

The Assiniboine, by E.T. Denig, edited by J.N.B. Hewitt. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2000. Pp. 290+xxxiv, photographs, illustrations.

The Assiniboine was written by Edwin Thompson Denig in 1854 as an answer to Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's circular requesting systematic information concerning the aboriginal population of the United States. It was later edited by J.N.B. Hewitt and published for the first time in 1930 as the second section of the *Forty-sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*. The present edition comprises an informative introduction by David R. Miller, Denig's extensive report, a comprehensive index, and Schoolcraft's 1847 circular. There are twenty-four plates ranging from portraits of Denig, Hewitt and Schoolcraft to ethnographic illustrations and original drawings by Assiniboine warriors.

With behind him twenty years of participant observation from the perspective of Fort Union, where he was in charge of trade, and one full year of fieldwork collecting responses to Schoolcraft's queries, Denig was in a unique position to give the American government an exhaustive ethnography of the Assiniboine, his familiarity with the tribe being enhanced by his fluency in the language and his having been married to two Assiniboine women. His is the earliest description of the Northern Plains which we can call anthropological; his authority in the matter was readily acknowledged, and it is no accident that Denig entertained friendly relations with such men as J.J. Audubon and Father De Smet (p. xxvii). This mid-19th century amateur thus set a precedent for the classics of professional ethnography later written by the likes of Lowie and Mandelbaum: in this sense Denig's contribution is invaluable.

Being predictably Eurocentric, *The Assiniboine* also allows the reader a glimpse into the mind of a progressive middle-class American of the period: behind Denig's chatty yet authoritative tone lies a firm belief in the civilizing achievements of white traders, all the more so as he holds before us a vivid image of a future with "the green plains, now covered with multitudes of buffalo, (...) strewn with innumerable grog shops, occupied by nests of gamblers and hordes of outlaws, bringing with their personal vices a host of infectious diseases" (pp. 229-230). To this state of affairs one solution offered itself: the conversion of Indians to pastoral pursuits (pp. 14, 149) as part of a general educational scheme aimed at bestowing upon them a more rational apprehension of the world (p. 23). Denig is intensely sympathetic: a comparison of the average white's and the average Indian's "general deportment" leads him to favour the latter (p. 200); yet he sees the Assiniboine as "superstitious, lazy, and indisposed to thought" (p. 3), as well as entertaining "childish notions" (p. 4); understandably, he also makes much of the Northern Plains style of cruelty, as when describing the killing of children prisoners (p. 158).

Yet Denig breaks down stereotypes which have endured to this day. Taciturnity, for instance, is described as a fact of Indian communication (pp. 132, 202); but this potential overgeneralization is tempered by depictions of ribald behaviour (p. 114) and personal vanity (p. 117) which lead the author to conclude that contrary to a prevailing stereotype "silence is not considered a mark of wisdom" (p. 132). In a similar vein, Denig duly reflects on the widespread lack of sense of land ownership, nonetheless pointing out that there exists a keen sense of property regarding horses and

women. As for the modern misconception of traditional aboriginal societies as non-competitive, it receives a severe blow with descriptions of widespread gambling and less-than-fair efforts to win foot races (pp. 172-173) — this spirit of competition under similar circumstances being confirmed later in reminiscences of the Cree chief, Thunderchild (see Edward Ahenakew: *Voices of the Plains Cree*, p. 42). The status of women was also far from egalitarian: strangers were “accommodated with temporary wives during their short residence” (p. 53); women’s social position was “inferior to that of men in every respect” (p. 57); they were “the property of the purchaser the same as his horses” (p. 61); and they were punished for fornication to a much greater extent than were men (p. 88). Finally, the much-touted respect for old age was not without ambiguities either: when feebleness and helplessness set in, old people became a liability and were abandoned (p. 91); this fact, together with harsh living conditions and constant warfare, explains why there were not many old Indians on the Northern Plains (p. 119).

