

Archives and Truth in Fred Stenson's *The Trade*

Fred Stenson uses two sets of archives in his historical novel *The Trade*: the first grounds his narrative firmly in historical actuality, and the second engages the reader's imagination in exploring the possibilities behind that actuality. The first archive consists of actual written records of the fur trade; these provide the factual material in the novel, and include copies of fur trade records, reminiscences of a fur trader from the beginning of the twentieth century, and the vast body of records that are held in the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Archives and that have already been used as evidence in histories of the fur trade.¹ The second archive is a number of writings produced or alluded to in the narrative which make up an imaginary archive within the novel. The letters, ledgers, reports, post journals, novels, history books, and magazine articles—both actual and imaginary—referred to in the narrative are constant reminders that the past is mediated through texts.

In using the documents themselves, and even more importantly, in imagining the contexts of their production, Stenson reunites the archival traces of the past with the lived reality they represent, but also thematizes the contingent and partial nature of historical knowledge. The doubling of the archive in *The Trade* results in a realist narrative that repeatedly calls the reader's attention to the lack of transparency in the record itself. Yet the effect of the narrative is not to question the possibility of truth or representation in historiography. As Stenson himself tells us in a note to the reader at the end of *The Trade*, his novel "argues with some of history's assessments" (344), that is, it proposes a historical revision of the fur trade rather than seeking to demonstrate that history is unknowable.

There is an apparent contradiction in contending that the actual context and thus the “real meaning” behind the archival record may be lost to knowledge, but that the historical record as a whole is still subject to interpretation, misinterpretation, and revision. That contradiction is best explained by splitting the notion of “truth” into two *kinds* of truth in representations—truth-to-actuality and truth-to-meaning. For historian Ann Rigney, these two kinds of truth rely on different kinds of authority:

Representations that are “true-to-actuality” claim fidelity to historical sources, and their authority is thus based on their relation to evidence and to the historical particulars gleaned from it. [. . .] In contrast, representations that are “true-to-meaning” claim to have insight into the underlying configuration of past events, and their authority is based to a lesser degree on evidence and much more on confidence in the understanding and learning of the interpreter. (26)

This distinction accounts for the fact that the same historical evidence can be used to support different interpretations of past events and personalities, but it also helps account for the possibility of “truth” in historical fiction quite independent of its “fictional truth,” to borrow Michael Riffaterre’s phrase. That is, some of the “historical” content may be imagined, but the interpretation of the events and characters in question, the meaning given to them by the fiction, may be true historically as well as fictionally.

The question of what distinguishes history from historical fiction is often answered by the observation that the historian is answerable to the evidence—the epistemological bedrock of the archives—whereas the fiction writer is not. Fiction, according to this argument, cannot and need not answer the test of “Is it true?” Robert Scholes states the distinction between history and fiction thus:

History is a narrative discourse with different rules than those that govern fiction. The producer of a historical text affirms that the events entextualised did indeed occur prior to the entextualisation. Thus it is quite proper to bring extratextual information to bear on those events when interpreting and evaluating a historical narrative. [. . .] [I]n fiction the events may be said to be created by and with the text. They have no prior temporal existence, even though they are presented as if they did. (211)

Dorrit Cohn asserts that the distinction holds even for the type of fiction that most closely approaches formal historiography: “Marked by their distinctive discursive modes, historical fiction and history are different in kind, not merely in degree” (121). The distinctive discursive mode, and the unmistakable marker of fiction, says Cohn, is focalization—that is, narratorial access to the inner world of characters. From this point of view, even

though a historical novel such as *The Trade* refers in large part to actual events based on the historical record, its status as fiction means that the question of its empirical truth simply cannot be asked. Clearly, however, people can and do ask about the empirical truth of historical novels. In his essay on Canadian historical fiction, Dennis Duffy states confidently that “History is being turned into fiction. Critics will decide how authentic the fiction is; historians will judge the authenticity of the history” (64). As Jeremy Mouat in turn points out in a discussion of western Canadian historical fiction, “Academic historians have yet to take fictionalized history very seriously” in Canada, even though this fiction “gives the past of western Canada a specificity and an authenticity that few others—even professional historians—have been able to achieve” (245-46). While Mouat is emphasizing the truth-to-meaning of “fictionalized history,” Duffy implies that the historian intervenes only as to the truth-to-actuality of historical fiction. Yet it is precisely through the combination of these two kinds of truth that Stenson achieves one of the higher purposes of historical fiction, that is, “to engage its readers in acts of historical cognition” (Shaw 535) through a representation of the past.

