

CROWFOOT COMES HOME

Repatriating a First Nation leader's regalia from a British museum to the prairies

By DOUG HORNER

HERMAN YELLOW OLD Woman was asleep in his home on the Siksika reserve east of Calgary on April 7, 2020, when the phone started ringing at 5:30 a.m. It was Alison Brown, a professor of anthropology at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. She told Yellow Old Woman that Exeter City Council, the local government officials of a small city in southern England, had just voted to repatriate a collection of artifacts known as Crowfoot's regalia.

"News like that will get you out of bed fast," said Yellow Old Woman. He was aware that the vote was coming, but had not held out much hope that the dozen personal items that once belonged to the revered Blackfoot leader would ever make it back home. Half an hour later Tony Eccles, the curator of ethnography at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) in Exeter, the place where Crowfoot's regalia has been for the last 142 years, also called to share the news.

That vote marked a pivotal step in a journey that had begun in a storeroom at the RAMM in November of 2013. The sad thing, Yellow Old Woman explained, was that some of the people he set out with on the journey have since died. "The ceremonial men and women who attended the negotiating of that time, more than half have passed away. So that's how long it's been."

IN THE FALL OF 2013, YELLOW OLD Woman, a ceremonial elder and the head of repatriation for Siksika, travelled to England as part of an eight-person delegation from the four First Nations in

Alberta and Montana—Kainai, Siksika, Piikani and South Peigan—that comprise the Blackfoot Confederacy. The group was part of a research project called The Blackfoot Collections in UK Museums Network, which also included academics and staff from the University of Aberdeen, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at Cambridge and the RAMM. The idea for the trip was inspired by another project, where five Blackfoot buckskin shirts from the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University had been loaned for exhibitions at the Glenbow and Galt museums in Alberta. The exhibitions included opportunities for First Nations people to handle and try on the shirts in what were much more intimate experiences than your typical everything-behind-glass visit to a museum.

The goal of these collaborations between First Nations and museums was twofold. Blackfoot elders and ceremonialists provided cultural information about the artifacts that dramatically improved how they were curated, described and cared for by the museums. And Indigenous people got access to invaluable cultural material that had long since vanished from their communities. The projects were an attempt to bridge disparate worldviews of the purpose, nature and provenance of the same set of historic objects.

Museums legally own their collections or, as in the case of the RAMM, steward them on behalf of governments. These institutions have extensive expertise and resources to preserve and protect the integrity of artifacts in perpetuity. And museums such as the MAA, RAMM and Pitt Rivers welcome hundreds of thousands of visitors every year with a mandate to showcase the world.



Herman Yellow Old Woman had not held out much hope that the dozen personal items that once belonged to revered Blackfoot leader Crowfoot would ever make it back home.

Above: Herman Yellow Old Woman is head of repatriation for Siksika. Below: Blackfoot Crossing, near Cluny, is described as a story woven into the shape of a building.

**The British museums had concerns about Blackfoot Crossing. “They were very focused on ensuring that if they do repatriate something, it gets appropriate museum care.”
—Daryl Betenia**



A conservation-grade cabinet drawer slides open to reveal Crowfoot's regalia in Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum storage room. An eight-person delegation from the Blackfoot Confederacy witnessed this in 2013.

For First Nations peoples, however, many of the artifacts in question are not inanimate objects. Some are sacred and essential for carrying out spiritual ceremonies. They have immense potential for revitalizing cultural practices that strengthen identity and empower communities. Also, many of these artifacts were stolen or sold under extreme duress. They're the spoils of colonialism. Some of the oldest artifacts from North American Indigenous nations are in museums overseas. Items from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries were sent far away to wealthy patrons and private collections that then ended up in museums. Laura Peers, an anthropologist who co-created the Blackfoot Shirts Project with Alison Brown, estimates that thousands of Blackfoot artifacts live in English and European museums.

