
Review by D.N. Sprague, University of Manitoba

According to the great guy theory of historiography, fields open, develop, and advance. They progress. And the rate of the supposed progress of a field depends largely upon the guys with the seminal power over the subject. Upon their passing, students, pals, and colleagues huddle to compile “essays in honour of” attesting to the greatness of the guy just passed, the current greatness of the field he did so much to develop, and the bright prospects for his legacy in the future. Such is this work: From Rupert's Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster.

To give the collection the appearance of rationality, the editors have divided its content into three sections: one on fur trade history, another on Metis History, a third to document the impact of the “linguistic turn” upon the understanding of native studies in the western Canadian context. Each opens with an historiographical essay premised on the supposition that Foster, his friends and relations, have built—-are building—a great edifice one solid little brick at a time rising ever higher towards comprehension in full. According to Michael Payne, the author of the inventory of the fur trade stuff, all is well and getting better: “enriched ... interesting ... complex and nuanced.” Frits Pannekoek writes in a similar tone of celebration about the “virtual explosion of interest” in Metis history, suggesting that the “future in Metis studies lies ... in determining the roots of the new Metis consciousness of today” (p. 116), then backs away from that affirmation with the statement that “where Metis studies will head in the next decades is not certain.” (p. 121) Gerald Friesen, however, the author of the third survey of the attainments and gaps would seem to suggest that “poststructural approaches” are the rising “concern”. His identified topic is the “imagined west” (whatever this means) but his brief affirmations could be about the imaginary fur trade or the imaginary Indian or the imaginary Metis just as easily.

Judging by most of the article-length research reports sandwiched between the historiographical inventories, more serious cerebral activity is needed. If these essays provide a fair sample of the current range and depth of these branches of western Canadian studies, the inescapable
Boo! Readell's conclusion is that the field tends towards excessive detail, avoidance of theory, and an anti-critical bias with respect to any and all institutions of the economy and state. These essays contribute little towards answering the key question implicit in the covering title—the question of the social cost of the transition from Rupert's Land to Canada. Who were the villains? Who were the victims? In these essays there are none.

Though it is admitted that the transition was not easy, and in certain identified cases the pain was great, the collection suffers greatly from what Bryan Palmer has identified recently as the regrettable silences of contemporary Canadian historiography in general. Attempting to do honour to Foster, his former students, colleagues, and pals say by their complacent contentment that all is well, and heap even greater praise upon themselves. The only criticism is of the critics: Frank Tough, in muted tones, because he is "very critical of approaches to fur trade history that apply notions of partnership and the autonomy of Aboriginal producers of furs" (p. 11) and of Doug Sprague because he argues that the Canadian state was fully implicated in the marginalization of original inhabitants after 1870. The new consensus it that Aboriginal people did it to themselves. "No text [other than Tough's or Sprague's] is scrutinized with even a gesture towards a critical question. There is no contention here. None!"


Review by Alex R. McLean, University of Saskatchewan

This anthology contains the collected papers delivered at a conference held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1997. The conference aimed to illuminate the concepts of citizenship, diversity, and pluralism and to offer alternatives for policy-makers to consider. This volume addresses some