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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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Rendezvous at the Straits:
Fur Trade and Military Activities at Fort de Buade
and Fort Michilimackinac, 1669-1781

By Timothy J. Kent. Two volumes. Os- 
sineke, Michigan: Silver Fox Enterprises,
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 (De-
troit). Similarly, Rendezvous
at the Straits brings to light
the early history of the re-
gion through a narrative
soundly grounded in the
documentary record. The
two volumes will serve to
encourage scholars to se-
riously reconsider the im-
portance of Mackinaw to
New France and pre-rev-
olutionary 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 per-
sonnel and trade was concentrated at De-
troit (c.1698-1714) and Fort Michilimackin-
ac (1715-81), as well as British efforts
to build a new fort on Mackinac Island
during the Revolutionary War.

At the Straits, resources and geo-
 graphical position gave the French and
later the British relatively quick and easy
access to the Upper Great Lakes, the Il-
ilinois Country, and the Ohio River sys-
tem. Likewise the easily accessible forts
in the region drew First Nations to the
area. Here traders, soldiers, and First Na-
tions 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 Mon-
treal 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 vol-
umes 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 seri-
ous 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 problem-
atic. (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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Bibliography:

