

Book Reviews

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF STORIES: NARRATIVE AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE YUKON TERRITORY. Julie Cruikshank. 1998. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. xxx + 211 p, illustrated. ISBN 0-8032-1490-1 (hard cover); 0-7748-0649-4 (soft cover). £42.75 (hard cover); Can\$25.95 (soft cover).

Narrative, memory, and alternative histories have been the focus of some of the most perceptive and innovative work in social anthropology in the past few years. Julie Cruikshank's study of narrative and knowledge in the Yukon stands out as an example of the best of this genre. Like her previous monograph, *Life lived like a story* (Cruikshank 1990), the work revolves around the stories, life histories, and teachings of several First Nations women from the Yukon Territory in northern Canada. The scope of this book however is wider and more ambitious. The stories are juxtaposed to various official histories, demonstrating with devastating clarity the ways in which culturally different understandings of critical events inform not only particular constructions of the past, but also the ways in which individuals read the present.

Cruikshank's central thesis, stated in the opening pages, is that 'Yukon storytellers of First Nations ancestry frequently demonstrate ability to build connections where rifts might otherwise appear.' She argues that 'they use narratives to dismantle boundaries rather than erect them. In so doing, they raise significant epistemological issues both about western classificatory practices and about contemporary constructions. If postmodern analyses attribute fragmentation of meaning to late twentieth-century uncertainties, Yukon storytellers have long experienced such fragmentation as springing from the structure of colonial practices that took root more than a century ago' (page 30). She goes on to explore and elaborate upon this argument, closely examining colonial and missionary records, and interweaving these with the very different contemporary oral accounts of the same events, which she was given by First Nations people. The result is a subtle and ever more layered and textured analysis of knowledge practices more often discordant than not, and of understandings of the individual and society, and the relationship between them, which are difficult if not impossible to reconcile.

The tensions between different views of the world and society are explored in various contexts, which highlight the enormous complexity of wider issues, such as environmental concerns and resource management, land rights and use, and basic citizenship. The problems implicit in even progressive approaches to resource management — such as sustainable development — are demonstrated beautifully by an account of a meeting between ecologists and indigenous elders in the southern Yukon. A fisheries

biologist argued for rational resource use, and outlined the 'catch-and-release programme' that required fish below a certain size to be released back into the water. The elders argued against this programme because it went against the indigenous practice by encouraging people to 'play with fish,' which had offered themselves to the fishers. Cruikshank shows the distance between not only the basic premises with which the two groups were operating, but also the language of argument used by each. The fisheries biologist used 'rational,' scientific argument, while an elder told a story about the trials, tribulations, and eventually understanding arising from a boy's thoughtless actions in relation to fish. In this and other examples, the stories are shown to be constantly shifting narratives, emphasising particular points to teach and inform about both the past and the present. Thus, she argues that here knowledge is a relational concept, a process rather than a product. Cruikshank avoids the trap, however, of idealising or romanticising indigenous knowledge; she rightly criticises tendencies either to depict indigenous people as noble savages with an innate understanding of resource management, or to conflate norms (respect for the environment) and behaviour (circumspect behaviour toward the environment).

In the chapter 'Confronting cultural erasure,' Cruikshank evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of storytelling as opposing or challenging authoritarian speech. Like Bourdieu, she sees accounts of the past as 'bound up in social-historical and power relations' and goes on to ask what happens when 'different narrative models intersect on a "frontier" where they are accorded unequal social weight' (page 73). Not surprisingly, the answer seems to be that the written accounts and archives are weighted with greater authority than the oral narrative. Skookum Jim, for example, is a central character in written accounts of the Klondike gold rush, featuring in William Oglivie's official account as well as in contemporary newspaper stories, which clearly depicted him as a colourful gold rush 'character.' Pierre Berton, the twentieth-century Canadian writer, portrays him in *Klondike* (Berton 1960) as 'a giant of a man' and the best hunter and trapper on the river, but also as one who unlike 'others in his tribe displayed the white man's kind of ambition' (page 74–75). However, Angela Sidney and Kitty Smith — two of the First Nations women with whom Cruikshank collaborated — tell stories that locate Skookum Jim's activities firmly within the social obligations of kinship and marriage and simultaneously use customary images of mythological figures and animal helpers to explain the contradictions and upheavals generated by the gold rush. A more complex analysis of the contested area where different narrative models collide is that of the trial of four Tagish men

charged with the murder of a white man. The official trial transcripts and other written reports and the oral accounts Smith and Sidney gave Cruikshank represent radically different pictures of what actually took place and why. Each is framed by a set of assumptions about what is culturally appropriate; as Cruikshank shows, the result is a confrontation between customary and western law in which the latter dominates so effectively that the former is relegated to silence.

