

Father Brabant and the Hesquiat of Vancouver Island

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This study is one of a series, and is the second completed, on Christian missionaries in British Columbia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ The object of this series is to explore certain variables of a model for the history of Christian missionaries among native peoples of the Northwest Coast of North America, particularly in British Columbia.² These variables are five in number: (1) national background of the several missionaries, (2) education and denominational or other training of the missionaries, (3) special environmental and other circumstances of the mission's location, including isolation, (4) ethnographic characteristics of the natives who were the subjects of the missionary's attempts, and (5) "outside influences" that shaped the course of the mission's history,

¹ The first in the series is of the little known Church Missionary Society missionary, the Reverend Alfred James Hall, who worked at Fort Rupert, Vancouver Island, and could not break local Kwakiutl potlatching habits (Barry M. Gough, "A Priest Versus the Potlatch: the Reverend Alfred James Hall and the Fort Rupert Kwakiutl, 1878-1880," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society*, XXIV, 2 (October 1982), pp. 7589). Further studies are planned on R.A.A. (later the Rev.) Doolan, Church Missionary Society, on the Nass River, Fr. Leon Fouquet and other Oblates at Fort Rupert, and on the Rev. Robert Christopher Ludin Brown, Church of England, Lilloet, B.C. It is doubtful if I will be able to avoid the perhaps already overtilled field of missionary history centering on Metlakatla and Port Simpson, where the studies by Jean Usher *William Dundan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada. Publications in History, No. 5, 1974), and by Clarence Bolt "Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian of Port Simpson, 1874-1897" M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1981 and "The Conversion of the Port Simpson Tsimshian: Indian Control or Missionary Manipulation," *BC Studies*, 57 (Spring 1983), pp. 38-56.), have laid the groundwork. However, new perspectives on Hall, Brabant and the others may provide the basis for a new look at the subjects highlighted by Usher and Bolt.

² To date there is no systematic survey of Christian missions in British Columbia that examines missionaries and hoped-for converts. One useful beginning, however, is that by Robin Fisher in John Veillette and Gary White, *Early Indian Village Churches: Wooden Frontier Architecture in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977), pp. 1-11

including economic change both in the immediate location and nearby area, and in the larger region and nation, governmental influences, including the extension of British and Canadian variants of law, order and authority, and any other influences, including competition, real or imagined, by other missionaries, orders and organizations, that had any bearing on the mission in question. Admittedly, such studies tend to concentrate on the missionary, and this for several reasons, not least the fact that the missionary's records – in journals, reports, and letters – have tended to survive (though not in all cases), whereas the native peoples have left little in the way of a literary tradition by which the historian can counterpoise and test the documentation left by and about the missionary. This is regrettable, but unavoidably so, and I have sought to make some allowances for the Eurocentricity of these studies by giving as full a description of the native peoples in question as I have been able. But again, I am mindful of the shortcomings of ethnohistory and of the methods of ethnohistory.³ I have sought to bring to light the varieties of native response to the missionary impact, what one scholar has called the “patterns of Christian acceptance.”⁴

This study has a double-subject: the Belgian-born priest The Reverend Father Auguste-Joseph Brabant and the Hesquiat of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Here were brought into conjunction two entirely different perspectives, two “civilizations” if you will – two ideals, two concepts of eternity, two ways of life. From Western Europe came the traditions of Catholic Christendom, deeply pietistical and thoroughly learned and literate. By contrast, on the spot was a society that had been there for at

³ For the past two decades and more historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists have been exploring and debating the perspectives and problems of the branch of learning called “ethnohistory.” While definitions of ethnohistory seem as various as the publications on the subject it is generally agreed that historians, anthropologists and others can benefit by exploring and incorporating the techniques and findings of others. Indian history needs to be seen “in the round.” The journal *Ethnohistory* is replete with articles exploring the models for ethnohistorical study, but the reader's attention is particularly drawn to James Axtell, “Ethnohistory of Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 35 (January 1978), pp. 110-44; Bruce Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic*, 2 vols. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1976), introduction; and for a recent view, Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), ch. 1 “Ethnohistory: An Historian's Viewpoint.” Two Laurier Conferences (Waterloo, Ontario 1980 and London, Ontario 1983) have been exploring these and related themes.

