

From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing. By Judy Thompson. (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994, p. IX + 129, photographs, maps, preface, introduction, notes, bibliography, ISBN 0-660-14025-x.)

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otherwise. In this crucial respect, he fails to tell us who these people are and how they think. This analytical sterility has meant that the book is almost never referred to, quoted — or read — by historians.

Passing the Time in Ballymenone is a triumph of description, not of analysis. As such it belongs, not to any academic field or debate, but to what might be termed “border literature”, a rich territory shared by Eugene McCabe, Patrick Kavanaugh, Shane Connaughton, Colm Toibin and Seamus Heaney. Glassie brings this world of bogs, farmyards and back lanes, of obstructed and enclosed lives, to the page as well as any of these writers.

The book’s re-publication is to be welcomed as it deserves a new audience. Recent events in Northern Ireland may supply one, but, like the poems of Kavanaugh and Heaney, it is not a work of purely local interest. It is a superb and ultimately — for those who read it all the way through — a moving piece of writing. I was surprised at how absorbing I found it the second time around. However, while I would recommend it on this basis, I probably would not put it on a reading list or suggest it as a book to be read “about” Irish or Ulster culture or history. It is not a book to refer to for its arguments, bibliography or data: in fact, Glassie repudiates any such ambition. Nor is it a model to be emulated. It is a fine and valuable book, but not a very useful one.

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From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing. By Judy Thompson. (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994, p. lx + 129, photographs, maps, preface, introduction, notes, bibliography, ISBN 0-660-14025-x.)

Having always been fascinated by Native American dress and adornment, I jumped at the opportunity to review Judy Thompson’s book *From the Land: Two Hundred Years of Dene Clothing*. In this book, Thompson, who is Curator of Western Subarctic Ethnology at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, describes the clothing and personal adornment of the Gwich’in, Sahtu T’ine, (Hareskin, Bearlake and Mountain people), Slavey, Dogrib, Yellowknife and Chipewyan. These are Northern Athapaskan speaking people who live in the Mackenzie River watershed and have a long tradition of wearing and producing fine, ornately decorated clothing.

Thompson begins her study with a description of the skills necessary to prepare the skins, fur, sinew, porcupine quills and other decorative materials used in the manufacture of clothing. She underscores how important competence in those skills was, not only for survival, but also as a means of indicating the social position of Dene women. Next, Thompson provides us with a description of Dene aboriginal clothing styles and a discussion of the values attached to clothing and personal adornment. Well-tailored, elaborately decorated clothing was an indication of status based on accomplishment, while tattoos and face painting indicated group affiliation, emotional state or, in the case of men, records of war exploits.

In the third section of her book, Thompson discusses the changes in clothing style produced by Dene participation in the fur trade, and it is this discussion that I found particularly interesting. As Thompson writes in her introduction, “perhaps more than any other aspect of their material culture, clothing made by the Dene reflects their intimate and enduring relationship with the land” (p. xv). But with the advent of the fur trade, clothing underwent a transformation, so that it reflected not only the Dene relationship with the land, but also with the various entities of fur-trade society: the Scots and English traders, Iroquois, Cree and Metis employees, and French missionaries. As mirrored in the clothing, this relationship developed gradually. For example, the Gwich’in initially thought their clothing superior to that offered by the Hudson’s Bay traders and accepted only glass beads, dentalium shells, and various trinkets for decoration. Eventually, as the Dene became further involved in the trade, they accepted new fashions and began to alter their appearance in accordance with personal inclination and the dictates of fur-trade fashion.

Besides traders, two other groups influenced the development of post-contact Dene clothing styles. Beginning in the 1860s, the order of Grey Nuns set up mission schools in the region, where they introduced young Dene women to European fashions and taught them, among other things, the technique of using silk thread embroidery. The Red River Metis, who had a reputation for flamboyant and colorful clothing, were also influential in the creation of new Dene clothing styles. According to contemporary sources, young Dene modeled themselves in every way after the Metis, “from the cut of their hair to the style of their clothes” (p. 74). By the middle of the nineteenth century, the threads of these various influences had coalesced into a new fashion that Thompson labels the Mackenzie River Style (p. 76). The characteristics of this style were jackets, leggings, and dresses, cut in foreign patterns, made of smoked tanned hides or wool stroud, and decorated with floral designs in silk thread or beads.

The transition from the small commodity production of the fur trade to an industrialized economy brought further changes to Dene fashions. By the 1950s and 60s, quantities of manufactured clothing, available from Hudson's Bay retail outlets, had replaced much of the home-made clothing of earlier eras. Within this context, Thompson notes the small changes in style, such as the change from pointed-toed to round-toed moccasins and the introduction of the mukluk and Mother Hubbard, an ankle-length cloth worn by women. The history of the Mother Hubbard illustrates how broad economic developments influenced the evolution of northern clothing styles. In the nineteenth century a brightly colored cloth dress, first introduced to Hawaiian women by foreign missionaries, was picked up by Inupiat traders in western Alaska. Adding a hood and fur trim, Inupiat women developed the Mother Hubbard into a cover for a skin garment. At the beginning of this century, the Mother Hubbard was introduced to Inuit women living in the Mackenzie Delta region by the wife of an Inupiat trader. Eventually the style spread to the Gwich'in and today is worn by Inuit, Dene and non-Native women and girls throughout the Northwest Territories.

Today all Dene wear western manufactured clothing. Sports team clothing is especially popular among young people, who watch their favorite hockey team on television. At the same time, Dene women have maintained a strong tradition of producing beautifully decorated clothing, footwear, gloves and mittens that are much in demand among Natives and non-Natives alike. As in the past, this clothing continues to be a mark of cultural identity and a source of income for many Dene seamstresses.

In conclusion, Thompson has produced a beautiful and interesting study of Dene clothing. The text is clearly written, and the voice of Native women, and their commitment to their art is strong and clear. I think a bit more attention could be paid to the editorial process; at least one reference is not listed in the bibliography. The drawings and the black and white and color photographs are superb and add immeasurably to the text. For students of Northern Athapaskan culture, the photos alone make the book worth owning.

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