



## Special Collections

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**Christie Harris**

**Biocritical Essay**

**by**

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During her long life, Christie Harris has written hundreds of stories and radio programmes for children in a variety of modes and with a wide range of subjects, but it is for her versions of Pacific Northwest Indian tales that she is most famous and for which she has won many awards such as the Canada Council's Award for Children's Literature (now the Governor General's Award). Inevitably, given the current negative climate of thinking about white appropriation of native culture, for a critic such as myself to be writing about an author such as Harris is to be involved at once in controversy. A radical rethinking over the past twenty years of the relationship between the dominant white Canadian culture and the native First Nations cultures has led to a different understanding of the rights of a culturally appropriated society than was prevalent during the years when Harris was writing her books. It seems likely that, were she to be starting her career as an author today, Christie Harris would not feel comfortable with at least the early material for which she has become famous, so sensitive an issue has cultural appropriation become in Canadian intellectual life. Nevertheless, I hope to point out later in this essay that, even thirty years ago, when she was casting her versions of the tales in *Raven's Cry* and *Once Upon a Totem*, she was very much aware both of the responsibilities that went with her task and of the need to educate herself as best she could about native culture before she ever wrote a word of the retellings. She knew that the great tales, the histories, of those called by her the Lords of the Coast were the possessions of individual families and thus needed to be treated with respect. She knew, too, that her versions of these tales should be regarded as no more than mediations between their native origins and a white audience and never as replacements. True, her earliest writing about native culture which appears for a children's page in *The Vancouver Daily Province* when she was twenty years old, in the late 1920s, was full of stereotyping and condescension, a troubling trend in many children's books of the same era. Her later books, though, for which she is best known, show a much different understanding of the great culture she was writing about.

One needs to keep in mind also that the native tales make up only a minor amount of Harris's output over seventy years of writing. She also wrote a large number of other stories for children, both published and broadcast, radio dramas and talks and juvenile fantasies, a few poems, and whole books historical, fantastical and ficto-biographical, all on a variety of subjects. Too, though this fact may be less well-known, she wrote adult radio dramas and women's

programmes and was the editor during the 1950s of a weekly women's page in a British Columbia newspaper, *The Abbotsford, Sumas and Matsqui News*. It is Christie Harris the dedicated storyteller on all sorts of subjects on whom I want to concentrate at the start.

Her first work was published over seventy years ago when she was twenty years old, and consistently since then Harris has spent her life in the honorable service of storytelling, answering a call that first sounded when she was very young and that has stayed with her all her life. As she tells us in an autobiographical article in *Something About the Author Autobiography Series (SATAAS)*, Volume 10, "Storytellers have always been my kind of people" (104). Whether it was the Shuswap Indians of her childhood's homesteading years or her own Irish immigrant father who came to Canada via the United States, storytellers seem to have made a huge impression on Harris as a child so that it must have seemed the most honorable calling in the world to be able to tell the "tale of the tribe", as Ezra Pound puts it in *Guide to Kulchur* (194).

It must be admitted that, in the twentieth century, the world outside of literature frequently does not honour stories and storytelling in the way that Harris has always done. The word "story", along with "myth" and "legend", is often taken to mean "that which is not true" and thus "that which does not really matter". Luckily, there are children's writers such as Christie Harris to whom the word "story" and the job of being a storyteller represent a bridge not from but to an intense form of reality, built by a very special creating power that is not simply out to entertain anyone (though her stories certainly are entertaining too). It is the "story" that sits at the heart of the word "history" that matters to Harris as a form of authentic experience. Little people caught up in big events attract her as subjects, and though the historical backgrounds she uses throughout her books are often quite large and important, it is the detail of the lives of the small humans drawn against a large canvas that she focuses on to best advantage. The stories within the histories are her central subject matter, though her knowledge of and fascination with historical events themselves is very clear in all of her writing.

Harris's storytelling is mainly, though not exclusively, for young people, not simply to entertain them but also to help them expand their minds and spirits through learning. From its beginning Harris's work has aimed at informing, confirming and affirming her young readers. In her later writing there are also some elements of confrontation and challenge that suggest cultural comment rather than simple entertainment. From her first published stories for children which appeared under the name of Christie Irwin or Christie L. Irwin in *The Vancouver Daily Province* in 1928 when she was twenty years old, through the busy years during which she and her husband, Tom Harris, raised a family of five children in British Columbia, to the more leisurely years when those children were grown up and her husband retired, she has been involved in writing and broadcasting for children and in visiting hundreds of schools and libraries throughout Canada, and attending and speaking at many academic conferences on children's literature.

For over seventy years Christie Harris has been perhaps the matriarch of Canadian children's literature in English. I do not mean to use this term in a gendered sort of way, since mothering can be done by both sexes, just as fathering can. But partly through her themes and plots and partly through the character of the speaking voice, many of Harris's works for children are characterized by a tender and at the same time a tough regard for the welfare of the young. The impulse to nurture, care for, rescue and teach the young without an excess of sentimentality marks her work. At the same time, she manages to convey a very special youthful exuberance through her narrators' voices and, most importantly, an affection for both her audience and the tales she has to tell. For example, in her Mouse Woman stories from the Haida legends, Harris uses a repeated description of the little *narnauk* (supernatural being) after she has just received the gift of woollen ear tassels that she so much covets, given by the young person in trouble who is the object of her aid. Strictly speaking, gifts to the spirits in the Indian legends should pass through purifying fire, but the mouse in Mouse Woman cannot bear to see all that lovely wool vanish in the fire: "...Mouse Woman darted forward and spirited them out of the coals. And her ravelly little fingers began tearing them into a lovely, loose, nesty pile of mountain sheep wool. Then, having received her favourite gift, she properly proceeded to give, in return, her favourite

giving - advice to a young person who had been tricked into trouble" (*Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses*, 46). If I were looking for a covering metaphor to describe what I see in Harris's writing for young people, I couldn't do better than to go to this image of the helper driven over and over by her nature to make a comfortable nest from and in the material world as a way of helping a child in trouble. A benign presence is created through the narrative voice in many of her books, a strong sense of an adult who understands and allows for the follies and the vagaries of the young. The young people in her books are often in trouble, sometimes of their own making but often because of the malice of others, and solutions are not always allowed them. But in the main, in Harris's work, there is usually someone or something whose job it is to help the young in trouble.

Since Harris's own life experiences are the source of much of her writing, reading through her work is in some ways like taking a tour through her life, watching her responses to what interests her mature and change. In the columns of *The Vancouver Daily Province's* children's page in 1928, the reader sees first an enthusiastic though immature writer who perhaps owes something to Kipling's *Just So* stories and maybe even school readers featuring a Dick-and-Jane cast of characters, an inexperienced teacher but one with a vivid imagination who likes to anthropomorphize animals and to people her stories with human children touched by elves and fairies, and young people having adventures. Later, she becomes a mother who writes poems to and about her two oldest children when they were babies, and tales of her family life. This woman also writes short articles and commentaries for women, some humorous and celebrating domesticity and the odd things that happen in families, a few containing sociological commentary. Her life as a busy mother raising a big and lively family with an Immigration Officer husband, and living near the U.S./Canadian border for quite a few years, is featured in her work both in *The Province* and later on radio. As the years pass, at a time when there is no television in Canada and radio plays an important part in people's daily lives, Christie Harris makes the radio her classroom, particularly through school broadcasts for the British Columbia Department of Education.

