

REVIEW

CHASING THE DARK: PERSPECTIVES ON PLACE, HISTORY, AND ALASKA NATIVE LAND CLAIMS

*Edited by Kenneth L. Pratt, 2009. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alaska Region, ANCSA Office, Anchorage
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When I agreed to review this fascinating book, I figured it would be a fairly straightforward and familiar type of academic exercise. After all, I am a northern archaeologist, had been to many of these regions in Alaska, and know many of the authors. I even thought I was familiar with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). But nothing prepared me for one of the most unusual books I have ever run across. I should have been forewarned when I picked up this ridiculously heavy 472-page tome. What I discovered was a beautifully illustrated mindscape of texts ranging from government lingo to poetry, self-examinations, and stern reminders of the colonial past to the challenges facing Alaska youth today. Section 14(h) (1) of ANCSA was a one-of-a-kind effort resulting in a vast, rich and diverse record of Alaska Native history and culture; but *Chasing the Dark* is certainly no ordinary academic treatise on the subject.

The goal of the publication is very clear: to reveal the richness of the records of this now thirty-year-old program and, as pointed out by the editor, to rectify the fact that this program is largely unknown to the general public and even to many Alaska Natives. The starting point is ANCSA 14(h)(1) legislation (Public Law 92-203), passed in 1971. The act created twelve Alaska Native regional corporations, extinguished all claims of aboriginal rights in Alaska, and awarded title to 40 million acres of land. This was done for the simple reason that access was needed for the oil pipeline that was to be built from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. Like many Native Americans in the Lower 48, Alaska Natives had been “bought” along with their terri-

ories in 1867, albeit after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the Thirteenth Amendment of 1865. This corporate model was again applied to Alaska Natives through ANCSA, and this is the curious backdrop for the whole enterprise. The Native corporations were to identify and apply for conveyance of historic and cultural sites and cemeteries which the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), following agency research, was to then certify. This is the only place in ANCSA legislation where culture and history were central to the claims.

The book is divided into six sections, most with multiple chapters, and three appendices. Additional sidebars, photos, illustrations, maps, vignettes, and essays are interspersed throughout the chapters.

BEGINNINGS

In Section I, Kenneth L. Pratt, editor and a major contributor to the volume, provides a detailed description of the program, which he has managed since 1996. Pratt pulls no punches about the difficulties of making this thing work, the failures of government agencies, researchers, and conflicts within the Native communities themselves. One can hardly imagine a more daunting task.

HISTORY AND CULTURE

Section II illustrates the varied nature of the sources and the challenges of the ANCSA endeavor. The thirteen papers begin with a chapter by William L. Sheppard

on Siberian-Alaskan warfare, the history of battle sites, and the nature of these conflicts, a largely unknown aspect of Alaska Native history. Rita Miraglia documents Steller's landfall on Kayak Island in 1741, the first time a European set foot on Alaska soil. Alice J. Lynch and Pratt give an account of Neets'it Gwich'in caribou fences and caches, illustrated with drawings and photos of elders. William E. Simeone writes of the varied historical narratives relating to fishing on the Copper River, the Batzulnetas site in particular, and the Katie John case in which Ahtna fishing rights were contested and eventually won. Matthew O'Leary provides two Koniag place-name lists and maps of Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula based on information provided by elders Anakenti Zeeder, Larry Matfay, and Nick Abalama. Miraglia writes of now-abandoned Chilkat Tlingit villages near Haines claimed under ANCSA and the difficulties of this conveyance. In "Vestiges of the Past," Francis Broderick and Pratt present a collage of artifacts from the Kuskokwim Bay area. Pratt writes of identity and change among the Dena'ina people of the Kenai through an interview with Peter Kalifornsky and Fedosia Sacaloff. He also writes of the story of Kapegualria, a shaman, and a unique Yup'ik memorial mask illustrating the story, along with a place-name analysis. David P. Staley presents fascinating material on settlement mobility in the Buckland region, a treasure to archaeologists trying to understand site remains. The story of a *tengmiarpak*, a giant eagle, is presented in a sidebar by Pratt. Miraglia follows with a great paper that describes the process of ANCSA documentation and research. In "Weaving History," she defines the eight "strands of evidence" involved: the application by the regional corporation, the physical setting, the cultural remains, the historical maps, the historical photos, the oral histories, the written histories, and finally, the interpretation of the material as a whole. The last chapter, by Pratt, presents toponyms, cultural geography, and a site inventory of the Kulukak Bay area of southwestern Alaska. This chapter lays a foundation for the subsequent discussions.

