

Book Reviews

Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1739-1818, by W. Raymond Wood and Thomas P. Thiessen. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985. 400 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

From the time North American fur trade began in the sixteenth century, the quest for furs played an important role in the exploration and settlement of the continent. In addition to their own important pioneer commercial activities, fur traders were explorers who through their journals and correspondence shared hard-won experience in the wilderness with the diplomats and mapmakers who sought to rationalize and control the frontier continent. Some fur traders prepared accounts of their adventures not only for geographers but for the general public. Alexander Mackenzie's publication in 1801 of *Voyages From Montreal* brought knighthood and public acclaim to the first man to cross the continent. Considering the primitive conditions under which they worked, fur traders, particularly Canadian fur traders, were remarkably prolific writers. They wrote to report their activities to fur company executives in eastern cities; they wrote to aid the researches of early historians and ethnographers; but just as important, they wrote to record their own adventures and to beguile away the often monotonous days they spent in dreary camps or trading posts. Fur traders on the far-removed Mackenzie River, isolated from the outside world by the Rocky Mountains and the Arctic Ocean, produced such voluminous correspondence that even the dedicated bureaucrats of the Hudson's Bay Company were loath to trudge through it, and it accumulated in dust-covered piles.

Although nineteenth-century clerks working by the light of gas lamps may have occasionally balked at reading the letters and journals of frontier traders, historians have shown no such reluctance. The study of fur-trade writings has been an important subfield of American history. Such notable historians as Frederick Jackson Turner, H. H. Bancroft, Harold A. Innis, and Allan Nevins have worked in this vineyard. Over the years, the orientation of the historians involved in fur-trade studies has changed, and with it the use to which fur-trade memoirs and correspondence has been put has also changed. For Washington Irving (whose *Astoria* is among the earliest histories of the fur trade), the records of John Jacob Astor's bold attempt to establish a string of trading posts on the Pacific slope were the raw material for a "perfect romance." Part of the romance of fur-trade writings stems from the often arduous explorations that pioneer merchants undertook. For Elliott Coues, who in 1897 edited the journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson, the principal focus was on the "thrilling

explorations of these pioneers in penetrating and occupying the vast region which may be styled the 'Greater Northwest.' " Louis Rodrique Masson, the Canadian historian who edited and published an anthology of memoirs and letters from the North West Company, saw fur traders in a similar light. His 1889 volumes helped to preserve the daring of the Canadian fur traders and their voyageur companions who blazed the trail for Canada's continental union. The center stage in most published collections of fur-trade records has been the fur traders and their trials. The exemplary volumes of the now-defunct Hudson's Bay Record Society departed somewhat from that tradition, instead emphasizing the role of corporate decision making, international intrigue, and economics. The work of Wood and Thiessen, riding the crest of a decade of fur-trade studies which emphasize ethnohistory, focused on the fur traders' narratives not as sources of business or exploration history, but instead they concentrated on the trader's partner, the Indian.

Wood and Thiessen focused on the Mandan and Hidatsa Indian villages of central North Dakota. These villagers used their position on the Missouri River's great bend to erect a vast intertribal trade network. Although this trade network may have been based on precontact communication patterns, the establishment of English trading posts on Hudson's Bay and French penetration of the Great Plains introduced a new element into Indian commerce: European technology. Trade among Indian groups accelerated as those with access to trading posts exchanged European goods for large quantities of fur. Initially the Mandan served as a conduit for furs moving from western plains to the Manitoba-based Assiniboin, who were in direct contact with the English. But by the late eighteenth century, the traders of the rival North West Company and the crown-chartered Hudson's Bay Company had pushed into the interior of the northern plains. Unwilling to leave access to any source of furs to the other firm, fur traders from both companies journeyed to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages. This gave the Mandan direct contact with European trade goods, and the importance of fur trading increased among the Missouri River Indians.

For more than thirty years, annual expeditions set out from Canadian trading posts overland to the Mandan villages on the Missouri River. Merchants from British North America were rivaled by fur traders from St. Louis who, particularly after 1800, journeyed up river to the Mandan trade center. The Mandan and Hidatsa were both the beneficiaries and the victims of this commercial activity. They were provided with all the European goods they needed for their own consumption or for trade with other tribes. This brought temporary affluence at home and prestige among their neighbors on the plains.

