



The Queer People *and* The Worst Savages S. Hall Young

(Events described: 1878-1884; 1904)

Samuel Hall Young was a white Presbyterian minister who worked for many years as a missionary in Alaska. Presented here are selections from two chapters of his autobiography. In the first selection, Young relates his initial impressions of the indigenous Stikine (“Stickeen”) people who lived around Wrangell, the settlement where he began his missionary work in 1878. The second selection comes from a chapter about white settlers who, in Young’s view, abandoned civilized mores. In that selection, Young recounts his disgust at being asked to perform a marriage for an English settler and an Inuit (“Eskimo”) woman. That episode took place in 1904, while Young was living at Council City, a mining town in the vicinity of Nome.

The Queer People

[...] I have come to the conclusion that every successful missionary to heathen peoples must pass through three stages: First, he idealizes the savages, takes their part against the whites on every occasion, excuses their faults and exaggerates their virtues, defends them as actually superior to the “squaw-men” and other whites who live promiscuously among them. The second stage is one of violent reaction: the filth, squalor, and shocking immorality of the natives disgust him. He grows to despise his charges, becomes impatient, and too often settles into a pessimistic and intolerant attitude towards them. Many missionaries have never got beyond this second stage and, going back to their homes in Christendom, have given the natives, to use a colloquial term, a “black eye,” decrying every effort made to elevate and Christianize them. They adopt the saying wrongfully attributed to General Sheridan: “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” [...]

The third stage into which all successful missionaries settle is the golden medium. The natives are looked upon as God’s children, although naughty, careless, and wayward children; they are to be pitied, loved, borne with, and patiently tended *as children*. Their capabilities are recognized, their native talents cultivated, and their future gilded by the rays of hope. Instead of meeting them halfway and becoming Indianized, such missionaries fraternize with them and, without standing aloof, constantly exert an influence towards higher and better ideals. [...]

The pidgin English which we had to use in communicating with them was very funny. The Chinook jargon itself made me laugh every time I heard it spoken. This trade language, which was spoken universally as a medium of communication between the whites and the natives and between the natives of different languages [...], had for its foundation the language of the Chinook Indians who lived near the mouth of the Columbia River. The Hudson’s Bay employees had injected French and English terms adapted to Indian vocal cords. It was a childish jargon and, of course, incapable of expressing any real thought. Abstractions or connected reasoning were impossible to it.

Although I had to preach in this jargon for ten years, as I had five or six different languages represented in my congregation, I never lost my impatience with it or the feeling that I could not communicate many Christian ideas to the natives [...] The Thlingit language, spoken by the

Stickeens [...], was scarcely more copious or capable of expressing the ideas of civilization than Chinook. The meagerness of their life, pent up as they were in this corner of the world, between the mountains and the sea, hardly can be imagined by those who have lived the free, full life of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Caucasian civilization. [...] Their language was copious in names of the objects of the sea, the forests, and the mountains surrounding them but, like the Chinook, was ridiculously inadequate to express any thought. [...]

Our whole environment, as well as the queer languages, was so strange, so radically different from all our previous experiences, that we^a were kept agog with interest and curiosity, while waves of pleasure and disgust alternated rapidly. A walk through the Stickeen town was both interesting and revolting to our civilized tastes. The houses were all built on the beach, which was slimy and filthy with decayed fish, meat, and offal, carcasses of dead dogs, skeletons of deer and other animals, and even human bones—those of slaves who had died and, of course, had been refused cremation, strewed the pebbly beach. There were no sidewalks or beaten paths. Many of the community houses were set up on posts, and under them came swashing the higher tides at time of full moon. [...]

It took us some time to catch the meaning of the common language of our people. [...] The inability of these people to pronounce any consonant which brought the lips together added to our difficulty. While there were three or four distinct *k* sounds, *b*, *p*, *m*, *f*, and *r* were impossible to them. They could not even pronounce our names. The nearest they could come to mine was “Wistle Yuy.” Mrs. McFarland^b was “Wis Whahlin.” When Matthew tried to express his opinion of another Indian whom he thought very conceited, he said: “He heart too wuch high down.” If we had not been able to see and enjoy the funny things which were happening every hour of the day, we would have died from disgust.

