

# DISCOVERY PASSAGES – GIVING A VOICE TO THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF ALERT BAY

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**Garry Thomas Morse uses poetry to explore how the Potlach ban stripped the Kwakwaka'wakw community of their cultural heritage.**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how poet Garry Thomas Morse discusses the maltreatment of the Kwakwaka'wakw people of Alert Bay in his 2011 collection *Discovery Passages*. Alert Bay is a small village on Cormorant Island on northeast Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada; and has a history rooted deep in Indigenous heritage and practices. This article aims to unpack how Morse adopts the voices and tales of key figures throughout the periods of extreme repression, and details how their spirit was inspiringly strong throughout times of hardship and suffering.

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Years before the Europeans initiated contact with Alert Bay in the late eighteenth century,<sup>1</sup> the Kwakwaka'wakw people traditionally inhabiting the area were comprised of twenty-eight sub-communities.<sup>2</sup> These communities lived in harmony, all speaking dialects of Kwak'wala, but practicing their own unique cultures. Over time, the European settlers began to take control and restrict the

Indigenous landscape, applying the name of one band, the Kwakiutl, to the whole group, disregarding their individuality.

Approximately 1,200-1,500 people live within the village and have suffered the effects ever since.

Canadian Literature has been an inclusive and informative means of highlighting the

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<sup>1</sup> Alert Bay, < <http://www.alertbay.ca/about-alert-bay> > .

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Encyclopaedia, Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl), <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/kwakiutl>>.

struggles that Indigenous people have met since restrictions were placed upon their culture. In particular, poetry has served as a vessel of voice and change for the repressed communities, with many collections spotlighting significant figures who are finally emerging after decades of appropriation.

Garry Thomas Morse, an award-winning Canadian poet and novelist of Kwakwaka'wakw descent, is a key front runner in the Canadian poetry scene. In his 2011 poetry collection, *Discovery Passages*,<sup>3</sup> Morse strives to tell the harrowing stories of his ancestors' struggle for liberation through a symphony of repressed voices. The *BNA Act* of 1867 marked the end of the nation-to-nation relationship and set the stage for the *Indian Act*<sup>4</sup> of 1876, which in turn, ushered in the era of colonisation and enforced cultural assimilation.

A focal point of the collection is the Potlatch Ban, one of the many by-laws introduced under the *Indian Act* of 1876. Other by-laws including the Native Language Ban and Fine Moneys, had a devastating effect on the wider Indigenous community in Canada. Morse chooses to focus mainly on how the barring of the cultural Potlatch ceremony devastated the

Ancestral people from Alert Bay and Quadra Island.

In his poem, 'No Comment', which is split into multiple parts, Morse speaks through the commanding and threatening voice of Wm. M. Halliday, the Indian Agent for the Kwakwaka'wakw Agency from 1906 until 1932.<sup>5</sup> Serving the North Island and Mainland Inlets, Halliday oversaw the implementation of the Potlatch Ban in the centre of its originating territory. Halliday felt that this tradition was a 'particularly wasteful and destructive custom, and created ill-feeling, jealousy, and in some cases great poverty'. In 'No Comment', Morse depicts Halliday's negative views and influential force over the community in the stanza:

'band, habit, giving, potlatch, each birth,  
marriage or death  
warn you  
the habit stopped  
must be enforced those who break  
punished'<sup>6</sup>

The powerful end line to the stanza, 'punished', summarises the main aim of the Indian Act: to identify any rule breakers who were trying to retain their freedom and either fine or incarcerate them. The asyndetic list

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<sup>3</sup> Garry Thomas Morse, *Discovery Passages*, (Columbia: Talonbooks, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous Corporate Training Inc, Potlatch Ban: Abolishment of First Nations Ceremonies, <<https://www.ictinc.ca/the-potlatch-ban-abolishment-of-first-nations-ceremonies>>.

<sup>5</sup> North Island Gazette, Northern Vancouver Island ~ The Undiscovered Coast: Indian Agent William May Halliday, (August 27<sup>th</sup> 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Garry Thomas Morse, *Discovery Passages*, 'No Comment', p31.

divulges the fundamental occurrences in life: ‘birth’, ‘marriage’, ‘death’, and includes ‘potlatch’ amongst the major events, illustrating its importance once more. This theme of celebration is harshly juxtaposed by the inclusion of words from the semantic field of danger, such as ‘warn’, ‘enforced’ and ‘break’, which conveys the opposition between the freedom of birth and the shackles of oppression.

