

# Book Review

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*Rediscovering the First Nations of Canada*, John Friesen,  
Calgary: Detselig, 1997.

My grandmother sometimes cooked up something we called "Mulligan stew." It was carrots, peas, potatoes, turnips, two or three kinds of meat, and simply anything available that could be amalgamated into the category of "stew fixings." *Rediscovering the First Nations of Canada* is a Mulligan stew in book form. The author apparently decided to do pretty much the same as what Grandma used to do, only instead of having a kitchen scattered with stew fixings, he has a library of "book fixings," all subsumed under the category of "information about First Nations People."

The book turns out to be a tourist's guide through bits and pieces of scholarly works located in the disciplines of history, anthropology, literature, journalism, and popular culture. But extracted from their academic context, they meander from any sense of purpose as they float through Friesen's "good intentions" to cast Native peoples in a positive light. In this sense the carrots are indistinguishable from the potatoes. The book would be more aptly named "Redigesting the First Nations of Canada."

The chapters are divided to cover the cultural regions of Canada, but a large portion of the material is mixed with United States sources about US themes. The author neglects to make any significant cross-border distinctions with regard to policy and response. There is a serious inadequacy in this omission because crucial differences between the two dominant societies animate divergent histories for Native people. For example, the Miriam Report of 1928 exposed the horrific conditions of the US residential schools. As a consequence, most of these schools were closed down by the end of the 1940s and most Native students were placed in public schools. This is in sharp contrast to the legacy of church-operated schools that dominates the history of First Nations education in Canada. Questions about the local communities' response to these different policies are missing from Friesen's book. Rather than offering a view of a genuine place, less than useful, less than accurate information is provided in its stead.

Each chapter begins with a brief version of some legend that, we are told, is "appropriate to the teachings of each nation" (p. 44). After the meal has been blessed by the legend, we are served heaping spoonfuls of regional marriage customs, hunting patterns, house construction, religious practices, and hairstyles. All the while, the professor's misdirected revisionist sentiment overspices the writing. Revisionist, did I say? Actually, it sounds more like a chat from the pulpit: "It is a tragedy that few historians have taken space to study in any depth the ramifications of the many terrible atrocities targeted against the Aboriginal peoples during the contact period. Whatever such a study proved, it might humble those who make proud claims about the virtue of their genealogy as Canadian citizens"

(p. 26). At other times a Pollyanna posture prevails as he imagines Indians basking in the warmth of "today's enlightened multicultural perspective" (p. 249).

One of the most frustrating aspects of this book is that it contradicts itself at times. For instance, we are uncertain about what the author wishes to say concerning religion. On page 129 we are told that "the incoming Europeans did not see the similarity of Indian teachings with their own because they were not looking for them." Then on page 130 we are informed that "Indian spirituality has very little in common with imported forms of religion." Finally, the entire matter is perfunctorily dismissed with the pronouncement that "the difference between their worldview and that of the incoming Europeans was that the First Nations were not particularly hung up on the details of any specific religious act; it was the essence of the act that mattered."

This book is simply brimming with overstatement and unfounded generalizations. If the book has a purpose, it is not explicitly stated except by way of an afterthought: "Could the two cultures possibly have met and not tried to wipe out the other? There is no way to know the answer, but there is still ample time to replay essentially the same scene in a mode of rediscovery. Let's not blow it this time!" (p. 255). The book, then, is a kind of simplistic propaganda tool to get the reader to reappraise Indians and promote harmony and friendship. At best, this is a dubious academic enterprise.

What would have been more useful, especially in the arena of educational thought, would be a smaller, and more focused, examination of one tribal group and their history of Indian-white relations. There is value in a study that critically describes the cultural, political, and economic motivations of both First Nations and Euro-Canadians. These kinds of ethnohistorical studies are needed because they provide specific information and, if thoughtfully written, create insights for generalizations about larger themes. A study that is carefully circumscribed can make more defensible claims. Such work, of course, requires a disciplined, systematic, and respectful inquiry. Attempts to show how clever the "old Indians" were in the terms of popular culture tend to trivialize and stereotype Native peoples. People can come away from a book like this thinking they know something about the First Nations of Canada by having consumed an assemblage of disembodied "facts." The most hazardous aspect of a book like this is that people will think they have learned something. Karen Swisher, in her essay "Why Indian People Should be the Ones to Write About Indian Education" makes the case that non-Natives have gotten it wrong so much in the past that they should not continue to write about Indian people. There are Native scholars who should now do the writing and speaking about these topics. Books like *Rediscovering the First Nations of Canada* provide evidence that non-Natives with "good intentions" do not necessarily produce works that are more "respectful" than the ill-informed white academics of the past. Contrary to its vaguely stated purpose, this book does not cultivate cross-cultural harmony and understanding: it only produces an intellectual indigestion.

#### Reference

- Swisher, K. (1996). Why Indian people should be the ones to write about Indian education. *American Indian Quarterly*, 20(1), 83-90.