



Ancient Cities of the Dead Revisited

Early Burial Cairn Investigations in Victoria

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Prior to European contact, the Straits Salish people, an ethnolinguistic group centred on present day Victoria in southwestern British Columbia, built a distinctive form of grave. The burial cairn and mound was at one time an ubiquitous feature of the landscape around Victoria. These precontact burials, essentially consisting of rock and soil structures built on the ground surface over a single body, were often prominently placed along the coastline of southwestern Vancouver Island. As they were situated on ridges overlooking Cadboro Bay and crowning the top and sides of Beacon Hill and other local landmarks (Figure 2), these burials were well-known to the early residents of Fort Victoria and the subsequent arrivals from abroad.

Although recent field research has been conducted on burial cairns and mounds in the Fraser Valley on the mainland of British Columbia (for example Lepofsky et al. 2000), and in a general theoretical sense in the larger Strait of Georgia region (Thom 1995), the burial cairns and mounds of Victoria have received very little direct archaeological attention in the twentieth century.

Above (Figure 1): Unaccredited 1896 photograph of Cadboro Bay burial cairns [credit RBCM 42786]

This article is a brief history of burial cairn investigation in Victoria during the later half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a short-lived period in which a flurry of both local and international attention was focussed on these features. The aim of this article is to provide an historical context for early research into the burial cairns of Victoria, which coincided with archaeology evolving from undisciplined antiquarianism to a more rigorous scientific undertaking. The Northwest Coast, including Victoria, was witness to and, in many ways, was one of the proving grounds for modern anthropology and the setting for groundbreaking research by early luminaries in the field. Rather than being a synthesis of the results of the work of these early researchers; their descriptive work stands on its own, this is the story of the early days of burial cairn research in Victoria as an allegory of colonial attitudes towards the indigenous peoples of North America.

The burial cairns of Victoria attracted the attention of Victoria's earliest Euro-Canadian settlers, many arriving from England to work on the newly founded Hudson's Bay Company farms. In 1853, the gold rush attracted large numbers of people from the United States, many travelling north to Victoria from the gold fields of California. The burial cairns on the outlying farms and countryside around the burgeoning city of Victoria, such as those at Cadboro Bay (Figure 1), uncannily resembled similar cairns and mounds that were built across much of Europe and the southeastern United States, a familiarity not lost on these early arrivals. The period of intensive immigration to Victoria in the mid- to late-nineteenth century coincided with the final years of antiquarianism (an avocation that typically involved wealthy gentlemen puzzling over earthworks, burial mounds, and other ancient monuments) and the emergence of archaeology as a scholarly discipline. Large-scale excavations of cairns and mounds had been underway for almost a hundred years in the southeastern United States and even longer in northern Europe. Needless to say, the numerous burial cairns around Victoria attracted not only local interest, but soon thereafter, the attention of international scholars and research expeditions as well.

Based on the observations of early researchers, the phenomenon of southwestern BC burial cairns seems centred in Victoria. Burial cairns and mounds were also located elsewhere in the Strait of Georgia area, such as in the Fraser River Valley and northwards along Vancouver Island in Nanaimo, Comox and other localities. It was in Victoria, however, that cairns seemed to be concentrated in the greatest numbers and varieties, with such burials reported to be in the thousands, arranged in sites varying from a few cairns to large cemeteries of several hundred burials:

In the vicinity of Victoria the custom of constructing cairns seems to have had its highest development. The type of structure appears to have undergone modifications with increasing distance from this point... The most elaborate cairns, and the greatest variety, are found near Victoria (Smith and Fowke 1901:58-59).

One of the earliest references to the cairns of Victoria is in an 1862 essay on the suitability of Vancouver Island as a colony, in which Dr. Charles Forbes, a surgeon serving with the Royal Navy aboard HMS *Topaze*, wrote that:

The general feature of the landscape is very similar to many parts of Devonshire, more especially to that on the eastern escarpment of Dartmoor, and the resemblance is rendered the more striking by the numerous stone circles, which lie scattered round... these stone circles are found, crowning the rounded promontories over all of the South eastern end of the island" (Forbes 1862:3).

