

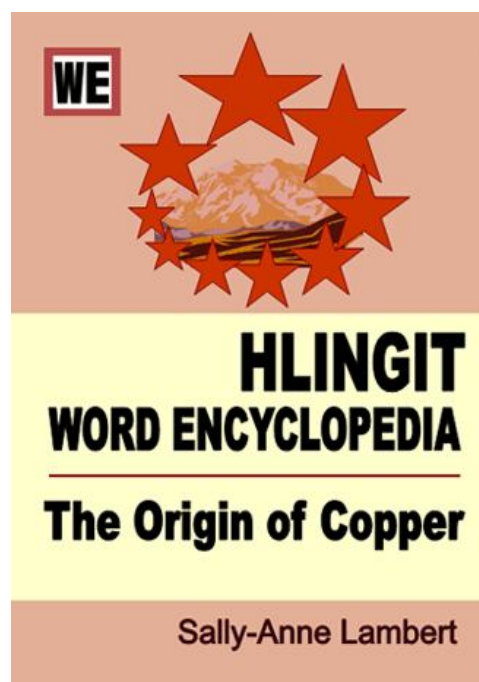


LOCAL NEWS

New Tlingit encyclopedia baffling to scholars, speakers

by Robert Woolsey, KCAW

January 30, 2012 4:05 pm



A new encyclopedia of the Tlingit language has teachers in Sitka scratching their heads. The massive work by New Zealand scholar Sally-Ann Lambert is extraordinarily detailed, and the product of years of effort.

The problem is: The language in the book is not recognizable by contemporary scholars, or Native Tlingit speakers.

[Click here for iFriendly audio.](#)

In a world as small as that of Tlingit scholarship, the appearance of Sally-Ann Lambert's "Hlingit Word Encyclopedia: The Origin of Copper" came as quite a surprise.

So did the appearance of Sally-Ann Lambert, who traveled to Sitka in mid-January to launch the book.

No one had heard of her: Not the Alaska State Museum, the Sealaska Heritage Institute, or the very active group of Tlingit language teachers in the Sitka Native Education Program.

Nancy Douglas is the Cultural Program Director at the Sitka School District.

"For those of us that have been studying Tlingit for forty-plus years and working with elders, I think it was surprising not to have heard of her or her work. We're a pretty tight-knit community when it comes to language-learning, and open to sharing our points of view with everybody and networking with those of us that are language teachers and language

learners. So, I guess it was surprise that drew me in to going to the book launch."

[Visit the Sealaska Heritage Institute's catalogue of Tlingit Language teaching materials.](#)

The Hlingit Word Encyclopedia is the second of nine volumes planned by Lambert. Her first work, a dictionary of Maori, was published a few years ago.

Lambert was born in New Zealand, but grew up in Samoa, where she developed an aptitude for language. Lambert turned her attention to Tlingit when she acquired a copy of a book by the late 19th/early 20th century ethnographer J. R. Swanton.

"I think often I'm led spiritually, and I don't make my decisions with the full knowledge of the situation. Basically the book was given to me with Tlingit Myths & Texts by John Swanton, and Tlingit language is fortunate to have that resource."

Swanton is indeed a classic, early ethnography of Tlingit, and a good starting point for the study of Tlingit culture, from a western perspective. "The Origin of Copper" is one of the stories he recorded, and Lambert uses it as a basis to parse the grammar and culture of the Tlingit.

This probably wasn't the best strategy.

At the Sitka Native Education Program...

Roby – Swanton couldn't hear many of the sounds of Tlingit, so he didn't write it. So she didn't speak them. Swanton didn't put tone marks in his writing, so she doesn't know where the tone marks go.

Ethel – They hadn't heard of it at that time?

Roby – Well, he didn't know how important it was.

This is Ethel Makinen, a retired teacher in the Sitka Native Education Program – or SNEP – and a fluent Tlingit speaker; Anne Johnson, the current lead teacher for SNEP, and a fluent Tlingit speaker; and Roby Littlefield, a non-Native who has spent much of her adult life in the active study of Tlingit culture.

We're sitting in the SNEP classroom around a copy of Lambert's Hlingit Word Encyclopedia, which comes with an audio CD.

Littlefield plays it for Makinen and Johnson, who both learned Tlingit as children.

CD Audio – Lambert telling the story of the Origin of Copper in Tlingit.

Johnson and Makinen look at each other as the disc plays, shaking their heads. They try to pick out the occasional words, but to these elders, who learned Tlingit at the knees of their parents and grandparents, this is gibberish.

