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**Review of *The Whiskey Trade of the Northwestern Plains: A  
Multidisciplinary Approach* by Margaret A. Kennedy**

Peter C. Mancall  
*University of Kansas*

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**The Whiskey Trade of the Northwestern Plains: A Multidisciplinary Approach.** Margaret A. Kennedy. New York: Peter Lang, 1997. x+181 pp. Figures, tables, notes, references, index. \$39.95 cloth (ISBN 0-8204-2596-6).

Margaret A. Kennedy marshals three distinct types of evidence here to describe the so-called "Whiskey Trade" of the nineteenth-century Northwestern Plains, a geographic region that crosses the border between the United States and Canada. The first part of the book presents evidence from the written historical record, a data set that privileges the views of the white traders who organized the commerce in buffalo robes in this part of the Plains. The second part consists of a too-brief ethnographic chapter based on Kennedy's interviews with Native People. In the third and longest part she describes the archaeological record, mostly the results of digs at trading posts and some Native burial sites. Kennedy should be commended for her willingness to undertake this multidisciplinary approach.

The argument here is straightforward. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, merchants came to the Plains to acquire buffalo robes, a commodity that had replaced beaver pelts as the prime article in the fur trade. Traders often employed local Plains peoples to kill the buffalos and process the robes, a task that led to changes within Native communities and encouraged the rise of polygynous households where multiple women did much of the work preparing dead buffalo for traders. As in other parts of North America, the fur trade destabilized Native groups: epidemic diseases led to horrific loss of life; traditional material culture began to fade with the growth in availability of trade goods; and the abuse of alcohol, the commodity that traders always knew would lure Native hunters, led to violence, murder, and presumably impoverishment. By the time the buffalo trade faded in the early 1880s, the culture and society of Plains peoples were far more precarious than they had ever been before, at least in part because the trade led to internecine strife between competing groups.

For all of its good intent, *The Whiskey Trade* fails to live up to its potential. Kennedy spends too little time discussing the function of drinking in Native communities; she claims that the stories she recorded "admit of the insatiable native thirst for whiskey, which made them dependent on the white man," without exploring in adequate depth why Indians seemingly craved alcohol or what dependence meant at the time. She claims that "native groups at war with each other" tried to infect each other (and whites) with smallpox, but provides no citation for instances when Indians tried to carry on such lethal germ warfare against other Indians. Neither the text nor

the bibliography suggests any serious engagement with medical or anthropological treatments of drinking practices among American Indians. The description of the archaeological record is arguably the book's strongest feature, but the two chapters on the subject are insufficiently integrated into the entire analysis and contain detail with limited obvious relevance to volume's purpose. Occasional errors of fact, questionable use of sources and language (describing the trade in buffalo on the Southern Plains, for example, as a "hunting holocaust"), poor production by the publisher, and an inadequate index all further reduce the efficacy of Kennedy's argument.

**Peter C. Mancall**, *Department of History, University of Kansas*.