The postmodern historical novel (more familiarly known by Linda Hutcheon’s term, “historiographical metafiction”) has been the means by which fiction writers have most recently grappled with the problem of the past as residing in textual traces. This is a question that historians had faced earlier in the twentieth century, according to Hayden White, in a “crisis of historicism” that produced “a general despair of ever attaining to that ‘objective science of history’ sought in the nineteenth century as an antidote to ideology in social and political thought” (23). The postmodern approach, exemplified in such works as Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* and George Bowering’s *Burning Water*, is to play with historical “facts” in order to question the very notion of factuality and to focus on the search for historical knowledge as an inevitably flawed process. (In *Burning Water*, for example, the explorer George Vancouver—an adamant “lover of facts” (196)—rejects a correction to the map of the Pacific that would make the Spanish and not the British the “discoverers” of the Sandwich Islands.) By mixing historiography with metafiction, postmodern historical fiction “keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 106).

The postmodern problematizing of historical representation has not, however, led to its collapse. Instead, historians continue to write histories,

while downplaying “the fact that historical practice involves muddling along in a less than perfect world” (Rigney 4). At the same time, novelists continue to write versions of the past that do not aim merely to reiterate the truths passed on by formal history, or to make the point repeatedly that historiography stands on epistemologically shaky ground. Far from skeptically absenting itself from the field of historical representation, Stenson’s realist historical novel makes its own statements about historical truths that ask not to be dismissed as so much postmodern play. As Stenson himself puts it, *The Trade* is the product of a revisionist approach to Canadian history, and in particular its assessments of fur trade bosses, “some of whom are revered figures in the formal history” (344). In the case of John Rowand (Chief Trader and later Chief Factor at Edmonton), this means countering what Stenson sees as a bias in history: “I felt the character [i.e., Rowand] in history had been treated always too kindly [. . .]. He was always given the positive benefit of the doubt in history, where the unknowns were concerned, and all I did was reverse the direction” (Interview). Stenson’s authority to engage in such an argument comes from his own archival research and from the work of historians whom he acknowledges as his sources.² Yet Stenson does not revert to an earlier innocent era of historical writing: he incorporates into his fiction questions about historical sources, that is, the sorts of questions that historiographical metafiction raises. But, unlike earlier practitioners of metafiction, Stenson embeds archives in his narrative not to question our ability ever to know the truth about history but rather to heighten the coherence of his story as a representation of the past.

In the interplay of archives in *The Trade*, the fictional archive serves to make a metahistorical commentary on the nature of the real archive. The scenes in which documents are produced, read, and reacted to in the fictional narrative point to one of the truths about the real archive: in the HBC, officers were the principal producers of discursive accounts of the trade, whether in the form of reports, letters, or diaries.³ This basic truth about the source of written archives poses a problem in a narrative whose aim is to use the actual record to create the backbone of the plot while adopting a revisionist attitude toward interpretations of that record.

The one real-world archival source for Stenson’s narrative that departs from the norm of officer-written accounts is William Gladstone’s reminiscences of the fur trade.⁴ As Stenson points out, Gladstone’s is one of the few non-officer accounts of the fur trade on record, and as such gives a labourer’s view of the bosses he works under. In his *Diary*, Gladstone describes an

