

***Common & Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains.* By Theodore Binneman. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. 288 p. ISBN 0-8061-3361-9 US\$29.95)**

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Theodore Binnema notes at the outset "Every work of scholarship is, in part, autobiography" (p. xiii). *Common & Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* is his synthesis of his academic career. His scholarly tome speaks of a researcher interpreting his observations for his peers. His treatise is divided into two broad chronological units, the first covers the years A.D. 200 to 1700 and the second the period from 1700 to 1806. They roughly coincide with the Dog Days and the Horse Days of Blackfoot history. The chronological context, spanning the years A.D. 200 to 1806, is unusual for a historian in that it attempts to read beyond the earliest archival documents. For this task he abandons anthropological history, with its preoccupation with culture, in favour of environmental history inspired by scientific methods, such as C¹⁴ and other atomic clocks. He attempts to catch a sidelong glance of an era on the northern plains when language was the only signal of ethnicity; the later chapters deal

with the era when race became the signal of ethnicity. The resulting narrative describes the characteristics that defined a battleground and the reasons people went to war over it.

Environmental history is grounded in ecological studies and draws heavily on geographical analysis, animal ecology, rangeland fecundity and archaeological data. So climate, carrying capacity and habitat are driving forces that affect the human community occupying any particular region. Understanding long-term environmental changes will give an indirect image of the human history represented in the archaeological record. The various parts of the environment form a kind of proxy archive that reveals the dynamics that confronted human communities. Broad generalizations might come of such studies, for example the general statement that climate change usually precedes social changes, but environmental history has its limitations because it cannot account for human agency. For an optimal view of this facet, the lens for discerning antiquity is the archaeological record. Coupled with archaeological data, environmental history is supposed to give "a sense of the depth, dynamism, and complexity of human history" (p. 56). However, this too has its limitation because archaeological explanations infer human behaviour from observations of artefacts. Any set of observations is amenable to more than one explanation and these must compete as the most plausible. Even the most popular explanation may not be correct.

Readers learn that on the northern plains, bison was an important country food. It figures large in historical records, and bison bones are conspicuously visible at many archaeological sites. The combination of climate, topography, rainfall, snow, wind and soils created an environment that was exceptionally fit for bison habitat because they fed on the grasses that produced high quality nutrition, albeit seasonally. The bison year, Binnema explains, resembled an hourglass and its constriction regulated the fate of bands dedicated to the chase. Nevertheless, its bounty more than offset the need to relocate on a continual round. Human communities orbited oases, such as the Black Hills, which were especially productive. Agriculture was present, and certainly provided a reliable alternative to a hunting economy where it was practicable, but it appears late in the archaeological record. Prior to the horse days, agricultural communities took full advantage of the fertile alluvial soils along the Missouri River and its tributaries. Some horticultural outposts reached as far north as the Cluny earthlodge village on the Bow River, although they were probably seasonally occupied. Bison peregrination, on the other hand, was a detracting factor for sedentism. Following the herds and practicing a mobile lifestyle persisted on the northern plains even after agriculture became practical.

Life on the northern plains had taken on an entirely different quality when horses and guns arrived. Europeans induced the ensuing revolution, but it occurred in their absence so the archives can only allude to the froth in the tide of history. Here Binnema writes of a power struggle between an alliance of Assiniboines, Blackfoot, and Cree advancing southward out of the Saskatchewan River basin into the Upper Missouri and being opposed by a southern coalition comprised of Kutenai, Shoshone and Crow. The prize was control of the vast mammalian resources that were the meat of the hunter's economy. As the balance of power shifted to the northern coalition, the inherent fissures of a shaky alliance contrived to cast it asunder.

Early in the eighteenth century European merchants had extended their trading network to edges of the northern plains. While doing so, they wrote the journals, letters and diaries that would eventually rest on archival shelves, so the latter chapters follow standard methods of historical research. Themes of trade, warfare, and diplomacy play out against a backdrop of a power struggle between aboriginal polities. As interaction became common, the traders reported on their dealings with their customers. Their correspondence alludes to individuals who held positions of authority in aboriginal diplomacy, however it is defined. The traders muse in their diaries about the characters that regularly visited their trading posts. With each passing year, decade and century, the documentary record grew more extensive, providing historians with more perspectives and impressions. For the era of the fur trade, Binnema has done the meticulous research that pulls together many obscure references, particularly those that rest in the Hudson's Bay Company archives.

Although Indians, especially Blackfoot, are the usual subjects, their oral narrations and histories are ignored as a source of history; a troubling oversight for an ethnohistorian. Theodore Binnema set out an ambitious objective to challenge his readers "to consider how their 'Indians of imagination' differ from the 'Native American of actual existence'" (p. xiii). However, environmental history of the northern plains is just that, and the human element is largely a summary of archaeological thought. Students of history get the standard treatment from a Canadian historian using the environment as a lens to capture another glimpse of Canada's heroic age.

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