

**ONE SMALL ISLAND
A CASE STUDY IN THE CONTEST BETWEEN
HISTORY AND LITERATURE**

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Home is alive, like a tree, not skinned and dressed or cut and dried like the quarried stone and milled wood houses are made of, nor masticated and spat out like the particleboard and plywood used for packaging prefabricated lives. A house is not a home the way a mask is not a face. But a mask is not a mask if it can't be read as metaphor for the face, nor a house a house if it can't be seen as the mask of home. Home is the whole earth, everywhere and nowhere, but it always wears the masks of particular places, no matter how often it changes or moves.

Mine moves often, but like many hunter-gatherers, I also keep a cache and circle back to it every year. I keep it now on a little island in what used to be the Squamish country, north and west of the rich new city of Vancouver - the third most populous city in the second most spacious country in the world, though it is barely a century old. Things have changed that much that fast.

The old name, the Squamish name, for this overshadowed island is Xwłł'xhwm: a stony protruberance of meaning cloaked in a forest of evergreen consonants which I think it is worth learning to pronounce.

Bowen Island, its English name, was given it by a certain Captain Richards, while he was charting the coast of southern British Columbia for the British Navy in 1859. His predecessor George Vancouver had already named the surrounding waters Howe Sound, to honor a British lord of the admiralty, Richard Howe - Black Dick, his seamen liked to call him. Howe had earned his geographical immortality, in the British Admiralty's view, on 1 June 1794, by defeating a French fleet in the English Channel - for which, of course, the French have a different name. They call it La Manche, and its narrowest point, which to the British is the Strait of Dover, is to the French the Pas de Calais. The battle itself was known to British patriots as "the Glorious First of June." To the French it was the 13th day of the month of Prairial, Year II of the Republic, and merely one more in a series of disasters that beset the Girondin and Jacobin regimes. Names are not the only things that vary with your point of view.

Captain Richards picked up the theme, naming other features within Howe Sound after British officers and ships involved in the same battle. Rear-Admiral James Bowen was one whom Richards chose to memorialize. He commanded the HMS *Queen Charlotte* on 1 June 1794 - the same ship used seven years earlier to make the first commercial raid on the Queen Charlotte Islands, 300 miles to the north - and that is why the channel between

Xwlfl'xhwm and the mainland has come to be called Queen Charlotte Strait. Gambier, Bowyer and other nearby islands take their names from British officers who fought the French on the same day. Even Keats Island is named for a British admiral, not for the poet who wrote that "true imagination ... has no self; it is everything and nothing." The poet, but not the admiral, struggled all his short life to learn to listen to the world, and to unlearn "the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime."

I want the names with which I touch the land I live in to connect me to that land. What most of them do instead is record the means by which its former inhabitants were evicted and their long-lived cultures destroyed. The way names link us to the land is not through history, which is sectarian and time-bound but through myth, which works the other way around. History becomes myth when imagination edits it, and a glorified version of British military history was myth enough for Captains Vancouver and Richards. But the Glorious First of June is not the myth I want to relive as I cross Queen Charlotte Strait and walk beneath the alder and redcedar and hemlock and wild cherry, over the salmon stream and up along the deer trail that passes next to my door. Nor is it a myth I would like my neighbors or my children to relive. I think my friend the historian Calvin Martin is right when he says George Santayana was wrong: it is not those who forget history, it is instead those who *remember* it, who are compelled to go through it again.

Black Dick, Rear-Admiral Bowen, and the others were all, no doubt, fine sailors and honorable men. I might admire them if I met them. I nevertheless find little nourishment in thinking about their illustrious careers. And I prefer to derive my excitement from some other source than a one-day battle in La Manche two centuries ago, no matter who beat whom. On a diet of British military history, no matter how brilliant and subtle the tactics, no matter how noble the soldiers and sailors, as the pride swells the spirit begins to starve.

For 1000 years, or perhaps for 10,000 years, the fjord I live in was a living map of the universe to the Salish-speaking peoples who were born and died here. It was a self-renewing library of archetypal images and stories as well as a self-replenishing larder of food, building materials, clothing and tools. It fed, sheltered and exercised body and mind. Its placenames recorded the doings of Xhais, the transformer, who adjusted the world in such a way that no creature had too much power over another. Xhais, who could cut himself up and put himself back together again, frequently took the form of four brothers, who often altered themselves in turn into three supernatural human beings and a two-headed sealskin canoe. At other moments, they merged into one four-legged creature, such as a black bear.

The land was thick with other stories - not of distant struggles for money and power, but of the roots of being and time: how the Son of the Day emerged from a lake to marry the selfish shaman's daughter; how a man named

Xwuch'tal' was roused on his wedding night at Stawamus to hunt the double-headed serpent, and how he made potent jewelry and weapons from its bones; how the Mosquito persuaded the Thunder that blood comes from wood instead of from flesh - which is why the lightning now strikes trees instead of people. (Those who know this know better than to curse mosquitoes.)

