



GRAVES REGAINED

By MATT J SIMMONS

Photography by JO-ANN RICHARDS

Straits Salish cairns, centuries old, are the focus of doctoral research by Darcy Mathews who is surveying native burial sites from Albert Head to East Sooke Park to determine the intricate social context of the rock and soil memorials.

They are the nearly forgotten graveyards of Greater Victoria—collections of stone and earth burial cairns that, as tributes to the dead, also reveal insights into the social hierarchies of the First Nations people who constructed them during a period 1,000 to 1,500 thousand years ago. Anthropology PhD student Darcy Mathews is conducting the first detailed investigation into the cairns of Victoria since archaeologist Harlan Smith and the Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897-99.

Mathews, MA '06, has collected data from more than 700 of the ancient burial sites, probably only a fraction of the actual number, in his exhaustive survey of cairns in the Metchosin area. In size, cairns range from a metre or so across to huge monuments, some featuring rocks likely weighing more than a tonne.

The most impressive cairn that Mathews has identified so far is 21 metres long, near Pedder Bay. Its amount of soil and rock is equivalent to roughly 18 dump truck loads. “The pre-contact Straits Salish would have moved (the material) with baskets, digging sticks and sheer strength,” says Mathews. “I think this speaks volumes about the significance of these burials. These were likely monuments for the living as well as a means of commemorating the dead.”

The Department of National Defence property at Rocky Point is the largest known site with

333 burial cairns and mounds in a three-hectare area.

While earlier researchers excavated cairn sites, Mathews does not disturb them. Instead he relies on the exterior features (dimensions, shapes, rock types, sizes and locations) for clues about how cairns were used to communicate the social status of the individuals buried underneath.

“My research is an analysis of how the cairns were made, combined with a spatial investigation of how they were placed on the landscape, and their implications for social networks and concepts of identity,” Mathews says. “Cairns might have been a statement of centrality and a focal point for one or more communities or (they may have been) markers defining social peripheries or boundaries that may have been contested.

“Once patterns in cairn construction are identified, I look at how these cairns are arranged on the landscape. Certain types of cairns are only built in certain parts of a site. At Rocky Point there is a definite spatial segregation with seven >> different ‘plots,’ each comprised of numerous cairns.”

Eric McLay, president of the Archaeological Society of BC and archaeologist for the Coast Salish Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, applauds Mathews for setting a “high standard for how archaeology should be done in British Columbia and how archaeologists, in general, should practice working with First Nations in Canada,” he says. “I think the important message of Darcy's research is that archaeology in BC is just as much about protecting and understanding the past as it is about respecting First Nations culture and people today.”

From his perspective, Grant Keddie, curator of archaeology at the Royal BC Museum, says that no one has yet taken the time to sit down and properly take stock of what burial cairns actually are, what they mean, and how they fit with the rest of Salish culture. “I have about 500 pieces of paper with projects on them like this that need to be done,” says Keddie. “Darcy is getting one of those projects done properly.”

Keddie refers to Mathews’ patient gathering and sifting of data. Mathews intends to include in his research all the information he can dig up from historical archives, such as records of the now-destroyed burial cairn sites in the Uplands and Beacon Hill Park.

What it comes down to is that death, and the ways in which the living deal with death are defined by social relationships within a community: “Mortuary ritual is a chance to perpetuate the status quo,” Mathews says, “but it’s also a chance to push the boundaries. In burials there’s an opportunity for people to contest or try to reshape the social norm.”

By developing a better understanding of their place in Straits Salish culture, Mathews hopes to help protect remaining cairns from the pressures that have erased so many of the monuments from the local landscape. He often gives public talks about his work and the meaning of the cairns and he intends to combine his archaeological findings with the knowledge of elders and others in First Nations communities. “It’s really important to recognize that there are multiple perspectives. I’m trying to step back and find ways that we can look at this from outside of our

Western notion of 'bigger is better' ...Culture doesn't fit very well into the scientific process—the hypothetical-deductive process. Culture can be messy. (But) burial cairns have been destroyed by the thousands in Victoria, and continue to be destroyed to this day. I'm hoping I can provide a more cohesive body of information about these burials, hopefully to enrich everybody's understanding...and ultimately, preserve them."

Darcy Mathews' studies have been assisted by Henry Chipps and the chief and council of the Scia'new First Nation of Metchosin. Mathews holds a Canada Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and his doctoral research is supervised by Anthropology Prof. Quentin Mackie.