incident in which the men mutiny as a result of Rowand's bad treatment of them, and writes that "I think [Rowand's] death gave more genuine pleasure to us than anything he could have done for us" (39). While Gladstone's view of his bosses informs their portrayal in *The Trade*, Stenson uses Gladstone's voice even more pointedly in a series of fictional letters that comment on the writing of history. These letters from Gladstone to the newspaper editor who has elicited his reminiscences introduce each major section of the novel, thus framing the narrative with an argumentative voice that reacts to unspoken pressures to shape history in certain ways. Stenson's fictionalized Gladstone refers to a list of names the editor has sent him, and makes his first crucial metahistorical comment when he notes, "I saw how you put a line under the Governor's name. I said to myself that's how history gets started. Some young fella putting a line under a name and leaving other people off" (5). Yet Gladstone yields to that pressure to write history in terms of "great men" when he suggests immediately afterward that the editor begin his story at the point when the Governor assumes power upon the amalgamation of the HBC and the Northwest Company—the point at which the narrative then begins.

The narrative voice of the novel echoes—though it is not identical to—the voice of the Gladstone we read in these letters, which is in turn modelled on the voice of the actual reminiscences. Thus John Rowand is known to the reader as "One Pound One," which (the actual) Gladstone gives as the men's nickname for him. A nickname taken from the historical record becomes in the novel a subtle reminder that Rowand is always to be seen as a boss, even when he is a focalizer in the novel. Similarly, George Simpson's name never appears in *The Trade*. His designation only as "the Governor" represents the power and privilege the man derives from his position. Again, the title is historically factual, but Stenson's use of it rather than "George Simpson" emphasizes the pervasive effects of power as it flows through the fur trade hierarchy.

Another important point in Gladstone's first letter is his self-identification as a labourer: "I was a working stiff in the trade. What you call history looks upside down to me" (5). This class-conscious framing of the narrative sets the stage for Stenson's interpretation of the fur trade—that it was a brutal business, more because of the merciless mercantilist ethos driving it than because of any savagery on the part of its Native trading partners. The letters offer a perspective on the events and characters in the narrative itself that guides the reader's interpretation. They also raise the underlying theme

of the distortions and misinterpretations hidden within a historical record that inevitably reflects the perspective of the “bosses.” Gladstone-as-source provides some of the historical material for the novel, while Gladstone-as-commentator is an agent of metahistorical commentary with a skeptical outsider’s view of “how history gets started.”

In one of his letters, Gladstone makes a wry comment on Edward Harriott, the young HBC officer whose melancholy and ironic intelligence is the dominant focalizing presence in the novel. According to Gladstone, Harriott “should have been a hero but I never heard anyone say he was” (83), indicating the divide between imperialist notions of heroism—in which being the first or going the farthest in daunting conditions is enough to gain the title of hero—and the mercantilist version, which requires that the hero bring back the goods and beat out the competition. The first major episode of the novel, in which the members of the Bow River Expedition attempt to open new trading territory, is a story of “heroic” exploration based on misguided conjecture about the prospects of finding an abundant source of beaver on the treeless prairie.

The explanation for this bad decision-making on the part of HBC management highlights the difference between the classic historical explanation and the fictional one. J.G. MacGregor, Rowand’s biographer, attributes the failure of the expedition to a lapse of institutional memory:

Somewhere, probably in London, someone had also failed to remember Peter Fidler’s reports of the conditions he had encountered in 1800-1802 and how he had found the parched grasslands south of the Bow River to be valueless as a beaver country. Simpson, of course, was a relatively new man, so he can hardly be blamed for not knowing about Fidler’s reports and his maps lying on some shelf in London. (51)

In *The Trade*, the failure is in lack of communication between the Governor and Colin Robertson, a trader who knew what Fidler had reported. The Governor’s admonishment of Robertson for failing to tell him about Fidler’s findings establishes his sense of impervious power, his keen insight into character, and a Machiavellian ability to sidestep responsibility for his own actions and deflect blame onto others: “I had told you earlier to be quiet, to hold your comments. This wounded your pride and you decided to wound me back. But you cannot hurt me. You lack the power. What you have done instead is hurt these other men, this Harriott of whom you allege to be so fond and some thirty others” (73). Stenson’s version fits plausibly with the historical interpretation of the incident while also supporting his

own interpretation of Simpson as a man whose ambition and egotism may in fact have made the HBC more inefficient and brutal.

