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When Hamilton, Ontario-born anthropologist Thomas McIlwraith travelled to British Columbia's remote central coast to study the Nuxalkmc (formerly the Bella Coola Indians) in 1922, he had no idea that he would be breaking the law by participating in illegal ceremonies.

Nonetheless, on more than one occasion, he wore a supernatural mosquito mask and darted around the Nuxalk Hall like a hungry insect.

"I'm supposed to keep up a steady buzz and carry a small stick in my mouth with which I occasionally rush one of the spectators," the 22-year old wrote his father. "But it's hard to see through the mask and I keep bumping into the wood heater. This job of mine is certainly a queer one!"

A few years later McIlwraith became the first fulltime academic anthropologist in Canada at the University of Toronto and also the Keeper of the Ethnological Collections at the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology.

Among other positions, he also served as Chairman of the Canadian Social Science Research Council, President of the Royal Canadian Institute and Chairman of the Advisory Board for the Protection of Archaeological and Historical Sites of Ontario.

His two volume book *The Bella Coola Indians* is the most comprehensive study of a Canadian Pacific Northwest culture to date and continues to be used as a reference by many, including the Nuxalkmc themselves.

Born in 1899 in Hamilton, Ontario, McIlwraith studied at McGill University in Montreal before serving overseas in the King's Own Scottish Borders during World War I.



After the war he obtained a degree in anthropology from St. John's College, Cambridge, England. He was teaching there when he received a letter from Edward Sapir, the first director of the anthropology division of the Victoria Memorial Museum (today's Canadian Museum of Civilization) offering him a job studying the Bella Coola Indians.

It didn't take McIlwraith long to find a room in the tiny settlement of Bella Coola; the problem was finding subjects to interview. To begin with, it was early spring and most Nuxalkmc were away working at coastal canneries.

Three older men - Joshua Moody, "Captain" Rueben Schooner and Jim Pollard - remained in the village and were willing to speak with McIlwraith but their English was limited and McIlwraith's knowledge of the Nuxalk language was nil.

Although young, McIlwraith was resourceful. He spent several weeks learning Chinook, a combination of First Nations' languages, English and French that was still spoken on the coast. But he soon discovered that while Chinook might be adequate for talking about fishing, hunting and trading, it left much to be desired when it came to discussing religion, philosophy or culture.

So McIlwraith began learning the Nuxalk language.

McIlwraith practiced the Cambridge style of anthropology where study of a native tribe invariably meant travel to a distant location where a researcher immersed themselves in a foreign culture and language, and, ideally, became a friend of their informants.

The objective of these researchers, who usually made only one field trip during their study, was to thoroughly understand their subject, eventually presenting their findings as a cohesive whole.

In the United States anthropologists usually lived relatively close to their subjects so were able to make numerous short visits to the field where skilled interpreters were generally easy to find. As a rule, their reports focused on individual components of a culture.

In Bella Coola, once Moody, Schooner and Pollard realized that McIlwraith was genuinely interested in their traditions, they welcomed him as a confidant.

"They resent the condensation with which most white men regard them so that contact with one who was friendly and sympathetic came as a pleasant surprise," McIlwraith noted in *The Bella Coola Indians*. And he was honoured when he heard a Nuxalk person refer to him as a "good white man."

But Moody, Schooner and Pollard were jealous of his time. So, to keep the peace the anthropologist employed humour and good-naturedly accepted practical jokes and a variety of affectionate and sometimes rude nicknames.

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