Speaking about these burials around Victoria, the visiting French naturalist Alphonse Pinart stated that "the name of cairns ... is used on account of the striking resemblance between this Indian cairn mound and the celebrated cairns of Scotland, Wales, &c" (Pinart 1876).

Beginning in the early 1870s, documented accounts of cairn and mound investigation begin to surface with increasing frequency. Although laws protected recent aboriginal cemeteries and graves, the laws were largely ignored in the case of ancient burials (Keddie 1997). By 1871, James Deans, who had arrived in Victoria in 1853 aboard the barque *Norman Morrison*, had become Victoria's first antiquarian of note, as well as a prominent member of the Natural History Society. It was in that year that Deans assisted the geologists James Richardson and Alfred Selwyn in the recording of cairns and mounds around Victoria. The geologists were conducting preliminary explorations of British Columbia for the Geological Survey of Canada. While in Victoria, they recorded nine mounds and eighty-five cairns at a site in the vicinity of Victoria and the approximate location of eight cairns on Beacon Hill (Richardson 1871).

That same year, Deans excavated five burial features at Cadboro Bay (Figure 2)., Located on the hillside on the south side of the bay, Deans described the site as numbering between two hundred and three hundred cairns. He noticed two types of features, those towards Uplands Farm that were composed primarily of earth and stones, whereas the burials somewhat farther north towards Cadboro Bay and at a lower elevation were built almost entirely of stone.

Deans, formally untrained and somewhat fanciful, provided information to historians and visiting archaeologists based largely on his own excavation of numerous burial cairns around Victoria. A regular contributor to the *Daily British Colonist*, Deans wrote a series of newspaper articles on the antiquities of southern Vancouver Island and, between late 1871 and early 1872, on the cairns of Victoria specifically. This included an article in the *Daily British Colonist and Victoria Chronicle* on his excavations at Cadboro Bay, entitled "The Cadboro Bay Cairns. An Ancient City of the Dead!" These articles, and the editorials that followed, illustrate the intense local interest in these features. It was at this time that Deans also began earnestly collaborating with researchers outside of Victoria, including the American historian, antiquarian, and publisher Hubert Bancroft. Based solely on Deans' observations, Bancroft wrote a detailed account of the burial cairns and mounds of Victoria in his seminal work, *Native Races of the Pacific States, Volume IV, Antiquities*, first published in 1875. Widely distributed and read, Bancroft's work was acknowledged as the outstanding voice in historical research of the western Americas (Caughey 1946). Bancroft undoubtedly brought the spotlight to bear on the antiquities of coastal British Columbia, with the beam focussed brightly on the burial cairns

