

"Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains"

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Ted Binnema's *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001) may be the most important book on the Aboriginal history of western Canada since the publication of Dale Russell's *Eighteenth Century Cree and their Neighbours*¹ fifteen years ago. Binnema's synthesis of human and environmental change spanning more than a thousand years of northwestern plains history, though perhaps inspired by Howard Meredith's *Dancing on Common Ground: Tribal Cultures and Alliances on the Southern Plains*,² is truly innovative in Canadian scholarship. In addition, he has provided a detailed account of the shifting political and military situation in the eighteenth century, a period when horses, the fur trade, and smallpox reached the region. What makes *Common and Contested Ground* significant is its approach. It is the first work of history on the Canadian plains to truly ground its subjects on the changing landscape. Instead of an ethnohistory dealing solely with cultural phenomena, Binnema has accorded the physical environment the weight it deserves when examining the human history of the northwestern plains. By taking a balanced regional approach, he has demonstrated why some groups prevailed as others declined. *Common and Contested Ground* is the first historical work to seriously consider the role of long-term environmental change in the development of societies on the Canadian plains. Binnema rightly draws the connection between historical change among the hunting and gathering societies on the northwestern plains and the impact of climatic variability. Climatic forces have become increasingly recognized as an agent of societal change. The recent publication of Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* has introduced climate change as an historical force to a mass audience.³ Before the arrival of the Europeans, germs, goods, and market economy, climatic variability was the predominant factor in precipitating cultural or technological change in prehistoric communities.⁴ With the recognition of climate change as a central force in northwestern plains history, Binnema has broken new ground in Canadian scholarship.

By considering historical processes at a macro level, Binnema has been able to avoid a common pitfall of many ethnohistories which tend to focus on small-scale changes within bands or ethnic groups. With their intimate connection to a single entity many

ethnohistorians tend to advocate for a particular group, and present the stories of their subjects from a single side of the equation. We need micro studies to understand the motivations of individual communities; they are the foundation of our understanding of past events. However Binnema reveals how our knowledge of the impact of introduced forces, such as horses, commerce and disease, on the region as a whole can be greatly enhanced by putting the ethnohistorical pieces together to create a large-scale interpretation of historical change.

Over the past thirty years, ethnohistoric method has been remarkably successful in showing how Aboriginal societies were active agents in their relations with European traders. Binnema's chapters on the 18th century clearly show that the inhabitants of the northwestern plains dealt with change on their own terms. Although Binnema's focus on the diplomatic and military interactions differs from most ethnohistorical studies, he is in general agreement with the prevalent interpretation in ethnohistory, that "[t]he arrival of Euroamerican traders and their wares did not bring rapid economic dependence or cultural and social disintegration but did bring profound change" (114). Among the Blackfoot, he argues that the arrival of the horse, European goods, and Euroamericans themselves actually strengthened belief systems (114).

Binnema's focus on the short-term military and diplomatic aspects of 18th century plains life comes at a price. Binnema may have overlooked the increasing environmental risk that plains people assumed as they adopted equestrianism and integrated themselves into the fur trade. With these changes, the susceptibility of Aboriginal communities to the negative effects of climatic conditions was greatly increased. To be fair, Binnema makes several references to severe weather conditions during the winters of the last quarter of the 18th century as a factor contributing to an increase in intertribal tension, but he does not explicitly identify bad weather, horse depletion and conflict as a pattern driving diplomatic and military relations. The late 18th and early 19th centuries brought some of the most severe and unpredictable weather episodes in the region in the last thousand years. The universal adoption of a species imported from southern Europe, at a time when the Little Ice Age was at its worst, had dire ramifications for the newly equestrian-dependent peoples on the Canadian plains. Aboriginal groups may have been free agents making autonomous decisions but their choices were shaped, indeed limited, by environmental factors. When it came to intertribal violence in western Canada, climatic forces were as important as the arrival of Europeans as causative factors.

Our current preoccupation with climate change has had the unintended consequence of providing historians with an increasingly detailed picture of climatic variability in the past. Tree ring reconstructions, for example, have detailed drought cycles in the region for the past 500 years.⁵ Streamflow reconstructions of the Saskatchewan River covering an 1,100-year period, a valuable indicator of regional temperatures, have been developed.⁶ The integration of proxy data from scientific sources into historical narratives can provide a new level of understanding the interaction of human communities and their environment. Much of this new data has become available since the completion of Binnema's dissertation in the late 1990s. In light of these recent developments, the historical trends identified by Binnema regarding past occupation of the region can be supported with a greater level of precision.

