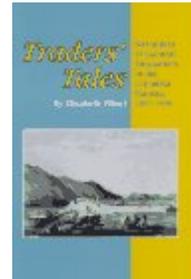


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Elizabeth Vibert. *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846.* Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. xviii + 366 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-2932-7.



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Northwestern North America is often forgotten in the historiography of the early American Republic. Studies of the area in the early nineteenth century are usually placed under the headings of Western History, Fur Trade Studies, or Native American Studies. Several qualifying factors suggest that the area encompassing the Columbia and Fraser River watersheds should not be neglected in future early American studies. *Traders' Tales* ends in 1846, the year that decades of diplomatic wrangling between the United States and Great Britain resulted in a division of the Columbia Plateau at 49 degrees north latitude. The place was full of rivalries: between Canadians, Britains, and Americans; between the Pacific Fur Company based in New York (defunct by 1813) and the North West Fur Company based in Montreal (later merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821); between diverse Indian peoples such as Umatillas, Cayuse, Nez Perces, Yakamas, Kutenai, and Salish groups among others; and last, but not least, between fur traders and their Native clients.

It is the last relationship, between fur traders and Columbia Plateau Indians, that is the subject of Elizabeth Vibert's important first book. Analyzing over thirty accounts left by British and American traders active in the region, her principal concern is one that all ethnohistorians, and indeed all historians, encounter in research and writing. Namely, how much credence should we place in the writings and interpretations of Europeans

or Euro-Americans (almost always male) who are often our principal surviving sources about a given time, place, and populace? This issue is particularly important in writing history concerning Native peoples. Not only did the Columbia Plateau traders possess significant cultural baggage along gender, class, and racial lines, but they attempted to describe Indian cultures and natural environments that they poorly understood at best. Vibert, a professor of history at the University of Victoria, cautions us, therefore, that what one gets when reading the papers and stories left by these traders is really a narrative "of European perceptions of colonized peoples" (p. xi), rather than a reliable portrayal of Indian customs and culture.

Vibert's goal is not to drag long dead European males through the mud by condemning everything they wrote as worthless. Rather, she seeks to understand these men on their own terms, and by so doing extract that which is of value in trying to understand and reconstruct the lives of Native peoples in the interior Northwest. Like all good ethnohistorians, she employs an array of other evidence (especially linguistic, archeological, biological, and anthropological sources) to refute, augment, or support observations by the traders.

Many of the cultural misunderstandings that Vibert exposes are familiar to ethno-historians. For example, British traders valued Native hunters of large mammals

higher than they did the salmon fishers along the rivers. They termed fishing peoples “indolent,” “weak,” “primitive,” and even “starving.” Buffalo hunters, on the other hand, were viewed as “manly,” “robust,” “brave,” and “full-bodied.” This imagery stemmed both from the economic basis of the traders’ existence (hunters supplied skins and furs essential to the traders’ financial survival) and from the predilections of British middle class men who associated red meats with vigor. They considered other meats, grains, and vegetables unsuitable for manly fortitude.

The traders’ view of fishing Indians exposes one of the more serious pitfalls in relying too heavily on European accounts of Native practices. Traders repeatedly stated that Indians who failed to hunt large mammals or supply many furs were “starving.” But, as Vibert demonstrates, this did not mean that those Indians were going without adequate sustenance. Instead, salmon supplied one part of a seasonally-variable diet that also relied heavily on the gathering of hundreds of plant products. Such foods were harvested and processed by women who traders nearly always undervalued and viewed as “over-worked drudges.”

As with Indians throughout the continent, Columbia Plateau peoples appealed to officials at the trading posts to take “pity” upon them by supplying them with gifts of food, clothing, and other items. Asking for “pity” was not begging for a handout as the traders described it. In one of the most enlightening sections of her book, Vibert uses linguistic and cultural evidence to show that Indians requesting “pity” were actually expressing humility, “to seek pity is the ‘polite’ way of asking” (p. 148). Indians living in the area near a trading post felt entitled to gifts from foreigners in their midst. Furthermore, “[r]equests for pity on many occasions appear to have signified not fear or awe, but the desire to forge a relationship” (p. 149). Apparently, traders never recognized the difference between modesty and begging as they con-

sistently condemned such behavior by visiting Indians.

Clarification of these misunderstandings are vital not only to historical accuracy, but also to current legislation and legal decisions. Vibert opens and closes her work by recounting a recent Canadian court case in which the judge privileged the nineteenth-century traders’ accounts over all other evidence. In deciding whether a particular Native peoples claims to land in British Columbia were valid, the judge, “declaring that he had no hesitation accepting the [traders’] information” (p. xi), commented that these fishing people were “not as industrious in the new economic climate as was thought necessary by the newcomers in the Colony” (p. 282), and he denied their claim. Even though the traders misrepresented reality, these Indians failed to utilize land in a manner consistent with early nineteenth-century European definitions of proper use. In the late twentieth century they were still paying the price for that distortion.

Such conclusions built upon faulty understandings of Native reality are not confined to judges; Vibert cites numerous instances where anthropologists and historians have been just as guilty of accepting the traders’ interpretations at face value.

Traders’ Tales is clearly argued and logically organized into eight chapters. It is recommended for use in a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses including Western history, Native American history, studies of European imagery of the “other,” Gender Studies, and Historical Methods. Even for historians who feel they already understand the pitfalls of written records this book will point out new interpretations and reinforce prior suspicions.

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