WE ARE COMING HOME
Prologue

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People have to realize we are human beings. Our different lifestyle doesn’t make us less human. We have our own way of dealing with nature.
— Allan Pard

This book is the legacy of Gerald (Gerry) T. Conaty, an exceptional Canadian museum curator who died on 25 August 2013. Gerry rejected the usual descriptors of cancer as a battle, fight, or struggle; he preferred to call it a process or a journey. That journey did not allow Gerry to see this book through to publication, as he died while the manuscript was undergoing review at Athabasca University Press. Understanding that he might not live to finish what he had begun, Gerry asked me to assume stewardship of this book in the event of his
death. Hence this prologue. This book is about relinquishing power and authority and about learning to listen. There is a salutary message herein for all museums and all museum workers, a message that stems from Gerry’s integrity, his vision of a better world, and his belief that museums can, and should, work to achieve this vision.

I met Gerry in 1989, when Hugh Dempsey, then chief curator of the Glenbow Museum, and I, as the museum’s director, set out to find the best curator of ethnology in Canada. By “best,” we meant a person who had the commitment and the skills to forge relationships with First Nations peoples founded on mutual respect. We had heard about Gerry’s work at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, in Regina, and we convinced him to come to the Glenbow. Thus began my nearly twenty-five-year association with Gerry, which continued until his death.

Gerry had, I discovered, a quirky sense of humour that was appreciated by all. It was continually refined and refreshed by his Blackfoot friends, whose sense of humour is boundless. He was also a private person—paradoxically expressing a serious and reflective side along with his joking and teasing. These were traits that shaped and smoothed his interactions with all First Nations peoples, not only the Blackfoot. Gerry was deliberate, reflective, self-critical, disciplined, and humble. All of these are the traits of a scholar, which Gerry was by nature, by training (he earned a BA and MA in anthropology and a PhD in archaeology), and by practice. Scholarship was our first bond.

Our second bond was, and remains, the Blackfoot people who became our friends and colleagues and who welcomed us into their lives. At the outset of our relationship at the Glenbow, Gerry and I decided that the Blackfoot must be our priority, given that we lived in their homeland and the Glenbow owned much of their cultural patrimony. Our approach was two-pronged: I played the backroom politics with the provincial government and the Glenbow’s Board of Governors while Gerry visited the reserves and Blackfoot communities to develop personal relationships—both of us driven by our belief that a museum could actually become a force for social good and community well-being. Although this division of labour was a conscious strategy, it was not absolute, as we also shared the politics of governance and attended ceremonies together on the reserves.

There was a standing joke among staff that the Glenbow should have purchased the motel in Fort Macleod, Alberta, where Gerry and other Glenbow staff members spent innumerable nights during their visits among the Blackfoot.
Hidden in this observation is the fundamental fact that our relationship with the Blackfoot would never have materialized without this commitment of time and money by the Glenbow, Gerry, and various other members of the staff.

In an email message written to me in January 2014, Gwyn Langemann, Gerry’s spouse, further described these relationships:

These friendships were important on a professional level, not only for the understanding they gave Gerry of the Blackfoot world view and cultural practices, but also because they were profoundly important to him on a personal level. Gerry greatly valued these friendships; he liked and respected them as people, and they liked and respected him. Like any evolving friendship, they contributed to making Gerry the whole person he was.

No friendship evolves or persists on its own, and all that has been accomplished by the Blackfoot and the Glenbow Museum is ultimately a result of the trust and respect that emerged from sustained, face-to-face encounters. This is a truism, but achieving enduring relationships is an immense challenge for most museums, whether they claim a lack of time, resources, or institutional focus as the obstacle.