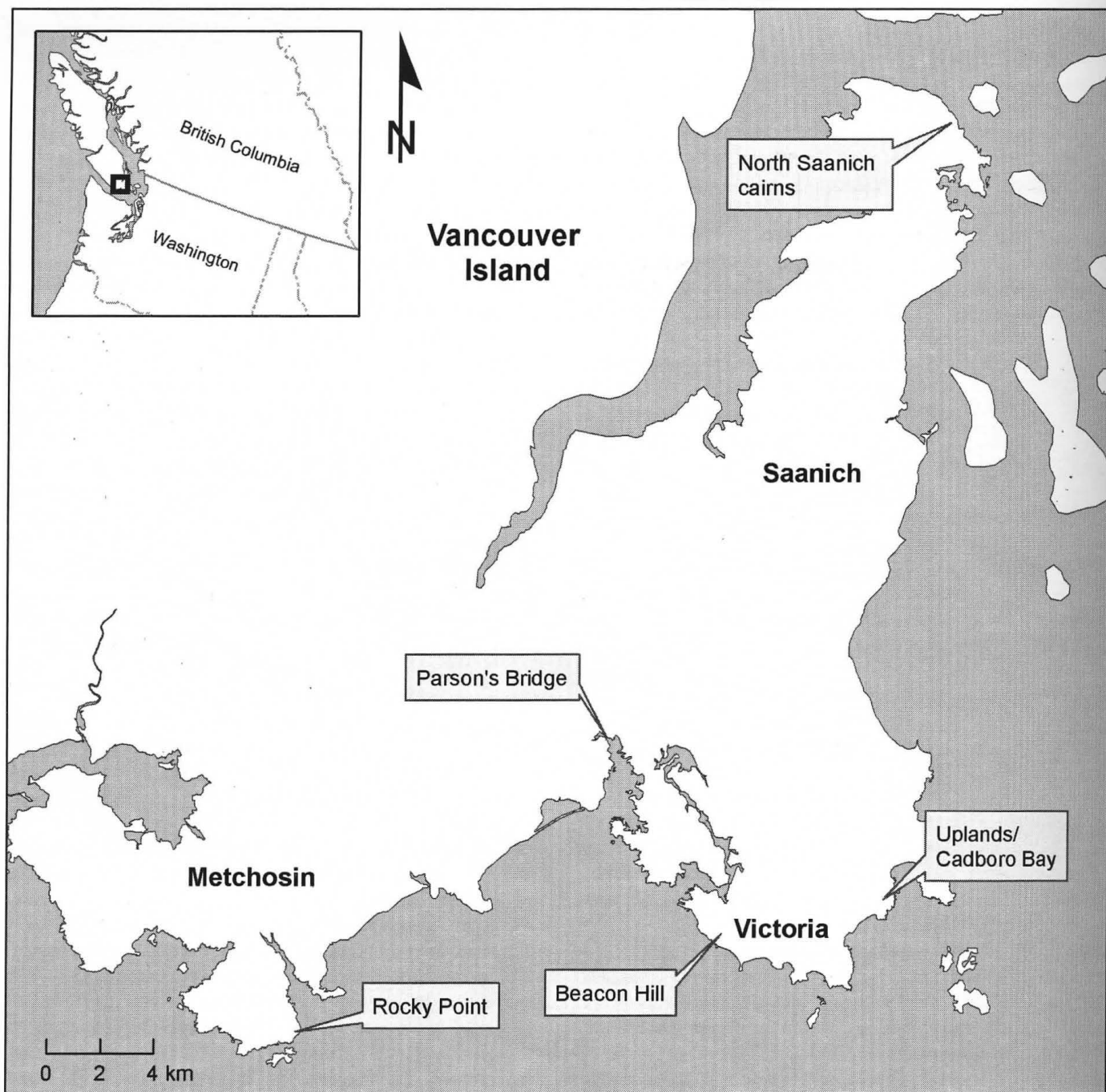


Figure 2: Burial cairn and mound sites in the vicinity of Victoria, as discussed in text.

and mounds of Victoria.

In addition to his own explorations, Deans assisted visiting researchers, such as Alphonse Pinart, in excavating cairns around Victoria. In a September 1, 1876 article in the *Daily British Colonist*, Pinart noted that "it is a very interesting fact to find on this coast remains so similar to what we are used to see in the old Celtic countries" (Pinart 1876). Based on his excavations of an undisclosed number of cairns, however, Pinart concluded that "I have not the slightest doubt that the cairnbuilders whose bones have been lying in the ground for six, seven, or more centuries, were the ancestors of the present race of Indians" (Pinart 1876). This view was at odds with popular thought in Victoria at the

time, such as that widely espoused by Deans, that the cairns were built by an extinct race that predated the Straits Salish people.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European antiquarians were preoccupied largely with burial mounds and other Neolithic monumental features. At the same time, in the United States, beginning with Thomas Jefferson's excavation of a burial mound on his property at Monticello, Virginia in 1784, the emerging discipline of archaeology was born in the southeastern states where excavations at Moundville and other sites set the stage for future research in North America. The comparison of cairns and mounds in Victoria to those in Europe and the southeastern United States—and most likely the expectations of what



Figure 3: 1907 photograph of members of the Natural History Society of Victoria removing a boulder from a burial cairn at Cadboro Bay [credit RBCM PN 5963-B].

lay inside—were ideas that travelled along with immigrants arriving in Victoria from those places. This is illustrated in a December 15, 1871 editorial in the *Daily British Colonist*, in response to the ongoing contributions of Deans that month: “The early inhabitants of the British Isles disposed of their dead in the same way. In the eastern States there are numerous mounds, some of which have been opened and evidences of a primitive race found.”