This management-level bungling in the Bow River Expedition in turn becomes part of the explanation for Edward Harriott's falsification of his report. When he writes, "*No beaver. Not enough to warrant forts*" he knows it is "Not a lie. But a little less than the truth" (77). So while Harriott has seen beaver furs in the Piegan camp, he lies to make the numbers sound insignificant, and the reader is privy to his reasons for doing so:

As to motive, that was simple enough. As [Harriott's mixed-blood friend] Jimmy Jock had said, the Company, or [expedition leader Donald] McKenzie at least, had tried to kill him. If he needed more reason, Jimmy Jock had provided that as well. If Harriott said there were no beaver, there would likely be no forts. If there were no forts, he would never be forced to return, and Jimmy Jock would never be obliged to kill him. (77)

A "heroic" interpretation of this incident might suggest that McKenzie is assiduously carrying out his duty as head of an exploratory expedition. But from another perspective, his decision to send Harriott and his men out on foot in the middle of winter with inadequate provisions amounts to a death sentence, and reflects the casual disregard on the part of some officers for the well-being of their subordinates. Given that Jimmy Jock has saved the expedition from starvation, Harriott finds his interpretation easy to accept, particularly in light of Jimmy Jock's own threat to kill him—a threat intended to keep the HBC out of Piegan territory. The fiction in the narrative thus coincides with the known historical record but gives it a new inflection. Having demonstrated his intelligence and (relative) moral rectitude as well as his awareness that any given action may have a number of hidden motivations and consequences, Edward Harriott becomes the author's privileged source of insights into the workings of the fur trade.

As the novel progresses, an emerging mythology of the northwestern fur trade emanating from Britain and the United States begins to impinge on the participants in the trade themselves. A romanticized view of the trade distorts the actual nature of white-Native relations in the region even during the lifetime of the men involved. This *fictional* version of the Northwest, created in far-off metropolitan centres, becomes a force that the people who know better are either disinclined or unable to counteract. The juxtaposition of romantic versions of the fur trade with the novel's "true" accounts provides commentary on an irony of which the characters are not necessarily aware. Colin Robertson reads a novel about the fur trade in which the

“Company men are shown as noble chaps, vigorous and brave, fighting for England among the blood-thirsty savages” and declares it “inspiring” (70),⁵ but this incident is inserted into the account of the disastrous expedition, where the main concern of a boss such as John Rowand is to show his men and himself that he is “tough enough” (31) to deal with Natives whose territory they are invading. The men are not brave, but fearful: “Few among them credited Indians with being human, and each night they paid a price for it. [. . .] In their exhausted sleep, fearsome images rose from the murk to stare. Warriors fanged and wolf-eared” (23). Rowand’s readiness to beat a belligerent Native man is consistent with his practice of antagonizing and abusing his own men: “When they fought a man of higher rank, they fought their fear as much as you. It made them distracted and weak. They all but worshipped you for half killing them” (74). This reinterpretation of heroic vigour and bravery as being in fact attributable to brutality and fear is one of the keys to Stenson’s revisionist effort in *The Trade*. As Albert Braz points out, the “Hobbesian” (240) worldview of the novel makes for a bleak narrative in which neither nature, religion, nor art offers much solace, but that view is part of the truth-to-meaning that Stenson strives for as he refutes the implicit exaggeration of white men’s heroism in formal histories.

The falsely romantic image of the fur trade is driven by the American public as much as by the British. In retirement in the Red River district, Harriott combats the pressure from an American writer for *Harper’s Magazine* who is eager to interpret fur trade history as a close approximation to American frontier myth.⁶ To the journalist’s conjecture that Harriott must have “killed a lot of Indians in [his] time,” the ironically revisionist reply is, “If I had, [. . .] with whom would I have traded?” (332). Similarly, the journalist’s reaction to the Governor’s massive Stone Fort is that it must have been built for protection against the Indians. Harriott, who sees the structure as a symbol of pretentious and misplaced European grandiosity (its thick walls a “little Tower of London thrown in to impress and comfort the wife”) tells the writer that his interpretation is “not right” (333), a reply that is hardly calculated to correct the mistake. With the prescience that he has exercised in other situations, Harriott seems to realize that it is simply beyond his power to sway the social forces at work in enforcing such interpretations—the very interpretations, of course, that Stenson has set out to combat rather more forcefully, using Harriott as his ironic focalizer.