These islands now are a cemetery of names for admirals who never sailed into this country. Their only connection with it lies in the fact that their victory over the French helped to secure the money and power by which the British conducted their colonization of Canada, in the successful pursuit of further money and power. The slopes looking down on Howe Sound are mangy now with the scars of clear-cut logging. The waters are fouled with dioxins - leaving the prawns, crabs and other crustaceans inedible - because of poisons discharged by the pulp mills fed by that logging. The shellfish contaminate other creatures in turn, from seabirds to whales. It is so because we continue to believe, as generations of eager colonists have believed, that the land is ours instead of us, that it is merely there for the taking.

How many names the island has had, over how many thousand years of human habitation and migration through this area, is something we can't know. How many different cultures have lived and camped here is another thing we don't know, though we might find out. The traces left by people like those in a land like this are slight, but not much archaeology has been done. In the meantime, I know the name the island had before Richards christened it for James Bowen, and that earlier name will stand for all the others. It is a slender thread, but it leads to a real world. It leads to a world that is real in a way the present world isn't, even though that other world has vanished and this one seems to thrive. I call that world real because, through all its changes, it remained essentially self-sustaining instead of self-destructive. Its last transformation began when the Europeans arrived with too many answers and too few questions, and began to plant their flags. But I have a hunch that if this world lives, it will have to be by including among its models the very worlds it deliberately destroyed.

Xwfil'xhw m means Fast Drumming Ground. The root of the name is *lixhw*, which means to beat rapidly. How old this name is no one knows, and no one is likely to find out. It could be a few centuries; it could be a few millennia. Charles Hill-Tout, an amateur archaeologist and ethnologist who worked all over southern B. C., heard it from his Spanish acquaintances in the 1890s. Louis Miranda, one of the last fluent speakers of the Squamish language, taught it to a linguist named Aert Kuipers again in the 1960s. The x is a sound like the ch in the German word *ich*, and the w is a suppressed round vowel, an o that is never

let out of the bag. The second syllable *lil'*, has a long accented vowel, like the ee in peel, and a glottal stop at the end (like the catch in the throat in the English expression of warning, *uh-uh-uh*). The *xh* is like the *ch* in Bach (farther back in the throat than the *ch* in *ich*). Add another suppressed round vowel, then *m*, and you'll have it. *Xwlf'l'xhwm*.

Kwum'shnam is the Squamish name for Hood Point, at the north end of *Xwlf'l'xhwm*; it means Thumping Feet. Passage Island, just south of *Xwlf'l'xhwm*, was called *Smetmetel'ch*. The old name for Gambier Island seems to be lost, though we still have the names for some of its bays and the seasonal village, *St'ap'as*, that stood on its northwest shore. Anvil Island was *Tlaxwm*. When Captain Vancouver rechristened it, naming it for its shape, there were plenty of knowledgeable Squamish still around, but questions like What is your name for that island? and What does the name mean? evidently never entered his mind. If they did, they must have seemed too much trouble to ask.

Most of the old names for the mountains around the fjord have vanished too. Miranda remembered that Mount Garibaldi was called *Ta Nch'qai'*, The Grimy One, in summer, but we seem to have lost its winter name.

Ch'axhai' was the name for Horseshoe Bay. It was a village once, with a small and beautiful harbor. It's a ferry terminal now, primarily asphalt, where thousands of travellers seeking nourishment and news are confronted by banks of silent machines dispensing junkpaper and junkfood. Each time I pass through it, I think of the color, the talk, the fresh, hot homemade food, and the anthology of faces in a hundred marketplaces and piers in South America, Africa, Asia, even in Europe -wherever the preindustrial world is still permitted to spill through the fences.

Though the population was small, that iridescent complexity greeted the first white visitors to the Squamish country too. In the name of efficiency, safety, privacy - all the synonyms of control - where we might have enriched it, we have chased it out and closed it down.

Q'iq'l'xhn was the name of a fishing site on the other side of the Sound. Now it's the largest single source of pollutants in the local air and water. It's the site of the pulp mill at Port Mellon.¹

"Do they eat gold?" the Inca asked, watching the Spaniards stripping the temples. And the Squamish, when they saw Vancouver and his sailors, in 1792,

1.- There are more Squamish placenames in Aert Kiupers's *The Squamish Language*, Part II (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), and still others - though in antiquated transcriptions - in Charles Hill-Tout's "Notes on the sk'qo'mic of British Columbia," published in *Report 70 of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, London, 1900. Hill Tout's article is partially reprinted in volume II of the four-volume collection of his work, *The Salish People*, edited by Ralph Maud (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1978), but the spelling of names is haphazardly simplified from Hill-Tout's transcriptions.

