

## Understanding the Magic of Totem Poles

The totem poles of the Northwest coast have long been a topic of fascination for researchers, travellers, and artists alike. The mystery and the magic surrounding these carved poles draws people to them and invokes a complex curiosity. The desire to uncover the meaning held within the symbols of these ornately carved columns has inspired many individuals to pursue the poles in academic and artistic studies. Some have even endeavoured to understand the people responsible for these stunning creations and the significant place these poles hold within their society and culture. One of the first few people to attempt to unearth the many mysteries of the Northwest coast totem poles was an early Canadian ethnographer by the name of Marius Barbeau. Barbeau, working for the National Museum of Canada, studied the poles and house carvings of the First Nations peoples of British Columbia during the early twentieth century. His scholarly research and findings is contained within his novel *Totem Poles According to Location*. Originally published in 1950 by the National Museum of Canada, Barbeau's research provides a beautiful collection of the carved columns and artwork of the Northwest coast First Nations captured in his original photographs. While Barbeau's work is significant to furthering our understanding of the practice of totem pole raising, many of the conclusions that Barbeau comes to in his writings are more and more discredited by current research and more recent publications. As a photographic ethno-history of the Northwest coast totem poles Marius Barbeau's work is unparalleled by later research. However, Barbeau's scope of study remains fixated on the carved wood columns alone, excluding other important elements such as the cultural significance of the poles and the relationship between the poles and their creators. Contrastingly, is the writing and academic research conducted by Edward Malin in the latter half of the twentieth century. Edward Malin's *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast*, published in 1986, attempts to provide an understanding of the social and cultural significance of pole raising as a practice and highlights

distinguishing characteristics found within totem poles which represent different First Nations groups and their distinct styles. Malin endeavours to give a comprehensive view of pole raising as it developed as a tradition in Northwest coast culture by emphasizing the people of the Northwest coast and their relationship with the totem poles they create. Published thirty-six years after Barbeau's compilation of Northwest coast totem poles, Malin's *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast* provides a broader perspective of pole raising and carving by incorporating its social significance, and cultural traditions. Marius Barbeau's research, while at times is contradictory and out of date, is critically important in providing a window into the lives of the Northwest coast First Nations groups. Barbeau's photographs and field notes in *Totem Poles According to Location*, if used in conjunction with Edward Malin's research in *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast*, work together to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of pole raising in the communities of Northwest coast First Nations groups.

Marius Barbeau's description of British Columbia's totem poles, in *Totem Poles According to Location*, examines the structure of the poles of six First Nations groups: The Tlingit, the Haida, the Tsimshyan, the Kwakiutl, the Nootka, and the Salish. Barbeau's composition begins with a map of British Columbia that illustrates the areas inhabited by these First Nations groups with numbered areas that correspond to the Native villages located within these areas. He then spends the first two thirds of his publication giving a detailed photographic ethno-history of all the poles (to his knowledge) that exist in BC. The original photographs included in Barbeau's research are accompanied by a description of each totem pole that is featured. The descriptions are recorded by Barbeau but are told by a Native community member or figure of authority and are translated by an English speaking member of that Native community. Barbeau spends the final section of his research examining the possible origins of totem pole carving, drawing on observations he has made during his own field work completed between 1915 and 1947, with references to outside contributors such as Franz Boas, James Deans, and W.A. Newcombe. Barbeau

briefly discusses, without much detail, the conservation and restoration of totem poles that resulted from early twentieth century anthropological work and finally concludes his publication with a numbered list that provides details for the illustrations used throughout his research.

Edward Malin's publication on the totem poles of British Columbia begins with a brief introduction that establishes the scope of his research and the First Nations groups discussed within that research. Malin looks at the carving styles of the Haida, the Tsimshian, the Tlingit, the Kwakiutl, the Bella Coola, and the West Coast (or Coast Salish). Malin structures his research into three distinct parts: Part one contains the first four chapters of his work which address totem poles and Native culture, the evolution of totem pole carving, the distinct styles of First Nations groups, and the social significance of totem poles. Part two provides a photographic ethno-history similar to the one conducted by Marius Barbeau; and part three holds the last two chapters of Malin's research which discuss the influence of European colonization on totem pole traditions and the restoration of pole carving practices. Chapter One of Malin's *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast*, entitled "Totem Poles and Native Culture" discusses the time period that pole carving took place in, possible reasons for its development, Malin's definition of totem poles, and various maps of British Columbia plotting the placement of different types of poles. Chapter Two, entitled "A Forest of Poles," looks at the evolution of totem pole carving beginning with memorial poles, moving to house poles and mortuary poles, and eventually culminating in the development of the free-standing totem poles we are used to seeing today. Chapter Two also includes many of Malin's own illustrations that highlight distinct characteristics of different pole types. Chapter Three, entitled "Stylistic Characteristics," details extensively the stylistic attributes that emerged that were unique to specific First Nations groups. Chapter Four, entitled "The Social Role of Totem Poles," examines the connection between potlatching and totem pole raising. Malin suggests that the raising of a totem pole during a potlach ceremony is the culmination of such a ceremony. Its purpose is to inspire awe, represent social status, and allow for the telling of the

stories and legends that correspond to the newly raised totem pole (Malin 1986:94-95). Chapter Five, entitled "Triumph and Tragedy: An Era Vanishes," looks at the destruction of Native culture due to direct and indirect contact with European settlers. Chapter Six, entitled, "New Poles for Old," examines the changes in provincial and federal legislation that allowed for the traditions of pole carving to be restored and the awakening of Native culture and art.

