

*Trading Beyond the Mountains:
The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843*

Richard Somerset Mackie

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997. 420 pp. Illus., maps. \$75 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

*Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters
in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846*

Elizabeth Vibert

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The migration and mingling of peoples on the frontier, defined as a zone of interaction, is an essential theme in the formation of empires generally, and of the British Empire in particular. Extensive zones where migrants came in the nineteenth century to dominate host peoples were to be found in Africa, the Americas, and Australasia. The methods and perspectives developed to study the interactions between intruders and Native peoples of the post-imperial period (i.e., after c. 1960) are, not surprisingly, rather different from those employed when empire was in fashion. Then the migrant's view got pride of place; now it is the host's that is stressed.

Elizabeth Vibert concentrates, though not exclusively, upon the previously little-studied Plateau region consisting of the Columbia River and Fraser River systems. Richard Mackie's zone of interaction includes the interior Plateau region but also Pacific shores from Alaska to California and even Hawaii. Both focus on the early nineteenth century (c. 1790-1850), an intrusive phase in

which migrants were less numerous than the host peoples and in which they had not imposed military and political domination. The migrants in this instance were not government officials, missionaries, or settlers but traders, particularly employees of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The records these traders left, used extensively by both, are the key source for their studies.

Though the authors use similar sources, comprehend overlapping zones of interaction, and work on the same time period, their works differ in several respects. Mackie writes historical geography and, largely, to reassess the intruder. He is influenced by the work of E.E. Rich on the HBC and by Harold Innis on the fur trade. He identifies with the traders and, though not uncritical, is essentially appreciative of their accomplishments. Vibert, on the other hand, situates her cultural history in post-colonial discourse. Critical, if not suspicious, of "white, male, British, and middle-class" observers (4), she is inclined to see the traders' assessments as self-serving and more self-revealing than

insightful of others. At the same time she stresses the need to discover the Native experience, pointing out, for example, how the world the traders created in their records could, when used as evidence, lead in the present-day to grossly distorted assessments of Indigenous culture in court cases dealing with land claims.

From his perspective Mackie stresses the diverse activities of the HBC. These did not centre exclusively on furs. In bases on the lower Columbia and Fraser, salmon were processed (salted in barrels) and timber was sawed for export to Hawaii, where demand was stimulated by US whalers. One enterprising factor there sent a consignment of whale bone by Company ship to England, where it fetched a tidy profit. A map, entitled "The Pacific Rim" (156), both illuminates and exaggerates the extent of these activities. It is part of the evidence Mackie assembles to assert what others have largely ignored – that HBC officials "formed a regional economy on the Pacific coast, an economy largely independent of the east of the Rockies" (312). Their various impressive initiatives, including the systematic deployment of the steamer the *Beaver*, are painstakingly considered. However, the HBC's multifarious activities, though they resulted in some commercial success, did not, much to the author's regret, "translate into a British diplomatic victory," since Americans won the "political war of 1846" (314). The lower Columbia was lost to the British Empire and to what would become the colony cum province of British Columbia.

What role did Natives play in the Company's commerce? Recognizing the existence of a Native exchange system featuring *haiqua* (shells) and slaves, Mackie sees the Company

committed to fitting into it. Exchange rates featured blankets calibrated in terms of beaver skins. Such exchanges were apparently seen to be advantageous by Natives, though the author observes that the European traders frequently remarked on the "absurd cheapness" with which provisions, trade goods, and labour were obtained (289). Provisions, he further points out, were often the result of women's work. Reference is also made to factors labelling the Natives as indolent, but the contradiction between that judgment and the essential role they played in the Company's commercial success is not engaged. "An immense creation and transfer of wealth occurred whereby commodities obtained from tens of thousands of Native people were converted in European and Pacific marketplaces into hard cash and handsome dividends that went directly to a few dozen Company shareholders, governors, and officers" (288-89). Mackie further notes much mingling, which facilitated material exchanges: "HBC employees of different ranks and backgrounds married or lived with Native and Metis women of all classes and cultures, from slaves to nobles" (308).

Given his approach, we need not expect Mackie to probe deeply the impressions the traders recorded of these economic and social encounters. Vibert does. She sorts out the names of groups of Natives that traders adopted, pointing out that they could be inconsistent with how these societies were organized by custom and manners. A recurrent theme in frontier studies alludes to the migrants' well-developed ranking of those encountered. The traders were no exceptions. "Fishing tribes" were indolent, "hunting tribes" industrious – an assessment derived from the traders' own identi-

fication with the hunt as a particularly "manly pursuit." Among Plateau societies the Salish Flathead (of what is now northwestern Montana) were the traders' favourites not only because they accounted for a substantial part of the Company's fur intake, but also because they were both buffalo hunters and courageous warriors, as was revealed in their conflicts with the neighbouring Plains Blackfoot. Natives, their nobility notwithstanding, were prone to acts of savagery. Compared to the traders' own notions of economic activity, Indigenous resource management was wanting.

By privileging Natives in interpreting traders' tales, the author shows traders' judgments to be quite misleading. Gift-exchange ceremonies, integral to Native social relations, were not always so recognized by traders even when they were recipients. The role of women in these societies often escaped them. Nor did they grasp the beliefs and practices Natives had fashioned, such as the use of prophecy, to cope with cataclysmic disease (i.e., smallpox epidemics that had preceded the traders onto the Plateau). Nor did traders understand the selective use to which Natives put introduced technologies. Plateau

groups saw the gun more as a tool to cope with collisions with Plains adversaries than as a means to better pursue the hunt. Goods acquired were used for purposes "that transcended ... basic 'utilitarian' values" (279). Their possession achieved prestige; their gift-exchange fostered peaceful relations. At the same time the peoples of the Columbia Interior had not become dependent on the traders. They were, as others have stressed in the literature on the fur trade elsewhere in North America, active agents in the exchange. Vibert concludes, then, that the traders' verdicts contradicted, rebutted, or ignored their own observations. As "a highly educated, White, middle-class woman in the 1990s" (5) "unpacking" the tales left by the traders, Vibert recognizes she is not likely to provide definitive insights into Native attitudes and adaptations on the frontier in Plateau country in the early 1800s. But she thinks she may have provided illuminating glimpses.

These works, despite their differences – one shaped by an older perspective and the other by a newer one – do have one thing in common: excellent maps rich with geographical, cultural, and linguistic information as well as useful illustrations.