

*Fur Trade and Exploration; Opening the Far Northwest, 1821-1852*, by Theodore Karamanski. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983. Pp. 330.

Until recently, fur trade historians all but ignored northern British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska. In the last few years, the appearance of several articles and a series of graduate theses have begun to redress this neglect. The publication six years ago of A. A. Wright's *Prelude to Bonanza*, a narrative description of early exploration based on published sources, provided a preliminary survey of the district. But the limitations of that book were clearly evident, and much important documentary material remained untapped. T. Karamanski's *Fur Trade and Exploration* is the latest attempt to bring this final frontier into the mainstream of Canadian historiography.

*Fur Trade* is a welcome, though not completely successful, attempt to explain the expansion of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian American Fur Company into the district Sir George Simpson once wistfully labelled a "new Athabasca." It is a fairly limited study, for Karamanski states it is "the story of the explorers and their explorations of a remote part of the continent. Their attitudes, actions, and adventures are the principal concerns of the book" (p. xvii). Those in search of a consideration of the economic and social dynamics of the northern fur trade will have to look elsewhere.

After setting these somewhat limited and outdated goals, Karamanski proceeds in a workmanlike fashion with his task. He does an able job of describing the corporate and diplomatic context of expansion and defining George Simpson's role in the encouragement of exploration. The book becomes more narrative as the author charts the travels of Samuel Black up the Finlay River and of John McLeod, Murdock McPherson and Robert Campbell along the Liard and describes the efforts of Campbell, John Bell and A. H. Murray to commence trading in the Yukon River valley. The book ends with the destruction of Campbell's Fort Selkirk by Chilcat Indians in 1852, an event Karamanski believes signals the end of Hudson's Bay Company expansion plans in the far northwest.

Karamanski is clearly at his best when describing in precise detail the actual voyages of exploration. His accounts are solidly based on traders' journals and letters and embellished by comments derived from his personal canoe travels in the district. Much of this, however, is already known and available in such works as C. Wilson's *Campbell of the Yukon* and the aforementioned *Prelude to Bonanza*. Several sections,

including the discussion of John McLeod's long-ignored but central exploration of the Liard in 1831, provide information rarely considered by other historians. More importantly, the author's use of the Hudson's Bay Company archives and fast-paced style puts this book a notch above previously published narrative accounts.

Given the author's extensive primary research, it is both surprising and unfortunate that he has overlooked much relevant secondary literature. For example, there are at least three Master's theses and one PhD dissertation from the University of Manitoba alone that address this topic and region directly. These studies, plus other graduate papers and Shepherd Krech's work on the Eastern Kutchin (only one of his articles is cited), would have saved the writer considerable effort and perhaps encouraged him to consider some of the interpretive issues raised about the northern fur trade. In a different vein, had Karamanski examined Robert Campbell's post journals for Pelly Banks and Fort Selkirk (available at the Public Archives of Canada), his consideration of the southern Yukon fur trade would have been more complete.

There are flaws with Karamanski's account of northwest exploration and fur trade expansion. His discussion of Robert Campbell adds little to current knowledge, drawing too heavily again on the explorer's well-known memoirs. The uncritical use of this source and the laudatory treatment of the man is most unfortunate. Company correspondence suggests that Campbell overestimated his importance, was at best a marginal trader and was not widely admired by his peers. By going little beyond Campbell's memoirs, Karamanski has simply reinforced old and incomplete images of this central figure. Similarly, his summary comment (pp. 277-78) that the HBC did not have clear plans for the Yukon River trade is not supported by detailed examination. Contrary to the author's claim, the HBC specifically decided against locating a route to the Pacific coast or establishing a separate district west of the Mackenzie River. His discussion of the function of the northern fur trade — as opposed to exploration — is less than successful and displays noticeable gaps in research and analysis.

Perhaps to justify this emphasis on exploration, Karamanski takes pains to document the importance of these early adventurers, suggesting that they "produced a blueprint of the Far Northwest which was the basis for later development of the area" (p. 280). While it is true that Robert Campbell ensured that British mapmakers knew of his travels, an act that allowed him to achieve much desired notoriety, the comment is

decidedly overstated. The HBC suppressed knowledge of the location of Fort Youcon for two decades because they knew it to be outside British territory, and kept to themselves information concerning gold discoveries in the district. More importantly, the vaunted HBC trade routes were deemed impractical and all but ignored during the Klondike Gold Rush. The “contribution” of the early fur trade explorers is questionable. Theirs was a distinct period in the history of the north, not a precursor of future developments, at least not the ones the author suggests. It is unfortunate that Karamanski attempts to claim more — and less — for his fur traders than they deserved.

By focusing on exploration and largely ignoring the mechanics of the fur trade, Karamanski has missed much of the significance. While the book will appeal to those interested in the processes and personalities of exploration, there is little here for those concerned with the broader substance of the northern fur trade. His Eurocentric focus hides the lasting implications of native response to trade, alterations in native material culture, the introduction of disease and the re-ordering of intertribal trade networks. Though ostensibly eager to fill a major gap in fur trade historiography, the author has nonetheless ignored most questions of current interest.

One must, however, give the author his due credit. *Fur Trade and Exploration* provides an adept narrative of European expansion into the northwest. According to his design, Karamanski does fill a gap in the fur trade literature, though in fact that gap is far smaller than the author believes. Though his summary comments are suspect and the tone of the book uncritical of HBC explorers, he has nicely detailed individual explorations and provided useful corporate and diplomatic context.

Several final notes. The book is generally well produced, although a garish cover and the inclusion of a series of unremarkable travel photographs taken by the author detract from an otherwise fine presentation. Originally published by the University of Oklahoma Press, the book is being distributed in Canada by the University of British Columbia Press, a collaborative venture one hopes will be repeated on future titles of interest to Canadian readers.