“If you think about the history of museum-collecting practices and what museums try to do, there's been this idea of museums as places where knowledge is created and to a degree... controlled, with cataloging and classification and all those

kinds of things,” said Brown. “But when you take that away and confront people with items that are related to their heritage, particularly if they've experienced colonial forces... these things can become triggers for all kinds of stories in history and memory, and reminders of what's not been passed on as well as what could still be.”

The vote by Exeter councillors in early April to return Crowfoot's regalia occurred at a time of active debate across England and Europe about whether and how museums should decolonize their collections. Arts Council England had commissioned the Institute of Art and Law in February to develop new guidance for UK museums on repatriation. The report is scheduled for release in the fall of 2020 and will outline the ethical and legal considerations, as well as best-practice examples, involved in making decisions on how and when to return objects to their originating communities. The report follows on the heels of new policies in France, Germany and Holland that guide the repatriation of colonial-era artifacts.

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YELLOW OLD WOMAN REMEMBERS the exact moment back in 2013 in the RAMM's storage room when the conservation-grade cabinet drawer slid open to reveal the regalia. “It was really emotional,” he said. The group sang a ceremonial song to honour Chief Crowfoot and smoked a pipe. “The songs that we sing to honour chiefs all of a sudden became very powerful and brought tears to our elders.”

The artifacts include a buckskin shirt with scalp hair, leggings with red feathers and fringes, beaded pouches, a steel hunting knife lashed with the front part of a bear's jaw, a bundle of feathers and a deer-hide necklace strung with grizzly bear claws, beads, animal teeth and brass studs. Chief Crowfoot's bow is in the RAMM's permanent gallery as part of the Americas display, but the rest of the regalia is in storage. The museum undertook a major conservation project in the late 1990s to restore and protect the artifacts. The shirt and leggings were last displayed in 2012 as part of an exhibition called “Warriors of the Plains” that was created and toured by the British Museum.

Yellow Old Woman said Chief Crowfoot could have worn many of the items when he signed Treaty 7 on behalf of the Siksika Nation in September of 1877.

He described how the Blackfoot elders quickly realized that some of the material had been misidentified. But they decided against revealing some of that information to museum staff. “We were reluctant to share too much,” Yellow Old Woman said. “Some stuff we [didn't] expose because of the sacredness. It has ties to the land, to the spirit of the animal, and we believe those are living things and they give us power.”

Given the spiritual importance of the regalia, Yellow Old Woman wonders why Chief Crowfoot would have given it to Cecil Denny, an officer with the North West Mounted Police who befriended the chief and was staying in his camp during the time of the signing of the treaty. Denny's sister loaned the artifacts to the RAMM in 1878 and the museum purchased them in 1904 for £10. The Blackfoot have a strong tradition of hospitality and giving gifts, which Yellow Old Woman said probably played a role in the exchange. Also, Crowfoot had lost many of his children to disease and often took others under his wing. “He adopted a lot, and that's basically what he did with this individual,” Yellow Old Woman said.

The day after the visit to the RAMM storage room in November 2013, the Blackfoot delegation met with museum and city officials for a public panel discussion. “They all agreed that the material they had should be returned to the Blackfoot,” Yellow Old Woman said. But museum staff also cautioned that it would take time and further discussions before Crowfoot's regalia could be repatriated.

“IT WILL BE AN HONOUR TO SEE [the regalia],” said Linda Many Guns, a professor of Indigenous studies at the University of Lethbridge and ceremonial elder with the Siksika. “I can hardly wait.” Once travel restrictions for COVID-19 are lifted, a group of Blackfoot leaders will go to Exeter for an official ceremony to receive the regalia.

Many Guns explained that Crowfoot earned the respect and leadership of his people because of his remarkable physical courage (he once killed a grizzly bear with a spear) and his keen instincts for diplomacy and peacemaking. He was the primary negotiator for the Blackfoot Confederacy when establishing the terms of Treaty 7 with the representatives of the British Crown. The chief of each of the five participating First Nations—Kainai, Siksika, Piikani, Nakoda and Tsuut'ina—all signed the treaty, but it was Crowfoot who laid the groundwork for the consensus.

