

Tangled, Lost and Bitter? Current Directions in the Writing of Native History in Canada

Kerry Abel

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[See table of contents](#)

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REVIEW ESSAY/NOTE CRITIQUE

Tangled, Lost and Bitter? Current Directions in the Writing of Native History in Canada

IT IS THE FIVE-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of the arrival of John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto according to one irate letter-writer to the *Ottawa Citizen*). Newfoundland tourist promoters trumpet the triumphant "discovery", the Assembly of First Nations promises protests, and my first-year students look puzzled. Who is John Cabot? They do, however, know a surprising amount about the role of aboriginal women in the fur trade. And they are eager to understand why the daily news is peppered with stories about "the Indian problem". Academic writing is only recently beginning to address some of their questions, and historical analysis is cropping up in some interesting new places. Given the impact of feminism and the civil rights movement on reclaiming the history of the previously silent and invisible, one would expect that, by now, Native history might have blossomed alongside histories of women, the working class, African-Americans or ethnic communities. In Canada, however, Native history has been slow to germinate and has developed none of the sophisticated debates on theory and method that have emerged in some of the other sub-disciplines. The body of literature is finally beginning to grow and now reflects a diversity of approaches that provide fruitful soil for a preliminary discussion of some important issues about the state of the discipline more generally, even if these issues are rarely addressed directly in the literature itself.

The books considered in this essay are in part a random sample, selected because they were the ones that happened to end up on the editor's desk, but they also represent several of the major directions in what might be called the "second wave" of Native history. Pathbreaking books of the first wave, like A.J. Ray's *Indians in the Fur Trade* (University of Toronto Press, 1974), Robin Fisher's *Contact and Conflict* (University of British Columbia Press, first edition, 1977), and Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties* (Watson and Dwyer [1980]) were rather like the compensatory studies of early women's history, writing aboriginal people back into the obvious gaps in previous work that had focused on the economies of the fur trade or the politics of settler expansion. The second wave is building on these beginnings with work in two main directions. The first is an approach driven by the political, legal and ethical issues raised in the contemporary political debate about Native rights, in which traditional historical sources and methods are merely applied to a new topic. The second approach recognizes the role of culture in history, driven in part by intellectual developments in the social sciences, and leading historians into the murky waters of anthropology and culture theory, including the current flirtation with post-modernism. At the same time (dare one say "conjuncture"?), anthropologists have turned to history as a technique to enrich their work and meet criticisms of their discipline. Hence a great deal of the Native history being published now is actually written by anthropologists. Subtle and not-so-subtle differences in approach raise some important challenges for

historians about what we think we are doing and why.

The discussion should begin with Denis Delâge's *Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1993) (translated from the French edition of 1985 by Jane Brierley), in some ways best considered part of the first wave, since the author comes to his topic through an interest in writing aboriginal peoples back into the story of European expansion. The book is one of the most methodologically sophisticated and complex of that first wave, influenced strongly by the *Annales* school and to a lesser extent by Immanuel Wallerstein and world-system theory. Delâge examines the processes of French, Dutch and English colonization between 1600 and 1664, evaluating the responses of the primarily Iroquoian peoples whom the Europeans encountered. His real interest is not the internal dynamics of aboriginal societies in response to contact, but the question of the transition from what he called a "Stone Age" economy to a capitalist economy, and why the "Stone Age" economy ultimately lost. For Delâge, colonization in northeastern North America was primarily an economic process in which an unequal exchange between colonizers and colonized permanently transferred wealth from the periphery to the centre and led to an "inner disintegration" of Amerindian societies.

This argument echoes the first round in an interpretive debate that has dominated fur-trade history for a decade, although Delâge provides detailed evidence and a complex argument for what some earlier writers simply asserted as fact: aboriginal peoples became dependent on Europeans through the fur trade and dependency was the first step in their cultural disintegration. A number of studies were produced in response to such claims, in which the emphasis shifted to the role of Native peoples in shaping the terms of the fur trade exchange or in maintaining cultural values in the face of overwhelming pressure to change.¹ First Nations were not passive victims of the colonial encounter, the argument ran, and can be seen as active agents in their own history. The exact extent of that agency has proven to be fertile ground for debate, but it is rare now to encounter a study in which agency is dismissed entirely.