As the Glenbow’s senior curator of ethnology and, later, as the director of Indigenous studies, Gerry was in charge of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit collections. Under his guidance, the Glenbow initiated the return of sacred objects to First Nations peoples for ceremonial purposes. Between 1990 and 2000—the decade leading up to the formal repatriation discussed in this book—Gerry thus oversaw all of the complexities associated with the return of over fifty Medicine Pipe Bundles to Blackfoot and Cree communities. Animating these activities was his persistent drive to create a more inclusive museum, where Aboriginal peoples could have a voice in the portrayal of their cultures and their histories. To this end, Gerry and the ethnology staff made every effort to employ Blackfoot individuals in a variety of positions. Sometimes this worked, and sometimes it didn’t. I recall the internal turmoil that Gerry ignited when he sought to have a Blackfoot employee paid at the level of a curator on the strength of the traditional knowledge and storytelling skills that this individual possessed. This caused consternation among staff and within the employees’ union because the individual in question did not have an advanced
degree—or any other degree, for that matter. Gerry succeeded in achieving the appropriate pay level. I mention this example to illustrate that Grey Bull (Sikapiistomik—Gerry’s Blackfoot name) was routinely engaged with First Nations in ways that had nothing to do with repatriation.

From the beginning, for example, Gerry worked to develop closer connections between the museum and local First Nations communities. The result was numerous informal initiatives that enabled Aboriginal people to explore the collections and to see and touch items from a variety of cultures. Among the community groups who took advantage of such opportunities were Just Say Yes (an employment program), the Nursing Professional Development System, and the Calgary Drop-In Centre. Gerry also provided a component of the cultural sensitivity training program for the Calgary Police Service. The Glenbow has not charged an admission fee to Aboriginal people since 2001—yet another example of Gerry’s broad sense of social justice.

In addition to these outreach activities, whenever possible, Gerry included Aboriginal individuals on exhibition teams to ensure that their voices and perspectives were an integral part of the work. Examples of such collaborative efforts include the First Nations Gallery at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum; “Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America,” developed in partnership with six major American museums as part of the Museums West Consortium; “Inusivut: Our Way of Life,” developed with the Inuvialuit of Canada’s western Arctic; “Niitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life,” a permanent gallery at the Glenbow created in partnership with the Blackfoot Confederacy; and “Honouring Tradition,” which examined the meaning embedded in items of Subarctic and Plains material culture in the Glenbow’s collections. Gerry was also working with Cree Elders to develop a website that would highlight their interpretation of the Glenbow’s Cree collection.

In 1992, the Glenbow also began developing temporary exhibitions with Aboriginal high school students in southern Alberta. Initially, we worked with the Plains Indians Cultural Survival School, in Calgary, to create four exhibitions. These were followed by other collaborations with Jack James High School (also in Calgary), Morley Community School (on the Stoney reserve, west of Calgary, near Canmore), and Kainai High School (in Standoff, on the Kainai reserve, southwest of Lethbridge). The students, teachers, and school administrators all remarked on the value of these projects in encouraging self-esteem among the students. Gerry
also participated in “Doctors, Lawyers, and Indian Chiefs,” a series of Kainai children’s culture and career camps sponsored by the Red Cross, speaking to the children about museums and the repatriation work. In addition, he regularly told Blackfoot stories to children at the W. H. Cushing Workplace School and worked with staff members there to include visits to the Glenbow as a regular part of their curriculum (Gwyn Langemann, pers. comm., 14 January 2014).

At the museum itself, Gerry mentored interns and graduate students from Europe and North America. For over a decade, students came to the Glenbow in a steady stream to learn from Gerry and the ethnology staff, including Beth Carter, the curator of ethnology and a key player in the Glenbow’s involvement with First Nations. This resulted in numerous theses and dissertations devoted to the Glenbow’s efforts to build relationships with First Nations. Among the other Glenbow colleagues who worked closely with Gerry on the Blackfoot repatriation were Patricia Ainslie, Daryl Betenia, Christine Chin, Gwenyth Claughton, Nancy Cope, Clifford Crane Bear, Camille Owens, and Evy Werner.

