

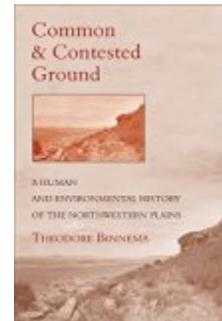
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Theodore Binnema. *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwest Plains.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. xvi + 263 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3361-4.

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Traveling Light

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Theodore Binnema has written an elegant and methodologically ambidextrous “new Indian history” of the northwestern plains of North America from A.D. 200 to 1806. Like Richard White’s *The Middle Ground*, which was published ten years before, *Common and Contested Ground* is an effort at putting Indians at the center of the story while eschewing the old preoccupation with ethnology and the “degree of cultural change and continuity in the history of indigenous societies” (pp. 199-200). Instead, Binnema endeavors to tell a new story about the political, diplomatic, and military interactions of the various human communities that inhabited this corner of the Great Plains, including members of the Euro-American community.

The first quarter of the book is devoted to a sophisticated description of this region’s environmental features and ecological relationships, which circumscribe but do not necessarily determine human history. Thus, we learn about such particulars of the northwestern plains as the Chinook belt, the fescue crescent, the rain shadow effect, the prairie-forest ecotone, warm-and cool-season grasses, bison pounds and jumps (such as the famous Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in Alberta), as well as the importance of natural and anthropogenic fire—la Stephen J. Pyne. On the point of fire control, Binnema accepts, as he sweepingly puts it, “that the environment from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic Ocean and on other continents was ‘managed’ by indigenous peoples

for their own purposes before contact with the West” (p. 34). But perhaps the most interesting concept Binnema introduces in this part of the book is that of the “Bison Hourglass,” a figure that neatly represents the changes in bison population density during the year. Too circumspect to propose any Malthusian laws of the northwestern plains, Binnema nevertheless implies that the number of animals that could “squeeze through the neck of the hourglass in late winter” determined the upward limits of the resident hunting and gathering populations (p. 20).

Binnema goes on to explain that in the ensuing centuries other Indian groups discovered the northwestern plains. In fact, by the time of the horse and gun revolution—which occurred between 1730 and 1779 and fundamentally altered patterns of trade, diplomacy, and warfare—this region had become home to a remarkably diverse if troubled human community. The central problem was that the relative prosperity that the horse and gun brought to the northwestern plains was not evenly distributed. In fact, Binnema argues, the struggle for horses and guns “encouraged the development and entrenchment of two interethnic coalitions of bands. The coalition of Crow, Shoshoni, Flathead, and Kutenai bands was wealthy in horses but poor in guns, while the northern coalition of Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Sarcee, and Cree bands had fewer horses but many guns” (p. 198-99). Earlier, as Binnema demonstrates, the advantage was with the southern coalition; later, with the northern. The northern coalition’s proximity to Euro-American traders

operating out of Hudson Bay was crucial to its ascendancy, but did not guarantee its primacy. It was into this complex and changing Indian world, which Binnema has deftly drawn for us, that Lewis and Clark entered in the early nineteenth century. And when they did, their offer of a new source of trade would primarily benefit the bands in the south, which, in turn, would lead to another refashioning of relationships throughout the northwestern plains.

By going beyond culture—actually by simply ignoring

it—Binnema has freed himself to write what has turned out to be a refreshingly clear and precise history that spans no less than sixteen centuries, with the rapid movement of an Alberta clipper. To be sure, there is a time for thick cultural description and analysis, especially as told in the warmth of a campfire on a long winter night. But when the snows melt and the geese return, and the long nights turn into long days filled with chasing buffalo, stealing horses, trading, and making war on your enemies, it is better to leave the cultural baggage behind. Sometimes it just gets in the way.

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