Dogs Indigenous to the Pacific Northwest Coast
Transcribed by Jennifer Bolstler, Vancouver Island University – April 14, 2015

William Barraclough: Dogs that were indigenous to the Pacific Northwest Coast, by William Barraclough.

This paper on the white woolly dogs was presented before Nanaimo Historical Society in the Wallace Street old library, December 13th, 1955. Since that time, other important references relevant to these animals have been acquired. I have incorporated them as an appendix to this article.

The outcome of the subject was the result of a visit the writer made to the Provincial Museum, Victoria, during the summer of 1955. In the Indian Department there was displayed a fine example of a woollen blanket, together with primitive spinning stick and hand loom, which was used by the Salish tribe of Indians in making this kind of woven blanket. On the label it stated that the blanket was from dog's hair with a mixture of mountain goat's hair.

It was [inaudible] to discover that these woollen garments were worn in general by the coast Indians from Juan de Fuca Strait around the great inland sea of Puget Sound, the Gulf of Georgia, and around Vancouver Island.

In preparing this article the material was gathered from many sources. I have stated brief historical facts and recorded dates, and excerpts of Captain George Vancouver's journals on his explorations around these inland waterways, to present a more detailed account of the subject. Selected information concerning these dogs was also obtained from written accounts of persons who had observed or been in direct contact with these animals in the early days of the country.

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Captain Sir Francis Drake was on the Pacific Coast in 1578, sailing 43 degrees towards the pole Arctic. The Spanish explorer Juan Pérez [Juan José Pérez Hernández, Joan Perés] sailed 55 degrees north in 1774. Capitan James Cook named Friendly Cove in 1778. And Captain John Meares started business on this coast in 1786, arriving by way of China.

These early adventurers may have had one or two dogs aboard their ships, but they certainly would not be all the same breed of long, white, woolly hair. The dogs must have been established in the area for ages. The natives could not have learned the art of weaving the wool and hair from the Europeans. Acknowledgement is made to the late Edmund S. Meany, who compiled the book "Vancouver's discovery of Puget Sound" making generally available the text of Captain Vancouver's journals used on the ship Discovery while on exploration to this area in 1792.
Vancouver records the dogs and woollen apparel extensively. Vancouver's ship, the Discovery - about 340 tonnes with a register of 112 men - together with the smaller tender, Chatham, were the ships used in his expedition. When Vancouver's men were exploring and charting the twisted coastlines - the numerous passages and inlets - the work was done in small boats while the ships were anchored safely in well chosen waters.

These small boats would often set out on several days journey, each with an officer in charge. Men like Puget, Whitby, Baker, and Menzies of the Discovery, and Broughton and Johnstone of the Chatham. These men came in close contact with the natives and Indian villages and all officers reported seeing packs of dogs and woollen clothing worn. They were the first white men ever seen by natives, therefore no influence as to the weaving or the introduction of dogs from the outside could possibly have been made.

The first mention by Vancouver regarding these dogs and woollen clothing was after passing Cape Flattery, April the 12th, 1792, then again after he named Port Discovery.

Following the south coast of Juan de Fuca, then down Hope's Channel and around Puget Sound - which is named by Vancouver - he and his officers contacted many Indian villages where they traded merchandise for bows and arrows, fish, woollen garments - which were as he states, "neatly wrought".

On Thursday the 24th of May, 1792, Vancouver recorded the following in his journal. To quote, "This harbour, after the gentleman who discovered it, obtained the name of Port Orchard." (Orchard was the clerk on the discovery) "On my return to the ship, I understood that few of our friendly neighbours had visited [in passing?]. The party was evidently reduced, and those who still remained, having satisfied their curiosity or being compelled by their mode of life, are preparing to depart with all their stock and effects. These it required little labour to remove, consisting chiefly of the [mats?] for covering their habitations wherever it may be convenient to pitch them.

"Their skin and woollen garments, their arms, implements and such articles of food as they had acquired during their residence, which, with family of dogs, all find an accommodation in warm, large, [single?] canoe."