Scenes of interaction with solid historical traces are interspersed with more fleeting moments when imaginary documents are produced (or, even

more significantly, *not* produced). Stenson uses entries from the (actual) post journal of Chesterfield House,⁷ but adds further details that mock the accomplishment recorded: “October 11: Today the men hung the gate. / The Indians pressed around the palisades and laughed at them through the gapes and cracks as they did so. [. . .] The search went on for wood to line the holes and cover the laughing faces” (29; italics in original). Stenson’s characters are (perhaps anachronistically) aware of the enduring and potentially incriminating power of written documents. This leads Rowand to hesitate when he contemplates writing to Harriott to warn him about the Governor’s plans to seduce Margaret Pruden, Edward Harriott’s mixed-blood cousin and lover: “Warn Harriott, aye. But would One Pound One risk a letter to do so? A letter that could easily get into the wrong hands?” (99). Not to write is to betray Harriott, but to write might jeopardize his own future in the Company. Rowand’s decision not to write can be partly attributed to his realization that outside the HBC, he would be “just another man without a trade” (125). It also reflects, however, a much deeper truth about fur trade society: in addition to being a trader, Rowand is a family man with a “country wife” and mixed-blood daughters whom he could not easily transplant to his native city of Montreal. The only place for such a family is the Northwest, and the Northwest is ruled by the Company.

Rowand’s concern about how his own position will affect his family is not just a passing detail: a significant part of Stenson’s historical interpretation rests on his vision of the life of women in fur trade society. This is an issue that gained prominence in the early 1980s with the publication of Sylvia Van Kirk’s *Many Tender Ties* (1980) and Jennifer Brown’s *Strangers in Blood* (1980). In *The Trade*, Harriott’s lover Margaret Pruden is central to the development of dramatic tension in the fictional plot, but this plot is the vehicle for Stenson’s critical view of the virtual commodification of Métis daughters in fur trade society, as well as of George Simpson’s role in taking racial discrimination to a new level of cruelty and acceptability. Stenson uses an ingenious device to lend plausibility to the fictional seduction/rape scene between Margaret and the Governor. This scene is central to the fictional plot: it establishes most memorably the Governor’s licentiousness and abuse of his power; it explains why Margaret goes mad (which the real-life Margaret did indeed do);⁸ and it provides a reason for Harriott’s subsequent grudge against the Governor. But Stenson has to make this fictional scene blend into the historical material that surrounds it. Stenson’s solution is to use the incident to comment on gaps in the archives as possible effects of power as

well as of weakness. Braz observes that “at a time when many individuals and groups are striving to empower themselves by entering history, Stenson suggests that sometimes power resides in the fact that one manages to stay outside history” (239). The Governor’s elaborate preparations to ensure that no one else is at the fort when he arrives to meet Margaret, and his order to the intruding Harriott—“I was not here” (*The Trade* 145)—ensure that no one will record his lightning trip to Fort Carlton, a historical silence that Simpson savours: “What an adventure, thought the Governor. Greater than anything he had attempted before, and greater too for the fact that it would never be found in anyone’s journal, letter or history” (128).

