

## Culture



# Guy WRIGHT, *Sons and Seals: A Voyage to the Ice*, St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1984. 129 pages, \$9.95 (paper)

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of Canadian natives, not in fact but in law, had been added to the discussion on "equality of consideration".

As a lawyer, I found Dr. Asch's treatment of the legal material, such as his analysis of the evidence in the *Milurpum* decision, interesting. As an anthropologist, I kept wishing that Dr. Asch would examine more critically some assumptions inherent in his own analysis — the assumption that Native people form a political interest group; the assumption that entrenchment of aboriginal rights will effect a material change in the lives of Canadian Native peoples, the assumption that entrenchment of aboriginal rights is "essential" to Native political development.

This kind of in-depth analysis is, of course, beyond the scope of Dr. Asch's book. The real strength of *Home and Native Land* is its ability to make sense out of a great mass of political documentation and to articulate the issues involved in entrenchment of Native rights in a manner that should prove useful for those concerned with aboriginal peoples and their rights.

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Guy WRIGHT, *Sons and Seals: A Voyage to the Ice*, St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1984. 129 pages, \$9.95 (paper).

By Steve J. Langdon  
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In *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976), Marshall Sahlins suggested some of the meaning dimensions which "la pensée bourgeoise" uses to order phenomena. Sahlins' categories were presented in the course of developing his claim that culture (meaning) orders economy (utility) rather than the reverse. A symbolic analysis of the recent controversies in Western societies surrounding whaling and sealing activities would provide further revealing insights into the cultural meanings which organize "la pensée bourgeoise". A good starting point for such an analysis would be Guy Wright's *Sons and Seals: A Voyage to the Ice*.

This book, a revision of the author's Master's Thesis, is published by Memorial University's Institute of Social and Economic Research as No. 29 in the Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies series. It juxtaposes the mutually exclusive values of animal welfare protestors and Newfoundland sealers, while providing an ethnographic

description of a voyage to harvest harp seals which Wright joined in 1979. It explores the ambivalence and psychic resolution in the sealers' approach to the harvest as well as the differences in beliefs about the harp seal hunt found among and within environmentalist organizations.

The short book is divided into eight chapters, the middle four of which constitute the ethnographic core based on the author's fieldwork. In addition there are three appendices, one of which is the Canadian government's position on seals and sealing, while the other two present environmentalist positions. There are two sections of useful photographs, one with scenes from the hunt taken at the turn of the century and the other with photos Wright took during his fieldwork.

The first chapter introduces the topic, the development of Wright's interest in the issues, his methodological approach (participant observation and informal interviewing), and outlines the modest aims of the book. Wright straightforwardly presents his bias in favor of the hunters, but generally is restrained in his treatment of environmentalists. There is one accusatory and self-indulgent lapse late in the book (p. 108) where Wright implies that environmentalist leaders use the sealing issue to raise money to maintain their organizations. In general, though, there is a healthy and frank tone of naiveté and openness throughout in the author's writing about his own thoughts and emotions, which adds to the volume's believability and impact.

In Chapter 2, the commercial harp seal hunt is traced from its origins in Newfoundland in the 18th century to the present day. The pattern of sealing which persisted down to the last hunt in 1983 was established early. Merchants and large vessel owners hired on crews of fishermen and outporters and transported them as hunters to the "Front". There, the harp seals congregate each spring for breeding, at the edge of the pack ice in the Atlantic northeast of Newfoundland. The hunters would live on the ships, trekking out daily to club and skin the seals and transport them back to the ships, where they would spend most of the night cleaning and storing the pelts in the holds. The vessels and men would spend from four to six weeks at the ice depending on a variety of factors. Vessels were often overcrowded, and many men lost their lives on the hunt over the years.

