

Here is the piece of writing that prompted me to put together this post on Dewdney and Morrisseau. Supposedly written by an Ojibwe “elder”, it shows none of the wisdom and respect for truth that one associates with a life lived long and well.

Wrong Man Acknowledged at Agawa

But in 1952, while still in his teens, Norval Morrisseau met Selwyn Dewdney, a former missionary who was investigating the prehistoric rock pictographs scattered throughout the region. Morrisseau guided Dewdney to many of these sites and decoded their meanings for the researcher. To demonstrate the significance of the imagery he shared many of the Ojibwa myths and legends with the investigator. Unfortunately it was Dewdney who became known as the expert on the subject.

In 1965 Ryerson press published Norval's stories, Legends of My People, The Great Ojibwa. The book, now long out of print, was edited by Dewdney and illustrated by Norval Morrisseau. It was presented to the world as a book of stories for children.

There is a blasphemous bronze memorial to Dewdney imbedded into the Lake Superior rock face at Agawa - a sacred site to the Ojibwa. Like any man, Dewdney deserves acknowledgement for a lifetime of hard work, but not at a sacred First Nation's site.

What were you thinking, guys!!!! Please! Someone - remove it!

The entire piece can be found here –

<http://www.native-art-in-canada.com/norvalmorrisseau.html>

As one “elder” to another, I did email the owner of the site and ask that the various incorrect – and some downright inflammatory - statements be removed. It’s been about six months and nothing has changed.

But in 1952, while still in his teens, Norval Morrisseau met Selwyn Dewdney,

Dewdney first met Morrisseau up in Red Lake in 1960. Norval was about 28 years old at the time. The meeting was arranged by Dewdney's friend Bob Shepard, an OPP constable stationed on McKenzie Island where Morrisseau and his wife Harriet were living at the time. Shepard was impressed with Morrisseau's artistic talent and thought that Dewdney, given his art background, could provide some guidance.

a former missionary

Dewdney was the son of an Anglican minister – indeed, his father was the Bishop of the entire District of Keewatin in the 1920's and 1930's. In 1928 – he was nineteen at the time - he accompanied his father on an epic summer long canoe trip to the Anglican missions in in the far north of Ontario. This does not make him a missionary!

Instead, he chose another path. A Wikipedia article on his life summarized his twenties like this –

- In the summer of 1928, he accompanied his father on a 3,800 mile journey to visit the [Ojibway](#) and [Cree](#) missions in Northern Ontario. Much of this venture was travelled by canoe. This experience established his interest in native culture and love of the bush in the [Canadian Shield](#).
- In 1932, he attended the [Ontario College of Education](#) and received a High School Assistant's Certificate and Art Specialists Certificate. He also took a course in landscape painting.
- In 1933, he was hired by the [Geological Survey of Canada](#), and was assigned to survey the transition zone between the [Precambrian](#) formations of the [Canadian Shield](#) and the [Hudson Bay](#) lowlands. Among the [muskeg](#) and [blackflies](#), he sketched the landscape and produced pencil portraits of the traverse crew at the survey camp. His inspiration as an artist came from the great northern landscapes that he loved to visit. His dramatic style is quite similar to that of the [Group of Seven](#).
- In 1934, he attended the Ontario College of Art, graduating with honors and moved to London, Ontario.

- In 1936, he married Irene Donner in a ceremony conducted by his father. Their honeymoon was a 500-mile canoe trip loop from Kenora to [Red Lake](#).
- In 1936, he began teaching at Sir Adam Beck Secondary School, London, Ontario, but resigned in protest at the demotion of a colleague in 1945. This experience was the subject of his first novel *Wind Without Rain*.

Dewdney began his study of pictographs on the Canadian Shield in 1957. The account given by Kenneth Kidd in Indian Rock Paintings of the Great Lakes (1962) reads like this –

In 1957 the project got started. In that year the Quetico Foundation kindly provided the funds to carry through the work for one summer, if a suitable recorder could be found, and if the Royal Ontario Museum were agreeable to supervising it. This the Museum was happy to do, and chose Mr. Selwyn Dewdney to carry out the fieldwork. He was an excellent choice, both because of his training in art and because of his experience in and knowledge of the woodland country where he would have to work. He had canoed through it extensively in his youth, knew and understood how to face its problems, and had a sympathetic attitude towards the native inhabitants. Thus the project was launched. Kenneth E. Kidd .Indian Rock Paintings of The Great Lakes (104)

Morrisseau guided Dewdney to many of these sites and decoded their meanings for the researcher.