Over the course of his career, Gerry published nearly sixty papers, book chapters, and reviews, edited or collaborated on four books, and gave numerous public presentations. Many of these publications and presentations concerned Aboriginal culture and history. He served as the associate editor of *Museum Management and Curatorship* and was an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Calgary. In addition to his scholarly work, Gerry was generous with his time to a variety of related activities and organizations. He was a member of Mount Royal University’s Ethics Review Board, a member of the Board of Directors of the Mookaakin Society of the Kainai First Nation, and a board member of the Mikai’sto Foundation, an affiliate of Red Crow Community College (which, in 1995, became the first tribal college in Canada). He was also honoured by membership in the Kainai Chieftainship, an organization that works on behalf of the Kainai Nation, of which he served for a time as president.

From every perspective, Gerry’s career was rich and exemplary, and it stands as eloquent testimony to his commitment to traditional scholarly values, on the one hand, and to pushing the boundaries of innovative and mindful museum practice, on the other.

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Figure 1. Blackfoot ceremonialist Pete Standing Alone painting the face of Gerald Conaty in preparation for his induction into the Kainai Chieftanship in recognition of his contributions to the well-being of the Kainai Nation. Photograph by Robert R. Janes.
The term “Blackfoot” is commonly used to refer to the four nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy: Siksika, Kainai, Apatohsipiikani, and Ammskaapipiikani. Today, the Siksika Nation is headquartered on a reserve located roughly 90 kilometres to the east of Calgary, at Siksika, near the towns of Gleichen and Cluny. The Kainai—often called by their English name, the Blood—are based in Standoff, roughly halfway between Fort Macleod and Cardston, some 200 kilometres south of Calgary. The Kainai reserve, the largest in Canada, stretches west and south of the city of Lethbridge. The Apatohsipiikani, or Peigan, occupy territory to the west of the Kainai and are based in Brocket, not far from the town of Pincher Creek. The drawing of the border between Canada and the United States separated the Apatohsipiikani (the Northern Piikani) from the Ammskaapipiikani (the Southern Piikani). The latter now reside in Montana, in the vicinity of Browning, and have come to be called the Blackfeet, although they are also known as the Piegan (as distinct from the Peigan). The four nations call themselves the Niitsitapi, the Real People.

The idea for the present book emerged in the summer of 2009, during a conversation among Allan Pard, Narcisse Blood, and Gerry in a restaurant in Fort Macleod, Alberta. They realized that, although their repatriation work had been ongoing for nearly two decades, no one was documenting this unprecedented initiative. From this modest beginning, the book grew in scope and purpose to include the essays that follow, five of them written by Blackfoot ceremonialists. Gerry authored the introduction, “Beginnings,” in which he shares his first experiences with Blackfoot ceremonial life.

As he explains, Gerry was simultaneously moved and alarmed at his first bundle opening, when Daniel Weasel Moccasin removed the sacred pipe from the bundle and began to dance with it. Such behaviour challenged all of Gerry’s curatorial propensities and assumptions: “Was this the proper way to treat a precious artifact?” It was here that Gerry’s learning began in earnest. He was becoming aware of a different way of seeing the world, trading his traditional museum assumptions for an appreciation of how sacred objects affect the social structure of a community. In commenting on his reactions to his first bundle opening, Gerry observes that “people were welcoming home a long-lost relative.” This was the beginning of Gerry’s apprenticeship, during which he embraced the sensitivity and humility that would become his hallmarks. His
introduction recounts the origins of his value-driven work, as well as of the conviction with which he concludes, namely, that “repatriation is a vital component in the creation of an equitable, diverse, and respectful society.” Full stop.

Chapter 1, “The Development of Museums and Their Effects on First Nations,” situates repatriation in its historical and institutional context. In it, Gerry offers an analysis of the evolving relationship between museums and First Nations, both globally and in Canada, as well as assessing seminal events such as the advent of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), in the US, and the Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, in Canada. With thoroughness and clarity, Gerry lays the groundwork for two fundamental truths that underlie this book. First, museums have always been biased in their outlook and activities. Museums have never existed in a social or political vacuum, despite conventional claims of neutrality. Second, repatriation is a highly complex affair, especially when it involves sacred objects. Gerry discusses the concept of ownership, the commodification of the sacred, and mainstream cultural values, as well as the inevitable confusion and paradoxes that result when two very different world views collide.

