

Book Reviews

"As Their Natural Resources Fail": Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870-1930, by Frank Tough. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996. Pp. 292.

A good deal of current discussion focusses on the cultural, legal and constitutional aspects of First Nations and Metis issues. Less is heard about the building of aboriginal economies, upon which the success of self-government in large part depends. In this context, Frank Tough's analysis of the role of Native peoples in the economy of northern Manitoba from 1870 to 1930 is a breath of fresh air.

The book takes as its starting point Canada's acquisition of Rupertsland from the Hudson's Bay Company and the negotiation of treaties to deal with the question of aboriginal title. The two hundred-year-old fur trade economy was in a transitional stage. The transportation system was shifting from the northerly route through York Factory to the southerly route through Fort Garry. Low fur prices forced the Company to cut operating costs and downsize its operations. The decline of York Factory caused suffering and deprivation for aboriginal people whose livelihoods had been linked to the post. A Hudson's Bay Company report for the winter of 1889-1890 noted, "[N]umbers have eaten their starved dogs, their snow shoes, and the refuse from dust heaps, while several have died from actual starvation" (p. 71).

The situation in the Interlake and Lake Winnipeg region was much more promising. In the post-1870 era, two distinct regions were created in northern Manitoba with the dividing line being the northern boundary of Treaty 5 (1875). North of the line in unceded territory, Native people were trapped in the traditional fur economy and experienced low fur prices and diminished wage employment. South of the line, Natives participated in a booming, diversified resource economy. Tough ponders the question why the Government of Canada delayed for thirty years extending the treaty north of the 1875 boundary. The Indians of northeastern Manitoba made numerous requests for a treaty and received support for their petitions from missionaries and lieutenant-governors of Manitoba, but the Canadian government would not enter into negotiations. In addition, the department vetoed the sensible proposal to allow impoverished northern Indians to move from the unceded to the ceded area. A departmental official stated the reason for the policy in terms that inspired the choice of title for this book: "All considered it seems to be in the best ultimate interests of these Indians to remain in a country with which if left alone, they seem sufficiently well satisfied to await its opening up, and then as their natural resources fail them turn to various industrial pursuits without the disadvantage of too great competition in the labour market, which will gradually be brought within their reach" (p. 227). Tough argues that government policy was not based simply on abstract legal obligations concerning aboriginal title, but rather on non-Native economic interest. It suited the Hudson's Bay

Company to have a surplus labour force for the fur trade, and it suited the Government of Canada to wait until Indians were weakened by the economic forces of "advancing civilization" before discussing treaty terms. It was not until 1908 that the Hudson Bay Railway project provided the rationale for the extension of Treaty 5.

At the same time that the government was resisting treaty talks with the Indians of northeastern Manitoba as well as blocking them from migrating to the more prosperous Interlake region, it was arranging the surrender of the 48,000-acre St. Peters Reserve on the banks of the Red River and the removal of its 900 Indian residents to the Interlake reserve known as Peguis. All the arguments that were used to explain why it was a bad idea for the northern Indians to move to the Interlake area had to be turned around to explain why it was a good idea for the Indians from the south to be moved there. In the former case, Indian Affairs served the interests of the Hudson's Bay Company; in the latter, it came to the aid of Selkirk area land speculators.

To a considerable degree, aboriginal economic development occurred in spite of, rather than because of government policy. Following the signing of the treaties (1871-1875), Native people from around Lakes Winnipeg, Manitoba, St. Martin, and Winnipegosis participated actively in the commercial fishing and lumbering boom. Their relative affluence contrasted sharply with the impoverishment and marginalization of Plains Indians during the same period. Unfortunately, Tough did not find enough information to give a precise analysis of incomes, but comments by Indian agents provide glimpses of living standards. One noted that in 1903, five to six dollars a day could be earned at fishing. Another observed of the St. Peters band in 1893: "[They] are getting more independent every year; they are more inclined to look after themselves, and at present are almost if not entirely self-sustaining" (p. 211). Comments were made about the purchase of sewing machines, reapers, mowers, a threshing machine, buggies, and wagons. One missionary observed enviously of Indian railway workers: "Some Indians were lighting their pipes with one dollar bills. Gramophones and jam were everywhere. Missionary stipends remained the usual starvation rates. They [missionaries] could not compete in the labour market" (p. 216).

However, Tough is quick to point out that Natives were very much "drawers of water and hewers of wood." They did not make the transition from wage labourers to capitalists. Nor was there a non-Native locally based capitalist class in northern Manitoba prior to 1930. The frontier staples economy was externally controlled, mainly by foreign owners. Tough suggests that Native people might have been in a better position to accumulate capital and create self-sustaining development if they had been allowed to collect rents from resource activities in return for the surrender of aboriginal title. But that did not happen, and, consequently, "frontier capitalism brought with it a very incomplete form of modernization" (p. 306).

One of the appealing features of the book is the extensive use of maps, figures, tables, and graphs to illustrate the points made in the text. For example, Tough shows that in the Interlake region a highly diversified economy emerged with many local variations. The reader can identify at a glance the balance of economic activities — for instance, commercial fishing, hunting, trapping, gardening, cattle raising, farm labour, haying, boating, lumbering — in each of the band and reserve economies.

If the book has a weakness, it is that the Native voice is not easy to hear. Apart from Chief George Barker's *Forty Years a Chief*, aboriginal views tend to be expressed indirectly through the accounts of Indian agents or missionaries. As a result, the reader cannot come to grips with how the economic transformations in the decades after 1870 were experienced within the Native community. Tough is well aware of this limitation. He notes that there is not enough evidence to determine how the economic pursuits of individual Indians influenced social structure or social class formation. He further observes that involvement in the labour market must have had cultural implications, but that "written records are really quite silent about social and cultural disruptions associated with economic change" (p. 218). Oral history might have illuminated some of these issues.

The strength of the book is that it has a clarity that is obtained through methodical analysis rather than the sacrifice of complexity and diversity. It tells of a time and a place when aboriginal people integrated successfully into the capitalist labour market despite an unsupportive government policy environment, and it speaks to issues that are of concern in our own day.

James M. Pitsula
Department of History
University of Regina



Turmoil and Triumph: The Controversial Railway to Hudson Bay, by Ian Bickle. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1995. Pp. 224.

The Hudson Bay Railway from The Pas, Manitoba, to the Port of Churchill, Manitoba, on Hudson Bay traverses 500 miles of inhospitable terrain where railway construction and operation is difficult and expensive and very little local traffic is available to help cover these costs. It is, in effect, a 500-mile "bridge" from the northern edge of the prairie grain belt to the nearest ocean port which is, however, ice-bound for more than half of each year. Even the most daring of private railway builders and entrepreneurs, Mackenzie and Mann, when assessing the railway's long-term prospects, and in spite of the availability of generous government land, mail and cash subsidies, declined repeated invitations to build the line.

Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait, and the rivers draining into the Bay, were, nevertheless, one of western Canada's oldest trade routes. In the days