policy that would ultimately dispossess Alaska Natives from their traditional lands. In addition to extensive use of historic documents, this compelling narrative draws from previously unpublished Muir journals and the author's interviews with Tlingit elders.

This enthralling book is much more than a history of Alaska. It is a detailed account of First Contact, good intentions and devious ones, a convergence of cultures on a grand scale, all sides fairly represented with vivid portraits; a valuable record of the complex fate of the last wilderness on earth.

—Paul Theroux, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Mosquito Coast*, *The Tao of Travel*, *Deep South*, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, and *Blinding Light*

With Tlingit elders as narrative partners, Henry has rendered a unique retelling of John Muir's encounters with Alaska's landscapes and people. Comprehensive and thoroughly sourced, this is an essential book for those who seek fresh perspectives on the complexities of the Northern experience.

—Deb Vanasse, author of *Wealth Woman* and *Cold Spell*

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ALASKA

Daniel Lee Henry

THE SCENES FROM THE
LIFE OF DANIEL LEE HENRY



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AND THE OPENING OF THE NORTH

The author will donate a portion of book royalties for the development of historical programs at the Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center and Chilkoot Indian Association.

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This enthralling book is much more than a history of Alaska. It is a detailed account of First Contact, good intentions and devious ones, a convergence of cultures on a grand scale, all sides fairly represented with vivid portraits; a valuable record of the complex fate of the last wilderness on earth.

PAUL THEROUX, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Mosquito Coast*, *The Tao of Travel*, *Deep South*, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, and *Blinding Light*

The little-known meeting between the “Ice Chief” and the Tlingit guardians of Alaska’s coast came at a moment of historic crisis and transition. Introducing an array of vivid characters, Daniel Henry deftly brings this hidden gem of a story to light, drawing on years of scholarly research, careful cultivation of local Native sources, and the author’s deep knowledge of the physical Southeast Alaska landscape. Whether John Muir’s appeals to brotherhood and altruism were justified—given the century of American rule that followed—is one of many glittering ambiguities that this story forces us to consider.

TOM KIZZIA, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Pilgrim’s Wilderness* and *The Wake of the Unseen Object*

With Tlingit elders as narrative partners, Dan Henry has rendered a unique retelling of John Muir’s encounters with Alaska’s landscapes and people. Comprehensive and thoroughly sourced, *Shaman’s River* is an essential book for those who seek fresh perspectives on the complexities of the Northern experience.

DEB VANASSE, author of *Wealth Woman: Kate Carmack and the Klondike Race for Gold* and *Cold Spell*

Henry is a gifted wordsmith and has written a convincing if complex narrative that begins with his own journey to Alaska in 1979 and backtracks one hundred years to John Muir’s first trip of seven to the region. He has a gift parallel to Pulitzer Prize-winner John McPhee in taking a near-contemporary event and moving back and forth between historical events and modern issues, using oral history and testimony to reinforce documented events. The result is a well-crafted, cogent story of the contest to break the hegemony of Native chiefs.

WILLIAM SWAGERTY, PH.D., Professor of History; Director, John Muir Center for Environmental Studies, University of the Pacific author of *The Indianization of Lewis and Clark*

If you're looking for cheap amusement, dear reader, get another book. If you're looking for a new lens on history, a story both patient and provocative, scholarly yet stunning; illuminating and even radical, this is for you. This is the story of John Muir and the last hostile tribes of North America, the Chilkat Tlingits of Alaska. Not John Muir the naturalist or conservationist, but JM the pacifist and agent of Manifest Destiny, speaking on brotherhood and love. I devoured this great book.

KIM HEACOX, author of *Jimmy Bluefeather* and *John Muir and the Ice that Started a Fire*

Henry's book fills a gap in our understanding of Tlingit history and their relations with Europeans that no other study has attempted. Given that there is plenty of interest in the life and adventures of John Muir among environmentalists, there will be an equal number of Alaskan historians and students who will enjoy Henry's *Across the Shaman's River* and discuss the significance of its contents for decades to come.

REV. DR. MICHAEL JAMES OLEKSA, Russian Orthodox Archpriest of Alaska, ret., author of *Another Culture/Another World*

Across the Shaman's River is an elegantly written text, laced with novel insights that should attract a significant readership. Henry takes on a host of controversial issues; I doubt all of his readers will agree with his arguments. However, given the depth and quality of the research he has marshaled, critics will need to take his arguments seriously, and interrogate the original research he offers.

DAVID FRANK, PH.D., Professor of Rhetoric, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, author of *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film*

Dan Henry tells a story about the history of Alaska in a way it has never been told before. This is a terrific read for both casual readers and nit-picky experts, a feat to celebrate and enjoy.

