

The Contribution of a Colonial Ethnographer: Charles Hill-Tout, 1858-1944

Wendy C. Wickwire

Volume 2, Number 1-2, 1980

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081032ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081032ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Wickwire, W. C. (1980). The Contribution of a Colonial Ethnographer: Charles Hill-Tout, 1858-1944. *Ethnologies*, 2(1-2), 62-67.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081032ar>

Article abstract

Cet article étudie l'oeuvre de l'un des premiers ethnographes canadiens, publiée récemment dans un ouvrage en quatre volumes édité par Ralph Maud, *The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout*. L'orientation des recherches de Hill-Tout et leur mise en question par quelques scientifiques de renom, notamment Boas, fait ici l'objet de la discussion. La comparaison avec les travaux d'autres chercheurs de son époque, tel que James Teit, met en perspective la contribution de Hill-Tout.

The Contribution of a Colonial Ethnographer: Charles Hill-Tout, 1858–1944

WENDY C. WICKWIRE

Born and raised in England, Charles Hill-Tout was twenty-five when he emigrated to Canada in 1884. He had pursued, but not completed, some training in theology; therefore, upon his arrival, he taught for several years at a church school in Toronto before purchasing farmland at Port Credit on Lake Ontario. By 1891, he had moved with his wife and family to British Columbia where he took teaching posts at church schools in Vancouver. Leaving his teaching career in 1899, he moved to Abbotsford in the Lower Fraser Valley and there bought land on which he operated a logging business and family farm.

While Hill-Tout was in Toronto, he was told about the vanishing Haida Indians and the “untouched field for anthropological research in the West” (p. 13, Vol. I). Perhaps inspired by this information, Hill-Tout began, shortly after his arrival in Vancouver, to spend his spare time surveying archaeological digs in the vicinity. By 1896, he commenced research among the local Indians, and by 1906, he had collected ethnographic data from most of the Salish peoples living on the southern coast and in the southern interior of British Columbia.

For the first time, Hill-Tout’s field reports, a selection of his theoretical writings, and some of his professional correspondence have been amassed and published in a four-volume work entitled, *The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1978). Admirably edited with an introduction by Ralph Maud, the work consists largely of ethnographic reports and the Indian stories and myths collected by Hill-Tout. Ethnographic accounts of the Thompson Indians (originally published in 1899)¹ and the Okanagan Indians (1911) are presented

¹The original publication dates of other works referred to in this and the subsequent paragraph are given in parentheses following the listings.

together in Volume 1, followed by 11 Thompson and 10 Okanagan stories; the Squamish (1897) and the Lillooet (1905) are featured together in Volume II along with 14 and 17 of their stories respectively; the Mainland Halkomelem ethnographic reports (on the Chilliwack (1902), the Pilalt (1902), the Kwantlen (1902), the Chehalis (1904), the Scowlitz (1904) are contained in Volume III in addition to a small sampling of stories from each; the Sechelt (1904) and the south-eastern tribes, the Lekwungen and Cowichan, (1907) are included in Volume IV together with 11 Sechelt, 8 Lekwungen, and 4 Cowichan stories. The selection of "Haida Stories and Beliefs," contained in Volume IV and first published by Hill-Tout in 1898, is not the product of his own research but rather taken directly from a Reverend Mr. Harrison's notes. The volumes also contain some little-known theoretical pieces by Hill-Tout, such as "Later Prehistoric Man in British Columbia" (1895), "Some Psychical Phenomena Bearing Upon the Question of Spirit Control" (1895), and "The Origin of the Aborigines of British Columbia (1901).

Included in Volume IV are some miscellaneous pieces by Hill-Tout, such as a short review (published in 1898) of Franz Boas' *The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians*, as well as a selection of Hill-Tout's professional correspondence. This includes letters to and from such notable figures as Franz Boas, E. Sidney Hartland, J.W. Powell (of the Bureau of American Ethnology), and James Teit, to name but a few.

It is the editorial comments and the introductory material provided in each volume by Ralph Maud which creates a cohesive whole of the diverse Hill-Tout materials. Maud carefully provides his readers with a biographical, ethnographical, and historical context which brings to light Hill-Tout's domestic, political, and professional orientations.

The contributions of Hill-Tout's work are great. By means of field research which he conducted intermittently between the years 1896 and 1906, Hill-Tout provided a broad sweep of ethnographic accounts of south coast and interior B.C. Indian cultures. With the exception of James Teit's studies in the Interior, Hill-Tout's work is unequalled in quantity and quality for the early period of ethnographic research in this region. Indeed, as Maud tells his readers (p. 13, Vol. III), Hill-Tout's research constituted practically the only information available on these tribes, the Mainland Halkomelem in particular, until Wilson Duff's work in 1949-50.

