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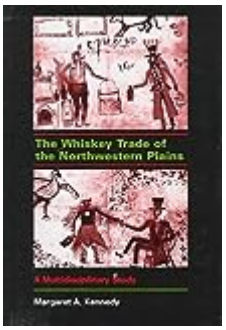

Margaret A. Kennedy. *The Whiskey Trade of the Northwestern Plains: A Multidisciplinary Study.* New York: Peter Lang, 1997. x + 181 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-2596-2.

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Published on H-Business (June, 1998)

Historical archaeologist Margaret A. Kennedy's *The Whiskey Trade of the Northwestern Plains* is a short multidisciplinary study which explores the final boom phase of the Indian trade economy on North America's northwestern plains. It focuses on the buffalo robe sector of the fur trade industry, with special emphasis upon "whiskey trade" activities in the Upper Saskatchewan River region of Western Canada–just over the Montana border–from 1865 to 1875. Her narrative highlights social aspects and material culture by interrogating archaeological, documentary and oral history records from Euramerican and Amerindian cultures. Kennedy proclaims her study to be an attempt, "among other things, to portray the different attitudes and perceptions held by the numerous and distinct parties who were directly involved or affected by the trade" (p. xviii). The resulting study provides an interesting historical overview of an ephemeral frontier economy precariously balanced between Euramerican settlement and Amerindian independence.

Kennedy divides her study into five primary chapters: four with discipline-dominated foci (history, ethnology or archaeology); one, a comparative methodology assessment. Each of the first four chapters represents a historical overview covering the entire period via the perspective of a particular disciplinary approach. As one might expect, this choice of organization results in a repetitive, somewhat disjointed collection of narratives. Professor Kennedy's "hope that by presenting and comparing the different perspectives…a more richly textured mosaic…will emerge" (p. xviii) appears to override any interest in encouraging multidisciplinary readability. A better narrative flow could have been achieved by integrating all of the pertinent data into one comprehensive narrative (as partially evinced in her adept treatment of the chapter on material culture) and concluding with a comparative methodological analysis. What this work successfully provides is a fact-filled historical sketch of the Indian trade on the northwestern plains from the mid-1820's through the extermination of the last great buffalo herd in 1882. It is an informative regional overview of a cross-cultural socioeconomic system in which Amerindian and mÃ©tis (mixed-blood) participants produce furs, robes, hides and meat to exchange for weapons, blankets, clothing, tools, accouterments and whiskey peddled by Euramerican frontier merchants who offer access to the world market. Additionally, Kennedy explains the special role of the mÃ©tis "commercial-capitalist" economy in providing independent trader, commercial meat hunter and industrial robe processing services. In the process she touches on virtually all major events impacting this world.

An emphasis on factual presentation at the expense of

historical analysis does, however, detract from the historiographic value of this work. There is no apparent concern with investigating, or at least attempting to explain, many of the relationships between significant presented facts. For example, Kennedy identifies the U.S. financial panic of 1873, fur market sales slump of 1874, spiraling inflation in trading post robe prices from 1874 through 1875, and auction house price crash in the summer of 1874 (p. 42). No explanation is offered for the divergence between market demand for buffalo robes and prices paid in the field. Extermination of various buffalo herds, including the last great northern herd in 1882, is also delineated at some length (p. 43-44), as is the failure of buffalo robe prices to recover between 1875 and 1882 (p. 42). No causal interpretation is attempted to account for the permanent depression in field purchase prices through the end of this trade: did the industry's change from field (native) to industrial (urban) tanning play any part?

Equally troubling is Professor Kennedy's underlying inference that chronic alcohol abuse amongst northwestern plains tribes of this era serves as the cause for their social and political degeneration. Historical records present consistently clear indications that alcoholism amongst independent Amerindian peoples initially stems from internal causes; both individual and group desires to escape cultural restrictions and responsibilities.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is its ability to juxtapose highly dissimilar economic systems (i.e., nomadic hunting, mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism), demonstrate their fleeting state of mutualism, and outline the eventual usurpation of each as our present economic system develops. Particularly enlightening is Kennedy's portrayal of the role played by the U.S. Civil War in stimulating American industrialization, facilitating the eventual undermining of Great Britain's economic dominance on–and the Hudson's Bay Company's profits from–the North American frontier, and fueling an accelerated frontier settlement and urbanization pattern. Although poor editing and a superficial index detract from overall presentation, *The Whiskey Trade of the Northwestern Plains* is a useful historical overview of the Indian trade among the northwestern plains Indians. Extensive use of primary sources and archaeological studies make this book notable; its bibliography and footnotes form a valuable tool for those interested in more in-depth study. Margaret A. Kennedy's archaeological illumination on trading post sites during the boom period in alcohol trafficking helps to clarify our understanding of this volatile business environment and represents a meaningful contribution to the historiography on the Indian trade.

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Citation: Steven D. Swearingin. Review of Kennedy, Margaret A., *The Whiskey Trade of the Northwestern Plains: A Multidisciplinary Study.* H-Business, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

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