

Canadian First Nations in the Early North American Fur Trade

A Comparative Analysis of Historical Textbook Interpretations

SEAN CARLETON

Historical textbooks, commonly presented in narrative forms, are selective representations of the past that function as mediums for specific messages. In *Culture and Imperialism*, literary critic, Edward Said juxtaposes this theory with the interconnected nature of historical writing by arguing that “how we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and view of the present.”¹ Therefore, I argue that Canadian history textbooks are narrow cultural constructs and products of their time that depict politicized versions of ‘our’ past. Although many interpretations of Canadian history exist and the sweeping generalization of national historical writing is difficult, I will focus on how Canada’s textbooks have portrayed the roles Native peoples played in the early North American fur trade.² After briefly describing some of the early Canadian works, I will examine the influential texts by Harold Innis, Arthur Dorland, J. M. S. Careless, Arthur Ray, Paul Collins, Penny Clark and Roberta McKay, and Kenneth Campbell, Charles Menzies, and Brent Peacock.³ This historiographical analysis will clearly illustrate how the textbook image of Natives has been transformed over time from the nineteenth to the twenty-first

¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993,) 4.

² The majority of Canadian textbooks describe the fur trade in two components. First, they describe “contact” and bridge this event with the beginning of fur trade relations. Second, they explain the development of the fur trade from the European perspective without further mention of Native peoples. Therefore, to clarify, my analysis will be on the former component, which I appropriately call the early fur trade.

³ With the exception of Innis and Ray, this is a list of high school history textbooks that I have borrowed from Argyle Secondary School in North Vancouver, BC.

century. In a larger con-text, this exercise will also critically evaluate the historical methodology of Canada's history text-books.

High school textbooks are the only history books that most people will ever read, and therefore, and as a result they play a crucial role in creating popular images of Canada's historical actors that profoundly affect how these actors are viewed in the contemporary society. The schoolbooks of Canadian students during the nineteenth century virtually ignored Natives and their roles in the early fur trade, portraying them, if at all, as dirty, immoral, cruel, and animal-like beings incapable of becoming civilized. For example, W. H. P. Clement, in his award winning 1899 text, *The History of the Dominion of Canada*, took eleven sentences to sum up the "character and trade habits" of the "primitive Indian savage."⁴ In *Canada*, Richard Jones concluded his brief discussion of Native im-portance in fur trade relations by stating "much more might be said, but it would be tedious to do so."⁵ Moreover, John Hodgins' *A History of Canada* included a nine-page chapter on Indians in the fur trade, but prefaced it with the following note: "the teacher can omit this chapter at his own discretion."⁶ The title of Charles Roger's book *The Rise of Canada from Barbarism to Wealth and Civiliza-tion* nicely captures the popular intellectual sentiment pertaining to Natives during the ethnocentric and imperialistic nineteenth century.⁷ For the majority of early Canadian history textbooks it is simply not admitted that Native peoples during the early fur trade, or any other era, had a point of view worth trying to understand.

In *The Fur Trade in Canada*, arguably one of the most influential Canadian history texts of the twentieth century, Harold Innis strongly argues that Native peoples played an important role in the early fur trade. Innis' reinterpretation deserves respect and admiration for its innovative contribu-tion; however, his work is culturally biased and fundamentally flawed. For example, he argues that the fur trade was the "line of contact between a relatively

⁴ W. H. P. Clement, *The History of the Dominion of Canada* (Quebec: Ramsey, 1899), 45.

⁵ Richard Jones, *Canada*, (Ontario: McClain, 1892), 12.

⁶ John Hodgins, *A History of Canada*, (Ontario: T. Eaton Co., 1900), 31.

⁷ Daniel Francis argues in *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* that imperialist authors purposely minimized roles played by Aboriginal people. See chapter two, "Your Majesty's Realm: The Myth of the Master Race."

complex [European] civilization and a much more simple [Native] civilization.”⁸ As well, he states that Native peoples quickly grew dependent on European technology and “became locked into a network in which they served as the primary collectors” of a staple for a world economy.⁹ Innis elaborates his interpretations in purely economic arguments without trying to understand the dynamics of early fur trade relations from the Native perspective. As a result, throughout his Eurocentric account “Native people remained economic stereotypes only minimally disguised in feathers.”¹⁰ Therefore, although Innis’ interpretation assigned Native peoples a significant role in the history of the Canadian fur trade the student is left with the perception that they were simply economic pawns exploited by European traders.

The most outlandish and unfortunately widely used history textbook is Arthur Dorland’s *Our Canada* that indoctrinated Canadian classrooms throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Dorland’s analysis of early fur trade relations primarily emphasizes Native racial inferiority as justification for the superiority of the Euro-Canadian population. In essence, Dorland is attempting to define the Canadian identity by comparing it to the negative attributes of Native society. For example, he racially generalizes Natives as “fierce and energetic people [who live in surroundings] swarmed with dogs, children and half-naked savages.”¹¹ Dorland also describes Native peoples as “Chinese Cannibals” still living in the Stone Age who when generously presented with food by Europeans “ate like famished animals in an orgy of gluttony.”¹² In the conclusion of this outrageous synopsis he poses the question “which race, white or Indian, conferred the greatest benefit during the early fur trade?”¹³ Dorland answers his own question by stating that the Indian’s habits of life became upset and “as he realized the cultural supremacy of the European he grew more dependent

⁸ Harold Innis, *Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 373.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁰ This quote is from a critique of Innis’ work in Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada’s “Heroic Age” Reconsidered* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1985), 184.

