

Robin Jarvis Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918-1939* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2003).

For anyone who would like to know more about Canadian First Nations history after the banning of the potlatch and before the rise of Red Power, I suggest picking up a copy of Robin Jarvis Brownlie's new book, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918-1939*. As the title suggests, Brownlie's approach is three-pronged: first, to document "the destructive legacy of the Indian Affairs system" (x), second, to reveal the agency of First Nations people as they contested DIA (Department of Indian Affairs) control and, third, to explore the history of the Indian agent, that "little scrutinized," yet "pivotal figure" who served as "middle man" between these two forces. The end result is a nuanced portrayal of the workings of state power as well as a detailed picture of reserve life in inter-war Ontario.

Brownlie's entry into the subject is via a comparison of two case studies: the Ontario Indian agencies of Parry Sound and Manitowaning in the Georgian Bay area. As in the case of other intensely regulated groups, the tragic fact of state surveillance and power vis-à-vis Native peoples led to the creation of voluminous records upon which to reconstruct their history (though in some cases, these have been destroyed). In this case, Brownlie is able to draw on the extensive correspondence, reports and memoranda that traveled between the DIA and the agents who witnessed reserve life first hand. Insisting on the importance of reading these Eurocentric documents "against the grain," Brownlie also concedes with refreshing candor that these provide "at best, partial, fragmented depictions of Aboriginal points of view; at worst, they might be egregious distortions" (xx). In efforts to balance this picture, Brownlie also draws on letters written by band members to their agents and the DIA and, to a lesser extent, on a very small number of oral interviews, both of which help flesh out the story.

That story is not a happy one, it quickly becomes clear. These decades represent, in Brownlie's estimation, "a bleak period" in First Nations history as bands faced devastating economic hardship, agent-control of their band councils, disregard for their treaty rights, and increasingly coercive measures aimed at their assimilation. Before delving into these particulars, Brownlie provides a broad overview of the structure of the DIA in the interwar period, usefully integrating much of the secondary literature on the subject. The Indian agent was an essential part of this story, the "man on the spot" and the living symbol of DIA power in First Nations' communities. Ironically, though occupying the lowest rung of the DIA's administrative ladder, on a daily basis, he had enormous impact on reserve life. Thus, we watch the agent as he invades, controls,

and occasionally ameliorates the lives of his Aboriginal clients in matters economic, political, and moral. Throughout the study, Brownlie does especially well at exposing the huge cultural divide across which such acts were carried out. The fact that agents and Aboriginals had fundamentally different understandings of such concepts as leadership, generosity, gratitude, and the nature of a promise (or treaty) ensured, according to Brownlie, that relations would be fraught with animosity.

There are (at least) two other parts to the story as well. Stemming from a Foucauldian commitment to exploring “the ‘micro-physics’ of power relations” (xxiii), Brownlie recognizes that state power was not monolithic. In effect, Brownlie argues, though an integral part of the DIA system, agents also represented a “third party in the power struggle” (32), sometimes challenging or reinterpreting DIA policy according to their own interpretations of Aboriginal welfare. In this vein, Brownlie illustrates that the “fatherly eye” occasionally had its benevolent side. Thus the same agents who arrogantly vetoed band council decisions, punished their political opponents by withholding relief, and policed the sexuality of Aboriginal women could also be known to champion hunting and fishing rights, to challenge the imposition of guiding licenses, and to caution individuals against taking up DIA offers of enfranchisement. In coming to these positions, their own personalities – their attitudes to Native peoples, their political ideologies, even simply their own temperaments – Brownlie notes, played important roles. Here this study takes us beyond the either/or debates of the Great Men v. the Little People of history, and succeeds in blending the structural insights of social history – including those of gender and class – with an appreciation for the role of personality and the individual. This is true not only in the case of the Indian agents, but also in the Native case, where Brownlie provides mini-biographies of several Aboriginal “dissenters.”

More broadly, the importance of the local and the particular is a theme which runs throughout this study. Thus, while confirming that reserve life was undoubtedly shaped by an Indian Act that was national in scope, Brownlie is also careful to show that DIA influence could be felt differently in different locales. A commitment to this view underlies the first chapter which outlines in detail the economic, geographic, political, even religious particularities of the two agencies under study. Indeed, Brownlie demonstrates the varying importance of agriculture, hunting, trapping and the particularities (or absence) of treaty rights in the two agencies and how these differences shaped agent actions and, ultimately, the nature of reserve life.