My main quibble is that the reader needs better overview maps of Alaska to follow the narrative. A map showing language areas, topography, vegetation, and climate would also have been helpful, especially for non-Alaskans. The individual maps in the various articles are colorful but needed insets showing the reader where these places are in Alaska, as well as north arrows and scales. The color pho-

tographs are spectacular and bring the places, accounts of elders, and the entire book to life.

IMPLEMENTATION

O'Leary starts this section with a description of Edward W. Nelson's sledge journey through the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in 1878–1879. The Nelson collection is one of the finest in the Smithsonian Institution and is now part of the Arctic Studies exhibit at the Anchorage Museum. Miraglia writes of the hospitality and assistance of elders Pete and Ruth Koktelash of Nondalton—a tribute to their generosity and warm hearts towards hapless researchers. Matthew L. Ganley gives an account of the frustrating relocation of the Bear Rock Monument for the Bering Straits Native Corporation and the luck associated with the effort once earthquakes had done their work. Two sidebar texts on a grave at Chisana (Upper Tanana) and caves at Ikligurak, inhabited by invisible people, pop up before a chapter by O'Leary on prehistoric blowout sites at Dickey Lake in the Alaska Range. Miraglia examines Chugach "smokehouses," which functioned as dwellings of various kinds and actually have little to do with subsistence and the smoking of fish and game. Elder Frieda Roberts' retrospective on female menstruation restrictions is a sidebar narrative accompanied by the editor's comments on the sensitivity of such personal information.

Dale C. Slaughter's "Aleutian Field Images" gives an engaging visual account of fieldwork experience. O'Leary's chapter on the reindeer villages of the Lower Mulchatna River, Bristol Bay, reflects on Sheldon Jackson's reindeer program and his 1892 social engineering experiment. Pratt's "Reflections on Russian River" casts light on the fishing of "reds" (sockeye salmon) on the Kenai and the multiple stakeholders involved in this "public fishing hole." The ethnography and archaeology of this region is presented in a sidebar article that makes it clear that the Dena'ina did more than catch salmon in this area. Fred Harden writes of the nineteenth-century caribou hunters of the Seward Peninsula. Clues about a winter village called "Under-the-Rocks" on the Anvik River are presented in a sidebar text. O'Leary discusses the marine reservoir age of shells from archaeological sites on Uyak Bay, Kodiak Island; modern shells give dates up to a millennium too old, with serious repercussions for archaeology. Pratt writes of a weird experience involving a haunted site in southwest Alaska that made people sick—which Pratt experienced first-hand.

This section includes sites, surveys, oral histories, policy dilemmas, and methods encountered by ANCSA fieldworkers and their local colleagues. The images and maps are stunning. The diversity of the content is almost overwhelming, but Section IV, Interpretation and Innovation, boils the subject down.

