

An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land: Unfinished Conversations by Jennifer Brown

Daniel R. Laxer, PhD

Volume 111, Number 1, Spring 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1059969ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059969ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Laxer, D. R. (2019). Review of [*An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land: Unfinished Conversations* by Jennifer Brown]. *Ontario History*, 111(1), 98–100.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1059969ar>

then, very little has been discovered elsewhere, and nobody has uncovered credible evidence for a Viking connection to Ontario.) Curiously, other ROM staff, including those who succeeded Currelly, either questioned or rejected the Ontario provenance, but stood behind the story—with some equivocation—until the mid-1950s when the truth could not be suppressed any longer. Today, the museum acknowledges that the doubters were right when it interprets the objects within the limits of their unprovenanced authenticity as Norse artefacts dating between 775 and 1025 CE.

In our more academically rigorous and somewhat cynical world, it is easy to condemn Charles Trick Currelly's naivety in accepting and then defending Eddy Dodd's story, but he was hardly the first or the last museum employee to make such mistakes. Furthermore, we ought to remember his importance in acquiring artefacts on a heroic scale to form the ROM's internationally significant cultural collection during its early decades. It is almost impossible for most museums, galleries, and historic sites not to have problematic artefacts. Aside from competently catalogued genuine ob-

jects, their collections often are polluted with modern fakes, or fictional pieces cobbled together from unrelated old materials, or real but ordinary objects "enhanced" by antique dealers to increase their monetary value, or items that have been misidentified as to their date or origin because of curatorial ignorance. As is the case with the Beardmore relics, museums also possess real objects that have been given false provenances intentionally in order to deceive. Sadly, we have museums across Ontario and beyond where more than a small percentage of their objects have been misidentified because the people responsible for collecting do not possess the expertise in material culture and connoisseurship they need to develop and curate their collections properly. Their failures consequently subvert their institutions' abilities to serve the public's interest in its heritage effectively. Thus, *Beardmore* may be read as a cautionary tale for the present day as well as an exposé of a sad incident in the history of Canada's pre-eminent museum.

Carl Benn, Professor
Department of History, Ryerson University

An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land *Unfinished Conversations*

By Jennifer Brown

Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2017. 360 pages. \$44.95 paper ISBN 9781771991711,
\$44.95 ePub ISBN 9781771991735, Free PDF ISBN 9781771991728. (www.aupress.ca)

Jennifer Brown's *An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land: Unfinished Conversations* is a stimulating contribution of one of Canada's premier ethnohistorians. This book is a real gift to the general public (the PDF is available for free on the publisher's website) and especially to scholars investigating fur trade

and Indigenous history in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. Brown has already influenced so many over her four-decade long career at the University of Winnipeg, serving as director and publications editor for the Center for Rupert's Land Studies from 1996-2010. This book delivers more

than its subtitle, “*Unfinished Conversations*,” suggests. It consists of six parts each containing three chapters expertly produced by Brown’s probing intellect and accumulated wisdom, weaving together a rich narrative and diverse treatment of Indigenous and fur trade history. Each is accomplished in a satisfying way without exhausting the subject. The various components produce fascinating readings that should inspire much future scholarship.

The first part of the book examines language to access various perspectives in the 1600s around Hudson Bay. Brown is interested in “ethnonyms,” or the way language and naming was/is structured by European and Indigenous peoples to reflect different understandings of people and place. Chapter 1 examines the conceptualization and naming of the territory around Hudson Bay, or as the Cree called it, *Winni-pek*, or “the sea of dirty (salt) water.” Brown contrasts *nituskeenan*, the Cree word meaning “our land,” with how the English claimed the Hudson Bay watershed and purportedly gave it to the Hudson’s Bay Company and named it “Rupert’s Land” after the nephew of King Charles I in 1670.

