

## Seeing Themselves: Jean Barman's *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* as a Resource for the Region's People

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### Article abstract

*Dr. Barman's award-winning study is a resource to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of the Columbia River Plateau and the Pacific Northwest, an environmentally and culturally diverse region that now encompasses two countries, two provinces, three states, and many Indigenous communities. For Indigenous communities of the region, French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest provides an important context of colonialism, global economics, and the complicated nature of cross-cultural encounters. For non-Indigenous communities, the book also encourages an appreciation for the complexities of history often overlooked by celebratory histories of colonization. French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest is a resource in which people see themselves and their families in a complicated, accessible, and inspiring story of the past.*

## **Seeing Themselves: Jean Barman's *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* as a Resource for the Region's People**

**STACY NATION-KNAPPER**

### *Abstract*

*Dr. Barman's award-winning study is a resource to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of the Columbia River Plateau and the Pacific Northwest, an environmentally and culturally diverse region that now encompasses two countries, two provinces, three states, and many Indigenous communities. For Indigenous communities of the region, French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest provides an important context of colonialism, global economics, and the complicated nature of cross-cultural encounters. For non-Indigenous communities, the book also encourages an appreciation for the complexities of history often overlooked by celebratory histories of colonization. French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest is a resource in which people see themselves and their families in a complicated, accessible, and inspiring story of the past.*

### *Résumé*

*Le livre lauréat de la professeure Barman, French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest, portant sur une région diversifiée au plan environnemental et culturel et chevauchant aujourd'hui deux pays, deux provinces, trois états et de nombreuses communautés autochtones, représente une ressource pour les Autochtones comme les non-Autochtones du plateau de la rivière Columbia et du nord-ouest du Pacifique. Pour les communautés Autochtones de la région, cet ouvrage ouvre une importante perspective sur le colonialisme, l'économie mondiale et la nature complexe des échanges culturels. Pour les communautés non-Autochtones, il sensibilise les lecteurs à la complexité d'une histoire souvent négligée dans les récits triomphalistes sur la colonisation. French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest se veut ainsi un outil permettant*

*aux populations de se voir, elles et leurs familles, à travers une trame historique à la fois compliquée, accessible et digne d'inspiration.*

I first encountered Jean Barman's research for what became her book, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*, in the summer of 2012. I had just begun the first summer of my doctoral field research, working to understand how and why the history of the fur trade in the Columbia River Plateau had been created. In the course of my archival research and in interviews with fur trade reenactors and local historians, I was repeatedly encouraged to contact David "Chalk" Courchene, an Indigenous man living in Wenatchee, Washington who has spent years researching his family history and who is considered a local expert on fur trade genealogy in the region. Mr. Courchene agreed to meet with me and brought a friend, Sharon Seal, who is also interested in Plateau fur trade history. As we approached each other in the parking lot of a local restaurant, Mr. Courchene warmly shook my hand, introduced himself, and told me that Dr. Jean Barman was already writing a book on my dissertation topic. I was momentarily stunned to learn about Dr. Barman's most recent work, but proceeded with the interview. After a few hours discussing with Mr. Courchene and Ms. Seal the histories of the fur trade and their families, I was incredibly relieved when Mr. Courchene reassured me that Dr. Barman and I were, indeed, working on two completely different projects. What followed was two years of anticipation for what is an important contribution to North American fur trade historiography.

With her award-winning book, Dr. Barman has produced a resource to the people of the Columbia River Plateau and the Pacific Northwest, a large region that is environmentally and culturally diverse. The region now encompasses two countries, two provinces, three states, and hundreds of Indigenous communities, all entities with relevant source holdings, community knowledge, and political interests in the history of the fur trade and its people. For Indigenous communities of the region, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific*

*Northwest* provides important context of colonialism, global economics, and the complicated nature of cross-cultural encounters. In the course of my interview with Chalk Courchene, he reminded me that “it’s a layered story here” and that the many Indigenous and non-Indigenous historical actors in the region complicate national and regional narratives with which people are familiar, often obscuring ancestors of the region’s people from view. Mr. Courchene works to teach people about the complexities of the past. Dr. Barman’s book complements the oral histories he shares with his family, his communities, and the many researchers who come to him to discuss fur trade history.