TERRENCE COLE, PH.D., Professor of History, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK, author of *Fighting for the Forty-Ninth Star: C.W. Snedden and the Crusade for Alaska Statehood* and *Banking on Alaska: The Story of the National Bank of Alaska*



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Daniel Lee Henry

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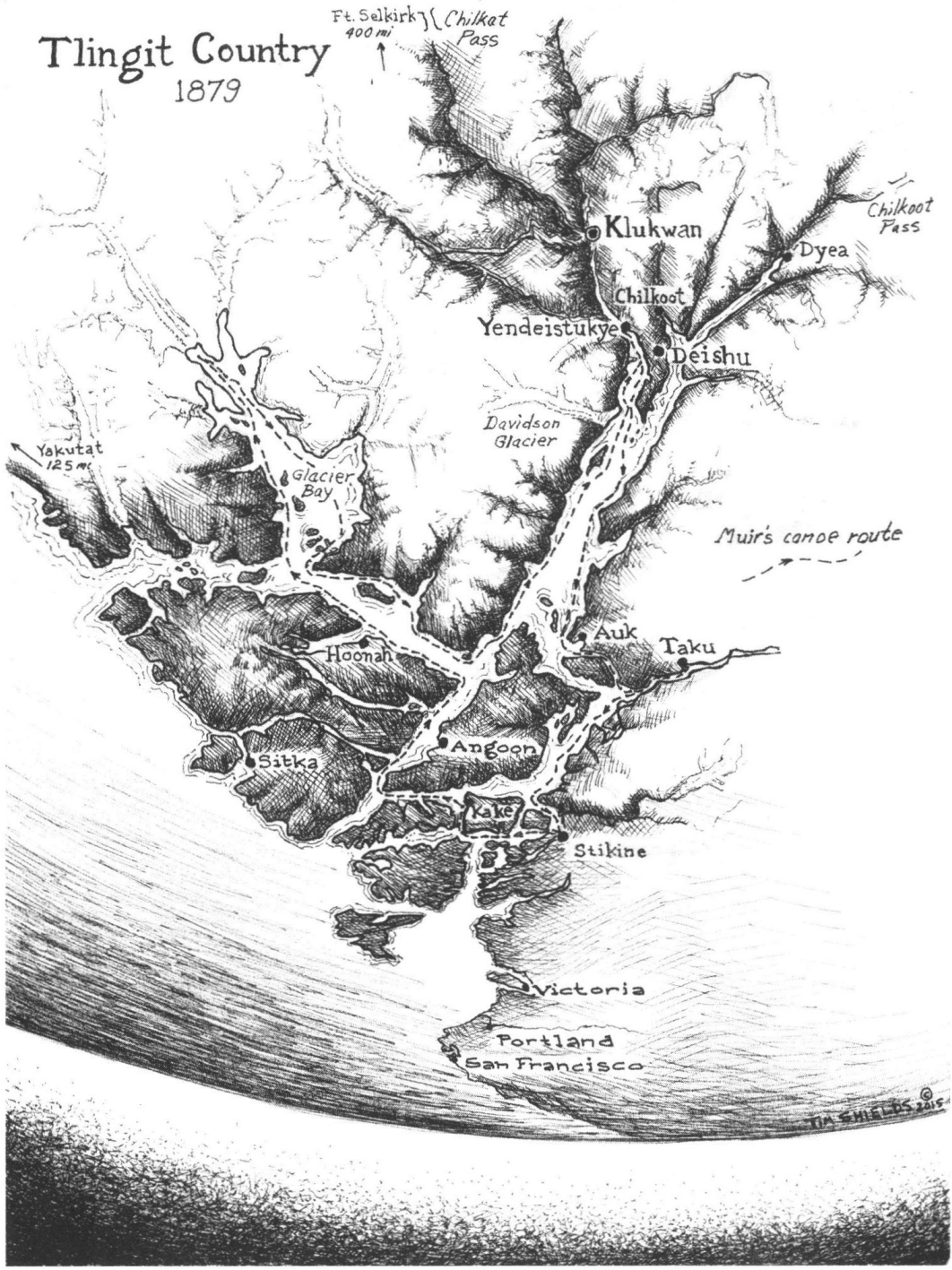
To my teachers—Austin Hammond, Joe Hotch, and Rachel “Dixie” Johnson

I might say all my life I have never until now heard a white man speak. It has always seemed to me that while trying to talk to traders and those seeking gold-mines that it was like speaking to a person across a broad stream that was running fast over stones and making so loud a noise that scarce a single word could be heard. But now, for the first time, the Indian and the white man are on the same side of the river, eye to eye, heart to heart.

Karskarz (Kaa'shaax), shaman-headman of Chilkoot, to John Muir
Yandeist'akyé, Alaska NOVEMBER 7, 1879

Tlingit Country

1879



Foreword

:: CONNECTIONS MADE

This book is a remarkable achievement. Daniel Henry discerns, documents, and, with elegant and entertaining prose, connects people, events, and cultures that have always seemed unrelated. No one else has recognized this history. Taking a wider and deeper view, Henry has discovered the amazing relationship between the northern Tlingit clans, the American Presbyterian missionaries—particularly Rev. S. Hall Young—and pioneering environmentalist John Muir, and tells the fascinating tale of how their interactions opened the northern region of Alaska's Southeast Panhandle to global influences.

