

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



Response to Roundtable on *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*

Jean Barman

Volume 27, Number 2, 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040571ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040571ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Article abstract

Along with expressing appreciation to the four insightful commentators, this response attends to the two most asked questions respecting the book. Why did you write it? And why did you write a book about us?

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Barman, J. (2016). Response to Roundtable on *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 27(2), 158–166. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040571ar>

Response to Roundtable on *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*

Jean Barman

Abstract

Along with expressing appreciation to the four insightful commentators, this response attends to the two most asked questions respecting the book. Why did you write it? And why did you write a book about us?

Résumé

Cette réplique entend remercier les quatre commentateurs pour la pertinence de leurs observations, mais également offrir une réponse aux deux questions les plus fréquemment posées sur mon livre : pourquoi l'avez-vous écrit? et pourquoi avez-vous écrit un livre sur nous?

I am very grateful to Carolyn Podruchny for organizing this roundtable and to Heather Devine, Yves Frenette, Stacy Nation-Knapper, and Bruce Watson for their trenchant remarks respecting *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*. Ever since the book came out at the end of 2014, I have had the same two questions posed time and again. The first — Why did you write the book? The question sometimes embodies an implied sense of consternation as to why I would bother to do so. The book is too long, it's too boring, the subject is too obscure, you are not French-Canadian, the list goes on. And the second question — Why did you write this book about us? It is most often asked with a sense of amazement that someone would pay attention to their family's story and, more generally, to French Canadians and to the Indigenous women in their lives.

I want to respond to these two questions within the context of the four excellent and considered assessments of the book.

But first, in the interest of full disclosure, I am not from Québec and, while I have a reading knowledge of French, I no longer speak the language. It has long since been submerged into

the Portuguese that underlies my husband's career as a historian of Brazil, meaning considerable time spent in that country.

What I am is a historian of Canada and of British Columbia, which, as with every province, is both part of the larger entity and distinct from the nation as a whole. As someone who has written extensively on aspects of the province's history, including its diverse peoples, I was long prodded as to why I ignored French Canadians. Three groups guilted me over many years. The first were descendants of early French Canadians and Indigenous women I encountered in teaching at the University of British Columbia who wondered why so much attention was given in histories of the fur trade to English speakers, but not otherwise. The second were British Columbia Francophones and others with much the same complaint. The third and most persistent was my son's French father-in-law, who used every social gathering over many years to remind me of what he considered to be my obligation.

As to why I shied away, I realize in retrospect I long boxed British Columbia into its present day political boundaries. It was only in 1846, just two decades before Canada became a nation, that the Pacific Northwest extending west of the Rocky Mountains from then Russian America, today's Alaska, south to Spanish and later Mexican California, and east across today's Washington and Oregon into parts of Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana acquired non-Indigenous governance. Until then this huge chunk of territory, which Stacy graphically evokes, was, from a non-Indigenous perspective, useless apart from a maritime and then land-based fur trade operating under their own self-constructed rules of behaviour. I had in effect overlooked what came before white folk took political charge.

Such a perspective was reinforced by the kinds of historical sources so appealing to many of us. We, as historians, are fond of written records, and virtually none centre on French Canadians in the early Pacific Northwest. Some of us also search out living history through the voices of descendants, including for me the many who have over the years contacted me to share their stories. It is this latter gift that slowly broadened my perspective.

So it was one morning, in good part — I have to admit — to disprove my critics, I decided to find out more. Impelled by an upcoming Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funding deadline and in collaboration with Bruce Watson, a good friend who had spent many years compiling a biographical dictionary of the Pacific Northwest fur trade that demanded publication, I constructed a last minute funding application.

The application's success, which would very importantly encourage Bruce's biographical dictionary into publication (*Lives Lived West of the Divide: A Biographical Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies, 1793-1858*. Kelowna BC: Centre for Social, Spatial, and Economic Justice; University of British Columbia, 2010), set me on an uncertain course not knowing where I would end up. I did have one admirable beginning point. Drawing with permission on Bruce's capsule biographies of 1,240 French Canadians active in the Pacific Northwest fur trade, from the first land crossings west to the Pacific Ocean in the late eighteenth century to the last part of the Pacific Northwest — being the British Columbia mainland — acquiring a non-Indigenous political status in 1858, I was, so to speak, all dressed up, but did not know where to head.

Except for the web, I suspect I would still be between there and here. Whatever the subject focus, the web, as we are all aware, has transformed the research process in respect both to primary and to secondary sources. A book such as this one, which is based in fragments of information respecting French Canadians and Indigenous women, both almost wholly illiterate, could not otherwise have been published with the degree of certainty deemed to be scholarly. Many topics, as with those proposed by Bruce and tackled in the outstanding recent books noted by Heather and Yves, were long similarly difficult to follow up. My sense is that Americans do a much better job than Canadians in surfacing relevant materials on the web and that in Canada, Québec outperforms British Columbia and, I suspect, elsewhere across the country. There is much to be done.