In imagining a gap in the record as a fabricated silence, Stenson strengthens the argument for the historical imagination as a form of possible knowledge, and not mere invention. Though this particular incident might be closer to plausibility than to full-fledged possibility, Stenson notes that “Some of the things I made up may be true” (344). The possibility that a fiction might actually be a fact challenges the distinction between fiction and history. Lubomír Doležel casts this distinction as a difference between ontology and epistemology: “While fictional poesis constructs a possible world that did not exist prior to the act of writing, historical noesis uses writing to construct models of the past that exists (existed) prior to the act of writing” (262). The gaps in fiction, argues Doležel, are ontological gaps that cannot be filled by new knowledge because there is nothing there to know outside of what the fiction tells us. The gaps in history, on the contrary, are epistemological gaps that could be filled in if further evidence came to light. Yet this distinction fails to address a work of historical fiction such as Stenson’s, which uses the already constructed model of a past that did exist and adds fiction to the model. While Doležel in his discussion of historical fiction admits that it produces an “overlap” between history and fiction, he then notes as a defining feature of historical fiction that “fictional persons coexist and interact with counterparts of historical persons” (257). He concludes that a “possible world where counterparts of historical persons cohabit with fictional persons is not a historical world” (257) and is therefore not valid as history. Clearly, this characterization of historical fiction does not deal with the case of a novel such as *The Trade*, in which all of the characters have historical counterparts.

The fact that all of the characters in *The Trade* also appear in the historical record, and Stenson’s speculation that events in the novel that are invented might in fact be true, raise the question of how much overlap, and

what kinds of overlap, must be present in fiction before it is considered “history.” We are very far here from Dorrit Cohn’s assertion that historical fiction and history belong to different categories rather than lying at different points on a continuum. Stenson is playing with the notion that what is usually a matter of ontology (the fictional creation of something that did not previously exist) might in fact be a matter of epistemology (knowing something that was not previously known). Of course, we cannot *know* that we know something factual without evidence to prove it, but the Governor’s ability to ensure that evidence will not appear in the record merely reinforces the claim of Stenson’s fiction: this could have happened.

Moreover, because Stenson’s account of the HBC and the Governor is so strongly based on existing evidence, his project of viewing history “upside down,” which results in a focus on the effects of HBC mercantilism and a view of George Simpson as a tyrant and a predator, stands on solid epistemological ground in its own right. The evolving views on Simpson in historiography are proof of that. In his 1978 biography of John Rowand, J.G. MacGregor offers an apologia for Simpson’s and J.G. McTavish’s abandonment of their Métis wives after they had brought white wives back from England:

Before one irrevocably despises Simpson and McTavish, one should look at the practice prevailing on the Indian frontier. Amongst freemen, natives, and white traders living with a Métis or Indian girl—marrying her in the *façon du Nord* which everyone condoned—this practice of abandoning wives was common. [. . .] Any Indian girl marrying such a trader knew that there was every chance that their union would last only until her husband discarded her or left the country. (85)

Van Kirk refutes this argument, noting that before 1821 “it had been customary, particularly for the Nor’Westers, to leave their Indian wives behind, even though they might take their children with them. Most bourgeois who married mixed-blood women, however, did not follow this course but took their entire family with them when they returned to Eastern Canada” (123). She asserts that as an outsider who had not been socialized within the fur trade, Simpson had no sympathy for these practices. According to Van Kirk, the “Governor’s reputation for having a woman at every post is exaggerated, but he showed a flagrant disregard for fur-trade custom and formed a series of liaisons with young mixed-blood women whom he treated in a most callous manner” (142). Twenty-two years after Van Kirk’s work was published, Aritha van Herk characterizes Simpson thus in her popular history of Alberta:

Simpson wrestled and throttled his empire, and through a combination of lightning inspection tours and terrible cutbacks that he christened “Economies,” he succeeded in keeping everyone off balance and himself high in the saddle. [. . .]

He felt, of course, that every beautiful woman in the country should be made available to him, and had a string of mistresses, whom he called "bits of brown" and treated much as he treated company pots and pans, with finely honed contempt. (63-64)

One might conclude that Stenson is indeed working on history in a derivative way, as Frank Ankersmit would have it ("Historiography *develops* narrative interpretations of sociohistorical reality; literature *applies* them" (238; italics in original). Yet Stenson's "application" amounts to creating a world in which the various parts—the mercantile drive of the fur trade and its bosses, the interactions between whites and Natives, the social structures and the individuals who make them up—are presented so coherently (often through the entirely convincing internal focalization of major characters) that this fiction appears ordinary, not derivative. Still, it is a mark of the deeply satisfying nature of Stenson's fiction as historical interpretation that van Herk cites at length his imaginary betrothal scene between One Pound One and his Cree wife, Louise. His portrayal of a Native woman as the tough-minded agent of her own marital arrangements effectively counteracts the notion that Native women were victimized and exploited by white traders (or, as MacGregor implies, that Louise was an aging, abandoned woman with a child by another man who desperately chased Rowand to ensure her survival).

