

**ABORIGINAL HISTORY**

Periodical

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As is the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, *Aboriginal History* is a relative newcomer to the legion of scholarly journals. Founded in 1977 it publishes one volume with two parts a year devoted to encouraging interdisciplinary research into Aboriginal history. Its interdisciplinary intention is taken seriously by the editors. Historical studies based on anthropological, archeological, linguistic and sociological research are regularly published. The ethnohistorian, in the fullest and best sense, is no doubt encouraged.

The journal however, is not narrowly academic. It is one of the few periodicals devoted to Aboriginal studies which aims at the general reader and opens its pages to non-academic material: recorded oral tradition, resumes of current events and biographies of aboriginal people. Jeremy Beckett's portrait of an aboriginal drover is an excellent example of the editors success in serving the scholar and the amateur. Beckett presents both an engaging and readable portrait of George Dutton, drover, and a scholarly investigation of aboriginal life on the margin of frontier civilization. Almost every volume devotes space to such material. P. Read's "Father and sons: a study of five men of 1900" and M. McIntosh and E. Rothwell's "Maddie" are two further first rate examples.

This journal not only appears to serve its community well but should be of particular interest to Canadian historians. Australia may be, to some, a distant and exotic clime but its history is broadly similar to Canada's. The parallels are obvious perhaps and have been underscored fullsomely by Palmer Patterson in his *History of the Indians of Canada*. Both were aboriginal homelands colonized by the progressive Anglo Saxon with his beehive industriousness. Both were the scene of the creation of Victorian England overseas. In each the native people faced dispossession by agriculturalists, the despoliation of their environment by resource development, the onslaught of evangelical protestantism, political colonization, economic irrelevance, poverty, the tragedy of urbanization and the loss of culture. In both the native people suffered the failed protection of the Imperial government and the neglectful self interest of national and local governments. This broadly similar historical conformation moves the work of Australian ethnohistorians from the category of casual interest to critical relevance.

The Australian historical parallel has produced both general approaches and narrower concentrations which are directly parallel to those of Canadian historians. Judging from the collection of articles in *Aboriginal History*, Australian and Canadian scholars alike have concentrated on the issue of contact. Articles adopting a philosophic, historiographic and comparative approach to the general phenomenon and articles which investigate specific contact episodes and contexts such as aborigines in the pearling, tobacco and pastoral industries highlight this focus. These are clearly parallel to the work of Arthur J. Ray and others on Indians in the fur trade and the more general periodized and regional contact work of such scholars as Cornelius Jaenen and Robin Fisher.

The parallels do not stop here. In both historical communities attention is devoted to the agents of directed culture change in the contact situation. Australian missionaries receive considerable and not unexpected inquiry in articles with not so unfamiliar sounding names - "How much food will there be in Heaven: Lutheran and Aborigines around Cooktown before 1900." In an article which appears to be unique in this area, the noted scholar W.E.H. Stanner and D. Barwick, a current editor of the journal, illustrate the nature of anthropological advice proffered to Australian governments.

In the Canadian school of native history many historians, Robert Suttées, David McNab and Douglas Leighton to mention only a few, have devoted their talents to the investigation of government policy. With extensive backgrounds in colonial and Imperial history they have specialized in the reaction of officialdom to the aboriginal fact. In Australia too, apparently, this topic is of considerable interest and the approach taken is similar. Studies have been conducted across a wide spectrum from specific pieces of legislation, the Native Labourers Protection Act of 1884, to the general issues of policy formation and government administration. Many of the conclusions reached are not so far removed from those of Canadian scholars as even the title of W.E.H. Stanner's article on the early history of New South Wales, "The History of Indifferences Thus Begins," attests one final example of the parallel situation will suffice. The contact situation produced a mixed blood population in both Canada and Australia. These "half castes" or "part-Aborigines" have been, as the Metis have been, an at once identifiable and invisible minority. Australian historians have applied themselves to the nature of the social structure of this cultural bridge and to the political struggle for recognition. In Canada the work of Antoine Lussier, Bruce Sealey and George F.G. Stanley highlight a similar preoccupation.

There are, on the basis of the historiographic testimony of *Aboriginal History*, differences of course. The theme of parallels can be taken too far. National histories and thus the work of national historians, are bound to have a unique character to some degree. Australia does, after all, stand out as the only British colony in which some form of native land rights was not recognized. Canadian treaty and land rights researchers looking for models of native understanding and behaviour in treaty bargaining situations will find no models in Australia. This lack is made up in two other areas where Australian historians appear to have taken the lead. First, these historians have focussed on particular

cultural sectors - beliefs, ceremonies or aspects of aboriginal value systems - and charted their change in the face of contact. Ritual ceremonies and art are only two examples of the many subjects which have received this treatment. This has rarely been attempted by Canadian historians who have tended to leave these vital areas to their colleagues in sociology and anthropology. Secondly, Australian historians have been somewhat more imaginative in testing aboriginal acculturation and cross cultural relations. In this vein the journal has published a study of the interaction between aborigines and the Army during the Second World War and one on professional aboriginal boxers which demonstrates as effectively as more traditional economic and political studies the universal oppression and exploitation of the aborigine.

Space prevents reviewing or making extensive comments on the articles which have been published to date. In addition, little would be accomplished by choosing one or two and reviewing them out of their natural historiographic context. Canadian historians can be the best judge of the quality and value of those which are parallel and thus arguably relevant to their particular field. A subscription to the journal would be a fruitful way of benefitting from an expanded circle of colleagues.