Her first successful venture into writing for radio came in 1937 with a Coronation script for juveniles that was broadcast nation-wide from Vancouver, starting a long association with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Though after her marriage in 1932 she had been required to give up her teaching job in Vancouver because of a school board regulation of the time banning married women teachers, nevertheless, through radio broadcasts to schools Harris continued to teach Canadian children about historical characters and events, about foreign cultures and places, and about their own country. She also entertained them with short dramas and fantasies and musical plays. For twenty-five years she wrote radio scripts, some more successful than others, some not accepted, others not finished, but many broadcast. Later, out of the radio work, specifically a juvenile adventure serial set in the Cariboo Country, she was asked by the publishing firm Longmans, Green to write the book which was to become *Cariboo Trail*, her first full-length publication. This appeared in 1957 when she was fifty years old with most of her own family grown up and gone about their own lives. At a time when some would be thinking of slowing down and retiring, Christie Harris was just beginning the novel-writing career that would see her produce eighteen books over twenty-five years, up till 1982, with one more, *Something Weird is Going On*, that appeared in 1994 after a twelve-year gap. Among these books were several that earned her many awards and admiring letters from readers and audiences across Canada. Many of her books were meticulously researched and some, including *Once Upon a Totem*, were rewritten many times in an attempt to avoid the fate of the Toronto scriptwriter who adapted a Haida legend for school broadcasting but managed to include thirty-nine basic errors in it (SATAAS, 112). The archive in Special Collections at the University of Calgary Library carries the evidence of how hard Harris worked at recasting her scripts and manuscripts. There are literally dozens of versions of *Something Weird Is Going On*, for instance, with several different titles, and most of the radio scripts exist in various versions.

Harris's life, from all the evidence of the family stories in *The Province*, the three family novels and her own commentary, appears to have been busy and happy as well as long. As she says herself in the SATAAS autobiographical article, "You *can* juggle Family and Career and survive to write about it. But it takes a bit of

doing" (111). Some of the "doing" started in her childhood, with listening to the wonderfully crafted tales of her father, Edward Irwin, identified by her as a "prime storyteller" (SATAAS, 104). She goes on to tell of the compelling growth of her own storytelling talents from the time that she was very young. From her own versions of the great stories of English literature, such as the tales of King Arthur, which she re-told to her brother to while away the tedium of chores on the family's farm in the Lower Fraser Valley, to the bedtime imaginary excursions in her head that separated her from the pre-sleep chatter of her sisters, Christie Irwin was compelled to tell stories in an unstoppable "pouring out [of] words" (SATAAS, 106). She adds somewhat ruefully that no one seemed to notice her talents as a future author, either in her family or among her teachers, perhaps because she was more obviously such an excellent student in science and math. But as a teenager, in order to make some money, she wrote local farm news for a small district newspaper, *The Columbian*, and then came the first nine stories accepted in 1928 by *The Vancouver Daily Province* for their children's section, called the Tillicum Page, under the aegis of the children's editor, Diana Gray. Harris says that as a beginning teacher she practised her art by telling her stories to her young students, showing that blend of teaching and storytelling energies that has never left her in any of her later work. She tells us: "...I loved teaching. Especially I loved teaching primary classes where I could tell stories and read stories and observe children's responses to the different stories" (SATAAS, 107). Harris's love of teaching has remained a marked characteristic of her work, information about an array of cultural, environmental, historical and career-related elements being a strong thread in all of her books, whether ficto-biographies of her three oldest children or mediations of native legends or historical fiction, and certainly forming the basis for many of the hundreds of radio scripts she wrote for CBC Radio between the late 1930s and the late 1950s.

Apart from the early *Province* articles, which are interesting mainly because they *are* so early, one of the appealing characteristics of the more significant of Christie Harris's works for young readers is, perhaps ironically, that they are interesting to adult readers as well as to children, partly because they do not talk condescendingly to the imagined level of child understanding that mars many children's books. In Harris's books, alongside the happy times and the excitement and the comic scenes that are so strong in her writing, there are scenes of danger, tragedy and loss. Learning about the dark side of the self is common among her characters, not all of whom experience comforting resolutions to conflicts. Nor, at least in her later work, does Harris make the mistake of trying to talk from a child's point of view or to talk in the fake child's voice that diminishes much children's literature. Writing about children is one thing. Writing *in* a child's voice is vastly different and incredibly difficult to do successfully without either infantilizing the speaking voice or ascribing unlikely knowledge to it. Many of her characters are children, of course, or at least let us call them young people since they tend to be teenagers, but the dominant voice in Harris's books is of an adult talking about young people from an adult point of view, and there are as many adult characters in her books as there are children. Whatever else one might say of Harris's novels and story collections, they are uncompromising in terms of narrators who don't talk down to their audiences and who thus hold the attention of readers of all ages. That Christie Harris is aware of this need to write for the alert reader regardless of age is seen briefly in the SATAAS article in which she mentions that some of the success of her Irish father's tales told in her childhood lay in the fact that they were always "as right for the children as they were for the grown-ups" (104). There are some children's books that talk through and beyond the generations and that can hold attention beyond that of young readers. Several of Christie Harris's books have that quality. No adult reader would be bored, for instance, by *Raven's Cry* or *The Trouble with Princesses* or the three family novels, at least on account of the style. As far as content is concerned, themes such as the very grown-up dilemmas of *Forbidden Frontier*, in particular the racism experienced by Alison Stewart and Ross MacNeil, are dealt with in an uncompromising way that isn't "just for kids".

Nevertheless, a look at the very earliest Tillicum Page stories in *The Province* reveals work that is only minimally interesting in a literary sense, though it is of biographical interest to anyone wanting to trace the growth of Harris the writer. That she was naturally delighted by the first acceptance of her material still resounds from her account half a century later in the SATAAS autobiography ("I had sold my very first stories!") and from the fact that the short stories were and are still preserved pasted, presumably by Harris herself, into a ragged scrapbook now in the University of Calgary Library's Special Collections. The first two tales (under the name of Christie Irwin), "Why the Elephant

"Swings His Trunk When Asleep" and "Why the Giraffe Has a Long Neck", are in the tradition of Kipling's tales, with talking animals interacting with humans in exotic climates, and tigers and giraffes cheerfully living in the same country. These animals are thinly-disguised metaphors for foolish or inept human behaviour, and the stories are in the moral fable mode. They are charming enough in themselves but not memorable except inasmuch as they show in the early Harris work a fascination with animal life that would develop later into much more sophisticated tales, such as the hilarious though also horrifying story in *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses* of the Super-Snails: Stupendous-Scavenger-and-Supreme-Snail; his wife Magnificent Mollusca; his son, Gigantic-Gastropod; and his daughter-in-law, Gorgeous Immensity. Two other animal tales, "The Robin's May Day" and "Why the Holly Leaves Have Sharp Points", could have appeared in any children's magazine at any time after the end of the eighteenth century as conventional moral tales in which human characteristics and emotions and behaviours are attributed to birds. They do demonstrate, however, a decided flavour of the oral tradition that was so important to Harris, specifically in the amount of repetition of phrases and situations. There are also three stories about twins, Bunny and Betty, aged five, children of a traditional two-parent arrangement, who are pictured in the tales as sweet-natured, obedient, loving and easily taught how to keep their parents happy. In "What the Twins Gave Mummy" and "Make Daddy Happy", the problem of what to buy for Mother's and Father's Days when you have no money and no way of earning it is solved by their learning that being good and helpful around the house is a great gift from children to parents and better than a store-bought present. They are clued into this originally by an elf friend, a sort of fairy-tale helper, and are able to repeat the gift for each parent. These are slight tales but they do have a theme that consistently interests Harris: the nature of gifting. All her later highly successful Haida Mouse Woman stories emphasize the importance of gifting for Northwest Indian societies, of something received needing a reciprocal giving, to keep the balance in nature. In the later work, gifting is pictured as much more complicated than I have suggested here. By the time she was writing her versions of native legends, Harris had arrived at an intense understanding of how sophisticated and important to the great coastal tribes the processes of gifting were. But that giving the gift of oneself should feature in her very first published stories is in itself worth noting, though presumably here it has Christian overtones. As for the helpful elf, a standard character though usually female in European fairy tales, he appears again in a curious little tale "Jimpo's April Fool's Day", in which he gets to act almost like the Trickster figure in Indian and African tales, fooling others into making April Fools of themselves, with the help of a witch's magic wishing cloak, borrowed for the occasion, that fits all sizes, a tantalizing precursor of the cloak in the Mouse Woman Indian tales that fits all sizes too and confers magic powers on the human wearers.