said, '*U'iu'aiti steuagin 'ia' uit, nitlch' mukwtnsuit tiua, uetl mnhuismatl ti s'atsusuit 'i'usxwixwi*'. "Maybe these are the dead, and those are their burial clothes, since only their faces are visible."²

Passage Island, smetlmetlel'ch, is, I think, where the Xhais brothers were welcomed into the Squamish country. Far upstream on the Squamish River, they were bid farewell. And every episode in the never-quite-finished epic of creation was mapped onto someplace in between. Xwlfl'xhwm, I think, is where they created the Deer, Gambier where they created the Great Blue Heron, and Anvil Island, Tlaxwm, where the eldest brother snared the Sun. But of course there are other possibilities, and no reason to think all the Squamish storytellers agreed where every episode took place. Even in an oral culture, the books move around on the shelves.

When the brothers first came to the country, things were too homogeneous. Perhaps, in fact, things were rather like they are now. The animals were indistinguishable one from the other, like shrink-wrapped meat or the contents of tins. But they weren't dismembered and packaged. They simply hadn't been given their different forms. So they all looked like animals do when they're skinned. They looked like humans. The brothers themselves were disguised as three humans and a sealskin canoe. When they came ashore on Xwlfl'xhwm, they met a man who was sharpening a bone.

"What are you up to?" they asked.

"Making arrow points," said the man. "I've heard that someone is coming to change us. When he arrives, I intend to kill him."

"It is true," said the brothers, as they seized the man. "Someone is coming."

They pulled at his ears, his arms, his neck, his jowls, and stretched and squeezed his fingers and toes, and they twisted his hips up and his shoulders down. Then they planted two pieces of driftwood on his head and clapped their hands to chase him off. He became the Deer, but he ran so fast the brothers feared he could never be caught. They chased him all the way to Kwum'shnam, where they caught him and knocked his hoofs together to slow him down. And they thrust the bone he had been working on into his foot, where it remains, the deer's astragalus bone, which looks like a half-worked spearpoint. Then they chased him away again.

"That will do," they said. "He is slow enough now, but not too slow. We can go on."

2.- Miranda told this story to Kuipers too.

Crossing to Cha'lkwnach, one of the south-facing bays on Gambier Island, they met an old man fishing with a two-pronged spear. That is to say, he appeared to be fishing, but he was not really spearing his fish. He was rubbing the head of his spear against the fishes' bodies, then wiping the slime off the spear with moss and putting the moss and fish slime into his basket.

One of the brothers produced a barbed point and fixed it to the old man's spear, then speared a fish and held it up in front of the old man's eyes.

"Grandfather, this is the proper way to fish," said the brothers.

"Don't tell me what to do," the old man answered. "I prefer the slime."

"That is not how it ought to be, Grandfather," they said.

The brothers broke his spear in two and stuck the two halves to his legs. They stretched his neck, glued feathers to his hands, and fastened the spearpoint to his face, in place of his nose. Then they clapped their hands, and the old man rose unsteadily into the air. The brothers called him the Great Blue Heron.

They kept on paddling, and when they landed under a steep bluff on Tlaxwm, the youngest resumed his human form. There the four built a house near the mouth of a stream.

"I want to talk to the Sun," said the eldest brother. "I'm going to snare him."

That morning, he tied a line round the legs of his youngest brother, who turned himself into a salmon and danced in the stream. Not long after that, the Sun came down in the form of an eagle. Sound asleep in the heat of the sun, the three elder brothers saw and heard nothing as the eagle made off with the salmon, snapping the line.

When the three brothers awoke in the cool of the evening, the eldest refused to allow any grieving. During the night, he braided a heavier cedarbark line. Next morning he tied it to the ankles of his second youngest brother, who leaped into the sea as a harbor seal.

The Sun came down again that day at noon in the form of an eagle, sinking his talons in the seal's back, and as the two elder brothers slept in the heat of the day, the eagle flew off with the seal, stretching and snapping the line.

Once again the eldest brother sat up all night braiding a line. He finished the thick cord late that morning and tied it to the ankles of his one remaining brother, who threw himself into the sea in the form of a porpoise.

That day at noon, the eagle descended again, and as the eldest brother slept in the great heat, the eagle of the sun flew off, clutching his heavy prey, stretching and finally snapping the line.

That night, the eldest brother braided yet another cord and tied it to his own feet. When morning came, he slid into the sea, taking the form of a killer whale.

Noon came, and the Sun came down in the form of an eagle, sinking his talons into the whale's back. The eagle flapped his wings but nothing happened. The whale was too heavy to lift. Then the whale took the eagle under the waves.

"Could we have a little chat now?" asked the whale.

"We could," said the eagle.

They returned to the surface, where Xhais and the Sun both took their human forms. Then they entered the house of the four brothers.