During the Scandic and Neo-Atlantic climatic episodes (A.D. 250–1250), societies on the northwestern plains were relatively stable. As Binnema pointed out, the principal

innovation during this period was the spread of bow and arrow technology (61–63). A recent archaeological discussion of the period notes the gradual nature of technological and human change in the region, and stresses that they were “in situ” developments rather than the intrusion of a culture from another region.⁷ Regions east of Binnema’s *Common and Contested Ground*, societies underwent a period of florescence during the benign weather conditions of the Neo-Atlantic climatic episode (A.D. 850–1250). Rather than Binnema’s interpretation that villages on the middle Missouri were founded by “refugees” from Cahokia (66), they were probably “settlers.” According to W.R. Wood, the establishment of corn agriculture in the Missouri basin was directly related to the favourable climate of the Neo-Atlantic period: “it is certainly not accident that the initial variant makes its appearance on the Prairie-plains border and High plains at the time it does... This was a warm period when more moisture was available than previously on the High Plains.”⁸

The climatic deterioration that accompanied the shift to the Pacific climate episode in the mid 13th century marked the end of stable occupation on the northwestern plains. Binnema’s general statement, “(t)hroughout the pedestrian era diverse human communities migrated onto the northwestern plains” (71), could have been more precise. From the beginning of the Pacific climatic episode on, the region was subjected to an unprecedented level of in-migration. The vast majority of those migrants arrived as a consequence of deteriorating conditions in their home territories. Binnema discusses the impact of the climatic decline on the horticultural communities of the Missouri and their brief foray north of the 49th parallel during this period (66–67). Diminished harvests forced the Hidatsa to the northern plains to supply meat to their increasingly strained agricultural partners (68). The period, characterized by severe drought south of the 49th parallel, forced widespread abandonment of agrarian villages and led to the adoption of the bison hunt by the Hidatsa to supplement the crops of the Missouri villages.

The climatic downturn beginning in the mid 13th century was a global phenomenon and affected all who eventually made their way to the northwestern plains. Long-term climatic decline drove many groups from unsustainable woodlands to the relative stability of the bison herds on the western grasslands. Binnema describes the westward migration of numerous groups to the northern plains, yet he does not posit their reasons for doing so. He quotes ecological anthropologist Douglas Bamforth that “humans rarely engage in extremely expensive behaviour without very good reason” (58). Many new arrivals to the northern plains travelled great distances in their quest for a reliable subsistence base. Clearly, their home territories could not sustain them. By 1300, the Mortlach, the ancestors of the historic Assiniboine, moved onto the grasslands from the east, pushing the ancestors of the historic Blackfoot westward out the South Saskatchewan River region (68). During the mid-13th century, the Atsina and their kin, the Arapaho, probably began their migration west from the Interlakes of Manitoba to the parklands and eventually to the region of the forks of the Saskatchewan River by 1550 (75). The ancestors of the Cree also moved south and west in response to the worsening conditions in the boreal forest and occupied the Lower Saskatchewan River Valley (77). Later, during the 16th century, the Shoshoni battled their way onto the northwestern plains. Binnema explains how the Shoshoni were able to invade the region but does not advance a reason for why they did so. Their invasion was probably a consequence of what has been called a “megadrought” across the western United States during the 16th

century.⁹ The protracted and severe desiccation would have certainly undermined food supplies in their home territory forcing them northward to survive. Although the destination of the Shoshoni and the other migrants was arid and prone to sustained drought, their universal adoption of the pedestrian bison hunting underscores the viability of that strategy despite scarce precipitation. Although the Dirty Thirties and the droughts of the late 1980s remain in our popular consciousness, the 20th century was anomalous for its absence of sustained drought.¹⁰