While Marius Barbeau's research in *Totem Poles According to Location* is extensive, he makes no effort to elaborate on the social and cultural aspects of totem pole raising and carving, and arrives at conclusions that are no longer considered valid. Barbeau asserts that the carved columns found standing in villages, clearly pictured in his research, "came into existence after 1860, and [that at the] time most of them were innovations, quite unlike anything known before" (Barbeau 1950:764). Barbeau further asserts that it was only through the acquisition of metal tools, and specifically through Native interaction with the Hudson's Bay Company, that Native communities were able to develop their wood carving and fine craftsmanship skills (Barbeau 1950:764). Unfortunately, Barbeau seems to contradict his own conclusions by referencing the research and observations of other relevant ethnographers and anthropologists of the period. He includes, in his work, a statement from Captain James Cook made in 1778 that describes Native people possessing and using metal tools for wood carving and demonstrating a "great dexterity" for the practice (Barbeau 1950:835). Barbeau also concludes that the inspirations and the means for totem pole carving came to Native communities, originating with the Tlingit group, through Russian influence and interaction (Barbeau 1950:764-765). The research of Edward Malin contradicts this conclusion asserting that while the "Russians were the first Europeans involved with the Tlingit, their impact on Native life was ephemeral, short-lived, and of a negative quality" (Malin 1986:12). The bulk of Barbeau's research is a photographic ethno-history that presents beautiful original photos of Native carved columns and artwork. And although he includes descriptions of the totem poles pictured in his research, the way that Barbeau

lays out the structure of his book makes it difficult to connect the photos with their respective descriptions being that often the photos and the descriptions are pages apart. Also, the descriptions tend to be strictly observational, offering little insight into the meaning of the carvings they are depicting. For example, when describing a pair of Tlingit house posts, Barbeau writes "two house posts, on either side of the Cannibal Giant and Klukwan; one holding the dead child; the other with the woman in front of him" (Barbeau 1950:633). This description offers no insight into the significance of a house post or the figures depicted within it. Also frustrating is the fact that Barbeau tends to name certain myths told in Native culture but never publishes them in his research. Where Marius Barbeau's work is unparalleled is in its preservation of original Native artwork. *Totem Poles According to Location* provides a window into the past that gives future generations a precious reference tool that can be used in conjunction with more modern research such as Edward Malin's *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast*, to truly understand the art and significance of Northwest Coast totem poles.

Edward Malin's research in *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast* looks at not only the structure of Native totem poles and carved columns, but also examines their social and cultural significance. Malin incorporates a comprehensive research style in order to fully understand the meaning of totem pole carving and raising as a traditional practice. He states early on in his research that his scope of work is not limited as Marius Barbeau's was during the early twentieth century calling Barbeau's understanding of totem poles a "narrow, restrictive definition" (Malin 1986:20). Malin considers in his research "all types of monumental carved columns as totem poles" (Malin 1986:20). Unlike Barbeau, Edward Malin does not labour over the exact time when totem pole carving became prevalent in Native communities. Malin asserts that it is possible the question of origin may remain elusive and perhaps locked away forever; however, he does insist that the "earliest evidence of monumental wood sculpture stems from observations made in the logs of early explorers and fur traders who visited the coast between the

1770s and early 1800s" (Malin 1986:19). Malin observes, in a similar fashion to Marius Barbeau, the stylistic components of each of the six different Native groups of the Northwest Coast and the structure of various carved columns throughout his research. Decidedly, Malin's research is significantly clearer than Barbeau's and less arduous to get through; but where the two are strikingly different is in Malin's discussion of the social importance of totem poles. Malin interacts with Native community members in an attempt to uncover the social significance of pole raising and carving. What he discovers is that totem poles are not simply artwork, (although they are without question works of art), these carved columns are symbols of status and wealth that can illustrate a single story or an entire family history (Malin 1986:90-91). The symbols and crests, according to Malin's research, that are depicted on certain totem poles are owned family property and the images depicted are "restricted symbols belonging to the sponsor" (Malin 1986:96). The "sponsor" Malin refers to is the individual who is able to commission the totem pole and provide the means to raise the column. Often this act is directly linked with the tradition of potlaching - a demonstration of wealth. Although the artistic significance of totem poles is immense, their main purpose was a social one - to demonstrate a "group's social affiliations and status" (Malin 1986:6). Thusly, using the inclusive research of totem poles presented by Edward Malin in regards to their social significance one can easily refer to Marius Barbeau's original photographic ethno-history to fully absorb the magic of totem pole raising and carving as a Native tradition.

The comprehensive understanding that is provided by these two stories not only helps us to uncover questions of the past, but also provides insight into important issues of the present. One of the main areas of contention today regarding First Nations communities involves treaty negotiations and the question of Native land title. Although these two sources mainly explore past Native cultural practices they in fact shed light on the current question of Native land title as well. Because Marius Barbeau so beautifully captured the original totem poles of First Nations communities in British Columbia we are left with no

questions of their existence or of their impressive nature. Further, Edward Malin's research asserts that the function of these remarkable carved columns was to establish and uphold a social rank and status within the community and that the symbols used to create these columns were owned property. Therefore one can conclusively draw the conclusion that Native communities in British Columbia most certainly had a concept of private property and ownership before European influence. It is also fairly obvious from the incredible beauty and mastery of such an ornate art form that Native communities in BC were infused with vitality and sophistication. Thus, using the past research of Edward Malin in *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast*, and of Marius Barbeau in *Totem Poles According to Location*, it is most certain that Native title in British Columbia did exist then and does exist today.

#### References Cited

Barbeau, Marius 1950 *Totem Poles According to Location*. Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Malin, Edward 1986 *Totem Poles of the Pacific Northwest Coast*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press.