Cultures are ways of seeing the world. Certainly, all the main players in this saga had their own unique visions of reality. Indigenous peoples had discerned the inherent spiritual significance of their land, for they valued its resources and delighted in its scenic beauty. Their shaman leaders affirmed an ancient belief in the power of the invisible made manifest in the wonders of the natural world and brought into focus by the power and authority of those extraordinary spiritual visionaries who prophesied and healed them. Their faith was rooted in the land.

The American Protestant missionaries found God most especially in Holy Scripture, the Word of God as a Book, and considered people who venerated the earth at best misguided pagans, at worst hopeless barbarians. It

was the preachers' task to convince Native people to abandon their ancient ways and become "civilized." To achieve this transformation, many missionaries, reformers, and Indian agents thought it would be necessary to eradicate much of the Natives' "primitive" culture and even suppress their tribal language. Later in his life, S. Hall Young insisted that the Tlingit language should be allowed to die in order to purge their "superstitions and lies," which, somehow, he intrinsically linked together. The sooner the old ways disappeared, the faster targeted populations could join the civilized world, albeit as laborers, miners, and fruit pickers. The Reverend Sheldon Jackson, Alaska's education commissioner and also a national leader of the Presbyterian Church, advised his subordinates to discourage and disparage the use of indigenous languages and customs, insist on the speaking of English alone, and to introduce or impose, if necessary, Anglo American cultural norms—the cutting of hair and wearing of starched shirts and of ties, coats, suits, and polished shoes. Civilized!

Another church official noted, "We have no higher calling than as missionaries to those who have not yet achieved the Anglo-Saxon frame of mind." One could hardly find two more diametrically opposed ways of seeing the world—two more opposite cultures—than those confronting each other in the prologue of this book.

The critical connecting link was the unlikely liaison, John Muir. His own upbringing was not unlike Reverend Young's, except that the doctrines of Muir's father, a preacher, were even more conservative and uncompromising. Nevertheless, Muir's evangelical Christian background provided him with a fundamental understanding of Young's convictions and commitment, thus enabling their friendship, as Henry shows in this book. Without this very human relationship, the events documented here could not have occurred.

What the author does is rather extraordinary insofar as he has appreciated and respected all the disparate elements of this drama and shown how, like the perfect congruence of planets on an astrological chart, these cultures and these people came together to enrich and inspire each other.

Muir understood very well the spiritual intuition of the Tlingit, but his own religious training prevented him from embracing it. He understood the positive motives of his new missionary friend as well but could not fully embrace his philosophy. Because he could empathize with both but accept neither, Muir became the bridge, the connection, capable in the end of bringing together conflicting, virtually opposite "ways of seeing the world" while forging another way.

Ironically, and perhaps even tragically, there already was another “way of seeing” available and already present in Southeast Alaska at this time. Introduced by Ioan Veniaminov, the Siberian Russian priest at Sitka, the Eastern Orthodox “way of seeing” affirmed the inherent spiritual value of the created world as basic to religious life. Byzantine theology discussed the Word of God as constantly seeking to be “embodied,” and Saint Maximus the Confessor, in the seventh century, affirmed that the Word (Logos) had been “embodied” three times: in the whole cosmos, the created universe; in the Bible, the written Sacred Word; and finally in Jesus Christ, the Word Made Flesh.

In the twentieth century, Saint Nicolai Velmirovich went so far as to affirm that anyone who could not find God in the first embodiment, the visible creation, was unlikely to find Him in any book. “If you cannot find God in the wilderness,” he explained, “the one crying in the wilderness will have nothing to say to you.” How well this would have resonated with Muir’s spiritual experience, a form of Christianity that celebrated and affirmed the inherent and eternal spiritual value of the natural world as blessed, sacred and even, as one ancient Orthodox writer stated, “God’s Self-Portrait.”

Veniaminov translated scriptural and liturgical texts into Tlingit, opened a school for the Tlingits to learn to read and translate texts into their own language, and built a chapel where worship was conducted in their language. The Great Blessing of Water, celebrated annually with processions from the church to the Pacific Ocean, renewed the original blessing that God Himself had bestowed, “in the Beginning,” calling what He had made “very good.” There are Orthodox rites for blessing land, houses, bread, flowers, salt, meat, fish, new wells, graves, and even beehives!

But neither Muir nor Young ever met the priests of Sitka. It was a potentially fruitful connection that was never made.

In this book, however, the author has discerned those connections that were made but have until now gone unnoticed. I hope all those who read these pages will be as delighted as I am to see how, despite all their limitations and differences, Native Americans, Anglo American missionaries, and one sensitive, brilliant, and visionary pioneer American environmentalist came together to create a new way of seeing for future generations.

Michael J. Oleksa, Th.D.
Very Reverend Archpriest, ret.,
Orthodox Church in America
Anchorage, Alaska OCTOBER 2016

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