“He was able to understand the bigger, really bigger, long-term picture,” Many Guns said. “We ended up with even more constraints and more difficulties, but I believe if he had taken another way, there's a good possibility we wouldn't even exist today.”

Above and beyond his prowess in battle and proclivity for peacemaking, Crowfoot is a significant figure for the Blackfoot because he exemplified an important cultural value. Many Guns explained that the wavy line in Blackfoot imagery symbolizes how change is an ineluctable part of life. Learning to navigate change is considered an invaluable skill. “Let's say you get diagnosed with diabetes; it's being able to pick up that disease and walk with it with pride,” she said. “Let's say you were going through changes, you've lost your family; it's picking up that disaster and walking with pride so that you can show your children how to deal with change.”

Crowfoot was born in 1830 and grew up when the Blackfoot tribes controlled a vast area of the northwestern plains from the Rocky Mountains in the west into what is now east-central Saskatchewan to the east, the North Saskatchewan River to the north and the Yellowstone River in the south. He emerged as an influential leader as European settlers brought catastrophe—smallpox epidemics, the whisky trade and the indiscriminate slaughter of the buffalo—undermining a way of life that had flourished for thousands of years.

“Everything in their world was gone or missing or no longer existed,” Many Guns said of the circumstances for the Blackfoot leading up to the Treaty 7 negotiations. She described how the Kainai and their chief, Red Crow, were late getting to the negotiations at Blackfoot Crossing in the fall of 1877.

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For First Nations peoples these artifacts are not inanimate objects. Some are sacred. Many were stolen or sold under extreme duress. They're the spoils of colonialism.

Top: Buckskin shirt with scalp hair. Bottom: Steel hunting knife lashed with the front part of a bear's jaw.

From top left: Beaded pouch containing a divination kit that was either purchased by Crowfoot or gifted to him; leggings; quirt/horsewhip; bow; bow case and quiver; feather bundle; deer-hide necklace with grizzly claws, beads, animal teeth and brass studs.

**“Crowfoot brought us through one of the most horrific periods in our history, and his memory is really important.”
—Linda Many Guns**

The tribe had gone south into the US to try and find a herd of buffalo to hunt. They ended up having to kill their horses and eat them, so they walked into camp.

“That’s when they knew there was no future, the buffalo were gone,” she said. “Crowfoot brought us through one of the most horrific periods in our history, and every part of his memory is really important. It reminds us of our resilience. It reminds us of our ability to change and adapt.”

IN JULY 2014, AS PART OF THE Blackfoot Collections in UK Museums Project, Alison Brown, Tony Eccles and Anita Herle, a curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, visited Alberta and Montana. They spent two days at Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, which is on the Siksika reserve an hour east of Calgary. The museum itself is built into a ridge overlooking the river valley where the treaty was signed. The building took 20 years and \$30-million to construct. The architect, Ron Goodfellow, worked closely with Blackfoot elders to incorporate 17 cultural symbols into every facet of the design. Many Guns described Blackfoot Crossing as a story woven into the shape of a building. The architectural approach reflected the way Blackfoot stories and culture are imbricated with the landscape.

Jack Royal is the chief executive officer of the Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal Council, but was the president and general manager of Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park from when it opened in 2007 until the fall of 2017. He was there in the summer of 2014 and helped tour the guests from England. They explored the museum, its displays, on-site storage and research facilities. They also walked to Cannon Hill, where the treaty was signed, and visited Chief Crowfoot’s last tipi site and grave, which are all connected by a

network of trails through the river valley.

It seemed like everything was in place after the visit, but then Royal started to get a series of emails from Eccles at RAMM. Questions about storage capacity, insurance and environmental controls. “We would send him an email and he wouldn’t respond for two or three months at a time,” Royal said. And when Royal would finally get a response it would include another question that would start the cycle again. Blackfoot Crossing submitted a formal repatriation request in 2015 and secured a grant from the Alberta government to fund the costs of safely transporting the artifacts. But as months turned into years, Royal said he encountered what felt like one arbitrary roadblock after another. When he left the organization in 2017, he was doubtful the regalia would ever return. “Obviously I am happy these things are finally coming home,” he said. “It’s been a long time coming.”

