

BOOK REVIEWS AND REVIEW ESSAYS

Peter C. Newman: *Company of Adventurers*. Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985. 413 pages.

My first introduction to Peter C. Newman's Company of Adventurers appeared in the Globe and Mail on October 19, 1985. Covering almost an entire page was a story entitled "A Daily Struggle by a Frozen Sea," the first of two promotional excerpts.¹ I must admit, the excerpt was impressive. In fine narrative style interspersed with graphic anecdotes Newman took his reader back in time to the hardships of everyday life at the Company posts along the bay. Visions of the frost-lined, drafty cabins housing far too many arthritic men for comfort elicited pangs of sympathy. The huge amounts of food and alcohol consumed by these fortuitous men appeared inconsequential in light of the daily struggle they endured for sheer survival.

Until now the history of the fur trade and the Hudson's Bay Company received the attention of a handful of scholars and other interested folk. Confined to the dry, rigid, scientific style considered necessary to establish scholastic credibility, historians have inadvertently reduced public access to the fruits of their labour. Newman's stylistic flair promised to provide 'non-academic' readers greater access to this fascinating feature of Canadian history. Furthermore, though lacking the finer qualities and techniques requisite in academic historic works (like proper footnote citations and critical analysis, to name just a few), the excerpt could not be considered horribly offensive to the more sensitive reader of historical literature. In anticipation I awaited the publication of the second excerpt.

"Company Men and Indian Women": the title alone stirred my intrigue! As I read, though, my elation was quickly overcome by both professional and personal disgust. The excerpt was loaded with detailed accounts of naked orgies, prostitution, disease,

and general havoc brought on by alluring uninhibited women who appeared to be habitually "asking some lonely fur trader to dry his britches in front of their tepee fire." Being suddenly surrounded by "attractive tawny-skinned women willing and proud to express their uninhibited sexuality" was far too much to resist for these weak-kneed men, especially in the wake of their recent liberation from the confines of their stern Presbyterian parentage.² Even more striking was his sympathetic and candidly sexist condonement of the moral 'degeneration' of the moral character of Indian women, and both Indian and company men.

What was the author and publisher's purpose in using this, of all passages, to promote the sale of the book? Do Penguin Books of Canada Ltd. and Peter C. Newman consider the above what history is all about? Clearly, the readers to which it would appeal are not serious historians or other academics or, for that matter, women, and least of all Indian women. In this instance it appears that the publishers and author of Company of Adventurers were appealing to that portion of the male heterosexual readership that indulges in fantasies of being surrounded by sexually verbose "tawny-skinned" women. The (male) reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement, for example, found this aspect of Newman's book quite appealing:

Newman is also fascinating on sex, and should have let his instincts run freer when writing of miscegenation ... His journalistic imagination and scarcely unbridled zest for the subject make one hope that he will treat the question of Arctic sexuality at greater length and without inhibition in later volumes of the series. ³

In stark contrast to the above, Marlyn Kane, president of the Native Women's Association of Canada, denounced Newman's treatment of Indian women in the excerpt as "racist and sexist" and "bordering on pornography." Reacting strongly to the closing paragraph which portrayed Indian women as solicitous nymphomaniacs, Kane stated that it "suggests that my grandmothers just wouldn't let a fur trader walk by her dwelling without tempting him to come in, and I just refuse to believe that that's the way it was."⁴ If Newman unbridled his imaginative zest any further on the subject, it might well deserve an entire volume of its own, wrapped in plastic.

By this point I was confident that Newman's rendition of the history of the Hudson's Bay Company would be distorted. His "journalistic imagination" would no doubt reflect his biases and in turn his interpretations would lack any semblance of scholastic credibility. Nevertheless, my protective sense of historical accuracy urgently demanded that I keep informed on what the followers of popular history were reading: what eventually over 135,000 readers (as of June 1986) would come to understand as the history of the Hudson's Bay Company fur trade in Canada.

