

ROBERT K. THOMAS – SOME REFLECTIONS ON HIS CONTRIBUTIONS IN CANADA

By

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Ten years have passed since the death of Robert K. Thomas. While the book, A Good Cherokee, a Good Anthropologist highlighted many of his contributions to the Native American scene many of his activities in Canada have been largely overlooked. It is time for us to reflect on the work which Bob did in Canada. I had the opportunity of working closely with Bob from about 1967 until his death. We shared in the leadership of many workshops, plotted and sometimes created a variety of new institutions (like the Indian Ecumenical Conference, the Centre for Indian Scholars, the Canadian Indian Youth Workshops to name but a few). We met with people from many First Nations from coast to coast, shared numerous and sometimes dangerous trips on rivers, like running aground on the MacKenzie River¹ or crossing the Nass² river when the ice was running. Bob was my mentor, the best man at my wedding and the godfather of the son named after him. The 43rd Annual Conference of the Western Social Science Association provides an opportunity for those of us in Canada to begin to describe and evaluate the contributions Bob made to the First Nations issues in Canada. I say begin, because as I look through the documents and projects in which we were involved it is clear that a paper will only touch the surface. Because embedded in his activities and his work are ideas and principles which need to be proclaimed in our time. I hope that the next book might focus on some of these issues.

In a previous article³ I drew attention to the significance of the Canadian Indian Youth Workshops. Bob spent a lot of time working with young people in the fifties and sixties. In his evaluation of the Sixth Annual Canadian Indian Youth Workshop (1972) prepared for the Keewatinung Institute, Bob describes his involvement in these events:

¹ The Northwest Territories.

² The third largest salmon producer located in Northwestern BC.

³ Pavlik, Steve, ed., A Good Cherokee, a Good Anthropologist: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Thomas, American Indian Studies Centre, University of California.

I was one of the founders of the summer workshop on Indian Affairs in the United States which was first held in the summer of 1956 in Colorado. Since that time and until that workshop discontinued in the late sixties, I was either the Director of the Colorado Workshop or I was there part time of full time in the summer as a guest lecturer. Over a period of thirteen or fourteen years, I have had intimate contact with the summer Colorado Workshops on Indian Affairs for American Indian College students.

I was a guest lecturer at the first Canadian Indian Youth Workshops in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Since that time I have had close contact with the summer workshops for Canadian youth, the year which they have been held.

I directed a workshop one summer in Tahlequah, Oklahoma for Cherokee Indian young people. Some were high school students and college students and others were not students at all, but in that age group.

I have had very intimate experience with at least twenty workshops for Indian people, particularly of college age, during the past sixteen years or so.⁴

He then proceeds to note that the 1972 workshop was “the most productive workshop that I have attended”. Why was this the case?

He gives as his first reason a one-sentence statement that it was a productive learning experience “in terms of just academic content for young Indians”. He then continues to give the other reason, which dominates the remainder of the evaluation – “Further it was a very productive experience for the young people in terms of dealing with their own marginal positions, their relationship to their home communities and to Indians as a whole. In fact, I think for several of them, it probably re-orientated their whole life-career patterns, vis-a vis Indians”. He follows this with an aside in which he expresses the view that most past workshops he led seemed to be “enabling people to find themselves a niche and a living in the “Indian business”. What made this particular workshop so great was that it was the “first time that I saw any real self-determination...”

⁴ Thomas, Robert K., Sixth Annual Canadian Indian Youth Workshop Evaluation report, 1972, prepared for Keewatinung Institute, pp. 1-3.

I think Bob may have been too hard on himself in comparing the 1972 workshop with the previous twenty experiences. But he captures in these words what I think was the great value of these workshops for several hundred native people. It enabled people to realize who they were in the context of their own tribal history and inspired them to seek and exercise self-determination. It is almost thirty years since Bob wrote this evaluation. If we were to put together a detailed list of First Nations leaders in the past ten years we would discover that a very large number of men and women in these positions attended such workshops and have sought consistently to implement their own understanding of the self-determination ideas which transformed their very being during these workshops. We would only truly evaluate the impact of these workshops if someone tried to reconvene a meeting of both the faculties and students who participated. My hunch is that most people who attended played some significant part in the movement to First Nation's self-determination in education, land issues, and self-government.

