BOOK REVIEWS


People concerned with issues involving Natives will be familiar with journal articles by Ponting and Gibbins and many will have waited impatiently for this, their first book on Natives. And a long-awaited book is often disappointing, either because the author fails to make the necessary stylistic leap from journal articles to a book, or because scholarship has advanced so rapidly that ideas are outdated by the time the book is published. Fortunately, this is not the case with Out of Irrelevance.

This book provides base-line descriptive data about Indian affairs in Canada at the national level. Although the study is heavily descriptive, analysis is provided which gives the reader a broader understanding of the subject. The authors state that the book is intended for three audiences: students and the general public, practitioners in the field, and academics. However, they have cast their net too widely. This is not a book for the general public; it is far too complex and ponderous to be read and comprehended by anyone not involved in the area of Native issues.

Out of Irrelevance does an excellent job of clarifying many of the complexities of Indian-White relationships in Canada. Chapter One provides the historical background to the study, while Chapters Two and Three provide quantitative data on the socio-demographic-economic situation of Indians. Chapters Four through Ten are rich in qualitative data which lead the reader through the administrative maze of the Indian Affairs Branch and the politicization of Indians.

The thesis of the book is that during the fur-trading period of Canadian history, Indians were relevant. As the country was settled they became irrelevant to Canadian society, but the authors contend that they have now moved “out of irrelevance.” The assumption is that Indians at one time became irrelevant. They may have been so in a political sense but they have always occupied a premier position in Canadian social affairs. Each decade of this century has seen them studied and analyzed, with the results providing ammunition for liberals and academics to belabour the national conscience. The difference since 1970 is that the Indians have grasped the whip and now themselves belabour the Canadian conscience.

The authors, in their introduction, make an honest effort to introduce definitions and to avoid the confusing terminology that has ruined many promising studies. They succeed in clarifying what is meant by 'Indian' in their book. It is one who is so defined by the
federal government and whose name is entered on the official register, in other words, one who fits the definition in *The Indian Act*. ‘Indian’ is not to be confused with ‘Native’ which is an umbrella term encompassing Indian, nonstatus Indian, Inuit and Metis: “... in this book we shall reserve the term Indian to denote registered (status) Indians.” The problem is that the authors, after carefully defining the term, are inconsistent in their use of it throughout the book. Thus, on page 50 the reader is given statistics for the average yearly earnings per Indian worker. The next lines give statistics for the Native labour force. Further on we are given educational statistics for Natives which are later compared with those for Indians. All this despite the fact that no national statistics have ever been gathered concerning Natives—simply because the problems of definition make them impossible to gather.

Having opted for a *legal* definition of Indian, the authors are on shaky ground when to prove their points they use statistics such as those gathered by the Solicitor-General's Department or by the Law Reform Commission which are based on observable *racial* characteristics. At other times in the book the authors set aside *legal* and *racial* definitions and use the term ‘Indian’ in a *cultural* sense. This ‘Alice in Wonderland’ use of words leaves the reader reeling. One can understand the use of the term ‘cultural genocide’ in relation to the assimilative policies of government. But to then remove ‘cultural’ and thereafter speak of ‘genocide’ shifts the meaning of the argument rather dramatically to physical extermination.

Despite such limitations, *Out of Irrelevance* will serve as an invaluable reference book.

D. Bruce Sealey
Faculty of Education
University of Manitoba


Larry Krotz has succeeded in his latest book in addressing a difficult subject in an insightful and sensitive way. Avoiding the temptation to resort to numbing statistics or gushy appeals to sentiment, the author evokes the spectre of the urban Indian in the Canadian West, and then calmly and accurately interprets the issues in a holistic fashion. The reader is left feeling both that the urban Indian has been given a fair representation in the book, and that the issues and circumstances of urban Indians are the result of every citizen’s negligence in failing to insist on justice for all.