A critical factor in understanding the allure of the northwestern plains during the prehistoric period is the issue of how communities survived under conditions of minimal precipitation. Grace Morgan asserts that the ability of pedestrian bison hunters to withstand prolonged drought was predicated on a widespread aversion to beaver hunting as a means to conserve limited water supplies.¹¹ According to Morgan, beavers provided prehistoric hunters with a reliable supply of water along valleys of the tributaries of major waterways through the grasslands. Ponds established in valley complexes slowed the flow of the water, a scarce but essential resource. These were the principle sites of human occupation for most of the year.¹² Morgan stressed that, without beaver, "human occupancy of the plains may not have been possible during periods of intense drought."¹³ Binnema makes only passing reference to Morgan's "intriguing" discussion about the place of beaver in Blackfoot life (216–17, fn.12), and dismisses the notion of Aboriginal beaver conservation with the statement that HBC journals "show that many Peigan did kill many beavers, but that their relatively sedentary lifestyle in winter precluded large-scale beaver hunting." With this, Binnema underestimates what was the critical factor in the survival of groups on the northwestern plains. David Smyth stresses that only a small number of Peigan ever commercially harvested beaver until well into the 19th century.¹⁴ Binnema states that the devaluation of wolf pelts, the predominant fur brought in by the Blackfoot and the Atsina, was an important factor in the increasing tension between them and traders in the late 18th century because "they could supply few of the furs that Europeans valued most highly" (142). Smyth stated emphatically that they would not trap beaver. The central point of Smyth's thesis is that the Blackfoot allies refused to exploit beaver commercially as a matter of choice rather than simply the scarcity of the species in their territory. According to Smyth, only the Sarcee and a single band of Peigan, amounting to 30–40 tents, commercially trapped beaver during the period of Binnema's study.¹⁵ The literature is replete with references to the Blackfoot and their allies not harvesting beaver to their commercial potential.¹⁶ On his journey to southern Alberta in 1792–93, Peter Fidler travelled with a Peigan group who, though disgruntled at the low prices paid for their wolves, passed by ponds seemingly teeming with beaver only days from Buckingham House.¹⁷ Fidler admonished the Peigan for their refusal to hunt beaver for trade in his journal although they were forced to adjust their travelling "entirely owing to the places where water is to be had, both for ourselves and for the horses."¹⁸ Clearly, the availability of water placed significant constraints on the inhabitants of the northwestern plains.

Groups that did not hunt beaver and traded primarily wolves and provisions were increasingly seen as second-class customers at the posts, where beaver was prized above all else. In the case of the Blackfoot, they were also the community with the longest collective experience in the northwestern plains. New arrivals to the region such as the woodland Cree, the Saulteaux and the Iroquois were the primary beaver producers on

the plains in the late 18th century. They came in association with the trade and were unencumbered by an aversion to beaver hunting, the key to long-term survival in the region. The role of the beaver in the plains ecosystem, and the aversion of those groups with a long history on the northwestern plains to commercially harvest beaver, are not fully considered by Binnema.

Another ecological issue that is not fully developed is the role of climate variability during the period identified as the "horse and gun revolution." Early in the book, he challenges the reader to consider how the "Indian of imagination" differs "from the native American of actual existence" (xiii). Binnema asserts that the adoption of equestrianism did not significantly change the cultures of those who adopted horses and that the acquisition of the species increased the power of those who took it up. While equestrianism may not have changed the cultures of those who adopted the new strategy on the northwestern plains, it must certainly have changed their relationship to the land. In addition to ever present need for water, groups that acquired horses had to feed their stock.¹⁹ The timing of the diffusion of horses to the northern plains, coincided with a long period of mild weather between the severe cold marking the first and last decades of the 18th century, was a significant factor in the spread of equestrianism across the west.²⁰

Three decades ago, Dennis Rinn recognized that horses could not be naturally maintained by all groups on the Canadian prairies and that an almost constant supply of equestrian stock flowed from the mountain tribes southwest of the plains.²¹ In a footnote, Binnema cites Rinn on the susceptibility of Cree and Assiniboine horses to severe weather (218, fn. 43). Rinn stated that while the Peigan lost fewer horses to cold and starvation, all groups suffered from acute depletions of their herds at least once a decade from adverse conditions.²² Rinn also stated that none of the people north of the 49th parallel were able to maintain their herds through natural growth. Binnema provides ample evidence of the difficulty in maintaining horses during the final cold decades of the 18th century and the connection between bad weather conditions and horse raiding. Binnema does not consider the increasing violence over horses in the context of long-term climatic variability and that the relationship between severe weather conditions and intertribal violence was a pattern. The years between the late 18th and early 19th centuries were among the most severe of the neo-Boreal climatic episode (A.D. 1550–1850). During the 1790s, as inter-tribal conflict grew, the northwestern plains were subjected to the worst drought of the past 500 years.²³ Horses became a military necessity, but this equestrian dependency exposed these cultures to a new level of assumed risk from the negative impact of climatic stimuli. Because intertribal conflict was inextricable from horse acquisition during the final decades of Binnema's study, the weather was as important as any other factor and heightened the level of conflicts on the western plains. In the final decades of his study, tribal populations were certainly more vulnerable to climatic variability than they were prior to their ill-fated equestrian dependency.

Climate science has advanced significantly since Binnema's research on his subject. He could not take full advantage of this unintended consequence of our new concern over global warming. Future studies that integrate the burgeoning scientific literature with existing historic sources will lead to a richer understanding of the broad strokes identified in Binnema's *Common and Contested Ground*. The recognition of climatic factors is essential to truly understand the relationship between human communities and their environment.

