

Etched in Stone

by Graham Brazier

While the mythical thunderbird and the mischievous raven play prominent roles in the art and mythology of many Indigenous cultures on British Columbia's coast, there is evidence that, for the Pentlatch people of Denman Island, the owl was more greatly revered.

An archaeological investigation on Chrome Island (known in the language of the Pentlatch as "ch'namin") in 2000 directed by James C. Haggarty and Laurie Williamson reported in *"The Midden"* magazine in 2001 offers the earliest evidence of this phenomena. Guided by lighthouse keeper, Chas Thompson, researchers Haggarty and Williamson uncovered a petroglyph that had escaped the attention of numerous previous prominent archaeological investigators. The image, etched in stone, is that of an owl. It is an image that doesn't appear in any prior publications on the petroglyphs or rock carvings of British Columbia. Dating the image is apparently more challenging than one might think, but without doubt, it is a product of the Pentlatch people and predates the arrival of the non-Indigenous population of Denman Island in the 1870s. While the owl is not the only bird depicted by the petroglyphs, it stands out as the only one that is not simply a 'generic bird' and as there are no thunderbirds or ravens amongst them it is testimony to the significance accorded to the owl by the Pentlatch people.



The prominence of the owl in Pentlatch culture was subsequently noted by Robert Brown when he and his crew of ten or so members of the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition camped at Village Point (now "Denman Point") on Denman Island in August of 1864. It was there that Brown appeared quite enraptured by the "deserted village" that "still retained traces of its former grandeur" and where he noted that, amongst the carvings and "massive hewn cedar frames". the figure of the owl occurred frequently. He then went on to describe the owl as "a bird of superstition" and suggested that the "Indians....will crowd closer round their camp fire as they hear the solemn hoot in the gloomy pine forest & wonder if they have offended the dead by talking about any one in the land of the spirits." While I'd be skeptical about taking Brown's conjecture literally, the visual images he describes are certainly convincing evidence of the significant role played by the owl in the culture of the Pentlatch. Exactly what that role was, we may never know.

Could it be that this link was known to surveyor Gordon Wagner? For I believe that it was he who named the roads in the subdivision he laid out in the mid 1980s; "Beaver Drive", "Keith Wagner Way" (for his son who died of cancer in 1985) and "Owl Crescent".

^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^^

Further reading: Hayman, John (ed) "Robert Brown and the Vancouver Island Exploring Expedition" UBC Press, Vancouver, 1989.

