

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ken S. Coates, Robin Fisher, eds. *Out of the Background: Readings on Canadian Native History*. Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996. viii + 405 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7730-5533-9.

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We can all think quickly of two people we wish would take a "Native Studies 101." The first is someone who recently uttered the most outlandish remarks, whatever our vantage point; the second is likely our self, suspicious of our own perspective, whatever its sophistication. This is a most dynamic field, politically and academically. Students at all levels and in many disciplines will sign up this September in record numbers for an introductory course in Native Studies. Meanwhile, professional researchers and educators of all sorts, social workers, lawyers, journalists and business people will turn to a few resources to keep abreast of scholarship. The single greatest inspiration remains the nation-wide cleavage between aboriginal and Euro-American societies. Here arrives a very good resource for the variety of newcomers and field workers wanting an accessible yet sophisticated survey of native-white relations. Coates and Fisher, two senior Canadian academics in the field, furnish an excellent selection of recent publications which displays a vigorous expansion in historical methods. The book's representation of current historical interpretation is good although it will not entirely satisfy some "101" agendas.

No surprise that this second edition retains only four of the original selections and the total number expands from fourteen to twenty. Works by Trigger, Martin, Van Kirk, and Tobias remain significant for their ground-breaking, forthright assignments of human agency where Canadians preferred not to look a dozen or so years ago: Indian diplomacy, trappers' relationships to environment, and the roles of Indian women and of federal administrators. These articles continue to prompt lively discussion in first year seminars, so at variance are they with school and street common sense. They have become implicit testimony themselves to the difficult work in exposing this part of the country's background.

The sixteen new inclusions are too many to treat individually but some methodological innovations and discussions deserve special mention. James Axtell's "Early Indian Views of Europeans" will likely stimulate classrooms and research both for its long overdue perspective and for Axtell's organization of interpretive sources from which we can glean this elusive point of view. Cole Harris' investigation of the pre-contact smallpox pandemic advances our emerging conception of contact period aboriginals to be already reeling from epidemiological disaster. The likely social and political fragmentation qualifies the European agency, and righteousness, mediating colonial domination of the continent. Seeing Sarah Carter's name in the table of contents, I expected to see her work on government suppression of Indian farmers, an apt sequel to Tobias' "Subjugation." Instead, Carter has more recently traced within settler discourse the gendered exclusion between natives and whites which took place on the western frontier. This constitutes a methodological sequel to Van Kirk's work, showing the evolution of both native and gender studies over the past decade. The excerpt from Daniel Francis' *Imaginary Indian* exploits similar methodology to address more generally the presentation of "Indian" in Canada's emerging consumer culture. Such illustrations of environmental and discursive currents which people adopt powerfully expand and refine our notion of human agency in social relationships, and they will aid students in conceiving of research in these new areas. These examples furthermore should summon mature classroom discussion about human agency, and individual responsibility, between supporters and opponents of the currently fashionable, severe individualism. Three oral histories portray native reckoning with mid-century social pressures, and a half dozen pieces investigate in more usual ways the social, economic and political crises in the native-white nexus. They all testify to

the burgeoning empirical study of this aspect of Canada's past.

The two purely historiographical pieces are good, but, together with the rest of the book which shares their tone, they achieve a less expansive survey of early 90s historical interpretation than the field deserves. Robin Fisher, like many others, no doubt wishes Chief Justice Allan MacEachern took a "Native Studies 101," at least. Fisher attacks MacEachern for his misguided and misleading use of historical evidence in his decision-making. Fisher's critique is a topical exposure of classic disciplinary pratfalls which will benefit new college students as well as the lawyers Fisher rails against. It is a fine elucidation of the danger of non-historians setting out to use history in the political arena—or in a nearby court.

Historians sometimes form their own courts and Robin Brownlee and Mary-ellen Kelm make their position clear when they decry that some others are "Desperately Seeking Absolution" using "Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi." Brownlee and Kelm fear that recent efforts to examine native reaction to penurious government policy, and to characterize the reaction as evidence of empowerment, obscures the original, culpable state oppression. The pair contends this well-meant but mistaken assignment of native agency is illogical, while it disorients and prolongs the struggle to redress the native grievance. They make a compelling point although readers will be forgiven for scratching their heads; one author under attack is J.R. Miller whose work included in this reader, "Great White Father Knows Best: Oka and the Land Claims Process," would likely win Brownlee's and Kelm's approval.

The two apparent sides to Miller, one which we hear about in Brownlee and Kelm and the other which we actually see, naturally reflect the trial and effort in noticing human agency among the myriad individuals, patterns, idiosyncrasies, restraints, and opportunities in relationship to one another on the Canadian landscape. This issue, the question of agency, sometimes translated as responsibility, is in this field passionately in the hearts of academic researchers as well as readers who include resource industry personnel, Warriors, and the rest of us grasping for sensible solutions. We all survey this unusual human relationship and ask with unusual urgency,

"How did this happen?" and "How can it be fixed?"

Out of the Background naturally reflects this underlying concern and consistently conveys the position that, as and when they could, white, European, capitalizing interests dominated the landscape, the people, the language, and of course instruments of modern government to painfully suppress native society. This view, which Terry Wotherspoon and Vic Satzewich characterize as the internal colonial model of interpretation, fairly reflects the academic consensus, so the edition does present, as the series' general editor claims, "a fine sample of the best new work." But since the book does raise some debate about human agency, especially the role of historians in redressing a national grievance, a wider range of alternative, resilient interpretations about peoples' agency deserves representation.

Just about any chapter from Wotherspoon and Satzewich, for example, would furnish thought provoking, relatively recent historical data and interpretation to the effect that patterns of gender or class conspire with policy to complicate natives' modern history and future prospects. Georges Sioui mixes methodologies to render, with a Wendat voice, a history which is starkly out of the background, a refreshing polemic which confronts European ideology. Marc Girard comments upon Oka from the standpoint of an environmental historian, dismayed by modernity's obfuscation of some very practical matters which ought to have mitigated that crisis. These perspectives are robust departures from Coates' and Fisher's dominating interpretive preference, for they relocate human agency quite differently. They incidentally portray both natives and whites variously as victims and beneficiaries of their relationships.

The editors' display of new research methods is superb, but a display of a wider interpretive field would improve the selection in its fairness and in its dedication to amplify native voices. Nevertheless, this is an excellent first or second year classroom or library resource for an introduction to the field and for the rest of us who regularly need to catch up.

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