Also attributed to Christie Irwin on the Tillicum Page is a six-part serial called "Pirate Gold", in which a young boy and his Scotch terrier, Sandy, get mixed up with treasure seekers. Each week the story ends with a mystery that the Tillicum Club members are urged to solve, with a prize of \$1 each week for the best solution submitted in writing. From the slightly desperate though still jolly editorial comment that heads up the third episode, one gathers that the series and the \$1 prizes were a smashing success, with hundreds of hopeful young readers sending in letters, all of which had to be read by the long-suffering editor.

The tales mentioned so far belong to a well-established, white, middle-class, Anglo vein of writing for children that dominated English-language school readers for at least the first half of the twentieth century. Days are filled with play and good times, the sun shines, friendship and caring are facts of life, butterflies and flowers and birds abound, and families have typically two partners and two children-- in fact, the world is secure, comforting, safe and white. This is also the note carried by the speaking voice in a number of short rhymes intended for the same white child readers, though their subject matter is the native Indian. Two, simply titled "Nursery Rhymes", by Christie L. Irwin, are relatively inoffensive and aimed at evoking a feeling of camaraderie between the subject matter and the white child reader, though unfortunately they perpetuate a picture in 1928 which belongs, if it ever legitimately belonged anywhere, to the nineteenth-century's version of the First Nations people as generic Indians, regardless of tribal differences. The contrast between this flattening of native characters into a generic tribe and the picture of native Northwest life in Harris's later retellings of Haida and Tsimshian and Tlingit and Kwakiutl legends and myths is startling to anyone coming to Harris first from the other end of her writing. In 1928, the old English nursery rhymes of

"Hickory Dickory Dock" and "Little Boy Blue" are changed by Harris into versions that have the mouse running up a totem pole and the boy sleeping over his bow and arrow. No clocks, no agriculture among twentieth-century Indians seems to be the message for the Tillicum Page white child readers. Also troubling, because of the stereotyping for child readers in 1928 of natives as uneducated, warlike but noble and happy savages, are the six short rhymes by Christie Irwin Harris (thus dated post-1932), titled "Redskin Rhymes for Tillicums", in which "The redskin fathers of a tribe .../fight and scalp another tribe", and "The redskin mother" spends her days echoing the domestic tasks of her white counterpart, only keeping "the wigwam neat". It is partly the use of the present tense to describe these activities for children reading in 1928 and partly the pretense that all Indians are the same and partly the stereotyping that one finds a bit hard to take now. Then in a series called "Nursery Rhymes for Tillicums" Christie Irwin-Harris(sic) writes perhaps her most unfortunate contributions to the Tillicum Page, one of which, based on "Mary had a Little Lamb", celebrates the unlikelihood of native children having to go to school at all.

That these rhymes are part of the young Harris's portfolio cannot be ignored, but this fact should be set beside the rapport with, respect for and knowledge of the Pacific tribes that the older Harris displayed in mediating West Coast legends for non-native readers later in her life. There is also an early charming and affectionate story written when she was Christie L. Irwin called "The Old Tillicum's Tale", in which a white boy, unsure of finding a good New Year's resolution, learns from an old native storyteller about the power of being faithful to a promise and a sacred task, and how there is a mighty reward given by Sagalie Tyee, the Great Chief, to those with the special courage of the truly faithful. Too, the overall name of the children's page in *The Province*, from the Northwest native word "tillicum" which means "a pal", and the club logo of a black-and-white totem pole with the greeting "Kla-how-ya" on the base, introduces the notion that the authoritative narrative voice of the Tillicum Page belongs to a wise old Indian with lots of affection for white children, the Storyteller of all storytellers, the Teacher of all teachers, to be respected and admired by his white listeners as the source of a better wisdom than theirs. Condescension towards and misinformation about First Nations people are certainly present on the Tillicum Page, but so too is affection and at least a germ of understanding.

From 1937 on, Christie Harris concentrated on the power of orality by turning her attention to the CBC airwaves, writing for adults comic half-hour radio plays, such as the Giles and Dolly series; fifteen-minute sketches based on her own family's life; close to fifty women's talks as if from one country woman to others; some musical plays for children; and hundreds of school broadcasts often on historical subjects. The latter were in some ways "bread-and-butter" writing and not always pleasing to her ("I was particularly enthusiastic about leaving school broadcasts with their endless research and their tendency to spoil a story line to cram in more information" (SATAAS, 111), but she does talk gratefully of the money brought in to a young and active family by the fifteen-minute humorous scripts that were broadcast on CBC's "Miscellany": "...twenty-five dollars meant gumboots all round or maybe a holiday outing. Or nearly two months of 'mother's help'" (SATAAS, 110). For anyone interested in Canadian radio in mid-twentieth century, the Harris *fonds* held by Special Collections at the University of Calgary Library contains a multitude of materials. There are a few folders of ideas that didn't survive to become scripts, some scraps of handwritten notes and complete scripts with broadcast dates and other information on them. A few of the folders have pencilled notes on the covers, sometimes comments by Harris herself on the fate of a particular piece. As with all work intended for the ear, the written scripts look a little flat and need some imagination to bring them to life, though the directions to the players give us some notion of the fleshing out of the text into more colourful shape. Some of the talks are given in one person's voice, as if a storyteller were speaking, as in "Gone With the Cracker Barrel", one of the women's talks in which Harris reminisces about life in the Fraser Valley in earlier days. For the most part, however, she uses dialogue and characters, voice-overs and "business" (that is, sound effects and music), even when the subject of the broadcast is factual. A favourite trick in the school broadcasts is to have a couple of ordinary contemporary children being taught about real historical personages by an adult, so that the dialogue switches back and forth between time periods. There is often a narrator who lays out the skeleton of the tale and who appears at intervals to move the plot along. Especially in the school broadcasts, the listeners are asked to participate in quizzes and practical demonstrations, such as the

suggested map-making in the program "Under the Trail of Stars", one of a twelve-part series on the early fur-traders called *From These Beginnings*, broadcast in the spring of 1954. The school broadcasts covered historical subjects, often but not exclusively Canadian, presenting for instance in late 1941/early 1942 a series called *Great Wonderers* on scientific thinkers such as James Watt, Archimedes, Newton, Marconi and Marie Curie. In another earlier one called *Living in Other Times*, Harris created a narrator, Charlie Chicknick, "a nice little fellow with the soul of a nightingale and the courage of a mouse" (SATAAS, 110). The many school broadcast scripts over twenty years deserve an article in themselves, giving as they do a fascinating glimpse of the workings of public education in British Columbia in those years.

As well as the school scripts, there is the fairly entertaining series on a husband and wife, Giles and Dolly, a sort of Canadian Burns and Allen, a series which Harris herself identifies on the cover of the folder containing the first play, "Brush Party", as "a *very* successful series". Since the humour depends very much, as with the Burns and Allen shows, on the wife's appearing somewhat scatty and the husband's trying unsuccessfully to keep her in line, the scripts inevitably now seem a bit dated. But that may be true of a great deal of radio, since it tends to be tied to specific time periods. Two plays that survive better were broadcast in 1946, "Never Mind the Old Gray Mare" and "Blue is for Evvy", both humorous, both with flexible dialogue and character shading, and both delivering a reasonably full story in the half-hour slot. The characters in both are country people, living simple lives and taking their pleasures in simple activities, but the comedy in both plays and the shrewd psychology of characterization work very well within the half-hour limit. Harris writes well for the ear and the tongue in her radio scripts, giving her listeners lots of meat but also lots of space in which to chew it.