Like many standard works on the history of the Bay, Newman's book chronicles its creation story and introduces the reader to Charles II, Prince Rupert, Radisson and Groseilliers ("Radishes and Gooseberries"), and to the more prominent factors, including traders, explorers, Indians and the beaver. Profound historical events like the battles on the bay between the French and English and the exploration journeys in search of the Northwest Passage also occupy their rightful place in Newman's story. While his passing, disappointingly weak treatment of the momentous merger of the Northwest and Hudson's Bay companies is disturbing, it is not Newman's tally of historical events that sets his work apart from other fur trade histories. Rather, he sets himself apart by his distorted, sensational interpretation of fur trade social relations. Newman's commitment to titillation causes serious historians (and Indian women) to shudder: obsolete interpretations are revived and stereotypes are given new life.

Newman's richly visible prose in many instances leaves misleading and erroneous images in the mind of his reader. He creates at least four very distorted impressions of fur trade social relations: that the Company on the bay reigned all-powerful; that all Company men were sexist racists; that relations between Company men and Indian women were only promiscuous sexual encounters; and that Indian women made no substantial contribution to the fur trade. For example, one's first impression from the first sentence in chapter one is of Company men along the bay "toiling for furs," "building their

toy forts" and "Lording it over a new continent" while "seducing the Indian maidens they playfully called their 'bits of brown'."⁶

In truth, post factors and their motley crews of traders, gunsmiths and labourers were hardly in any position to 'lord' over their respective plantations, let alone the immense region defined as Rupert's Land. For the first century or so Company men seldom ventured beyond the immediate vicinity of the posts and were dependent on Indians for food and clothing supplies, to bring in furs and to extend the reach of Company trade to untapped regions.

The phrase 'bits of brown' was brought into use by Governor George Simpson in the 1820s. Simpson is well-known for his extreme racist and sexist views and while his attitude spread among the company elite,⁷ it was far less pervasive among the Company working class. By presenting the views of a few members of the Company elite at a specific point in time as pervasive views of Company men for the entire period under study, Newman has injuriously distorted the views of Company men towards Indian women.

Recent studies by Jennifer Brown, Sylvia Van Kirk and others have demonstrated that sexual relations between Indian women and Company men were not normally "casual promiscuous encounters."⁸ Rather, they were marriages "a la facon du pays,"⁹ many of which "developed into lasting and devoted unions." By sensationalizing and overemphasizing the extremist activities and views of Simpson and his close colleagues, Newman denigrates the more prevalent affectionate relationships between Company men and Indian women. Regard for the health and welfare of country families after the departure or death of company spouses and fathers was often expressed in directives or wills which provided for a portion of their expenses and keep. The Company itself even attempted to establish schools for Native born children, and until London prevented its continuance a few men returned permanently to England or Scotland with their Native families. Newman omits, overlooks, or hardly mentions (except in passing) these and other expressions of genuine familial

attachments and obligations many Company men had towards their Native families.

Newman distorts the role of Indian women in the fur trade by overemphasizing their role as sexual beings and understating their socio-economic and political role. In doing so he also leaves the reader with two contradictory images. On the one hand he states that relations between the two sexes "had little to do with business." On the other, he outlines a few of the important tasks women performed which are by definition economically sound: producing country products and provisions, teaching bush survival skills, interpreting, and "on the most elemental level [providing] cheap scalp insurance."¹⁰ This contradiction is left unresolved despite the fact that the author purports to rely heavily on the works of Sylvia Van Kirk. In Many Tender Ties, Van Kirk successfully demonstrates that women had an important social and economic role which "mitigated against" their being simply "object[s] of sexual exploitation."¹¹ On this point, as with many others where Indian women are concerned, Newman decidedly differs; he insists on perpetuating many of the myths which more qualified studies have successfully dispelled. In a few paragraphs following a descriptive orgy scene and preceding a discussion on the informal "discarding" of Indian mates by white traders, Newman tossed in a few of the aforementioned points from Van Kirk's book. The quotes not only appear out of context, they seem to have no other purpose than to weakly provide scholastic credibility and to give the reader a break before carrying on in his otherwise lurid fashion.

