



HILARY STEWART

LOOKING  
AT  
TOTEM  
POLES

FOREWORD BY NORMAN TAIT

LOOKING  
AT TOTEM  
POLES

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# LOOKING AT TOTEM POLES

*Written & Illustrated by*

HILARY STEWART

*With a Foreword by*

NORMAN TAIT

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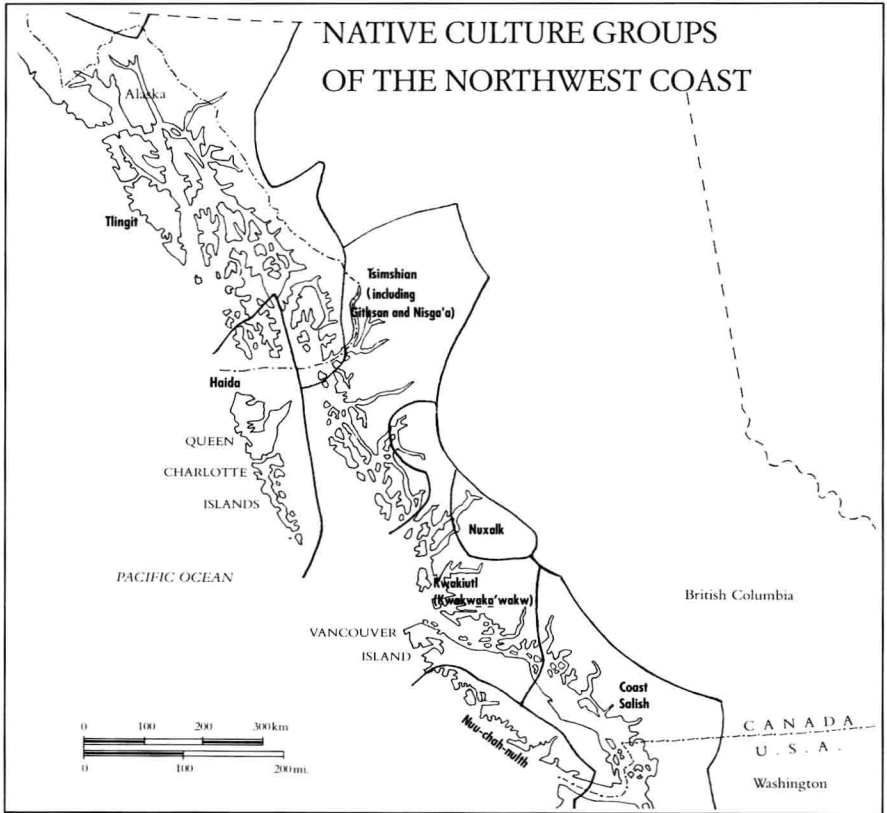
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# NATIVE CULTURE GROUPS OF THE NORTHWEST COAST