⁴ A line of research suggested by Martin Jarrett-Kerr, C.R. in *Patterns of Christian Acceptance: Individual Response to the Missionary Impact, 1550-1950* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), who attempts “to survey the field from the receivers' end (p. xii).”

least four millenia (and undoubtedly longer) that had a deep oral, linguistic, social and mythological tradition which was in its own way a civilization. These were different civilizations, different societies. And, moreover, both were undergoing (as societies seemingly are) change – some would even call it “progress,” though that term is outmoded and old fashioned. The civilization of western Europe was undergoing urbanization and industrialization in the late 19th century, and it was pouring outwards to the four corners of the earth; in some cases the home countries of Europe were establishing colonies of settlement, and in other cases leases for trade and military advantage. In addition, Europe was spreading outwards in a non-national way, as in the case of this missionary in question. Brabant was not a nationalist, he flew no flag, and he did not answer to any colonial office or corporate board; but he was clearly a European bringing European values and intentions to then one of the world’s most distant quarters.

This study is divided into four sections. In Section I is given a description of Hesquiat as a location and a place for its people; here also is noted the transitions being undertaken by the Hesquiat as European trade and colonization impinged on them. In Section II is provided detail and analysis of Brabant, in particular his background, early life, training, and motivation, and arrival in Victoria, British Columbia. In Section III, is explained the establishment, problems and concerns of Brabant’s Hesquiat mission. In Section IV, is contained a retrospective critique of Brabant and the Hesquiat, in which is included an assessment of the missionary and the native acceptance to Christianity.

I

Hesquiat, the focus of Brabant’s work and our attention, lies in 126°00 W. longitude and 49° 30 N. latitude.⁵ It sits in the lee of Estevan Point. To the north is celebrated Nootka Sound; to the south, equally celebrated Clayquot Sound, both centres of the maritime fur trade of the late 18th and

⁵ The best, first accurate visual representation of Hesquiat can be found in the insert to the 1862 Admiralty Chart, based on surveys by Captain George Henry Richards, “North America, West Coast South Side of Vancouver Island: Esperanza to Clayoquot, including Nootka Sound.” A map of Hesquiat and Vicinity can be found in Philip Drucker, *The Northern and Central Nootkan Tribes* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 144: in 81st Cong., 1st sess., *H. Docs.*, vol. 49, 1951), p. 236.

early 19th centuries. Hesquiat is situated approximately two-thirds of the distance from Victoria to Cape Scott, the most northwesterly tip of Vancouver Island.

Hesquiat, then as now, was on one of the world's wildest coasts. A near contemporary of Brabant's, Captain George Henry Richards, R.N., writing in the British Admiralty's *Pilot* (1861) described the area as "fringed by numerous rocks and hidden dangers, especially near the entrances of the sounds, and the exercise of great caution and vigilance will be necessary on the part of the navigator in order to avoid them..." He went on to recommend that mariners take every precaution "as fog and thick weather come on very suddenly at all times of the year, more especially in summer and winter months."⁶ As for the natives of the area, he knew from personal knowledge that the west coast of the Vancouver Island was "rather thinly populated," a view which accords with other surveys, and he reported that the highest estimate was that the natives did not exceed 4,000 in total, and were divided into a number of very small tribes. "As a rule they are harmless and inoffensive," he continued, "though in a very few cases the crews of vessels wrecked on their coasts have been plundered and ill-treated; they are addicted to pilfering, especially in the vicinity of Nootka Sound, and ought to be carefully watched; this is perhaps the worst charge that can be brought against them."⁷ For the Hesquiat he had a particular reference: "The natives though friendly are much inclined to pilfering, and should be carefully watched."⁸

The Hesquiat and their neighbours have been variously described and classified by anthropologists and ethnologists, particularly by Philip Drucker in his classic 1951 study.⁹ It is generally agreed that the Hesquiat are a branch of the linguistic family known in times past as the Ahts, hence the suffix of Hesquiat. They are also in the Wakashan language "stock," the word *Nootka* perhaps being either non-Indian or some sort of corruption of a native word but is one which has survived. The Nootkan peoples, of which the Hesquiat are a part, inhabit the Northwest Coast of North America from (and including) the northwestern tip of Washington State to

⁶ Great Britain, Admiralty, *Vancouver Island Pilot, Part I* (London : Printed for the Admiralty, 1861), p. 181.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182. The Nootka "only took items that were useful to them," according to Robin Fisher ("Cook and the Nootka," in Fisher and Hugh Johnston, eds. *Captain Cook and His Times* (Vancouver : Douglas McIntyre, 1979) p. 89.