Maud believes that it is the style of Hill-Tout's written translations and distillations of Indian myths and stories told to him by his informants which distinguishes his work as exceptional, particularly for the early period in which he worked. Unlike others (Teit, for instance), Maud claims, Hill-Tout was drawn into the story-telling performance rather than into stories as specimens to be examined and categorized (p. 11, Vol. II). As a

result, says Maud (himself a student of B.C. oral tradition), Hill-Tout's Indian texts emerge as "the most readable body of Indian literature from the Northwest Coast" (p. 12, Vol. II). This opinion is supported by some contemporary ethnographers who have used Hill-Tout's material in conjunction with their work amongst today's Salish story-tellers in some of the areas where Hill-Tout worked.²

Another aspect of Hill-Tout's ethnographic work which is worthy of recognition is the information he provides about his native informants and the state of life in some of the communities he studied. Although by today's anthropological standards these observations appear to be sparse, Hill-Tout provides more than were usual for most anthropological researchers of his time.

Despite the great value of Hill-Tout's ethnographic contributions, there are some shortcomings in his work which must be understood. As Maud himself explains, Hill-Tout was a popularist, somewhat of a dilettante, and extremely attracted into an uncertain realm of theory and speculation, particularly with respect to evolution and migrations of peoples and languages. Maud attributes these concerns of Hill-Tout's to the influence of Darwinist theory and the speculative activities of British folklorists who had made an impression upon him during his early days in England. In his effort to revive Hill-Tout as a notable Canadian ethnologist, Maud nonetheless admits that his theoretical works — pontifications on shaky ground — will be ignored.

Franz Boas, who also devoted much of his life to B.C. Indian (specifically Northwest Coast) ethnographic research, would have little to do with Hill-Tout (p. 15, Vol. I). Boas disdained popularist evolutionary theorizing on the basis of scanty evidence and feared any efforts to interpret data by deductive theories. It is therefore not surprising that Boas, who spent a major portion of his writing in combatting fallacies in nineteenth-century European armchair anthropology, made no attempt to support or encourage Hill-Tout's work.

In Maud's opinion, however, "these criticisms do not really disturb the ground on which Hill-Tout's true reputation will rest, the field reports. . ." (p. 13, Vol. IV). Yet, in the absence of comparative data collected contemporaneously from the same area by others, it is difficult to assess the accuracy of Hill-Tout's recorded material. In the few cases where there is comparative ethnographic information (for example, James Teit's ethnographies on the Okanagan, Thompson, and Lillooet, published under the

²Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy of the British Columbia Indian Language Project, Victoria, B.C., provided this information.

auspices of Franz Boas³), Hill-Tout's work is clearly open to criticism. His ethnographies are far more superficial and sparse in both content and length than are Teit's. About Hill-Tout's Lillooet ethnography, Teit wrote a series of comments which he submitted to Boas who published them as "new facts and corrections" at the end of the Teit 1906 Lillooet ethnography. Numerous disagreements between Hill-Tout and Teit regarding factual accuracy appear in this section (for example, over the Lower Lillooet house description which Teit found unclear; over the name-system described by Hill-Tout which Teit found to be not at all characteristic of the Lillooet as a whole; over marriage customs assigned to the Lillooet by Hill-Tout which Teit found to be more like those of the Squamish and Delta.)

Another possible weakness in Hill-Tout's ethnographic work is his tendency to draw his data from informants belonging to one family in an area. Moreover, these individuals were mostly prominent churchmen, translators, and court workers — not the best sources of the kind of information about the pre-contact past which Hill-Tout sought (pp. 14-15, Vol. III).

Maud's claim that we are justified in discounting Hill-Tout's theorizing but not his empirical fieldwork, which reflects a "good eye, good ear, and a good heart" (p. 15, Vol. IV), and in which "pet theories intrude occasionally but not damagingly" (p. 10, Vol. IV), rests on the assumption that descriptive ethnography, unlike theorizing, is somehow value-free and objective. On the contrary, ethnography, just as much as theorizing, does not escape the biases of its author, for these shape the very questions posed by the researcher to his informants.

