



Review:

Rena Point Bolton and Richard Daly, *Xwelíqwiya: The Life of a Stó:lō Matriarch* (Edmonton: AU Press, Athabasca University, 2013). ISBN: 978-1-927356-56-2.

reviewed by LINNÉA ROWLATT, PhD

This volume, at once a personal memoir, a history of the Stó:lō people (also known as the Xwélmexw people and, in ethnographic literature, as the Fraser River Indians or Lower Fraser Salish), and an ethnography written by a member of the community, amply demonstrates the power of determined cooperation across cultures. To create the autobiography, Xwelíqwiya (Point Bolton) sat regularly with Daly for twenty-five years and shared the stories of her life in a series of conversations. Trained as an anthropologist, Daly transcribed and ordered the stories into the present publication while also involving himself in the Stó:lō community within which Xwelíqwiya lives and to whom she has dedicated her life's work.

Born shortly before the Depression, a period when the potlatch and other communal Stó:lō gatherings were banned, Xwelíqwiya and her brother were raised by their maternal grandparents to take on responsibility for *chu'chelángen* (pl; 'esoteric family knowledge, as well as the inherited right and duty to protect that knowledge and bestow it on coming generations', 243). Living alongside the river, Xwelíqwiya grew up as a high-born Stó:lō woman of the Wolf Clan, learning her language, ceremonies, medicines, and stories along with traditional arts and crafts. When the ban was repealed in 1952, she had the necessary knowledge and skills to contribute to a Stó:lō cultural revival and, even while her children were small, was invited to become president of the Indian Arts and Crafts Society of British Columbia (IACSBC), part of a provincially-organized network of Indigenous women's clubs known as the Indian Homemakers' Association (IHA). Among other things, these organizations were instrumental in improving conditions for Indigenous people in BC, on- and off-reserve; for calling together the Chiefs of one hundred and forty First Nations across BC, which led to the founding of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs; and for creating the Aboriginal Mother Centre Society (AMCS)



in Vancouver's East Side, a drop-in centre where Aboriginal women can still gather and receive support including counselling, advocacy, childcare, education, training, and social support.

Not surprisingly for a community with a strong matriculture, the threads of communication and understanding woven among Indigenous women by Xwelíqwiya and her colleagues spread further than anticipated. These threads, including *Indian Voice*, IHA's monthly newsletter, led to a province-wide realization that common hurdles had been imposed on Indigenous communities by the colonial state, including poverty, exclusion, and the cultural genocide enacted by residential schools and other institutions. Organizing first provincially and then federally to counteract this oppression, groups inspired by the IHA include the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) and the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Xwelíqwiya understands that reviving Indigenous culture is necessary for effective political resistance to colonialism. Along with providing and maintaining avenues of communication among Indigenous homemakers, she organized the construction of a *híkwl'além*, a longhouse for ceremonies, in Sardis, BC; supported the carving of traditional canoes; and created cedar-bark regalia for performances of Stó:lō song and dance, to name a few initiatives. In 2010, Xwelíqwiya received the British Columbia Lifetime Creative Achievement Award for Aboriginal Art for her work in weaving and basketry (199). She also writes poetry, a few selections of which are included in the autobiography. Consider, for example, this paean of grief from 1986:

A Cry from the Wild

O, cry from the wild, my brothers!
No food, no trees, no free terrain
Run, run from the strangers:
To kill you for sport is their game.

O, cry from the depths, my brothers!
For others have come to pollute your home,
To slay you without prayer or fasting:
Unclean, you die alone.

O, cry from the air, my brothers!
Your wings meant power and sovereignty.
But where is there to fly to?
For radar and death now rule the sky.

O, cry my brown skinned brothers!
Should we lose control of our land
We'll fail to save our brothers

And perish beneath the dying sand.

O, cry for the earth, poor strangers!
For the waste that you have laid,
No longer a land of plenty,
A third world you have made. (161)

Xwelíqwiya's family are bearers of Sxyóyxwey, sacred masks and costumes of the Stó:lō people; this type of mask and clothing is also known as Sxwaixwai among Vancouver Island's Indigenous community. The right to bear Sxyóyxwey descends through one's mother's lineage, another marker of a strong matriculture. Xwelíqwiya's accounts of receiving her family's Sxyóyxwey, their origins and how they are displayed, along with her lineage and family history, not only communicates the story of one family's heritage but situates it within a vibrant matrilineal culture where the Sxyóyxwey inspire cultural training, moral teachings, intense competition, and far-reaching negotiations between families (116).

Xwelíqwiya's lifelong commitment to bearing *chu'chelángen* is not only found in the cultural revival she and her colleagues led, it is evident in the existence of the autobiography itself: Xwelíqwiya writes explicitly that producing the book is part of leaving a legacy for her descendants, so that they can carry on the work (115). While the book makes clear that certain kinds of knowledge are still being held within the family, Xwelíqwiya's generosity in sharing her culture in a publicly available volume is both a personal legacy for her family and a testament to the continuing existence of a people colonial society attempted to erase.

Richard Daly recognizes the tension between these aspects of the autobiography in his Introduction, where he offers some conceptual road maps to both Xwélmexw and mainstream readers (xlvi – l). His maps support cross-cultural understanding by openly articulating many of the goals and expectations of Xwelíqwiya and her two audiences and providing the context in which they make sense. Daly's role in Xwelíqwiya's autobiography is understood by Xwelíqwiya and her family as that of a 'speaker' – a traditional Stó:lō office where the appointed person listens carefully, learns to understand and appreciate the views and perspectives of the narrator, and then presents their carefully-considered words to a wider audience. His success in crafting twenty-five years of conversation into a coherent and interesting book is witnessed by the presentation of a talking stick to Dr. Daly by Steven Point, Xwelíqwiya's son, the 28th Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, and, currently, Chancellor of the University of British Columbia.

The inclusion of this review in *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* acknowledges that, for years, matricultural societies on the Pacific Coast have been breaking a state-imposed silence and re-establishing the vitality of their cultures. The journal is dedicated to perceiving what already exists when looking without a patriarchal colonial gaze. An autobiography such as this one informs readers about the inherent strength in matriculture and demonstrates how a society which centralizes

women, such as the Stó:lō, may be organized. Xwelíqwiya's life is an inspiration and a reminder of the difference one person can make.

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References

Aboriginal Mother Centre Society, 'About', <https://www.aboriginalmothercentre.ca/about>, accessed 21 March 2022.

Point Bolton, Rena, and Richard Daly, *Xwelíqwiya: The Life of a Stó:lō Matriarch* (Edmonton: AU Press, Athabasca University, 2013).