

R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson, editors: Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986. 542 pages.

The new text on Canadian Native peoples edited by Bruce Morrison and Roderick Wilson starts with a question about how well Canadians today, Euro-Canadian or Native, understand Native societies, concluding that there is not a sensitive or complete understanding of Native genesis, Native reality, from yesterday to today. To ameliorate this situation, they offer a series of descriptive and theoretical chapters about Canadian Native groups. In spite of the recent blossoming of works in Canadian Native Studies, most standard texts on North American Indians lack a substantive Canadian focus. The editors and authors of Native Peoples provide a comprehensive reference text for Native peoples in the prehistoric, early historic, and historic periods, filling a need for an updated text which covers this breadth of experience.

Texts which set out to be representative of a nation or continent of Aboriginal peoples often run the risk of being trait lists of features found in each circumscribed area. The authors of this book successfully avoid this trap, for, more than anything else, the pages portray the vivid wealth of human living in all its variation and detail. The reader cannot help but acquire an appreciation for the deeply-connected complexity of Native lives as they have developed to the present. All aspects of their societies--habitat, language, economy, cultural expression, social institutions, political will--receive some coverage. Native Peoples is also an anthropology text. Although respect is given to aboriginal perspectives, the insights are primarily ethnological. The varied theoretical perspectives are presented with anthropological currency; most of the contributors have anthropological backgrounds; the terminology is disciplinary; and, importantly, the general interpretive



frameworks are paradigmatic in anthropological treatments of North American Indians.

The editors open the volume with a statement about the approach of the book, and about the general relationships between anthropologists and Native people which have affected the way data have been collected and interpreted. They also introduce the concept of the culture area, the basic organizational and analytic feature of the presentation. A chapter on linguistics, and two chapters on prehistory (Canadian and Arctic)--all oriented to Canadian Native people--follow. The remainder of the chapters by contributors are grouped into seven culture areas: the Eskaleuts, the Eastern Subarctic, the Western Subarctic, the Eastern Woodlands, the Plains, the Plateau, and the Northwest Coast. Each of these sections is preceded by a regional overview summarizing features of geography and history in the culture area.

As a text, the references in the contributed articles are not fully cited, but all contributors have provided lists of recommended readings on the topics or groups described. The editors provide a concluding chapter which attempts to link historic legacies with the present through a discussion of social, economic, and political change. An abbreviated glossary contains a selection of standard ethnographic terms. The maps and charts incorporated into the texts provide valuable aids to comprehension, and the inclusion of historic photographs, in spite of inconsistent quality of reproduction, adds vitality.

The editors assert that the book is not meant to be, cannot be, encyclopedic of Aboriginal peoples. The objectives they have set for the text are not those of descriptive inclusiveness, or of the abstract validity of that description. Morrison and Wilson 'assert' three points. First, each society should be understood in its own terms (cultural relativity). Second, the development of the Native societies of today cannot be explicated entirely in the isolation of relativity; analysis must account for the nature of the relationship with Canadian society, such as legislative status, evolved policy, or economic



class relations. Third, accounts of Native societies by anthropologists are interpretations, not bare descriptions of empirical facts and traits.

All three of these points are broadly accepted in the discipline today. Cultural relativity, in spite of its critics, is still an underpinning of method and theory. Cultures are no longer treated as isolates in time and space. Recent critiques of participant-observation stress the absurdity of a search for objective replication of an empirical world. Many accept, in modified forms, the counter-thrusts of the phenomenologists and the hermeneuticists toward the intersubjective creation of knowledge in dialogue, and few would deny the critical human factor of interpretation in what we know of aboriginal people today. Since the text is supposed to be creditable to the reader without anthropological education, these points need to be stated because, first, failure to recognize them has led to many stereotypes and false myths about Native people; and, second, they provide necessary pillars for understanding the assessments of theory and method presented throughout the book.

For the most part, the books succeeds in substantiating these objectives. Cultural phenomena are given an internal rationale from within the society. Some chapters offer, for example, accounts of creation given by the Native people themselves, stating, but not judging, a truth alternative to science dogma. And, since most contributors use some version of chronological presentation, the interaction with Euro-Canadian societies is inevitably treated. Indeed, the authors successfully and purposefully point out the unique dynamics of this relationship for each group or tribe.

