



Myths and Legends of British North America

Katharine Berry Judson

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From the bleak coasts of Labrador and the icy borders of the Frozen Sea, in the east, through the river-threaded steppes and plains of the interior with all their charming lakes, over the tremendous, gleaming white heights of the Canadian Rockies, and onwards by cañon and pass to the more pacific climate of the western coast—it is a far sweep of country, this British North America, and occupied in bygone times by many a tribe of red men.

Yet from eastern coast to western, from the long southern boundary to the Arctic Ocean, one finds everywhere the same questioning among these red men. Who was the Someone who had cut and carved the rivers and plains and great mountain heights? Who was the Someone who gave Squirrel a beautiful bushy tail which swept his back, and gave Rabbit no tail at all? Why did Someone send the icy winds of winter, the storm winds that shriek around the tepee and rattle the flaps, howling through the trees and blowing the snow down the smoke-hole? It seemed impossible that it was the same One who sent the warm breezes in summer, when the lakes were full of fish and the bushes laden with berries, when the forests full of game, and life was easy. Therefore there must be two Powers, one strong and ugly, one beautiful and good, always battling against each other—the universal human belief in both good and evil.

Indian myths and legends are the efforts of the red men to answer these questions, as well as to interest and amuse each other in the long winter evenings when the fires burned brightly in the tepees and the carved plumstone dice were thrown. Men forgot their games and women the beading of the moccasin, while children listened intently, as the story tellers of the camp related, with dramatic gestures, stories of the Days of the Grandfathers, in the beginning of the Newness of Things. Nothing was too large or too small to come within the bounds of their beliefs, or within the play of their fancy.

As in all other volumes of this series, only the quaint, the pure, and the beautiful, has been taken from the tales of the Indians. Any one wishing pure ethnology, good and bad together, would do better to go to ethnological reports.

The Indians omitted many stories we wish they had told. There are few references to the snowy mountains, probably because of their belief that all above the snowline was governed by vague, misty, but powerful spirits who sent down the thundering avalanches in the sunlit valleys when summer had come and all was green and beautiful. There are few references to large lakes or rivers, which is characteristic, for even the Indian names of rivers apply to localities on the river, not to the entire river itself. And in the myths of British North America, especially on the western coast, there are many legends involving cannibalism—an element entirely lacking in the myths of the United States, whether east or west. Even Alaskan myths practically omit that subject, while in the Old South-west—New Mexico and Arizona—one finds myths of rare beauty and charm of imagery. Indeed, climatic conditions played not only a distinct part in the physical life of the Indian, but had a tremendous influence over his thinking.

Only authentic myths and legends have been used in the compilation of this volume. The leading authorities are the publications of the United States Bureau of Ethnology, of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, of the Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, as well as the ethnological publications of the Canadian Bureau of Mines.

K. B. J.

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