ISHI
in Two Worlds

A BIOGRAPHY OF THE LAST WILD INDIAN IN NORTH AMERICA

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With a Foreword by Lewis Gannett

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and idiomatic exchange in the childhood tongue. Affectionate and uncorrupt, he was denied the fulfillment of wife and children, or of any sex life whatsoever. Then there was the total lack of immunity to diseases of the modern world, which had been disastrous to thousands of other Indians, and which brought to Ishi illness and untimely death.

Almost a century has passed since Ishi was born, and he has been dead forty-four years, yet he continues to engage the imagination: he was unique, a last man, the last man of his world, and his experience of sudden, lonely, and unmitigated change-over from the Stone Age to the Steel Age was also unique. He was, further, a living affirmation of the credo of the anthropologists that modern man—_homo sapiens_—whether contemporary American Indian or Athenian Greek of Phidias’ time, is quite simply and wholly human in his biology, in his capacity to learn new skills and new ways as a changed environment exposes him to them, in his power of abstract thought, and in his moral and ethical discriminations. It it upon this broad base of man’s pan-humanity that scientists and humanists alike predicate further progress away from the instinctual and primitive and subhuman strata of our natures.

With little room for choosing, Ishi made choices as courageous and enlightened as the scope of his opportunities permitted. In the Oroville jail he chose life with a strange white man, rejecting the alternative of joining subjugated members of his own race; later he chose the dignity of an earned salary and independence, rejecting government wardship and when “civilization” bestowed upon him the gift of tuberculosis he chose to fight it according to Popey’s instructions and to accept defeat with grace, his concern being to make himself as little a burden as might be to those who cared for him.

Ishi developed a hacking cough in December, 1914, and was in hospital for treatment and tests during most of the following January. Retrospectively the doctors knew this illness to have been the probable beginning of an active tuberculosis, but his sputum contained no tubercle bacilli; he was not running a temperature, and appeared to have suffered and recovered from a respiratory infection of a mild and nonrecurring nature. But early spring found him back in hospital once more, and giving a positive reaction to the tuberculin test, although the sputum was still free of bacilli. By late spring he seemed to be recovered and the doctors said the progress of the disease had been arrested. Kroeber left to go to Europe at the end of the semester, not altogether reassured by Ishi’s apparent recovery and the favorable medical prognosis—an uneasiness which the event justified. He was not to see Ishi again.

The summer began well for Ishi. He went to live with the Watermans in Berkeley. They made much of him; he was happy to be part of a household and family, and for several hours most days he worked with Edward Sapir who was spending the summer in Berkeley in order to record linguistic material on the Yahi language from Ishi.

Ishi did not hint that he felt unwell, but in August Waterman noticed that he tired easily and had little appetite. Worriedly, he coaxed him to eat more and to rest, and, when he seemed no better toward the end of the month, took him home to the museum where Dr. Pope could look after him.

To survive our civilization, an early and continuing immunization to it is necessary. There were the six healthy and ebullient
Eskimos whom Admiral Peary brought with him to New York City upon his return in 1897 from one of his early trips which ultimately were to lead to his discovery of the North Pole. All six of them caught colds in Newfoundland and promptly contracted tuberculosis in New York. An employee of the Natural History Museum and his wife, herself half Labrador Eskimo, took care of them in a pleasant home and garden in the Bronx. Their sanguine temper did not desert them, and every care then known was given them, but when Peary returned to the Arctic the next year only one of them, and he a desperately sick Eskimo, went with him. Unless he blessedly died before reaching home, he may possibly have spread the disease abroad amongst his people. Of his companions, four were already dead. One, a child of ten, recovered and grew up to become one of New York City's army of taxi drivers. As for Ishi, he had had the first “common cold” of his life within a few weeks of coming to San Francisco; his first pneumonia the same winter.