Apart from a radio version of *Once Upon a Totem* which was broadcast late in 1973, Harris's final radio work was done in the early 1960s, in a series done for the British Columbia Department of Education on the Haida. *Proud Heritage*, a five-part series airing in late 1961, showed Harris beginning to use her recent contact with native culture in the Pacific Northwest to explore a whole society of which she had been only marginally aware before the late 1950s. That was when she went with her husband Tom when he was transferred to Prince Rupert to work. There she met a whole new world that was to transform both her life and her writing. She tells it best herself, in the SATAAS article: "Although I had been on the west coast for half a century, this was a new world to me, the world of the people who had produced a stunning art and a wonderful mythology" (112). Though she says she easily managed to write the informational school series, she also makes it clear that she "had over three years of almost total immersion in books and in the field" before having the nerve to write her first retelling of a Haida story. In 1961, as a finale to all her years of school broadcasts, she was involved in description, in information, in passing on material that was later to become the source of her most significant writing for young people, the re-telling of the Northwest Indian tales.

From 1957 to 1994, Harris wrote nineteen books, eleven novels and eight re-tellings of the Indian stories. After the first, written at the behest of the people at the publishing firm Longmans, Green, Harris credits her publishing record in part to Jean Karl, the children's editor at the American publishing house, Atheneum, after the publisher Longmans, Green returned the manuscript of *Once Upon a Totem*. Karl is said by Harris to have helped her transform herself from being a writer for the ear, on radio, to being a writer for the eye too, and to giving her good advice about how to train herself to write literature for children rather than radio scripts (SATAAS, 112). Twenty-five years of script writing might be thought to have been a good training ground in themselves but Harris was ready, at fifty, to put herself back in writing school. The result was eighteen books after *Cariboo Trail*, one a year until 1982 and then a twelve-year gap until the publication in 1994 of *Something Weird Is Going On*. The common thread in all of them is her fascination with both private and public history, whether the Cariboo gold rush or the making of a fashion designer or the demise (almost) of a proud nation, and with the extraordinary beauty of the landscapes of British Columbia. They all are either set in or at some point touch upon Western Canadian history, of this century as well as previous ones. Not only the way of life but the natural landscape and its effect upon character are central to Harris's purpose, which might be called "mapping" Western Canada and Western Canadian life.

Trading, exploring, pioneering and homesteading were the basis for the settlement of the Canadian West and these provide the settings and the themes of Harris's three historical novels. Historical fiction for children is not really one of the strong lasting points of Canadian children's literature as it is in Britain, though there are some worthwhile books. Some, like Janet Lunn's *The Root Cellar* or Barbara Smucker's *Underground to Canada*, stand out from the rest as probable survivors, but historical fiction in Canadian children's writing has not generally been a lasting success. (This may be partly because young readers prefer fantasy above all other genres so that there is no enthusiastic readership, at least now, for historical novels set in Canada.) Still, Christie Harris wrote three respectable historical novels from 1957 to 1968. *Cariboo Trail* (1957), *West With the White Chiefs* (1965) and *Forbidden Frontier* (1968) all resulted from extensive research into standard sources for the history of Canada's pioneers, traders and explorers, as well as her own early life's experiences as a young pioneer child in British Columbia. The historical detail in all three reveals that the teacher in Harris had survived from her radio days, but all three also have touches of comedy of a clear-eyed type (though in the case of *Forbidden Frontier*, which is a pretty dark book, irony may be a better word than comedy). All three are strong in characterization, always a feature in whatever sort of writing Harris did, and incidents bringing danger sometimes not evaded make the plots move quite fast. Of the three novels, *Forbidden Frontier* is the most compelling, and probably the one which would appeal the most to young people today. It shows readers something of the effects of one of the Hudson's Bay Company's policies during its early years in Northern and Western Canada, a policy also followed by the French Government in supporting its trading companies in Eastern Canada in the early eighteenth century. I am referring to the encouragement of the white male company employees (in the case of the Hudson's Bay Company, many of them Scottish) to marry and raise families with native women, in order to effect stability and loyalty among the often-young employees in the absence of marriageable white women who were a rare type in the wilds of Canada in those early years. Alison Stewart's mother is a high-born Haida, her father a Scottish trader, and the novel shows right from the start how much tension there is between the two halves of her heritage for the child who thinks of herself as white and Scottish at the start of the book but comes to learn about her Haida self through the course of the plot, about her need for a Haida name given at a witnessed Haida ceremony (the potlatch). Her mother's devastation on returning to her West Coast origins and finding her once proud people living in a miserable travesty of their previous splendour is drawn by Harris in a most affecting way, and the narrator's sympathies are clearly with the native characters and not with the company whites. The difficulties of being a half-breed, not fully accepted by either ethnic group, and of being subjected to racist practices, was scarcely a common topic in children's literature in 1968, and though it is not the only theme in *Forbidden Frontier*, still it is the one a reader may remember most acutely.

Perhaps her experiences with her own children as they grew up helped Harris to develop her affectionate attitude to her young characters and to her young readers. She has indicated that her own family provided both the models and the situations for much of her writing and also always gave her very staunch support in her literary endeavours. Her children, she tells us, "...were very involved in my radio writing. They also provided me with a lot of characters and scenes for my as-yet-unplanned children's books. Finding them fascinating, if exasperating at times, I made notes on their patterns of behaviour, their patterns of speech. I tried out everything on them..." (SAATAS, 110). In return, "They read everything I wrote. And they would go to any trouble to be sure there was nothing 'phoney' in my scripts. Their father was even more concerned to see that I got my horses right, and my boats, dogs and guns. Even now, all married, and with families of their own, my children are my willing technical advisors, my most loyal fans..." (SATAAS, 110). More than just a fan, her elder daughter, Moira, has been involved in a number of her mother's books, including a history of dress which they co-wrote, *Figleafing Through History: The Dynamics of Dress* (1971), besides illustrating two of the novels. The ficto-biographies of her three oldest children were written with their full cooperation after they were grown up. Long hours of consultation, conversation, tapes and editing went into the making of *You Have to Draw the Line Somewhere* (1964), followed by *Confessions of a Toe-Hanger* (1967) and then *Let X Be Excitement* (1969), featuring the three Ross-Allens: Linsey (Moira Harris), Feeny (Sheilagh Harris) and Ralph (Michael Harris). The first two books are pleasingly illustrated with black and white line drawings by Moira (Harris) Johnston while the third uses photographs from the life of the real Michael to excellent effect. All three are cast in the first person



