

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Jean Barman, *Iroquois in the West* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019)

Sean Carleton

Volume 90, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094792ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0020>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Carleton, S. (2022). Review of [Jean Barman, *Iroquois in the West* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 90, 307–308. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v90.0020>

**Jean Barman, *Iroquois in the West*
(Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's
University Press, 2019)**

JEAN BARMAN'S *Iroquois in the West* makes an important contribution to the fields of Indigenous history and fur trade history, but the book is also a significant study of labour and migration in the 19th century. Building on Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) scholar Audra Simpson's argument that Indigenous Peoples "labor to live a good life" while "enduring and pushing against the stress and structure of settler colonialism" (Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settlers States*, 2014, ix), Barman skillfully traces the stories of more than 600 Indigenous men who traveled west to work in the fur trade in the early 1800s. Though studies by Arthur Ray and Carolyn Podruchny have examined the complex lives of Indigenous Peoples and voyageurs in the fur trade during this period, Barman adds new layers by focusing specifically on the roles played by paddlers and trappers from the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation of the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Barman contends that these migrant workers supported and challenged mercantile capitalism while also "self-determining their lives" as they laboured far from home. (18) *Iroquois in the West* will appeal to anyone interested in issues of labour, migration, and Indigeneity.

Barman examines the lives of more than 600 Kanien'kehá:ka from three communities (Kahnawà:ke, Kanehsatà:ke, and Akwesasne) who journeyed west to work in the fur trade. While the book is not framed as a labour history, one of its key contributions is its detailed accounting of the experiences – the struggles and achievements – of Kanien'kehá:kamigrant workers. Barman organizes the book into four parts that trace the push/pull factors of fur trade

work, the labour process/relationship, the efforts by Kanien'kehá:ka migrant workers to build families and establish new connections in the west, and the increasing stress placed on those relations by the changing nature of settler capitalism by mid-century.

What we know about Kanien'kehá:ka workers comes from the surviving employment contracts that Barman uses, along with additional genealogical research, to trace the lives of paddlers and trappers who left home to work for the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. In terms of the labour process in the fur trade, Kanien'kehá:ka men worked in teams alongside white voyageurs. Eight to twelve men paddled large canoes for up to sixteen hours per day, sometimes making as many as 40 to 50 paddle strokes per minute. Most men signed contracts to go on two or three separate trips in a season, traveling hundreds of kilometres each time to trap and trade for furs that would then be shipped to Europe to be manufactured and sold on the global market. Some Kanien'kehá:ka chose to stay on in the west and were away from their communities for 20 years or more. Others permanently relocated to the west, built new lives, and never returned home. In recovering these important stories, as "slivers" from the "shadows of the past," (8) Barman emphasizes the courage and dignity of Kanien'kehá:ka migrant workers from this period.

Barman argues, though, that the Kanien'kehá:ka men "lived a contradiction." (50) The men were recruited and valued for their considerable skill, and the demanding working conditions helped forge strong bonds of brotherhood between crews that bolstered their self-confidence and ability to challenge unfair working conditions. Nevertheless, the men were caught up in what Barman calls the "Indigenous-white" divide. (40)

They had to constantly negotiate hierarchies of power and racialization with employers and white crew members as well as with the citizens of other Indigenous Nations they encountered along trade routes. These negotiations were not easy, and fierce disputes and even deadly conflicts often arose in the field.

Barman also pays particular attention to the lives of labourers who, like Louis Oteakorrie, chose to put down roots in the Pacific Northwest as the fur trade declined. In fact, more than half of the Kanien'kehá:ka workers Barman examines decided to stay in the west, with some establishing intimate and permanent relations with Indigenous Nations there, including a number of Salish communities in what is today British Columbia, Washington State, and Montana. With the transition to industrial capitalism later in the 1800s, many former fur trade workers went on to find seasonal work as guides and packers while others joined the emerging wage labour force. Much is known about the famous Kanien'kehá:ka ironworkers who, in the early-to-mid 20th century, travelled to New York City and elsewhere to build skyscrapers and bridges (David Weitzman, *Skywalkers: Mohawk Ironworkers Build the City*, 2010; Carlee Kawinehta Loft and Allan Downey, *Rotinonhsión:ni Ironworkers*, 2020), but Barman's book helpfully adds an earlier and less-known chapter to the history of Kanien'kehá:ka migrant labour.

Iroquois in the West highlights how Kanien'kehá:ka migrant workers in the 19th century made their own history, but not exactly as they pleased. Though Barman could have engaged more with relevant literature from the fields of Indigenous Studies and labour history/studies, she successfully shows how Kanien'kehá:ka men, under circumstances partly of their choosing, both endured and challenged settler capitalism to live a good life in the west. These migrant

workers and their stories are worth learning from and remembering.

SEAN CARLETON

University of Manitoba

Collectif, *Grève des stages, grèves des femmes. Anthologie d'une lutte féministe pour un salaire étudiant (2016–2019)*, (Montréal : Les Éditions du remue-ménage, 2021)

RÉUNISSANT UNE SÉRIE de textes (articles, témoignages, tracts) et d'images (affiches, autocollants), cet ouvrage collectif se présente comme une anthologie qui revient sur la « construction iconoclaste de la grève des stages » (19) initiée par les comités unitaires sur le travail étudiant (CUTE) au Québec entre 2016 et 2019. Ce mouvement a réuni plus de 60 000 grévistes au plus fort de sa mobilisation et a permis de créer des bourses dans seize programmes d'études au sein d'écoles de formation professionnelle et d'universités. L'ambition de l'ouvrage n'est toutefois pas de faire l'histoire rétrospective du mouvement pour présenter son déroulement et ses succès, mais de faire acte de mémoire pour contrer le risque que la grève des stages ne soit « effacée de l'histoire du militantisme étudiant » (23), comme l'écrivent les auteures Annabelle Berthiaume, Amélie Poirier, Etienne Simard, Valérie Simard et Camille Tremblay-Fournier dans leur introduction. Les revendications des CUTE présentent en effet une rupture majeure par rapport aux mouvements étudiants précédents. En mobilisant les apports des théories féministes et en inscrivant d'emblée la grève des stages comme une grève des femmes, les militant-es ne cherchent pas à (re)discuter la marchandisation du savoir, mais à penser l'exploitation des étudiantes et des étudiants dans et par le système de