

RAVEN FEATHER AND THE TSIMSHIAN: A LOOK AT *THE MOUNTAIN GOATS OF TEMPLAHAM* ILLUSTRATED BY ELIZABETH CLEAVER

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Elizabeth Cleaver (1939-1985) from Montreal, Quebec is known as an artist and illustrator through her work with children's book illustrations. She started illustrating children's books in 1968-69 when William Toye asked her to work with him on his book, *The Wind Has Wings: Poems from Canada* (1968).¹ Her work in this genre includes many books, such as *How Summer Came to Canada*, *Canadian Wonder Tales*, *The Witch of the North*, *The Loon's Necklace*, *The Fire Stealer*, *Petrouchka*, *The New Wind Has Wings* and *The Enchanted Caribou*.² The book that is the subject of this paper is *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham* (1969) retold by William Toye and illustrated by Elizabeth Cleaver.

The Mountain Goats of Temlaham is essentially a tale about the treatment of nature and how important it is to do what is right. The setting is the Northwest Coast, signified by the presence of the totem poles. In the story the hunters of a certain tribe begin to treat the goats disrespectfully by over-hunting them for no reason other than greed. Eventually the children of the tribe learn from the adult's disregard for life, and begin to cruelly torment one particular small goat. A young boy named Raven Feather steps in to rescue the goat and release it back to the forest. Later, the hunters of the village are taught a lesson by the goats by being tricked and falling to their demise off a mountain. The only person who is saved is Raven Feather and he is seen telling the story to the children of the village, so that they would know how to treat wild life.

The image on page 10 and 11 is central to this story. This is the scene where Raven Feather helps the kid (fig. 1). The first page shows Raven Feather holding the kid in his arms. Raven Feather is dressed simply, in a long red tunic. The ground is defined by the overlapping of different colors such as blue and green. The second image of Raven Feather shows him letting the kid go near a totem pole. The only clear indicator that this is a First Nations child is the presence of the totem pole, off to the side. The images are bold yet simple and constrained; Cleaver does not over-decorate the pages of this picture book. Her style in its two-dimensionality directness and linear quality reminds us of Paleolithic cave painting. This is evident in the drawing of the goat here and even more so in the scene of the hunters killing the goats for sport, in the simple linear forms of the goats and their leaping motion (fig. 2). This connection is enforced by the scene being depicted, hunting, a common trope in the Paleolithic drawings located in a complex of caves in Lascaux in southwestern France.

Cleaver found inspiration for her medium of collage in her childhood activities of creating paper cutouts.³ "The foundations of her illustrations were monoprints pulled wet from a glass plate to create intensely-colored, texturally rich papers."⁴ Cleaver used those materials in various techniques such as cutting, tearing and layering while combining the paper with unlikely objects. These could be natural materials like bark, pearls and grass, or man-made objects such as zippers.⁵ Cleaver's idea was to use the mixed media to create the best possible platform for expressing the feelings and creating the moods she wanted her illustrations to express.⁶

The decision to develop children's books centered on First Nations themes was the result of the shared interests of Toye and Cleaver. In the 1960s Toye was concerned that the many children's books from Britain and the United States read by Canada's youth did not reflect the true character and spirit of Canadian society. He turned to First Nations stories to capture the uniqueness of Canada for children through the stories of its Native people.⁷

Cleaver herself was also interested in First Nations stories for children and discovered there was a definite lack of published material, after trying to find some books on this subject.⁸

Cleaver's attention to Native culture was by no means superficial. This is exemplified by the research that Cleaver did for the *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham*, a story about the Tsimshian people of British Columbia.⁹ Cleaver travelled to British Columbia to learn about the culture there.¹⁰ She was determined to allow the spirit of the story and the culture of the people to come through her illustrations to accurately portray the Tsimshian people:

I had to convey their close bond they had with nature and animals, and their highly decorative art forms. Their works of art functioned as a means of personal and cultural expression. Dancing and music were inseparable parts of their lives, and the dramatic impact of their performance was heightened by the use of costumes and masks, painted screens and mechanical devices. I had to create this mood and feeling in the illustrations for the legend to come alive.¹¹

In the same way that a writer tries to convey a mood and feeling about the character she portrays through text, Cleaver as an illustrator recognized that it was important to give her viewers a sense of the people, their interactions with one another and their environment through her pictures.

Cleaver's dedication to comprehensive research can be seen in the cultural references she makes in *Mountain Goats*. At this time, the mid-twentieth century, many productions of First Native imagery was stereotypical and romanticized. In contrast, for *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham*, Cleaver found out all she could about the culture of the Tsimshian people. Their name means "People of the Skeena" for the location they occupy: the Skeena River.¹² One of the tribes of the Tsimshian is the Gitksan who live in the upper area of the Skeena River.¹³ This shares a connection with Toye and Cleaver's book because the story of the one horned mountain goat can be found there. The tale is the same: a boy rescues a goat after finding it badly treated and the village is punished later by the mountain goats for their abuse of nature.¹⁴ An example of this story and image can be found in the Gitksan village of Ans'Pa Yaxw where there is a mountain goat monument to Chief Lilbecks (fig. 3).¹⁵ The one horned mountain goat of the story can also be found on totem poles. In the lower village of Gitsegukla, there is the Pole-of-the-Moon of Chief Cooksen (or Guksan), upon which stands the one horned goat (fig. 4).¹⁶ In *Mountain Goats*, Cleaver also illustrates the one horned goat on the exterior of the lodge on page 15 (fig. 5). Although Cleaver based her design not on the totem pole represented here, but on a ladle she found at the National Museum of Civilization, both images share a striking resemblance.¹⁷ The horns are placed in the same way: emerging straight from the top of the head into a point. The faces are also similar: the eyes are the same shape, the brows have the same definition and the chins of the goats both rise up as if it was a smile.