As a historical novelist, Stenson engages with the existing historical record by imagining the context of production—that which does not remain in the trace itself—and the possibility of unreadable biases behind the evidence. Harriott's report on his expedition to the Marias River is treated as authoritative by the company and by the "objective" eye of history: it is, after all, the official record of a responsible participant. As imagined by Stenson, however, Harriott deliberately falsifies his report to ensure that he will not be sent back into Jimmy Jock's territory. Harriott's personal interest in the effect of his report turns it into a "false" document whose falseness cannot be objectively discerned. Stenson's stories of the Bow River Expedition and One Pound One's betrothal to Louise tell us that the "truth" of history at the level of individual events may never be known, not because an eyewitness account is missing but because the motivations of eyewitnesses are always silently and invisibly bound up in their accounts.

Stenson also draws our attention to the different meanings of "truth" at the level of discourse. In the Prologue to the novel, the narrator tells us that the story of a keg of bones crossing the Atlantic twice is "true," but Stenson the author reaffirms in his Acknowledgements that "One Pound One's bones

did cross the ocean in two directions en route to their burial in Montreal” (344). The fact that the author asserts the truth-to-actuality of this story (at the end of the volume and outside the narrative) indicates that what the narrator had asserted was a different sort of “truth”: truth-to-meaning. Conversely, William Gladstone’s letters to the editor have all the hallmarks of archival documents, but are in fact fictional imitations of such documents. The use of forms of discourse that imitate archives, and of a fictional voice to tell a doubly-true story—that is, true to actuality *and* true to the fictional interpretation of that actuality—tells the reader that “truth” has many guises, only one of which is that of archival evidence.

If, as Rigney argues, “Compromise, failure, provisionality, [and] dissatisfaction [are] unfortunate but inevitable features of history writing” (1), then the historical novel that hopes to offer a vision of history must include devices that mirror, in fictional terms, that sense of compromise, failure, provisionality and dissatisfaction. Fred Stenson appears to believe that historians of the fur trade have lost sight of the provisionality of their historical accounts and allowed a false sense of epic heroism to dominate their portrayals of fur trade bosses. Yet the novelist who wishes to intervene in the interpretation of history cannot go so far as to denounce all history as fatally compromised. By reducing his metafictional questioning of historiography to unobtrusive shorthand—showing possible contexts of archival material without completely discrediting that material—Stenson demonstrates that archival records are subject to the contingency of their contexts without casting doubt on the ability of historians (and novelists) to interpret history. Stenson’s narrative might be seen as a neo-realist strain of historical fiction that has absorbed the lessons of the postmodern but continues to stake a claim to historiographical relevance.

The problem with using official history to propose a revisionist version of that history—what Stenson calls “writ[ing] between the lines” (343) of history—is that the fictional narrative necessarily repeats the structural outlines of the existing archives. The archival trail in *The Trade* reflects the voices present in the actual record, but it also reflects the silences. Margaret Pruden is both illiterate and mad, so that after the crucial scene with the Governor, we see and hear very little of her directly. Jimmy Jock Bird, though literate, has chosen to live with the Piegan rather than continue serving the HBC, and has no interest in engaging in the sort of written communication that might tell a latter-day historian about his role or motivations. As these telltale silences indicate, a narrative that relies on the

historical record for its broad outlines and most of its specific events can attain in only a limited way the goal of much revisionist history, that is, to give a voice to the voiceless in history. The marginal presences in the novel must remain marginal if the existing record is to be respected.