Because much of Delâge's analysis is based on what happened to the Huron, he is able to make an effective case for the destructive impact of colonization, although he never convincingly explains why the Huron were willing participants in an apparently one-sided exchange. If Delâge had examined the Six Nations Confederacy more closely, he might have found evidence for his interpretation harder to come by. The Iroquois appear to have enjoyed an unprecedented era of expansionism, prestige and material wealth at exactly the same time that Delâge argues the Huron were working harder for diminishing returns and their confederacy was collapsing. Although the Iroquois Confederacy experienced a crisis of its own during the American Revolution, it has been revived and a strong sense of political

1 A.J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto, 1974); Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs* (Montreal and Kingston, 1983); Paul Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840* (Winnipeg, 1986); P.D. Elias, *The Dakota of the Canadian Northwest* (Winnipeg, 1988).

and cultural independence permeates its modern communities. Just as Delâge explores why some European nations prospered economically and demographically during colonial expansion while others did not, so too one might ask why some First Nations appear to have done better than others. Delâge has provided a considerable service in differentiating patterns among European nations, but his generalizations about North American aboriginal nations merit further consideration.

Bitter Feast is therefore both innovative and retrograde. The author's attempt to place early colonial history in a wider context of both European expansion and Amerindian reaction is interesting, and his careful integration of patterns of economic and social change is effective. While some "first wave" writers assumed Native peoples became dependent on Europeans for cultural reasons (preference for the "superior" technology), Delâge provides a provocative argument that there were economic reasons for the development of dependency rooted in the nature of capitalism itself. Nevertheless, he is still arguing that the result was dependency and disintegration.

Political realities of recent years have made it abundantly clear that aboriginal peoples themselves do not believe that their cultures have entirely disintegrated. Activists are demanding recognition that their peoples continue to exist, arguing that participation in a capitalist economy and changes in material culture do not mean that they have lost an interior sense of what it means to be "Indian". Since First Nations continue to exist, the argument goes, Canadians must recognize aboriginal people's rights. Contemporary debates about the political, philosophical and legal meaning of those rights are encouraging academics to look at the historical roots of the issues. Interestingly enough, however, most historians who have tackled these topics have not engaged in a discussion of basic principles and underlying assumptions. Instead, most have taken the existence of aboriginal rights as a given and their studies have become more or less advocacy exercises, explicitly or implicitly. Three of the books reviewed for this essay fit this pattern: Sarah Carter's *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal and Kingston, London and Buffalo, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Diane Newell's *The Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada's Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, University of Toronto Press, 1993); and J.R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, University of Toronto Press, 1996). All three are important studies that go well beyond simply fitting Native peoples into the empty spaces on the non-Native history outline. Each emphasizes the attempts by First Nations in various circumstances to challenge the direction of Canadian assimilationist policy and to adapt to a changing world on their own terms. Finally, each author is highly sympathetic toward Native struggles for control over the direction of their lives, and ultimately supportive of the idea that special rights do belong to them both as aboriginal peoples and through post-contact arrangements like treaties.

Lost Harvests is a detailed examination of a failed experiment in the introduction of agriculture on prairie reserves from the 1870s to the early 20th-century, with particular emphasis on the Plains Cree of Treaty 4. The author was