By the time Dewdney arrived in Red Lake and met Morrisseau he had already recorded and sketched and photographed some 85 sites. He had spent three summers in the Quetico and Lake of the Woods regions, as well as central Ontario and Mazinaw Rock. He had spoken to many Ojibwe elders about the pictographs and earned their

friendship for the keen interest and respect he showed their culture. His book contains dozens of instances where he acknowledges the help given by these elders. He never missed a chance to say “thank you” to anyone who helped him in his quest.

“To no one am I more indebted than the old people – Cree, Ojibway, and Algonkin whose straight talk and courtesy have given me many new insights into aboriginal modes of thinking, and into the ways in which these have been related to the rock paintings they knew of. A number of these have since died, and it is more and more rarely now that I meet a man or woman whose memory goes back before the turn of the century. Only a few of them passed on to the younger people what they could collect of the old ways and beliefs. The old lore and practices are being submerged by the new, even as the flooding by lumber dams and hydro projects is drowning their forebears’ paintings. “ (p. 104-105)

At the end of the book there is yet another statement –

In addition to the general and special acknowledgements made herein Mr. Dewdney is anxious to record the following:

“Above all I should like to record the invaluable aid in tracking down ethnological clues furnished by the late Chief James Horton of Manitou Rapids. A gentle man of unflinching courtesy and unpretentious dignity, greatly gifted as a teller of Ojibwa tales, his death was an incalculable loss. Of other Ojibwa who generously shared with me the lore of their forefathers, I should particularly like to mention Messrs. Norval Morrisseau and Thomas Paishk of Red Lake, Mr. Jack Bushy of Ignace, and Mr. Charles Friday of Seine River...”

While he acknowledges Morrisseau’s insights into the world of Ojibwe myth, Morrisseau’s name never appears in the context of a specific pictograph site. It was his OPP friend who took him to the very humble one on Red Lake. As I write in my post, through his grandfather Morrisseau was undoubtedly aware of sites in the Lake Nipigon, there is no evidence he took Dewdney to any of them.

To demonstrate the significance of the imagery he shared many of the Ojibwa myths and legends with the investigator.

Ojibwe culture has been an object of study for over a century. Already available were works by hundreds of writers, including –

George Copway. [The traditional history and characteristic sketches of the Ojibway nation.](#) 1851.

William Warren. 1885. [History of the Ojibways, Based Upon Traditions and Oral Statements.](#)

Frances Densmore. 1929. [Chippewa Customs.](#)

Morrisseau was hardly revealing some deep secret knowledge that only a few knew. In fact, one of the reasons he gave for painting was to revive the legends of his people, which even the Ojibwe community was in danger of becoming disconnected from.

Unfortunately it was Dewdney who became known as the expert on the subject.

“Unfortunately”! It is made to sound as if something awful has happened, that Dewdney has stolen something that rightfully belonged only to Morrisseau. Given all the evidence above, the writer is wilfully misrepresenting the situation and shows no recognition of their lifelong bond of friendship based on their common passion for traditional Ojibwe culture.

It is also the case that Dewdney showed Morrisseau pictograph sketches from sites that Norval would not have gotten to. He would also have shared with Morrisseau the oral traditions he would have heard from other elders.

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Norval wrote two manuscripts which Dewdney edited. My post has the particulars. Dewdney had some severe editing to do given Morrisseau's level of writing skills. I have read the book; it is anything but a children's book – and I wonder if the writer has even seen the book!

There is a blasphemous bronze memorial to Dewdney imbedded into the Lake Superior rock face at Agawa - a sacred site to the Ojibwa.

How ignorant this is. How small-minded. How non-Anishinaabe!

Like any man, Dewdney deserves acknowledgement for a lifetime of hard work, but not at a sacred First Nation's site.

What were you thinking, guys!!!!

Please!

Someone - remove it!

I did ask the writer – he or she poses as an elder – to remove this piece of malicious or incompetent writing. It does not cast a positive light on the website.

The overriding question I want to ask the writer of the post is this -

What were you thinking, guy!!!