

## BIOGRAPHY OF A CANADIAN HAIDA WOMAN

***During my time; Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida woman***, Margaret E. Blackman. Douglas and McIntyre, 1982. 172 pp. \$19.95. cloth. ISBN 0-88894-351-2.

*During my time* is a slim volume (172 pages) which recounts the life story of a Northwest Coast Haida woman born in 1896. It is an important work, as, in general, the lives of women in Canada have not been well documented, especially the lives of Native women. Florence Edenshaw Davidson has lived all her life in Massett, a Haida community in the Queen Charlotte Islands. She is one of the last living women to have undergone the traditional Haida puberty seclusion rites, and to have experienced an arranged marriage.

Florence grew up during a time of dramatic change, as her community was increasingly drawn into modern Canadian society. She has been described as “a fragile link to the past.” (p. 153) Her story is one of courage and strength in dealing with a changing environment which is neither traditionally Haida nor fully modern.

The author, Margaret Blackman, is an associate professor of anthropology at the State University of New York College at Brockport. She edited more than 50 hours of taped interviews with Florence, conducted between 1977 — 1979. She juxtaposes historical and anthropological reports to place the story into a context which greatly benefits the reader, and allows the development of a clear understanding of the social conditions prevalent before and during Florence’s life.

The book is organized into an orthography, ten chapters, an afterword and an unedited transcript. The book is illustrated with photographs and graphics by her grandson and Haida artist Robert Davidson. It includes a bibliography and an index.

The orthography provides us with a guide to pronouncing the Haida language; Haida terms and names are used throughout the book. The author takes pains to explain the meaning of such terms as they are used; however, a reader who is seriously interested in the Haida language will find him/herself having to refer closely to the orthography. All readers will have to refer back to terms used earlier, as there is no glossary of Haida terms.

Chapter 1 is entitled “The life-history project” and explains the methodology of the project and provides background material on Florence Davidson. It serves to introduce anthropological terms of reference and various accounts of Haida life in the 1800’s. Chapter 2 provides a sketch of the traditional role of Haida women, and again draws upon historical accounts of Haida society. It concentrates on the role of women at a time when divisions of labour were crucial to the economic, political and social life of the community and their role within the context of the changes wrought by Euro-Canadian and American contact.

Chapter 3 presents a brief biographical sketch of Florence Edenshaw Davidson and includes a genealogical chart.

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of Florence's own story, based upon the interviews conducted by Margaret Blackman. This account continues for five chapters, recounting her life as a young girl, as a young married woman, as a mother and as an older woman no longer bearing children. The account is followed by a discussion wherein the author summarizes the story of Florence and places it in an anthropological setting. An afterword describes the author's last trip to Masset to present Florence with her own (edited) story.

The text, photographs and oral accounts all blend to form a clear picture of this remarkable Haida woman. Especially refreshing is the human approach to a subject which could conceivably have become just another anthropological account. By combining historical documents and academic interpretations with Florence's own story, the author skillfully builds her story line and provides us with a depth of understanding of Haida society and culture not otherwise possible.

Florence's story is straight-forward and humorous. The strength of her character is clear. Her arranged marriage to Robert Davidson, whom she talks about with affection and respect throughout the book, is a highlight.

"I was still going to school yet when several people came in. The women all belonged to *C'at'lanas*, my husband's tribe (lineage), and the men belonged to husband's dad's tribe *Stl'ang'lanas*, except for my husband's brother. They were all streaming in and I didn't know what was going on so I ran to my uncle's house. I told my cousin Josie who all came in to my dad's house and she started laughing. She didn't tell me what was happening.

'Don't say anything when I tell you something,' my mother said to me. 'Those who came in last week proposed to you.' I didn't know what to say. Propose! Why? I thought. I was just a kid yet. I didn't know what to say and mother advised me not to say anything about the proposal because they were high-class people.

The next week Josie said to me in English, 'Florence, you know they proposed to you?' I don't know anything, I don't know English. 'No, I don't know what you're talking about,' I said. 'They want you to marry Robert Davidson,' she said. And she laughed and laughed. I thought she was just teasing me. I told my mother what my cousin said. 'Did you say yes?' I asked her. "No, your dad sent them to your uncle. Your dad says he's got nothing to do with it; it has to go through your uncle. You have more respect for your uncle than for us,' she told me. 'That's the only brother I have.' 'You're going to make me marry,' I said. 'Yes, you're going to marry him.' 'I'm not going to marry,' I said. 'Don't say that, Florence, he's a real prince.' "

She did marry him, and they had a long life together with many children. Her life revolved around her family and the efforts of feeding and raising them. The author states the case well in her discussion summary at the end of the book.

“Marriage and especially children meant more work and longer hours. Pregnancy, Florence noted, was not enjoyable, because ‘you can’t do as much,’ but even though she was pregnant for more than ten of her twenty-six childbearing years she managed to ‘do’ a lot. She washed clothes into the early morning hours, sewed for her children, and prepared daily meals for ten or more people. Like many other North American women of her generation, Florence Davidson was also an energetic domestic entrepreneur, augmenting her husband’s income to keep pace with her steadily increasing family. For a time she operated a coffee shop from the front room of her house. She knitted sweaters for sale and made baked goods, following Haida fishermen to purvey her bread and cakes at isolated fish camps. Today the loaves continue to flow from her bread oven. ‘Old as I am,’ she notes, ‘I’m still struggling.’ But when she says, ‘I don’t think I ever rested to be a lady,’ it is not so much said wistfully as said with pride.”

The author has stated that the primary value of the book lies in its documentation of the life of a Haida woman, who worked hard for her family and her community. Perhaps this is the reason why the book seems so familiar to so many of us.

This is a book which should be widely read, by scholars, by secondary school students and by everyone who is interested in the real unsung heroes of Canada — those women who, through their labour, survived and tried to build a better life for their children. Much more work of this quality is required to document the role of women in the building of Canada.

**Keith Turnbull** is Director of Project Development and Communications at the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies in Regina. He is the author of several articles on Native issues in Saskatchewan.



Florence Davidson