

Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900, by Sarah Carter. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. 195.

The history of Canada's Aboriginal peoples is a rapidly growing and contentious field of study and, in *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada*, Sarah Carter synthesizes the recent scholarship on Native/White relations for the area that would become the Prairie Provinces. In this book Carter examines themes such as the impact of European diseases, changing interpretations of fur trade interaction, the Red River settlement as a cultural crossroad, missionaries, treaties, the disappearance of the buffalo, the North-West Mounted Police, and Canadian "Indian" policy. She outlines the debates that have arisen on these topics and attempts to explain them to the non-specialist reader. As such, the book should find a niche as a text for introductory Native history courses, but as a general synthesis it is too brief and uneven.

Sarah Carter, the author of previous studies on Treaty 7 and prairie reserve farming, states that her goals in writing this survey were to highlight new approaches and interpretations focussing on two central debates: that of Native agency, and the motivation of Aboriginal peoples of the past. She quite effectively recasts Natives as "active agents" in their own history with strategies and interests which they rigorously pursued, and she explains these strategies in the context of the debate between "romantic" (cultural relativism) and "rationalistic" (universal self-interest) explanations. The real theme, or moral nexus of the book, is her assertion that there were occasions and opportunities prior to 1900 when Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals could have established a progressive partnership—that Western Canada could and should have been a "common ground" (13), where a mingling of customs, laws, technology, and material culture established a "common world" (34, 131–32). As proof of this possibility, Carter claims that in the early years of extensive settlement the host Aboriginal people and the newly arrived settlers learned from and required the assistance of one another. Whether or not this type of cultural pluralism was even desired by western Aboriginals, Carter places the blame for the failure of this vision wholly on the shoulders of the Canadian government whose policies and attitudes ploughed up a fertile "middle ground." Consequently, the second half of this study reverts to portraying Natives as victims.

Carter's argument for the demise of this "common world" also has a number of distorting effects on the book. Of the approximate 160 pages of text that deal with more than 200 years of history, almost half are devoted to the thirty-year period after 1870 when Canada acquired Rupert's Land. As well, most of the analysis of Native/White relations after 1870 focusses on the southern prairies where the Canadian state was most pervasive. There is almost no coverage of northern Natives (2 pages), and Sitting Bull's four-year sojourn in Canada receives more coverage (3 pages) than Treaty 8 negotiated in Northern Alberta in 1899 (one paragraph).

Given the disproportionate amount of space allotted to the period from 1870 to 1900, it is somewhat ironic that the period prior to 1870 is examined in a more balanced manner. Carter provides a good summary of the recent critiques of exploration literature as deliberately constructed intellectual strategies for gaining possession of and symbolic dominance over non-European space, and her account of Aboriginal/European interaction in the fur trade succinctly summarizes the recent

work in the field: the fur trade as a socio-cultural complex that produced an indigenous society, the ethnogenesis of the Metis, the role of Native women, and the great diversity of Native involvement in this fur-trade nexus. If there is a weakness in these early chapters of the book it is that Carter spends very little time examining inter-tribal and inter-band diplomacy and dynamics. In her chapter on change and continuity on the plains prior to large-scale white settlement, Carter states that the Cree and Blackfoot peoples maintained their independence despite experiencing great change and severe crises, but she says almost nothing of shifting Native alliances, expansion, and warfare. It is as though conflict and contestation can only exist between Aboriginals and European colonizers. This blind spot is most apparent in the discussion of the demise of the buffalo, which was the life staff of the plains peoples. Carter summarizes most of the current explanations regarding the destruction of the bison herds (disease, drought, habitat degradation and competition, and overhunting for the market), but she particularly focusses on European contributions to the slaughter (hide hunters and the actions of the U.S. Military) and downplays Native overhunting, quoting Richard White to the effect that if Natives did overhunt they did so "within the context of a moral universe that both they and the animals inhabited" (99). Throughout this discussion Carter relies almost solely on American historiography, ignoring the work of John Foster who has suggested the Blackfoot, Sarcee, Cree, and Metis pursued the buffalo to the brink of extinction on the Canadian plains because consumerism had become institutionalized in their cultures after the mid-nineteenth century.