Makinen says the author of a book on the scale of the Hlingit Word Encyclopedia needs a two-fold commitment.

"You have to be a speaker of the language, and the person who's doing the writing has to understand the writing system, before you can develop a book without knowledgeable people."

Johnson remarks on the unconventional orthography in the book's title. "Tlingit" is commonly spelled in English T-L-I-N-G-I-T. Lambert opts for an H, or H-L-I-N-G-I-T. While this is a small difference, it's also a red flag that Lambert is not following the writing system anywhere in the 630 pages of text.

Littlefield cannot read it.

Littlefield reads. She and Mackinen try to figure out what the words mean.

Nancy Douglas says Lambert's failure to adopt the accepted writing system makes her work of limited value for modern students.

"It was 1976 when Gillian Story and Constance Naish were in – I don't recall if it was Hoonah or Angoon – working with the elders there and developed the current orthography that we've been using for forty and fifty years, so that might be challenging for those of us who have been studying and teaching to grasp on to a new orthography."

So does that mean the Hlingit Word Encyclopedia is a waste? Lambert, who has no advanced degrees and no university position, admits that she produced the book outside the worlds of Tlingit culture and traditional academia. She says she was pulled to Tlingit by its "polarity" with the great cultures of South America.

Her rationale for the huge investment in time and energy in the book may ultimately have little to do with whether or not it is accepted.

"To some degree I think I was trying to bring my mother and father back together through my Celtic heritage. My father had a little French, and my mother had a little Scottish. And I thought that when they lost their culture, they lost their reason for being together. And I think that deep in my heart I was looking for that family togetherness, and I wanted to find that through language."

Lambert's Hlingit Word Encyclopedia, and her Maori Word Dictionary, are both self-published under the imprint [WE International](#). "The innovator in indigenous language resources." Her next project will be Celtic, to honor her heritage, but she has six other projects planned, including Asian languages.

She describes her publishing company "as a business operating as a charity."

8 comments

[Add a comment](#)**Du Aani Kawdinook Xh'unei** · Assistant Professor of Native Languages at University of Alaska Southeast

Pick up the Edwards dictionary and spend your time studying things that truly matter to the language. This text can sit in isolation, and we can talk about the work that will help our language, like that of the Dauenhauers, Leer, Crippen, Edwards, Taff, Littlefield, Makinen, Hope, Cable, and others. This is unfortunately of little use to anyone studying the language, but its publication should not affect our diligent efforts to revitalize our language by working with speakers and learners.

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**Rob Widmark**

There are so many words I would like to use, that are not nice that would describe this as... Well, wrong on so many different levels... Disrespectful to our people, disgrace, basically... A slap in the face to us....

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**Leonty Williams** · [Subscribe](#) · Mt. Edgecumbe High School

What the heck is up with this? I don't even know what to say. Seems like someone has a little too much time and money on their hands and is trying to make a name for themselves by exploiting dying languages/cultures...

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**Duane Gastant' Aucoin** · [Subscribe](#)

just another sad example of an outsider coming to "save" our people/language!

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**Johan Sandberg McGuinne** · University of Stirling

This might be one of the most baffling things I've read in a while; to try to compile a dictionary without speaking the language is just silly but the rationale behind it 'a spiritual' connection is a clear example of the way in which indigenous peoples across the globe are perceived by the west. In short, to the western mind anyway, they're little more than mythical but ultimately now non-existing cultures to use as inspiration for faux-religious practices, wannabe-linguistics and cultural appropriation fashion and this despite the fact that these people actually still exist and thrive as people today. Her book could have been a welcome contribution to the study of a critically endangered language, but instead it makes a mockery of the struggle to keep the very source of Tlingit culture alive.

As a speaker of Gaelic, I can only await her next book on 'Celtic' with horror and as a student of Māori I wonder how completely useless her Māori dictionary is.

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**Jessica Unmack** · [Subscribe](#)

wow, really? that's a touch offensive on so many levels.

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Gunalchéesh to true Tlingit speakers and writers!

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**Becky Clark** · Sitka High School

Unbelievable!

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**Vivian Faith Prescott** · Works at Co-Director of Raven's Blanket

After I spent over a dozen years learning the language, trying to speak it with my children and elders, developing curriculum, encouraging others to learn, study, study, and then I worked HARD on getting it right in my poetry with Xh'unei and the elders, and then this book comes along. HUH?

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