In addition to this the Potlatch is likened to a ‘habit’ twice in this extract, insinuating that it is something annoying and detrimental in the long run, something that should be stopped over time in order to achieve personal growth. Punishments imposed upon the Indigenous people included the confiscation and sale of Indigenous artefacts to museums across Canada by Indian agents.

Short, declarative statements are featured throughout the poem, disrupting any rhythm that could have been included, and adding a harshness to the form. This mirrors the anger directed both towards and from the community of Alert Bay, putting their fear and torment into a jagged piece of poetry that refuses to use elegant language and polite address.

Another stanza of ‘No Comment’, featured below, broadcasts the voice of an additional

influential figure in the mistreatment of the Kwakwaka’wakw people: Sergeant Donald Angermann, who worked for the government’s RCMP investigative unit. Morse depicts how the Indian Agents were struggling to ‘cleanse’ the area from Indigenous tradition due to their underground rebellions:

“‘sentenced two months  
potlatching going on as bad as ever without  
foundation  
pig sty reserves  
Alert Bay Reserve the cleanest  
the cleanest”  
Sergt. D. Angermann  
Jan. 28, 1921’<sup>7</sup>

The juxtaposition between ‘pig sty’ and ‘cleanest’ shows how the Indigenous people outside of Alert Bay (living in the reserves that had not had such strict enforcement) were deemed to be dirty and animalistic, living under conditions and legislations that did not match those of the regimented settlers. Furthermore, it is suggested that the Canadian government sought to remove all traces of the Kwakwaka’wakw’s heritage and of their legacy, with Morse incorporating the repetition of the phrase ‘the cleanest’ to show how the Kwakwaka’wakw’s heritage was also regarded as unclean and to illustrate the ideology of a spotless country. Under Section 91(24) of the

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<sup>7</sup> Garry Thomas Morse, *Discovery Passages*, ‘No Comment’, p41.

Indian Act, the Parliament of Canada was provided with exclusive legislative authority over 'Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians'. By grouping every Indigenous individual under the umbrella term 'Indian', the government sought to deprive them of their cultural identity and de-humanise them, regarding them to be of lesser value and status. This was an attempt to reduce a plethora of years of creative experience, tradition, and wisdom, to a singular word, seemingly overnight.

However, the spirit and determination of the Kwakwaka'wakw people refuses to be silenced and controlled by the settlers and political hierarchy, as they celebrated 'as bad as ever without foundation'. This decision was a perilous one, with the by-law stating that 'every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the "Potlatch" is guilty of a misdemeanour, and shall be liable to imprisonment [...] and any other Indian or other person who encourages... an Indian or Indians to get up such a festival, or to celebrate the same... is guilty of a like offense...'.<sup>8</sup>

Such an instance is covered by Morse in 'No Comment', as told in the stanza below,

““big potlatch reported at Christmas

investigated by police  
the court any way biased”  
Wm. M. Halliday, *Indian Agent*  
Dec. 21, 1921’<sup>8</sup>

Resistance to losing the freedom to continue with traditions was severely underestimated, and even with the threat of arrest looming closer every day, the people of Alert Bay remained determined. As reported in the stanza above, a famous underground Potlatch took place at Christmas in Alert Bay in 1921. Official reports claimed that 'Namgis Chief Dan Cranmer held a six-day Potlatch to celebrate a wedding. The Potlatch was held on Village Island in an effort to keep the activities out from under the nose of the Indian Agents and missionaries.' Unfortunately, the celebration was detected, and 45 people were arrested and charged under the Potlatch Law. Moreover, almost 750 items (from that particular Potlatch) were confiscated and later transported to Alert Bay and displayed; admission was charged, and the Canadian government profited off the theft of the ancestral artefacts. Most of these artefacts were later sent east, the majority of which were sent to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, now the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa. This specific incident can easily be viewed as the poster child for

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<sup>8</sup> Garry Thomas Morse, *Discovery Passages*, 'No Comment', p42.

Canadian colonial behaviour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Morse spotlights Halliday's direct and emotionally devoid way of referring to the maltreatment of the Indigenous community, conveying him to be a callous figure, lacking empathy and humanity. Morse also refers to the inequality experienced in Court, stating that it is 'any way biased', suggesting that even if the people of Alert Bay strove to fight for justice, they would be met by a prejudiced system that would only deepen their struggles.

Although it was once outlawed by the Indian Act, the Potlatch remains an integral part of

modern community life, being celebrated annually and utilising the Indigenous artefacts that were once locked away as items of taboo. Canadian Literature, with the help of poets like Morse, continues to expand its voice of the silenced, educating and offering different outlooks of the Indigenous communities that have suffered for centuries and are only just achieving retribution against their repressors.

## REFERENCES

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