Bulletins were sent regularly to Kroeber giving Ishi's afternoon peak temperature, whether he was cheerful or depressed, and any messages that Ishi might have for him. Gifford wrote most of these reports, since he was with Ishi daily; Waterman was teaching in Berkeley and could come to the museum only on weekends. Occasionally it was a doctor, a nurse, or a secretary who wrote. Kroeber must have written in answer two or three times a week. There are repeated references in the correspondence to a two-way exchange: “Ishi is very fond of the purse you sent. He keeps his sacred tobacco in it.” “Ishi was very much tickled with your letter and postal, particularly the latter showing a dance figure.” From his bed, Ishi could see the steel structure of the new hospital under construction next door. He watched the men at work on the high girders with an amused fascination. All a same monkey-see, he reported. Kroeber was in Germany, in England, and finally back in New York City. The bulletins followed him faithfully: he and Ishi were in touch to the end in a continuing communication of sorts, although Ishi could not read or write, and a continent lay between them.

Ishi had been put in hospital with the return of acute symptoms. He was well taken care of, Popey was at hand, and he knew many people in the hospital, but Gifford and Waterman saw that he was constrained and unhappy, and they recalled the passionate wish of all Indians to be home when death comes. They brought Ishi home. In a letter written on September 30, 1915, Gifford tells how they did it:

“Waterman and I have decided to cut out the Pacific Island exhibit for awhile and give the room to Ishi. This is the sunniest room [in the museum]. Here he will be treated as Ishi. At the hospital I fear that the nurses were so busy that he was treated simply as a hospital patient, without regard for his personality.”

Ethnological and art objects from the Pacific Islands went back into packing boxes in the basement of the museum. Ishi's room was large and sunny, with a wide view overlooking the park, the black mass of eucalyptus trees known as Sutro Forest, and the hospital. Popey visited him several times a day, someone of the museum staff was in and out at all hours, and Warburton nursed him and cooked for him so expertly, and kept his health chart so professionally, that even the exacting Popey could find no fault.

Ishi lived on with good days and bad, stoical, uncomplaining, interested in whatever went on, affectionate and responsive, until the spring. He died on March 25, 1916. Popey, his Kuwi, was with him at the end. Death came at noon, in the time of the year when new clover was painting green his native hills and when Deer Creek and Mill Creek were swollen with the rush of the spring salmon run.

Kroeber and Gifford were agreed that when Ishi died his body should be touched and handled as little as possible. Cremation should follow at once, the crematory furnace being our nearest approach to the out-of-door funeral pyres of ancient Romans and modern Mohaves, of Hindi peoples ancient and modern, and of
the Yahi. The ashes should then be buried, the cemetery urn
again being our closest equivalent of a basket and a rock
cairn—all to accord, as nearly as our ways allow, with Yahi usage. Kroo-ber
wrote to Gifford from New York on March 24, the day before Ishi
died:

Please stand by our contingently made outline of action,
and insist on it as my personal wish. There is no objection to
a cast (death mask). I do not, however, see that an autopsy
would lead to anything of consequence, but would resolve
itself into a general dissection. Please shut down on it. As
to disposal of the body, I must ask you as my personal represen-
tative to yield nothing at all under any circumstances. If
there is any talk about the interests of science, say for me
that science can go to hell. We propose to stand by our
friends. Besides, I cannot believe that any scientific value is
materially involved. We have hundreds of Indian skeletons
that nobody ever comes near to study. The prime interest
in this case would be of a morbid romantic nature. Please
acquaint Waterman with my feelings; also Pope. When the
time comes, please see that the various people in the hospital
are properly thanked. They have been more than good.
You can get an individual plot in any of the public ceme-
teries. Draw upon any money in our keeping for this purpose
without question or formality on my responsibility.

Waterman, had he been less upset, would have backed Kroo-ber
and Gifford. But Waterman was taking Ishi’s death with so much
grief and emotion and sense of guilt that he could be no principle’s
and no person’s ally. He wrote Kroo-ber: “As you have heard
from Gifford, the poor old Indian is dying. The work last summer
was too much for him. He was the best friend I had in the world
and I killed him by letting Sapir ride him too hard, and by letting
him sneak out of lunches.” It did no good to point out that loss
of appetite marked a certain progress of the disease; nor that it
was Sapir who, exhausted, brought a day’s work to a close before
Ishi tired of repeating the beloved words and sounds of Yahi.