After the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, many, although certainly not all, American archaeologists accepted Darwinism as a means for understanding human progress (Trigger 1989). The basis of this thinking was founded in the idea that evolutionary progress was inherent in humans, with Euro-American society naturally at the forefront of human advancement. It was widely believed that Indians were brutal by nature and biologically incapable of significant cultural advancement—a notion that became a key concept of antiquarianism. Social Darwinism provided a convenient explanation for the perceived biological inferiority that had been ascribed to American Indians at that time, reinforcing a belief that the native cultures of the New World were inherently primitive and had remained virtually unchanged prior to the arrival of Europeans or at one time had achieved a higher state of evolution and have since been in a steady state of decline (Trigger 1989). This thinking provided a justification in the minds of many Euro-Americans for the subjugation of North American Aboriginal peoples.

This belief in the biological and cultural inferiority of North American indigenous peoples in the mid- to late-nineteenth cen-

tury is well-illustrated by the “moundbuilder myth” in which the complex and monumental earthworks and mounds in the American southeast were attributed to a race of Moundbuilders, non-North American Indian peoples, who were imagined to have been destroyed or displaced by the people now occupying those lands. This is reflected in the local ideas about the builders of the cairns and mounds in Victoria:

Many ancient mounds and tumuli, resembling those in this vicinity, also exist in a very marked degree in the States of Ohio and Kentucky. Many eminent geologists have been at work on them of late years and from these discoveries and glimpses of antiquity, something like the following deductions may be drawn: At the time of the discovery of America, her age of civilization over. Through force of circumstances one great nation had disappeared and another ruder race, which had perhaps fallen from a higher state into the barbarism in which Columbus found them, took its place. An unmistakable family relationship shows itself in all these ancient sepulchral mounds. [Editorial, *Daily British Colonist and Victoria Chronicle*, December 29, 1871]

There are several telling references to Darwinism and the physical and cultural superiority of a race of “moundbuilders” in Victoria, the perceived inferiority of their replacements, the Straits Salish peoples, and the right of the superior Euro-Canadians to replace them. This editorial from the *Daily British Colonist* on December 15, 1871, most likely based on an interview with James

Deans, provides an example: "They [cairns] have long been supposed to be the work of a race of men who passed away to make room for the red man, who in his turn is being 'improved off the face of the earth' to afford the white man room to increase and multiply." In the same article, the author goes on to describe a human mandible unearthed in a mound at Cadboro Bay by Deans as having the teeth of a "vegetable-eating man-being wide and flat on top" and that "Perhaps the Darwinian theory is about to receive new and startling confirmation from these researches." It would be another twenty-three years before Cyrus Thomas of the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnology would dismantle the "mound-builder" hypothesis in 1894, using new archaeological methods to demonstrate cultural continuity, such as stratigraphy.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, anthropology was about to undergo an evolution of its own, which in no small way involved the burial cairns of Victoria. The German-American anthropologist Franz Boas, often referred to as "the Father of American Anthropology" diverged from his nineteenth century predecessors by developing the theoretical framework of Cultural Relativism that argued against an evolutionary scale for human societies leading from Savagery through to Culture. He believed that culture is too complex to be evaluated according to broad evolutionary "laws." Further, his insistence on rigorous methodology served to establish the scientific value of his contributions and those of his protégés.