From the first, Mr. McKay’s^c advice not to “become an Indian” kept recurring to my mind and prevented me from treating really low and debasing incidents in the life with indifference. My fear of becoming used to vile sights and sounds and indifferent to them became at times almost an obsession. I often felt like my dearest cousin, Lyda McAvoy, whom I brought to Wrangell in

^a *The antecedent of “we” is unclear but is probably Young and Frances (“Fannie”) Kellogg. Kellogg was a single white American woman, also a Presbyterian missionary, who had preceded Young to Alaska by four months. Although she was stationed in Sitka, Kellogg was visiting Wrangell at the time that Young began his work there. Not long after meeting in Alaska, Young and Kellogg decided to marry.*

^b *Amanda Reed McFarland, a white American whom Hall credits elsewhere in his autobiography with being “the first American missionary to Alaska” (64). She had formerly been married to a Presbyterian minister, with whom she had worked as a missionary in New Mexico and Idaho. After her husband died, she singly undertook a mission to Wrangell, where she started a school for indigenous girls, a year before Young’s arrival.*

^c *Joseph William McKay, who directed the business operations of the Hudson’s Bay Company in Victoria, British Columbia. He had been a fellow passenger on the steamer that carried Young up the Pacific coast from Victoria to Wrangell. McKay was Métis, meaning that he had blended white and indigenous ancestry.*

1884 to be the teacher of our training school. After a walk through the Indian town, during which occurred several very shocking and disgusting incidents, I found her in her room, bitterly weeping.

"Why Lyda," I asked, "what is the matter?"

"Oh, Hall," she cried with a fresh gust of tears, "I can't keep my horror keen enough!"

* * *

The Worst Savages

[...] There used to come to see me, and [borrow] my books, an Englishman. He was dressed in English fashion, with knickerbockers; he was always spruce-looking and was very intelligent. He could discuss almost any question of art, science, or literature. My daughter^d and I enjoyed his occasional visits. He informed us that he was living down Fish River, eight or ten miles from Council, and developing a gold claim. [...]

One day my young English friend came to my house. He knocked and was admitted to where we were sitting. Presently came a very fat and homely Eskimo squaw, who sidled into the house and squatted down on the floor in a corner of the room. We did not connect the visit of the two at all but supposed the squaw had simply come, after their fashion, for some favor.

After chatting a while, the young man said, "Dr. Young, I wish you would do me a favor."

"I shall be glad," I answered. "What can I do for you?"

"I want you to marry me to this woman."

I started up, aghast. "You don't mean what you say! Surely you don't wish me to marry you to that squaw? I shall not be a party to a crime like that. You, an Englishman of high education and standing—and, I understand, a younger brother of an English lord—to 'mate with a narrow forehead' like that is scandalous!" And I quoted some Tennyson to him.^e

^d Margaret Alaska, an adult daughter of Young and Kellogg, had accompanied Young to Council City.

^e Young is alluding to (but imperfectly quoting) "Locksley Hall," by the 19th-century English poet Alfred Tennyson. The poem is a lengthy lament by a narrator who has been rejected by a woman he loved. At one point, the narrator imagines finding solace by emigrating to a tropical Pacific island where "never comes the trader, never floats an European flag." In that Edenic setting, far from modern industrial society, his passions "will be cramp'd no longer [...]; I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race." A few lines later, though, the narrator rejects this fantasy as folly. To be "mated with a squalid savage" and "to herd with narrow foreheads" would be to sink to the level of "a beast" and to spurn his lofty cultural inheritance: the "glorious gains" of Christian civilization.

Alfred Tennyson, *Poems* (Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1842), 2:92-111 (esp. 107-110), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112096607756>.

“Oh, I have gone over all that in me mind, ye know,” he replied. “And I have made up me mind. I don’t want to leave here, nor do I want to go back; so I am asking you to marry us according to the law.”

“Never,” I replied. “If you want to commit an outrage like that upon yourself and your family and upon all decency and manhood, you will have to get somebody else to tie the knot; I will not do it.”

So he went over to the commissioner and was united in matrimony with that squaw. I suppose that was the last of him.

Now, these cases, disgusting and displeasing though they be, are worthy of consideration. The fact that the most vicious, degraded, ruined, and hopeless savages I ever met in Alaska were educated white men from refined homes does not prove that human nature is hopeless or that all white men who go to a country like that fall in the same way. That would be far from the truth. There was something wanting in the character of all these men, something weak, something ignoble. These vices are not natural but unnatural; and for every case of this kind that occurs to my memory, I could relate dozens of cases of truth, fidelity, and manhood, especially among the mining populations of later years.

Source: S. Hall Young, *Hall Young of Alaska, “The Mushing Parson”* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1927), 88-94, 287-288, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ia.ark:/13960/s2j9jshxdfv>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Section headings correspond to chapter titles in Young’s book. A paragraph break following a dialogue tag omitted. Spelling, capitalization, punctuation and typography (italics) regularized or otherwise emended in line with modern American conventions. Young’s spellings of *Stickeen* and *Thlingit* retained from the source publication. The use of lowercase for the racial label *whites* replicates the usage of the source.

These edited excerpts from Young’s autobiography are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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