Waterman wrote also to Roland Dixon who knew Ishi and had
done ethnographic work in country bordering the Yana hills: “He
was my best friend.” The stark letter leaves no room for the
comfortable suspicion of overstatement.

Pope, as will be seen, was as keen as the others that Ishi should
reach the Land of the Dead properly prepared and accoutered
to take his place amongst the other Yahi Shades. But he was Ishi’s
Kuwi, and the white man’s also. He would have liked to know
everything about Ishi. As Kuwi, he owed it to the world and to
Ishi to know as much as he could by any reasonable means learn.
Waveringly, Waterman agreed with him. Alone, and the young-
est, Gifford did what he could. His letter to Kroo-ber on March 30,
tells how he succeeded against difficult odds, one serious one being
that Kroo-ber’s letter (quoted above) was received too late to help
him.

I took the stand which you asked me to take some time
ago: namely, that he [Ishi] have a Christian burial like any
other friend. The only departures from your request were
that a simple autopsy was performed and that the brain was
preserved. The matter was not entirely in my hands—in
short what happened amounts to a compromise between
science and sentiment with myself on the side of sentiment.
Everything else was carried out as you would have done it,
I firmly believe. [Ishi] told Pope sometime ago that the way
to dispose of the dead was to burn them, so we undoubtedly
followed his wishes in that matter. In the coffin were placed
one of his bows, five arrows, a basket of acorn meal, ten
pieces of dentalium, a boxful of shell bead money which he
had saved, a purse full of tobacco, three rings, and some
obsidian flakes, all of which we felt sure would be in accord
with Ishi’s wishes. The remains are to be placed in a niche
at Mount Olivet Cemetery. Pope and Waterman decided and
I agreed that a small black Pueblo jar would be far more
appropriate than one of the bronze or onyx urns. Tomorrow
afternoon Pope and I are going down to place the ashes in
this jar and put it in its niche. [The inscription on the jar
reads: Ishi, the last Yana Indian, 1916.] The funeral was private and no flowers were brought. Waterman, Pope, Loomis [of the Academy of Sciences], Loud, Warburton, Mason [of the Philadelphia Museum], and myself were official attendants.

Now the law reads that when a person dies intestate and without living blood relatives, such monies and property as may have been his at the time of death go to the state. The public administrator who is charged with responsibility to see that this transfer is actually made, has, or had in 1916, certain discretionary powers also. Ishi's few personal possessions the administrator left with the museum. There was also Ishi's treasure in the safe in the museum office, his "counting room"—five hundred and twenty half dollars in thirteen film cases, each neatly filled to the top. The administrator took half this sum for the state. The other half went where Waterman knew Ishi wished his treasure to go—to the House of the Kuwi. So it was that Doctor Moffitt, Dean of the Medical School, received two hundred and sixty half dollars with a covering note from Waterman: "This [gift from Ishi] is in actual cash, and I hope you will accept it, though of course it is no return for the medical and hospital attention that Ishi received. It will serve perhaps as a recognition of his sense of obligation." Doctor Moffitt acknowledged the gift, thanking Waterman and explaining that he was putting Ishi's money in a special fund rather than taking it as payment of hospital expenses, since there had never been any idea of charging him. In this way, Ishi's treasure continues to contribute its bit to the science of healing, a science for which Ishi himself had so great a curiosity and concern.

Ishi's public missed him. Letters expressing affection for him and sorrow that he was gone came to Waterman and Gifford. A few of these blamed the staff for not having taken better care of him: a museum was not a proper home, they said; there had been carelessness in allowing Ishi to be exposed to infection; he should have been taken back to his old home and natural environment.

As far away as Kansas City a group of high school students there, who knew of Ishi from one of their teachers who had spent some time with him at the museum before he was ill, held a memorial meeting for him.

