

Chief Wickaninnish was a man who was both feared and loved. His people respected him but he refused to be taken advantage of and saw fit for those who did, to suffer the consequences of their actions. Depending on who you asked or what you read, opinions are very different. First Nations people respected him because of how he represented them and took care of them. The white men saw him differently but not all white men. One explorer in particular, John Mears, had a very positive opinion of him. But why did his people respect him so much? What role did he have with the white men and the fur trade? And why is his legacy so important today?

Chief Wickaninnish was a courageous leader of the Tal-o-qui-aht people of the Clayoquat Sound. (Wickaninnish Inn, "*Tofino History*.") It is said by the end of his leadership, he had over 13 000 people following him. (Wickaninnish Inn, "*Tofino History*.") His name in itself means "having no one in front of him in the canoe". (Fisher, "*Dictionary of Canadian Biography- Wickkaninnish*") This meaning behind his name feels so powerful and shows that everyone respected him so that no one dared step in front of him or cross him. He is said to have ruled from Juan de Fuca to the Charlotte's Islands (Fisher, "*Dictionary of Canadian Biography- Wickkaninnish*") This man had an incredible influence of his people but some of the Europeans thought less. Wickaninnish took no trouble from anyone. His peoples could be violent to the Europeans. While this could be out of fear, as violence usually is, it is also evident that the Chief wanted what was best for his people and their land and he wouldn't stand to be made a mockery of. One instance was a mishap with a European visitor, James Colnett. Colnett believed that there had been an attack on his boat therefore took Wickaninnish's brother hostage while he investigated the situation. This accusation proved to be untrue. This did not sit well with the Chief and his peoples so in defence of their innocence, several weeks later they in fact, did launch an attack on Colnett's ship. (Fisher, "*Dictionary of Canadian Biography- Wickkaninnish*") Other explorers have a different impression though.

John Mears, an Irish explorer, set sail with his men to visit King Georges Sound. Wickaninnish and his people helped them navigate out of a storm and welcomed the men with open arms. They gathered for feasts and exchanged goods. "... we must consider this the most luxurious feast we ever beheld." (Mears, "Voyages Made Between the Years of 1788-1789 from China to the Northwest Coast," 222-226.) "...several blankets and two copper tea kettles [from us]... each other them holding a sea otter skin or nearly six feet in length and the most jetty blackness [from them]." (Mears, "Voyages Made Between the Years of 1788-1789 from China to the Northwest Coast, 226). And their night finished with "...giving hands in token of friendship" (Mears, "Voyages Made Between the Years of 1788-1789 from China to the Northwest Coast," 226.) With this positive impression, Mears raves about Wickaninnish and the Tal-o-qui-aht people and celebrates the respect that is given and received amongst all. While Mears does note of an instance of violence between Europeans who arrive and the Tal-o-qui-aht people. "... The Chief had ordered his people to fall upon the intruders, one of whom they have no seized... We are sorry to add that this unfortunate man was immediately hurried into the woods where we have every reason to apprehend that he was quickly murdered." (Mears, "Voyages Made Between the Years of 1788-1789 from China to the Northwest Coast," 229.) But he seems to understand why they acted this way; due to the disrespect and trespassing on the land. Mears understanding could come from being Irish. His people were not treated fairly by Europeans either and there seems to be a sense of empathy in his writing. There are several other instances where foreign people arrived and the Chief sent out men to help them into shore or they've exchanged pleasantries. But what is common is that respect is given one way and then received back. And most of these instances, they were not Europeans, rather Spanish and Irish. This seems to make a difference in impressions due to the fact that the didn't believe that they were entitled to something that someone else already had- their land.

A large contributing factor to the great amounts of respect and praise for Chief Wickaninnish is due to how he conducted business. He was an intelligent man who knew how to manipulate people in order to make the best profit for himself and his peoples. When the fur trade made it's was to the pacific north west, Wickaninnish, like anyone at the time, was "...as quick and keen as any British or American trader to take advantage of new opportunities." (Tindall and others, *Aboriginal Peoples and Forest Lands in Canada*, 18.) Chief Wickaninnish played Europeans and other First Nations groups in the area against each other and worked as a middle man between them. (Fisher, "*Dictionary of Canadian Biography- Wickaninnish*") He showed dominance and was able to control the fur trade in his area. (Fisher, "*Dictionary of Canadian Biography- Wickaninnish*") "He directed the trade at Clayoquat, particularly by manipulating competition between foregin vessles, in a way that raised the price of furs and therefore increased his personal wealth." (Fisher, "*Dictionary of Canadian Biography- Wickaninnish*") This shows how powerful of a man he was and how smart he was in business.

But these business skills and the fur trade is not for what Wickaninnish owes his tribute. Wickaninnish is so renowned for his commitment to his people, their land and the traditional native ways. (Mathes, "*Wickaninnish, a Clayoquot Chief, as Recorded by Early Travelers,*" 120.) While he had a role in the fur trade, it was so minimal compared to the boundaries he set, requested people to follow and succeeded at. It is noted in Mears journal, continuously, about how well they were treated and the relations that the Chief could build. The men of the fur trade treated Chief Wickaninnish and his people well, for the most part. What they were looking for was to make their profit and leave. They encouraged the First Nations peoples to continue to live like they did, unlike farmers or settlers. (Mathes, "*Wickaninnish, a Clayoquot Chief, as Recorded by Early Travelers,*" 120.)

While he is associated with the fur trade of the Pacific Northwest, his legacy lives on for what he did for his people, the land in the Clayoquat Sound and how he gave people the benefit of the doubt and welcomed people into his village with open arms. It is unfortunate though, that regardless of what Chief

Wickaninnish had accomplished, once he passed, the people in trade took advantage of the land and exploited the First Nations People. (Mathes, "Wickaninnish, a Clayoquot Chief, as Recorded by Early Travelers," 120.)

A better question to ask rather than "what was Chief Wickaninnish's role in the fur trade?" would be "who was Chief Wickaninnish and why does his legacy precede him?" He did trade and meet many people to do with the fur trade but who he was as a person and a leader goes much deeper than that. He was pushing the boundaries of welcoming people in a time when people weren't being accepting of anyone who was different.

Chief Wickaninnish worked so hard to accomplish so much and sadly, it disappeared with him. Although, it is still satisfying to know that an area of Vancouver Island is dedicated to him and what he fought so strongly for. The beach is beautiful and the forest around it is mostly untouched, which is special and something he would be proud of today. While his role in the fur trade was smaller than anticipated, him as a leader and a chief is something to respect and strive for.

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