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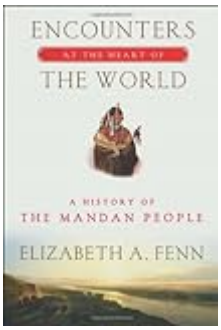

Elizabeth A. Fenn. *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2014. 480 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-4239-5.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Elizabeth A. Fennâs Pulitzer Prize-winning *Encounters at the Heart of the World* reflects a growing trend among some early American historians to write from a continental perspective. Fennâs subject, the Mandan Indians, lived at precisely the geographical center of the North American continent in what is today North Dakota. A region that earlier generations of scholars regarded as peripheral, Fenn positions as central. At odds with the more dominant approach of Atlantic history, which privileges the Atlantic coast and its English-speaking colonies that later became the United States, those who espouse a continental framework look instead at the continent as a whole, giving equal attention to Native Americans and other European empires.[1] Fenn embraces this model by arguing that, at least until the early nineteenth century, European colonialism did not dramatically reshape Mandan society. Rather, their homeland âat the heart of the worldâ insulated them from many of the changes that Europeans wrought throughout the continent. To understand the Mandans, then, one needs to look not at colonial processes but rather at those indigenous to the North American interior.

Fennâs history has an extensive scope, covering the migrations of ancestral Mandans during 1000 CE to the aftermath of a deadly smallpox epidemic in 1837. The Mandans lived on the Upper Missouri River portion of the Great Plains. Since they were largely an agricultural people, corn played a central role in their economic and cultural lives. Corn carried spiritual significance to the Mandans, who organized ceremonies and communal festivals around its cultivation. Corn fed the Mandans and also provided the basis for trade with other peoples. Fenn reveals the pervasiveness of indigenous trading networks before and after European contact. Even once economic ties with European traders became the norm for the Mandans during the eighteenth century, corn remained their principle export and they traded it largely according to indigenous terms of exchange.

Fenn focuses heavily on the relationship between culture and environment, combining the sources and methodologies of diverse disciplines, such as anthropology, environmental science, epidemiology, and nutrition. She does not claim that Mandan culture solely derived from environment, but that culture and environment interacted and reshaped one another. For example, an iconic geographical feature, the medicine rock oracle stone, bore âlichen markings that changed over time,â in which the Mandans read their future (p. 203). This anecdote reveals much about the cosmology of the Mandans who viewed their landscape in sacred terms that changed

over time. Plants, animals, geography, and weather patterns all held spiritual significance. Fenn emphasizes the dynamic nature of the relationship between the Mandans and their natural world, noting in the opening sentence of the book that âno two seasons were ever the same for the Mandan peopleâ (p. xiii). Every season wrought not only ecological change but culture change as well.

If European contact did not dramatically alter Mandan communities, the introduction of Old World animals and pathogens eventually did. Although the horse has generally received the most attention by historians of the Great Plains, Fenn contends that the brown rat had a greater effect on the Mandans. Initially, the Indians thought its arrival in 1825 marked âa visitation of the spiritsâ (p. 291). Many came to see the curious animal and no one would kill it. In short order, however, the Mandans began to view the rodent as a curse, for it devoured the tribeâs corn stores. The destruction of corn, along with decreasing bison, made a smallpox epidemic in 1837 all the more deadly, killing 90 percent of the Mandan people. Yet Fenn ends on an optimistic note: smallpox did not destroy Mandan culture, as âthe survivors clung fiercely to the traits that made them Mandanâ (p. 329).

Fenn writes in an original style, often presenting research in a nonlinear fashion and including numerous first-person asides where she describes her experiences with the modern environment of the places she describes historically. For example, while walking through a Mandan village site, she says, âI look in the grass for clues among the circular depressions that mark former earth lodgesâ (p. 101). Sometimes temporal jumps from, say, the early eighteenth century to 2002 can be jarring for the reader, but Fenn largely handles them adeptly. This stylistic choice reinforces the Mandansâ cyclical, nonlinear understanding of time and also highlights the central tension of the narrative between environmental change and continuity.

Fenn fails to persuade on one central assumption of her book: the Mandans lived âat the heart of the world.â Fenn takes this phrase from the Mandans, who describe their homeland in these terms, but she also wants to make the case that their position in the center of the continent shaped their history in unique ways. In terms of sheer distance, the Mandans undoubtedly were in the center of the continent. If considering demography and population density, the Mandans shift toward the margins. Rather than the center of numerous indigenous trade networks, they actually stood at the edge of much larger ones centered in the Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes region. Certainly the Mandans saw themselves as central, which matters, and geography influenced their culture, as with most peoples. Yet in some respects, their relative isolationânot their centralityâshaped the ways in which they developed.

Overall, however, Fenn has produced an excellent work backed by impressively diverse research, well deserving of the praise it has received.

Note

[1]. Peter H. Wood, âFrom Atlantic History to a Continental Approach,â in *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal,* ed. Jack P. Greene and Phillip D. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 279â298.

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