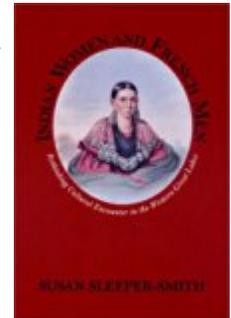


Susan Sleeper-Smith. *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. vii + 234 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-308-7.



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Examining Indian life from the colonial period to the mid-nineteenth century, Susan Sleeper-Smith's *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* is an ambitious work. Intent on correcting an older view of Indian decline and disappearance, she argues that Indians in the region persevered by using a range of strategies, from employing Catholicism as a means of resistance to disappearing into plain sight by adopting whiteness as a means for community persistence (pp. 5-7). Throughout, she illustrates that a number of Indian communities in the region resisted removal by drawing on kinship and Catholicism as well as the experience of successive encounters with Iroquois, French, British, and American invaders. Indians in the western Great Lakes so ably adapted to new social-political realities, Sleeper-Smith maintains, because diaspora, both forced and voluntary, was a significant part of their past. Through this experience, Indians were practiced in the arts not just of accommodation but also of resistance (p. 3). In making this argument, Sleeper-Smith compellingly uses a wide range of sources, including the Jesuit Relations, several lo-

cal archives, and a particularly striking series of paintings of nineteenth-century Miamis and Potawatomis by the English painter George Winter.

Following the lead of scholars like Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer S. H. Brown, Sleeper-Smith illustrates the importance of kinship and marriage to understanding the fur trade.[1] Indian women, she demonstrates, were essential to the development of the Catholic kin networks that were key to the fur trades persistence in the western Great Lakes. Early on, Indian women who married French men integrated their new husbands into Indian society. As Sleeper-Smith makes clear, a French traders success was largely determined by his willingness to respect Indian understandings of exchange and kinship. Women were thus key in the creation and expansion of the ties facilitating the trade. Ignoring the imperatives shaped by Indian women doomed a European fur trader to failure. In this way, exchange was a social process turning on kinship and determined by Indian practice. Later British traders failing to adapt local ways, watched as their trade flagged, while

mixed-blood Catholic fur trading families continued to use their kinship networks to great effect.

In contrast to the work of an earlier generation of mission scholars like Carol Devens, Karen Anderson, and Eleanor Leacock, who stressed in different ways that conversion led to a precipitous decline in women's status, Sleeper-Smith finds that Indian women's involvement in the fur trade and decision to adopt Catholicism enhanced female power in a number of ways.[2] Using examples of individual women like the Iliniwék Marie Rouensa, she details how intermarriage with French traders, active participation in the fur trade, and conversion to Catholicism afforded Indian women greater control of trade goods, enhanced power, increased autonomy and a public voice as well as a means of avoiding potentially abusive polygamous husbands through the adoption of European-style monogamy. She additionally notes that women like Marie Rouensa may well have used Catholic marriage as a means of better controlling their French husbands. More concerned with women's role in the fur trade and Catholicism, she is largely silent on the nature of French and Indian marriages.

In an argument in some ways paralleling Nancy Shoemaker's study of Kateri Tekakwitha, Sleeper-Smith illustrates the subtle interplay between older Indian religious practices and Catholicism in the creation of a syncretic frontier Catholicism that was largely the making of Native women like Marie Rouensa and Marie Madeline Reaume Larcheveque.[3] Thus, Jesuits like Father Gravier at Kaskaskia promoted a Christianity that publicly enhanced female power and authority, but did so in a way that encouraged Indians to consider the multiple nature of the Christian God (p. 33). Similarly, the Catholic penitential tradition was especially appealing to Indian women who were part of a culture that had long held public self-mortification in high esteem as a religious practice. By adopting and promoting this special variety of Catholicism, Indian women often en-

tered into the roles more typically enjoyed by Native and Euro-American men. Women led family prayers, after the fashion of French men, and employed oral traditions to illuminate Christian truths, thus using a cultural form more typically the province of male Indian elders. In this way, Indian women pioneered a religious form that merged Christian and Indian cosmological understandings (Christ was thus understood as the Manitou assouv or the Great Spirit, to cite one instance). Catholicism, Sleeper-Smith illustrates, also offered succor in a world that often proved hostile to Indian women.

With its eloquent use of individual women's experiences to illuminate more than two centuries of Native persistence in the western Great Lakes and careful reading of a wide range of sources, *Indian Women and French Men* offers a compelling interpretation of the centrality of gender to Indian cultural persistence. Sleeper-Smith's work should prove an important addition to fur trade scholarship as well as a significant model for scholars studying other regions.

Notes

[1]. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, reprint 1983, originally published 1980); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980).

[2]. Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Karen Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Women Seventeenth-Century New France* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Eleanor Leacock, "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization", in *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives*. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980).

[3]. Nancy Shoemaker, "Kateri Tekakwithas Tortuous Path to Sainthood", in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*. Shoemaker, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1995): 49-71.

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