⁸ *Vancouver Island Pilot*, p. 214.

⁹ The following detail except where noted is from Drucker, *op. cit.*

Quatsino Sound, Vancouver Island, where they meet the Kwakiutl. In terms of groupings, according to Drucker, the Hesquiat are among the Central Nootka and indeed are the most northerly of this classification, living hard by the Moachat and Muchalat Nootka on the north, and adjacent to the Ahousat, Clayoquot, and Uclulet on the south.¹⁰ The name Hesquiat, that given to the village, harbour and point, is an adaptation of Heish-kwi-aht, derived from Heish-heish-a – “to tear asunder with the teeth.” At Hesquiat, salt water or *segmo* grass drifts ashore, especially at herring spawning season. The celebrated student of British Columbia coast names, Captain John Walbran, says that the Hesquiat were “in the habit of tearing asunder with their teeth to disengage from the grass or weed the spawn, which is esteemed by them a great delicacy.”¹¹ The Hesquiat were thus called by their neighbours.

The Hesquiat were a loose confederacy of peoples, a collectivity of several local groups. They were tied together by economic activity, including resource exploitation in certain sites, and by ties of kin and lineage, themselves reinforced and integrated by internecine warfare and potlatching. Their concepts of the world extended to their immediate locale, and their cosmology reflected this, though a few of their myths tell of legendary heroes who entered a sky-world and an undersea world. Supernatural beings prevailed in mythology. In terms of life and death, and of a life hereafter, Drucker says, “both soul and life simply ‘went away’ when one died.” The Northern Nootka conceived of no afterworld nor land of the dead. One myth holds that a person who went to the Land of the Dead in an underworld was sent back – for refusing food consisting of cooked fleas, nits and vermin – but this experience was an individual one and was not used to explain the fate of souls in general.¹²

Lastly in this brief summary of the Hesquiat it must be noted that they possessed a strong sense of property. The land and resources were theirs, owned by themselves by right of lineage, occupation and extraction. Similarly any property coming into their realm, such as an abandoned vessel or an object which came ashore became theirs. Salvage rights, supervised by European admiralty courts, were unrecognized by and unknown to these peoples.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-6.

¹¹ John T. Walbran, *British Columbia Coast Names, 1592-1906* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1909), p. 241.

¹² Drucker, p. 156.

From the beginning of European contact, beginning with the Spanish under Juan Pérez in 1774, the Hesquiat would have experienced intermittent association with Europeans, though not until 1874 with Christian missionaries. The Hesquiat claim as tradition the first sighting of a European ship on the coast, that of the Spanish corvette *Santiago*, on 8 August 1774. In reference to this visit, Brabant informed Walbran, the Hesquiat composed a song “relating to this wonderful visitor,” that song still being the property of the “regal” family of Hesquiat at the turn of the last century.¹³ The Hesquiat also had contact with British, American and other maritime fur traders on the coast 1785 to 1820.¹⁴ Moreover, as the mid-nineteenth century resulted in a less intensive period of white-Indian commercial and human contact on the west coast, so too can it be postulated that the Hesquiat would have been more isolated than in the previous period. However, after 1846 several significant changes occurred: firstly, Great Britain established the Colony of Vancouver Island in 1849; secondly, trading vessels frequented the coast in larger numbers, buying seal and dog fish oils used as lubricants in local sawmills; thirdly, in 1852 and 1862 smallpox epidemics ravaged native numbers; fourthly, in 1861 the entrepreneurs Stamp and Sproat built a sawmill nearby, at Alberni; fifthly, in 1864, the Royal Navy, at the request of the colonial governor, conducted (when all peaceful measures failed) an extensive and violent reprisal against pirates of the nearby Ahousat tribe who had captured a trading vessel and killed her crew; and lastly, though in 1859 a government agent had been appointed (partly to deal with Indian affairs) he had been killed a few years later, and was not immediately replaced thus leaving the coast unpoliced save for the occasional visit of her Majesty’s ships.¹⁵ It is true that a few lighthouses were tended; a few storekeepers kept establishments on the coast, in Barkley and Clayoquot sounds; but by and large few Europeans lived on or frequented the coast. It was uncolonized and was not promoted by authorities as a place for colonization: for timber exploitation and whaling and fishing, yes, but for farming and concentrated

¹³ Walbran, p. 241.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the sketchy interaction described in John Hoskins, “Narrative,” in F. W. Howay, ed., *Voyages of the “Columbia” to the Northwest Coast, 1787-1790 and 1790-1793* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, vol. 79, 1941), pp. 187-88. Also, Warren L. Cook, *Floodtide of Empire: Spain and the Pacific Northwest, 1543-1819* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 292.

¹⁵ I have described these changes and influences in greater detail in my *Gunboat Frontier: British Maritime Authority and Northwest Coast Indians, 1846-1890* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), ch. 8.

settlement, no. In the 1870s the Hesquiats began to be employed as seamen in the pelagic seal hunt, but until that time they had not lived far from their harbour and their coast.

In the 1870s the isolation of Hesquiats was still very real. The occasional schooner, gunboat or steamer would call, but as of yet there was no steady coastal steaming service. The isolation of an individual such as Brabant may be imagined; not only was Victoria distant; but Europe, including Rome, was much more so. The death of Pius IX was two months past by the time Brabant learned of it, and Leo XIII was already on the Papal throne. "As a matter of fact," Brabant continued, "it was close on five months since I had received a newspaper, a letter or a word of news of the civilized world." Seldom did Europeans visit the coast, and for as much as six months at a time he would have no opportunity of speaking "civilized language."¹⁶ This was Hesquiats territory – one still far removed from the main channels of even coastal commerce, from government regulation and law, and from the influences of Christianity.

II

However, on 25 September 1874, the Reverend Auguste-Joseph Brabant arrived at Hesquiats to begin a mission that continued under his direction for thirty-three years, until 1908. Brabant was born to a distinguished, devout and well to do family in Rollegem, near Bruges, West Flanders, on 23 October 1845.¹⁷ His parents died when he was an infant. He, his brothers and sisters were raised by an uncle. With his brother Prudent he was sent to study classics at St. Amandus' College, Courtrai, where they both graduated in August 1865 and had by this time resolved to enter the priesthood. At this time they had read accounts of Indian missions in North America, and Auguste was fired by prospects of missionary zeal. Prudent did not go forward, but Auguste proceeded on a path well recommended to him. First, he studied at the celebrated, ancient

¹⁶ A. J. Brabant, *Mission to Nootka, 1874-1900: Reminiscences of the West Coast of Vancouver Island*, ed. Charles Lillard (Sidney, B.C.: Gray's Publishing Ltd., 1977), p. 9. Lillard underestimates the degree of Brabant's isolation (p. 116, n. 2).

¹⁷ Details of his life are in The Rev. Joseph van der Heyden, "Life and Letters of Father Brabant, A Flemish Missionary Hero," *American College Bulletin* (Louvain), XI, 1 (January 1913), pp. 8-13 and 52-69, the basis of a 249 page book of the same title, published in Louvain in 1920 (printed by J. Wouters-Ickx).

University of Louvain (now the Catholic University of Louvain) and on 30 September 1865 he entered the American College of the Blessed Virgin, or the Americanum as a student of philosophy. He was made a priest in the cathedral of St. Rombout, Mechlin on 19 December 1868. He continued to study at the Americanum in theology, and at the end of the 1868-9 academic year took up his missionary assignment under Bishop the Rt. Rev. Modeste Demers, a founder of Vancouver Island and Oregon missions, who in 1867 had visited the college to recruit priests.¹⁸

A description of Brabant's Louvain training can be found elsewhere.¹⁹ Here it is sufficient to note that Brabant was educated in one of Europe's most learned universities, and he was trained in one of its best, most progressive missionary institutions, for the Americanum had been founded in 1857, the first rector, Father Peter Kindekens, wrote, "first to serve as a nursery of properly educated and tried clergymen for our missions; and secondly, to provide the American [that is North American] Bishops with a college to which some at least of their students might be sent to acquire a solid clerical training."²⁰ Brabant was among the many Belgian students of whom American bishops wrote admiringly were "robust in body and mind."²¹ The college, its historian says, was held in high esteem by Belgian youths who were "desirous for apostolic labors in foreign lands."²² *Missionarii Patria, Christi Dei Ecclesia* was the college motto and the words were emblazoned on the walls of the College's refectory, serving as

¹⁸ Van der Heyden, "Life," p. 10.

¹⁹ Barry M. Gough, "Father Auguste-Joseph Brabant, Missionary among the Hesquiat: His institutional Connections in Louvain, 1865-1868," unpublished ms. 1982. See also, John Sauter, "History of the American College of Louvain," B.A. diss., fac de philosophie et lettres, 1952-53, Catholic University of Louvain (published as *The American College of Louvain, 1857-1898* [Louvain, 1959]). For sources for the study of the history of the University of Louvain, including the student movements of the 19th century, see the extensive bibliography in *The University of Louvain, 1425-1975* (Leuven: University Press, 1976), pp. 455-6. Dutch, French and English language editions were published simultaneously.

²⁰ Quoted in "The Story of the American College," *American College Bulletin*, XXXVI (June 1957; One Hundredth Anniversary Issue), p. 30.

²¹ Quoted in *ibid.*

²² Van der Heyden, "Life," p. 9. By 1870 the college, which had begun in near poverty in an abandoned butcher shop, had sent 122 priests to missions and had an enrollment of 41. By that time also the college enjoyed Papal support, and was patronized by 13 American bishops ("Story of the American College," p. 39). The college supplied the Northwest Coast with two archbishops, two bishops and sixteen priests.

a constant and certain reminder for students eating meals and discussing future prospects!

Brabant's choice of mission was Vancouver Island, where Bishop Demers was in charge. He left Antwerp 28 August 1869 in the company of other clergy, and landed at Victoria 18 October, via New York Chicago, San Francisco and Portland. For a few years, Brabant lived in Victoria, assisting the Bishop and his secretary, Father (later Archbishop) Charles John Seghers, teaching at St. Louis College and serving as assistant priest of St. Andrews Cathedral – all the while learning English. His biographer has assessed these preparatory years as follows:

The sound theological studies at Louvain University, of which his native talent, aided by the dogged application and determination of his Flemish temperament, took the best advantage, prepared him for the solitary ministry far away from a brother-priest to whom he might go for counsel or advice. Three years of almost daily companionship at Victoria with the learned priest who became afterwards Archbishop Seghers was somewhat of a post-graduate course, which evidently stood him in good stead in the solution of difficulties that came up in the course of the labors that brought several tribes of the worst kind of savages from the depths of ignorant pagan degradation to the heights of enlightened Christian Faith. Father Brabant was a scholar who as such would, had he chosen his field of labor in any large eastern diocese, easily have taken first place among his peers.²³

III

With Father Seghers, Brabant made an exploratory trip to the West Coast of Vancouver Island in the spring of 1874. Heretofore, Catholic missions had been principally concentrated on the Salish Indian communities in and near Victoria and Esquimalt and on the Kwakiutl at Fort Rupert and Newwitty. The West Coast had no missionary of any kind or connection, and Brabant thus had a field open to himself. Seghers and himself chose Hesquiat as headquarters, being in a relatively secure geographical position and free from contaminating European influences. Neither Seghers nor Brabant wanted the British colonists and government to interfere, and were terribly afraid that the Royal Navy would cause

²³ Van der Heyden, "Life," p. 15.

trouble. In one instance, in 1874, H.M.S. *Boxer*, Commander William Collins, provided material assistance and food to the missionaries, and Brabant seems to have been rather surprised by the beneficence of the officers and crew of the gun vessel, having prejudged them as callous, uncaring men.²⁴ However, it will be appreciated that missionaries such as Brabant sought isolation and even employed techniques of maintaining isolation for the people of the mission in order to keep Indians such as the Hesquiat from certain contaminating influences disease, liquor, and prostitution, among others. Above all, the object was salvation: “Nothing in the world,” Brabant wrote in his diary, “could tempt me to come and spend my life here were it not that the inhabitants of these inhospitable shores have a claim on the charity and zeal of a Catholic priest.”²⁵