speaking voice purporting to be the grown people looking back on their own histories, on their childhood and young adulthood, that have taken them to where they are now. This means that, though many of the incidents described belong to childhood, they are commented upon by an adult persona, often wryly funny in tone and ruthlessly honest about the self and the family, in particular the siblings. Ralph says of his two sisters, "Linsey had brains but no sense while Feeny had sense but no brains", but he also acknowledges, "My sister Linsey ...had a talent. She could draw. (And sing and play the piano.) A year and a half my junior, Linsey was so interested in drawing girls and dresses that at eight she announced she would go to New York some day and be a *Vogue* fashion artist. It was always apparent that she would too. You had to admire Linsey". Ralph shows his little sister Feeny, as does Linsey, as a daredevil tomboy with ferocious loyalties to her family. So well handled are the three personae, and so strong is the establishment of a believable confessional mode which is based on "Don't let Mother know!" that it comes as something of a surprise to remind oneself that Christie Harris was responsible for them all. This is part of the fun, naturally. Ralph's and Linsey's books are episodic and perhaps a bit disjointed in terms of the narrative line though there is enough pungent humour to keep readers interested and even to laugh out loud at times. Feeny's book is the best constructed of the three, with a strong narrative line and excellent psychological drawing of an insecure girl who comes to learn that, though she is not the obvious high-flyer her siblings are, she is a rich and well-endowed personality in her own right, taking second place to nobody. (The Feeny book went into four printings in its first year of publication, so the reading public must have agreed about its attractions.) There are comments, too, through the three books that tempt us to read them as truths about the Harris family rather than fictions about the Ross-Allens. Feeny tells us her mother spans the children when they are bad, and all three books hint at financial straits. The father in all three is pictured as pretty straightlaced and proper, a bit of a disciplinarian, though clearly much loved and usually successfully "handled" by the girls. Ralph says ruefully, "...you had to have character in our family", and character is what Christie Harris draws for all three young people. These are entertaining tales, full of information too, of mechanical principles in Ralph's book and painting techniques in Linsey's. All three show a fine appreciation of child psychology on the part of the author-mother, fed by the children-characters.

Tom Harris appears as a character in all three of the ficto-biographies but he is also credited by Harris with keeping her straight about facts featured in her other writing. When Christie Irwin first met Tom she was not quite sixteen and he was a very young ex-soldier not long back from the war. Apparently a superb horseman, he joined the Mounties first and later the Immigration Service. He is the co-author with Christie Harris of a very entertaining long short story (or short novel) called *Mule Lib* (1972), based, one presumes, upon his experiences in France during World War I. The narrator tells his tale of being a very young, green but enthusiastic soldier who gets sidetracked into being a mule-driver instead of a rifleman. The hero of the story is the recalcitrant mule, The Big Gray: "About eighteen hands plus, he seemed to rise out of the mud of France as sheer and gray and unfeeling as the Rock of Gibraltar" (17). There are many comic scenes in which the mule defeats all efforts to tame him, but in the end, the reader is left with a poignant picture of a badly wounded but still spunky animal and a young man who, looking back years later, records his admiration and understanding of what the mule has taught him:

I think... Was it just chance that brought us together, that one last time, in a setting that was devastating proof of man's unfitness to be master of all life on Earth?

Was it mere chance? I ask myself, or...Or was The Big Gray - as I so often sensed - actually the reincarnation of all the mules the world had ever kicked or beaten? After all, he was always a master at waiting for his moment. His timing was always fantastic. And The Great Mule Devil couldn't have picked a better moment than dawn on the Menin Road. Come to think of it, standing his ground firm and steady, being his own mule, The Big Gray actually stood for the very thing we thought *we* were fighting for.

In fact, thousands of horses and mules had The Great Liberator in their midst.

Fortunately for us, they did not realize it. For if they had won their war, we might have lost ours.(78-79)

Christie Harris has always honoured and prioritized the connection between the worlds of humans and animals, and *Mule Lib* is one of the more persuasive examples of her work in which this attitude prevails.

Possibly through her research in the 1960s into the native cultures of the Pacific Northwest coast, after her move to Prince Rupert in the late 1950s, Harris began to show an interest in environmental issues, in guardianship of the wilds and of native culture, and in the spirit world, an interest that shows up in three novels of the seventies that are part fantasy, part adventure. *Secret in the Stlalakum Wild* (1972), *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* (1975) and *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds* (1978) are all set in British Columbia, though *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* also deals with an alien planet, Tlu, and its space ships. The central issue of two of the books seems to be in the order of 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy', though *Mystery at the Edge of Two Worlds* is a more conventional mystery story in which stolen Indian art objects are sought and found. Harris dedicates *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* thus: "To everyone who suspects that legends are fanciful records of history - recountings of actual events that were often misunderstood at the time and then imaginatively interpreted by generations of storytellers". There is a substantial school of thought among scholars of mythology that agrees with this position, so Harris is not alone in her concepts here. In the early 1970s when these books were written, there was a resurgence of interest in the theories of Immanuel Velikovsky (*Earth in Upheaval* and *Worlds in Collision*) and Erich Von Daniken (*Chariots of the Gods*), both of whom she lists in her bibliography at the end of *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?* Before she begins her story in *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?*, almost as though to refute sceptics, Harris has an introductory short chapter, called "before you read the story", in which she explains her position, re-telling the Indian legend of Man-from-the-Sky which belongs to a Northwest coast native family:

...the Indians who told the story firmly believed in their own descent from a Man-from-the-Sky. Only the coming of the white man made it begin to seem an embarrassing myth to them.

Now, however, in a time of startling Space Age discoveries, who can be sure that a Man-from-the-Sky did not land on Earth near a Northwest Indian village? Complete with plastic clothes, ray gun, vapor screen, prefabricated houses and luminous paint.

The Indians of the Pacific Northwest recorded legendary events in symbols we see on their totem poles: Eagle, Raven, Wolf, Killer Whale, Frog, Thunderbird ... and who can be sure that Thunderbird didn't originate as the symbol for a spaceman zooming into the mountains on a rocket belt?

The Thunderbird may possibly be explained in this flesh-and-blood way. But who is to say that some of the other supernatural beings weren't quite as real *without* flesh and blood? For instance, the spirit people of the forest.

After recent discoveries in the plant world, there's a new interest in the primitive belief in nature spirits. Scientists are discovering that there is indeed a conscious energy animating trees and grasses; and to their solids, liquids, and gases, they're having to add a "fourth state of matter" - an invisible *something* that defies accepted physical laws of their science books. Could their "fourth state of matter" be the "mystic realms" of the old storytellers? Are there indeed spirits in the forest and mountains, in the seas and rivers? Is there even an actual, mystical power in the old

## totem pole? (4-5)

These are the questions that Harris explores in *Secret of the Stlalakum Wild* and *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?*, seeming by virtue of the plots and characters to be in agreement with the premises behind the questions. The protagonist in the former book, a girl called Morann who is cast in the Feeny self-doubting mould, learns that there are indeed supernatural beings in the forest who approach her because she is sensitive to plant life and feels the presence of the spirits. She faces a moral dilemma, whether to reveal the presence of gold in the forest and thus make herself important in the eyes of others or to keep it to herself and thus save the wilderness from an invasion of gold-seekers with their destructive ways. She hides the revealing nugget of gold and hugs the secret of the forest to herself, after a battle with her own lack of self-confidence and her longing to matter to her family particularly. This book was a Junior Literary Guild selection and it also won the International Book Year award for British Columbia's Best in Juvenile Literature for 1972. *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?*, set in the two worlds of skymen and Indians, the one dominated by mechanistic thinking and a lack of emotion and the other permeated with a belief in the reality of the spirit world, in the "invisible people of the forest"(8), is Harris's version of Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*. There is no doubt that she finds the so-called primitive world of the natives much superior to anything the "advanced" civilization of Tlu can produce. Her main protagonist among the Tlumen, Laetl, the captain of the spaceship *Colonizer*, is eliminated by his government when he returns to Tlu because he has brought back with him the unsettling idea that Spirit Beings are real, which is against the rules in Tlu. His ideas generate a set of followers called Laetloonies who, because they have beliefs that challenge the *status quo*, are hunted and outlawed and have to live underground. The native part of the book deals with the search for the wondrous Tsimshian land of Temlaham (which Harris likens to the Garden of Eden), and the journey this involves for centuries, a journey in which every so often the natives see one of the Tlu spaceships but think of them as stars or portents. The problem with the book seems to be that the two worlds are not woven together well enough for the novel's structure to hold, though each world in itself is quite well dealt with. It is an ambitious book that contains some highly imaginative episodes but it could have benefitted from some strenuous editing and re-crafting.

