

*Common and Contested Ground:
A Human and Environmental History
of the Northwestern Plains*

Theodore Binnema

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001.
263 pp. Maps. US\$29.95 cloth.

MATTHEW EVENDEN
University of British Columbia

THIS BOOK IS WELL NAMED: *Common ground* because it is about a place – the Northwestern Plains – that played host to a variety of band societies of diverse linguistic, ethnic, economic, and military affiliation. Over time, different groups sought out the rich bison resource of the Plains, hunting at first without bow and arrow, and then, in the eighteenth century, obtaining (albeit unevenly) gun and horse technologies. Different groups intermingled, intermarried, and demonstrated flexibility and fluidity in the face of changing circumstances. Resource procurement cycles were developed. Groups shifted between ecological zones with the seasons, in pursuit of bison herds and hospitable environments. *Contested ground* because groups came into conflict in this shared world, seeking advantage over one another; engaging in internecine fighting over horses, guns, and trade; and reshaping the cultural geography of the region well before European groups asserted or assumed dominance. The spread of European-introduced diseases and the rivalries of the fur trade certainly destabilized relationships in the region, but they did not erode cultures nor did they introduce entirely new patterns. In the long view that Binnema

provides, fur traders appear as the latest group to arrive on the Plains, ineluctably involved, however unwillingly, within the broader scheme of military rivalry.

The time scale of this study is broad, from about AD 200 to 1806. This leads Binnema to consult a wide range of evidence and interdisciplinary research. He has examined ecological studies carefully, made his own judgments about the quality of current research on bison migration, synthesized focused archaeological studies into a broad panorama, and explained all of this varied material clearly. This is no small feat. While Binnema's time scale is broad, so too is his spatial scale. The Northwestern Plains region has doors: at different points Binnema traces the connections between groups tied to Missouri agriculturalists and fur traders on Hudson Bay. While he points to the many groups drawn to the Northwestern Plains, he also attends to those centrifugal forces that drew them away or tied them to peoples beyond.

At the heart of this book is an attempt to redress long-standing approaches to Aboriginal history on the Plains. Tribal histories, Binnema suggests, pay insufficient attention to interaction among groups. Each group,

he argues, had porous boundaries. For example, Saukamappee (Young Man), whom David Thompson met in the 1780s, was a Cree-born Peigan leader whose life traversed the Plains and crossed the divide between the pedestrian and equestrian eras as well as the time before and after the introduction of guns. A tribal or group-centred history cannot properly explain his complex political and ethnic provenance. According to Binnema, Saukamappee, and others like him, must be understood within the context of the shifting set of group relationships that gave form and meaning to his life. Binnema also insists on the importance of attending to conflicts on the Northwest Plains. Warfare happened. It is important to analyze it and to seek to explain it rather than to ignore it. To do otherwise is to do an injustice to the humanity and complexity of Plains peoples. In general, Binnema would like to transcend a "culturalist" approach and to emphasize environmental, economic, and political factors. He would also like to analyze the motivations of individuals within a broader tapestry of events rather than simply to focus on group interaction and structural changes. In the background one senses the influence both of Richard White's *Middle Ground* and Arthur Ray's *Indians in the Fur Trade* – two works that Binnema praises and selectively emulates.

Binnema succeeds unevenly with this ambitious agenda. He has convincingly demonstrated how groups interacted and overlapped, but he also shows how group identities could become fixed and potent during moments of military engagement. And, with regard to the later period, owing to the paucity of source material he can provide only a limited analysis of individual motivations and events.

This is an important book that will set the terms of discussion for early Plains Aboriginal history for some time to come. Its weaving of human and environmental themes is particularly revealing, innovative, and important. I suspect that this aspect of the book, rather than the recounting and analysis of the numerous military conflicts in the eighteenth century, will mark its importance to a general readership. The book could be used in undergraduate seminars to good effect. Unfortunately, the maps have not been well reproduced, and the Aboriginal maps are hardly discussed. Interested readers will have to turn to an intriguing essay about Aboriginal cartography that Binnema has published elsewhere.¹

¹ Theodore Binnema, "How Does a Map Mean? Old Swan's Map of 1801 and the Blackfoot World," in *From Rupert's Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster*, ed. Theodore Binnema, Gerhard Ens, and R.C. Macleod (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 201–24.