Some aspects of *Common and Contested Ground* may incite debate from within the ethnohistorical community. Binnema includes a discussion of Blackfoot groups travelling to York Factory during the first half of the 18th century, citing Ray's pioneering study, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (105). David Smyth categorically denies that there was direct trade between any members of the Blackfoot alliance and Europeans at Hudson Bay "ever," and that only four people from the alliance ever travelled to York Factory of their own volition.²⁴ Smyth raises another, perhaps more significant issue surrounding the nature of Cree-Assiniboine relationship with the Blackfoot before the onset of open warfare in 1806. He forcefully disputed the notion of a Cree-Blackfoot alliance in this publication more than a decade ago.²⁵ Binnema does not repeat what, according to Smyth, was John Milloy's error.²⁶ Rather he uses the looser term "coalition" for the relationship that Milloy described as an alliance. Both Milloy and Binnema cite the same account by Daniel Harmon from the summer of 1806 on the outbreak of hostilities between the Cree-Assiniboine and the Blackfoot.²⁷ There is no question that relations between the Cree-Assiniboine and the Blackfoot alliance were hostile after 1806. It is the characterization of their relations in the decades before that remains not fully resolved. Binnema noted that occasional hostilities over horses occurred between the Cree and Archithinue bands as early as the 1750s and 1760s (99). The number of incidents between the members of Binnema's northern coalition grew toward the end of the 18th century. According to Smyth, "If such a coalition ever indeed existed, there is little evidence of it in the 1780s and 1790s."²⁸ Intertribal violence was predicated on the acquisition of horses or retaliation for predations on herds; climatic forces were largely responsible for the ongoing warfare in the period after Binnema's terminal date of 1806. Binnema asserts that the tenuous connection between the Blackfoot and the Cree-Assiniboine remained a coalition until the first decade of the 19th century. Smyth's view was that it was not. When Smyth's thesis gains a wider readership, the debate over the fundamental nature of indigenous relations will be given a new impetus. Regardless of which interpretation prevails, by the late 18th century, violence increased as tribal groups tried to maintain their herds in the face of conditions that were often too severe to sustain them.

Although Binnema stresses the independence and agency of Aboriginal groups inhabiting the common and contested ground, it is clear that from a climatic standpoint, communities of the northern plains were in a more precarious position at the end of the 18th century than at the beginning. As the century progressed, tribal groups took on new roles and new locations in relation to the expanding trade. Their almost universal adoption of horses created vulnerabilities that did not exist during the pedestrian era. As the trade took hold as the dominant force among tribal groups on the plains, their situation became increasingly precarious. During the difficult years of the 1790s, the Blackfoot trade at Edmonton and other posts on the North Saskatchewan River slowed to a trickle because harsh weather made horse travel impossible. Over the winter of 1797, the Ojibwa, who had come west as commercial trappers, were the only group who traded at Buckingham House.²⁹ As Aboriginal societies turned their backs on climate as the dominant force in their decision making in favour of the introduced factors, they assumed a level of climatic vulnerability much greater than had existed before.

In going beyond the "culturalist preoccupations" of ethnohistory, Binnema has provided a truly innovative study of historical change in western Canada. In taking a regional approach to intertribal relations to the beginning of the nineteenth century, he has

provided us with a new level of understanding in the history of the west. For this Binnema should be applauded for his vision and its realization. With the increasing volume of scientific data of past climate, historians can no longer rely exclusively upon traditional methodologies which focus solely on the written record. The integration of historical records with scientific data cannot but render a more accurate narrative of the past. The marriage of historical method and the science of climate change is still in its infancy in the Canadian context.³⁰

Binnema has opened the door to a new approach to Aboriginal scholarship. Advances from climate science have provided previously unavailable data that can be applied to historical analysis. Our growing insight into climatic variability may force scholars to reconsider longstanding beliefs developed from studies that consider human agency exclusively. The interrelationship between climatic variability and human communities identified by Binnema remain with us to the present. Recent droughts, floods and trade disputes have shaken the agricultural economy of western Canada. In this sense, the northwestern plains remains a *Common and Contested Ground*.