Brown contrasts English and French names with Cree concepts of geography, place, and landscape. The names arbitrarily imposed by Europeans typically honoured explorers or royalty, or replicated European place-names, such as “New South Wales” for southwestern Hudson Bay. This stands in stark contrast with Omushkego Cree place-naming which encoded local features that could serve as visual cues for

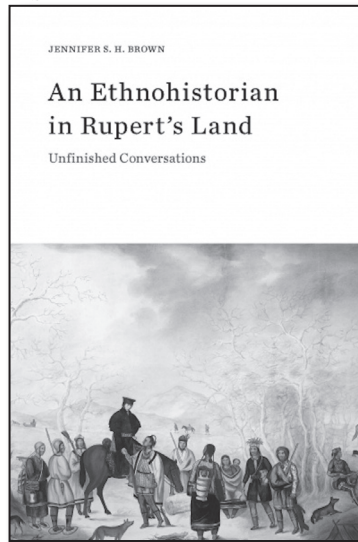
travellers or contain important information about place. Chapter 2 examines the different linguistic usages of the Hudson’s Bay Company and North West Company employees, the latter borrowing naming and terminology, especially relating to class and gender, from the French fur trade that had developed out of the St. Lawrence from the 1600s. The analysis becomes particularly interesting as Brown returns to a familiar topic, the ethnogenesis of the Métis.

While this subject is not a direct focus of this book, Brown’s investigation of fur trade families and women’s activities that was first examined in her path-breaking *Strangers in Blood* (1980), is further developed here in Chapters 4-6 and 8-10. She examines demographic changes over time, the evolving customs of fur trade

marriages, conceptions and taboos regarding kinship, and baptising fur trade children, pushing the analysis of topics previously covered by her and historian Sylvia Van Kirk. There is a fascinating chapter about Charlotte Small, the daughter of a Cree woman and a Scottish trader, who was the lifelong wife of the infamous fur trader and cartographer David Thompson. Each chapter bristles with her evident mastery of both fur trade history

and historiography, always demonstrating a sensitive and thoughtful application of sources to develop argumentation.

The remaining chapters largely focus on topics relating to the history of Cree and Ojibwe peoples living around the Hudson Bay watershed in what is now northern Ontario and Manitoba. She examines



Cree story-telling about elders, exploring the term *Aaniskotaapaan*, which expresses ideas about succession and great-grandchildren. The Wasitay prophetic movement of 1842-43 among the Omushkego Cree of Hudson Bay, as well as Ojibwe-Methodist encounters in the mid-late nineteenth century demonstrate that Christianity brought by the fur trade and subsequent missionaries had a significant, though not absolute, influence on Indigenous spirituality, which developed in its own distinct way in the midst of external pressures.

The final part of the book is devoted to the history of the Berens River in Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario. One of the most interesting chapters examines the life of Fair Wind (*Naamiwan*), who was a well-known medicine man who lived along the Berens River at the outset of the twentieth century. Brown pieces together a biography of his life based on fragmentary written sources, including the notes and papers of anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell. She expertly weaves the fragments, carefully extracting the credible information from the conjecture. She examines both Ojibwe and

Cree terms and concepts and interweaves Indigenous oral history. Her scholarship can be seen as a model example of how the methodologies of ethnohistory are still relevant, and indeed, crucial, to understanding the complicated history of Indigenous peoples and the fur trade.

Brown grapples with nuances from both the European and Indigenous perspectives, analyzing how worldviews collided yet were turned into a system of reciprocal relationships and material exchanges. Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is the openness to new ideas and evidence from all perspectives and sources, epitomizing the approach of ethnohistory and revealing its fruits. This is one of the best readers on the fur trade, with its strongest suits being in the realms of language and gender studies. This is a thoughtful, deep, and priceless contribution that will certainly fuel much further study from the next generation of scholars who will pick up where Brown leaves off.

Daniel R. Laxer, PhD
Ministry of Indigenous Affairs

Creating Exhibits that Engage

A Manual for Museums and Historical Organizations

By John Summers

Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 216 pages. \$52.00 paperback.
ISBN 978-144227936-0 (rowman.com).

As museums struggle to compete for audiences in a rapidly changing and competitive world, creative exhibits allow visitors to think, participate, create, and interact with a space where they are challenged and inspired. John Summers recognizes and calls out immediately the important role that engaging and dynam-

ic exhibits are in the museum 'business' model. *Creating Exhibits that Engage* is the outcome of a careers worth of practical experience and advice, mixed with current museological theory, that comes together in a single resource that museum and heritage professionals or volunteers would find helpful at any stage of their career. With his