The four comments and earlier the unexpected attention accorded the book have been welcome for turning attention

to French Canadians and Indigenous women as mattering to the Pacific Northwest, which was my hope once I realized the multiple roles that they have played. In the book I explain how French Canadians, who comprised the largest non-Indigenous group across the Pacific Northwest during the first half century of Indigenous/non-Indigenous contact, made possible the earliest non-Indigenous westward crossings of the Rocky Mountains, sustained the resultant fur economy, eased relations with Indigenous peoples, and fourth and very importantly saved British Columbia for Canada by virtue of their presence ensuring that the United States would not as it dearly sought acquire the entirety of the Pacific Northwest, thereby depriving the future Canada of a Pacific shoreline. That the book has garnered diverse prizes (in order of receipt, the K.D. Srivastava Prize for best book published by the University of British Columbia Press, the Basil Stuart-Stubbs Prize for Outstanding Scholarly Book on British Columbia, the Canadian Historical Association's Sir John A. Macdonald Prize for best English-language book of Canadian history, and the Governor General's Gold Medal presented annually for Scholarly Research) attests to its appeal to multiple constituencies. The book's doing so speaks to each of us taking chances to write as we would, as opposed to how we think we should.

In some ways more important, and certainly more heartwarming, has been the response to the second of the two questions I have been repeatedly asked. Why did you write this book about us? To have the question posed by readers, as it is so eloquently by Stacy, is to my mind highly significant to all of us who pretend to be historians. To have it asked means that what we write, and how we write, resonates beyond the academy and beyond our being talking heads — or rather writing heads — to each other. Whether or not we consider ourselves “vernacular historians,” as coined by former Canadian Historical Association president Lyle Dick and described by Heather in her comments, we have much to gain by extending our reach.

The first time this question was asked was after an invited keynote talk I gave, just as the book was published, to open the annual conference held on Oregon's Grande Ronde Reservation.

I remain grateful to the University of British Columbia Press for rushing two dozen copies there at the organizers' request. As I describe in the book, once the fur trade fell into decline in the mid-nineteenth century, families originating with French-Canadian men and Indigenous women scrambled to make lives for themselves in a rapidly changing Pacific Northwest. In the United States, unlike Canada, Indigenous women who had partnered with outsider men could legally settle on reservations and perhaps acquire land there. Grande Ronde's central location caused numerous Indigenous women to head there with their families by French Canadians. The general circumstance whereby daughters could merge into the edge of the dominant society through partnering with newcomer men, this at a time when few white women were present, with sons having little choice but to opt for Indigenous women like their mothers, has meant that French-Canadian surnames originating in the fur trade survive as Indigenous surnames on American reservations and, to a lesser extent, on Canadian reserves and across the Pacific Northwest into the present day.

At the close of my Grande Ronde talk, a young woman came up to me holding an open copy of the book she had just purchased. Pointing to the name of a long since relative, and by now joined by members of her extended family, she and the others expressed their amazement that someone considered their family, and families like theirs, important enough to be in a book, and in a big book at that. How was it that I had cared to do so?

As I realized through this exchange and those that have followed, most recently in the British Columbia interior beyond the internet and cell phones, French Canadians and Indigenous women matter not only because they, so I argue in the book, changed the course of Canadian history, but also because they were real people with real lives and with descendants wanting them to be remembered on their own terms. I would like to think that the obligations we incur as privileged academic historians extend for all of us beyond the walls of scholarly institutions.

JEAN BARMAN, Professor Emerita at the University of British Columbia, has written extensively on British Columbia and Canadian history with attention to Indigenous peoples and to women and families.

JEAN BARMAN, professeure émérite à la University of British Columbia, a abondamment écrit sur l'histoire de la Colombie Britannique et l'histoire canadienne, en portant une attention toute particulière aux populations autochtones, de même qu'aux femmes et à la famille.

Endnotes

- 1 Jean Barman, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), xi.
- 2 Barman, 290.
- 3 Barman, 290.
- 4 Barman, 107.
- 5 Barman, 116.
- 6 Barman, citing Jack Nisbet, 335.
- 7 See Heather Devine, review of *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest*, by Jean Barman, *BC Studies* 188 (Winter 2015–6): 114–5; Heather Devine, review of *Métis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People*, by Michel Hogue, *Canadian Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 606–8; Daniel Clayton, Faye Dussart, Heather Devine, and Tony Ballantyne, review essay of *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World*, by Adele Perry, *BC Studies* 190 (Summer 2016): 89–106; and Heather Devine, review of *At the Hearth of the Crossed Races: A French-Indian Community in Nineteenth-Century Oregon, 1812–1859*, by Melinda Marie Jette, *Western Historical Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 245–6.
- 8 Lyle Dick, “Vernacular Currents in Western Canadian Historiography: The Passion and Prose of Katherine Hughes, F.G. Roe, and Roy Ito” in *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined ‘Region,’* ed. Alvin Finkel, Sarah Carter, and Peter Fortna (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 13–46, 14. The discussion of vernacular history that follows is condensed from Lyle Dick’s article, as well as a subsequent discussion of the topic in Heather Devine, “J.Z. LaRocque: A Métis Historian’s Account of His Family’s Experiences During the North-West