In the twelve years between 1982 and 1994, Harris wrestled with many versions of her latest book, the ghost story, *Something Weird Is Going On*, and perhaps it is not finally one of her more successful books. Nevertheless, it does contain some strong scenes and occasional flashes of humour that light up the relationship between the two main protagonists, Xandra who has just moved to the Vancouver area and Hilary whose father runs a ferry service to Granville Island. There are detailed scenes of Granville Island, particularly of its market day, and a compelling scene in which the sea almost claims the lives of the two girls because they fail to read the weather signs of the treacherous west coast. There is also a figure who must surely be based on Harris herself, Xandra's gran who wears purple stockings, believes in reincarnation and writes children's books. She is also a source of constant embarrassment to Xandra because she behaves unlike most people's "normal" grandmothers. There are several tantalizing, barely sketched characters, such as the female artist and Xandra's father, estranged from the family and acting/playwriting for a children's theatre company. His play, about saving the environment, provides a sub-text and a secondary theme for Harris underneath the central themes of the need for friends and the wanderings, unannealed, of the lost spirit of Flora Lee, killed at the age of five and not yet set at rest. There are certainly glimpses of the old Christie Harris in this book, but it lacks the narrative energy and the fine character drawing of the earlier stories.

The work for which Christie Harris is best known, her re-tellings of the stories belonging to the tribes of the Pacific Northwest coast, began to appear in 1963 with *Once Upon a Totem* which contained five re-tellings. Interestingly, the early 1960s saw a small flurry of activity among white writers producing versions of Canadian native material. Robert Ayre's *Sketco the Raven* (1961), Dorothy M. Reid's *Tales of Nanabozho* (1963) and Kay Hill's *Glooscap and His Magic* (1963) followed Cyrus Macmillan's *Glooscap's Country and Other Indian Tales* (1955), after many years in which written versions of tales originally oral existed mainly in libraries and archives, collected by ethnologists at the turn of the century often for the purposes of illuminating their own disciplines (ethnology, anthropology, archaeology)

rather than from a desire to understand the native cultures *per se*. The twentieth century's reverence for the written word has led to sometimes misguided efforts on the part of whites to preserve native culture in ways inimical and displeasing to many natives themselves, such as placing sacred or ritual objects on display in museums or writing "white" versions of the oral tales which should have a performing storyteller and a participating audience rather than a silent and solitary reader. Before the twentieth century, Canadian native societies, being non-print cultures, preserved their histories and heritage in and taught their young people through their artifacts, art objects and oral tales, in a great unwritten text that depended for its survival on the survival of the people to whom it belonged. After the initial contact with white men on the West Coast in the late eighteenth century developed into a trading and missionary flood to the eventual dreadful detriment of the coastal tribes by the end of the nineteenth century, the guarding of their great text fell away for a number of reasons too complex to deal with here. As a result, the culture, the art and the legends of the coastal tribes were in danger of disappearing. A few European ethnologists, working in the field around the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, preserved what they could understand of the Haida, the Tlingit and the Kwakiutl stories and language in field records and reports to their funding societies. The work of these scholars, Franz Boas and John Swanton in particular, preserved in archives, provided Christie Harris with a great deal of her library knowledge of the tribes. They are acknowledged gratefully several times in her work, for example on the dedication page of *The Trouble with Adventurers*: "To adventurers like the late Franz Boas and John Swanton, who collected the varying versions of the old Northwest Coast Indian stories, piling up treasures for new storytellers to fit together, reshape and repolish for presentation in other times to other people". The image of a pile of treasures, traditionally in European culture heaped up to be kept and guarded and taken out of circulation, may be unfortunate when used of native stories, since these were supposed to be in constant movement as part of the system of gifting carried on among the Haida, especially at potlatches. Particular stories were owned by particular families whose family history they were thought to reflect, and no other family would have told a tale belonging to another. In this way, the tales were possessions to be guarded but not kept out of circulation. That Christie Harris could use a phrase with an inapplicable European connotation even when she knew a great deal about the culture and habits of the Northwest coastal tribes shows how vigilant one must be when handling the ways of another culture if one is not to be accused of a kind of colonizing by language.

In the 1980s and 1990s, political and cultural activists have made us much more aware of the dangers of white complacency in the matter of "saving" non-literate societies' cultural heritage. For instance, in her extensive study published in 1990, *Native Literature in Canada*, Penny Petrone is not enthusiastic about the dominance of white scholars and writers in the preservation of disappearing Canadian native culture. Specifically, she names Ayre, Harris, Reid and Hill in her negative evaluation of white versions of native tales:

In order to make Indian oral narratives acceptable and easy to read for non-natives, white compilers and editors have made considerable alterations: plots were fashioned from variations of a tale: tales were pruned, polished, and rearranged; native oral storytelling techniques such as repetition, the pauses and stops of the narrator's voice, and the vocables of the participating audience were often disregarded; syntax and grammar were also changed. Many white children who are now adults became familiar with such altered narratives, during the many years when the native voice was silent, through books like *Sketco the Raven* (1961) by Robert Ayre, *Once Upon a Totem* (1963) by Christie Harris, *Tales of Nanabozho* (1963) by Dorothy Reid, and *Glooscap and His Magic* (1963) by Kay Hill. Not only were such adaptations distortions, but readers were unaware of their cultural significance. Natives considered it unfortunate that such an intrinsic element of native culture as their oral literature was lifted and made use of in ways they never intended. (120-121)

Though acknowledging the early work of Boas, Jenness, Swanton and so on as "valuable" (18), Petrone attacks, also,

literary scholars of Indian tales and legends on the following grounds:

As Canada's native peoples were originally not literate, their literature was, perforce, oral. Historically the oral literature of aboriginal peoples everywhere has been deemed inferior by literate western societies not only because it was unwritten, but also because it was not understood properly. The highly developed and extensive body of native Canadian oral literature was no exception.

It was misunderstood because, although it did not conform to the conventions of Western literary criticism, scholars still treated it as Western literature. The oral literature of Canada's native peoples embraces formal narrative, informal storytelling as well as political discourse, song, and prayer. Much of this literary expression was didactic in nature, communicating the respective histories and rules of belief and behaviour of the diverse tribes, and perpetuating their specific world views that gave the cosmos its origin, order, and meaning....(3)

Earlier, Petrone explains the Indian reverence for words, and thus for their oral traditions:

Central to the ancient oral traditions was the power of the *word*, spoken, intoned, or sung. Whether Cree or Ojibway, Iroquois or Micmac, Haida, Tlingit, or Hare, Loucheux or Montagnais, each in story, speech, or song made the *word* sacrosanct - of far greater importance than people in literate cultures were generally aware of. The *word* carried the power to create, to make things happen - medicine to heal, plants to grow, animals to be caught, and human beings to enter the spiritual world. Through this sacred power of the *word*, aboriginals sought to shape and control the cosmic forces that governed their lives. Such power is not attributed to the spoken word in literate societies, where attempts to change the physical world through language are regarded as magic, as "hocus-pocus". (9-10)

Though one has a great deal of sympathy with Petrone's views about the kind of ignorance and arrogance that persists in seeing native life and culture only in terms of how it does or does not match up to European values, in the case of Christie Harris's work (always excluding those very early nursery rhymes of the Tillicum Page) *most* of the time throughout the eight volumes of story re-tellings she reveals a considerable knowledge of and respect for native art and stories and spiritual life and social customs than Petrone's remark about *Once Upon a Totem* would suggest. And in two of her novels, *Secret in the Stlalakum wild* and *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?*, she shows that she understands very well the ways in which the natives revere the *word* and thus the whole of the natural and the spirit world. There are many incidents and scenes in *Sky Man on the Totem Pole?*, and even casual descriptions of people's everyday lives, that express as deep an admiration and valuing of native attitudes and rituals as anyone could have who is not native. Whether they are completely accurate or not is beyond me to say, but Harris herself mentions in the *SATAAS* article how proud she was when, in researching *Raven's Cry*, she was accepted by the Haida people as a fit historian, to the extent that the book has been used by the Haida to help their young people in their Rediscovery Program (115). She also claims "native people tell me *my* Mouse Woman is exactly right" (117).