Bob became a major resource person between 1968 and 1972 in the development of the Rochdale College Institute for Indian Studies. He was a continuing and significant participation in the work of the Institute and its projects. The two most important projects were the Indian Ecumenical Conference⁵ and the seven cross-cultural workshops held by the Institute in various locations in Canada.

Bob's influence on native leadership and on non-native leadership in Church and government was expressed dramatically in seven cross-cultural workshops sponsored by the Rochdale College Institute of Indian Studies, which was later known as the Nishnawbe Institute. The Institute for Indian studies itself had part of its roots in discussions between Bob Thomas and a number of young Canadian Indians in the middle sixties. The development of a "free" University (Rochdale College, Toronto) provided the opportunity for a number of us to put those ideas into practice and Bob is listed as one of the "faculty" associates in the original literature. This was the first "native run" educational institution in higher education in Canada and perhaps in the United States. The first brochure describes the Institute as "an educational-residential centre which provides an opportunity for Indian people to study and teach their own languages, histories, and cultures in their own way...Furthermore, the centre has become a centre for cross-cultural exploration and dialogue." The idea of an Indian run post

⁵ Pavlik, pp. 219-224.

secondary institution in 1967 was revolutionary. As was also the idea of “cross-cultural” workshops run by native people because it recognized First Nations as actually having a civilized culture. It is perhaps useful to remember as well that according to government statistics in 1960 in Canada there were only SIXTY native people studying in any post secondary institution in the whole country.

The Institute developed and sponsored seven cross-cultural workshops between 1967 and 1971. Bob was one of the consistent resource people at all of them. The workshops generally included almost as many native resource people as non-native students. The “students” included clergy and professional people from a variety of government services. The format of what became a ten-day intensive workshop was a mixture of group dynamics and lectures. In this context Bob was brilliant. In fact, he himself believed that the most effective teaching happened contextually. So when both whites and Indians were heavily engaged in some struggle around an issue, Bob would introduce a concise historical, social scientist and “Cherokee” lecture. The effect of this process, and of Bob’s influence, stretched from Coast to Coast. Many people who attended as resource people or as students went on to become major political leaders in First Nation’s organisations.

Both the cross-cultural workshops and the youth workshops were critical factors in forming the self esteem of numerous native people who rapidly took on leadership roles either through developing their own political institutions or in some cases taking over and reforming those institutions so that they became major elements in the development of native rights in Canada. They were also critical catalysts for the development and indeed proliferation of First Nation’s post-secondary educational institutions throughout Canada. In fact, Bob himself was one of the first staff persons which laid the groundwork for the native educational institution now located in Regina.

It is hard for us most of us to remember the post secondary scene for native people in the sixties and early seventies with the proliferation in both Canada and the United States of native studies programs either within academic institutions or as tribal Colleges. Bob was a significant and creative catalyst in moving individuals and institutions to recognize First Nation’s languages, to take seriously First Nation’s scholarship and to encourage First Nation’s people to appropriate the western educational system while retaining ones identity. In many ways, the participation in College and University programs was a necessary prerequisite to

gain power within the system in order to achieve self-determination. Yet towards the end of his life Bob seemed to become very sceptical of the process mostly, I think, because of the secular nature of most government run post secondary institutions. In some ways he may have underestimated the power of secularization in education. From about 1985 onwards he directed the Centre for Indian Scholars⁶ to try and operate in cooperation with the Vancouver School of Theology because that school, whose mission was to provide education for Christian ministers, was a “faith-based institution”. It was his feeling that anthropological faculties or even departments of Indian Studies in Universities would not grasp the traditions of First Nation’s doctors and ceremonial leaders. Ten years after Bob’s death the attempt of the Centre to negotiate such a relationship with Christian theological schools is incomplete and undecided. Since Christian theological schools in Canada and the United States are so influenced by contemporary secular thought themselves, such a relationship may not be possible. But is clear that one of the still unresolved issues facing post secondary Indian Studies programs in Canada is whether or not there is the capacity within such secular institutions for First Nations people to move ahead without falling prey to the new forms of continuing Colonialism.⁷

Bob influenced many tribes in Canada in their pursuit of self-determination through his work with young First Nations people and through the cross cultural workshops.⁸ However, he also influenced a number of native nations in Canada directly.

