

## Catharine McClellan (1921- )



Catharine McClellan with Mrs. Angela Sidney, a Tagish Indian storyteller, Whitehorse, Yukon, approximately 1970.

Anthropological research by Catharine McClellan has received two markedly different kinds of recognition in two very different worlds. In North American anthropology her clear detailed descriptions of western subarctic Tlingit and Athapaskan culture and her insights into social organization, myth and folklore, and fur trade history have earned her international stature. In Yukon Native communities her openness, her wit, and her intelligent appreciation of everything she has been taught have earned her a place in the kinship network.

Kitty, as she is known by both her academic colleagues and her friends in the Yukon, has spent 35 years applying her remarkable energies and research abilities to integrating those two worlds. Whether she is writing an academic paper or taking her turn telling a story in a cabin on a winter's evening, her

contributions to documentation and analysis of northern intellectual history have been outstanding.

Like many others who have become northern scholars, Catharine McClellan began her life with interests far removed from the North. She was born in a rural Pennsylvania Dutch community, Spring Grove, and her childhood was spent exploring the countryside and developing an interest in the different languages and cultures in her community. An avid reader, her interests began to focus more and more on classical archaeology, which she went on to study as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr college. U.S. Navy service during World War II interrupted her studies, but in 1946, she returned to university at Berkeley, California. Attracted by the anthropological concept of culture, she shifted from classical studies to anthropology.

In the summer of 1947 she helped Douglas Leechman and Frederica de Laguna with an archaeological survey preliminary to the building of the Saint Lawrence Seaway. The next summer brought an opportunity to do an ethnographic survey in the Yukon Territory, shortly after the Alaska Highway opened the area to easy access for scientists. Research stipulations were rather different for female anthropologists even as recently as the 1940s, and McClellan was informed by the funding agency, the National Museum of Canada, that a woman researcher could not go to the Yukon "alone". After unsuccessful efforts to locate a scientific party going to the Yukon with other interests but willing to take along a graduate student in anthropology, she and a fellow student, Dorothy Rainier (Libby) persuaded the Museum to give them a small stipend and let them proceed on their own.

That summer, friendships and research interests developed which have grown and flourished during the intervening years. Catharine McClellan completed her doctoral dissertation, "Culture Change and Native Trade in the Southern Yukon Territory", for the University of California in 1950. Over the years she has continued her studies in the Yukon Territory and northern British Columbia on Tlingit, Tagish, and Southern Tutchone culture history. She has worked extensively, too, in Alaska with Dr. Frederica de Laguna on archaeological and ethnological problems in coastal Tlingit settlements, and in Ahtna communities on the Copper River. In 1956 she did field work in western Alaska Eskimo communities for the Arctic Health Research Center.

McClellan's fascination with the North has led her to investigate a broad range of questions. Her writings provide us with detailed descriptions of Athapaskan ethnography, particularly for the southern Yukon. She has followed up specific questions about shamanism, sib and clan organization, oral narrative, and culture contacts. Her publications have become documents that a generation of anthropology students and young Native people now use in the Yukon to reconstruct patterns of land use, social change, and prehistory. In fact, her work is so firmly established as the baseline for present research that the debt often goes unacknowledged.

Included in her writings are a two-volume ethnography, a monograph on oral narrative, and articles in the new *Handbook of North American Indians Vol. 6* and the forthcoming *Canadian Encyclopedia* as well as other articles and book reviews. She was the editor of *Arctic Anthropology* from 1974-1982 and is a past president of the American Ethnological Society.

She has taught at the University of Missouri, at the University of Washington, at Barnard College, and at Columbia University. In 1983, she retired as Bascom Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin where she began teaching in 1961. She has also held visiting positions at Bryn Mawr College, and at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, in 1973.

Catharine McClellan's position in North American anthropology is important, but equally important is her recognition in the Yukon. For her academic work she has received distinction; in the Yukon, she has become part of the folklore. Not infrequently, anthropologists refer to "informants" as "my people" and speak of "trips to the field". A generation of Yukon Indians ranging from elderly people to adults who were toddlers when she first arrived refer to Catharine McClellan as "our Kitty" and see her primary residence as the Yukon with periodic "field trips" back to her university. They welcome her visits as those of a returning family member and regret her departures as temporary absences.

Catharine McClellan is currently writing a book on Yukon Native history for the Council for Yukon Indians. She plans to write up more of her accumulated years of field research and to spend time, as she has for almost four decades, visiting her friends in the Yukon.

#### FURTHER READINGS

- McCLELLAN, CATHARINE. 1971. *The Girl Who Married the Bear*. Publications in Ethnology No. 2. Ottawa: National Museum of Canada.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975. *My Old People Say: An Ethnographic Survey of Southern Yukon Territory*. Publications in Ethnology No. 6. Ottawa: National Museum of Man. 2 volumes.

Julie Cruikshank  
Yukon Native Languages Project  
Box 2703 - E2  
Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada  
Y1A 2C8