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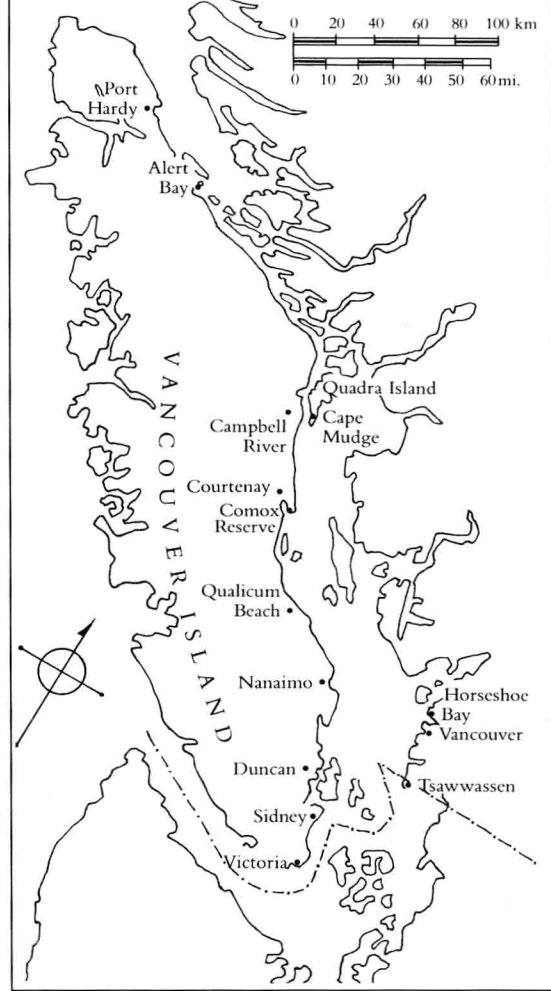
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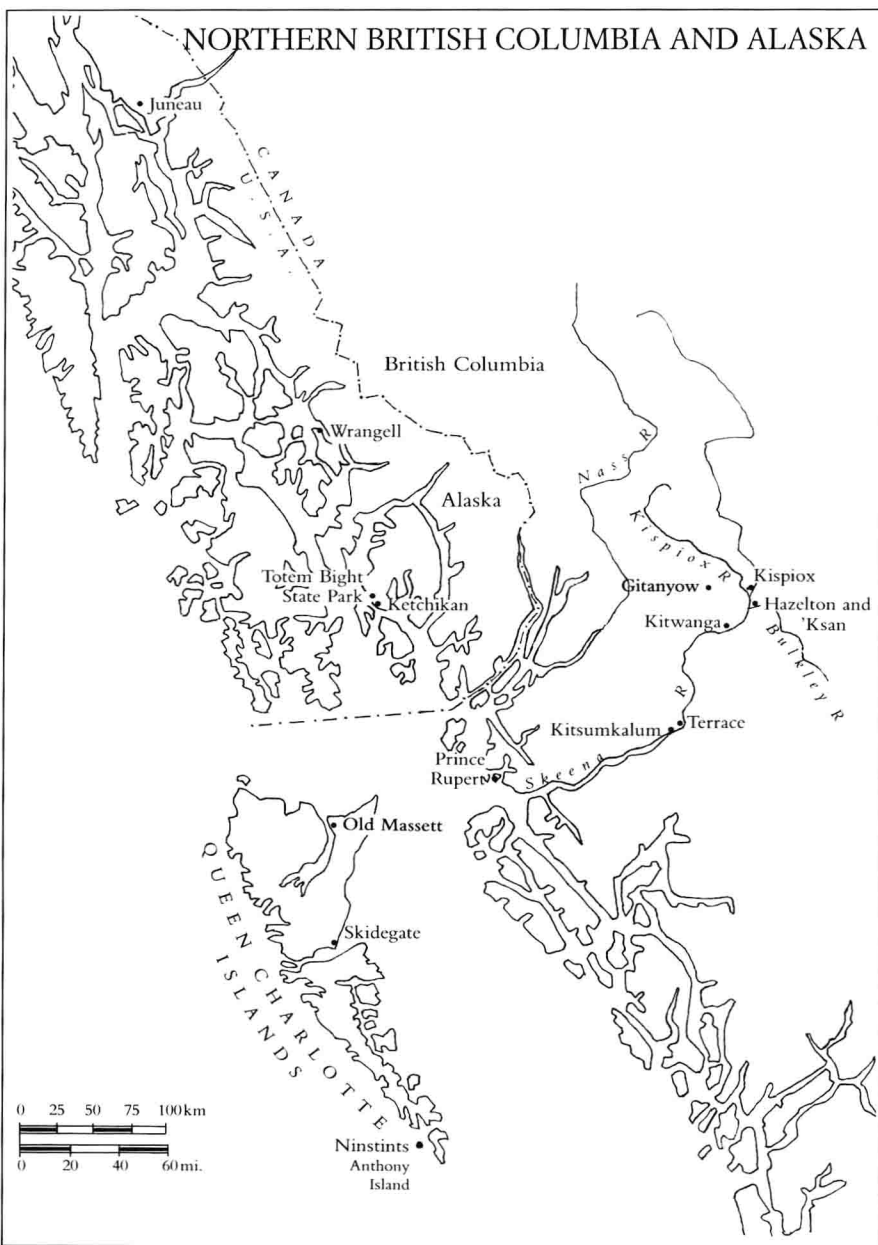
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# VANCOUVER ISLAND





# NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND ALASKA



## FOREWORD

**T**otem poles are all about cultural identity. They are a way of native people saying, “We’re here. We’re still here and our culture is still here.” I’m glad when I carve a pole because I want people to know that we still carve totem poles and that stories go with the poles.

You treat a totem pole with respect, just like a person, because in our culture that’s what it is. A pole is just another person that is born into the family, except he is the storyteller. So it should be treated with respect and honour.

The figures on a pole are an outline of the story that goes with the pole. If it’s a serious traditional story that is family history and belongs to your uncle or grandfather, for instance, you have to check with them to get their permission. That tradition is still there, although it’s not always followed as fully as it used to be hundreds of years ago. Nowadays many carvers use a general story, a public story, because the poles they’re doing are carved for everybody.