Until the 1960s, little attention was paid to conservation of the seals. Over 250,000 pups were taken, annually, on average, from 1951 to 1970. By the mid-1960s the Canadian and Norwegian governments began controlling the harvests through

quotas. Wright traces the gradual decline of the harvest quotas on harp seals from 250,000 in 1970 to 127,000 in 1976. He suggests that lowered quotas appear to have stabilized the population and allowed for a slight increase in the harvest levels by 1979. What is puzzling about the recent quotas and lowered harvest levels is that earlier in the book Wright suggests that harvests of 400,000 animals annually were sustained over a twenty-year period from the 1840s to the 1860s (p. 11). In light of these figures, one is not totally convinced that over-exploitation of the herd occurred during the post World War II period. Obviously there is a great deal that is not known about the harp seal.

Environmentalist protests are traced by Wright to the mid-1950s, when two physicians made a film about "inhumane" aspects of killing the pup seals. Canadian naturalists and environmentalists sent observers to the hunts in the 1960s and continued writings which attacked the hunt. According to Wright, concerns about the survival of the seals (given the number of animals being killed) were raised, but more important was the manner in which they were killed (clubbing) in causing public outcry. Wright himself terms the activities "gruesome" and the terms "inhumane" and "barbaric" are repeatedly used by environmentalist observers to characterize the hunt. By the 1970s, a new wave of committed and activist environmentalists attacked the issue using protests on the sealing grounds and support from celebrities to bring the attention of the media to their cause. This strategy, accompanied by a massive protest letter writing campaign, eventually produced an European Economic Community ban on the importation of harp seal pelts in 1982.

In Chapters 3-6, Wright provides an ethnographic description of his sealing trip in 1979. In these chapters he effectively intersperses narrative of his own experiences and feelings with analysis of the characteristics of the men, the structure and economics of the sealing enterprise, and the meaning of the hunt to the Newfoundland sealers.

One of the topics Wright treats well is the socialization methods used by older sealers to bring a younger one into their midst. Wright traces a young boy's transformation from being an innocent schoolboy butt of jokes, to a novice sealer in extreme physical pain questioning his own manhood and the hunt itself, to an experienced sealer who has the hunt "in his blood", i.e. is committed to it as part of his identity.

Wright explores the form of separate reality created on ships and boats by those who work on them. Camaraderie and solidarity develop among

the sealers, built around the shared values of hard work, egalitarian relationships, competence, and mutual self-help. Return to port after the hunt carries with it the opportunity for story-telling and release in the bars, for reunion with loved ones, and for basking in the admiration of fellow Newfoundlanders who understand the difficulties the sealers have endured. It is a world of meaning sculpted by rural workers accustomed to a life that takes a toll but provides its own sense of self-worth and accomplishment.

The final chapter is a faintly embittered description of the demise of the fur seal hunt due to the EEC ban. Implicit are questions about relationships between values and actions and the impact of cultural beliefs on others. The Newfoundlanders' way of life has been dramatically altered by value twists in "la pensée bourgeoise" and the actions based on those twists. There is no question of utility (efficiency or cost) involved in the harp seal question, only meaning and the imposition of the meanings of one group of people on another group who do not share those meanings. The arbitrariness of cultural meanings is perhaps nowhere better portrayed than in the distinctions which "la pensée bourgeoise" has generated to label clubbing of seal pups "inhumane" and "barbaric" while tolerating strangulation of chickens and slaughter of lambs.

*Sons and Seals* provides a good introduction to sealing and to its meanings to Newfoundlanders, which will be useful to students and scholars of northern and maritime adaptations. But it also provides new data on the important questions about the relationships of values to actions, and the powerful, transformative impact of "la pensée bourgeoise" on peoples around the world who construct meaning differently.

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Eleanor LEACOCK and Richard LEE (eds.), *Politics and History in Band Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982. 500 pages, U.S. \$59.50 (cloth), U.S. \$17.95 (paper).

*By Colin Scott  
McMaster University*

Since the earliest conferences devoted to hunter-gatherers in the mid-1960's, there has been growing discontent with the inability of existing anthropological paradigms to address the lines of conflict between small-scale societies and impinging macro-political realities. Concerned in-