

## The Magic Canoe All Our Wisdom for Living<sup>7</sup>

AT AGE TEN, a boy named Cecil Paul was removed from his Haisla native village of Mis'kusa on the banks of the Kitlope River in north-central British Columbia. He was taken in his moccasins by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to a residential school in Port Alberni on Vancouver Island, a victim, like thousands of young native children, of Canadian government policies designed to convert native people into proper Christian white children. Generations later, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada would refer to these policies as amounting to "cultural genocide," and no-one disagreed. The government, abetted by the Church, had sought, in the words of Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, to "take the Indian out of the child."

*In the case of Cecil Paul, it didn't work.*

*Cecil suffered greatly at the Port Alberni school. Hundreds of miles from his home, forbidden to speak the only language he knew, beaten, sexually assaulted, and then discarded by the school at age fourteen, his spirit broken, not knowing how to get home. He washed up on Skid Row in Vancouver, depressed and habitually drunk. He eventually went north, at one point snagging a job in a fish cannery called Butedale, where he fell in love with a young white woman and she became pregnant. He proposed marriage, the only decent thing to do. Instead, he was called into the cannery manager's office and told, "You have to leave."*




---

<sup>7</sup> Beebe, S.B., "The Magic Canoe." *It's Not Any House You've Ever Known*, Ecotrust, Portland, 2018.

*A boat was coming the next day and he had to be on it. The child, a girl, was given up for adoption. Cecil headed to the fishing town of Prince Rupert and, once again, drowned his sorrows in drink.*

*But after a time a voice beckoned, an ancestor. It was his grandmother, calling him back to Kitamaat Village, where the survivors of his people, the Xenaksiala people, had amalgamated with the Haisla First Nation. She bade him return to the Kitlope River, to Mis'kusa—to go all the way home.*

*But home was vanishing before his eyes. The Haisla and Xenaksiala traditional territory of some four-million acres of marine fjordland, islands, mountain streams, huge Douglas fir, Sitka spruce, and cedar were almost all now part of a "tree farm license" that was being rapidly logged, while commercial fishing fleets were depleting rich supplies of crab, shrimp, halibut and salmon. What Cecil called his "bank" was being drawn down by the same forces of colonialism and industrialization that took him from his homeland as a child. The social effects on Kitamaat Village and the Haisla community were taking a deadly toll on youth and adults alike in alcohol, drugs, and suicide. Cecil wondered aloud if there would even be a Haisla people in the future: "Who are we in this strange modern world?"*

*Then, on a salmon fishing trip to the Kitlope River, something unusual happened to Cecil and his companions. As Cecil tells it, four young white people "fell out of the sky." In point of fact, a de Havilland Beaver float plane landed, unloaded four people and their gear, and departed.*

*Around a campfire that night the "Boston people" and the villagers talked. For three more days they talked and fished together and shared stories. These whites had learned that the Kitlope River was the largest pristine coastal temperate rainforest watershed anywhere in the world. No roads, no logging, no dams, no hatcheries. All eight hundred thousand acres from mountain top at eight-thousand feet, high glaciers, waterfalls, magnificent forest, all the way to the estuary where fresh water met salt, and nourished large flocks of migrating waterfowl, shorebirds, and returning salmon and steelhead of all six species. It was about to be logged, and Cecil and his companions were talking about what to do. He wasn't even sure he could convince his own villagers to fight for their land.*