When I’m carving a pole, people often come up to me and ask questions. Some are simple questions like what kind of wood we use, but sometimes the questions are more elaborate. “What are you carving?” “What does it mean?” “Where are you from?” A lot of people want to find out who carved the poles. They approach me and ask if I’ll tell them the story of those poles. Just one person coming up and asking is an education to the public regarding totem poles.

When people ask, “Where are you from?” I tell them what part of British Columbia I’m from. I explain that the whole coast is made up of native groups who are all different. They don’t speak the same language. They don’t carve the same way. Then I describe the style I carve in. Totem poles are our identity, and each group wants to be recognized. They don’t want to be generalized.

In the old days, when you travelled through each territory, sometimes you’d suddenly run into a carved figure or rock. And bingo, you’d know you were in somebody’s territory. When I go up from Vancouver to Prince Rupert or to Kincolith where I come from, I can still feel myself going through all those different native territories. I’m always aware of the totem poles when I get off the ferry at Nanaimo or pass by the U.S./Canada border cross-

ing. There they are again, just like in the earlier days, identifying themselves and identifying the people whose territory you're coming to.

What annoys me is that a lot of totem poles that go up have no plaque or information. People who come by wonder, "Who did this? What's it all about?" Every time I carve a totem pole, there's always a kind of signature to identify my family or my nation, the Nisga'a. But people who don't know the various native nations or their carving styles can look at a book like this. *Looking at Totem Poles* gives an outline of what each pole is all about, where it's from, who carved it, what for, and when. Hilary Stewart's book has in it just about every important outdoor pole. There's quite a bit of information in this book, quite a few poles to study. She pays attention to detail and that's very important to native people. A few groups, for their own reasons, don't want their poles documented, and Hilary respects that.

I like it that this book tells more than the facts. Hilary's talked to a lot of the carvers or their families to get some behind-the-scenes stories. It's like the pole we just put up in London, England. The top figure is an Eagle, but we weren't going to attach it until just before raising the pole because it was very fragile. Since I'm Eagle clan, traditionally the Eagle leads the pole. We gave the honour of carrying the Eagle to two people in the crowd, since the carver's family is not allowed to touch the pole once it is carved. Then we invited everyone to pick up the pole and walk with it, and the family followed. We got to the site, went through the ceremonies and on to raise it. It was halfway up when my brother said, "Norman, we forgot to put the Eagle on."

I just casually turned around to the crowd, hoping nobody had heard, and announced, "The Eagle goes on last. Meanwhile, it goes right here," pointing to a spot near the base of the pole. And then I turned around, muttering, "Now, where the heck is that Eagle?"

Well, what happened was that when the two men carrying the Eagle walked ahead of the pole, they went into some bush and just kept on walking. They didn't realize the pole had stopped. Then photographers spotted them and started taking pictures. They were so proud and were standing there posing for pictures while the pole was going up! We got a ladder afterwards and put the Eagle on the pole, so it wasn't a major mistake because it was corrected. But that's what really happened.

Every pole has its stories of things that happened when it was being carved. Some of them weren't meant to be funny. But in the end, when the pole is up and it's all over, those are the things that the artists will talk about and laugh about. We encourage that part of it, just so we don't get to feel so important we're not part of the people any more.

And that happened in the old days also. When a big chief got up and he

was getting so important, the ladies were all ready for him. They'd come out dancing a ridicule song and making fun of him. They'd really put him down, and yet everybody would have fun about it. Today that kind of humour still has its purpose—to remind you that you're not so important that you don't make mistakes, that you're not above the ordinary person. You may have raised the totem pole, but look at what you did while you were doing it.

Totem poles are recognized all over the world. When I'm in Europe, I see pictures of totem poles in travel agents' windows. They advertise travel to Canada: "Stop off in B.C. and take a look at the totem poles." And in my travels I've run across a lot of people who say, "Oh, I've been to British Columbia and I saw the totem poles." They're so happy to reel off what they've learned. A lot of it is generalizations, of course, because they don't have that much time to study. Some people are just happy they passed through and know a little something about it. But others will say, "I didn't realize there was so much in that culture. And I've since bought this book, that book, and read about it." They've gotten into it with both feet.

I'm always glad when people want to see totem poles and are eager to find out more about them. A lot of the early books were badly misinformed because the native people weren't really involved. But now we are. So we're getting books that are more and more accurate—and educational. That's what I like about new books like this one coming out.

*Norman Tait*  
*Nisga'a carver*

## PREFACE

The totem pole has become the very symbol of Northwest Coast native people and their art. Although the name “totem” for these carved monuments of cedar is actually a misnomer—a totem is a creature or object that a person holds in great respect and religious awe—many years of common usage and the want of a better word have made it acceptable.

