

---

**Jennifer S.H. Brown.** *An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land: Unfinished Conversations.* AU Press, 2017. 360 pp. ISBN 978-1-77199-171-1.

<http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120267>

It is possible to read *An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land: Unfinished Conversations* and, without knowing the author, soon recognize the voice of Jennifer Brown. Her style is unique—from her elegant writing, as seen in her use of metaphor and thought-provoking chapter titles, to her penetrating analysis of Indigenous societies and the oftentimes fluid, intercultural spaces of contact zones. Comprised of eighteen essays written over four decades, *An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land* nevertheless maintains the style of “unfinished conversations”: questions are raised, debates are continued, and stories evolve. To some extent, Brown's approach is left open-ended and, while sources are well interrogated, she asks readers to think in different ways as she writes of questions unanswered or queries never posed. In studying different forms of evidence—written, oral, and material—Brown is always “reading voices,” looking for subtexts, connections, and consequences.

As Brown writes, the essays in the book are linked by “threads of interest and concern” (7), but share a consistency based upon the close study of texts and the “weaving of words” from many sources and many forms. All are focused upon the large expanse once known as “Rupert's Land,” the territory that encompassed the lands drained by Hudson Bay and home to, among others, the Cree and Ojibwe peoples, who inhabited/inhabit what is now Western Canada and parts of the northern United States. In providing her insights into the discipline of ethnohistory, Brown describes her own background as a student, teacher, and writer. The eighteen essays included in the book were chosen by Brown because they have retained interest, not only for herself, but for other scholars. More than just reprints, Brown has updated many of these works with recent research and fresh observations; for instance, her later work with the Mushkego storyteller Louis Bird is nicely woven into many older texts. The pieces are organized under six different themes, though there is, unsurprisingly, much overlap. Each of the six sections is introduced by a short summation of the articles contained therein, providing the thematic link between each of the pieces. The first section, “Finding Words and Remembering,” includes one of Brown's better-known pieces, “The Blind Men and the Elephant: Touching the Fur Trade” (61-67), an updated version of a keynote talk given at a 1990 conference. Ensuing sections on fur trade marriage and family, Indigenous families and kinship, women's stories in the fur trade, Cree and Ojibwe prophets, and, lastly, life on the Berens River in Manitoba, round out the collection and demonstrate the breadth of Brown's scholarship as well as her own involvement in the oral and community history of that particular region. This last section, and especially the final article, “Fields of Dreams: A. Irving Hallowell and the Berens River Ojibwe,” demonstrates Brown's long interest in the 1930s work of anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell and reveals Brown's willingness to study not only the texts of fur traders and storytellers, but those of anthropologists and ethnographers as well.

While the articles in this collection provide a broad overview of Brown's ethnohistorical writing and teaching, they only scratch the surface of the contributions she has made to fur trade history, women's history, and Indigenous studies in Canada. Like her colleague and friend, Sylvia Van Kirk (whom Brown talks about and cites throughout the book), Brown's work has changed the

course of these historical topics; in fact, Brown and Van Kirk have been given due credit for helping to create modern scholarship on gender, marriage, kinship, and family in the pre-20<sup>th</sup>-century Indigenous West. Their work has provided much of the impetus for the great expansion of scholarship in gender and family that we have witnessed over the last few decades by scholars such as Brenda MacDougall, Heather Devine, Carolyn Podruchny, Nicole St-Onge, and Adele Perry.

To some extent, the works of MacDougall, Devine, et. al., have replaced the regional, national, and international economic models—such as the economic and geographical studies by authors like Arthur Ray, Frank Tough, and Patricia McCormack—that were once crucial to the investigation of Indigenous history in the West. At the local scale, at places like Fort Chipewyan or the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century communities of northern Manitoba, the works of Ray, Tough, and McCormack helped explain inter- and intra-group economies; on a global scale, they demonstrated how local economies fit within an international capitalist framework, especially in relation to global fur markets. For ethnohistorians, however, the focus has been upon such topics as ethnicity, kinship, and the establishment of racial and sexual hierarchies. Demographic studies, the analysis of ethnic and cultural persistence, and the pursuit of racial and ethnic roots—what cultural historians and anthropologists call “ethnogenesis”—have dominated these perspectives. What is often missing, however, is an appreciation of the community or region within the context of market capitalism, of class division, and how Indigenous peoples influenced and were influenced by local, national, and global economic forces.

Arguably, the more recent emphasis in Indigenous studies on community, family, and cultural forces—specifically, the attempt to explicate the formative nature of Indigenous societies as the key to understanding the history of the West over a number of centuries—was motivated in part by a reaction to the traditional views inherent within the old metropolitan and frontier schools of Canadian history and their opposition to viewing Indigenous cultures within the context of European and Canadian expansionism. In the process, economic history moved from the attention of historians to that of economists who developed mathematical models that proved intimidating to many historians. As the American historian William Sewell has argued, cultural history that had once been interwoven with the economic aspects of social change had, by the 1980s, reacted against economic determinism, quantification, and the positivist outlook that had once united social and economic history (Sewell 146-47).

By discussing the link that once existed between cultural and economic history, I mean only to comment on the role of ethnohistory in the study of Indigenous pasts. I do not intend to criticize or undermine the brilliant work that Jennifer Brown has pursued over many years nor the critical importance of the cultural and kinship dynamics within Cree and Ojibwe societies and with European and Canadian newcomers that is on display in *An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land*. Brown's ability to read between the lines of texts of all kinds is without parallel in Canadian ethnohistory. The articles are a pleasure to read, full of insight and analysis, and written with the agreeable style of a born communicator and teacher. A mentor to so many, there is almost a direct line between her writing and the family and kinship scholarship of today. Brown's work continues to impress and influence.

*Robert James Coutts, University of Manitoba*

*Works Cited*

Sewell, William. "A Strange Career: The Historical Study of Economic Life." *History and Theory*. Vol. 49, No. 4, Theme Issue 49 (Dec. 2010): 146-66.