- Rebellion of 1885” in *Finding Directions West: Readings that Locate and Dislocate Western Canada’s Past*, ed. George Colpitts and Heather Devine (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2017), 59–92.
- 9 Lyle Dick, “Vernacular Currents in Western Canadian Historiography,” 18.
- 10 Ibid., 18.
- 11 Ibid., 15.
- 12 For a succinct summary of Jean Barman’s work, see “Jean Barman” (online), at ABC Bookworld, http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_author.php?id=89, <accessed 1 April 2017>.
- 13 Indeed, in note 5, p. 398 of *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women* Jean states, “I am grateful to descendant and family historian Chalk Courchane for reading sections of this book, including this one, dealing with the Finlays.” I, too, am grateful to Chalk Courchane, who has also generously shared his knowledge of the Pelletier family with me over the last two decades — we are distant cousins and share common ancestry from the Turtle Mountain region of North Dakota. Another relative of Chalk’s, Ms. Gail Morin of Elmer City, Washington, is a well-known compiler of Métis genealogical records.
- 14 See, for example, Calvin Martin, ed. *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Devon A. Mihesuah, ed. *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd. 1999); and Devon Abbot Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson, *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
- 15 Devon Abbott Mihesuah, “American Indian History as a Field of Study” in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, ed. Devon Abbot Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 146.
- 16 Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
- 17 Bruce McIntyre Watson, *Lives Lived West of the Divide: A Biographical Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies, 1793–1858* (Kelowna, BC, Centre for Social, Spatial, and Economic Justice, University of British Columbia, 2010), en ligne à http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~goudied/PDF/Goudie/Lives_Lived_Entire-Bruce-McIntyre-Watson.pdf.
- 18 Melinda Jette, *At the Heart of the Crossed Races: A French-Indian Community in the Nineteenth Century, 1812–1859* (Portland, Oregon State University Press, 2015).

- 19 Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007); Yves Frenette, *Brève histoire des Canadiens français* (Montréal, Boréal, 1998).
- 20 Sur l'histoire contrefactuelle, voir entre autres Quentin Deluermoz et Pierre Singaravélou, *Pour une histoire des possibles* (Paris, Seuil, 2016).
- 21 Parmi les ouvrages les plus importants de la dernière décennie, Heather Devine, *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660-1900* (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2004); Nicole St-Onge, *Saint-Laurent, Manitoba: Evolving Métis Identities, 1850-1914* (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004); Brenda Macdougall, *One of the Family: Metis Culture in Nineteenth Century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2010); Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny et Brenda Macdougall, dir., *Contours of a People: Metis Family, Mobility, and History* (Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 2012); Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *Great Lakes Creoles: A French-Indian Community on the Northern Borderlands. Prairie-du-Chien, 1750-1860* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2014); Michel Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People* (Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
- 22 Frenette, *Brève histoire des Canadiens français*.
- 23 Pour un exemple, voir Micheline Marchand, *Les voyageurs et la colonisation de Pénétanguishene, 1825-1871: la colonisation française en Huronie* (Sudbury, Société historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1989).
- 24 Benoit, Virgil, Yves Frenette et France Martineau, *Les mémoires de Charles Morin, charpentier errant* (Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, à paraître).
- 25 Jean Barman, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press), 2014.
- 26 Ibid., 5, 320.
- 27 Ibid., 5.
- 28 Correspondence with Earl John Chapman, Montréal historian of the 78th Fraser Highlanders Regiment, 2015.
- 29 Historians appear to agree that the "Auld Alliance," a military and diplomatic agreement signed in 1295 between Scotland and France against England, was initially more symbolic than meaningful. However, over time it became embedded in the Scottish psyche, law, architecture, continuing long after the post-Tudor 1603 Union of Scottish and English crowns. The Scottish soldiery serving in the French Army and scholars going to French universities helped cement the initial, somewhat abstract agreement into something more meaningful and lasting.

- 30 A battlefield situated on a moor within the Chattan Federation of Clans traditional territory, but bordering on the Fraser clan traditional territory. The Fraser clan had become a voice and nexus for the many clans that had Jacobite sympathies.
- 31 Chapman, 2015.
- 32 http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mctavish_simon_5E.html, <viewed January 2016 >.
- 33 http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/fraser_simon_9E.html, <viewed January 2016>; Bruce McIntyre Watson, *Lives Lived West of the Divide. A Biographical Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies, 1793–1858*, Centre for Social, Spatial, and Economic Justice (Kelowna BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 393.
- 34 W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, Publications of the Champlain Society, 22 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), 473; Watson, *Lives Lived West of the Divide*, 653–4.
- 35 Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 482; Watson, *Lives Lived West of the Divide*, 672–3.
- 36 Barman, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women*, 320.