To further complicate the story, Brownlie also demonstrates that, whatever the power of the DIA agent (and it was great), it was met with repeated and determined resistance on the part of Native peoples. Returned veterans, we learn, were frequently key agitators for change (as indeed they were in the

dominant society). On the other hand, we also hear stories of parents intervening to control teachers at reserve day schools, band members protesting the imposition of compulsory enfranchisement legislation, and, during the devastating poverty of the Depression, band councils working (if unsuccessfully) to standardize the nature of relief. Indeed, Native agency is another of this book's prominent themes. Interestingly, however, some of the ambivalence Brownlie has exhibited on this issue in the past (and, perhaps, rightly so) also comes through here.<sup>1</sup> Apparently not wishing to romanticize or exaggerate Native control, the narrative oscillates somewhat between an emphasis on "the surviving tradition of Aboriginal self-determination" (153) and the extent to which First Nations resistance "faced serious obstacles" (151) due to the oppressive nature of DIA power.

Brownlie's handling of the question of assimilation reveals a similarly nuanced approach. First, it is wisely posited that all cultural change cannot simply be read as Native capitulation. On the other hand, following the trend of recent scholarship, it is argued that the assimilationist project was generally unsuccessful. In trying to account for this, Brownlie makes some interesting and rarely noted points. On the question of education, it is suggested that the impact of residential schooling has been overestimated, given that the vast majority of children attended reserve day schools close to home. Most provocatively, Brownlie argues that the state itself was ambivalent as to the possibility of truly assimilating its Aboriginal wards. In effect, this suggestion provides a nice counterpoint to literature that has stressed the DIA's assimilative drive. Again, this is owing to a view of state power as multi-dimensional. Ultimately, Brownlie contends, by the interwar period, statements of policy issuing from the Ottawa office of Duncan Campbell Scott were only half-heartedly pursued in the field, where agents frequently wondered if "the Indian" was actually capable of change. In the end, Brownlie concludes, "officials appear to have resigned themselves to a more or less permanent state of tutelage" (40) vis-à-vis Native peoples. Added to the fact of state ambivalence was the geographic reality of segregation on reserves and hostile Euro-settler attitudes, both of which served as further barriers to assimilation. We are left with the nagging question: who really supported the assimilationist project? First Nations resisted it, white settlers did not welcome it, and state officials more or less accepted the impossibility of achieving it.

In sum, this is First Nations history as one hopes it will more often be written. Brownlie effectively combines social, institutional, biographical history to provide a well-rounded picture of Aboriginal-government relations in this period. No doubt, the balancing of the macro-level of state policy and the micro-level of individual agencies will serve as a useful model for future study. On a more prosaic level, the review of the administrative context that this book provides will serve as indispensable background reading for new scholars in the

field.

If one had to point to any weaknesses in this study, I would say that I sometimes wanted to hear the sources speak more clearly for themselves. I wanted to read, for instance, the words of band members as they appealed to Indian Affairs, or those of self-satisfied Indian agents as they rejected their appeals. More substantively, some might suggest that Brownlie is over ambitious with this project; that one is hard-pressed to cover the history of treaty rights, band politics, the organization of First Nations relief, health care, education, and even Native participation in fairs in some 150 pages.

On the other hand, what might be seen as a limitation might also be this book's unique appeal. What it offers is the "big picture" of a small picture. When I finished it, I felt I could imagine the day-to-day life of an interwar reserve in greater totality than was previously possible. Given most scholars' on-going preference for narrowly defined projects of historical research, this "slice-of-life" study comes as a welcome addition to the historiography. More than this, this is the kind of book you could give to an undergraduate class and have them walk away with a solid understanding of the grievances which underlie modern Aboriginal rights movements. And, in light of Brownlie's own commitment to "dismantl[ing] colonialism in Canada" (154), I would think that broadly educating the next generation would be seen as a most worthy goal.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in a 1994 co-authored article, Brownlie took issue with those historians who "go beyond the argument for the recognition of Native agency to one that uses evidence of Native resilience and strength to soften, and at times to deny, the impact of colonialism, and thus, implicitly, to absolve its perpetrators." Clearly Brownlie does not wish to do this here. Robin Brownlie and Mary-Ellen Kelm, "Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?" *Canadian Historical Review* 75.4 (Dec 1994): 543-556.

James Holstun, *Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution* (London: Verso, 2000).

*Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution* is an engaging and sometimes enraging book. Holstun sets out to prove that the popular praxis of labouring people played a crucial role in shaping the English Civil War. He also attempts to demonstrate that the Civil War constituted the first capitalist and anti-capitalist revolution of the modern period. Finally, Holstun argues that the experiences of radical, lower-class men and women in the 1640s and 1650s can help activists in the twenty-first century better understand their own