

## REVIEW

### *GWICH'IN ATHABASCAN IMPLEMENTS: HISTORY, MANUFACTURE, AND USAGE ACCORDING TO REVEREND DAVID SALMON*

By Thomas A. O'Brien, 2011. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks. Paperback, xxxii + 133 pages, 112 figures, two appendices, index. ISBN 978-1-60223-144-3; \$45.00

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*Gwich'in Athabascan Implements* is the product of the fruitful collaboration of Reverend David Salmon with Tom O'Brien, who worked with Salmon for over ten years until Salmon's death in 2007 at the age of ninety-five. Born in 1912, Salmon was raised in the bush-land of the Wood River country by his father, William Salmon, who was concerned that life in the nearest village, Salmon, some hundreds of miles away, would prove too dangerous for his son during a time when contagious diseases ravaged the Alaska Interior.

Thus, for many years of his life, Salmon made a living with his father by trapping in a sparsely populated region where "my father tell me the story. We have no radio, we have no TV. Only I listen to my father... the only one talking all winter long for eighteen years. And I learned..." (p. xxix). As a result, Salmon was well-informed about his ancestors' traditional culture when he embarked on his own life in the modern Alaska that was emerging in the 1940s and 1950s.

Beginning in 1994, Salmon made a set of traditional Athabascan tools based on the teachings of his father and other elders. The tool set eventually grew to include implements associated with hunting, fishing, gaming, and manufacturing, as well as special purpose items. Thirty-eight of these tools, fifteen of which are arrows, are described in the text. The descriptions are based on a close examination of their morphological characteristics and supplemented by life-size drawings by O'Brien. The construction and contextual use of each artifact is further elaborated upon in the accompanying text, which was drawn directly from

a series of taped discussions with Salmon that were recorded by O'Brien in 1997.

In constructing the text, O'Brien "intentionally refrained from interjecting [his] own assumptions or citing comparative references from other sources," seeking only "to present this detailed body of knowledge solely reflecting the information as conveyed to me by Rev. Salmon" (p. xix). On the one hand, this approach allows for a respectful acknowledgement of Salmon's personal knowledge, but for some it will represent a major failing in that it represents a single, idiosyncratic perspective lacking traditional comparative ethnographic context.

I do not find this to be a major problem; many of the implements are well-known to Athabascan scholars and documented in traditional ethnographic sources. It is precisely Salmon's intimate knowledge of the implements that makes the book useful and interesting. His personal knowledge is extensive, including not only technology and construction techniques, but also the social context of the implements—who may make the object, who may use it, when and under what circumstances, and a description of the associated social norms and taboos. I particularly liked the account of the Grizzly Bear Spear; the description of how it was used to dispatch this dangerous northern resident was both chilling and awe-inspiring.

The main text is preceded by a short introduction to the Gwich'in Athabascan homeland, Salmon's life history, and reflections on the creation of the artifacts and the collaboration between O'Brien and Salmon. The five-page index is entirely adequate.

Many readers of the *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* will recall that in 2001 both O'Brien and Salmon were keynote speakers at our annual conference, held that year in Fairbanks and sponsored by the Tanana Chiefs Conference. O'Brien has thoughtfully chosen to include the text of Salmon's address that year, "A Clean History: How I Work with Other People." A wonderful example of Athabascan English oratory, Salmon reminded us of the unique collaborative relationship that typifies much of the interaction between Natives and non-Natives in the North, how through our shared history, Natives, traders, prospectors, trappers, and contemporary residents—including anthropologists—helped each other to survive in this sometimes harsh environment, creating "a clean history." Salmon also noted that "Indian too was anthropologist, you know from the early days. They study the people, they study the life of the animal, people through living things" (p. xxxii), an instructive observation that encourages me in the continued pursuit of this cross-cultural endeavor to which we devote ourselves.