Notes

1. Dale Russell, *Eighteenth Century Cree and their Neighbours* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991).
2. Howard Meredith, *Dancing on Common Ground: Tribal Cultures and Alliances on the Southern Plains* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995).
3. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005).
4. Donald J. Lehmer, "Climate and Culture History in the Middle Missouri Valley," in W.R. Wood (ed.), *Reprints in Anthropology, Volume 8. Selected Writings of Donald J. Lehmer* (Lincoln, NE: J & L Reprint Company), 59–72.
5. David Sauchyn and Walter Skinner, "A Proxy Record of Drought Severity for the Southwestern Canadian Plains," *Canadian Water Resources Journal* 26 (2001): 253–72.
6. Roslyn A. Case and Glen M. MacDonald, "Tree Ring Reconstructions of Streamflow for the Three Canadian Prairie Rivers," *Journal of the American Water Resources Association* 39 (2003): 707–16.
7. Trevor R. Peck and Caroline Hudecek-Cuffe, "Archaeology on the Alberta Plains: The Last Two Thousand Years," in Jack Brink and John Dormaar (eds.), *Archaeology in Alberta: A View from the New Millennium* (Medicine Hat: Archaeological Society of Alberta, 2003), 90.
8. W. Raymond Wood, "Plains Village Tradition: Middle Missouri," in Raymond J. DeMallie (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians. Volume 13. Plains* (Part 1) (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 190.
9. David W. Stahle, et al., "Tree-Ring Data Document 16th Century Megadrought over North America," *EOS: Transactions, American Geophysical Union* 81 (2000): 121–25.
10. David Sauchyn, E.M. Barrow, R.F. Hopkinson and P.R. Leavitt, "Aridity on the Plains," *Géographie Physique et Quaternaire* 56 (2002): 247.
11. Grace Morgan, "Beaver Ecology/Beaver Mythology" (PhD dissertation, University of Alberta, 1991), 5.
12. Ibid., 153.
13. Ibid., 49.
14. David Smyth, "The Niitsitapi Trade: Euroamericans and the Blackfoot-Speaking Peoples to the Mid-1830s" (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 1992), 207. Smyth quoted Alexander Henry's narrative from 1810–11 that noted only 30–40 tents of Piikani (Peigan) hunted beaver; by the mid-1820s, "beaver trapping had become widespread among the Piikani," 306.
15. Ibid., 205.
16. Although a full inventory of references to the failure of plains groups to commercially harvest beaver is beyond the scope of this review, references to the phenomenon are present from the 1730s on. G.H. Smith and W.R. Wood, *The Explorations of the La Vérendryes in the Northern Plains, 1738–43* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 44; Barbara Belyea (ed.), *A Year Inland: The Journal of a Hudson's Bay Company Winterer* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 121. For a discussion of the practice during the 18th and early 19th centuries, see Smyth, "The Niitsitapi Trade," 203–08.
17. Bruce Haig (ed.), *Journal of a Journey over Land from Buckingham House to the Rocky Mountains in 1792 & 93* (Lethbridge, AB: Historical Research Centre, 1992), 10–12.

18. Ibid., 23.
19. J.R. Vickers and T.R. Peck, "Islands in a Sea of Grass: The Significance of Wood in Winter Campsite Selection on the Northwestern Plains," in Brian Kooyman and Jane H. Kelley (eds.), *Archaeology on the Edge: New Perspectives from the Northern Plains* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003), 98.
20. The period between 1685 and 1704 was the coldest of the past 1,000 years in western Canada. See B.H. Luckman and R.J.S. Wilson, "Summer Temperatures in the Canadian Rockies During the Last Millennium: A Revised Record," *Climate Dynamics* 24 (2005): 137. Alwynne Beaudoin, "What They Saw: The Climatic and Environmental Context for Euro-Canadian Settlement in Western Canada," *Prairie Forum* 24, no. 1 (1999): 32.
21. Dennis Rinn, "The Acquisition, Diffusion and Distribution of the European Horse among Blackfoot Tribes in Western Canada" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1975,) 93.
22. Severe weather conditions included not only cold temperatures and deep snow but also unseasonable rain during winter. See Rinn, "The Acquisition, Diffusion, and Distribution of the European Horse among Blackfoot Tribes in Western Canada," 87–88.
23. Sauchyn and Skinner, "A Proxy Record of Drought Severity for the Southwestern Canadian Plains," 266.
24. Smyth, "The Niitsitapi Trade," 67–68.
25. David Smyth, "Missed Opportunity: John Milloy's *The Plains Cree*," *Prairie Forum* 17, no. 2 (1992): 337–54.
26. Ibid., 341–48.
27. John Milloy, *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy and War, 1790 to 1870* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 35. Binnema, *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains*, 196.
28. Smyth, "The Niitsitapi Trade," 214.
29. Alice M. Johnson, *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence: Edmonton House 1795–1800. Chesterfield House 1800–1802* (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1967), 87.
30. A recent study that deals specifically with the relationship between climate change and history is Renée Fossett, *In Order to Live Untroubled: Inuit of the Central Arctic 1550 to 1940* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002).