The heart of this book lies, however, in chapters 2 through 7. In “Niitsitapiisinni: Our Way of Life,” Gerry presents a capsule history of the Niitsitapi—the way they lived in the world and, most importantly, their cosmology. In so doing, he does not shy away from considering the innumerable changes to the Niitsitapi’s political, social, economic, and spiritual life over the past three centuries. Some of these changes were slow and incremental; others—such as smallpox epidemics—destroyed individuals and families and threatened the entire culture. Overall, Gerry’s assessment is sobering, ranging from the consequences of residential schools, to alcohol abuse, to land appropriation by the dominant society—the last perhaps more catastrophic for the Niitsitapi than the ravages of epidemic disease. By the late 1960s, Blackfoot traditional spiritual practices had reached a low point. Fewer people were joining the sacred societies and attending ceremonies, and sacred bundles were continuing to be sold to museums and private collectors. A revival of interest in ceremonial life has since taken place among the Blackfoot, however, and the repatriation movement has been one important consequence of this renaissance.
Chapters 3 through 7 are the work of Allan Pard, Jerry Potts, Frank Weasel Head, Herman Yellow Old Woman, and Chris McHugh, respectively. These individuals are among the most prominent ceremonial leaders, teachers, historians, and role models of the Blackfoot Confederacy. They are usually referred to as “Elders” by museums and others in the non-Blackfoot world, but (as Gerry notes) this term does not encompass all that it means to be regarded as a mokaki, a wise person. The authors of these essays are the wise persons to whom he refers, and their essays are a gift to the future. Their writing constitutes the definitive historical record of Blackfoot repatriation efforts, not only in Canada and the United States but also in Great Britain, complete with the personalities, tribulations, and personal journeys of learning and discovery.

The repatriation work described here, and the knowledge required for it, is as complex, demanding, and sophisticated as any research conducted by museum curators with advanced degrees. For example, writing in chapter 3 about objects that are eligible for repatriation, Allan Pard notes that “the most important part of repatriation is successfully identifying the bundles.” As he goes on to explain:

There is a lot of confusion about bundles. For example, some people don’t distinguish between a split-horn headdress and a litskinaiksi [Horn Society] headdress. We also have to be aware that some of the material in museum collections was duplicated. When we are attending those institutions, we have to examine the material carefully to determine whether it is a replica or the real thing. If it is a Natoas bundle, was it used in an O’kaan [Sun Dance ceremony]? You can see the telltale signs, such as the paint. People have to know what they are doing, what they are looking for.

I will not attempt to give an overview of each essay: their substance and value defy brevity. Instead, I will mention two critical outcomes of the work described here that museums ignore at their own peril. These outcomes both justify repatriation and validate its enduring value. Early on in their quest for the return of sacred objects, the Blackfoot (and the Glenbow) were advised by Alberta government officials to replicate the bundles using contemporary materials—thereby allowing the original bundles to be preserved in museum...
collections. It is patently clear from these essays that replication is not a replacement for repatriation and that this alternative should be discarded, once and for all, as a museum’s avoidance strategy. Second, I note the overwhelming consensus among the Blackfoot essayists on the importance of repatriation to enhancing community well-being. I leave it to the reader to discover the manifold, salutary, and sometimes mysterious benefits that the return of ceremonial bundles has had for Blackfoot society.

Chapters 8 and 9 confront the psycho-politics that result when two strong-willed organizations and their leaders cannot agree on a common course of action. In this instance, the Government of Alberta owned the Blackfoot objects that the Glenbow wished to repatriate, and provincial officials were staunchly opposed to repatriation. In chapter 8, John Ives—at the time, the director of the Archaeological Survey of Alberta—provides an inside view of the government’s perspective and describes the events that culminated in Alberta’s First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (FNSCORA). In a judicious manner, he recounts the discussions that ultimately prompted the Glenbow to seek a political solution to the government’s opposition to the proposed Blackfoot repatriation, rather than continue to rely on bureaucratic procedures. Ives is generous of spirit when he notes the hope, understanding, and respect that are emerging from this repatriation—despite the province’s long-standing resistance to the idea.