By the time she was writing *Once More Upon a Totem* in 1973, Harris had reached the understanding expressed in the foreword: "Our version can only be a distant echo of the ancient tale that roused cries of joy and tears of understanding among those drumming, chanting, dancing, feasting people of the potlatch". And in the afterword, she makes a plea for "readers with understanding hearts and lively imaginations" (195). She says, too, in a warning about the new white storytellers, "...they need a genuine familiarity with the Northwest Coast and its native people. They need years of

sensitive contact with Indian homes and remote Indian villages to round out the research they can do in archives and in Northwest collections" (194-195). Harris herself spent quite a few years in both archives and libraries for book knowledge and among the Haida as a friend and field researcher. It seems clear that, though aware of the problems of appropriation of one culture by another, she considers herself to be as adequately prepared for her task as it is possible for an outsider to be, acknowledging that all white writers are inevitably dependent on the early ethnographers, travellers, pioneers and missionaries who first noted down the Indian tales. No one knows how many mistakes were made, in language translation, in recording from faulty memories, and even from being deliberately misled by the original Indian sources who may have both eliminated what they thought their white questioners really didn't want to hear and also changed the sacred stories to preserve them from alien hands. Current scholarship is supported by a much better knowledge of the linguistic properties of the coastal dialects than was possible for the very early ethnographers, and there are a number of useful books that direct the reader to a more attentive response to the culture of the West Coast tribes. For instance, John Enrico, a scholar of Haida dialects, has revised John Swanton's original report, *Skidegate Haida Myths and Histories*, in a 1995 version that corrects information and expands upon commentaries in a fascinating way. George F. MacDonald's *Chiefs of the Sea and Sky* (1989) is packed with details about Haida hierarchies and the significance of their rituals. Bill Holm's *Smoky-Top: the Art and Times of Willie Seaweed* (1983) has a wonderful array of detailed photographs of Haida art objects and commentaries on the history and culture of the coast. Holm's book also has a very informative couple of pages at the start helping the non-native speaker to understand a little about the pronunciation of the West Coast tongues. Unfortunately, none of this research was available to white writers such as Harris earlier in the century.

Harris's Indian stories are full of information gleaned from her own experience about the culture and the lifestyles of the West Coast tribes. She became aware, as she progressed in her knowledge of the tribes, of their different natures and her versions of the stories do contain at least a mention of which tribe they come from. For instance, in *Once Upon a Totem* only one of the stories is Haida, the second one, while the others are Tsimshian and the fourth one, Tlingit. But in general, the work is full of information about customs, attitudes, values and social structures. Readers will learn from *Raven's Cry* and *Once Upon a Totem* that the coastal tribes took and kept slaves, were brave and resourceful as hunters on sea and land, were matrilinear in inheritance issues and used the great potlatch ceremonies for a number of different purposes:

"People of the Potlatch," they have all been called, for their great potlatch gatherings were the heart of a complex social system. Having no written language to use on records, they found it practical to conduct their affairs in public. Claims to the ownership of such property as salmon streams and clam beaches; of such non-material wealth as crests, dances, legends, songs, and ceremonies; and of a clan's hereditary high-ranking names, all had to be witnessed, not only by members of the kinship group involved, but also by important people from other clans and tribes. This was done at a potlatch.

Mainly for the prestige of the host, guests had to be lavishly feasted and entertained. They had to be presented with gifts, also, for their service as witnesses. Since the gifts would be returned later, however, with interest, the potlatch tended to serve as a bank and insurance company as well as a court and festival of the arts.  
(*Once Upon a Totem*, viii-ix)

To understand further the kind of economic scheme that Harris is dealing with here, and just how widespread it was among ancient peoples, Lewis Hyde's searching analysis of the place of art and the creative spirit in western, market-oriented societies in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* is useful. Demonstrating a strong admiration for the ways of earlier societies, Hyde sets up an oppositional structure between the constantly travelling gifts of ancient societies, an economy in which any gifted object gains value the more it is in circulation and thus the

more history that accrues to it, and the hoarded gifts of western society which "banks" its economy and perceives wealth in terms of keeping treasure rather than sending it into further circulation. In his introduction he says:

Every culture offers its citizens an image of what it is to be a man or woman of substance. There have been times and places in which a person came into his or her social being through the dispersal of his gifts, the "big man" or "big woman" being that one through whom the most gifts flowed. The mythology of a market society reverses the picture: getting rather than giving is the mark of a substantial person, and the hero is "self-possessed", "self-made." (xiv)

Harris presents the same sort of picture in her versions of the potlatch though Hyde's knowledge is more complex. He goes on to acknowledge, for instance, a historical fact that should perhaps be taken into account:

When American ethnologists first studied the potlatch at the end of the nineteenth century, over a hundred years of trading with the whites had changed it to its roots. We must therefore look upon the literature we have about potlatch with a wary eye - what is truly aboriginal and what is an accommodation to the new economy? Before the Europeans appeared, for example, a chief was likely to give only one formal potlatch during his lifetime, the one at which he assumed his chieftainship. The tribe would labour a year or more to prepare the ceremony, if only to collect the treasure to be given away, not just coppers, but sea otter and marmot pelts, eulachon oil, tusk shells, skins of albino deer, and nobility blankets woven of mountain-goat wool and cords of yellow cedar bark. When Franz Boas, the first ethnographer to study the potlatch, stayed with the Kwakiutl in the 1890s, however, the gifts were trade items, easy to manufacture and cheap to acquire, and potlatches were held all the time. (29)

How much one can depend on the authenticity of the details about native society that appear in the versions of Indian tales by non-native writers is tricky, especially when one has to consider that many contemporary natives have no more detailed and authentic knowledge of their early tribal culture than do the members of any other culture that used to depend on oral transmission of knowledge. Sorting out what is and what is not absolutely authentic to the ways and culture of ancient societies is surely a fraught task, particularly when considering a society with an oral literature, for even the contemporary members of such a society may not always have access to the tales. Ella E. Clark tells of the troubles she had in collecting authentic stories from Indian storytellers:

Today, these old tales, which have been transmitted orally for countless generations, are known by only a few Indians, most of them more than seventy years of age. In almost every village I visited, someone said, "If you had only come last year! The person who could have helped you most died last winter" - usually at the age of ninety or older.

Many of the younger Indians are scornful of the tales or apologetic about them.  
(*Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*, 2)

In the early 1960s Christie Harris was fortunate in being given the chance to achieve a level of authentic knowledge not generally accorded at that time to non-natives. She found favour with the descendants of Charles Edenshaw, the Eagle Chief Edinsa, who had become a great artist in order to preserve the disappearing tale of his tribe. Edinsa's daughter, Florence Davidson (Jadal q'eganga) agreed to talk to Harris over the course of a summer in Masset, telling "all the treasured old family stories" (SATAAS, 114). This trust in Harris may be considered by some to confirm that

the details in her Indian re-tellings make her versions more acceptable than Penny Petrone suggests in her study, though for purists, no amount of native confirmation will make it right for one culture to appropriate the history and culture of another.