Of the Hesquiat, Brabant had one overriding perception. At the time of his arrival they were, he wrote, “addicted beyond redemption to every description of pagan practices.”²⁶ At and near Hesquiat, Brabant learned of, and described, these pagan practices, three of which are here cited. A medicine woman, dancing, shaking and spitting blood predicted deaths of the sons of three chiefs' families; she was appeased by gifts given from two of the families, though the third, “more sensible than the others,” took no notice.²⁷ A chief, Nitaska drowned, and partisans blamed a rival, Townissim, and appointed an assassin who, however, was stopped by Brabant's intercession.²⁸ Hungry natives believed deceased chiefs would send food to them from “the other world.” However, as Brabant said, the deceased Nitaska sent no whale or food to his starving relatives.²⁹ In addition to these three examples, others too numerous to detail here are recounted: some deal with creatures and myths, others with song and dance, others with environment and condition. When he visited the Kyuquot nearby, the problems seemed much the same. “As regards the spiritual state of the tribe,” he wrote on 20 March 1877, “it is worse than ever. They blame me for the absence of food. They laugh at the doctrine which I teach. I gain nothing by making the sign of the Cross. I am neither a white man nor an Indian. I am the *Chigha*, the devil.”³⁰

²⁴ Further particulars in Gough, *Gunboat Frontier*, ch. 12.

²⁵ Brabant, *Mission to Nootka*, p. 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁷ Brabant, *Mission to Nootka*, p. 68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70

Sometimes his absences from the Hesquiat could stretch to months, as he founded a new branch of the west coast mission in Numukamis, Barkley Sound, known as St. Leo's mission; later he built a church at Ahousat. During these absences, another priest would carry on. In January 1878, for instance, Father P. J. Nicolaye reported that forty Indians, male and female, were willing to be baptized on condition that they observe the priest's structures to rid themselves of superstitions and the medicine men.³¹ Brabant similarly had experienced this at Numukamis, an easy volunteerism by ninety-four men and women including medicine men who were anxious "for the sacrament of regeneration."³² Brabant would have none of this, and refused to baptize until convinced of the legitimate expectations of the candidate. Always cautious, he refused to inflate the list on the baptismal register, in his estimation an unworthy practice that was undertaken by less virtuous Protestants.

Brabant's diary shows that he possessed an inordinate and enviable supply of perseverance and patience. He realized that you could not make devout believers of Indians overnight. Take for instance this reference, in July 1880. The new Bishop of Vancouver Island, the Rt. Reverend J. P. Blondel, conducted a tour of inspection but Brabant could not report *omnia prospera*. "The Bishop seemed disappointed," Brabant recorded, "he expected to receive a great reception and he would have been received with all the honours due to his rank. But my Indians, with the exception of one family are still pagans. I thought it would look like hypocrisy to make them turn out and act as Christians." And he concluded, "I live in hope that the time may yet come when our Bishop will be duly received here by Christians."³³ Indeed it was a matter of time and patience, and in 1882 he conducted the first marriage (after first performing baptisms). Though he regarded this as a progressive step, he found to his dismay that the bride's parents objected, interested chiefs had not been consulted, and elderly natives railed against priestly interference. Brabant countered the following Sunday by preaching on matrimony; in the older marriages, he said, daughters were property – sold as a canoe or horse "just as of old the chiefs sold their slaves." That era had passed, and he threatened to arrange marriages outside of the tribe if necessary. This evidently had the desired effect, and helped reduce native concepts of people as property.³⁴ At the

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 91 and 93. On matrimony, see also pp. 75-77.

same time it tended to accord Brabant an increasing degree of respect from the Hesquiat.

Brabant's durability was tested on several occasions, and never more strongly than in 1875, the year after his arrival. In that year smallpox spread from Nouetsat, twenty kilometers away. An excited Hesquiat chief, Matlahaw (who had been awarded a Dominion of Canada medal for bravery and kindness in rescuing the captain and crew from the wreck of the barque *Edwin* in 1874), contacted the dread disease. Immunization given by Brabant did not work; Matlahaw took the priest's shotgun and twice wounded him, once in the hand, once in the right shoulder. While Matlahaw fled to the forest, loyal Indians plotted revenge against the chief by planning to kill his unsuspecting sister. Brabant intervened, had another chief appointed her guardian, and temporarily stopped the feud. Meanwhile his condition deteriorated rapidly and fortunately H.M.S. *Rocket* arrived from Esquimalt in sufficient time to take him to hospital in Victoria. He recovered, and returned to Hesquiat and appointed a three-man Indian constabulary. Thereafter he seems to have lived in relative peace.³⁵