In fact, Hill-Tout's British Victorian values surface frequently in his ethnographies. Indeed, his personal bias so revealed is itself useful ethnographic information, for it sheds additional light upon the late nineteenth-century attitudes of non-Indians towards Indians. Perhaps the most prominent example of Hill-Tout's bias is to be found in the Okanagan material. Here he was severely critical of the Okanagans who, with the exception of those who intermarried with non-Indians, he saw as lacking "in energy and enterprise" and "content to muddle along in their old hand-to-mouth style of living" despite the fact that they had good opportunities, valuable land for agriculture and stock-keeping, and the potential there-

³These works are: "The Thompson Indians of British Columbia," *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, 2 (1900), 163-392 (Jesup North Pacific Expedition Report, Vol. 1, Part 4); "The Lillooet Indians," *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, 4 (1906), 288-371 (Jesup Expedition Report, Vol. II, part 5); and "Okanagan" in Franz Boas, ed. "The Salishan Tribes of the Western Plateaus," *Forty-fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology 1928-1929* (Washington, 1930). Pp. 198-294.

fore to become "wealthy or well-to-do" (pp. 132-33, Vol. I). In contrast, the Sechelt displayed a much improved condition and considerable industry which, in Hill-Tout's estimation, they owed almost entirely to the fathers of the Oblate Mission (pp. 93-94, Vol. IV). These reactions reveal a tendency to adopt an unself-critical European perspective rather than seeking to appreciate a suffering people recently uprooted from their profoundly different, age-old subsistence lifestyle. Others, such as Boas and Teit, understood the roots of the malaise of the British Columbia Indian peoples with whom they worked, and their studies benefitted from this appreciation.

It is Maud's suggestion that Hill-Tout's participation in Vancouver seances gave him "special qualifications for field research" and special access into the "bliss of gaining a guardian spirit" (pp. 11-12, Vol. IV) in the Salish sense. But what genuine insights would the Victorian seance parlour of nineteenth-century Vancouver provide for penetration into the timeless mythology and spirit of the ecologically-based Salish?

In recent years there has occurred, particularly in Canada and the U.S.A., a burgeoning of interest in an indigenous cultural heritage independent of Europe. This has resulted in the resurrection and discovery of many previously unrecognized Canadian scholars and traditions. For the most part this trend has been positive. However, it can easily be taken a step too far. That Hill-Tout has gone relatively unnoticed in Canadian anthropology is bad. But is this alone reason to elevate him now to a lofty position without critical evaluation? The editor's message in his introductions to all four volumes reveals such a tendency. For instance, Maud maintains that the early death of George Dawson had "tragic consequences" (p. 14, Vol. IV) for Canadian anthropology because he, unlike others, was in favour of Hill-Tout's work. Therefore Dawson, had he lived, might have provided Hill-Tout and others like him with more funding and prominent positions, thereby fostering a "Canadian anthropology independent of the United States, utilizing Hill-Tout's talents and many others" (p. 14, Vol. IV). Maud implies here that Boas' American influence upon Canadian anthropology has been negative in this respect. An indigenous Canadian anthropological group would assuredly have been a desirable goal, but the orientation that Hill-Tout would have provided, had he been at the helm, would clearly have had a limiting effect.

In the name of American anthropology, Boas fought racism, and sought to create an anthropology grounded in the living, diverse *field* and divorced from the sterile academy of social Darwinists. Boas did not, as Maud implies, neglect Canadians (p. 14, Vol. IV). His support of Teit, let alone others, is proof of this. But Boas had little tolerance for popularism and dilletantism, and, for this very reason, his participation in and in-

fluence upon Canadian anthropology is to be praised. Certainly Boas' rejection of Hill-Tout was not, as Maud suggests, a case of either parochialism or territorialism.

These and other criticisms must be carefully weighed in reaching a sophisticated evaluation of Hill-Tout's contribution. Despite his faults, Hill-Tout is obviously an important figure, too long neglected. Ralph Maud is to be commended for his thorough and necessary compilation of and commentary on Hill-Tout's writings.

The four-volume work is very handsomely produced and contains, in addition to four striking and beautiful cover designs, a fine selection of photographs and illustrations. The price (\$6.95 per volume; \$27.80 per set) unfortunately puts the collection out of reach of many who could benefit from it most.

Wendy C. Wickwire
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CN

Résumé

Cet article étudie l'oeuvre de l'un des premiers ethnographes canadiens, publiée récemment dans un ouvrage en quatre volumes édité par Ralph Maud, The Salish People: The Local Contribution of Charles Hill-Tout. L'orientation des recherches de Hill-Tout et leur mise en question par quelques scientifiques de renom, notamment Boas, fait ici l'objet de la discussion. La comparaison avec les travaux d'autres chercheurs de son époque, tel que James Teit, met en perspective la contribution de Hill-Tout.