Harris's eight books of native stories make no attempt to cover the full range of themes available within the tales recorded by ethnologists in archives. Mostly she concentrates upon those with young protagonists, some of whom need to learn no more than a lesson in tribal values, others of whom carry the fate of their families in their hands throughout harrowing adventures, and a few of whom are involved in versions of the Haida creation stories, such as Ice Ribs in "The Boy and the Sea Monsters". Some of the characters are mythological in nature, some are historical. Often the reader is invited by Harris to draw comparisons with European folk and fairy tales in an attempt to assert some universality of theme (the kind of comparison that First Nations people themselves are now objecting to), particularly with regard to the princess tales. The whole of the award-winning book *The Trouble with Princesses* rests on the premise that princesses are princesses no matter which culture's stories they appear in, though one would have to point out that European fairy tale princesses are not part of a matrilinear society and are indeed far from that sort of importance. Some of Harris's tales give detailed descriptions, particularly of the dress and habits of young aristocrats. For instance, in Chapter 2 of *Raven's Cry*, the young (male) chief-to-be Yatza makes his sister's gorgeous wedding cloak according to strict rules of decoration:

Maada's wedding cloak was of sea otter pelts, fur side inside. Its outer surface was tinted a lovely marine-blue; and as Yatza put the last fine line of black paint on its stylized Eagle decoration, his eyes glowed with an artist's satisfaction and with a young man's pride in his skill.(21)

Yatza had prepared the blue-green paint for the outer surface. He had traded carved horn spoons for rare, blue-green abalone pearl for border ornamentation: Haida abalone shells were lined with a paler, more silvery-rose iridescence. He had ordered the precise placing of the shining discs. Then he had designed and painted Eagle across the back of the robe.(22)

In a number of tales, the aristocratic young protagonists never stray far from home without their requisite number of attendants, four for young men, two for young women, and the princesses are liable to have a special basket with a cosmetic stick and a woman's knife as standard contents. Readers are reminded often of the meaning of the totems, with their emblems, and of the matrilinear system of inheritance, and of how the clans are arranged and named. The world of the stories is peopled with both humans and their human friends and enemies and also, more to the point in these tales, animal spirits who live in societies and villages like the humans do, only in magic places. Of particular importance are the tales such as "The One-Horned Mountain Goat" and "The Princess and the Bears" in which human arrogance and forgetting to honour the animal one has hunted are severely punished. Groups who forget the old ways are common in the stories and they are commonly punished, too, often with death, always with at least a loss of their substantial livelihoods. And, as in all her novels, Harris shows in many of the tales a good grasp of child psychology and a wry understanding of the ways of teenagers, in particular their impatience with traditions and old customs and also their fast arrogances and equally fast repentances.

A most important aspect of the coastal tribal societies for Harris has been their highly sophisticated art, expressed in their carvings on totems, canoes, houses and domestic objects, as well as on weapons and jewellery. Throughout *Raven's Cry*, her history of the Haida's disastrous contact with the whites, Harris talks knowledgeably about Haida art in a detailed way that shows how much she has learned from her contact with the sculptor Bill Reid, the half-Haida grandson of the famous Edinsa. Reid himself, like the people mentioned by Ella Clarke in *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*, was initially ignorant of his ancestors' art and had to learn it from scratch when he was an adult



living away from the coast, so obscure had Haida art become in the mid-twentieth century. How well he succeeded in restoring Haida carving to its previous illustrious height is recorded in the beautiful book *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. This gives details in photographs and text of the making of Bill Reid's masterpiece sculpture of the same name, of a canoe filled with mythological creatures such as Frog, Raven, Bear and Mouse Woman. That Reid agreed to be the illustrator for the white author's *Raven's Cry* speaks to the high regard in which Harris was held by her Haida friends.

The most entertaining of Harris's Haida tales are the Mouse Woman stories which she basically had to write from the beginning, since this *narnauk* had no complete stories of her own in the original material in the archives or in the native tellings. In *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses*, in the foreword, Harris puts Mouse Woman at the other end of the scale of awesomeness from Raven, the Great One "who could change himself into any shape he wanted, in order to trick people". Mouse Woman, on the other hand, is there to help people, not to trick them: "She especially watched the tricksters. And she watched the young people they tricked into trouble"(3). Her job is to rescue the young from malice, which she does successfully because, in spite of her tiny size, she has the power to make the young change their ways themselves with only a little bit of direction from her. She is both tiny and effective, a lesson for the young in size not mattering in a crunch, and she acts like a fairy-tale godmother in European tradition in her guardianship of children. The tales in *Mouse Woman and the Vanished Princesses* are quite nightmarish, as are the dazzling illustrations by Douglas Tait, a non-native artist who illustrates quite a few of Harris's books of Indian stories. Here we have young princesses at the mercy of horrid forces such as the Giant Snails and the terrible wrinkled old arrowmaker, and the fear of being eaten is only just held at bay and no more in most of them. They are full of details about daily life among the high-born Haida, such as the gathering of the berries by Rh-pi-sunt and her maidens in *The Princess and the Bears*. The crabby, spoiled little girl, Rh-pi-sunt, who can't make a proper basket and gets fed up with everyone around her, meets a sad sort of fate eventually, stolen away from her own people at the start and becoming unfit to live with them when she is returned to them. Many of Harris's tales do not have the happy endings usual in the European tradition, but rather they pay attention to the starker nature of the original tales she is re-telling. A robust attitude to being human in a challenging world governed by often-unfriendly spirit forces governs these tales and this suits Harris's mode of writing very well.

All seven of the native story books have their strengths, particularly in the amount of information about tribal life that is delivered without being obvious to the reader. Harris never stops being a teacher but she disguises it successfully for the most part in these re-tellings. The history book *Raven's Cry* is more open in its detailing of recorded events as white trading contact with the West Coast tribes is seen destroying much of the proud society that had flourished on the coast for hundreds of years. There is no doubt whose side Harris ranges herself on throughout this book. It is permeated with admiration for the old Haida society, for its art and artifacts and way of life, and Harris makes short work of most of the white characters who are seen as grasping and ignorant villains for the most part. It is partisan, but the moral outrage that drove it in 1966 has come to be the common public response in 1999.

In *Native Literature in Canada*, the native writer Lenore Keeshig-Tobias is quoted as saying:

Stories, you see, are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships, and attitudes of a people. Stories show how a people, a culture, thinks. (121)

True of native stories, it is equally true of the stories of all other cultures, and if ever a storyteller has come to understand this, that person is surely Christie Harris. As an immigrant pioneer child with two new nationalities (American and Canadian) and an Irish heritage, she was raised among people who used storytelling as a way of making their way from one world to another, from the past European life to the present new world in Canada. Harris's early radio storytelling was a part of the making of the new society and the new stories out of the pieces of the old. Cultures do not stand still; they need their storytellers to both preserve that which is valued and at the same time to

move on. This is the task that Christie Harris has performed for Canadian culture over the past seventy years of writing for its children, and performed so well that she has become a member of the Order of Canada and won numerous awards and honours, including two awards from the Canadian Library Association, the Canada Council Children's Literature Prize (now the Governor General's Award) and the Vicky Metcalf Award. Even as recently as 1998, she was honoured with a Lifetime Achievement Award by B.C. Gas for her "outstanding contribution to the literary arts in British Columbia". Christie Harris's "lovely nesty pile" of stories has been rightly judged to be outstanding by various parties, not the least of whom are her child readers from the past. Ironically, adults brought up on Christie Harris can now buy for their children copies of only *Raven's Cry* and her most recent book *Something Weird Is Going On*. All her other titles are now out of print, so that the stories about Morann and Maeve and Laetl and Mouse Woman and Rh-pi-sunt can presently be gathered only from community library shelves or from second-hand bookstores.

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*The Christie Harris papers. An inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Library. Compiler: Marlys Chevrefils. Editor: Apollonia Steele. Biocritical essay: Alexandra West. [Calgary]: University of Calgary Press [c2000].*