In the following chapter, I recount the events leading to the repatriation, including the personal and organizational readiness that underlay the Glenbow’s work with the Blackfoot. I discuss our persistent conflict with provincial officials openly and frankly, making no effort to downplay the dysfunctional nature of the relationship that existed between our museum and the Alberta government. I believe it is necessary to leave a record of what actually transpired. The goal of repatriation was not a collective aspiration from the beginning, and, while concealing difficulties in retrospect may be politically convenient, no purpose is served by minimizing the degree of opposition that was directed at the Glenbow’s proposal. The entire repatriation process was a fundamental learning experience—the lesson being that anything is possible if the commitment is strong enough.

The book concludes with Gerry’s essay “Moving Forward,” which reaffirms, with examples, that the repatriation in January 2000 is not only a story of
hope and perseverance but has been a source of renewed pride, self-confidence, and well-being among the Blackfoot. As Gerry observes, hope, pride, and self-confidence are the fundamental ingredients of cultural survival and prosperity, neither of which is possible without these qualities. He goes on to assess the inherent value of repatriation in a world beset by urbanization, industrialization, and globalization. Diversity, including our ability to cope with change, is crucial to the well-being of both ecosystems and civilization. The preservation of cultural diversity through the repatriation of sacred objects ensures the survival of different ways of understanding and living in the world. Ever the realist, though, Gerry also acknowledges the persistent conservatism of museum culture and the continuing challenges this presents to Aboriginal communities seeking the return of their cultural property. The question thus remains: Why is so much of the museum community still largely resistant to fostering diversity in living cultures rather than just in collection vaults?

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Gerry’s concluding message is clear: despite the success that he, the Glenbow, and museums elsewhere have had in demonstrating the value of repatriation for the preservation of cultural diversity, the task is far from finished. Countless items currently languish in museum collections worldwide, bereft of their cultural context and their human creators. Many of these objects are ordinary, of the sort in everyday use; many others, however, are charged with cosmological and spiritual meaning. It was the sacred that preoccupied Gerry, and it is the sacred objects that require the attention of any museum that claims to be culturally relevant and responsible. Although the ways in which the museum community is currently addressing these responsibilities give us some cause for hope, the legacy of colonialism is proving to be remarkably stubborn.

In the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) continues to unfold, bringing Native peoples into museums for the first time and resulting in the repatriation of thousands of objects and human remains. While NAGPRA has fundamentally altered the relationship between Native communities and American museums, it is also apparent that it is only part of a genuine relationship. A survey of sixty-three American museums revealed that they are not making the structural
adjustments necessary to ensure that their relationships with Native communities are secure, healthy, and long-lasting (Scott and Luby 2007, 277). The opportunity to develop a mutual, long-term vision continues to escape the museum hierarchy in these organizations.

In Canada, the museum community awaits a national follow-up discussion to the groundbreaking work of the Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association Task Force on Museums and First Peoples. Despite the profoundly important recommendations of the task force, ranging from repatriation to museum training for First Nations, the response among Canadian museums remains variously unknown, nonexistent, or uneven. In contrast to NAGPRA in the United States, which is federal legislation, each Canadian museum has been left to the dictates of its own conscience and its own devices. There is no doubt that the extensive consultation and reflection spawned by the task force were capable of changing the Canadian museum landscape forever, but, as in the United States, the Canadian museum hierarchy has been unwilling or unable to organize a thorough examination of the task force’s legacy. We still do not know to what extent the task force succeeded in its work.

