

Rendezvous at the Straits: Fur Trade and Military Activities at Fort de Buade and Fort Michilimackinac, 1669-1781 By Timothy J. Kent

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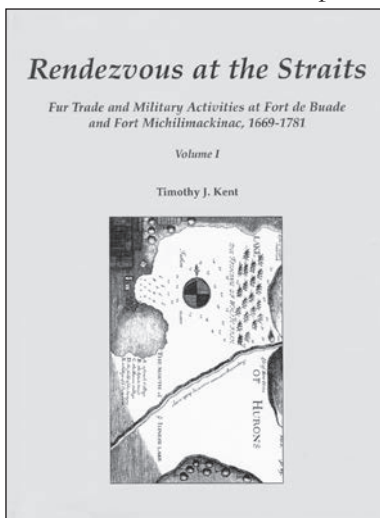
By Timothy J. Kent. Two volumes. Ossineke, Michigan: Silver Fox Enterprises, 2004. Volume I: xvii + 320 pp. Volume II: 331 pp. \$195.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-9657230-4-6.

Timothy J. Kent, an independent scholar and fur trade re-enactor, has produced a document-driven narrative account of the French and early British trade and military establishments in the Mackinaw Straits. This self-published study is a wonderful follow-up to Kent's earlier work on Fort Pontchartrain (Detroit). Similarly, *Rendezvous at the Straits* brings to light the early history of the region through a narrative soundly grounded in the documentary record. The two volumes will serve to encourage scholars to seriously reconsider the importance of Mackinaw to New France and pre-revolutionary British North America. By using the Straits as his focal point, Kent is able to explore the history of Fort de Buade (c.1670-1701) and the period of closed posts when military personnel and trade was concentrated at Detroit (c.1698-1714) and Fort Michilimackinac (1715-81), as well as British efforts to build a new fort on Mackinac Island during the Revolutionary War.

At the Straits, resources and geographical position gave the French and

later the British relatively quick and easy access to the Upper Great Lakes, the Illinois Country, and the Ohio River system. Likewise the easily accessible forts in the region drew First Nations to the area. Here traders, soldiers, and First Nations gathered, traded, warred, conducted diplomacy, and set out either for distant homes or in search of furs. The forts (de Buade and later Michilimackinac) acted not only as examples of French military presence but each served as an entrepôt for traders between the region and Montreal as well as an annual gathering place for Native people. As such, Kent's timely study illustrates the Straits' significance to European access to the resources and peoples of interior America. The two volumes are replete with government and civilian writings, as well as cargo manifests, translated from the French. This allows English-language readers to experience the history by seeing first-hand how both the fur trade and military life evolved in the region. Kent's intimate grasp of the details of history and material culture, as well as his love of the region, is readily apparent in his narrative.

While the strengths of *Rendezvous at the Straits* are many, there are some serious issues with the work. The overuse of lengthy quotations leads to repetition and in some cases to significant drift from the topic or period under discussion. The rendering of French units of measure into English units and the reordering of document cargo manifests is problematic. (vol. 1, p. 5) These simple authorial



changes may indeed make the measures and various lists more understandable to contemporary readers, but scholars of the fur trade are deprived of the opportunity to judge for themselves any nuances that may lie within the unaltered evidence. In my opinion it also weakens direct comparisons between documents from the French and British eras as well as over time. To Kent's credit, however, he does not hide the alterations he made to the documents.

The great use of primary sources combined with Kent's text and simple chronological structure has its advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is that the reading is quite dense, lengthy, and not always straightforward. By Kent's strict adherence to a chronological narrative, readers find themselves learning about trade goods at the Straits, then problems with the French-Indian trade and alliance system, next troop movements, and then back again to trade at the post. As such, readers get an occasional sense of *déjà vu*. Subheadings noting change of location or topic under discussion would greatly help, as would editing to reduce wordiness, eliminate repetitive sections, and improve narrative flow. Nevertheless, the framework allows readers to jump back and forth among chapters and between the two volumes without losing sight of Kent's overall narrative.

For me, the most significant problem with Kent's study is his lack of reference to contemporary sources or to interpretations of events. For instance, recent scholarship by Gregory Dowd and Richard White shows that events of 1763 were not simply a rebellion throughout the Great Lakes coordinated by Pontiac. Even the idea of rebellion against British rule in the region suggests that various First Nations had surrendered to British

authorities alongside the French in 1760-63. Other instances of older interpretations and phrasing that make their way into Kent's narrative render Native peoples as uncivilized and acting in inexplicable ways. This evidence belies the differences among Great Lakes First Nations and their myriad reasons for participating in support of or against European activities. I believe that Kent really needed to include a more thorough account and understanding of the Native side of the military alliance and fur trade being conducted in the Mackinaw region.

Criticisms aside, Kent's two volumes make a masterful documentary study of the Mackinaw Straits in a period largely ignored by academics. I hope that this work will be read and appreciated by more than local or amateur historians. It should serve to inspire all types of scholars interested in the French and British history of the Upper Great Lakes. After all, as Kent demonstrates, the French and even the British were economically reliant on the trade and military relationships established at the Mackinaw Straits.

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