Quote again, "The dogs belonging to this tribe of Indians were numerous, and much resembled those Pomerania, though in general somewhat larger. They were all shorn as close to the skin as sheep are in England; and so compact were their fleeces, that large portions could be lifted up by a corner without causing any separation. They were composed of a mixture of a coarse kind of wool, with very fine, long hair capable of being spun into yarn. This gave me reason to believe that their woollen clothing might be, in part, composed of this material mixed with a fine kind of wool from some other animal, as their garments were all too fine to be manufactured from the coarse coating of the dog alone."
"The abundance of these garments amongst the few people we met with indicated the animal from which the raw material is produced to be very common in the neighbourhood. But, as they have no one domesticated except in the dog, their supply of wool for clothing can only be obtained by hunting the wild creature that produces it, of which we could not obtain the least information." end of quote.

Vancouver as this time had no idea of the commerce that existed between the Indians of the inland and the higher regions who brought the mountain goat's hair to barter for products of the coast Indians. It must be noted - the dogs were all newly shorn of their long, fine hair. Vancouver was used to observing dogs with coarse hair, that he must have mistaken it for the coarse goat's hair.

Exploring around Puget Sound, Mr. Puget and Mr. Whitby came upon many Indian villages, and entered in the journal for Saturday, June the 2nd, is Mr. Whitby's account. Having reached the place where they intended to land, they were met by upwards of 200 Indians. Some in canoes with their families and others walking along the shore, attended by about 40 dogs in a drove, which were shorn close to the skin like sheep.

The spot where they landed was delightful, together with the cordial reception they had met from the natives, induced Mr. Whitby to continue his examination of the shore. On this occasion he was accompanied by the Chief and several of the party, who conducted themselves with greatest propriety, though with no degree of civil curiosity in examining his clothes and expressing a great desire to be satisfied as to the colour of his skin - which they covered - making signs that his hands and face were painted white instead of being black or red like their own, but when convinced of their mistake by opening his waistcoat their astonishment was inexpressible.

From the foregoing account by Mr. Whitby, it will be seemed Vancouver's men were the first humans from the outside they had witnessed. Also, that dogs were there in equal numbers.

After naming Admiralty Inlet, Vancouver sailed north, charting the mainland coast, giving names to numerous places and islands. Named the Gulf of Georgia Monday, June the 4th; Point Roberts, Tuesday, June the 12th; Point Grey, Burrard's Channel, and Point Atkinson on Thursday, June the 14th 1792.

For June 13th, inside Burrard's Channel, Vancouver describes a low-lying area with two good creeks flowing, which fits Capilano and the North Shore district. Here they encountered about 50 Indians in canoes who conducted themselves with the greatest decorum and civility, "...presenting us with several fish, cooked and undressed, resembling the smelt."

Next morning on the land, trade was made; their arrows were tipped with slate. Quoting, "...and examined the colour of our skins with infinite curiosity"
"This circumstance, and the general tenor of their behaviour, gave us reason to conclude that we were the first people from a civilized country they had yet seen."

After naming Anvil Island, Howe Sound, and other places, and meeting with some scattered bands of Indians, there is an entry in the journal for Friday the 15th. Quoting, "We expected to find some difference in their general character. This conjecture was, however, premature as they varied in no respect whatsoever in garments, spears, bows, arrows, etc." End.

Vancouver did not mention seeing dogs here, but the fact that the Indians wore the same woollen garments as the other tribes indicates that the dogs were there.

Proceeding north by west, charting the mainland coast, naming several long inlets and waterways, Vancouver gave the name Johnstone Straits on Friday, July 13th, and anchored at Port Neville.

Thursday the 19th, four leagues away, on Vancouver Island, they came upon a large Indian settlement. The chief was called "Cheslakees". These people had contact with the people of Nootka, which was four days walking distance away across the land to Nootka Sound, and they knew of Maquinna.

Vancouver writes, quote, "The women in proportion appear numerous. Were variously employed, some in their different household affairs, other in the manufacture of their garments from bark and other materials, though no one was engaged in making their woollen apparel, which I much regretted." End.

