

Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.

review by Laurie Meijer Drees

In the last decade, the main university presses in Canada have made increasing efforts to include Native histories in their repertoire. Kerry Abel's *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* is the second volume dealing with Native history published in the McGill-Queen's University Press Ethnic History series; the first was Ken Coates' volume on Native-White relations in the Yukon territory. The publication of these two books suggests McGill-Queen's Press wants to integrate Native history into the field of Canadian ethnic history.

Abel, an historian at Carleton University, sets out to write a sweeping academic history of the Dene from prehistoric times to the present. In her own words, the book "is an attempt to readjust the balance of historical writing"—to write a regional history of the north beginning with the people who have been there since ancient times: "the Dene" (p. x).

In Abel's view, her book neither represents a "traditional" history, nor an anthropological study. Abel also denies offering a new interpretive framework for understanding the history of the north; her aim is "not to prove or disprove particular theories of culture change or to establish or challenge models of social structures and functions" (p. x). Instead, the aim of the book is to "reconstruct" "how these northern people have been able to maintain a sense of cultural distinctiveness in the face of overwhelming economic, political, and cultural pressures" (p. xi). Consciously avoiding reference to models of culture change and social theory, Abel's central thesis holds that, over time, the Dene were able to maintain their culture by accommodating change.

*Drum Songs* is divided into eleven chapters in addition to a preface, an introduction, illustrations, tables and maps. Several interesting historic photographs are presented at the beginning of the volume, and the maps and tables are well integrated into the text of the book. Finally, the book also possesses a good general index, and the bibliography is substantive, though in need of updating.

Chapter 1 is a standard traditional approach to Dene "prehistory." It begins with the "origins" of the Dene in the Mackenzie-Western Subarctic region, and chronicles Dene life prior to direct European contact. The first chapter presents primarily linguistic and archeological evidence supporting standard theories of human origins in the subarctic, and suggests that the first human inhabitants resided in the Yukon area beginning 14,000 years

ago. Unfortunately, only towards the end of the chapter does the author attempt to integrate these scientific interpretations of Dene early history with Dene oral traditions. Despite the existence of much interesting writing on subarctic peoples and oral traditions (by Julie Cruickshank and Robin Ridington, among others), Abel uses only a small fraction of this information, and then only in cryptopositivistic attempts to correlate unique elements from the oral histories to dateable events.

Chapter 2 continues the description of Dene society on the "eve" of contact with Europeans. Its main focus is on Dene family life, hunting and fishing techniques, social structure and material culture. Most of the material for this discussion comes from the descriptions of various Subarctic peoples made by early European explorers, traders and missionaries, including Alexander Mackenzie, Samuel Hearne, and Fathers Morice and Pettitot. From the evidence of Dene society provided by these European sources, Abel speculates that flexibility and adaptability were "perhaps" central characteristics of Dene society (p. 18).

Chapters 3 through 5 discuss Dene involvement in the fur trade. Though Abel covers much important primary material in these chapters, her portrayal of Dene culture as flexible yet resistant to change is not only contradictory, but romanticized. According to Abel, the Dene were initially indirectly involved in the fur trade because the Hudson's Bay Company posts were distant from their homelands. Gradually, however, they were drawn into a trapping economy through their own middlemen and the encouragement of European traders. However, despite the inroads made by a foreign economy into Dene territory, Abel asserts that many Dene chose not to participate in the trade. They resisted manipulation by fur traders, according to Abel, and they "continued to prefer the *more leisurely life* of hunting, fishing, and gathering" (emphasis added) (p. 112). To suggest, without reference to Dene primary sources, that leisure figured in Dene economic considerations is not only highly suspect, it reflects a romantic interpretation of Dene culture.

Chapter 6 is perhaps the most substantive chapter in the book and deals with the effects of Christian missionaries on the Dene. Abel claims that the activities of the missionaries among the Dene in the nineteenth century have been misunderstood. Though the exact nature of this misunderstanding is not clarified by the author, Abel offers the interpretation that both the Anglican and the Catholic missions in the north accommodated their work to fit the lifeways of the Dene, rather than "encouraging culture change in an unrealistic and improbable direction" (p. 118). The Dene, in turn, responded to these strangers and their ideas by initially showing great interest in Christian teachings, but later adhering only to those elements

deemed most useful and practical to them. According to Abel, missionaries in the north did not cause significant change in Dene communities, and the Dene world view was not undermined "completely" because the Dene refused to "accept the European compartmentalization of various aspects of human endeavour, such as politics, economics, and religion" (p. 143). This is but one example of the type of cultural generalizations Abel uses to support the thesis of her book.

Chapters 7 to 11 survey the Dene's entry into the modern era. This is an era in northern and Dene history that is perhaps the most complex and least analyzed to date. These chapters focus on the changing economy of the north; Abel is concerned here with how the Dene remained distant from this southern-oriented, natural-resource-based economy and provides some interesting insights into the rise of the Dene as a political force in Canada. Throughout this discussion, Abel continues to emphasize the Dene's ability to remain flexible and adaptable in the face of incredible change brought on by increased government involvement in the north after the Second World War.

Abel has made an admirable attempt to write an all-encompassing regional history that involves the Dene. Her book is highly readable, is well organized and touches on many of the central issues that concern historians interested in Native origins in North America, fur trade history, mission history and aspects of Indian-government relations in the twentieth century. For the beginning student, the book serves as a basic introduction to standard issues in Native and northern history. On the other hand, its simplistic, positivistic and romantic undertones should serve to alert a more sophisticated reader to its shortcomings.