Boas was no stranger to the burial cairns of Victoria, having investigated some near Parson's Bridge and North Saanich during an 1888 visit to Vancouver Island (Figure 2). Boas conducted these trips on behalf of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), which was chaired by E.B. Tylor, then the United Kingdom's leading anthropologist. Somewhat ironically, it was in Tylor's most important work, *Primitive Culture* (1871), influenced by Darwin's theory of biological evolution, that Tylor developed the theory of an evolutionary, progressive relationship between primitive and modern cultures. The actual direction of Boas' BAAS funded work, however, was from a panel of three Canadians, including the geologist George Dawson. After conducting a five year reconnaissance of the geology of British Columbia, Dawson was familiar with the cultures and antiquities of British Columbia. Having spent the winter of 1875-76 in Victoria, Dawson was well aware of the burial cairns and mounds of that city, noting in his diary on April 6, 1876, that he noticed the "Indian burial Mound and Cairns very frequently" (in Cole and Locknell 1989:171).

Boas visited British Columbia on three trips during the summer months of 1886, 1888 and 1889, using Victoria as not only a staging area for field expeditions elsewhere throughout the province but also as a source of archaeological and ethnological information. These early visits instilled in Boas a sense of urgency in studying people who he feared were losing their language and customs to missionaries and physical attributes to intermarriage with whites. Boas also feared, correctly, that "settlement was destroying cairn and burial sites" (in Cole 1999:113). It was during the 1888 trip that Boas, under pressure from his BAAS backers, for the first time seriously collected physical remains. To collect his physical data, Boas dug at several sites in Victoria and Saanich, including the burial cairns at Parson's Bridge and North Saanich. Boas reported that this business was "repugnant work" but that

"someone had to do it," collecting a dozen burials himself and returning to New York with a total of eighty-five skulls and fourteen complete skeletons (Cole 1999:112).

Subsequent to his early fieldwork in British Columbia, Boas became a curator at the American Museum of Natural History, from 1895 to 1905, at a time when that institution was beginning to be a major player in American anthropology (Cole 1999). During his early trips to British Columbia, Boas concluded that "the customs which we observe today are evidently the modern development of ancient forms" (in White 1963:36). Boas hypothesized that investigating the history of past and present peoples in a well-defined area and the ways in which cultures change and influence each other would be a vehicle for addressing the larger theoretical concepts of the origin and development of culture. What was needed was a culture area that had a well-defined archaeological and ethnological record. The north Pacific Coast, which to the superficial observer seemed culturally uniform, was actually composed of a multitude of local and regional differences that Boas thought would be one of the best lines of evidence to follow in understanding culture change. Shortly after starting at the American Museum of Natural History, Boas proposed, organized and led the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902), a systematic ethnological and archaeological investigation on both sides of the north Pacific. The immediate objective of the Jesup Expedition was to collect archaeological information, cultural objects, stories, biological measurements, observations of daily life, sounds and photographic images: the end goal being a reconstruction of the culture history of the north Pacific Coast (White 1963).

The Jesup Expedition resulted in the most comprehensive examination of cairns and mounds in Victoria, and indeed in British Columbia and western Washington, before the turn of the twentieth century. Over three consecutive field seasons, Harlan Smith worked under the guidance of Boas as the principal North American archaeologist for the Jesup Expedition. Smith, a native of Saginaw, Michigan, began his field archaeological career with the American Museum of Natural History. In 1891, Smith first excavated at the Madisonville site in Ohio (Cole 1999) and in 1895, at the Fox Farm site in Kentucky (Thom 2001); both were large agricultural village and burial sites. Smith first met Boas at the Chicago Fair in 1893 (Boas was then with the Chicago Field Museum) and later befriended the professor in New York, where Boas chose him as the Jesup Expedition archaeologist in 1896.