¹¹ Arthur Dorland, *Our Canada* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1949), 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

on the white man's civilization."¹⁴ Although *Our Canada* is the most radically racist textbook interpretation, many of the misconceptions formed in this work are reinforced by subsequent scholarship.

J. M. S. Careless' *Canada: A Story of Challenge* is one example of how textbooks perpetuated past misconceptions about Natives and their roles in the early fur trade. For Careless, the Indian is an embodiment of Canada's "prehistoric man."¹⁵ By using the term "prehistoric" Careless implies that Native peoples had no history worth discussing until the "red man was discovered."¹⁶ In chapter two, Careless describes how with their superior civilization the white race could go forward and master the raw land, as the Natives had never done.¹⁷ He further argues that while seeking the white man's superior weapons and other goods such as traps and kettles Indians during the early fur trade became "extremely dependent on Europeans for their ultimate survival."¹⁸ Yet, as Careless claims the "chief weakness [really lay in the] inferiority of Indian society itself."¹⁹ Therefore, as European customs penetrated the more primitive Indian, "his life simply collapsed and fell apart as it met a more advanced civilization."²⁰

Students paying attention to Careless' text as well as to larger social trends would have been confused by his claims of prolonged Native inferiority due to the fact that starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s Native peoples began to assert themselves and become politically active.²¹ This movement facilitated a general historical trend to reevaluate the past interpretations by incorporating new information provided by ethnohistorians. The most prominent and outspoken of which was influential Native historian Arthur Ray. In "Fur

¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁵ J. M. S. Careless, *Canada: A Story of Challenge* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), 17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 30.

²¹ Bruce G. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing from Charlevoix to the Present," *Canadian Historical Review* LXVII, no. 3 (1986): 324.

Trade History as an Aspect of Native History,” Ray argues that past texts have portrayed Indians as little more than savages without intelligence or beauty and consequently Native peoples have been forced to endure a history that “shames them, destroys their confidence, and causes them to reject their own history.”²² Ray states that Indian people have not figured prominently in works dealing with the fur trade because historians such as In-nis, Dorland, and Careless have been primarily concerned with studying the fur trade as an aspect of Canadian economic or European imperial history.

In the main body of Ray’s piece, he deconstructs many of the past stereotypes concerning Native peoples in order to demonstrate the complex nature of Indian-white relations in the context of the early Canadian fur trade. First, he argues that students need to abandon the assumption that Indians were ruthlessly exploited and cheated in all areas and periods by white traders.²³ In fact, Indians, contradictory to the popular image as dumb savages, had a “sharp eye for quality merchandise” and traded competitively.²⁴ As well, Indian groups perceived and responded eloquently to changing economic situations which destroys the distorted view that Native societies were rigid and incapable of responding to change and thus inevitably, as Careless states, collapsing as they met a more advanced European civilization.

Ray’s work marks a turning point in Canadian and Native scholarship in that it challenged many erroneous and overly simplistic assumptions. However, many schools and textbook authors were apprehensive about radically changing Canada’s history. Nevertheless, Ray was the catalyst for a changing interpretation of Native peoples as can be seen in *Exploration Canada*, by Paul Collins. This version presents a politically correct interpretation of fur trade relations with the first nine chapters dealing specifically with Native peoples. In fact, the title page for chapter nine, “People of the Fur Trade,” is the same cover art for

²² Arthur Ray “Fur trade History as an Aspect of Native History,” *Readings in Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*, edited by Douglas Francis and Donald Smith (Canada: Nelson-Thomson, 2002), 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

Arthur Ray's *Indians in the Fur Trade*.²⁵ The best example of Ray's influence, however, is in the authors' outline of the trading process, a first in Canadian curriculum texts. A concise description is given by Collins:

First, the Indian chief presented a bundle of his best furs . . . as a gift of friendship to the colonial representative. Once these furs were received it was the representative's turn to give gifts to the chief. After this mutual gift exchange a feast was provided and both Natives and Europeans ate as equals in celebration of friendship. After the feast, the trading began in which both parties were highly demanding and selective.²⁶

Although the author's work allows Native peoples to play a more active and equal role in the trading process they once again disappear from the rest of the pages dealing with the fur trade, which are dominated by three European groups: merchants, *courier de bois*, and missionaries. Thus, although Ray's ideas clearly influenced this work, the Eurocentric image of Indians as historical objects remains largely unfazed.

