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Review of *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* By Sylvia Van Kirk

Olive Patricia Dickason
University of Alberta

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Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870. By Sylvia Van Kirk. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. Map, illustrations, photographs, bibliography, notes, index. 320 pp. \$21.50, paper \$4.95.

The bittersweet story of women in the fur trade of the Canadian Northwest has been a long time in the telling. According to standard historical interpretations, trading furs was an exclusively male domain; related activity, particularly if it involved women, was seen as peripheral, and often as libertine. As Sylvia Van Kirk makes clear, however, that is a one-sided view at best; the previously dismissed social aspect of the fur trade was far more important than has generally been assumed.

The Hudson's Bay Company did its official best to prevent alliances from developing between its men and Amerindian women. This placed the men in an anomalous position: they

had come to trade, but they were restricted in the most effective means of establishing the necessary relationships. Not only did Amerindians prefer to deal with kin, but the gathering and preparation of furs involved a considerable amount of female labor, from making clothes and equipment for hunters and trappers, to cleaning and drying pelts. London could thunder all it liked, but women played an essential role in the commerce that was the principal reason for the company's existence.

Out of this unlikely situation arose a surprisingly stable society that flourished as long as the fur trade remained dominant. As Van Kirk points out, its basis was the much-maligned marriage *à la façon du pays*, the "custom of the country." This custom was, of course, Amerindian; during the early days of the trade, when dependence upon Amerindian expertise was at its highest, such native practices were widely adopted. Pressures toward European values and standards, however, grew with each succeeding mixed-blood generation.

Once European agricultural/industrial settlement took hold and began to expand and European women appeared in the Canadian Northwest early in the nineteenth century, the shift in social values reached a critical point. Increasingly, Amerindian or even mixed-blood wives and mothers became social embarrassments to their families, particularly to the children. Not everyone accepted this with equanimity. In 1856, James Ross wrote: "What if mama is an Indian! . . . Who more attached to her children or more desirous of their happiness. Who more attentive to their wants— anxious about their welfare? None. She has all these qualities in a wonderful degree." Sadly, personal qualities were not at issue, and many once-prominent fur-trade families sought to obscure and even deny their Amerindian heritage. Van Kirk argues well that such a denial has meant a loss for Canada, whose heritage is much richer than Euro-centered histories allow.

This warmly sympathetic recounting of some of the human consequences of interaction between disparate cultures adds to our understanding of the fur trade in Canada. The Univer-

sity of Oklahoma Press is to be commended for so promptly reprinting this work, first published in Winnipeg.

OLIVE PATRICIA DICKASON
Department of History
University of Alberta