This is a book about misunderstanding and lack of communication as much as it is one about knowledge and explanation. Colonial and post-colonial law and policy rest on certain assumptions of intellectual or cultural entitlement as surely as they do on those of economic entitlement. On one level, *The social life of stories* is about narrative and social and cultural knowledge in the Yukon, and about contesting and legitimating knowledge claims; on that basis alone it is a fine ethnography, and a stimulating and perceptive theoretical study. On another level it is an exploration of the power of language and the language of power; a documentation of the ways in which different types of customary knowledge and social meaning are eclipsed or silenced when they meet official texts and accounts based on western logic and values. Ultimately, it is a work that challenges hegemonic practices, be they political, cultural, or indeed academic. As Cruikshank writes in her epilogue: 'What is too often missing from scholarly studies...are interruptions and risk. Academics too often frame the experience of others with reference to scholarly norms. Yet unless we put ourselves in interactive situations where we are exposed and vulnerable, where these norms are interrupted and challenged, we can never recognize the limitations of our own descriptions. It is these dialogues that are most productive, because they prevent us from becoming overconfident about our own interpretations' (page 165). This is undoubtedly a scholarly study in the best sense of the term; it is also one that succeeds in pushing beyond the boundaries of 'our own descriptions.' (Frances Pine, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RF.)

References

- Berton, P. 1960. *Klondike: the life and death of the last great gold rush*. London: W.H. Allen.
 Cruikshank, J. 1990. *Life lived like a story*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

REMEMBERING THE YEARS OF MY LIFE: JOURNEY OF A LABRADOR INUIT HUNTER. Carol Brice-Bennett (Editor); recounted by Paulus Maggo. 1999. St John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland. 188 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 0-919666-95-7.

This little book, a by-product of Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, offers a wealth of information on the life of the Inuit of Labrador. The reminiscences of the Inuit narrator Paulus Maggo provide his personal insights into the great changes that occurred in

his lifetime, while the excellent introduction by editor Carol Brice-Bennett supplies a quick course of study for those, like this reviewer, who have hitherto been more aware of the lifestyles of Arctic Quebec and Nunavut Inuit culture. The differences arise principally, of course, from the early arrival of Europeans, and in the mid-eighteenth century of the Moravian missionaries. It is eye-opening to realize that in the same period of 1822–23 when the Royal Navy explorer William E. Parry — ice-bound in Igloolik — passed the winter teaching reading and writing so that his sailors could return to England able to read the Bible, 'the majority of congregation members at Nain, Okak, and Hopedale were literate, and adults applied the skill to communicate through letters to relatives and friends in different communities.' Teaching of reading and writing had begun in 1780.

Paulus Maggo began talking about his life in order to put together this book at the age of 83, and Brice-Bennett can rightly claim that his descriptions of Inuit life 'comprise the most detailed reflections by an Aboriginal inhabitant of northern Labrador' yet published. Life stories, oral biographies, and oral histories have appeared fairly frequently in Arctic Quebec and Nunavut, but not in Labrador. His descriptions of the traditional Inuit life he lived and the end of that lifestyle are valuable indeed. However, one could wish that it had been possible to extend the scope of the interviews. Paulus Maggo may very well have heard passed-down accounts of the establishment of the Moravian missions. Did he ever learn anything about the attitude of his forefathers towards the introduction of the new religion? Did the shamans die hard? Could he have told anything about the migrations of Labrador Inuit who made their way to Arctic Quebec and to Baffin Island? This is an opportunity missed, because when will an elder and an editor as knowledgeable as Paulus Maggo and Carol Brice-Bennett work together again?

The other quibble, perhaps, is that *Remembering the years of my life*, compiled from 14 taped interviews, does not fully capture the presumed vitality of the vernacular. Whether an interviewee is a company CEO or a native elder, the liveliness of everyday speech has to be counted as the particular strength of the oral history genre.

These are criticisms with which Brice-Bennett may very well agree. Partially because of funding, the conditions under which she worked were not ideal. She was able to be present only at the first and last of the interviews. She hired Martin Jararuse, who, working from her outline of questions on key topics, conducted the interviews in Inuktitut, and along with Wilson Jararuse and Sam Metcalfe — all three fluently bilingual — prepared transcripts in English. Brice-Bennett then cut, pasted, and edited and supplied bridging sections to form a chronicle of Paulus Maggo's life experience. From time to time it may strike the reader that the narrative slips into too academic a mode, but nonetheless Paulus Maggo's words are often moving, and the reader feels for him when he says that, presumably because of the different world in which they live, his