

Laugrand, Frédéric B., Jarich G. Oosten. *Inuit, Oblate Missionaries, and Grey Nuns in the Keewatin, 1865-1965*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 520 pages

Ezra Anton Greene

Volume 63, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078619ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021338>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Greene, E. A. (2021). Review of [Laugrand, Frédéric B., Jarich G. Oosten. *Inuit, Oblate Missionaries, and Grey Nuns in the Keewatin, 1865-1965*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 520 pages]. *Anthropologica*, 63(1), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021338>

© Ezra Anton Greene, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Book Review

Laugrand, Frédéric B., Jarich G. Oosten. *Inuit, Oblate Missionaries, and Grey Nuns in the Keewatin, 1865-1965*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 520 pages.

Ezra Anton Greene
University of British Columbia

A short time spent in the Kivalliq (formerly Keewatin) region of Nunavut is all one needs to realize that Christianity is important to many people's lives. The presence of Roman Catholicism is very much in evidence in the small community of Chesterfield Inlet. The town's old mission house and its church, featuring a statue of Jesus, his welcoming arms outstretched, are prominent fixtures on a main road. Several town residents regularly attend church services during the week. Nearby, another eye-catching structure is the abandoned three-storey building that was Ste. Thérèse's Hospital. The walls and shelves of many people's homes are adorned with images, figurines, and crucifixes of Jesus as well as prayer cards, relics, votives, and other Catholic memorabilia. These exist next to old black and white photographs of Inuit families taken by missionaries or nuns, often with the church or hospital in the background.

Building on their previous and extensive work on the introduction and metamorphosis of Christianity in the eastern Arctic, Frédéric B. Laugrand and Jarich G. Oosten's book *Inuit, Oblate Missionaries, and Grey Nuns in the Keewatin, 1865-1965* aims to—and succeeds at—providing a comprehensive history of how Catholicism became such an intricate part of people's lives in Chesterfield Inlet, and more broadly, how Christianity, including Anglicanism and Evangelism, expanded in the Keewatin.

The book is divided into four parts focusing on: (1) the beginnings of Christianity in the Keewatin and the competition for souls between denominations; (2) health services provided by Roman Catholics at the hospital in Chesterfield; (3) formal education and the residential school at Chesterfield; and (4) the attempt to recruit Inuit individuals as nuns and priests. Overall, the

narrative is engaging and informative. There is a lot of history to cover, and the choice to highlight four main foci generally works well.

In each part, the authors enrich the history by profiling prominent Inuit who were influential in the adoption of Christianity, including Tirisikuluk Niaqulluk, Etienne Qimuksiraaq, Armand Tagoon, Jean Ayaruaq, Pelagie Puvaliraq Inuk, and several others. Providing the life stories of these Inuit personalizes the history. The presentation of black and white archival photographs throughout the book adds to the richness of these stories. One drawback is that the profiles of those who worked as missionaries and nuns are somewhat thin. The background context in which they pursued their callings is not explained in great detail, so it is difficult to understand how the institutions of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Grey Nuns of Nicolette guided and influenced their orders.

Laugrand and Oosten use a multivocality method to tell the story of Christianity in the Keewatin. They draw on interviews with Inuit and Grey Nuns as well as archival material from Anglican, Catholic, government, and Inuit repositories. For the most part, this approach is compelling. For example, first reading priests' and nuns' interpretations of Pelagie Inuk's vocation and path towards becoming a nun and then reading her own personal thoughts on the process reveals that Inuit were not separating from shamanism in the way that non-Inuit Christians may have thought. In general, the authors do an excellent job, as they do in their previous book, *Inuit Shamanism and Christianity* (Laugrand and Oosten 2010), of showing that the conversion to Christianity was not a full break from past religious traditions and that conversion is a culturally-informed process.

There are issues with the use of multivocality though, particularly in the third part of the book. Specifically, the chapter that addresses the physical and sexual abuse of students at the Turquetil Hall residential school is problematic. At the beginning of the section that focuses on sexual abuse are long quotes from two former Chesterfield Inlet Inuit who never actually resided in the boarding school. Their quotes downplay the abuse and suggest that accusations of it were falsifications and only about getting money. All of the testimonies which come afterwards—almost entirely from a series of interviews filmed by Isuma Productions and conducted by Zacharias Kunuk and Peter Irniq (2007-2009)—are extremely tough but important to read, and yet, based on the earlier quotes, one has the impression that they could all be lies. Listening to the stories of survivors of sexual abuse is so important, so it is concerning that voices that

were only loosely connected to the actual place where abuse happened are given such prominence and that the authors do not appear to have profoundly listened to the survivors themselves. While a detailed history of Turquetil Hall is needed in the literature, it seems that the authors' choice to "neither defend one opinion nor to adopt a neutral position" (11) and lack of comprehensive, first-hand interviews about life in the residential school weakens this section of the book.

Other choices related to residential schooling are questionable. It is unclear why the authors and publisher felt it important to provide a register of every student who attended the school. It is doubtful that so many former students would have provided permission for their personal information to be published in this way. Revealing this information will likely deepen the distrust many Inuit already have of researchers.

Less egregious issues appear periodically, such as the conflation of two people into one because of similar names, indexical errors, geographic misplacements, and copy-editing mistakes. These raise some questions about the attention paid to specific details. Nevertheless, a tremendous amount of research went into this book, and the overarching history of Inuit engagement with Catholicism in the Keewatin reads well and contains much novel material.

Although residential schooling in Chesterfield Inlet has been handled in a manner that gives rise to concern, the intertwining of Christianity into Inuit life and culture over the course of a century is addressed in a substantial way. Laugrand and Oosten have written a contribution worth reading that focuses on one region of the Arctic and how the development of a mission in one community played an important part in this history, enriching our understanding of the processes, transformations, and lived experiences inherent to conversion and immersion in Christianity.

References

- Laugrand, Frédéric B., and Jarich B. Oosten. 2010. *Inuit Shamanism and Christianity: Transitions and Transformations in the Twentieth Century*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kunuk, Zacharias, and Peter Irniq. 2007-2009. *Testimony—Residential Schools*. Video series. Isuma Productions. Iglulik. Available at: <http://www.isuma.tv/testimony>.