

# Sealaska book on elders a worthy endeavor. needs more explanation

BECAUSE WE CHERISH YOU  
Sealaska Elders Speak to the  
Future

Transcribed, translated and  
edited by Nora Dauenhauer and  
Richard Dauenhauer

Sealaska Heritage Foundation  
Press, Juneau, Alaska, 1981

154 pages \$10

Having lived and worked with  
Tlingits for 10 years, I have  
awaited the publication of this  
work for some time. It is a  
word-for-word translation of  
talks given at a gathering of  
Sealaska Elders in Sitka in May  
of 1980. One of the beauties  
of the book is that the actual

Tlingit speeches are recorded in  
the new writing system. Future  
generations will be able to go  
back and find the exact ex-  
pressions that were used at  
this time.

It is evident that the speeches  
and songs flowed from deep  
feelings of love and respect

for the great Tlingit heritage.  
The content is beautiful. In  
some places it is profoundly  
poetic. For example, John  
Bell said:

"As a man stands on earth  
he has only two reasons for  
being here;  
living and dying.

And whatever comes between  
is just a form of being re-  
membered."

As I read, and then re-read  
the speeches, my thoughts went  
back nearly 20 years to the  
time when I first tried my hand  
at recording some Athabaskan  
songs. I had been trained in  
several European languages and  
knew some of the problems of  
translation. But here there were  
great cultural differences too.  
My friends and I would sit  
and talk for a long time trying  
to put concise Athabaskan phras-  
es into good English without  
changing the feeling of each  
phrase.

In some cases, just a few de-  
scriptive words were used to sum  
up an entire personality. For  
those who had known the per-  
son, that brief verse said it all.  
For outsiders, like myself, the  
phrase was almost meaningless  
until it had been carefully  
explained and expanded. Need-  
less to say, my translations  
were not that successful.

But from that time on, I  
have been keenly aware of how  
difficult it is to translate songs  
and speeches from a Native  
Alaskan language into good,  
flowing and understandable  
English.

The Tlingits have always been  
master speech makers. In English  
or Tlingit, they can turn a phrase  
with just the right connotation  
and shades of meaning to  
convey fine nuances of feeling.  
Although I do not read, write  
nor speak Tlingit, my experi-  
ence with the language has been  
that formal speeches are filled  
with cryptic references to the  
past. One must know the legends  
and stories of the past to fully  
understand what is being said.  
This book is a fine example of  
such formal Tlingit oratory.

But to be perfectly honest,  
I have some apprehensions about  
the translations. One has to  
understand that there are several  
possible levels of translation.  
First, there can be an exact,  
word-for-word translation. But  
since languages have different  
grammars, the translation will  
sound strange and awkward.

Sometimes translators alter

the words slightly so that the  
translation follows more closely  
the grammar of the language  
into which it is being trans-  
lated. It is this type of trans-  
lation that is found in the text  
Because We Cherish You. At  
times, it just doesn't read well.  
For example, here is how one  
sentence has been translated into  
English directly:

"My kinsmen the one they  
will use now but from now  
on he too is in this which  
we are members of relatives  
to each other."

What is needed is another  
type of translation, known as  
a "free" translation. On this  
level, the original language is  
translated into a smoothly flow-  
ing text using good style and  
grammar in the second language.  
I would prefer to have had  
the translators go beyond the  
direct translation into a "free"  
translation.

Then I, and others who do  
not speak the language fluently,  
would have a comparable feel-  
ing for what was said. It would  
also make for good literature  
in translation. Another problem  
with translating Tlingit - as I  
found out with Athabaskan -  
is the allusion to certain events  
in the past. For instance, one  
speaker said:

"And now it's just as if  
the drum is heard. They  
are like the man whose  
hair was tied around the  
pounding of the drum keep-  
ing beat with their heads  
toward them only those who  
are their ancestors."

For someone who is tho-  
roughly familiar with Tlingit  
traditions and oral history, I am  
sure that this comparison was  
right to the point. But for out-  
siders - and I suspect it may  
be true for many young Tlingits  
- the point remains a mystery.  
It would have been better to  
have a few footnotes or ex-  
planations of such cryptic ex-  
pressions to get the full impact  
of what was being said.

I hope that all of this doesn't  
sound too critical of the work.  
Nora and Dick Dauenhauer have  
done a lot of fine work in the  
past teaching and translating  
the Tlingit language. I offer  
these comments as a form of  
constructive criticism. I would  
like to have seen a better English  
style and explanatory notes.  
That would have made it a much  
finer work in my estimation.

Wally Olson  
University of Alaska, Juneau