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Book Review: When Skins Were Money: A History of the Fur Trade

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of the trade in furs and skins that is the focus of the Museum of the Fur Trade in Chadron, Nebraska. Like the museum itself, *When Skins Were Money* has a worldwide scope and a long view as it seeks to describe the evolution and impacts of the fur trade. Its basic premise, that the fur trade has been important to world history but underappreciated and misunderstood, is advanced in a well-produced volume filled with wonderful things. Most pages have handsome illustrations that support the text with period pictures of the activities and individuals under discussion. Attractive sketch maps present relevant geographic background and context. The carefully researched text, though packed with specifics, is highly readable, telling the story of the fur trade in a lively style that is anything but pedantic.

The volume opens with a chapter aimed at correcting misconceptions about the fur trade. In Hanson's view traders were multiculturalists interested in working with Native people, encouraging their survival, and providing them with goods they wanted and needed. Unlike the soldiers, missionaries, and settlers who followed them into new territories, traders were not interested in eradicating Native cultures. Likewise, they were not cheaters out to defraud their Native customers. Rather, they operated *in a fiercely competitive arena that forced small margins and fair service*. This challenging argument, seeming as it does to fly in the face of collective myths, has a cogency that establishes themes developed in the rest of the volume.

In the twenty chapters forming the bulk of the book, Hanson traces the expansion of the fur trade across the Atlantic and throughout North America. Individual chapters deal with specific geographic and temporal blocks. In virtually every case, Hanson is able to use developments in the fur trade as a basis for surveying the political, social, and material trends that mark the earliest history of North America. Indeed, the only chapter that falls back on description of government stratagems and political intrigue is the one that describes the eastern United States. For the rest of the continent, the dynamics of the fur trade seem

When Skins Were Money: A History of the Fur Trade. By James A. Hanson. Chadron, NE: Museum of the Fur Trade. 2005. xii + 216 pp. Maps, illustrations, index. \$34.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

When Skins Were Money: A History of the Fur Trade is James A. Hanson's grand synthesis

to have been far more important than the actions of governments.

When Skins Were Money, like the Museum of the Fur Trade, treats a portion of the human past that is significant but huge and complex. It skillfully presents a wealth of intriguing material that makes the fur trade accessible to students, scholars, and the interested public.

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