The Hesquiat knew the influence of British guns, for in 1869 the barque *John Bright*, which ran aground near Estevan Point, offered to the Hesquiat an irresistibly tempting prize of plunder and murder, and British law reinforced by the show of British power had convinced the Hesquiat that the British meant business; white persons and property were not to be interfered with.³⁶ Brabant had no involvement in this matter, it occurring five years before his arrival. Yet he gained from the Hesquiat an altogether different perspective. The Hesquiat maintained that the shipwrecked persons had not been murdered. They told Brabant that the bodies had been mangled by surf, rocks, and boulders and that, as was customary, they had moved them above the high watermark in order that the fish on which the Indians lived would not feed on the dead bodies.³⁷ "The Indians also say," noted Captain Walbran, who was among them many times, "the executed men were the victims of an interpreter's mistakes, false accusations of

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-45.

³⁶ Capt. Edge to Rear-Adm. Hastings, 13 May 1869, encl. in Hastings to sec. of Admiralty, 29 June 1869; Admiralty Minute, 3 August 1869; and Hastings to Secretary of Admiralty, 14 October 1869, all in Adm. 1/6092, Public Record Office, London.

³⁷ Brabant's view of the *John Bright* episode is in A. J. Brabant, misc. papers, ED B72.4, pp. 41-48, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Victoria.

hostile tribes and too credulous white people.”³⁸ If this interpretation is to be believed, we may imagine that in the oral tradition of the Hesquiat the story of the *John Bright* must long have remained as a sad, fatal encounter with British law and order. The Navy and the civil authorities may have felt that the punishment met the crime. They may, in their own minds, have satisfied themselves that justice had been served. They were in this case evidently unable to convince the Indians of the judiciousness of their actions. And to the end Brabant remained convinced that the Hesquiat had suffered injudiciously.

Despite, perhaps because of the Matlahaw episode, Brabant remained loyal to the Hesquiat, and the chiefly power of Matlahaw was discredited. A further example of Brabant’s loyalty to the Hesquiat is demonstrated by his support of native testimony given him, over a long period of time by natives, close to him in connection with the *John Bright* affair. And, he wished to remain with the Hesquiat despite the isolation. To his superiors he expressed no desire to move to a new field, and almost to the end of his Hesquiat years he continued to expand the work of the missions, building churches and developing an Indian industrial school, the first of its kind in British Columbia, called Christie Indian School, near Tofino, Clayoquot Sound.

He regarded his Christian Hesquiat (and other Christian Nootkan peoples) as the truly faithful. They had experienced a long and careful approach to Christianity under Roman Catholic instruction and he therefore watched with trepidation the encroachments of Methodists and Presbyterians at Nitinat and Ahousesant respectively. The Indians were well disposed, Brabant wrote in 1895, and the Protestant missionaries were making “very pronounced” efforts to “invade the coast.”³⁹ A thorough-going skeptic of government wrongdoing, he suspected that favouritism existed between the Canadian government and certain Protestant denominations, and in 1899 he was writing in his diary of his fears that a per capita grant from Ottawa for fifty native children was to be subverted by the actions of the Protestant opposition, and shared with his bishop the opinion that “Either the Methodists or the Presbyterians would

³⁸ Walbran, *British Columbia Coast Names*, pp. 241-42. When Capt. James Colnett of the trader *Argonaut* investigated the death of Thomas Hudson and five companions near Hesquiat in 1790, he was told by the Indians that they had drowned and when the bodies reached the beach they were stripped of clothes and thrown to the crows (*Cook, Flood Time of Empire*, pp. 292-93)

³⁹ Brabant, *Mission to Nootka*, pp. 112-13.

get our grant and use it to pervert our Catholic children.”⁴⁰ These fears never materialized. The Christie Indian School was built, and it opened in October 1899.

