

## *Telling our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay* By Louis Bird

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## SPRING 2007

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### *Telling Our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay*

By Louis Bird. Edited by Jennifer S.H. Brown, Paul W. DePasquale, and Mark F. Ruml, with contributions by Roland Bohr, Anne Lindsay, and Donna G. Sutherland. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005. 269 pp. Illustrations. \$27.95 softcover. ISBN 1-55111-580-8.

This delightful volume of Omushkego (Swampy Cree) stories is one of Louis Bird's ongoing contributions to the recording of his people's unique culture and orature, or oral literature. Louis Bird, an Omushkego elder from Peawanuck, Ontario, has spent three decades gathering the stories of the Omushkegowak from the western shores of James Bay and Hudson Bay. Having begun his life's project by trying to memorize the legends, myths, and personal histories related by elders, Mr. Bird soon began experimenting with ways to record this rich tradition in more enduring formats. After using a tape recorder for many

- Telling our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay
- Through Water, Ice & Fire: Schooner Nancy of the War of 1812
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- Revival in the City: The Impact of American Evangelists in Canada, 1884-1914
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years, in the 1990s he established a relationship with researchers at the University of Winnipeg who collaborated in recording Mr. Bird's stories digitally, transferring his old audiotapes onto CD-ROMs, and making some stories available on the internet in both Cree and English. *Telling Our Stories* is the most comprehensive written version of Louis Bird's work that has been published, though the stories in it are still

only a selection. Many of his recordings are held at the Centre for Rupert's Land Studies at the University of Winnipeg, and of these a significant portion are also available on the Centre's website. This internet resource is tremendously important, retaining as it does the orality of the genre, the sound of the speaker's voice, and of course the original Cree-language version. The book is best enjoyed in conjunction with the website.

That said, much of



what is contained in *Telling Our Stories* is not available on the website, and the book has its own distinct charms. In its nine chapters it focuses on particular themes: origin stories, the Mi-te-wi-win (“shamanism”), early contact narratives, Cree versus European weaponry, Christianity, and a moving account of a devastating epidemic. The stories in themselves are absorbing and engaging, well-told and rich in meaning. Most of the chapters have useful introductions by the University of Winnipeg researchers who worked on the Omushkego project, writing of their collaboration with Mr. Bird and providing historical and cultural context. Mr. Bird himself contextualizes the stories too, largely by describing key aspects of the traditional Omushkego lifestyle. He also explains the motivations and concerns behind his project of recording as much Omushkego culture as possible, focussing particularly on his fear that the Omushkego language is disappearing and, with it, the wealth of stories it carries. Louis Bird’s concern to save an ancient, vital tradition frames the book and much of his narrative, but for the reader this is only one component of the experience. To a non-Omushkego, the reading experience also includes a sense of being admitted into the thought world and lived experience of the Omushkegowak. In any one story here, countless elements of belief, understand-

ing, values and daily practice are transmitted incidentally in the course of describing the actions and thoughts of the protagonists. I know of few books that so effectively transmit a cultural world as does this one in its combination of traditional tales, oral histories, and commentary and explication by an internal expert, Louis Bird.

*Telling Our Stories* will be a tremendous teaching tool for students of virtually any age, from primary school to university. In salvaging what knowledge he can, as the forces of colonization and modernization pry the generations apart and impose the English language, Louis Bird is attempting primarily to preserve his culture for the Omushkego generations to come, hoping they will return to it. At the same time, he has offered the rest of the world access to the thought, knowledge, struggles and historical understanding of his Omushkegowak people.

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#### **Bibliography:**

Bird, Louis. *Omushkego Legends*. Omushkego Oral History Project, Centre for Rupert’s Land Studies, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2006. See <<http://www.ourvoices.ca>>

### *Through Water, Ice & Fire: Schooner Nancy of the War of 1812*

By Barry Gough. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006. 213 pp. \$24.99 softcover. ISBN 1-55002-569-4.

*Through Water, Ice & Fire* is a biography of the *Nancy*, a sailing vessel that played an important role on the Great Lakes during the War of 1812. Barry Gough has fle-

shed out in great detail the *Nancy*’s story that he began to tell several years earlier in *Fighting Sail on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay*. By placing the activities of one ship at the centre of his narrative, Gough draws our attention away from more familiar players in the War of 1812 such as Tecumseh, Isaac Brock, Oliver Hazard Perry and