responding to an earlier, influential assessment by George Stanley who asserted that the Indians failed as agriculturists because they were culturally unsuited to farming; the idea was part of his larger thesis that western Canada saw the playing out of a final scene in the drama of civilization meeting (and overwhelming) primitivism. Through a careful screening of the archival record, Carter demonstrates convincingly that the Indians themselves recognized the value of agriculture and were anxious to learn about it, as they could clearly see the demise of the bison economy, but that government policies ultimately sabotaged the programme. In the effort to support and protect the commercial agriculture of non-Native settlers, Indian farmers were prevented from becoming competitors by regulations that limited access to technology and encouraged instead what Carter calls "peasant" agriculture: small, self-sufficient, subsistence family farms operating outside the exchange economy. A programme to subdivide reserves into small individual holdings, and later programmes to surrender reserve lands deemed to be unused or "surplus", further limited Native access to the large acreages required for successful commercial agriculture. Throughout the sorry tale, Carter continues to emphasize the Indian protests and attempts to gain some semblance of control over the programme. While ultimately they failed to replace the bison economy with a viable agricultural one, it was not for lack of effort.

Carter is careful to point out that some of the problems experienced by reserve farmers were also experienced by non-Native settlers. These included drought, lack of familiarity with unique soil and climate conditions, lack of local markets and shortage of capital. Nevertheless, the overwhelming emphasis of the argument is that government policy was to blame. Politicians and administrators were responding to pressures to spend as little as possible on Indians, and pressures from settlers to stop giving Indians special assistance; they were also attempting to implement an overall assimilationist policy that never worked to their satisfaction. The implication here is, of course, that government policies were wrong. The author hints that if the policies had been different and if the concerns of the Indian farmers had been heeded, the programme might have succeeded. Prairie Indians were entitled to assistance because of promises that were made in the treaties that they negotiated, and Carter's implication is that these promises were not fully and fairly honoured.

The question of Native entitlements becomes even more complex when it comes to the issue of access to natural resources. Diane Newell, in *Tangled Webs of History*, explores the case of aboriginal people's access to the Pacific fishery from the 1870s to the present, with an emphasis on the evolving legal dimensions. The case is much like prairie agriculture in that problems are precipitated by non-Natives who see Natives as competitors, and are compounded by public policy. In the case of the Pacific fishery, however, Native claims to special treatment are based on the concept of aboriginal rights rather than treaty rights. The B.C. issue is complicated by the jurisdictional dispute between federal and provincial governments. Newell, like Carter, is careful to document Native protests against the growing body of regulations and, in some cases, is able to identify small victories. She also notes the role of technological and economic change in marginalizing Native fishers, but again, like Carter, ultimately emphasizes the culpability of the

state. However, Newell is more explicit about the advocacy role of her study. "In the end", she writes, "history must be seen as a powerful process and an equally powerful political metaphor in the struggle for recognition of aboriginal rights and in the area of human rights generally" (p. 219).

The clash between human rights and public policy takes on its most painfully human face in J.R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision*, a study of the evolution and impact of the Native residential school system from the days of New France to the 1960s. Through detailed research in archival and oral sources, Miller reconstructs the roles and motivations of the various players. Like Newell and Carter, he consistently emphasizes the active role of Native parents who sought education on their own terms and protested persistently and consistently when the system failed to meet their expectations. Like Newell and Carter, he blames the government (and in this case the missionaries who helped shape and implement the policy). But he goes beyond the other two authors in arguing that Canadians as a whole are also culpable, writing that "...the people are responsible in a moral sense for what government does in their name" (p. 435). Aboriginal policy has failed, according to Miller, because "Euro-Canadian society... has consistently perverted what Aboriginal people have asked of it in return for sharing the land and resources of Canada" (p. 437). He feels no need to defend the underlying principle of aboriginal rights, and, like Carter and Newell, implies that Native people have known the solution all along, but we have failed to listen.

These three books are important additions to our understanding of current aboriginal rights issues and have the potential to contribute substance and reason to an often vacuous and emotional public debate. The authors have all made effective use of standard tools of historical analysis with well-documented arguments. Oral testimony is used carefully, particularly in Miller's case, to add a human dimension to the narratives. And while the topic is interaction between Natives and non-Natives, each author has made an attempt to emphasize Native initiatives and reactions rather than simply outlining what was done to them by the state.

