

Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996)

As a student and researcher, I was full of great expectations for *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*. I have to admit the book is impressive. Brown and Vibert have made a wide sweep with their nets, gathering together insights from a variety of disciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives. The weight and stature of the work derives from the inclusion of essays by some of the most influential minds in the arena of Native history in Canada today.

With ever increasing interest paid to Native histories, it was only a matter of time before some brave souls took up the task of setting a cornerstone. Brave because the action of collecting experts in the field is bound to exclude more than can be included. Although self-reflexively critical of modernist approaches, especially in history, *Reading Beyond Words* becomes, nonetheless, a canonical work, erected to fill a gap opened up by the “lack of sound, comprehensible readings to illustrate our points about issues of textual and cultural construction in native history.” (xxi)

While perhaps more concerned with text than other forms of representations, the collection of essays allows for discussions which reach beyond history to Cultural Studies, Canadian Studies, Anthropology, English, Linguistics, Geography (historical and medical) and Native Studies. The audience for this book, undoubtedly, will be students and teachers of Native studies and history. In fact, as a general reader the book offers many insights and as a more advanced reader it also challenges assumptions established by Amerindian scholarship of the past. The collection represents a broad range of Native histories (in Canada: Ojibwe, Mohawk, Inuit, Nuu-chah-nulth, Nak’azhil, Chipewyan, Mandan, Cree [Swampy, Woodland, Plains, Beaver], Assiniboin, Blackfeet, Blood, Sarssee, Gwich’in, Algonquin, Salish, Metis, Tagish, Iroquoian; the essays in this collection also touch on American Native histories: Powhatan, Ojebwe, Penobscot, Blackfoot).

The experience of non-Native scholars listening to Indigenous peoples around the world continues to shift. What I mean is that since contact and over time, Indigenous peoples have gazed across the landscapes, mediated and constructed, and encountered someone staring back at them. Shifts occur as a result of watching newcomers changing the world around them — always there have been changes in the wake of contact. Colonials and their subsequent generations of offspring have taken many different forms and have given many different representations of their pasts; who was included and erased, who they were written for, whose accounts were valid and whose were not, what was saved and what was discarded — all these variables mediate and mould historians’ stories.

But before I go on with the review of *Reading Beyond Words*, I must confess that I am an insider. Twice I have been a student in Dr. Brown’s classroom at the University of Winnipeg, first as an undergraduate student in the early 1990s and

again as a graduate student in 1995. As such I am privy to having experienced the classroom struggles both before conception of the book (1993) and when it was born. The collection of essays are compelling because of the need for theoretical and practical touchstones on the problems of studying First Nations' histories. This is where Brown and Vibert have failed to make a connection — the book is not concerned with studying First Nations histories. While appearing to make the leap into the theoretical, the First Nations voice is almost always filtered through the academic expert (Roulette, Stevenson and Schneck are exceptions to this criticism). This may be unfair criticism, however, when I am lucky that my own research allows me to work not only with documents, artifacts and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) but also with the living keepers of artifacts, documents, and TEK.

Brown and Vibert have structured the book in seven sections, each section with roughly three complementary essays. Part One, "Illusions of Contact," includes essays by Olive Dickason, Frederic Gleach and Germain Warkentin. Dickason's discussion of intellectual struggles between sixteenth-century French cosmographers, Gleach's insertion of "controlled speculation" to the Pocahontas saga, and Warkentin's rediscovery of Radisson, all work to open the closed quality of history — revealing tailored stories whose audience we can now only imagine. Part Two, "Trading Texts: Explorers and Their Hosts," includes essays by Renee Fossett, Daniel Clayton, and Frieda Esau Klippenstein. Fossett begins with a discussion of Inuit maps and the significance of culture to map making. Clayton examines the space and dynamics of colonial power and knowledge through Captain James Cook's visit to Vancouver Island. Klippenstein re-tells the clash between Carrier Chief Kwah and James Douglas — combining traditional historical methodology with alternative methodologies, including oral history. These three essays confirm and strengthen the assertion that written histories, when problematized with oral accounts, generate knowledge which offers insights otherwise unavailable.

Part Three, "Interpreting Disease, Survival, and Healing," includes essays by Jody Decker and Shepard Krech III. Decker's article is an excellent example of the clash between worldviews, in this case regarding disease and health, while Krech pursues the narrative to retell the story of Barbue. Together the two articles push the boundaries of historical inquiry and caution readers to be critical of historical texts. Part Four, "Native Voices in Writing," includes essays by John Fierst, Theresa M. Schenck, and David H. Pentland. This is a fascinating section with Fierst's essay on John Tanner serving as a fine description of the Tanner project, epitomising an interdisciplinary team effort, while Schenck's analyzes documents "written by Natives." Schenck's critique of William Warren's *History of the Ojibway People* highlights some problems associated with transforming oral history to written document, while Pentland is more concerned with discerning meaning from a letter written on behalf of eleven Ottawa Chiefs from Manitoulin Island. All three essays, arguing from different angles, transect

on the point that historical documents can become fixed and unyielding if readers become passive consumers, uncritical of the text.

Part Five, "Religious Encounters in Text and Context," includes essays by Laura Peers, Winona Stevenson, Maureen Matthews and Roger Roulette. Similarly throughout the collection of essays, Peers finds that, with regards to the Salish, we read history through sets of contextual lenses. Both Stevenson, Matthews and Roulette search and find the people, Charles Pratt and Naamiwan, behind the documents and in the search find layers of meaning. Part Six, "Women's Lives Through Words and Images," includes essays by Erica Smith, Alice Beck Kehoe, and Bunny McBride. Brown and Vibert write, "those who study women of colour find their subjects doubly silenced by gender and race. The authors ... recover and interpret the image constructions and experiences undergone by three Native women." (362) Smith gleans insights of the Red River settlement following reports of the trail of Reversed Corbett in the *Nor'Wester* and associated historical documents. Similarly, both Kehoe and McBride examine the lives of women, reconstructed through the process of decontextualizing original documents. The re-interpretation allows for women's voices to be heard where they should otherwise be muted.

Part Seven, "Words and Things, Documents and Collectors," includes essays by Julie Cruickshank, J.R. Miller and Trudy Nicks. While Cruickshank, Miller, and Nicks all offer insightful discussions, their grouping is less clear than the previous six — these essays are about *things*. Cruickshank's reinterpretation of written histories of the Klondike gold rush and Skookum Jim, in light of oral accounts, might have been better grouped in with the first two sections. Furthermore, Miller's essay serves as a significant trailer for his book on residential schools, *Shinguak's Vision*. Regardless, his argument for the use of oral history and visual records is quite convincing. Nicks closes the book with a fascinating discussion of Dr. Oronhyatekh's collection of artifacts donated to the Royal Ontario Museum in 1911. Nicks provides a fine discussion of the collection, the collector and the process of collecting — mirroring and rounding out the preceding essays on culturally constructed texts and contexts.

*Reading Beyond Words* is a well developed collection of essays that will stimulate debate for many years to come. The pressing by Broadview is simple and manageable, affordable to most students and interested readers. Both the introduction chapter and section introductions provide a sound basis for reading. Each essay provides a bibliography from which those with greater interest can draw. The index is detailed, though perhaps developed more with those who have specific questions in mind, ie. bias. At 519 pages there is very little fat on the hoof.

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