North Amerindian Literacy Before the White Man:  
*The Allegory of Mystic Cave*

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ABSTRACT: Nearly 100 years ago a cave was found on the property of a young rancher in Alberta, 40 miles outside of Calgary, which contained some unusual markings looking like some form of writing. The rancher and his wife, believing they had made a momentous discovery in that the writings did not look like contemporary or recent plains Indian markings concluded they must be writings of a people from somewhere else and at a much earlier time. For 50 years they tried to interest the scientific establishment in Canada, Britain, and the United States in their discovery but were dismissed, in their turn, as they had dismissed the native Indians as a possible source of the markings. These dismissals and their intertwining sagas are mutually allegorical. The rancher could not believe that the fragment of an apparently sophisticated script, looking like some early Semitic writings, could possibly have been created by Amerindians. And the scientific establishment could not believe that Dick had stumbled on writing in North America which might have dated from the withdrawal of the last ice Age, five to ten thousand years ago or even earlier and which may not have been written by contemporary Indians.

KEYWORDS: Literacy, Amerindian, native peoples, aboriginal peoples, ice age, amateur science, scientific establishment, writing, semitic script.

One of the recurring difficulties of our species is that we are intrinsically tribal even as we live in a single civilization that spans the entire globe. This tribality shows itself in our having difficulty, time and time again, in taking another tribe than our own seriously. The tribes of our time are sometimes tribes of the kind we often ascribe to the North American aboriginal peoples, or at any rate the peoples who were here when the white man came. Sometimes they are a large linguistic group such as Germany was prior to the Second World War and, perhaps, again in our time. Sometimes they are a smallish linguistic group living a modern life but with a deep literary tradition and their own language, such as the few hundred thousand Icelanders are. And sometimes our tribes are connected with our business, religious, gender, educational, or research traditions. The story of Mystic Cave spans some, if not all of these, tribalisms.

There are a number of possible stories about origins with respect to the aboriginal peoples of North America. But whatever the ultimate facts may be one fact stands out. Sometime between five and ten thousand years ago, perhaps most likely

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ten thousand years ago, most of the North American continent was covered with snow and ice. This means that even if people crossed the land bridge between Eurasia and North America some 30 thousand years ago, most of them were forced to retreat southward because of the advancing ice of the last great Ice Age. The ice cover went as far south as Georgia and Northern Texas and retreated more or less completely only five thousand years ago. When it did it left behind a boreal forest which thereafter covered most of North America. The boreal forest has been on the retreat ever since. Its major southern extent now mainly bisects Canada east to west and is populated by the Cree Indians across the entire breadth.

Who formed the peoples who repopulated the landmass of North America after the ice withdrew? Naturally most of the people must have been descended from those who were forced to move south as the ice cover grew, perhaps 15 thousand years ago. But could there have been any others? Thor Heyerdahl, the Norwegian scientist and explorer, suggested that perhaps some of the people who inhabited North America or Central America arrived later than those who probably crossed the land-bridge to Alaska. Perhaps some sailed over from the middle east on reed boats, bringing with them their languages, their writing, and their technology. His Ra expedition was in aid of showing that such an expedition on a reed boat was possible and in the late 1960s he succeeded in sailing across the Atlantic on just such a vessel.

The story of Mystic Cave is the story of the efforts of a rancher living outside Calgary, Alberta, J. Ward Dick, and his wife Catherine, to have the existence and the importance of a cave filled with markings, perhaps writings, found by them on their property in 1905 to be recognized as an important scientific and archaeological discovery. After much research and comparison of the markings on the cave, Mystic Cave, they concluded reluctantly that the markings were unlike anything else known in the Western Plains.

The cave, located some 40 miles southwest of Calgary in a ranching area in the foothills near to the town of High River, was not a cave in a cliff. Rather, it was a cave in a rock-outrigger on an otherwise unremarkable part of the foothills-cum-prairie. To a casual observer, the markings or pictographs in that cave appear to be clearly Indian writings of the kind common on skins used by the Plains Indians to record the events of a sequence of years so that the tribal historian could use the markings as a clue in order to orally relate the history of a tribe over a long time frame. However, to the Dick's it appeared that it was something more remarkable.

Mr. Dick could find no Indians in the area to whom the markings meant anything, although the first assumption to which he and his wife were drawn was that it must be local plains Indian writing. Subsequently Dick corresponded with many archaeologists, linguistic scholars, geologists, and other potentially interested parties, including government officials to try to interest them in the cave. As the years went by he and his wife, getting no help from others, developed an extensive collection of