In 1970 the Anglican Church engaged Bob and myself to study the relationship of the Churches to the native peoples who lived along the MacKenzie River. We commissioned the building of a river boat in Yellowknife, towed it to Fort Providence and embarked on a trip which took us to all of the communities as far as Fort Good Hope, about 800 miles down river. When we were at Fort Providence, we had an opportunity to watch the ceremonies around the Queens visit to that area and Bob acquired his famous Union Jack! For personal reasons, I had to fly home at Fort Good Hope, but Bob continued to visit most of the other

⁶ The institution which attempted to carry on the work of the Indian Ecumenical Conference.

⁷ This issue is explored in “Ethics and Edicts: the Postcolonial Interpretation of Difference between Western Philosophy and the Ayuukhl Nisga’a” by Dr. Paula Sampson, WSSA, Reno, Nevada, April 20, 2001.

⁸ The cross cultural workshops influenced many First Nations individuals because in each workshop there were usually as many native people acting as resource people as there were non-native clients. The effect was to provide many native people with the status of teacher in a time when the society as whole simply did not recognize them as having anything to offer.

communities in that vast area. Our report and recommendations to the Anglican Church of Canada and the Roman Catholic Diocese urged the convening of a conference of all the Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy in order to educate them in ways in which they might be helpful to their congregations. Bob continually talked about his fears for the people as we travelled. He had this sense of visiting wonderful tribal peoples in these communities who were, in his view, totally unprepared to resist the steam roller of western “civilization” which was about to “roll over” them like a steamroller. This was becoming particularly urgent in the light of the rumours circulating about oil and the possibility of a MacKenzie River pipeline.

Such a conference should be seen as an educational workshop to consider the nature of tribalism and nationalism, native religious movements, community dynamics and community development in folk communities. Such a workshop should utilize the experiences of Indians in other parts of the United States and Canada, but especially, such a workshop must tap the experiences and thinking of those clergy who have worked and are working in the native communities in this area.⁹

Bob had been impressed with a number of the Roman Catholic clergy that he visited in these communities.

The Roman Catholic Bishop of the area refused to consider such a workshop. The Anglican Diocese agreed and we engaged a Yaqui religious leader to join us in leading the workshop. About three days before we were to go to Yellowknife for the event, the Anglican Bishop cancelled as well.

At first sight it seemed that our work and recommendations were in vain. However, the analysis of the situation did strike a chord with a number of Catholic clergy and with a few individual Anglican clergy.

The hierarchy of the Catholic Church should be made aware of the fact that Indian settlements on the Mackenzie River are very new social forms, a collection of tribal individuals struggling to become a tribal village against impossible odds. They are Indians and they are tribal. They are not Quebec French farming villages. Nor is it possible to make them such by treating them as if this was the case. It seems to us that the Oblate order’s model for its relationship with Indians in this area, and Canada generally,

⁹ Robert K. Thomas and John A. MacKenzie, “Survey Report to the Anglican Church on the Northwest Territories”, p.136, For Every North America Indian Who Begins to Disappear, I also Begin to Disappear, Neewin Publishing Company, 1971

regardless of the exceptional wisdom of some local Catholic priests, is seriously misplaced. The Catholic Church should look into other areas for more reasonable models of church-native relationships.¹⁰

I discovered several years later that this report had received wide circulation amongst the local Roman Catholic clergy. Many of them began to re-examine their goals in the villages. In my opinion this change was a major supportive factor in the emergence of the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories (later the Dene Nation). Catholic Dene attended the Indian Ecumenical Conferences in numbers and began to be comfortable integrating their own traditions with the Catholic faith. Indeed, there were thousands awaiting the Popes visit in the middle eighties, men and women who travelled by boat hundreds of miles for the visit which never took place because of bad weather. In 1985 Bob wrote the Pope and made this observation ,

“As an aside, let me tell you how unfortunate it was that you couldn’t land at Fort Simpson in Canada and talk to the Indians waiting there. I am afraid that the anti-Christian bigots among the native leadership now have all the ammunition they need to discredit the church among many Indian groups. I beg you make some symbolic gesture soon which will reassure Catholic Indians in Canada of your love for them.”¹¹

And the Pope did make another special visit and celebrated mass watched by millions on television!