Smith conducted almost all of the Jesup Expedition fieldwork on the burial cairns of Victoria, with the exception of explorations made by Gerard Fowke in 1898. Fowke was an "itinerant, largely self-educated adventurer who was attracted to archeology and geology ... because in that way he could indulge his love for outdoor life and taste for exotic customs" (Freed, et al. 1988:12). Born in Kentucky in 1855, Fowke worked as a grammar school teacher until the age of thirty when he undertook energetic archaeological research in the eastern United States, with only a minimal amount of university credit at Ohio State University. Throughout the three field seasons of the Jesup expedition, six mounds and eighty-eight cairns were investigated (Smith and Fowke 1901). Smith and Fowke's cairn explorations focussed on two areas of Victoria: Cadboro Bay in 1897 and

several sites at the north end of the Saanich Peninsula in 1898 and 1899 (Figure 2).

Smith first investigated cairns in British Columbia in October of 1897. He and his assistants examined some of the burial cairns at Cadboro Bay where, in seven days, they excavated twenty-one cairns. Smith was disappointed that only a "handful of bone dust" was recovered (Thom 2001). Smith's explorations at Cadboro Bay were assisted by the venerable James Deans, as well as Oregon Columbus (O.C.) Hastings. Like Deans, Hastings was an early member of the Natural History Society. Hastings, who had worked with Franz Boas in Fort Rupert in 1894 (Cole 1999), was born and raised in Pontoosuc, in the Illinois River Valley. This was the location of many mounds and other monumental earthworks including the nearby Cahokia site. In the same way that Deans' interest in the cairns of Victoria was shaped by the similar graves of his native Scotland, Hastings' curiosity was likely shaped by his boyhood in Illinois. Hastings, Deans and other members of the Natural History Society, such as Dr. Charles Newcombe (who was also a field collector for the Chicago Field Museum), examined and excavated an undocumented number of cairns around Victoria both on their own and in conjunction with outside researchers throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s (Figure 3).

The 1897 field season played out against a backdrop of institutional rivalry, enhanced by personal bitterness, between New York's American Museum of Natural History and Chicago's Field Museum. Unbeknownst to Boas, the Field Museum had planned an expedition of its own to the Northwest Coast for 1897. Three months before Smith began excavating cairns at Cadboro Bay, George Dorsey of the Chicago Field Museum, assisted by Deans, had already excavated a few cairns there. Boas was incensed at this transgression by the Field Museum into what Boas considered as his territory and believed that intrusion, without consultation, was reprehensible. Boas also had little regard for Dorsey, who became Curator of Anthropology at the Field Museum two years after Boas was unexpectedly turned down for the same position after the Chicago Exposition (Freed, et al. 1988). This was still a sore point for Boas, and when Dorsey and his "favourite enemies" at the Field Museum proceeded with an expedition of their own to the Northwest Coast the same year as the beginning of the Jesup Expedition, Boas considered this an affront (Cole 1999). To make things worse, Dorsey had tried, unsuccessfully, to recruit members of the Jesup Expedition team—including Harlan Smith (Freed, et al. 1988). Boas was ultimately unconcerned, however, because "little Dorsey won't have achieved much with the help of the old ass Deans" (in Cole 1999:195).

Later in August, two months before Smith arrived in Victoria to excavate cairns at Cadboro Bay, Dorsey was arrested in Oregon for grave robbing. Although he was subsequently released, this was a cause of alarm for Smith, who was himself excavating Indian burials and collecting human remains throughout British Columbia. Smith, while in Port Hammond digging cairns and mounds on the lower Fraser River, was reassured, however, by Superintendent of Indian Affairs A.W. Vowell that the concern in BC at that time was with non-natives who were digging and moving aboriginal graveyards to make way for settlement and

not with Smith's scientific work (Thom 2001).

The next year, in late August of 1898, Smith and his crew worked at several cairn sites in North Saanich (Figure 2), after somewhat disappointing results at Cadboro Bay the previous year. Smith explored some of the Saanich cairns that were reported to him by local residents, leaving Albert Argyle to excavate twelve cairns there (Thom 2001). Argyle, a Victoria local, was the son of Thomas Argyle, a former Royal Engineer and the first lightkeeper at Race Rocks. The Argyle family also had one hundred and fifty acres at Rocky Point (Figure 2), where Smith learned from Argyle that "cairns abound, but he had not found any skeletons in any of them" (Smith 1907). Smith concluded the last year of the Jesup Expedition by returning to North Saanich, without Fowke, in August 1899. Winding down the last season of the Jesup Expedition, Smith and his crew excavated thirty cairns at five different locations in North Saanich (Smith and Fowke 1901; Thom 2001).

Smith was very descriptive in his excavation and publications, and he verified many of the earlier field observations of Deans in terms of cairn construction and contents. Although Smith did not espouse the "moundbuilder" rhetoric of Deans, which had been largely refuted by that point, the theorist Boas was somewhat discouraged that Smith could not "see the connection between his work and the general broad questions of anthropology" (in Cole 1999:192). Smith's work, however, was generally respected and considered well done for its day, providing a substantial body of data that was published in January 1901 as the *Cairns of British Columbia and Washington*, which was part of the Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History series. In the September 28, 1904 edition of the *Daily British Colonist*, reprinted from the Montreal Gazette, a review of Smith's publication won the following praise:

Since Mr. [Hubert] Bancroft gathered the facts, which, at such cost of toil and means of enthusiasm, he had searched out and arranged, into five bulky volumes much new knowledge of great value has enriched the subject that he did so much elucidate. The report on the cairns of British Columbia and Washington, the substance of which is contained in Mr. Harlan Smith's article, is among the most valuable results of the thirty years research in the region indicated.

After the Jesup Expedition, Smith continued to work for the American Museum of Natural History for eight more years. In 1911, Smith moved to Ottawa where he held the position of Dominion Archaeologist for the next twenty years, conducting periodic field research in British Columbia (Thom 2001). After excavating cairns at Cadboro Bay in 1898, Fowke's work in southern Siberia later that season was so disappointing that Boas considered hiring Fowke to have been a mistake that he would not repeat the next season (Freed et al. 1988). Undeterred, Fowke returned to fieldwork in the eastern United States and went on to establish himself as a prominent if somewhat eccentric archaeologist, publishing the *Archaeological History of Ohio: The Mound Builders and later Indians* in 1902. Subsequently, the St. Louis Society of the Archaeological Institute of America financed Fowke to conduct a systematic survey and excavation of prehistoric mounds along the Missouri River and its tributaries, the results of which were published by the Bureau of American Ethnology under the title

Antiquities of Central and Southern Missouri in 1910.

Since the pioneering work of the Jesup Expedition, the Northwest Coast has figured prominently in theories about the development of social complexity. Although Boas envisioned a four-fields approach to understanding culture process, ethnography has since been the dominant medium, with archaeology relegated to the background (Matson 2003). The burial cairns and mounds of Victoria have received little archaeological attention since the beginning of the twentieth century, but they have great interpretive potential for examining culture process in the Strait of Georgia. As such, the work of its early researchers is still most relevant. Although their work is the product of theories and ways of thinking which are different from those of contemporary archaeologists, it is still in many ways the most comprehensive knowledge available on the burial cairns and mounds of Victoria. It is hoped that a further critical review of these early observations will have present-day and future applications in terms of understanding these burial features. In particular, the descriptive work of Harlan Smith allows for modern refinements in the types of questions posed and the methods employed in the study of burial cairns. Whereas early archaeologists would have accounted for complex changes in the archaeological record, such as the advent of burial cairns, by simple diffusion and migration, contemporary research holds promise for highlighting the ingenuity and social and technological complexity of the Straits Salish peoples.

Darcy Mathews is currently working towards his master's degree in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria. He is also a senior archaeologist with Millennia Research. His ongoing research is on the spatial and morphological analysis of the Rocky Point burial cairn cemetery in Metchosin. Located southwest of Victoria, this site has over three hundred cairns and mounds. The early cairn investigations outlined in this article have obvious relevance to Darcy's ongoing research at Rocky Point. In addition to work at Rocky Point, Darcy's current research interests include the use of material culture in mortuary ritual, GIS spatial analysis, landscape archaeology and the role of social memory and identity in the archaeological record.

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