On the other hand, these books leave some crucial questions unanswered. First, by starting with the assumption that aboriginal rights exist and merit recognition, academic historians are losing an opportunity to participate more fully in the public debate that they are trying to influence. Many Canadians do not accept the premise of aboriginal rights,² while others do not know what the term means. It seems to me that if you want to convince an audience that a policy is unjust, you must first convince that audience to accept the principles behind your position. In a sense, historians have been preaching to the converted because these books are being read primarily by others who already agree with the premise. Someone who opposes the principle of aboriginal rights will not be interested in Diane Newell's argument that aboriginal peoples need to "regain... effective power over their cultural and economic destinies" (p. 219), and will probably lose interest in other aspects of her interpretation. Historians ought to consider some of the basic issues

2 Melvin H. Smith, *Our Home or Native Land?* (Victoria, B.C., 1995).

if they want to be more effective advocates.

A second important question arises from the potential conflict between advocacy and historical method. A vivid sense of injustice emerges from these books, but less clear is a sense of how each author believes the injustice can be rectified. There seems to be an implication that, if only the Native alternatives had been heeded, things might have turned out more satisfactorily for all concerned. I am left with the uncomfortable feeling that not only is this observation overly simplistic and reflective of a romantic view of aboriginal wisdom but it also misses a fundamental historical fact: the existence of racism. If settler-farmers on the prairies or settler-fishers in B.C. had not seen Indians as “the other”, then they would not have been able to see them as competition. If missionaries and civil servants had not seen Indians as unfortunate primitives, then they would not have been able to conceive of an education system to re-shape their children. Given these attitudes, it would have been impossible for Canadians to be convinced to listen to the Indians’ proposed solutions, and it is pointless for historians to lament that our predecessors did not do so. Of course, the proposal that we “just listen” to Native alternatives makes sense for the contemporary political activist-historian, but it is less effective as an argument for interpretation of the events of the past.

That leads to the final important question raised by these studies, and that is the question of whether the historian *should* be primarily an advocate for one side or another in contemporary public debate. Obviously that is a question that continues to be discussed with some heat in graduate seminars and common rooms. I happen to believe that advocacy is a legitimate role for historians (and that we are all advocates in one sense), but I would also argue that we need to be more open in communicating such purposes to a general public that still believes history is about uncovering truth, and facts are facts with no room for interpretation. It is also easy to twist ahistorical interpretations from our evidence if we become too involved in drawing information from the past purely for the purpose of constructing an argument that speaks to a contemporary issue. There is still a place for the historian who tries to understand the past on its own terms.

While Carter, Newell and Miller take contemporary problems and rights issues as their starting point, other writers of Native history prefer to begin with questions about the significance and role of culture. A few voices in the “first wave” of Native history argued that, because of cultural differences, Native peoples did not interpret the fur trade in the same way that Europeans (and later historians) did. Notably, Calvin Martin, in his controversial *Keepers of the Game* (University of California Press, 1978), may not have succeeded in convincing readers that eastern First Nations declared a “holy war of extermination” on fur-bearing animals for causing epidemics, but he did convince many that motivation and behaviour need to be assessed in their own cultural context. From what now seems to be an entirely common-sense starting point, Martin demonstrated that Native religious beliefs and world view need to be understood before we can begin to assess why people may have made the choices that they did. Subsequent attempts to understand aboriginal

cultures led some historians to discover anthropology and ethnohistory.³ At the same time, anthropologists were discovering history. In some cases, historical evidence simply provided a substitute data-set for the field notes of a previous generation's participant-observers. In other cases, a recognition that hunter-gatherer societies had not disappeared in spite of all expectations was leading to an interest in the question of culture change over time (diachronically, according to the new jargon). Anthropology meets history in the final four books considered here: Peter Carstens' *The Queen's People: A Study of Hegemony, Coercion, and Accommodation among the Okanagan of Canada* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, University of Toronto Press, 1991); Ingeborg Marshall's *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk* (Montreal and Kingston, London and Buffalo, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); Jennifer Reid's *Myth, Symbol and Colonial Encounter: British and Mi'kmaq in Acadia, 1700-1867* (Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1995); and Julie Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story* (in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned), (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1990).