Our analysis of the Anglicans was equally shattering but unfortunately the local Anglican clergy do not appear to have paid much attention to it. Nevertheless, the analysis is worth repeating because it catches a major perspective in Bob’s thought which continues to be valid for most Protestant approaches to native people to this day.

If Catholic officialdom in Canada tends to see Indian communities as incomplete French villages, then many Anglican clergy suffer the almost reverse bias and see Indian communities simply as collections of isolated individual choice makers. It is as if Indians are incomplete versions of the urban middle class. The liberal democratic ethic is simply transferred to a new and totally inappropriate context. Further, many Anglican clergy confuse this Western European middle class ethic with the essence of

¹⁰ Thomas & MacKenzie, p. 126

¹¹ Anderson, Daphne G. ed. *Getting to the Heart of the Matter*, Robert K. Thomas, *Collected Letters and Papers*,.. Native Ministries Consortium, p.104.

Christianity. The result of the confusion is the imposition on Indians of destructive value judgement, burdensome expectations, and the introduction of fragmenting social programmes into tribal communities. This leads to frustration on the part of the clergy and a disillusionment with the Church in a time of tribulation. Whatever may be the particular distortion of Catholic and Anglican clergy, the result has been, by and large, a negative force in Indian life in recent times.¹²

Although local Anglican clergy do not appear to have taken any of the recommendations to heart, both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches heard and responded in time to one major recommendation:

First, recognizing its role as patron and intermediary, individual clergy in the communities and the hierarchy outside of these communities, should be trained and encouraged to use what diminished power remains to the churches, to protect the rights of Indians against the rapid encroachment of secular power.¹³

The national leadership of the Anglican Church of Canada and the Canadian Catholic Bishops were soon heavily involved in supporting efforts of First Nations peoples to achieve a just settlement of the land question and particularly in the successful fight to stop the building of the MacKenzie River oil pipeline. Successful at least up to now when there are signs that the US President and the Canadian Prime Minister might be prepared to achieve such a goal at the beginning of this century!

In 1971 I moved to Vancouver and in 1974 began Parish ministry in the Haida village of Old Massett. During the five years that I was in Old Massett Bob was a frequent visitor as we continued working on the Indian Ecumenical Conference, the establishment of the Centre for Indians Scholars and a variety of other consultations. The dominant national issue for the Churches was the proposal to build the pipeline down the Mackenzie River. While in Massett I worked for the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories assisting them in mobilizing support throughout Canada against the pipeline.

In 1979 I moved to Greenville, (Lakalzap) and was immediately appointed to the Nisga'a Tribal Council. Thus I began 21 years as a part of the negotiation team for

¹² Thomas & MacKenzie, p. 127

¹³ Thomas & MacKenzie, p. 128

the Nisga'a. The first modern treaty in British Columbia was implemented in May of 2000. Bob played a significant role in the Nisga'a process during the eighties.

As those who are familiar with Bob's writing know, he was concerned throughout his life with the loss of language by North American tribes. While actively supporting the study and teaching of native languages in schools and University, Bob consistently pushed native institutions to use their language in public events. I remember one time when he pointed out that natives in Canada were far too polite. If a Band council was meeting with one English speaker the whole conversation would take place in English, perhaps with some translation if there were speakers present who did not use English. Bob pointed out that the reverse should be the case, particularly when the meetings took place on First Nation's territory. He urged tribes to carry on all their business in their native tongue and have interpreters for those who spoke only English even if all of the native speakers understood and spoke English. This perspective was strongly put to the leadership of the Nisga'a nation through individuals and workshops in which Bob participated. The Nisga'a themselves were very concerned with their own language loss and in the middle seventies established a bilingual and bicultural program in the school system, a first for British Columbia. However, when they had their annual education conference in which teachers and other English speakers participated, everything took place in English.

