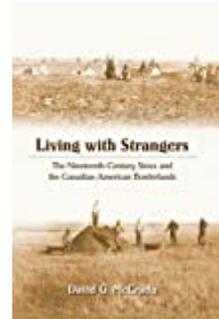




**David G. McCrady.** *Living with Strangers: The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xvi + 168 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3250-1.



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## Neither Canadian nor American Am I

On a frigid December night in 1869, a small band of Piegan Indians stole twenty-seven mules and one horse belonging to Hugh Kirkendall, a Montana freighter. Although the theft took place on the U.S. side of the border, it was unclear whether the Indians were American or Canadian, as the domain of the Piegans (one of the three member groups of the so-called Blackfoot Confederacy) straddled the international boundary. The suit that Kirkendall later filed in the U.S. Court of Claims came to rest squarely on the Indians' identity: if they were American (as the freighter insisted) and thus under the nominal control of the federal government, Kirkendall and his heirs were entitled to compensation for the theft. If, on the other hand, the Piegans were Canadian (as the defense maintained), Kirkendall's only recourse was to take up the matter with officials in Ottawa.[1]

In his new book, historian David G. McCrady probes similar questions about the implications of borders and border-making for indigenous peoples of North America, though he focuses his attention slightly eastward, and on a people rarely considered bi-national: the Sioux. Certainly one of the book's greatest contributions is its

conclusive demonstration that the Sioux—described recently by one scholar as “America’s Indian”—moved regularly between the United States and Canada.[2] McCrady traces their clever exploitation of the border (established in 1818 by the British and American governments, but rarely enforced until the 1870s) throughout the nineteenth century—using it to strengthen their position in the robe trade (by pitting Canadian and American factors against one another), and later to avoid annihilation at the hands of the U.S. Army following the Indian triumph at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

*Living with Strangers* is at once both more and less than it seems. On the plus side, McCrady (like Jeffrey Ostler in his recent book) proves that there is still much that can be said about the Sioux, despite the proliferation of studies about them.[3] Beyond merely establishing the geographical mobility of the Sioux, McCrady's book illuminates their complex interactions with other indigenous peoples in the northern borderlands, among them the Blackfoot, the Crows, the Assiniboines and especially the Metis. As McCrady explains, Sioux relations with these peoples fluctuated wildly, characterized sometimes

by brutal violence and at other moments by sustained periods of accommodation. Such context adds invaluable understanding to Sitting Bull's flight to and eventual return from Canada following his defeat of Custer's Seventh Cavalry on the Montana plains: though the Sioux had intimate ties to many peoples north of the border, their prolonged stay in the Cypress Hills country brought them into conflict with others, fueled especially by competition for the dwindling bison herds. According to McCrady, Indians—and not whites—ultimately forced Sitting Bull's return to the United States in 1881.

More broadly, McCrady's book marks a significant contribution to the study of the northern borderlands. Long ignored by most North American historians, scholars from Canada and the United States have recently discovered the unbroken region that straddles the forty-ninth parallel, represented most notably in works by Beth LaDow and Sheila McManus, as well as a new anthology edited by Sterling Evans.[4] For his part, McCrady does a wonderful job in explaining what happens to indigenous peoples when borderlands become "bordered lands." [5] And in developing his argument, McCrady masters the secondary literature and extensive documentary evidence from both the United States and Canada, using archival material located in repositories ranging from Alberta to Oklahoma (and seemingly everywhere in between). Developing such historiographical bilingualism is no easy feat, but the payoffs, as shown in *Living with Strangers*, are legion, most especially in transcending the provincial narratives of the singular nation-state.

But the book has shortcomings, too. For one thing, while one must admire McCrady's concision, the book's brevity has some consequences for the reader. For instance, two of the most significant episodes in Sioux-U.S. relations receive only passing mention. Although the Dakota Conflict of 1862 and the Battle of the Little Bighorn have been well (and often) treated elsewhere, given their importance in pushing various Sioux bands across the forty-ninth parallel, one wishes McCrady had spent more time in describing them, particularly for the non-specialists in his audience. Similarly, McCrady exhausts little energy in developing some of the central figures that populate the book. Indeed, individuals like Crowfoot (a Blackfoot headman), James Walsh (an officer in the North-West Mounted Police), and even Sitting Bull himself remain remarkably distant, lost at times in the author's effort to keep the focus on the seemingly bigger story of border-making. There are thus few narrative hooks that ensnare the reader.

For another, one detects a faint sense of Canadian triumphalism, beginning with the epigraph which contains a statement made by a Yanktonai headman to a Canadian surveyor in 1874: "My heart is not bad, my heart is glad to see the English, the English are good, but the Big Knife [the U.S. government] is bad, they kill our children." While U.S. Indian policy of the time was unquestionably disastrous, it is increasingly difficult to cast the Dominion in a much more benevolent role. To be sure, the United States visited unconscionable violence on its native peoples (see Sand Creek, Washita, the Marias River, and Wounded Knee, for starters), but starvation—as used by Canada's Indian Department in the 1880s to force the Blackfoot, among other groups, onto reserves—is merely another form of brutality. This is noted not in any attempt to exonerate U.S. civilian and military leaders (a dubious and at any rate impossible task), but rather to suggest the broader failure of North American Indian policy in this period, a sentiment with which McCrady would probably agree.

Notwithstanding such criticisms, *Living with Strangers* is highly worthwhile. McCrady has written a careful, thoroughly researched ethnohistorical study that is sure to serve as a model for other scholars (in North America and elsewhere) interested in the importance of borders in the lifeways of indigenous peoples.

#### Notes

[1]. See *Hugh Kirkendall v. The United States* and the Blackfeet and Piegan Indians Records 1896-1910, Montana Historical Society, SC 83.

[2]. Francis Edward Flavin, "Red, White, and Sioux: A History of 'America's Indian'" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2004). Flavin is less concerned with the actual territorial range of the Sioux than their popular and enduring status in the United States as the quintessential "American" Indians.

[3]. Jeffrey Ostler, *The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[4]. See Beth LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Sheila McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); and Sterling Evans, ed., *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian West: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-Ninth Parallel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska

Press, 2006).

[5]. For this phrasing, and more on the concept itself, see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Border-

lands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999), pp. 814-841.

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