Meanwhile, within the museum walls there lingered a numbing sense of loss, and an unwonted silence no longer interrupted by the soft-voiced inquiry, Everybody happy? Eyes were averted from the shut door of the sunny room which had been his. The staff members, even Lundy and Warbinana, were idle, at loose ends.

Gifford ordered the door to the empty room opened, and the Pacific Islands exhibit brought up once more from its basement storage, and reinstalled. At work, the men reminded one another that Ishi himself had warned that it was dangerous to speak of the dead; bad even to think too much about them; that each had his world—the living and the dead—and should be left to it. Grief and mourning there surely must be, but as with all feelings, kept within measure, unindulged. The museum was learning to live without its Wild Man.

As for Ishi's three closest friends, Pope probably missed him, day by day, more than did Waterman and Kroeber, but, almost surely, suffered less than they from a sense of half-realized opportunity in his death. Between Pope's active role as his physician, and his and Ishi's total reciprocal enjoyment of whatever had to do with a bow and arrow—any bow, any arrow—theirs was a rich and fulfilled relation. Pope continued to be beguiled by his Wild Man's aboriginal and romantic differences from himself; and their likenesses never ceased to thrill him. Of Ishi's death, Pope wrote:

And so, stoic and unafraid, departed the last wild Indian of America. He closes a chapter in history. He looked upon us as sophisticated children—smart, but not wise. We knew many things, and much that is false. He knew nature, which is always true. His were the qualities of character that last forever. He was kind; he had courage and self-restraint, and
though all had been taken from him, there was no bitterness in his heart. His soul was that of a child, his mind that of a philosopher.

Waterman and Kroeber, bound to the reticences of Yana etiquette, made no significant public statement upon Ishi’s death. He had walked quietly out of the Neolithic world into their world, and once he was settled in the museum, Ishi and the anthropologists took each other pretty much for granted, as one’s family is taken for granted, and one’s close friend. Four and more moon cycles waxed and waned and returned, while Ishi stayed on, a part of the changing twentieth century—his two friends had ceased to envision a world without him.

Then he was gone, the long journey from the ancient Yana homeland along Mill and Deer creeks to the Land of the Yana Dead completed; his leavetaking from his friends and their world as quiet as his own preferred and understated phrase of farewell:

“YOU STAY, I GO.”

NOTES

Note on Chronology, Chapter 4, page 57

For those who have read closely Waterman’s monograph The Yana Indians, or who will read it in the future as the principal source for the history of the Yana, it should be said that my account accepts Waterman’s dating and time sequence except in two instances, as follows.

The last, or Kingsley Cave massacre, date given, 1871, is construed by me to have preceded the Five Bows incident, date given, 1870. Of the two dates, 1870 will be seen to be the firmer one, but it is the sequence that is of first importance, whether it was 1870, 1871, or 1872. The crucial events may have occurred in any one of these years. The only definite date given for the Kingsley Cave massacre is from a single informant, Norvall, whose oral and unverified recollection in 1915, forty-four years later, was that it had occurred in April, 1871. This would mean, according to Powers’ and Segraves’ dating, that the last massacre postdated the Five Bows incident and that the concealment was undertaken with a population of more than thirty people, perhaps as many as forty or forty-five; that within a year, thirty or more of this number had perished in the Cave killings; and that perhaps a dozen, conceivably as many as fifteen, survivors were left to enter a second year of concealment. Norvall’s date is judged in error vis-à-vis Segraves’ and Powers’ date.

Waterman undertook to present the oral source material as he got it, warm and alive from the honest memory of living informants, keeping it in their own words, when the account was not too prolix or rambling. No one was more aware than Waterman of the inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and gaping holes in the materials. His task was to record the sources before all the living fragments of recollections were gone. Either he or someone else could, later and at leisure, sift the material for its meanings and non-meanings. Waterman nowhere suggests that he believed that there was any violent convulsion of loss during the period of the concealment; such as the Cave massacre would have been. He speaks rather of its course as having been a very gradual reduction of population over the years of the duration of the concealment. It was the understanding also of other people who came to know Ishi well that only a few of his tribesmen were left to