If the first half of the book is generally fair in its coverage of the main themes identified, and clearly explains the historical debates that have arisen, the second half of the book, which covers the period after 1870, reads like a morality play. For the most part Carter summarizes the historical debates of this latter period clearly, but she introduces the questions under discussion in such a manner as to leave no doubt what the "correct" interpretation should be. The debate over the causes of the Metis dispersal from Manitoba after 1870 is introduced by stating (incorrectly) that by 1882 the Metis "had been allotted less than 600,000 acres of the 1.4 million acres promised, and the rest was diverted to speculators" (109), implying that the dispersal of the Metis was the result of some governmental sleight of hand. Whatever one's views of speculators, the 1.4 million acres of Metis land could not end up in the hands of speculators prior to allocation of this land to Metis children.

The debate over the causes of the 1885 Riel Rebellion is likewise prefigured by Carter's statement that prior to the Rebellion the Metis had only been told "that they were to be enumerated, and that the greatest generosity that they could expect was a chance to purchase what they believed they already owned" (154). In fact, it was clear as early as 1884 that the Metis could claim lands they were living on as homesteads, and in January of 1885 an order-in-council authorized a commission to enumerate the Metis of the North West with a view to settling their land claims. It is certainly open to debate how the Metis perceived these late initiatives of the Federal government, but it was obvious that they could expect more than to purchase the lands on which they lived. These and other statements skew any balanced evaluation of the debate that follows.

The numbered treaties, negotiated in the Canadian west between 1871 and

1877, are dealt with in some detail but on this topic Carter does not bother to introduce the debates that have arisen among historians; instead she contrasts the governmental perspective at treaty time with that of Native oral traditions as projected back in time. However useful this perspective may be, the author does little to indicate how historians have dealt with these issues in the recent past, leaving the impression that all historians fall either into the "government" camp or that of the First Nations.

The strong suit of the book is that it covers a great deal of ground succinctly and summarizes current debates, but given its unbalanced coverage and moralistic tone, the non-specialist reader is still better off reading Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies*.

Gerhard J. Ens
Department of History and Classics
University of Alberta



Indian Fall: The Last Great Days of the Plains Cree and Blackfoot Confederacy, by D'Arcy Jenish. Toronto: Viking. 1999. Pp. 341.

The seed for the stories in *Indian Fall* was planted in the late 1950s, near a windy, tumbleweed town in southern Saskatchewan. It took root in an unlikely place: the fertile mind of a boy named D'Arcy Jenish, now a well-known Canadian journalist. The book begins on a day long ago, when Jenish remembers "standing amid tepee rings ... on the virgin prairie." The "circular patterns" in this image seem to inform every aspect of his book *Indian Fall*, which is about the history of the Plains Cree and Blackfoot Confederacy. The stories therein span almost a century, beginning before and ending not long after European settlement on this continent.

The image of the circle, which has been such a durable symbol for First Nation peoples, pervades the text of *Indian Fall*. While its shape represents all that is essential to native culture—inclusiveness, wholeness, balance and connectedness—its movement is also evoked in the narrative practices of First Nation storytellers. Anyone familiar with the plot structures of this form will know that the action in these multi-planar stories moves backwards and forwards in time. This feature of storytelling reflects the First Nation belief that past and present inform each other and that everything is connected. Of course, this makes *listening* to such stories very challenging indeed. So audiences are well-advised to know that the *form* of such a story has purpose and that that aspect of it is as important as its characters, setting and plot.

I draw attention to the form of native storytelling because Jenish seems to use it in *Indian Fall*. The stories about the four great plains chiefs, known as *Kísikowâsân*, *Mistahi Maskwa*, *Astohkomi* and *Pihtokahânapiwiyin*, are circuitously ordered and interwoven with each other in the text in a manner that emulates the form of this tradition of First Nation storytelling.

Indian Fall opens with two maps illustrating the extent to which white settlement on the plains affected the lives of aboriginal tribes, before and after 1875. The introduction which follows, entitled *Dominion Over All*, tells us why Jenish