Given the historical trend to portray Native peoples in a more balanced fashion, *Exploration Canada* had a relatively short shelf life in Canadian schools being quickly replaced by the textbook I was taught from, *Canada Revisited* in 1992. This work, by Penny Clark and Roberta McKay is primarily focused on the development of government in Canada; however, it is also a major social history of Canada and thus places significant emphasis on Native roles in the fur trade. Before beginning their discussion of fur trade relations, the authors warn students about the dangers of ethnocentrism, which had been the central pillar or dogma for the majority of early textbook interpretations.²⁷ They argue that Native peoples were "not ruthlessly exploited [by the Europeans but rather] the Natives

²⁵ Moreover, Collins' text is one of the first school-books to refer to the beginning of early Indian-white trade relations as "contact" rather than the discriminatory term of "discovery." Paul Collins, *Exploration Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979), 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁷ Penny Clark and Roberta McKay, *Canada Revisited* (Canada: Arnold, 1992), 92.

supported them with furs, food, and canoes” and often saved their lives from the harsh Canadian conditions.²⁸ Although, the authors mention European merchants, courier de bois, and missionaries they continually reinforce the claim that while Natives grew dependent on Europeans for some goods, including alcohol, on the whole “both the British and French were equally depend-ent on the Natives for survival,” a claim that previous texts vigorously avoided.²⁹

It is clear that great strides have been made in tailoring the past textbook perceptions of Na-tive peoples, however, even in the more balanced *Canada Revisited* Natives are viewed as a phase and not as continuous actors in the history of Canada. As a result, a revolutionary new textbook has just been introduced into my local high school called *BC First Nations Studies* which was funded by the BC Ministry of Education and written by Kenneth Campbell, Charles Menzies, and Brent Pea-cock in 2003. This textbook attempts to teach students Canadian history strictly from the Native perspective. For example, the text begins by explaining in an introductory chapter called “The Voice of the Land is Our Language” that Native history is contained within the oral traditions of their sto-ries and songs which are the “foundations and identity of First Nation culture.”³⁰

With regards to the fur trade, the authors argue that “European newcomers were dependent on First Nation communities” not only for furs but also for services such as guiding, carrying mail, and most importantly supplying much of the food they required for daily survival.³¹ This breaks the image of not only native dependency but also of mutual dependency as proposed by Clark and McKay.³² As well, it is stated that First Nations communities incorporated the newcomers into the fabric of their lives, utilizing the new trade goods in ways, which “enhanced their societies such as using iron to replace stone axes

²⁸ Ibid., 94.

²⁹ Ibid., 95.

³⁰ Kenneth Campbell, Charles Menzies, and Brent Peacock, *BC First Nations Studies* (Canada: BC Ministry of Education, 2003), 5.

³¹ Ibid., 39.

³² Ibid., 31.

and guns to augment the bow and arrow.”³³ Notice the use of more appropriate language such as “augment” that implies European technology was used to strengthen Native practices and not to replace their traditional cultural methods. As well, the authors argue that Europeans recognized the trading expertise of the First Nations and thus the newcomers were largely integrated into the First Nation traditional trading system leaving them “no choice but to ne-gotiate on Native terms.”³⁴

Arguably the single most important case of reconciliation in Canada involves historical relations between Canada’s Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Through the previous historiographical analysis it is clear that the way First Nations have been portrayed in textbooks has undergone a radical transformation and thus historical reconciliation is fast becoming a reality. For example, in the early works Natives were depicted as mere animal-like savages who quickly grew dependent on the superior civilization of the white European. In contrast, the most recent work, *BC First Nations Studies*, rejects these past misconceptions and negative stereotypes about Native peoples during the early fur trade era and promotes Canadian history strictly from the Native perspective. Unfortunately, this transformation is not without consequence.

Historical textbooks have the opportunity to play a positive role in the educational development of our nation because they promote knowledge and literacy among Canadian children. However, I am concerned that the methodology of these texts is inhibiting a comprehensive understanding of Canada’s past. It is inappropriate to describe unequivocally the elements of our past in absolute terms and any attempt to do so ignores the multi-faceted nature of history. As a result, I feel that text-books have presented a dangerous and parochial view of Canada’s First Nations as either depend-ents or active participants in polarized terms. Such a view perpetuates the clouded and problematic dichotomy of image and historical actuality that created disillusionment between First Nations and Canadians in the first place. It is undeniable that Native people have suffered great injustices from the negative stereotypes promoted by Canada’s textbooks. More importantly, however, the true vic-tims

³³ Ibid., 42.

³⁴ Ibid.

in this sad process are the Canadian children whose minds have been continuously colonized by transformed, yet equally, politicized interpretations of the past presented to them in their methodologically flawed history textbooks.³⁵ Therefore, I suggest that future textbook authors adopt a more balanced and holistic methodology to provide the adults of tomorrow with, more adequately, diverse answers to complex means rather than narrow ends to historical questions.

***Sean Carleton** was a student at Simon Fraser University at the time of the original publication. The 2005 edition of *the Atlas* was a joint venture by UBC and SFU undergraduates; for more detail, please see the Chairman and Editor's Notes.

****Media Editor's Note:** Minor formatting and punctuation errors in the endnotes were fixed to bring the citations into closer accord with Chicago Manual of Style guidelines. The errors of information omission that remain result from the original publication and not this transcription.

³⁵ I feel that a more valuable textbook approach would be to include a critical analysis of elements from each interpretation instead of promoting the hegemony of one over the other in conclusive terms.