As a result of archival constraints, the narrator of *The Trade* has access to the thoughts and emotions of Edward Harriott, One Pound One, and the Governor, but knowledge of Jimmy Jock Bird and Margaret Pruden is available only through others' interactions with them. At the same time, Stenson uses the archive's silence about these marginal figures to strengthen his central argument. Harriott interprets Margaret's retreat into madness as the result of the Governor's treatment of her. Moreover, in the most thoroughgoing criticism of the fur trade and its effects on everyone who comes in contact with it, Stenson portrays Jimmy Jock Bird as representative of an unsettling resistance. While Harriott himself acts for the most part as the novel's skeptical and contrarian observer of the fur trade, Jimmy Jock questions Harriott's own assumptions when he asks, "Are you such a Company man as all that, Ted? That you can't imagine opportunity that isn't about them?" (68). As someone who pursues his own goals without subordinating them to the mercantile forces that govern the fur trade, or the evangelizing desires of the missionaries, Jimmy Jock acts as a seriously troubling presence to the white men and their projects. This version of Bird is more coherent and satisfactory than that offered by official histories, where he is portrayed as "victimizing" the missionary he interprets for, and as a man unreliably given to "fit[s] of pique" (MacGregor 112). But Stenson does not—cannot, given his archive-based premise—let Bird play more than an adjunct role in the novel.

By reading between the lines of official history and consciously arguing with that history, the novelist can unsettle its representations and contest its pronouncements. In following the official line, however, Stenson cannot do more than touch on the question of how the dispossessed and voiceless in the history of a society are to be adequately represented in their own right. He eschews the freedom that postmodern historical fiction grants itself to intervene in the archive itself as well as to question the "facts" construed from that archive. Instead, Stenson imagines the contexts in which archival documents are produced in order to suggest an alternative truth-to-meaning for established truth-to-actuality. The question then is whether the necessarily partial truth of archive-based historical fiction can satisfy the needs of society as a whole for representation.

Stenson's purpose was clearly not, however, to represent the marginalized in official history. What he has done is to integrate more recent research on fur trade society with the long tradition of formal fur trade history based on officer-dominated archives in order to create a unified sense of the fur trade ethos under the central trope of the novel: trade. By positing the Governor and One Pound One as embodiments of that ethos, Edward Harriott as an anti-heroic dissenter, and Jimmy Jock Bird as a rogue who works to destabilize the system after opting out of it, Stenson fashions a convincing truth-to-meaning around these characters from actuality. The play of imaginary and real archives in the novel shows how the fiction writer, in imagining the unknown contexts behind the historical record, may offer true and satisfactory interpretations of history.

NOTES

- 1 The impressive scope of this archive is attributable to the HBC's meticulous corporate record-keeping and makes the Company, in the words of Peter C. Newman, "probably the best-documented institution in the world, next to the Vatican" (xii).
- 2 Stenson cites J.G. MacGregor's biography of John Rowand and William Gladstone's diary in particular, though he rejects MacGregor's sympathetic treatment of Rowand. As I discuss below, one can discern the work of such historians as Jennifer S.H. Brown and Sylvia Van Kirk behind Stenson's portraits of George Simpson, Margaret Pruden, and Louise Rowand.
- 3 Post journals and accounts might be kept by apprentice clerks, but in the post-amalgamation HBC, clerks were "gentlemen" with an expectation of promotion to higher rank.
- 4 William S. Gladstone, born in Montreal in 1832, was a boat-builder with the HBC at Fort Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House from 1848 to 1862. His diary was first published in the *Rocky Mountain Echo* of Pincher Creek, Alberta in 1903.
- 5 Here, Stenson anticipates by a few decades the emergence of fur trade narratives and fiction, beginning with such works as R.M. Ballantyne's *Hudson's Bay* (1848) and Alexander Ross's *The Fur Hunters of the Far West* (1855).
- 6 In 1860-1861, *Harper's Magazine* published a three-part report by Manton Marble entitled "To Red River and Beyond." The author mentions Harriott's hospitality and describes his residence, but does not record any dialogue.
- 7 This was confirmed by Stenson in e-mail to the author, 16 May 2003; the original journal is in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg (B.34/a/4).
- 8 MacGregor mentions Margaret's madness (83) and her disappearance in the Athabasca Pass (89-90).

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