Although this evidence confirms that Cleaver was attempting to be truthful to what she saw and learned this does not mean she necessarily knew the meaning of all the symbols and imagery she chose to portray this Temlaham tale. For example, Cleaver stated that she chose the image of the totem pole with a hole in it for the title page because she thought it was beautiful and special (fig. 8).¹⁸ She did not know the significance of this image until years later when she found out it was once a ceremonial doorway to a dwelling.¹⁹

Elizabeth Cleaver illustrates a tale that not only teaches its young audience about the respect and protection of wild life but also teaches young children about the culture of the Tsimshian people of the Northwest Coast. It must be noted, however, that this portrayal of a culture not one's own can be problematic. The use of symbols and imagery can contain meaning that the user is unaware of. These images are seen as signifying the

Tsimshian cultures; however, they are also inauthentic because they are being used from an outsider's point of view. That having been said, Cleaver was a pioneer in this endeavour, leading the way for First Nations authors and artists to create picture books to teach their own Native as well as Canadian children the lessons of Canada's Aboriginal people. *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham* is perhaps even more relevant to-day given our wanton destruction of the environment and disrespect for wild life and nature.

FIGURES



FIG. 1

Illustrations by Elizabeth Cleaver in William Toye,
The Mountain Goats of Temlaham (New York: H. Z. Walck, 1969) 10-11.



FIG. 2

Hunters over-killing the goats. Illustrations by Elizabeth Cleaver in William Toye, *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham* (New York: H. Z. Walck, 1969).



FIG. 3

One horned goat monument of Chief Lilbecks.

(Image: <http://www.sfu.ca/brc/virtualvillage/tsimshian/gitxsan/anspayaxw/monumental_art_of_anspa_yaxw_village/#Anspayxaw22>).



FIG. 4

Pole-of-the-Moon of Chief Cooksen/Guxsan with one horned goat motif.

(Image: Emmons, 1910

<http://www.sfu.ca/brc/virtualvillage/tsimshian/gitxsan/gitsegukla/gitsegukla_lower_village/>).



FIG. 5

One-horned goat on the exterior of a lodge. Illustrations by Elizabeth Cleaver in William Toye, *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham* (New York: H. Z. Walck, 1969).



FIG. 6

Villagers preparing for a feast. Illustrations by Elizabeth Cleaver in William Toye, *The Mountain Goats of Temlaham* (New York: H. Z. Walck, 1969).



FIG. 7

Photo of men wearing Chilkat-Tlingit blankets.

(Image: <<http://www.sheldonmuseum.org/chilkatblanket.htm>>).

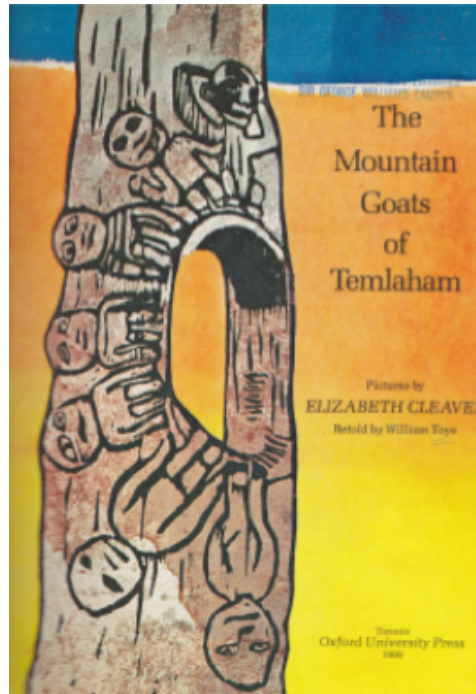


FIG. 8

Title page of *The Mountains Goats of Temlaham* (New York: H. Z. Walck, 1969).

ENDNOTES

¹“Elizabeth Cleaver, 1939-1985,” *Library and Archives Canada*

<<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/literaryarchives/027011-200.031-e.html>>.

² Cleaver.

³ Gail Edwards, and Judith Saltman, “Elizabeth Cleaver, William Toye, and Oxford University Press: Creating the Canadian Picturebook,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 42:1 (2004): 35.

⁴ Edwards, and Saltman, 35.

⁵ Edwards, and Saltman, 35.

⁶ Edwards, and Saltman, 36.

⁷ Gail Edwards and Judith Saltman. *Picturing Canada: A History of Canadian Children's Illustrated Books and Publishing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) 59.

⁸ Elizabeth Cleaver, “Words and Images: An Investigation into the Literal and Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text,” Dissertation (Montreal: Concordia University, 1980) 194.

⁹ Cleaver, 194.

¹⁰ Cleaver, 195.

¹¹ Cleaver, 195.

¹² “Tsimshian,” Simon Fraser University <<http://www.sfu.ca/brc/virtualvillage/tsimshian/>>.

¹³ “Tsimshian.”

¹⁴ “Monumental Art of An'spa yaxw Village,” Simon Fraser University

<http://www.sfu.ca/brc/virtualvillage/tsimshian/gitxsan/anspayaxw/monumental_art_of_anspa_yaxw_village/#Anspayaxw22>.

¹⁵ “Monumental Art of An'spa yaxw Village.”

¹⁶ “Totem Poles of the Lower Village of Gitsegukla,” Simon Fraser University

<http://www.sfu.ca/brc/virtualvillage/tsimshian/gitxsan/gitsegukla/gitsegukla_lower_village/>.

¹⁷ Cleaver, 196.

¹⁸ Cleaver, 199.

¹⁹ Cleaver, 199.