

Review Article

Determining Okanagan History

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The Queen's People: A Study of Hegemony, Coercion and Accommodation among the Okanagan of Canada, by Peter Carstens. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. xxvii, 333 pp. Illus., maps, index. \$22.95 paper; \$55.00 cloth.

This could have been an important book. Senior University of Toronto anthropologist Peter Carstens sets out to trace the evolution of a single First Nations community, the Okanagan Indian Band, aiming to show how the people came to live on the reserve they now occupy near the head of Lake Okanagan, and how their culture has been shaped by life on the reserve. In the best tradition of community studies, Carstens proposes to address the dynamic interaction between the local cultural system and the encompassing Canadian social system. Unfortunately, the project is undermined by a number of weaknesses, the most serious being the author's cavalier use of source material, and the determinism that underlies his view of Okanagan history.

"I do not wish to give the impression of supporting in its entirety the 'fatal confrontation' hypothesis which asserts that all native peoples were irrevocably doomed by the simple fact of contact," Carstens assures the reader early in *The Queen's People*. "Yet by the 1850s in Okanagan history the stage had been set . . ." (p. 53). The fact that the author feels obliged to make this disclaimer speaks volumes about his approach. At many places in this disturbing study, one gets the distinct impression that Carstens sees Native peoples as helpless victims of a "fatal confrontation."

The book is divided into two sections. The first proceeds from "traditional" times to the 1930s, chronicling the processes and policy decisions that forced the Okanagan onto reserves. The second is an economic and sociological analysis of reserve life from the 1950s to the 1980s. The first section is the focus of this review.

Carstens paints a picture of a reserve culture marked by "rampant factionalism," status-seeking, and "jealous guarding" of personal property

(pp. xix, 11, 143, *passim*). The *explicit* argument is that this culture is a product of the Indian Act of 1876: the Act “administratively determines” the lives of the Okanagan and their “social personalities,” to the extent that they are distinct from other Canadians by virtue not of their “Indian-ness,” but of their socialization on reserves. The *implicit* thesis is that the Okanagan are innately fractious, and preoccupied with status and wealth.

The author notes at the outset that his portrayal of aboriginal Okanagan culture draws heavily on the turn-of-the-century ethnographies of James Teit, supplemented by his own field observations. Yet readers familiar with Teit’s writings, and with the work of many later students of the Okanagan and the Plateau (Verne Ray, L. V. W. Walters, Leslie Spier, Angelo Anastasio, Eugene Hunn, and others) will be struck by the contrasts. On the question of traditional leadership, for instance, Teit and later students have generally characterized power as widely diffused through the village or band. The political chief maintained authority only as long as he (and in some Plateau societies, she) had the support of the people. Carstens sets out along similar lines, acknowledging that the Okanagan was not a Plains- or coast-type tribal society. Then, in a sudden change of tack, he concludes that it was a society defined by a sharp “status hierarchy.” People were “obsessed with guarding their positions” in the hierarchy, and a successful chief was one who “through his ability to manipulate social relationships, was able to maintain his office without falling foul of his rivals and lieutenants” (pp. 11, 14). Such a personality might become head chief of the “tribal” unit which formed in time of war. These assertions are made with scant source references, primary or otherwise. Other archaeologists and anthropologists have challenged the notion that hunting-fishing-gathering societies were necessarily “simple” and egalitarian (c.f. Brian Hayden *re* the Lillooet).¹ However, Carstens shows no sign of being influenced by their more careful research.

Readers familiar with the ethnographic sources and early fur traders’ accounts of the Okanagan are left wondering, where does Carstens’ notion of ranked hierarchy come from? He cites as evidence Teit (no volume reference) and a Hudson’s Bay Company Archives file (B.97/e/1). In fact, this file contains no mention of political or social organization among interior groups. Such an error might be overlooked, were careless use of the sources not such a problem throughout the text. In the discussion of “wars” with the Shuswap, for example, fur trader Alexander Ross is cited

¹ Research first published in the 1970s and eighties is presented again in Brian Hayden, ed. *A Complex Culture of the British Columbia Plateau: Traditional St’at’imx Resource Use* (Vancouver, 1992).

as the source on “tribal” war parties, although all he had to say on the matter was that the peoples of the regions were “ready to unite against a common enemy.” Significantly, Carstens is silent on Ross’s statement in the same paragraph that “[t]he Oakinackens are not a warlike people. Fishing and hunting, and not war, are their usual occupations” (Ross 1923, pp. 311-12).² Carstens frequently cites “oral tradition” as his source, but on very few occasions does he provide the names of informants. These criticisms are not just the quibbles of an historian. Carstens is issuing a challenge to “received opinion,” and his failure at so many points to provide evidence for his claims — or to acknowledge the often ample counter-evidence — undermines the whole endeavour.

The Okanagan are portrayed throughout as obsessed with power, status, and factional loyalties. The author’s own preoccupation with these themes appears to lead his narrative. There is a good deal of informative discussion of Okanagan chiefs, but in the final analysis, many emerge as little more than power-seekers. The early-nineteenth-century chief Pelkamulox is described as a “megalomaniac” with imperial designs over the entire southern interior (pp. 16-20). The only discussion of Johnny Chelahitsa is of his role in a power struggle between rival factions of his people.