Indigenous people like Mr. Courchene are often overburdened with interview requests from researchers, like me, who ask to learn from them. Dr. Barman’s book, which thanks Mr. Courchene, is one resource to which he and other Indigenous people can direct researchers to gain a solid groundwork of knowledge before meeting with them to discuss specific questions.<sup>1</sup> The penultimate chapter in the book is titled “To Be French Canadian and Indigenous” and it delves into a perceived ambiguity about identity that can be difficult for people to understand.<sup>2</sup> Barman explores some of the ways descendants of fur traders and Indigenous women in the region she calls the Pacific Northwest responded to others’ difficulties with ambiguity in multitudinous ways. Barman writes,

...some sons, more so than daughters, turned towards their mothers’ and wives’ indigenous inheritances. To the extent the offspring acted on the inclination by moving onto the reservations and reserves to which indigenous peoples were being confined, three main reasons can be intuited. Some did so in the course of exercising leadership, others out of a desire to belong, yet others in the interests of family betterment. Much as their parents had done before them, they thereby often acted as intermediaries to ease relations between newcomers like their fathers and indigenous people like their mothers.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Barman has created a resource for Indigenous people to deploy when faced with non-Indigenous queries into their family histories that would otherwise be time-consuming and intrusive. This book beautifully and clearly explains how members of a family with a French surname can be currently enrolled members of the Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation in Montana, a query posed to Indigenous people in the region. The book is also a family resource for some of the Indigenous people whose ancestors are within, and who, because of the effects of residential schools or assimilation processes that disrupted intergenerational knowledge flow may not have been exposed to some details of their family histories.

For non-Indigenous communities, the book encourages an appreciation for the complexities of history often overlooked in the many fur trade histories of this region that are celebratory of colonization processes and gloss over or entirely ignore the messiness of the past. Such a knowledge base has led to fur trade reenactments and the creation of textbooks and public school curricula that do not have space for experiences and people they cast as liminal, and thus reflect non-Indigenous peoples' wishes or hopes about their past and foster confusion about the historical path to the present. Dr. Barman offers a thorough investigation into the messiness of this region's intercultural past and challenges existing progress narratives.

Barman's work provides context for some of the political and economic challenges experienced in the region today. One such example is the renewal of the Columbia River Treaty. This treaty between the United States and Canada dates to 1964 and led to the construction of four dams for power generation and flood control in the Plateau. The treaty is being renegotiated now, and expires in 2024. Indigenous people were not consulted or involved in the original treaty negotiation between the U. S. and Canada, but are involved today, a point of confusion for some people in the region. Dr. Barman's book provides excellent historical background for all people interested in the treaty renegotiation process, to better understand who lives and has lived in the affected regions, how intercultural interac-

tion there has unfolded over the course of two hundred years, and why Indigenous people on both sides of the international border are working to be included in the treaty renegotiation process. By understanding more of the complexities of the past, the region's non-Indigenous people can better work with their Indigenous neighbors for the responsible negotiation of international agreements that affect all people in the region.

*French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* contributes new sources and innovative analysis to regional fur trade history. In chapter five, "Taking Indigenous Women Seriously," Barman writes that "[t]he presence of indigenous women explains much of what went on in the Pacific Northwest fur economy" and she argues that scholars of colonialism and ethnographers "have slighted indigenous women's lives in past time."<sup>4</sup> For Barman, "[t]aking indigenous women seriously means seeking out, so far as possible, their perspectives" and she did just that in her research for this book.<sup>5</sup> She demonstrates the agency Indigenous women in the Pacific Northwest exercised in their interactions with French Canadian fur traders, "persuading" them to settle in the women's home territory, negotiating between traders and also between traders and their families, and molding lives for themselves in the context of the global fur economy, occasionally in the aftermath of unsuccessful relationships with French Canadians.

The history of Indigenous women and French Canadian traders has been examined before, but Barman's contribution here is to the fur trade history of the Pacific Northwest, a region that is vastly different from the Saint Lawrence River Valley, the Missouri River, or the northern plains. While French Canadians who arrived to the Pacific Northwest may have been culturally similar to their counterparts elsewhere, the Indigenous peoples of the region are vastly different from elsewhere in North America, and even from each other, as is the landscape in which they encountered each other. This diversity makes for regionally specific history, demonstrating the importance of knowing and understanding the historical context of place.

Barman closes her final chapter, "Reclaiming the Past," with the story of fur trader Jacques Finlay's remains, which were unearthed in 1951 in an archaeological dig at Spokane House, the fur trade post he founded. Finlay's remains were held in a museum in Spokane, Washington for nearly twenty years, some of that time in a display case. Barman shares the story of how Jocko's descendants, Chalk Courchene's family members, worked for the respectful reinterment of their "Honorable Ancestor's" remains. Barman cites the story of Jeannette Whitford and her daughter, who "drove around to the reservations, looking for all the Finlays we could find, trying to drum up the interest to get him reinterred."<sup>6</sup> Today, women in the Pacific Northwest continue to bring together their Indigenous and non-Indigenous families, fostering respect for their communities and encouraging us to continue to tell the stories of French Canadian and Indigenous fur trade families that highlight, rather than over-simplify, the complex nature of Pacific Northwest fur trade history. In *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*, Jean Barman created a work of history that is exciting and relevant, in which people see themselves and their families in a complicated, accessible, and inspiring story of the past.

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