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Elizabeth A. Fenn. *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2014. 480 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-4239-5.

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Recovering the Indigenous Past, Crafting a Native Narrative: The Mandan People Who Lived and Still Breathe at the "Heart of the World"

In this truly innovative study, Elizabeth A. Fenn challenges scholars of Native American history to rethink the ways that we perceive and write such history. From start to finish, Fenn immerses readers in a strictly Native world–specifically, the Mandan peoples of present-day North Dakota–where everything from the names of the seasons to the spaces the Mandans occupied or revered are reconstructed from the Mandan perspective. In particular, Fenn's attention to detail when it comes to the places that the Mandans inhabited is quite astounding, as the story of the Mandan people unfolds in the towns, settlements, and excavations of Double Ditch, Huff Indian Village, Mih-Tutta-Hang-Kusch, Like-A-Fishhook, On-a-Slant, and the Painted Woods. Further, the Mandans themselves act as the primary voice and the driving force behind Fenn's work, as she deliberately leaves the Euro-American colonizers to skulk in the shadows as minor actors in the larger story of the Mandan people. For instance, to demonstrate the vital importance of corn–or "koxate"–to the Mandan culture and economy (a theme that resonates throughout the history of the Mandans), Fenn deploys the life of Buffalo Bird Woman to illustrate the ways in which the Mandan peoples' lives revolved around the female cultivation and trading of koxate, which "fueled the daily life, ceremonial life, and commercial life of the plains" (pp. 57, 229).

The lives of Chief Good Boy and Sheheke-shote, the "White Coyote," who lived during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, also serve as examples of Mandan voices. Through these two leaders, Fenn reveals how the Mandan people confronted and navigated the destruction of the smallpox epidemic in 1783-84, as well as the arrival of the U.S. Corps of Discovery in 1804. In particular, Fenn consciously keeps the narrative on these two individuals rather than their Euro-American counterparts, specifically how Chief Good Boy took the "lead in forging order from [the] chaos" of the plague, and how Sheheke-shote negotiated with Lewis and Clark and accompanied them back to Washington DC, where he met with Thomas Jefferson (p. 165). It is here that Fenn again reveals a knack for not falling into the proverbial trap of resorting to the Euro-American viewpoint, as she deftly fishes out the Mandan perspective from her sources. In fact, Fenn replicates this feat time and time again by deconstructing Spanish, French, British, and American accounts of the Mandan people to get at the heart of the Mandan story. Finally, it should be noted that Fenn draws upon the knowledge and cultural expertise of Cedric Red Feather (the "Red Feather Man"), a contemporary Mandan spiritual leader, and other Mandans whose "vision and determination" sparked a spiritual revitalization among their peoples today, and who "have shaped this book profoundly" by revealing "that the Mandan story is one of spirit, in every sense of the word" (pp. 431-432).

Yet of even greater importance, Fenn skilfully transposes her understandings of history to Native ways of thinking and seeing the past, which is nonlinear in approach and quite comprehensive in breadth. This is wholly reminiscent of the demands that Peter Nabokov made of historians in his seminal work, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (2002). Nabokov challenged scholars to consider and actively pursue non-Western mentalities and interpretations of the past, as well as to actively employ all of the sources at one's disposal, particularly those sources beyond the documentary record. Accordingly, Fenn tells the story of the Mandan people through more than just the words of European and American outsiders, but through archaeological investigations of Mandan sites; artifactual and material evidence unearthed by excavation, entombed within nineteenth-century ethnography, or preserved through-

out the centuries by collectors (which include winter counts and buffalo robes); the creation stories and language of the Mandan people; geological, climatological, biological, and epidemiological studies of the Mandans and Plains region; and a wealth of other avenues that collectively led Fenn to paint the story of the Mandan people on their own canvas. Despite the scattered and fragmented nature of these sources–which has scared off scholars in the past–Fenn seamlessly weaves these disparate sources together to chronicle the Mandan people. As Fenn puts it best, there is a "very sparse documentary record pertaining to the Mandans before 1800," which is "daunting, but it led me to explore alternative approaches to research and narrative" (p. xvii).