Camilla Hampshire, the museum manager at the RAMM, explained in an email that all those questions were part of their standard due diligence for all repatriation requests. Organizations are asked to provide information about governance, financial position, business plans and what they intend to do with the repatriated material. “It helps us compile a report and make a recommendation to councillors,” Hampshire wrote. “Blackfoot Crossing provided RAMM with a business plan for 2015–16 that suggested it was in an uncertain financial position, but none of the other documentation requested.”

Daryl Betenia, director of collections for the Glenbow, has been helping out behind the scenes since 2014. She provided advice to Blackfoot Crossing about various professional museum standards and technical details such as the right environmental conditions for exhibit cases. Betenia and Joanne Schmidt, the Indigenous Studies curator at the Glenbow, had a meeting at Blackfoot Crossing in May of 2019 to see where they were planning to display Crowfoot’s regalia.

“We were all incredibly impressed by what they had done. I think they could probably sell that model to other museums,” Betenia said. “Within a larger gallery, they created a separate space, which they were able to seal off and engineer so it’s able to maintain the appropriate humidity and they can control light levels.”

She too has been in contact with staff from the RAMM about the repatriation. “There appeared to be a great deal of concern on the part of the museum and Exeter about Blackfoot Crossing,” she said, particularly about appropriate museum standards and a lack of accreditation. “They were very focused on ensuring that if they do repatriate something, it goes to another museum and it gets appropriate museum care.”

THE RETURN OF CROWFOOT’S regalia is by no means a first for an English museum, but Betenia said Canadian and US institutions by comparison are veterans of repatriation. They are much more used to the idea of giving things back without strings attached. “If something is sacred and being repatriated, everybody knows it’s going to be used in ceremonies rather than sitting in a museum,” she said. Betenia has been at the Glenbow since 1982, when she worked part time while completing a history degree at the University of Calgary. By 2000, when the Glenbow repatriated 251 ceremonial bundles to Blackfoot communities in Alberta, Betenia had worked her way up to senior registrar, the person who oversees acquisitions and loans of artifacts in the collections.

Robert Janes, the director of the Glenbow at the time, and Gerald Conaty, the curator of Indigenous Studies, worked closely with Blackfoot leaders for over a decade before the release of that material. It was a decisive and ground-breaking decision that precipitated the creation of Alberta’s First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Act in 2000, which is still the only Canadian law on the books that deals with repatriation. The Blackfoot First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Regulation followed in 2004 as the means for applying the legislation.

Betenia said that at first she worried how the release of all those artifacts would affect the future and mission of the Glenbow. The museum was founded in 1966 by Eric Harvie, an oilman and philanthropist, who wanted to present the world to Alberta. “He was building these collections, and particularly international collections, as a way to offer an opportunity to Albertans to see things they would not otherwise see.” Releasing items out of the museum, and perhaps initiating a chain reaction that would hollow out the collection, could contradict that vision. But 20 years later no flood of repatriation requests has ever materialized. Betenia estimates they receive six requests every year and said they’ve proven to be a thoughtful and respectful experience for everyone involved. However, the regulation only covers Blackfoot items and has yet to be expanded to include First Nations from other parts of Alberta and Canada.

Betenia’s experience with repatriation transformed her perception of the role of museums and their relationship to the communities they serve. “We are stewards of a lot of this material rather than owners,” Betenia said. “These pieces are seen as living things that need to go home. I don’t think it’s our place to argue with that.”



Top: Chief Crowfoot was the primary negotiator of Treaty 7 for the Blackfoot Confederacy in 1877. Bottom: Chief Ouray Crowfoot—the former leader’s great-great-grandson—has an MBA and a master’s in accounting and has spent his career in the financial industry.