But as the nineteenth century wore on, their desire for trade goods sank to a dependence on manufactured items. American fur traders consolidated their hold on the Missouri River trade by establishing permanent posts in the Mandan country. These posts ruined the intertribal commerce of the Mandans and exposed their villages to the dreaded diseases of the Euro-Americans. Mandan and Hidatsa population was drastically reduced from a pre-1780 figure approaching 10,000 people to an early nineteenth-century estimate of 3,700 people. Eventually the twenty-four villages of the Mandan and Hidatsa would be reduced to a single surviving village. For the villagers of the Missouri River, the cost of European trade goods proved very high.

The journals that Wood and Thiessen chose for their volume cover the critical period between 1797 and 1805 when the Mandan trade was at its zenith. None of the five accounts presented in the volume are new to frontier historians. John McDonnell's 1797 account was published first in 1889 by Louis Rodrique Masson in *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-ouest*. Masson also published sections of François-Antoine Larocque's "Missouri Journal" and Charles Mackenzie's "Narrative." In 1910 Larocque's "Yellowstone Journal" was edited and published by Canadian historian Lawrence J. Burpee. Even the section from David Thompson's largely unpublished manuscript journals is fairly familiar, as a considerable portion of it was published by Wood himself in a 1977 edition of the journal *Ethnohistory*. Nonetheless there is much to recommend Wood and Thiessen's new editions of these well-known accounts.

The earlier editions of these journals suffered from various sins of omission and commission. Burpee's first rendition of Larocque's "Yellowstone Journal" omitted a paragraph describing bestiality among some of the Plains Indians. Of a more substantive nature were the considerable passages of text Masson left out of his version of Larocque's "Missouri Journal." Masson only presented what he felt were the highlights of Larocque's observations; the bulk of the journal was not published until now. Wood and Thiessen's edition of these accounts includes many mundane details of trading activities that earlier historians, concerned with exploration and expansion, did not see fit to include. Yet it is these details that recount the decay of Indian crafts and the Indians' rising dependency on white traders. Unlike earlier editors, Wood and Thiessen used a very light editorial hand, presenting the reader with source material in a fashion as close to its original as possible.

Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains is a worthy addition to the university library shelf or the fur-trade researcher's personal collection because it presents five detailed fur-trade journals in a more complete

fashion than has previously been available. The book is well indexed, and the journals are supported by useful maps. The volume's only weakness is its introduction which, while it capably provides background on the evolution of the fur trade on the northern plains, does no more than mention many new social history perspectives on Indian life. The authors contend that the principal value of their project is that the journals will tell part of the story of Indian decline on the northern plains. The rest of the story will come into focus when these journals are "combined with the results of archaeological research recently conducted in their villages." Yet even though both authors are archaeologists active on the northern plains, there is little in this volume to suggest any new perspectives on the early fur trade. While historians will be justly grateful for Thiessen and Wood's work as editors, they also will be disappointed by their surprising reticence as anthropologists. Regrettably the task of integrating historical records with the material culture of the northern plains awaits future scholars.

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The Indian Rights Association: The Herbert Welsh Years, 1882-1904, by William T. Hagan. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985. xi, 301 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$26.95 cloth.

In December, 1983, the Indian Rights Association celebrated its one hundredth year of existence. Founded in Philadelphia in 1882, the IRA was the brainchild of Herbert Welsh, an upper-middle-class Philadelphian, who served as the association's corresponding secretary. In this first book-length study of the IRA during the Welsh years, 1882-1904, William T. Hagan, Distinguished Professor of History at the State University of New York, College at Fredonia, details the association's beginnings, its scope of operations, and its impact on federal Indian policy. Hagan relied extensively on the wealth of materials in the IRA archives for his book. What resulted was a highly informative, readable study, revealing the successes and failures of the most influential Indian reform organization in late nineteenth century America.

Hagan presented good background material on the principal figures who worked for the IRA, including Welsh, Charles Painter (the IRA's Washington lobbyist), Painter's successors Francis Leupp and S. M. Brosius, and Matthew K. Sniffen, Welsh's successor. Welsh held the key position as corresponding secretary and dominated the association's activities. He was an avid supporter of the total assimilation of Indians into the mainstream of American society. Indeed, Welsh believed that Indians should obtain a Christian education, hold land in

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