The Discovery and Chatham arrived back at Nootka, Tuesday, August the 28th, 1792, when Vancouver met the Spanish captain, Quadra.

For further information concerning these dogs, I now refer to "The Naturalist in Vancouver Island and British Columbia", but John Keast Lord, published in two volumes in London, England in 1866. John Keast Lord, fellow of the Zoological Society, arrived at Esquimalt July the 12th, 1858. He travelled extensively around the Pacific Northwest coast, followed the rivers to their source, and recorded more scientific information in natural history than any man of the period.

Volume 2, chapter 11 is devoted to Indian dogs. He covers these animals from the coast, over the mountains and across the plains to Spokane and Winnipeg. At all places other than the Pacific Coast, Lord states, "The true Indian dog is nothing more than a tame coyote or prairie wolf."

In dealing with the woolly dogs of the coast, he writes, "West of the Rocky Mountains I have never seen Indians use dogs for any system of transport. ... Along the coast, several tribes
at one time kept dogs of a peculiar breed, having long white hair. They were annually shorn as we shear sheep, and the hair that's obtained was woven into rugs, sometimes mixed with the wool of the mountain goat, and others duck feathers or wild hemp, finely carded. Several of these most curious rugs are in the Ethnological room at the British Museum, visible to any who may be curious to see weaving in its most primitive form.

"I obtained them at several places along the coast. This simple machine, or loom if it may be so designated, used in weaving these rugs is also visible in the Collection of the Economic Museum at Kew. The art of dying the hair, and materials used with it, of different colours was also known to them, thus producing a regularly designed coloured pattern.

"Whence came this singular white, long-haired dog possessed by only a few tribes inhabiting the coast - scrupulously kept on islands to prevent their extending or creeping, and different in every other specific detail from all other breeds of dogs belonging to either coast or inland Indians?"

Lord lists two possible ways the woolly dogs could have reached this coast. "Long before the arrival of European explorers, they could have come from the north, or the more probably supposition is they came from Japan, as there is little doubt Japanese ships and junks did visit this coast, and the art of weaving could have been learned from those who brought the dogs. And still more confirmatory of the probability, words of Japanese origin are still used in the jargon spoken on the coast called Chinook" [chinuk wawa].

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Lord states further, "More than this, the first possessors of these white dogs were, as far as it is possible to trace, Chinook Indians, a tribe once very numerous and living near the entrance of the Columbia River. Thence the dog will reach Puget Sound and eventually must have been carried to Nanaimo, across the Gulf of Georgia."

Well, that could very well be, but if one goes back far enough, we could ask Where did the woolly dogs come from to Japan?

When Vancouver was writing about the woven wool apparel, the Indians would be wearing the same for clothing. When Lord was exploring the area 66 years later, the native woollen product would be used for mats and coverings of camps, while their clothing would consist chiefly of Hudson’s Bay Company blankets and similar materials. Lord must have examined the white dogs that remained here, as he mentions them being kept on islands, carefully guarded, to protect the breed from mixing with the white man's dog.

Lord’s mention of the woolly dogs in Nanaimo prompted me to call on several of the local Indian people. From those questioned, if they had any information handed down to them from their elders relating to these dogs and the garments woven from the hair mixed with the goat's hair, all were firm on one point - the white, long-haired dog was here before any
men from the outside came. Only meagre information has been preserved by the Nanaimo Indians concerning these native dogs that were of great economic value to their ancestors.

After some questioning, it struck a note in the memory of Ed Brown, a full-blood Indian and a man well versed on Indian lore. He re-enacted to me the telling and the actions as it was given to him about 35 years previously by Old Dick, an aged Indian who liked to tell hand-down history. The fact of Mr. Brown, exemplifying the manner with this hands and a deep sense of recollection of how the barter was done, leads me to believe that was the way he received the story from Old Dick, and we are fortunate to record it. The place names are for the present.

