

“In Vain I tried to Tell You”

Bruce Miller Explains How Past Ethnographers Failed to Understand First Nations’ Concern for Their Heritage

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Walking through the Vancouver Museum for the first time I was amazed by their display of 1950’s relics. Though interesting, it was for an even greater look into the past that we had all assembled on Thursday, September 20th for Bruce Miller’s presentation to the Archaeology Society of British Columbia. Originally titled “What do we know about Sacred Sites in the Coast Salish World?” Dr. Miller discussed the issue of identifying and protecting sacred sites specifically in the Coast Salish world, using examples and themes from his recently published book, *Be of Good Mind: Essays on the Coast Salish* (UBC Press, 2007).

Upon arriving I noticed immediately that the title of the presentation had been changed to “In Vain I tried to tell you”. In the first few moments I understood why Dr. Miller chose to rename the presentation. Through examining the works of our archaeological and anthropological predecessors he perceived a distinct lack of understanding in regards to the connection between the First Nations community and the land. It was Dr. Miller’s goal to express the idea of living history, the idea that the land in which First Nations people live is incredibly sacred and in constant use, and as such is a constant reaffirmation of their faith. Using examples, such as the failure of the courts to protect the Nookachamps Rock in the 1990s, Dr. Miller demonstrated how people “just don’t get it.” That court loss put into perspective the level of the general population’s apathy. This, in part, is due to the fact that identifying a sacred site is incredibly difficult if one does not understand the mythology, the peoples and their relation to the landscape.

When Miller compared the Nookachamps site to the “holy grail” in one anecdote, I felt I truly understood what he was trying to express. Sacred sites are more than just a tangible site. They are also a concept, an ideal that is a very important

aspect of First Nations spirituality. It is through the work of anthropologists such as Dr. Miller that we, as outsiders, are able to have a better understanding of the First Nations view of the landscape, mythology and their way of expressing themselves spiritually.

The connection between anthropology and archaeology is an incredibly important one and we see this displayed in Dr. Miller’s discourse. Through the work of early and contemporary ethnographers and anthropologists in open communication with the direct descendants of the people whom we archaeologists are trying to understand, we are able to see the bigger picture, the way of life. Seeing these connections, especially for a young archaeologist, makes me feel better prepared to approach work in First Nations communities; I feel I am better prepared to listen and ask the right questions to understand what the community needs and wants from our research.

This presentation was a delightful and educational experience and I am thankful to both Dr. Bruce Miller and the ASBC for allowing me the opportunity to attend and write about the experiences and stories shared.

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