BOTTOM: MIKE SYMINGTON/CBC; TOP: ALAMY

MET CHIEF OURAY CROWFOOT at the Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal Office in southeast Calgary at the end of May. He had just wrapped up a biweekly meeting with his counterparts from the Kainai, Piikani and South Peigan nations. We settled into chairs on opposite sides of a large boardroom on the third floor. Bottles of hand sanitizer were spaced evenly around the horseshoe-shaped arrangement of tables.

“It’s been a whirlwind,” Ouray said. “I’ve only been chief six months, and three of that’s COVID months.” His father is from the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina; Ouray speaks with a strong southern accent, as though each sentence is gently easing back in a recliner chair until it finds the position of maximum comfort. His mother was Amelia Crowfoot Clark. Her father was Cecil Crowfoot. Cecil’s father was Joe Crowfoot. Joe’s father was Bear Ghost. Bear Ghost’s father was Chief Crowfoot.

“Actually, [his name] is Isapo-Muxika, which means Crow Indian’s Big Foot,” said Ouray. He explained that his great-great-great grandfather’s name was truncated during the treaty signing by an official who decreed it too long and cumbersome. The same goes for many of his forebears, who were given biblical names because the Indian agent couldn’t be bothered to learn or translate their original Blackfoot names.

Ouray, who turned 45 the day after our interview, was wearing a pink dress shirt. He looked the part of an energetic young politician. He has an MBA and a master’s degree in accounting and has spent most of his career in the financial industry, working for global corporations such as Ernst & Young and KPMG. “Five years ago, four years ago even, I had no desire, no plans to move to Canada or no plans or desires to be chief.” Ouray returned to Siksika to help his mom after she was diagnosed with cancer. She died in

October of 2019, a month before the nomination day for the election of the new chief and council.

“We’re going to do a lot of great things with Siksika, and I can say one of the big things already is bringing this shirt back home,” he said. I asked him if he thought the letters that Premier Jason Kenney sent to various British officials, including the mayor of Exeter and the director of Arts Council England, in late 2019 and on behalf of Blackfoot Crossing had tipped the balance for the vote to repatriate the regalia. “Jason Kenney more or less pissed them off,” Ouray said. “I think he might have hurt it more than helped it.”

In early 2020 Ouray started having regular phone conversations with Camilla Hampshire, the manager of the RAMM. He often received calls from Hampshire first thing in the morning because of the seven-hour time difference. “Every question she had, every concern she had, I addressed it.” The chief and the museum manager first developed a rapport and then a solution. The RAMM would repatriate the regalia to the Siksika Nation, which would then release it to Blackfoot Crossing. “I think [it helped] that I was a chief and a Crowfoot descendant and gave them the rationale and let them know who I am,” he said. “I want it to be mutually beneficial. So when we go over there, we’re going to take a big crew. We’re going to have a big delegation. We’ll give them a gift.”

Ouray mentioned he had his eye on another personal item that belonged to his great-great-great grandfather. But it’s not at the RAMM. Most pictures of Crowfoot show a knot of some kind tied into his hair at the top of his head. It’s an owl’s head, and Ouray’s uncle, Strater Crowfoot, has it. “My uncle Strater was chief when they started doing those repatriations through the Glenbow and he got that,” he said.

The historian Hugh Dempsey wrote a biography of Crowfoot that includes a description of the owl’s head. Three Suns, Crowfoot’s predecessor as chief, gave it to him when he was a young warrior. Three Suns told him it would be his protection and he would become a great leader if he always carried it. After Crowfoot died in April of 1890 at Blackfoot Crossing, people sang mourning songs to the owl’s head in the hope it could bring him back to life. And then somehow, at some point, it ended up behind glass or in a drawer in a storage room at a museum.

Ouray hasn’t asked his uncle yet for Chief Crowfoot’s owl’s head. He’s waiting for the right moment. “I want to be able to feel like I earned it,” he said. “Respect is a gift earned, not given.” ■

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**–Chief
Ouray Crowfoot**

Doug Horner is a Calgary-based writer and editor. He won the 2019 Alberta Magazine Award for best essay.