For an academic audience, the book is seriously deficient in a number of aspects. The book's first obvious weakness is its failure to deal substantively with related secondary literature. Many of the interpretations contained within the book are derived from other sources that are not acknowledged. Abel's system of footnoting recognizes primary sources almost exclusively, and the book does not orient readers to the complex academic perspectives that have evolved in the last ten years around the seemingly simple questions Abel purports to address. For example, in her discussion of the role of the Dene in the fur trade, no attempt is made to address the historiography that has emerged specifically around questions of Native involvement in the trade, either in the pre-modern or modern eras. Arthur Ray's *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Twentieth Century* is remarkably absent from these discussions, for example. As a result, the discussion remains shallow and limited to generalizations. This error of omission makes the chapters on the fur trade appear as if they were the first

and only ones written on the subject—a misleading appearance indeed.

A second, perhaps more serious, weakness of the book is its claim of presenting Dene perspectives when Dene sources are conspicuously limited if not completely absent. Though *Drum Songs* is not meant to be written according to the Dene definition of history (p. x), it *does* attempt to represent the Dene point of view. Abel offers a variety of Dene perspectives on issues ranging from their views on Treaties 8 and 11 to their perceptions of the value of mission schools and their ideas pertaining to game management. None of these discussions, however, acknowledges or references Dene sources, so Abel's claims are unsubstantiated. Does this author have a privileged perspective of the Dene collective mind? If not, what Dene sources contributed to her understanding of the Dene's views? Had Abel used existing historical methods to collect and document the views of her subjects, the book and its theses would have a great deal more credibility.

Thirdly, despite claims in the introduction that *Drum Songs* is not concerned with theories of culture change, social structure or developing new interpretive models, the thesis of the book focuses on the Dene and their historic ability to maintain their culture in the face of change. It is not clear to this reader how Abel justifies or can support such a thesis without reference to theories of culture, or even an explanation of the concept of cultural maintenance. Since there exists an extensive body of literature on the subject of cultural maintenance, it is surprising that Abel makes no specific reference to it. It appears that Abel's neo-conservative approach to history precludes the use of theory.

Finally, it is critical that the inclusion of *Drum Songs* in McGill-Queen's Ethnic History series be noted. McGill-Queen's also published a Native and Northern Studies series and it is surprising to this reader that *Drum Songs* was not published there. The decision to publish *Drum Songs* in this manner implies that this press, representing the academic standard, considers Native history to be ethnic history. Those concerned with Native history and its place within Canadian historiography will find such a view surprising; the publishers have unilaterally decided that First Nations' histories are comparable to those of Canada's other minorities. This seemingly innocent point of view belies other subtexts: that Native history can and will be integrated (assimilated?) into Canadian historiography without question, and that this "normalization" of Native history is desirable.

In conclusion, *Drum Songs* will likely appeal most to a general audience. It provides a variety of interesting comments on a range of issues, and gives a good overview of northern Canadian history. For an academic audience, however, the book is deficient. It is noteworthy that Abel has attempted to write a regional history of the north, including the Dene as the

main characters; however, the book's lack of sources undermines its conclusions. The result is that the reader is left, indeed, with only "Glimpses of Dene History."

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Robert Galois, *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements, 1775-1920: A Geographical Analysis and Gazetteer*, with contributions by Jay Powell and Gloria Cranmer Webster. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994.

review by Frank Tough

This is a large tome with a massive amount of information on Kwakwaka'wakw. It is also the first volume in UBC Press's Northwest Native Studies series. The book begins with contributions from Gloria Cranmer Webster and Jay Powell concerning the politics of research and the Kwakwaka'wakw language. Powell provides a very readable and terse explanation of Kwakwaka'wakw orthographies. This is required because Kwakwaka'wakw place names, as documented by oral traditions, ethnographies and written documentation, are central to understanding the Kwakwaka'wakw settlements. As an overview essay, Galois then provides an intricate account of Kwakwaka'wakw settlement patterns between 1775 and 1920. Considerable knowledge about the Northwest Coast and the specifics of the history of Aboriginal title in British Columbia is assumed. Readers will need to know the main contours of the maritime fur trade, who Douglas and Sproat were, the purposes of the McKenna-McBride Commission, etc. A detailed gazetteer, organized along regional lines, follows. The book also includes forty-eight pages of appendices (population data, abstracts from the voyages of Vancouver and Galiano, the Nahwitti incidents of 1850 and 1851, salmon canneries operating in Kwakwaka'wakw territory and place names in the U'mista Cultural Centre Orthography). The book includes sixty-one maps, nineteen tables and five other illustrations.

Most of the book (305 pages) is a gazetteer devoted to the reproduction and explanation of the Kwakwaka'wakw place names. The Kwakwaka'wakw gazetteer is organized by regional groupings of tribes (Gilford Island, Knight Inlet, Kwakiutl, Lekwiltok, Nahwitti, Nimpkish, Northern and Quatsino Sound). Each site located by Galois has been assigned a bold-face alphanumeric designation. Histories and descriptions of the sites are also provided. The gazetteer includes information on English and Kwakwaka'wakw place names, the general location of the site, survey information if the site became a reserve or if the site was requested. In each