In a world beset by the marketplace, one recent development in the repatriation saga is worthy of note. In December 2013, the Annenberg Foundation, which provides funding and support to nonprofit organizations in the United States and globally, announced that it had purchased twenty-four sacred Native American artifacts from an auction house in Paris—at a cost totalling US$530,000. This purchase was made solely for the purpose of restoring these objects to their rightful owners. Twenty-one of these items will be returned to the Hopi Nation in Arizona, and the remaining three, which belong to the San Carlos Apache, will be returned to the Apache tribe. Perhaps this unprecedented move will shame museums into acting with similar innovation and courage. Then again, it may have the opposite effect, relieving museums of any further responsibility for their colonial legacy and allowing them to default to the auction houses and private philanthropists to undertake the transfer of unconditional ownership. While this is impossible to predict, choosing inaction in order to limit change and risk is a pervasive museum pattern.

The most insidious obstacle to repatriation was, in fact, invented by global museum leaders themselves. It is embodied in the Declaration on the
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Importance and Value of Universal Museums, which Gerry discusses briefly in his closing chapter. Signed in December 2002 by such luminaries as the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Rijksmuseum, the Guggenheim Museum and the British Museum, the declaration rejects repatriation on the grounds that “universal museums,” with their encyclopaedic collections, are best positioned to act on behalf of the world. By claiming to know what is in humanity’s best interests, the signatories have violated a cardinal tenet of anthropology—namely, to avoid deciding what is in other people’s best interests (Hinshaw 1971, vii). Who is advising these omniscient directors in such an undertaking, and what is responsible for their lack of intellectual and moral rigour?

Both the idea and the practice of repatriation enjoy a far more progressive climate in North America than they do in Europe, as is clear from what the Blackfoot contributors to this book have to say about their ongoing efforts to repatriate key sacred objects held in European museum collections, notably in the United Kingdom. These museums stand to lose some significant objects if they relax their preoccupation with keeping collections on behalf of the world—the ethnocentric logic of the universal museum declaration. As a means of pre-empting this threat, the declaration is either a post hoc rationalization that sustains a colonial past or a new chapter in colonial history dressed up in contemporary parlance.

Whichever it is, there is a fundamental flaw in both the intellectual and moral dimensions of the universal museum declaration. Recall the tale of the camel’s nose. Once you compassionately let the camel stick his nose inside the tent, how can you refuse him further entrance? The inference is that returning any sacred objects to their source communities would cause a run on museum collections, and everything would eventually be lost to a variety of special-interest groups. But this sort of thinking is inappropriate and ill advised, especially when one is dealing with the inherent complexities of repatriation. Individuals and organizations that use the camel’s nose argument seem to believe that human beings are devoid of practical judgment and are bound to act unreasonably (Hardin 1985, 64). There is, however, one simple refutation to camel’s nose reasoning when applied to repatriation, one that is grounded in both ethics and morality—namely, that “the abuse of a thing does not bar its use” (Fletcher in Hardin 1985, 63).
Despite the deeply rooted paternalism that still reigns in British and European museums, a few of them have made an effort to respond to repatriation efforts in a socially conscious manner. In 1992, Glasgow Museums received a request from the Wounded Knee Survivors Association for the return of a Lakota Ghost Dance shirt and four other ceremonial items, which had been sold to Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Museum in 1892. The request was initially rejected, but after an appeal and further review, including consultation with the Glasgow public, the original decision was overturned, and arrangements were made to return the shirt. The Lakota had to guarantee, however, that the shirt would be preserved in perpetuity—it is currently in the care of the South Dakota State Historical Society—and remain on public display. In exchange for the return, the Lakota also created a replica of the shirt for Glasgow Museums. As Kathryn Whitby-Last (2010, 41) points out, such conditions, which are by no means uncommon, can have the effect of discouraging Indigenous groups from pursuing repatriation claims, and, “if the object is currently held in a museum, there is often a presumption of return being to an alternative museum rather than to the group making the claim for continuing use.”

In chapter 5, Frank Weasel Head discusses another repatriation from a British museum, this one involving a fitskinaiksi headdress that the University of Aberdeen’s Marischal Museum had acquired in 1934 from a collector in the United States. After two trips to Aberdeen, in 2002 and 2003, a Kainai delegation succeeded in negotiating the return of the headdress. As Weasel Head indicates, the Kainai refused the museum’s request for a replica of the headdress, as well as a proposal that the museum be allowed to photograph the headdress, as this would violate its sacred status. Nor, in this instance, were conditions imposed of the sort that surrounded the Ghost Dance shirt. Rather, once the bundle was brought home to Kainai, in the summer of 2003, it was immediately restored to ceremonial use.

