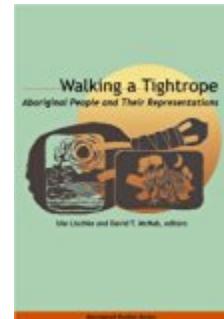


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ute Lischke, David T. McNab, eds. *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal Peoples and Their Representations*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005. xix + 375 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88920-460-7.

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This edited collection has its origins in the Wanapitei Colloquium of 2000, on “Representations of Aboriginal Peoples by Themselves and Others.” The exploration of the socially constructed nature of identity and Aboriginality has been late in coming to the field of Native studies, but has seen recent growth and dynamism not only in Native studies, but also in the various disciplines that consider indigenous peoples. Thus timely in its appearance, *Walking a Tightrope* brings together a diverse collection of material on representations of Aboriginal peoples: some produced by Aboriginal people and scholars, others by non-Aboriginal academics. The intent is to explore the interplay between Euro-American images of the indigenous other, Aboriginal peoples’ own sense of identity, and their efforts to “walk the tightrope” between the two. Lischke and McNab’s choice of title and introduction suggests this intriguing conceptual idea as the hook upon which to hang the work, although it is not really well developed. Philip Belfry’s chapter, “Permission and Possession: The Identity Tightrope,” from which they borrowed the idea, explores the complexities of the analogy more effectively. The essays are separated into three broad sections entitled: “Reflections on Walking the Tightrope,” “Historical Representations,” and “Literary and Cinematic Representations.”

Even before the forward, preface and introduction, *Walking a Tightrope* opens with a brilliant poem, “Good-bye, Wild Indian,” by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias from Cape Croker. She lays to rest the Euro-American imagery of the Indian in a manner that is powerful, painful, witty, sometimes caustic, and even wistful. Once into the chapters, it quickly becomes evident how profoundly different in perspective and approach each contribution is from the next. For instance, Drew Hayden Taylor’s

short, irreverent introspective presents the reader with the responses of Canadian audiences, specifically “pigment challenged” ones in his words, to the Native humor in his plays. This is followed by Belfry’s scholarly and personal exploration of logos and corporate possession of indigenous imagery and its implications for Aboriginal people on the identity tightrope. Further on, a reader encounters Mark Dockstator’s legalistic approach to conceptualizing Native and Euro-Canadian perspectives of the historical relationship in a graphical manner. Add to these Stephen Bocking’s examination of the interplay of scientific and indigenous knowledge in the north, Lischke and McNab’s chapter on representations of Aboriginal people in East German film, and Bernie Harder’s literary approach to Native writing and perspective and the remarkable breadth of the collection is unmistakable. Contained within are some strong pieces, particularly Olive Patricia Dickason’s historiographical chapter and Winona Wheeler’s thoughtful treatment on social relations and cultural contexts in approaching, accessing, and comprehending indigenous oral histories. A number of others are interesting or novel, but limited in their conclusions or implications. Dockstator’s article is an example of this, as too is Karl Hele’s examination of a mid-nineteenth-century debate between Methodist ministers, one the Anishnabai Peter Jones, over whether Aboriginal people were savage. Denis Bartels and Alice Bartels’s look at elusive Mi’gmaq identities in Newfoundland, and Katherine Bunn-Marcuse’s well-argued assessment of ethnographic films of the Kwakwaka-wakw are also worthy of attention, even if the arguments were not pushed as far as they might have been.

Overall though, Lishke and McNab have assembled a collection that is so diverse, even eclectic, that while all

the entries typically treat in some way representations of Aboriginal people, a sense of thematic unity seems lacking. Part of the problem is that the rambling introduction never really provides an effective framework upon which to hang the conglomeration of essays and reminiscences. Some weak chapters and poor copyediting also undermine the overall impression. As a result, the total of *Walking a Tightrope* is less than the sum of its parts. A few of those parts are valuable, however, and make a modest contribution to the growing understanding of Aboriginality in its various guises and permutations.

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