Visitors to the Northwest Coast from all parts of the world often stand in wonder before these carved poles, which are some of the largest wood sculptures ever created, astounded by their height and girth. They are perplexed and intrigued by the bold, complex designs and the extraordinary creatures that emerge from the logs with such vitality, and they ask, “What are they, and what do they mean?” Most poles are accompanied by the barest information or none at all. Questions about what kind of wood, who the carver was, how long it took to carve, how old it is, how it was raised and what the figures represent are mainly left unanswered.

This book attempts to satisfy that curiosity while adding cultural and historic background as well as human interest. The totem poles illustrated are grouped geographically, from southern British Columbia north to Alaska.

All the poles in this book are situated outdoors, are readily accessible (with one exception), and for the most part are in places frequented by visitors.

A great many of the totem poles on view today are not in a traditional context. Many have been placed along highways, at ferry terminals; in parks, gardens and shopping plazas; outside hotels, public buildings, tourist bureaus, schools and, of course, in museums.

Three years of travel and research revealed a large number of outdoor poles along the Northwest Coast—far too many to include all of them in this book. Due to space limitations, many that I would have liked to include have been left out.

In the drawings, poles whose paint is badly weathered are depicted as though newly painted. A pole’s height is shown with a scale or diagrammatic figure representing 1.8 m (6 feet), which does not include the base, unless it is illustrated.

Courtesy requires that no one should lean against, sit on or climb totem poles—much less carve initials, pry off a souvenir, or in any way deface a pole or its setting. While native villages are in fact restricted property, gener-

ally the residents do not mind visitors who are respectful and considerate of their surroundings. Photographing the totem poles is usually permitted, but some villages have restrictions on commercial use of the photos. Check with the band office if photos are not for personal use.

Throughout this book, I refer to the people long known as the Kwakiutl by that name, as it is the word most familiar to the general public, for whom this book is intended. However, as many Kwakiutl now prefer to be called Kwakwaka'wakw, which means "those who speak Kwakwala," I use that name as well.

Totem poles, whether old or new, in their original setting or not, make a statement that goes beyond the carver's art and the history they embody. The message is timeless, for such is the commitment to continuing growth and strength by the First Nations of this land—the people of the totems.

As always with my books, research was a lengthy and time-consuming process that relied on the kindness and generosity of a broad spectrum of people. I am particularly indebted to the carvers who discussed their work with me, as well as to the individuals and officials who gave me permission to include their totem poles in this book. And to the many people who gave of their assistance, knowledge and expertise, I would like to offer my appreciation and gratitude:

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PART 1

# THE BACKGROUND



## THE NORTHWEST COAST

### THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

**A** vast area of extraordinary beauty, the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America extends some 2000 km (1,300 miles). Its coastline, rugged and spectacular, is deeply indented and broken by countless inlets, channels, bays and rivers, as well as scattered with hundreds of large and small islands. The temperate climate clothes the steep mountains and valley bottoms in a rich profusion of plant life, creating a lush, evergreen rain forest that sweeps to the edge of the sea. Along the foreshore and the banks of the rivers that flow to it, the sea-oriented aboriginal people have made their homes for thousands of years.

Hunters and gatherers, they harvested their food from land, sea and intertidal zone, taking a variety of fish, sea mammals, molluscs, land mammals, wild fowl and vegetation. The wood of coniferous and deciduous trees; grasses, rushes, bark and roots; animal furs, hides, bones and antlers, as well as shells and stones, provided the raw materials for all their daily and ceremonial needs. Sea-going and river canoes assured access to most of the resources, while a network of trade increased the availability of other foods and materials.

The native people were, in fact, several distinct nations, belonging to seven different language families and speaking many dialects; their customs, practices and art styles varied from north to south, but they also held much in common. They were a civilization with an elaborate social and ceremonial structure, and with traditions that went back to the beginning of time. They usually located their villages in sheltered bays and inlets, and lived in large, sturdy post and beam houses that provided warmth and comfort. Each household generally consisted of several families, all related, and each family had an assigned place in the house. Boxes of stored foods, wealth goods and ceremonial regalia, as well as tools and implements, were stacked against the walls.

Wealth and prestige, achievement and high rank, were linked to family lineage, history and the possession of rights. Marriage between various groups strengthened the bonds of alliance, adding security from the threat of beligerence. The head of a household was a chief, and his close relatives were the nobles. More distant relatives and any others in the group were the commoners, with slaves and their offspring ranking last. The most powerful, highest-ranking chief of all the households was chief of the village.