

## EDITORIAL: *The Archaeologist's Report*

In the last issue of *The Midden*, we featured three short pieces reflecting on recent media coverage of archaeology in the province. At issue was the depiction of archaeological work at the Willow's Beach site in Oak Bay, and comments made in an online news forum, where the concern was the *cost* of archaeology, not the *value* of heritage sites.

Around the same time, as I stood in line at the Rhizome Café at Broadway and Main in Vancouver waiting for a table, I flipped through the most recent issue of *The Carnegie*, a volunteer-run newsletter that often deals with controversial topics and social justice issues. I was struck therein to encounter this cartoon (Fig. 1). Entitled "The Archaeologist's Report," it has much to say.

The cartoon features an archaeologist in suit and tie, complete with an Indiana Jones hat, who takes notes on a clipboard while speaking to an Aboriginal person holding a drum. The archaeologist's statement—"Well, that's it ... no native burial sites around here."—is received with an expression of shock by the Aboriginal man as he stares at the mountains in the background. Therein, an Aboriginal family clothed in traditional garb looks down upon the scene.

What is the artist saying in this cartoon? It is, I suggest, fundamentally about power: the archaeologist holds the clipboard, takes the notes, wears the "costume" of a professional, the embodiment of an expert with the authority to judge. The cartoon is also about perspective and location: the archaeologist seems oblivious to his surroundings or unable to comprehend them, able only to focus on physical, tangible, empirical things—archaeological data—which he finds lacking. This cartoon is about humanity: the archaeologist is seemingly impervious to the feelings of the Aboriginal man, for whom the final judgement of "no sites" is clearly devastating. Instead, his focus is on the clipboard, the checklist. And the cartoon is about responsibility, as the ancestors look down at their descendant as if asking, "Why is this happening?"

This artwork evoked many emotions in me and prompted much reflection. At its core, I believe, is the issue of *evidence*.

While studying at university, I have often been taught that archaeology is "the scientific study of the material remains of past peoples." I have also had many discussions and arguments with friends and teachers about this definition of archaeology, and while I have successfully convinced some that archaeology is neither a science nor is it necessarily restricted to the study of *past* peoples, I have had a much more difficult time challenging the primacy given to "material culture." In fact, it seems to be the one thing that still holds archaeology together as a practice and way of viewing the world—a focus on material culture as the physical, tangible, empirical *stuff* that people make, use and eventually throw away.

Yet this focus on tangible things inherently limits our understanding of artifacts, features and sites collectively as *heritage*. By this, I do not mean the heritage of an abstracted concept of "humanity" on whose behalf archaeologists are self-appointed stewards, but the heritage of specific groups who should by all rights be in control of their own culture—past, present and future. An "archaeological" approach disconnects people from places, removes meaning from material, erases emotion from evidence—it "scientizes" heritage, makes it impersonal, apolitical and inanimate, *an object to be studied*.

Like the court system, archaeology is founded in Enlightenment empiricism, wherein the only *real* world is the material one, and the only *true* way to know it is through science. The result in archaeology has been that Aboriginal peoples have been alienated from their heritage and forced to "prove" their cultural connection to places, objects and even ancestral remains. In court, this has meant that, rather than colonial forces demonstrating the legitimacy of *their* claim to the land today called Canada, the onus is instead on First Nations to prove they were here, by proving their villages, camps and sacred sites existed, and then proving that these places are *significant*. In short, *tangible* proof of culture is required, yet the stories, meanings and histories that comprise a culture are fundamentally *intangible*.

This catch-22 means that it is nearly impossible to protect sacred sites where

there is no physical evidence found. Yet, as Hutchings notes in this issue (pages 4-5), it is nearly impossible to protect heritage sites in this province anyway, as the project of growth, development and progress appears insatiable. For me, this cartoon shows that Aboriginal history is embedded in the landscape everywhere around us; however, provincial legislation does not protect cultural landscapes and so, instead, archaeologists must still draw dots on maps, labelling some places "significant" and, by extension, others insignificant.

After finding this cartoon, I wrote to *The Carnegie* editor, Paul Taylor, who informed me that the piece was drawn by an artist known locally as Tora, and had originally featured in an issue of the newsletter over 20 years ago. I was both shocked, and completely unsurprised. While, arguably, some practices and perspectives within archaeology have changed since this cartoon was first published—indeed, a major project run out of Simon Fraser University is focused on intangible values in archaeology (<http://www.sfu.ca/ipinch/>)—the issues and challenges obviously remain very much the same.

Accompanying Tora's piece was this quote by anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Towards this, I encourage archaeologists to use their power—in the field, in the classroom, in their reports, and in court—to change the culture of heritage stewardship, give priority to intangible cultural meanings, push to have heritage landscapes formally recognized. Be vocal, be allies and support the work of organizations like the Joint Working Group on First Nations Heritage Conservation (featured here on pages 11-14), who are fighting to revise the *Heritage Conservation Act* and improve the practice of archaeology in B.C. There is more at stake than simply material culture, for heritage *is* culture—history, memory, meaning, and identity—and is embedded in the very landscape itself. Thank you, Tora, for this reminder.

**Marina La Salle**  
Editor, *The Midden*

THE ARCHEOLOGIST'S REPORT:



Figure 1. "The Archaeologist's Report." This cartoon featured in the March 1, 2011 edition of *The Carnegie Newsletter*. The artist's *nom de plume* is Tora, who is well-known locally in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver for his art, poetry and articles. He originally created this cartoon over 20 years ago. *The Carnegie* has been publishing on average 23 issues per year since 1986. It is free and produced by volunteers, with a standard print of 1200 per edition. Issues may also be accessed online: <http://carnegie.vcn.bc.ca/about>. Reprinted with Permission of Paul Taylor, volunteer editor of *The Carnegie* for over 24 years.