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Review of *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900* By Sarah Carter

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Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900. By Sarah Carter. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Map, bibliography, index. ix + 195 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

This critical survey of Western Canadian history seeks to set the record straight. Sarah Carter takes issue with prevalent versions, much of which she sees as distorted because of inadequate or suppressed information, as well as from biases and misconceptions. As she points out, in some cases there have been actual misrepresentations: the accounts of explorer Samuel Hearne (1745-92), who reached the Arctic Ocean overland, and artist Paul Kane (1810-71), who recorded Plains Indian life in his paintings while keeping a diary, were altered by publishers with an eye to sales. A consistent underestimation of the role of Indians in the fur trade and during the time of treaty-signing can be traced to a pervasive racial stereotyping. In countering these and other failings, Carter does not confine herself to pointing them out; she also provides alternative interpretations, particularly where she has new information.

While this approach makes for a more richly textured history than has been standard fare for the Canadian West in the past, its limitation lies in Carter's being as much a historian of her time as those she criticizes. For one thing, she tends to idealize Indian societies, a reflection of the mood of our times. She also slips up on details, referring, for example, to the disappearance of the buffalo herds as the "extermination of the buffalo," and analyzing the effects of "the extermination of the species" on Amerindian societies. That the dis-

appearance of the herds was not the equivalent to the disappearance of the species is confirmed by the thriving animals in national parks. As for the proclaimed Aboriginal social principle of "respectful relationships among equal parties," this has been by no means universally honored. The largest Stone Age empire the world has known was that of the Inca of Peru, and it was highly centralized, even to the use of language. In North America, social structures ranged from those of the hierarchical Natchez and peoples of the Northwest Coast to those of the various branches of the egalitarian Cree.

Although it is easy to argue with Carter's goal of creating a definitive history for Western Canada, she has still enlarged and enlivened the popular view. As is the rule with history in general, however, the revisions will never end, as there will always be new questions, not to mention new information.

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