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Einar Odd Mortensen Sr. with Gerd Kjustad Mortensen. The Fur Trader: From Oslo to Oxford House

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Einar Odd Mortensen Sr. with Gerd Kjustad Mortensen. 2022. *The Fur Trader: From Oslo to Oxford House*. Edited by Ingrid Urberg and Daniel Sims. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press. 224 pages. ISBN 978-1-77212-598-6.

Norwegian-born Einar Odd Mortensen's career as a fur trader began in 1925, when he travelled from his home country to Canada under the evidently mistaken impression that he had been offered a job by a Manitoba-based fur trading company. With no real knowledge of furs and equipped with a pair of skis that would break on his first day in the bush, Mortensen nevertheless managed to find work as an independent trader at a remote Manitoba trading post. In 1928, he returned to the urban setting of his birth city of Oslo to work in his family's furniture store. He never set foot in Canada again and passed away in 1969. However, he left an incomplete draft of a book on his experiences in Manitoba, written with a Norwegian audience in mind. Mortensen's unfinished memoir was edited decades after his death by his daughter-in-law Gerd Kjustad Mortensen and published by Gyldendal in Norway in 2007 as *Pelshandleren* [The Fur Trader].

The Fur Trader: From Oslo to Oxford House is a critical edition and translation of the Norwegian edition, co-edited by Ingrid Urberg and Daniel Sims. It contains a detailed and valuable introduction to Mortensen's narrative, with an epilogue by Gerd Kjustad Mortensen that gives more background on her father-in-law's life and the process whereby she and her husband, Einar Odd Mortensen Jr., revised the original manuscript into a book for publication with a major publishing house in Norway. Gerd Kjustad Mortensen also recounts her own trip to The Pas in 2011 and the contribution of the late Dr. Rosalyn Ing, an Elder of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, to the project of bringing *The Fur Trader* to a Canadian readership.

The Fur Trader describes a cultural encounter between margin and margin: a young farmhand from the periphery of Europe who spends three successive winters trading with First Nations and Métis communities in the vicinity of Oxford House and Pine Bluff in northern Manitoba. The thousands of kilometres separating these locations receive barely a mention: Mortensen is already in The Pas when his narrative begins, and the narrative ends abruptly with an exhausted Mortensen returning to Oxford House after a gruelling winter journey from Port Nelson. Ing's advice that deeper historical and cultural context was needed for English-speaking readers was wise, since Mortensen expected his readers to share both his background knowledge of his home country and many of his initial misconceptions about the Indigenous Peoples of

Canada, such as the notion that they were bloodthirsty “free sons of the Prairie” (4).

Urberg and Sims’ introduction thoughtfully addresses the more problematic issues with the memoir itself: compiled soon after Mortensen’s return to Oslo, it reflects the racism of the early twentieth century, and Mortensen frequently displays a patronising attitude towards his Indigenous customers. Rather than glossing over the various offensive terms and stereotypes found in the memoir, the editors explain the decision to keep the translation as close to Mortensen’s original as possible, outlining for instance why “half-breed” as used by Mortensen should not be understood as the equivalent of “Métis” (xviii–xx). Racial comments and slurs, as ugly as they are, reflect a colonial system that presented settlers as inherently superior and largely reduced Indigenous individuals to the “unnamed Indians” (cf. xviii) who feature so prominently in works like Mortensen’s.

The book’s introduction and annotations will also be helpful to readers interested in the Norwegian context in which *The Fur Trader* was written and its relationship to Helge Ingstad’s 1931 classic *Pelsjegersliv blandt Nord-Kanadas indianere* [*Land of Feast and Famine* 1933]. Ingstad’s bestselling book had a deeply formative influence on Norwegian wilderness literature and conceptions of northern Canada as a land where middle-class European men could go to experience true wilderness. Mortensen’s original draft manuscript likely predates Ingstad’s book but deals with the same period and the same preoccupation with seeking out authentic wilderness.

In describing the “Canadian wilderness” for a Norwegian audience, Mortensen is unafraid to portray himself humorously as a naïve and ignorant newcomer whose romantic notions of life in the bush have little or no basis in reality. He contrasts the image of urban Norwegian boys playing “Indians” together, with feathers in their hair and wooden tomahawks (58–59), with the deep poverty and rampant disease he finds in northern Manitoba communities. Mortensen is critical of settler exploitation of Indigenous Peoples and portrays many practices in an unflattering and cynical light; he wryly observes that many free traders sell alcohol at high prices under the guise of “medicine” and that even the Catholic priest who arrives to collect the “school tax” regularly sweetens the deal with a barrel of wine (69–70). He is skeptical of the residential school system (34) and the priests and missionaries who spend a minimum of time in the communities they compete fiercely with each other to save (31–33, 71). However, the exoticizing stereotypes of Mortensen’s childhood are often replaced by equally damaging colonial stereotypes that continue to be perpetuated in Canadian society today. For instance, the memoir describes gendered violence against Indigenous women and girls but simultaneously suggests that women are largely indifferent to violence against them (74–75), an attitude to Indigenous women that echoes the findings of the MMIWG report

in 2019 that a high level of violence against First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women has been systematically normalized in Canada.

One minor quibble with the book's layout is that the editors' annotations, which provide invaluable context for the memoir and its translation, have been relegated to the position of endnotes at the back of the book. These endnotes are not easily navigated, and the font size will pose accessibility issues for some readers. Given the importance of the annotations to the reader's experience, it would enhance the book to make them more visible. Overall, however, the collaboration between the editors and the Mortensen family has resulted in an engaging and relevant book that will appeal to a broad readership.

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