"What I want to know," Xhais said, 'is where the salmon come from."

"A long way over there," the Sun said, pointing west. "Where rainbow-colored smoke rises over the houses."

"How do I get there?" Xhais asked.

"Take the leaves of all the trees," the Sun said. "Take the roots of all the plants, the feathers of all the birds, and the bones of all the animals. That is the medicine you will need."

The Sun resumed his eagle form and flew up through the clouds. And Xhais collected everything, just as the Sun had said. Then he set off.

He paddled west for many days, to where the sea is covered with floating charcoal, then to the place where the sea is covered with foam. Days after that, he saw smoke in all the colors of the rainbow rising to the clouds, and beneath the smoke a line of houses.

The chief of that town was called Chinook Salmon. When Xhais arrived, Chinook Salmon called four of his villagers, two men and two women.

"Swim to the trap," he said, and the four of them stepped into the creek, turning to salmon as soon as their faces entered the water. Swimming upstream, they were caught in the trap behind the chief's house. Then they were gaffed, cleaned, filleted, and roasted over the fire.

Xhais saw how the guts of the fish were buried when they were cleaned, and how the flesh was set to cook by the fire. He shared in the feast, and he saw how the skin and bones were gathered after the meal, and how they were scattered like the ashes of the dead on the water of the stream. Next morning, the four villagers who had turned into salmon and been eaten reappeared. But Xhais had kept a rib from the fish he had eaten. And one of the four who reappeared that morning had an open wound in his chest. He was moaning in pain.

Xhais went to the stream and lay his salmon bone down on the water. He turned back to the village and found the wounded one had been healed.

"Let me invite you to visit my country," Xhais said. And he gave to the Salmon Chief a leaf from every tree, a root from every plant, a feather from every bird, a bone from every animal that lives in the Squamish country. Every year since then, the salmon have come. Most years, all five groups of them come: the Chinook, the Sockeye, the Coho, the Dog, and finally the Pink. But even in the old days, the Pinks and the Dogs were sometimes mistreated and failed to return.

“Also I need directions,” Xhais said, “to the house of the Sun, where my brothers were taken.”

“Go with the mouse, the louse and the flea,” the salmon said. “They know the way to the house of the Sun, and they know what to do when they arrive there.”

Xhais set off with these three for companions, over the mountains of white cloud and the ocean of air. They arrived at the Sun’s house that evening.

“The Sun will see you and hear you and smell you, “ said the mouse. “You should wait out here.”

The mouse and the louse and the flea went under the door as soon as the Sun lay down for the night, and they kept him awake until morning. At dawn, when they let him alone, he fell into a deep sleep, and the house shook with his snoring. Then they opened the door to Xhais, who gathered his dead brothers’ bones.

He returned to this country and covered his brothers’ bones with a quilt of feathers and leaves. And after the sun had passed through the sky four times, and the elder brother had danced on the beach for four days, the quilt stirred and his younger brothers revived.

They continued up the Sound, changing one thing and another. It was long ago when they were last seen, rearranging the mountains and snowfields near the upper reaches of the Squamish River.

There was a chapter in the story, once, for every animal important in the Squamish world, and for every cove and bay and cliff on every island and both shores of the Sound. The people who fished and travelled and lived in this fjord relived as they did so an epic of creation and an ethic of ecology day by day, instead of reviewing Lord Howe’s and Admiral Bowen’s claims to military glory. No one ever told the story all at once, and maybe no one knew it at all, but as each storyteller’s knowledge of the world he lived in deepened, his story deepened too.

Some of the story - crucial as the missing salmon bone - is lost now, though its niche in the ecology is real. In time - when the canned meat and the TV dinners run out - replacement stories will evolve, if there is still a living watershed here for stories to evolve in. I know a few new ones even now, about another transformer called White Man, who split not into four but into millions of little white men, all of them busy rearranging the world. In one version I’ve heard, they kept rearranging the world more and more thoroughly, faster and faster, until there was simply no world left, only metal and plastic and petrochemicals and sand. In another, they changed it around until nothing organic

quite worked anymore, only machines. And when that had happened, they soon got bored and wandered off.

Then the world sat there, homogenized, stunned, until one day a black bear wandered down from the Coast Mountains and tried to start a few conversations with rusting automobiles and empty junkfood machines. He found they had nothing to say and weren't good to eat either, so he decided to rearrange and rename things. He changed himself into three human brothers and one canoe, they say, and started up the Sound.

For those of us whose tongues come from Western Europe - even if the rest of our bodies were born in North America - the old name for the island is more difficult to spell than Bowen Island, and more difficult to say. It won't make the real estate move more briskly or increase the tourist-flow. It isn't enough, by itself, even to make us think very much about the people who used to live here and the way they used to live. But I prefer it. It reminds me of something I know I need to know.