As a direct result of Bob's observations, it was decided in the early eighties to insist that all those who spoke Nisga'a should present in Nisga'a and translators were provided for those who spoke only English. Shortly thereafter, the Nisga'a Tribal Council began to use a translation service at all of its conventions. This is one of the reasons that the Nisga'a language is alive and well, and continues to be used at a majority of public events.

In the eighties the Nisga'a completed a very large land use study. The editorial/ advisory committee engaged Bob to critique the claims presentation, to suggest other uses for the material, and to assess the long range program implications for this large research endeavour. His 1985 report contains two observations that indicate Bob's growing attempts to identify indigenous Christianity and his concern to articulate the ingredients required for a First Nation to survive in the midst of North American secular and technological values. He tells the Nisga'a that while their Christianity looks to the outsider as the same as white Christianity he

states: “You have a native Christianity. There is no question in my mind about this”.

One of Bob’s recommendation was that the Nisga’a needed to continue their study through to contemporary times.

I get the strong sense when you talk about your claim, that you are not simply saying that the Nishga owned this land in the 1880’s, but that you in fact own it now; that not only did you not surrender aboriginal title, but that you have modern title. The only thing that can possibly sanction modern title in the eyes of whites, other than a politically independent nation-state bureaucracy usually with a military apparatus, is to be a distinct people with a unique language and culture, socially and culturally autonomous, living in a holy land since the dawn of time, preserving a continuity and autonomy with their ancestors as a yet unique people.¹⁴

Bob was the guest speaker at the education conference of the Nisga’a people in the middle eighties. In that speech he articulated these ingredients for survival, that is, a unique and holy language, a distinctive religion, a homeland and holy land, and a sacred history. As he described each area he ended with the assertion that the Nisga’a had that feature. Of course it is no wonder that he received a standing ovation! Recognition of these elements emerge today in the Nisga’a treaty itself.

Between 1986 and his death, Bob was a regular participant in the Native Ministries Consortium¹⁵ summer school. The summer school invited him to participate as a teacher, as an elder, to lead workshops, to give public lectures, and sometimes he came just to continue discussions between Vancouver School of Theology and the Centre for Indian Scholars. The Appendices contain some illustrative course descriptions.

¹⁴ Thomas, Robert K. Report to the Ayuukl’ Nishga’ Editorial/Advisory Committee, , 1985, p.14, my private papers. I hope to develop a separate article on this issue in the near future. Bob went on to suggest that “these volumes could be the basis of an important religious document for the Nishga, and for humanity in general.”

¹⁵ The Native Ministries Consortium, a joint action committee, was formed in the spring of 1985 by the Diocese of Caledonia (Anglican Church of Canada), the Native Ministries Division of BC Conference (United Church of Canada), Charles Cook Theological School in Tempe, Arizona, the Diocese of Alaska (Episcopal Church, USA) and Vancouver School of Theology. Under native direction, this ecumenical consortium develops community-based training programs for native ministries – lay and ordained. Its work includes the Native Ministries Summer School, support for the TEE Centre in Terrace BC, and participation in the Vancouver School of Theology Master of Divinity degree by extension in four US States and four Canadian Provinces.

The Native Ministries Consortium summer school attracted annually about 100 students and twelve or more faculty to Vancouver. While a majority of the people were First Nations from Canada, the remaining participants were from around the globe. The purpose of the summer school was primarily to provide leadership training for Christian lay ministers in local native congregations. Bob's presence and active involvement as a teacher and mentor kept before everyone the reality of native values. Especially since Bob was clear that he was not a Christian.¹⁶ Even more surprising is the fact that he was invited to preach in the Chapel of the Epiphany in 1989!¹⁷ There is a passage in his sermon which suggests why Bob continued to associate with Christians. Like many First Nations people, he identified with the "ideals" of Jesus not with the institutional churches.