At certain times canoes would arrive at Nanaimo of Sliammon Indians from Squirrel Cove, Cortez Island. The brought bales of mountain goat's hair in trade for the native dog's hair. The Sliammon Indians had procured the hair from the mainland, possibly by barter. The mountain not native to Vancouver Island. In the business of exchange, the bales of hair would be laid side by side, the hair patted down by hand, adding more of this kind or that hair, until all were satisfied the bales were even, and then agreement was reached.

This being the case, which I consider as a fact, the woolly dogs must have been in the Nanaimo area centuries ago, and some remnants of the woolly dogs were still here when J.K. Lord came to Nanaimo in 1858 and fished at the Nanaimo River. It is possible the Nanaimo people preferred to use mostly goat's hair, and traded off the dog's hair. The yarn would be very similar to that used by the Cowichan's today.

Referring now to the book "Reminiscences of the West Coast of Vancouver Island" by the Reverend Charles Moser of Kakawis, B.C., gives two brief accounts of the native dogs and woollen clothing. On page 17, an item dated April the 22nd, 1874, by the Reverend A. J. Brabant mentions dogs being taken to an island across Ahousaht Village in Clayoquot. And again on page 180 he states, "Since I first set foot on the western shores of Vancouver Island ... when I first met the inhabitants of this desolate coast ... their attire, a blanket of cedar bark and dog's hair, or other inferior article." end of quote. This account is enough to show the native dog was in that area before white settlers brought other breeds.


This chapter tells of the better class of woven materials made from a mixture of the native woolly dog and the mountain goat's hair. It was chiefly the upper class of native who wore a robe made from this material. Best of all, there is an excellent reproduction of a painting by Paul Kane entitled, "Coast Salish Blanket Weaving" ["A Woman Weaving a Blanket"?]. The
original painting is in the Royal Ontario Museum. In the foreground is pictured a white, woolly dog. It is a breed apart from other dogs.

One point in this account differs from Vancouver's journal. He described them, "...the coarse hair of the dog and the fine, long hair of the other animal" (that is the goat), while on page 35 of the booklet it states, "The wool of the dog is much finer than that of the goat's." As I already quoted on page 2, it must be remembered when Vancouver first saw these dogs it was early in May and they were newly shorn of their hair. Having seen neither kind of hair before, he could have easily mistaken one for the other.

Regarding Paul Kane, he was born in County Cork, Ireland, on the 3rd of September 1810. He brought to Canada at an early age and died in Toronto the 20th of February, 1871. His paintings preserved for posterity the life of the Indians of the North West.

Since the first presentation of this article before the Nanaimo Historical Society on November 13th, 1955, the following items have been added as part of this paper:

Item number one. An extract taken from my article read before Nanaimo Historical Society, March 20th, 1957, entitled "Early attempts to explore the Mouth of Winthuysen, or Nanaimo Harbour area, including Cala del Descanso Bay". Quoting from F. W. Howay and E. O. S. Scholefield, Volume 1, British Columbia History, Page 172, translated from the Spanish of Señor D. A. Galiano's journal, Commander of the brig *Sutil*, accompanied by a Señor Don [Cayetano] Valdés in command of the schooner *Mexicana*, (both vessels are 45 tonnes).

The entry is dated June the 15th, 1792. "They also offered new blankets, which we afterwards concluded were of dogs hair, partly because when the woven hair was compared to that of those animals, there was no apparent difference, and partly because of the great number of dogs they kept in those villages, most of them being shorn. These animals are of moderate size, resembling those of English breeds, with very thick coats, and usually white. Among other things, they differ from those of Europe in their manner of barking, which is simply a miserable howl."

Item number two. An item taken from "British Columbia, a Centennial Anthology of 1958" by James Anderson - "School days at Fort Victoria". In the summer of 1850, Anderson, age nine, and his sister, age 11, travelled from Fort Colvile to Fort Langley. Thence aboard the [Cadboro?] to Fort Victoria. Quoting from Anderson's memoirs, "Often Indian dogs will swim over from the village to the fort. The dogs I refer to were handsome white animals, resembling a Pomeranian but larger, with long, woolly hair which was regularly shorn and woven into blankets and articles of clothing, so the dogs were of economical value to the natives."