Peter Carstens examines the history and contemporary dynamics of the society of the Okanagan people of the B.C. interior, arguing that the socio-economic structures of the colonial encounter placed the Natives at a power disadvantage that led to a modern sense of helplessness. He roundly chastises historians who interpreted the fur trade as a partnership, for example, and returns squarely to the older idea of dependency. Ingeborg Marshall's study is an encyclopedic compilation of the results of a lifetime of research about the Beothuk of Newfoundland. Those who have followed her work with interest will not find much new in the conclusions that the Beothuk disappeared through a combination of "cultural, historical, and biological factors" and not entirely European culpability (p. 442), but the wealth of data means the book is bound to remain a standard reference for years to come. Jennifer Reid's study is an extended essay in which the attitudes of the British and Mi'kmaq toward each other in colonial "Acadia" are used as a case study for understanding the late 20th-century problem of "alienation". Reid argues that our contemporary problem is rooted in a colonial encounter in which the British failed to recognize that the realities of North America were not the realities of Europe, while the Mi'kmaq were "estranged" from "white structures of valuation" (p. 111), which I took to mean that they didn't understand the British any more than the British understood them. Julie Cruikshank's presentation of the "life stories" of three Yukon Native women is the most subtle and complex book on the list. Here, three women tell the history of their own lives and their people's directly to the reader, on their own terms, raising important questions about cross-cultural concepts of history and epistemology.

All four authors clearly struggled with the problem of bringing an historical perspective to anthropological studies, some more successfully than others. Carstens and Marshall divided their books into separate sections to deal with

3 Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993); Laura Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada* (Winnipeg, 1994).

history independently of the more traditional anthropological concerns, but they have rather different ideas about what that history is. For Marshall, history is documentary evidence about Beothuk culture. The emphasis is on European sightings of the people; it is not a narrative of events with the Beothuk at center stage. It is interesting that in her ethnography section, she uses archaeological evidence to reconstruct what are essentially historical events, such as a late 17th-century population movement. However, for the most part, Marshall associates history with European documents and chronology; ethnology is associated with cultural description based on archaeological, linguistic and other non-documentary evidence. For Carstens, drawing historical evidence from documentary sources to construct a narrative is less important than interpreting those past events to demonstrate a bigger theory. The approach is neatly encapsulated in one example. "It matters little to sociological analysis", he writes, "that [Governor James] Douglas generally referred to the Indians as 'Native Indians' while [lands commissioner Joseph] Trutch usually called them 'savages.' In the long run they were both involved in the same socio-economic system" (p. 58). History is merely a place to explore the idea that structures are more significant than human agency in shaping human experience.

Reid addresses her assumptions about history more explicitly, as she claims to be approaching her subject from the perspective of "religion", in which history is apparently only one tool. However, she is never able to articulate clearly what history means to her. Historians must recognize the role of human imagination, she notes, but because historical sources provide only an "objective chain of events" (p. 12), the writing of history must become a creative act in which historians attempt to access the inaccessible from their sources. The way in which she puts these observations to use, however, is not much different from Carstens' use of history as a place to explore theory that addresses a contemporary problem. For example, she uses Northrup Frye's definition of God to explain what mid 19th-century Nova Scotians thought of themselves and their role in the New World (p. 101). Many historians will find these uses of history problematic, either as being ahistorical or making improper use of evidence, issues that do not seem to concern many anthropologists.

Julie Cruikshank presents the stories told by Yukon Native women as something of a counterpoint to EuroAmerican academic tradition in both history and anthropology. Her "cultural habit of looking for chronology" (p. x) is clearly not shared by the storytellers, and those stories make a very good case for the argument that oral traditions are most valuable for what they tell us about cultural identity and symbolism rather than for the "facts" they can provide. The stories are dense and complex although the language is deceptively simple; this is not a book that can be skimmed quickly. The differences between anthropologists' and historians' ideas on history seem small in comparison to the culturally-distinct concept of history that is developed implicitly through this book.