Museums have also been exploring options other than deaccessioning ceremonial objects and restoring them to their original owners. Gerry discusses one such example in the introduction to this book. The Pitt Rivers Museum, at the University of Oxford, has undertaken to share various objects from its collections with the Haida First Nation in Canada (Krmpotich and Peers 2013). In this instance, sharing means having a group of Haida travel to England to visit the Pitt Rivers Museum. Nika Collison, curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum
at Kay Llnagaay, notes that “there is still so much collective knowledge in our community that spending time with a piece sees all sorts of information and memories come out, knowledge shared and inspiration born” (pers. comm., 16 December 2014). One tends to doubt, however, that the Haida will be at peace until a broad sample of their cultural treasures has “come home,” as have Blackfoot sacred bundles.

The idea of sharing, as opposed to repatriating or loaning, is also discussed by Frank Weasel Head in chapter 5. This instance involved five traditional Blackfoot shirts of known provenance and exceptional cultural meaning for the Blackfoot. In 2010, the shirts, also owned by the Pitt Rivers Museum, were transported to Alberta and shared with the Blackfoot and with the Glenbow and Galt Museums, both located in traditional Blackfoot territory. The sharing consisted of public exhibitions and “handling sessions for Blackfoot people.” In a clear demonstration of commitment and tenacity, the Blackfoot had worked for six years to arrange for these shirts to come home, at least temporarily.

As is the case with the Haida, spending time with these shirts is certainly better than not doing so. Frank Weasel Head and his colleagues remain ever hopeful that these shirts will also come home (Frank Weasel Head, pers. comm., 4 December 2013). But what with the universal museum declaration and the prevalence of camel’s nose thinking, it would seem that sharing now defines the comfort limit for much of the museum community. In considering the contents of this book, it is difficult to be patient with the reframing of museum hegemony in the form of sharing, as compared to repatriation or long-term loans—especially in light of the demonstrated value that sacred objects have for nurturing individual and community well-being. It is disingenuous to act as if similar value flows from these objects while they reside in storage, whether at the Pitt Rivers Museum or somewhere else. I, of course, defer to the wisdom of Haida and Blackfoot Elders, and I have no doubt that they will persist in their quest to realize their legitimate aspirations.

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Regardless of the difficulties and obstacles surrounding repatriation, Gerry Conaty’s work as a curator, scholar, and humanitarian models the behaviour required for a more desirable future—for the biosphere and for museums and
the communities they serve. Gerry seems to have known from the beginning of his career that bundles and other sacred objects were fundamental ingredients in the well-being of First Nations peoples. Given the opportunity, Gerry acted on his prescience, and the results are a matter of record. The enduring value of his contributions, and those of his Blackfoot colleagues in this book, is best summed up by Betty Bastien, the author of the landmark book *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*:

> Our knowledge and knowing process are not lost, nor are they irrelevant for a highly industrialized and technological society. They are a way that can begin to generate renewal and balance on a planet that the human species is destroying. They are a way of being that can produce knowledge to reunite and strengthen our interdependence as a community of kinship alliances. The healing power of tribal wisdom, Indigenous ways of knowing, and our ability as human beings to renew and strengthen the alliances of a cosmic universe can reverse the path of destruction on which we find ourselves. (2004, 180–181)

Is there a timelier message for our species than this?

According to one Blackfoot grandfather, the Creator said, “We have one more chance to be Indian” (Bastien 2004, 181). Gerald T. Conaty did all he could to assist the Creator with that task.

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NOTES

1 Because “Siksika” literally means “black foot,” the term “Blackfoot” has often been used to refer only to the Siksika. In this volume, however, “Blackfoot” is used as a collective term.


5 Full details on the Blackfoot shirts project are available at “Reconnections with Historic Blackfoot Shirts,” http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/.

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