Chelahitsa’s portrait figures prominently on the cover of the book, and a caption notes that “he liked to display his medals as an expression of his admiration for the British monarchy” (facing p. 136). In fact, this same Chelahitsa was a key leader in the province-wide Allied Tribes movement for Native land rights early this century. We hear very little from Carstens of native efforts to counter white encroachment at any time. He acknowledges the resistance effort of the Okanagan and Shuswap in the 1870s, and the actions of a few individuals in later periods. However, in his view such efforts were doomed from the start, largely because Okanagan society was so riven by factions — which government readily manipulated — and because the people were so loyal to the monarchy (pp. 92-93, 272). Few would deny the injustices to which the Okanagan and other Aboriginal peoples have been subjected by colonial governments and the Canadian state. But to deny their efforts, and achievements, in their ongoing struggle for justice — to go so far as to call them “the Queen’s people” — is to deny their history.

The notion that any resistance was doomed brings us back to the “fatal confrontation” thesis. The thesis is clearly illustrated in Carstens’ treatment of the fur trade era. His willingness to challenge the accepted view that the

² Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River*, M. M. Quaife ed. (Chicago, 1923 [London, 1849]).

fur trade had little impact on the Native peoples of the interior is welcome. But in the absence of any convincing evidence, few will take seriously his proposition that the fur trade wiped out most fur-bearing animals in the region; depleted the supply of salmon; altered the nature of Okanagan leadership; and generally undermined Okanagan culture and values "to the extent to which they could never recover" (p. 31).

The Okanagan were readily incorporated into the trade, according to Carstens, because the promise of luxury goods fed their "traditional pre-occupation" with personal status (p. 33). The result of their zeal was that populations of beaver and other animals, including deer, were rapidly reduced. Depletion of some species (notably beaver) no doubt occurred, but the evidence is not nearly as clear as Carstens implies. He accepts uncritically traders' accounts of "poverty" and "starvation," with little appreciation of the cultural connotations of such terms. The most conspicuous example of this is his use of an entry in A. C. Anderson's journal from his travels in the Lillooet area in May 1846. Anderson noted that the local Indians were "suffering from want of provisions . . . exhibit[ing] every symptom of abject poverty." Carstens takes this to mean that the salmon "run" on the Fraser River failed that year, and it is the only piece of evidence offered to support his contention that the fur trade depleted salmon supplies in the region (pp. 31, 35). His failure to take into account the most basic biological considerations leads him far astray.

In the first place, the main salmon runs in this region — and there are many runs, of several species — are between June and October. May is early to be talking about a failed season. Secondly, runs are subject to dramatic fluctuation in the normal course of things. Fraser River Sockeye, for instance, follow a four-year cycle; back-calculation shows 1846 to be a year of low return. Landslides, floods, and variation in natural conditions also affect the size of runs. But while such factors can have a significant short-term impact, salmon populations are remarkably resilient. There is simply no evidence, biological or anthropological, to indicate a depletion of stocks in the nineteenth century.

These criticisms should not be taken to suggest that there was no starvation among the Okanagan. Winter shortage was a recurrent phenomenon, and it may well have been exacerbated by factors related to the fur trade. But Carstens' failure to consider basic biology diminishes the credibility of his case. On a more fundamental level, his privileging of hunting and fishing over other activities predisposes him to exaggerate the ill effects of the fur trade. By accepting the notion that societies like the Okanagan were dependent on animals, largely to the exclusion of plant resources, he

underestimates the diversity and flexibility of these economies — and the essential contributions made by women.

In *The Queen's People*, the “pacification” of the Okanagan begins with the “mild hegemonic influence” of white fur traders, and culminates in economic, political, and cultural dependence under the terms of the Indian Act of 1876. The thesis of “administrative determinism” rests on the assumption that Okanagan culture was in fatal decline by the time of the Indian Act, and that the Okanagan people were left powerless in its wake. Since then, Carstens argues, the Okanagan are best understood as “peasants,” people with “few choices in their daily rounds as to how they should run their lives” (p. 276). Indeed, he contends that as early as the 1860s, structural and cultural transformations had been set in train which could never be reversed. Key among these were changes in the personalities of individual Okanagan, and in the “conscience collective” of their society. Carstens’ analysis of just how their destiny was determined is best reviewed in his own words:

Whether they wished to accept it or not, they fell under the hegemonic spell of the white man and his institutions. At first they wanted trade goods; then they wanted his powers; then they identified with the alleged wishes of the monarchy . . . They learned about the mysteries of Christianity which required considerable rejection of their traditional beliefs and values; they observed the unruly behaviour of mining hooligans; and learned the pleasure and pain of alcohol. In short, they began to experience a dual or bifurcated culture and developed social personalities to match. The conscience collective had two parts, an Indian part which they were beginning to despise, and an unreal fantasy part, based on their observations and misunderstanding of the strangers who came from afar, like white giants . . . (pp. 52-53)

Carstens calls this the “realist” approach, and is pleased to contrast it with the “romantic” notions of his anticipated critics. Never mind the intellectual revolt against the whole “realist” project that is under way in his field; it is not realism so much as a simplistic kind of historical determinism that pervades *The Queen's People*. One doesn't have to be a romantic to see the limitations of this approach.

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