By underemphasizing the socio-economic role of women and the importance and depth of social relations in the fur trade, Newman also exhibits his lack of appreciation for the "personal labour relations" which characterize pre-industrial capitalist activities. A bond of reciprocal obligation between local Indian workers (trappers and provisioners) and the Company developed,¹² and the posts became social entities as well as places of work.¹³ In the case of the Home Guard Cree,

seasonally inactive Indian workers and their families were provided with relief during hard times. When Indian workers were away from the posts gathering furs or provisions, their sick, aged, and sometimes their immediate families remained behind and were provided for. Since the nature of the trade required Indian workers on a seasonal basis and as there was no surplus labour force, the Company was obligated to assume certain overhead costs of employee sustenance in exchange for a loyal and efficient labour force. Indian women residing around or within posts, though, were not merely recipients of paternalistic welfare relief: they performed the many valuable economic tasks previously mentioned, and provided familial comfort to Company men.

During the past one and a half decades, Canadian historians have taken on the arduous task of reassessing and rewriting histories which proved to possess racist, sexist and otherwise prejudicial and subjective distortions. Two sub-fields in the discipline which have burgeoned of late are the histories of women and Native North Americans. Specialized and more thorough studies go beyond conventional Eurocentric male interpretations. They strive to capture the world views, cultural norms, and ways of life from within the cultural and genderal context of their subjects. Only just recently have studies of this nature established a foothold in scholastic circles. Sadly, they have not yet found their way onto popular bookshelves. Newman's assertion that academic criticisms of his book are simply jealous attacks against an outside interloper,¹⁴ although delusive, does hold a grain of truth: Newman's work is accessible to the public at large while the fruits of academic labour are not. If popular literature like Newman's book provides the only link between our past and contemporary readers, and if historians find much of it unacceptable, then we have only two choices: either we shut-up or else we start writing our histories for the general Canadian readership and not just for each other.

NOTES

1 Peter C. Newman, "A Daily Struggle by a Frozen Sea," Globe and Mail, October 19, 1985, A10.

2 Peter C. Newman, "Company Men and Indian Women," Globe and Mail, October 21, 1985, A7.

3 Richard Davenport-Hines, "Caesars of the Arctic," Times Literary Supplement, May 23, 1986.

4 "Newman book called slur on Native women," Globe and Mail, October 23, 1985, A8.

5 Peter C. Newman, Company of Adventurers, (Markham, Ont.: Penguin Books of Canada Ltd., 1985), p. 61.

6 Ibid., p. 1.

7 For a more thorough discussion on the rise of racism and class consciousness in fur trade society see: Sylvia Van Kirk, Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870 (Winnipeg, Man.: Watson and Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980) and "What if Mama was an Indian': The Cultural Ambivalence of the Alexander Ross Family," in John Foster, ed., The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honour of Lewis H. Thomas (Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1983); Fritz Pannekoek, "The Reverend Griffiths Owen Corbett and the Red River Civil War of 1869-70," The Canadian Historical Review, 57, No. 2, (1976): 133-149; Jennifer Brown, "Changing Views of Fur Trade Marriage and Domesticity: James Hargrave, His Colleagues and 'The Sex'," Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology, 6, No. 3, (1976): 92-105, and Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Families in Indian Country (Vancouver, B.C.: University of BC Press, 1980).

8 Van Kirk, Many Tender Ties, p. 4.

9 Ibid., p. 33.

10 Newman, Company, p. 202.

11 Van Kirk, Many Tender Ties, p. 4.

12 Paul Phillips "Introduction," in Clare H. Pentland, Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860, (Toronto, Ontario: James Lorimer and Company, Publishers, 1981), p. xxvi.

13 Brown, Strangers, p. 19.

14 "This is a standard academic attack on popular historians. Every time Pierre Berton or anyone else like that moves in on their territory, they complain," quoted in William French, "HBC history has scholars up in arms," Globe and Mail, July 8, 1986, A12.