Item number three. From the book "Simon Fraser: Letters and journals, 1806-1808", edited by W. Kaye Lamb in 1960. During Simon Fraser's explorations of his well known journey,
when he traversed the 'Great River' from the Rockies to the sea and back to the upper country, his journals recorded many accounts about the indigenous dogs of the country. The Indians raised and used these dogs as a prime source of protein food. The meat was prized by Fraser's voyagers as a delicacy.

Quoting from pages...84, "The Thompson Chilcotin Indians supplied us with several dogs, which is always a favourite dish with the Canadian voyagers."

[Page] 87, "All men dined on salmon, berries, oil, and six dogs."

[Page] 93, "The Indians gave my men three dogs in the vicinity of Jackass Mountain."

"Tuesday, June the 28th, 1808. Ackinroe Nation Indians ... garments and wool from dog's and goat's hair ... the dogs were lately shorn."

Page 101, "Wednesday, June the 29th. They made rugs of dog's hair that have stripes of different colours crossing at right angles, resembling, at a distance, Highland plaid. We were supplied with sturgeon. This place was near Lady Franklin Rock."

[Page] 104, "Friday, July the 1st. The dog's hair, which is spun with a distaff and spindle, is formed into rugs." Fraser describes a large Indian house 640 feet long, 60 feet broad, and 18 feet high. This was below Lady Franklin Rock.

[Page] 116, "Saturday, July the 9th. Thompson Nation Indians gave us two excellent dogs which made delicious meals for the men. Here we procured a blanket of dogs hair, a matted bag, and other items."

[Page] 121, "The men brought back some dogs, which to their palate proved a delicious dish, from the Askittih tribe (Lillooet Indians)."

There are several more items in the book relevant to our subject. These entries in his journal by Simon Fraser discloses the native white woolly dogs were widely distributed along the Fraser River, from the sea to the higher countries.

As a final item, and a most important one, concerning these native dogs, I had the good fortune and pleasure of making a tape recording interview with Mr. Victor B. Harrison at his home on Newcastle Avenue, Nanaimo, February the 22nd, 1966.

Mr. Harrison was born at Victoria in 1885. When boy of about seven years of age, and living with his family at Departure Bay, he saw three of these white woolly dogs that were in a canoe, which was drawn up on the beach in front of the old Harper hotel, or known as the Bay Hotel. The dogs belonged to some Indians, whose home was at Hope Island, at the
north end of Vancouver Island. They had been fishing at the Nass River and were visiting
friends at Departure Bay.

Mr. Harrison described these animals in particular as to size, shape, and colour. He had
retained a clear recollection of them as he was always very fond of dogs. Mr. Harrison
stated the dogs were rather small, short-legged, with thick barrel-shaped bodies, long hair,
light colour - he never saw a dark haired one. These animals must have been part of the
last remnants of the breed in existence. Mr. Harrison is the only person I have interviewed
that actually saw these white woolly dogs.

Years later, while practising law in Victoria, Mr. Harrison spoke to Mr. Frank Kermode,
Provincial Museum curator, about securing specimens for the museum. Mr. Kermode did
locate some of the dogs at Hope Island. Members of the Forestry staff tried to procure some
of the animals but they were too difficult to obtain. Mr. Harrison stated that he is doubtful if
there were any good specimens preserved.

Mr. Harrison also recorded on tape particulars of an Indian longhouse, that was situated
nearby and behind the Harper hotel.

An added note concerning the goat's hair. There is a good article in Maclean's Magazine for
November 25th, 1955, by Howard O'Hagan, on how the goat's hair was gathered. "At
moulting, or hair shedding time, the goats gathered at certain areas where there were
thickets of low brushes. Weaving to and fro through the brushes the goats rid themselves of
their long winter hair, which was left hanging on the branches. It was the native women and
children's work to gather up this hair.

This is William Barraclough speaking.