Brabant’s last few years at Hesquiat were ones of consolidation and maturation, and his preaching, teaching and parish work continued. When Captain Walbran, penned the “Brabant Island, Barkely Sound” entry in his *British Columbia Coast Names*, he wrote this testimony of his friend, giving at the same time references to other entries for which Brabant had supplied information:

Although his headquarters are at Hesquiat, he has constantly travelled from one tribe to another, and is thus universally known along that coast, hardly a point or bay of which he cannot call by its proper Indian name. Having a thorough knowledge of the Indian tongue, he has gathered a fund of information and anecdote relating to the tribes of those parts. The traditions of the first appearance of white men in the neighbourhood of Hesquiat (*see* Estevan point), the attack on the *Boston* and the murder of the crew (*see* Maquinna point), and a graphic description of the blowing up of the *Tonquin* in Clayoquot sound (*see* Clayoquot sound), have all been given to him by Indians who had the facts related to them by eye witnesses of, or participators in, those events. He is thus a link between the past and present history of the west coast Indians, who are gradually becoming themselves a thing of the past.⁴¹

Brabant was appointed apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Victoria in 1908, and thus returned somewhat ill and weak to a city that he had known as a young man. He requested on account of age not to be considered to succeed the retiring archbishop. He stayed with the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria, who in his failing health accorded him every respect and assistance; every day a sister read to him, his favourite reading always being Thomas à Kempis.⁴²

IV

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴¹ Walbran, *British Columbia Coast Names*, p. 61.

⁴² Van der Heyden, “Life,” pp. 21, 23.

In his declining years Brabant always hoped to go back to Hesquiat “fully determined,” his biographer has written, “to return to his Indian converts as soon as he would be relieved of the dignity that had all unexpectedly fallen to his lot.” Resigned to Victoria and other work, Brabant wrote “I should so much have liked to go spend the last years of my life with my converted people. The only consolation the Bishop gave me was: Let us pray for a successor.”⁴³ That successor was the Rev. Charles Moser, a Benedictine father from Mount Angel, Oregon, who recounted his experiences along with Brabant’s in his 1926 *Reminiscences of the West Coast of Vancouver Island*.⁴⁴

Brabant’s life and work reveals several outstanding characteristics of the man and his training. As a person he enjoyed remarkable serenity; he had long-term dedication; he was robust and resilient; his musical interests held him in good stead with the Hesquiat; he bore no malice, though was suspicious of Government and Protestants; and he faced failures squarely. As for his training, he was multi-lingual. In his youth he had the best of classical training.⁴⁵ Educated by progressives, he brought progressive attitudes in education to the frontier, as eventually realized in the Christie Industrial School. His languages and rhetorical training were doubtless of much assistance in his work among the Hesquiat and other natives.

As for the Hesquiat, the years of Brabant’s presence show them not resisting to religious change and conversion, save in two ways firstly, an objection by older natives to newly-introduced marriage practices, and, secondly, a heady willingness to be baptized and converted almost *en masse*, a matter Brabant thought premature. The Hesquiat seemed anxious to please him, especially the younger ones; the older persons were more resistant to change. As regards social and legal practices, chiefs and medicine men might offer resistance, as Matlahaw did violently when smallpox threatened. Shamans too, were discredited but their practices

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

⁴⁴ Printed by Acme Press, Victoria. This work reprinted Brabant’s 1900 *Reminiscences*, together with other documents, an excerpt from Bishop Lemmens’ journal and a biography of Father Nicolaye. Moser remained on the West Coast until 1930, when he returned to Mount Angel.

⁴⁵ Classical language and rhetorical training was an advantage for any missionary, according to Axtell (“Preachers, Priests, and Pagans: Catholic and Protest Missions in Colonial North America,” Laurier II Ethnology paper, 1983), p. 14. Jesuits enjoyed a special advantage in this regard, says Axtell. But were certain Protestant missionaries such as Hall and Doolan (see n.1 above) any the less educated?

probably “went underground” rather than disappearing altogether as Brabant and others would have liked. Certainly the Hesquiat made no determined stand against the advance of the mission, and perhaps this was so because of the declining native population, and the changes of the local economy, which in their own way were changing native economic and social customs.

The Hesquiat mission brought two cultures into contact. The values and intentions of the Roman Catholic priest changed hardly at all; to him, his object involved a long-standing obligation, and a duty that was to be undertaken well and thoroughly. His European past, education, and training carved him out for the role of a determined, dedicated priest. Louvain lay half a world away from Hesquiat, but Brabant closed the gap by his presence. As for the Hesquiat, they made rapid changes, being far from resistant to adaptation and education; they readily accepted what Brabant brought among them. The resulting mission, begun successfully yet not without trial by Brabant in 1874, continued, and indeed is continued by those who have followed in his wake.