This short-lived horse culture is painstakingly described by Denig in strokes reminiscent of George Catlin’s paintings (see e.g. pp. 159ff). There emerges the portrait of a Plains warrior akin to the mounted medieval knight, complete with lance, shield and flamboyance — or to the ancient Celts with their impetuosity and lack of unity. Northern Plains societies, then increasingly affected by the ravages of war and smallpox, depended entirely on the buffalo, of which an estimated 150,000 were killed every year (p. 16). This state of affairs leads Denig to hypothesize that should both Indians and buffalo be doomed as a consequence of white settlement, “the Indians, being the smaller number, would be the first to vanish” (p. 68); and their disappearance would be hastened by the sale of liquor to them — an act “morally wrong and productive of great evil” (p. 136). If Denig erred on the first account, he touched more than a little truth on the second...

The question of authority receives extensive treatment in his report, demonstrating the fleeting nature of leadership: a chief is supported by connections (p. 37) and consensus (pp. 44ff); he is “the poorest in the band, yet he takes good care to distribute his gifts among his own relatives or the rich” (p. 55); and the appearance of any physical debility would depose him or make him the band’s laughing-stock (p. 39). Such astute observations, peppered with comments on the notion of egalitarianism on the Northern Plains, bring to this particular ethnography the breadth of human universals: the soldiers’ lodge, for example, levies a tax on the band for the tobacco smoked there; the very few old men who survive are poor, neglected, and ridiculed by the young; as for very old women, they “are used pretty much as one of their dogs” (p. 50). Of course, one must bear in mind that these judgements may contain exaggerations inherent in the *Zeitgeist*, when nomadism was equated with savagery and with lack of “real” history as expressed in mounds, stone works or hieroglyphics (pp. 19-20): Eurocentrism never lurking very far from the surface, this ethnography is as much a report on the Assiniboine as on the prevailing white mentality.

Similarly, Denig from the outset betrays his low opinion of oral history, dismissing most of it as “singular and fabulous tales” (p. 1); later on he talks of the “extravagant fables and exploits of former warriors” (p. 127), finding little of historical or explanatory value in myths. He also underestimates the very real power of some

shamans and is inclined to dismiss them all as humbugs or artful conjurors, whose tricks are often "well done and not yet known to any of us" (p. 30). There is one exception, however: the treatment of hydrophobia, which the author has never witnessed but describes with awe. In it the patient is almost literally cooked over a hot fire, then plunged into cold water — which leads to the inescapable conclusion: "if he survives the treatment the disease disappears" (p. 32). Of greater interest perhaps is the practice of bleeding "when the pulse is full from sickness and at any time they think it beneficial" (p. 32): in an era when Western society was barely coming out of the age of bleeding and purging, Northern Plains Indians emphasized this process of elimination, popular in Europe since at least the ancient Greeks. This, incidentally, is in direct contrast with the Oriental attitude, which seeks fullness and retention of accumulated plenitude rather than elimination of excess energy. In contrast with Asia too, the moon on the Northern Plains is considered a hot body (p. 90); but as in Asia, and this is probably a universal in polygamous societies, the first and last wives are generally a husband's favourites — the first because she "manages the lodge in all its domestic arrangements, and the last because she is youngest and often handsomest" (p. 112).

This book is a fine production, with only minor typos and faulty syntactic agreements probably to be found in the original report; Denig's date of demise, however, seems to be a mystery, as it is variously given as 1862? (p. iv), 1858 (p. xiii) and 1862 or 1863 (p. xxvi). This edition makes widely available to anthropologists and students of First Nations a masterful ethnography, devoid of romantic overtones, giving traditional concepts of respect and authority their true flavour of impermanence and universal flow. It is a fascinating account of a lifestyle and worldview outside of civilization, a subtle analysis of human behaviour looming high above the constraints of political correctness as conceived in the nineteenth or, for that matter, the twenty-first century. And above all it is a reflection of the sempiternal clash between natural and civilized states because, says the white man, "there is no dependence to be placed on anything a wild Indian does" (p. 59). Indeed.

Patrick C. Douaud
Faculty of Education
University of Regina