But the most singular, if fragmented, accomplishment comes with addressing the third objective. Each author is asked to inform the readers of his own dynamic, her own relationship with the group described. Each is also encouraged to emphasize his/her research specialties. The result is consistent attention to the 'how' and 'why' of knowledge. The editors explain why, although culture areas are useful analytic frames, their



constituent boundaries should not be taken too literally. And, in their concluding chapter, they warn readers against use of social statistics out of context. Most authors in the text, certainly, offer cautious interpretations of historic, linguistic, and cultural evidence, repeatedly warning the reader against unsubstantiated generalizations even within societies and the biases of much primary reporting by missionaries, traders, and even other scientists. Some explain at length processes of primary field interpretation and secondary classification, analysis, and hypothesis-testing. Although the text offers little explanation of field methods *per se*, the reader is likely to emerge from the chapters with a sense of how the anthropologist, as perfect scientist and fallible human, arrives at the kind of comprehension of culture that he does.

There are other notable features of scope and approach. For example, the Metis are, for once, included as Native people, although only the Red River Plains Metis are described in detail. Because the authors seek to debunk common anthropological and popular over-generalizations about various groups, and because the text uses a geographic focus for analysis, there is consistent attention to micro-environmental adaptation. The writers stress that within an area, within even the geographic range of functioning band societies, there may be sufficient environmental variation to give rise, by micro-evolution, to variant historic cultures.

Some of the most positive features of Native peoples can, however, become also a source of weakness for the text as a whole. The use of theory is one of the most problematic aspects of the volume. According to the introduction, each contributor was to incorporate one theoretical perspective in his/her selection. In actuality, theory is either non-existent, or deeply embedded, in some selections, and pedantic in others. Some selections would be easily followed by a first-year student, while others suggest more theoretical sophistication in interpretive frames such as hermeneutics. A few, such as the chapter on Canadian prehistory, might require some familiarity



with terminology and presentation. Some contributors aptly place their perspective in a framework of theoretical debate, but in other cases the reader could be misled to believe that the interpretation suggested is the only widely accepted one. Since the text is meant to be used by readers outside the discipline also, the omissions and presumptions of theory present a problem.

Although education in theory is not an objective of the book, its didactic use throughout makes one wonder if the book is indeed primarily about Native people, or is intended as disciplinary instruction. The two functions do not nicely integrate with each other; this makes it difficult to see the rationale for use of particular theories in particular instances. Because of this, the reader is given little means for classification and comparison. Historical and political presentations vary considerably, although to some extent this is reflective of disparate historic experiences of Native people across the country. Some chapters use classic 'ethnographic present' descriptions; others focus on social change. History may be a superficial listing of sequences, or a depth analysis of process. The same is true for political organization. As is now true in anthropology, each author uses his own categories of political analysis for aboriginal societal forms, making comparisons difficult. While two selections emphasize current political activity among Native people and its impact on culture and economy (Eastern Cree and Slavey), others note the existence of indigenous organizations only as an afterthought.

The regional overviews are intended to make some generalizations for each culture area, and most succeed in doing so. But the focus is different for each: we learn about Inuit language, eastern Subarctic environmental modelling, and the restrictions of Plains Indian stereotypes. Perhaps if each overview had, at least in part, mentioned the same kinds of features of geography, economy, and history, comparison would be enhanced. All in all, the emphases on variation in adaptation are the strengths of the authors, and, in one sense, are the



strengths of the book, but they limit its comprehensive, comparative, and multidisciplinary use. Perhaps this latter is the task of the instructor: molding the text to her own class needs.

Part of the problem relates to representivity. Since no text can be all-inclusive, each must have some criteria by which some features, or peoples, are selected and some are not. The editors of Native Peoples argue that the chapters are representative of Native peoples, but they provide no rationale for selection other than, one can assume, the interests and reputations of the contributors. Since filtering and generalization are inevitable in any text, particularly one which incorporates the hypotheses of theory, the editors and authors must be wary of the juxtaposition of the general and the particular: the objectives demand both, but their relationship is not clear. Why, for example, are the eastern Cree again singled out as representative of all bush-dwelling Cree, while the western Swampy and Woods Cree are given no clear place in either the eastern or western subarctic? To some extent this is a problem of culture area classifications: the migration and adaptation of Cree into three areas reveals the invisibility of borders.

In sum, Native Peoples provides a much-needed resource in the anthropological study of Aboriginal peoples in this country. The substantive contributions lend insight into the complexity, vibrance, and continuity of Native life through many clearly written and vivid selections. Its material, although not always well-integrated within the volume, can be fitted by instructors into a variety of descriptive and theoretical models. It provides many examples of anthropological process, and can be used as a reference book by any student of Canadian Native peoples. Like Canadian Native peoples themselves, the text has a deep-rooted unifying heritage--in this case in the anthropological mind--but it reveals divergent paths to cultural truth.