Ultimately, this selection of books provides a valuable cross-section of the recent development of Native historiography in Canada. The field has expanded dramatically beyond early interest in the fur trade; concerns about the impact of colonization have led to case studies of political, legal, economic and social

interaction. Debates over the relative dependency of aboriginal peoples on Europeans have emerged, as have debates over whether economic or cultural imperatives should be given primacy. New sources (notably oral) have been incorporated, sometimes merely as a footnote to traditional archival research, and sometimes as the focal point. A sense of moral outrage permeates much of the current writing. Among the historians considered here, political advocacy was an important motivation. For some of the anthropologists, political advocacy is also evident, but less in the sense of addressing a public policy debate and more in the sense of addressing a contemporary social problem (“alienation” for Reid and “helplessness” for Carstens).

Post-modernist angst appears in varying degrees. Reflecting the state of the disciplines as a whole, the historians represented here are less concerned with it than the anthropologists. Carter, Newell and Miller write as if facts are real and useful; evidence can be marshalled to argue a case through the process of logical cause and effect. Their emphasis is on the actions of individual human beings. Marshall may make use of a wider range of sources, but she also accepts the idea that evidence can be accumulated and weighed to arrive at some semblance of the truth. Delège, too, is a “modernist”, but for him reality exists in socio-economic systems or structures which clearly constrain human agency. Carstens is less sophisticated in his analysis, but he shares Delège’s emphasis on the structural and takes it one step further. Historical data are not evidence for cause and effect linkages over time, but rather evidence for the existence of those macro-structures that explain social relationships. Reid has been more clearly influenced by post-modernism. For example, she defines religion as a process by which we “construct... boundaries within which life must be lived” (p. 14); in other words, it is not *what* we define as giving meaning, but *how* we define it that matters. She also believes that “colonial language” can be explored outside of its historical context. And yet, throughout the book there are references (both explicit and implied) to “historical reality”, hardly a post-modernist construct. It is not clear whether she recognized the unresolved contradictions, but she is surely not alone in her uncertainty. Anthropologists in particular seem torn between seeing historians as engaged in a search for “reality” (as anthropologists once believed they were) or as engaged in a search for symbols and social constructions. As reflected in the books reviewed here, however, the balance seems tipped in favour of viewing the past as a source for evidence, whether that evidence is used to demonstrate human agency or structural hegemony.

While these books address a number of important issues, there are other questions lurking in the wings that deserve some thought. For the academic-as-advocate, is it enough to claim injustice and lay blame? Or is it also the critic’s role to suggest solutions? (Yes, I am a hypocrite.) Furthermore, is it effective to argue that things must change without addressing the first principles of your argument? Academic historians complain that history is no longer taken seriously in our society, but we have done a very poor job indeed of explaining to the public what it is we think we are doing and why. Historians could play a role in the public discussion of the concept of aboriginal rights, but have not done so, arguing instead that injustices are perpetrated simply because Canadians have not

recognized the natural justice of aboriginal rights. The problem is not entirely that Canadians have failed to recognize the concept, but rather that many have preferred the alternative philosophy of individual equality. If historians wish to play the role of advocates, they should begin by arguing why they believe aboriginal peoples have special rights.

Finally, although these books represent an interesting range of the directions Native history has taken, in another sense they represent only a limited perspective on what Native history might be. With the exception of *Life Lived Like a Story*, all emphasize only one aspect of that history (interaction with Europeans) and focus on one main body of evidence (European sources). Obviously this topic is of vital importance and great interest. On the other hand, we must not forget that North America had a very long history before the arrival of Europeans, and even after the encounter much happened within aboriginal societies that was not directly connected to European agendas. The problem, of course, is how to get at this history given the traditional tools and techniques. Is it even possible to put a Native community at center stage and tell its story with the Europeans appearing only tangentially? We need to be more imaginative in our conceptualization of Native history and to develop some methods that would perhaps enrich the writing of non-Native history as well.

KERRY ABEL