Some general final comments may be illuminating and cautionary. If *Aboriginal History*, which is unquestionably a journal of the highest professional standards, is also one which is a fair representation of the state of the historical art, then some general conclusions on that art can be made. There is evidence of a degree of immaturity. There are no evident historiographical debates on the basis of fully developed paradigms, no parallel to the positive intellectual push and shove engendered for example by Calvin Martin's concept of despiritualization. Australian historians seem to be plowing separate furrows that have not yet converged and thus the art seems to be in its early exploratory phase. The journal thus serves the important function, as all journals should, of pulling the results of this work together and broadening the horizons of its audience, and in cataloguing bibliographies and source materials in various specialized collections. It will in the future, hopefully, be able to assist in the creation of a more purposeful dialogue among scholars in this field. Also, the work being done is not aboriginal history in the complete sense. Except for a few articles which attempt to plumb the depths of pre-contact culture, the histories produced position the aborigine as the object rather than the subject of the study. Too often aboriginal history is merely a facet of white colonization. The historian writes from the outer boundaries of the culture looking in rather than from the centre of the culture looking out. Studies of missionization and government policy are no doubt useful and are a nourishing part of a general historical diet. But tribal and cultural histories should be the main course.

These final and somewhat negative comments should not be construed as the basis for a Canadian historical smugness. For is it not possible that some Australian scholar surveying the result of Canadian efforts could characterize our art in similar terms? We have much to learn from each other and *Aboriginal History* appears an excellent channel of knowledge, inspiration and a model for Canadian work in many areas of native history.

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**THE PEMMICAN JOURNAL**

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The *Pemmican Journal* came into being in the autumn of 1981. Published by Pemmican Publications of Winnipeg, Manitoba, this quarterly "is intended to be first and foremost about Metis people," past and present, although some attention is devoted to other native groups. True to its prospectus, outlined in the editorial of the first edition, the *Journal* characteristically features the positive aspects of Metis history and culture. While this sometimes entails caustic criticism of White society, for the most part such criticism is veiled or merely incidental to an upbeat story of native initiative and success. To the extent that there is a dominant theme, the main message of the Journal is pride in native ancestry and the ability of the Metis to make a positive contribution to both native and non-native societies.

Essentially, the *Journal* is intensely provincial. It was the expressed hope of the editors that content would expand beyond Manitoba "to cover the Metis people anywhere in Canada but especially throughout the prairie provinces," but this goal has been achieved only infrequently. The most recent edition (Winter, 1983), devoted to a readable and generally insightful analysis of native land claims across Canada, is largely uncharacteristic in its scope. On the whole, the *Journal* derives its inspiration and focus - and perhaps following - from the "Keystone Province," Manitoba, and to a far lesser extent from the West generally.

The first edition is not untypical of the literary style. There is a highly romanticized account of the Battle of Grand Coteau (1851) during which sixty-seven Metis staved off and seemingly unwitting some three thousand Sioux warriors. Historically, the event figured prominently in the "New Nation" identity of the Metis during the pro-rebellion days and the details are recounted as a source of modern-day inspiration and pride. Also included are feature stories on Francis McKay, whose wheel chair marathon from Northern Manitoba to Winnipeg is reminiscent of the feats of Terry Fox; Mary Richards, whose contribution to the Manitoban native community earned her one of the YWCA's Women of the Year awards; and Albert Ballantyne, who in 1981 captured the Manitoba twin crowns, King Trapper (The Pas Trapper's Festival) and Okinow of the North (Thompson Winter Fair). Especially indicative is the autobiographical narrative of a visit to Batoche by Dorine Thomas. Raised on distorted interpretations of history by Euro-Canadian writers, Dorine had had self-doubts about the meaning of being Metis. At Batoche, however, amid the celebration

of Metis Heritage Days, her identity was confirmed. As she put it,

This is the place where blood was spilled for freedom. This is the place where friendship and ideas meld [sic] individuals into one bloodline: Metis. This is the place where I found my answers. I am half-breed. I am proud.

In emphasizing what is laudable in the native community, the Journal makes an important contribution. It goes without saying that enduring stereotypes of the native represent a shameful injustice and that recognition of native achievement is long overdue. And yet the same emphasis makes the Journal somewhat one-dimensional and paints an opaque and incomplete picture of the native community. Although the editors proclaimed that they were "... not looking at the world through rose colored glasses and [would] at times be dealing with the problems of Metis people face," this has not meant critical comment on native society itself. One searches in vain for any hint of scandal in the native leadership, or of the deep-seated divisions between the Metis and non-status Indians in native organizations. Book reviews are singularly uncritical, especially where native authors are concerned. And seldom, if ever, are the negative features of native life highlighted beyond mere background information. A case in point is the treatment of George Ryga's acclaimed drama, "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" which played in Winnipeg for four weeks. Lengthy excerpts from the play are cited in order to underline the appalling conditions of native life in Canadian cities - tormenting discrimination, drug abuse, crime, suicide - but all of this is little more than staging for the main point of the feature: the fact of an all-native cast, the hope held out to other native actors, and the personal triumphs of the leads, Margo Kane and Erroll Kinistino.

The *Journal's* literary thrust is both understandable and necessary to its purpose. It aims at a general rather than an academic reading public and its positive approach, for natives and non-natives alike, makes an important statement about Metis ethnicity and native awareness. Remarkably, it does so without creating idealized stereotypes. There is no attempt to transmute modern-day heroes into mythological visionaries or romantic idols. What is highlighted is native success and identity - both of which, it is recognized, are often accomplished in a hostile environment and at great odds.

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: As this issue goes to press, we learn that *Pemmican Journal* may suspend publication this year, to be replaced by a new newspaper.]