And it is here in the *narrative* that Fenn's work becomes truly novel. Again heeding the advice of Nabokov and Native scholars, Fenn provides both readers and historians alike with a different way of seeing and writing about the past. For Fenn and the Mandan people, their history is completely divorced from the linear chronology that myself and other scholars impose upon the distant events and peoples of centuries ago. Instead, Fenn blends the present and past together–while rooted around particular Native places or individuals–to create a synthetic narrative that treats a specific facet of the Mandan people and their story within each chapter. For instance, Fenn begins chapter 3 in 1960 at Huff, North Dakota, where she unveils the archaeological excavation of a Mandan town and the discovery of "House 12," which reflects the ways in which Mandan settlement patterns and cultures shifted after the sixteenth century. From there, Fenn delves into the Mandan cultural world, specifically the "earth-lodges," a gendered division of labor in Mandan society, the vitally important corn and buffalo economies, the practice of eagle-trapping, and Mandan dress, all the while spinning her source material into a narrative that merges *time* and *space*. In particular, this narrative moves backwards and forwards spatially and chronologically, beginning with the observations of Alfred Bowers among the Mandans in 1870, followed by a French observer who did much the same in 1738. These scenes and the time frame quickly shift to the reconstruction of an earth lodge in 1978 at Lake Crystal in Minnesota, after which Fenn transports us back to the nineteenth century through the life and times of Buffalo Bird Woman, who sheds light on the complexities of the Mandan corn economy. From there, Fenn moves even further back in time to the winter of 1806 at the "Mandan villages" to depict a buffalo hunt, but with an interlude that unfolds upon the State Highway 1804 in North Dakota some two hundred years later, where she reveals the site of a "buffalo jump." In concluding this chapter, Fenn ends the reader's journey at the Fort Berthold Indian (Mandan) Reservation in 1890, where the U.S. agent George B. Cock observed–despite the rich history of Mandan horticulture and economy that Fenn chronicles throughout this chapter–that the Mandans' "natural habits of indolence and wastefulness, with their indifference to future needs, preclude the possibility of their ever becoming frugal and prosperous farmers in this climate" (p. 78). Fenn in turn replicates this same process of compressing time and space in every single other chapter, which gives voice to a truly Mandan account of their past and present.

It is also quite refreshing to see Fenn drop continual references to what was happening on the rest of the continent, which provides a temporal context for her audience as well as irreverently demonstrating that the Mandan people had little care for the seminal events that unfolded to the east. This is not to say that Fenn believes Spanish conquistadors, Anglo and French colonization of eastern North America, the American Revolution and War of 1812, Napoleon's designs on the "heart of the continent," and the Haitian Revolution had little impact on the Mandan people, but that the events themselves went unnoticed or were dismissed as unimportant by the Mandans, whose concerns and interests lay elsewhere (p. xiii). In doing this, particularly from the sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries, Fenn illustrates that the history of early America unfolded well beyond the confines of the eastern seaboard. While this seems rather obvious, scholars of early America have been relatively slow to extend our gaze beyond the eastern edge of North America. Consequently, Fenn joins the recent spate of scholars like Claudio Saunt, Pekka Hämäläinen, James Brooks, Ned Blackhawk, Paul Mapp, Juliana Barr, and Colin Calloway, who have started the process of casting the history of early America beyond the eastern seaboard, which encompasses the vast peoples and places of the continent like the Mandans, as well as their interactions with other Native peoples and Euro-Americans away from the eastern periphery.

However, Fenn's breathtaking work is not without its flaws. Despite her warning to readers that "the writing of history is neither certain nor sanitary," it is quite surprising given Fenn's meticulous and rich analysis of Mandan culture that at times such cultural detail is actually lacking (p. xix). While this is likely due to the nature of her sources–or the lack thereof–we never get a clear picture of how the Mandan peoples organized themselves politically. While she briefly notes the existence of "chiefs" that ruled within each Mandan town, that there were sep-

arate civil and war leaders as well as "town elders," and that the respective headmen for each town rarely came together in large diplomatic settings, Fenn never extrapolates upon the political makeup of the Mandans (p. 211). With this issue aside, Fenn's history of the Mandan people extends from 1000 CE to the mid-nineteenth century, but with only an occasional glance at the Mandans during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While it is novel that she provides significant attention to the full breadth and time of the Mandan story, she sacrifices the signal achievements of Native peoples after 1900. As a consequence, we have no idea how the Mandans found themselves confined to the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, how they confronted the destructive processes of allotment and termination, how they negotiated the terms of the Indian Reorganization Act (1934), or what role they played in the rise of Native activism during the mid- to late twentieth century. To compound matters, by ending her book in the early to mid-nineteenth century, Fenn presents her readers with a quasi-declension narrative. Because her final chapters detail the destruction of the Mandan corn economy due to the "Norway rat," which coincided with the cataclysmic smallpox epidemic of 1837-38, Fenn ends her book full of doom and gloom for the Mandan people. While she provides a brief epilogue on the survival and persistence of the Mandans, with attention to their cultural and spiritual vitality today, the undertones of the "rise and fall" of the Mandan people skirts dangerously close to the archaic studies and ethnographies that she herself scrutinizes in her book.

But in the end, Fenn's work is a magisterial account of the Mandan people, researched and written in a way that privileges Native voices, places, and particularly narrative. For Fenn has provided scholars with an effective template for how to think about and see the past for what is truly *was* and still *is* for Native peoples. And for this alone, Fenn needs to be commended for bringing the story of the Mandan people to life in a way that does justice to their past and present, while challenging historians to follow in her footsteps.

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