INTERPRETATION AND INNOVATION

Robert M. Drozda's "An Agattu Island Journal" consists of notes and personal reflections on place, spontaneous thoughts, and memories of his time on this Aleutian island and, previously, on Nunivak Island. His wonderment captures the feeling of being there and "the mix of metaphor and logic that cannot be completely explained with linear language" in which the lines between "human consciousness and the physical world begin to blur" (p. 318). A sidebar on the Sawmill Bay site on Prince William Sound contains a quote by John Klashinoff from an ANCSA tape: "Don't destroy nothing." Gerald A. Bair and Pratt write of the Fish River Eskimos, the Omilak Mine, and the beautifully decorated Golovnin Bay drill bow from the Nelson collection. A sidebar describes Kokrines, an important abandoned Koyukon Athabascan village. Monica Sheldon's piece on the "dreadful" days of winter darkness and the power of the sun is a delightful essay on the story of a man named Akmaljar, who captured daylight in a seal bladder, and the songs, dances, and masks connected with this festival. Michael Seyfert gives a personal narrative of his experience of coming north and the process of listening and understanding voice and memory in oral histories. A sidebar presents a text on traditional teaching by two Native elders. Marshall elder Ben Fitka speaks of learning how to live on the land, and Wrangell elder Dick Stokes tells a migration story. "The Last Harvest" by Gerald Bair is an elegant fictionalized reconstruction of the last blue fox harvest on Agattu Island, inspired by Parascovia Lokanin Wright and Innokenty Golodoff. This story takes place over eight months (August to March) and leads up to the Japanese invasion in 1942.

This "Interpretation" section is more essay than description and captures the essence of human experience, including that of researchers, in this part of the world.

MOVING FORWARD

This section returns to the nuts and bolts of implementing ANCSA 14(h)(1) and opens with an overview of the

places and cemeteries in the vast Doyon region by Robert A. Sattler, who describes the administration of this investigative and legal process through the Tanana Chiefs Conference, the necessity for redoing documentation that proved inadequate, interagency coordination, consultation, management of allotments, and continuing work with the ANCSA archives. "Protecting the Past for the Future," by John F.C. Johnson of Chugach Alaska Corporation, gives Native voice to the loss of ancestral lands and the urgent need to preserve Native knowledge as world heritage. The work of the Sealaska Corporation, one of the twelve regional corporations, is presented by Sarah Demmert. Like Johnson, she describes the dilemmas of ANCSA and the conflicts between fulfilling government protocols and perpetuating Native culture. Carl M. Hild writes of the value of local and traditional knowledge and proposes that those who use the ANCSA materials deposit reports or summary materials in the collection in order to develop and sustain it.

The ANCSA staff lists in Appendix A are full of cartoons and photos and vivid testimony to the hard work that went into this program by so many people over the years. It closes with a powerful sidebar article by Howard T. (Nakaar) Amos, from Nunivak Island, on page 449. A polite and respectful acknowledgement of the efforts by ANCSA staff is tempered by the realities of the loss of Native culture, knowledge, and values. Appendix B, by O'Leary, Drozda, and Pratt, describes the content, organization, and disposition of the ANCSA 14(h)(1) records collection. Appendix C, by O'Leary, describes "Native Groups" and "Native Primary Places of Residence" (NPPR) claims under ANCSA. Two certified Native Groups are highlighted: Olsonville, Inc., an Aleut-Swedish community, and Tanalian, Inc., on Lake Clark. Two NPPRs are also described: New Kassigluq on the Holitna River and Dehsoon' Cheeg, an Ahtna village on the Nabesna River. This last section pulls together both the substance and the process of the ANCSA 14(h)(1) undertaking.

I like this book for many reasons. It has made ANCSA records more visible and accessible in a well-written, referenced, and beautifully designed format. I am certain it will become a valuable teaching tool and guide to Native Alaska and cultural research at the university level but, hopefully, also in school lesson plans. The thousands of tourists who visit Alaska for its natural wonders need to have a look at this book as well. But in the final analysis, this book is a legacy of Native culture and history

achieved through years of hard work and scholarship by numerous individuals through the ANCSA 14(h)(1) program. The faces and the landscapes merge into a whole through Native knowledge and voices. The series title “Shadowlands” is explained as the loss of knowledge today, and *Chasing the Dark* is the effort to shed light on these fragile traces of Native heritage. The shadows have been transformed into exquisite and vibrant images in this outstanding book.