"I'm a social activist and have been for most of my life, and I'll probably end my days charging some barricade somewhere. But I know that all of my activities would be beside the point if North America was really a Christian society. If North America was a decent society for the rich, it would be a decent society for the poor. If it was a decent society for the whites, it would be a decent society for the Indians and Blacks. If it were a decent society for men, it would be a decent society for women. If, indeed, we lived our lives according to Christ's admonitions there would be no reason for church programs to help with certain reforms in the general society".¹⁸

I think Bob's continuing interest in associating with Christians and Christian institutions was primarily a hope that he might assist some First Nations claiming for themselves a form of indigenous Christianity which was not a replica of the mainstream bureaucratic Christian institutional model. Whether those tribes who can be identified as indigenous Christian communities can survive and maintain a unique identity in this new century is an open question.

In his 1990 essay "Some Last Thoughts" Bob betrays his pessimism about North American Society:

¹⁶ "Your Eminence, I don't want to deceive you so I should tell you that I am not a Catholic, not even a Christian. I still hold to the ancient Cherokee faith alone", Anderson, p.105.

¹⁷ Anderson, p.110-116.

¹⁸ Anderson, p.14

At this point in history, I do not see any way possible for Indians to have a productive relationship with most of the rest of North American society. Quite the contrary! We would surely profit, however, from a relationship with other minority peoples in other parts of the world who are in a similar position, if for nothing more than needed mutual psychological and spiritual support.¹⁹

Throughout my years of working with Bob there was hope that the values of tribal society would be upheld and recognized by the mainstream society. Indeed, one of the major motivations for our activities was that these unique values were not only of significance in themselves and for the peoples who lived them, but that they indeed provided a possible solution to the problems facing our sacred island and indeed the globe itself.

I remember in the late sixties during a discussion in a workshop Bob saying that Indians were only then realizing that they would have to find some way to live with whites. Up to Bob's time, he said, tribes kept imagining that whites would return to Europe. So much of his work with white people and institutions throughout his life was directed at finding creative ways in which tribal societies might function within North American Society. He spent a lot of time in the seventies and eighties working with people in Canada because he often said that there was not much hope left for self-determination in either the United States.

I remember another statement he made when we were writing the report about our trip and evaluation of the relationship of the Churches to the native communities on the MacKenzie River. We were discussing the fact that in every school in these communities the walls were filled with pictures and themes depicting successful participation in the great Canadian society. Yet the chances of anyone in those classes ever making it seemed impossible given the social environment of 1970. Then Bob posed as a possible recommendation that the Church should make it possible for its native members to take office in school boards, Centres, etc. I argued that this would be encouraging assimilation. Bob's response was that the only way First Nations people would discover that the existing institutional systems of Western society were not for them was if they actively participated in such institutions.

¹⁹ Anderson, ,p.120.

As we begin this century, First Nations peoples in Canada participate in many institutions. In thirty years, Indian control/involvement in First Nations Studies programs in Universities and Colleges has grown from nothing to a department in almost every Canadian University and/or College. There is a proliferation of First Nations post secondary institutions. There are a growing number of nations who have negotiated a modern treaty and have achieved some form of self-government. One characteristic of all of these institutions is that the systems are mostly modelled on contemporary western institutions. Is Bob's pessimism based on his perception in the nineties that participation in Canadian institutions by native peoples was not leading them to the conclusion that these models were inappropriate?

A conference at Langara College later on this month calls participants in post secondary institutions to examine the question of systemic racism in post-secondary institutions. I think Bob's answer to the question might be different than most. I think he would argue that such an alliance between western institutional models and tribal values becomes impossible because of the secularism so deeply embedded in contemporary western structures.

What will be the legacy of Bob Thomas? Is the only hope for tribal survival separatism? Is it possible to achieve such separatism in the context of Canadian society? Or will it be the development of a new form of interaction which truly provides equality between tribal societies and Canadians?

Bob leaves us with a great challenge as we begin this new millennium.²⁰

²⁰ Sampson, P. points to one possible positive solution but with a number of recent First Nations writers articulates a similar pessimism.

APPENDICES

1. The first Rochdale College cross cultural workshop brochure - 1968.
2. VST summer school course – 1986.
3. VST summer school course – 1989.
4. NMC summer school course – 1989.
5. NMC consultation of elders – 1990.
6. NMC summer school course – 1991.
7. Aboriginal symposium description-2001-04-13.
8. Centre for Indian Scholars brochure.