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# review of *Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in an Atlantic World*

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## Book Reviews and Notices

*Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in an Atlantic World*, edited by Susan Sleeper-Smith. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. lxii, 638 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, index. \$40.00 paper.

Reviewer Claiborne A. Skinner is an instructor at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, Illinois. He is the author of *The Upper Country: French Enterprise in the Colonial Great Lakes* (2008).

The written history of Iowa begins in the late seventeenth century with the arrival of Frenchmen pursuing souls and beavers. Its name is derived from *Ioway*, the French word for the Bah-kho-je Indians. Its capital, Des Moines, is also from the French, though just what it means is disputed. The town of Decorah is named for the descendants of one Sabrevoir de Carrie. Arguably, the largest battle in the state's history was fought between the French and the allied Sauk and Meskwaki on the Des Moines River in 1735. Fort Marin, built in 1739 near McGregor, was the first European outpost in the state, and Julien Dubuque is revered as its first settler.

The engine behind all of this was the fur trade, a vast, complex, too often misunderstood commerce that drew Europeans deep into the interior of the continent, enmeshed its native peoples in the global economy, and helped trigger almost 125 years of imperial war for possession of America. Susan Sleeper-Smith has done this important subject a considerable service with *Rethinking the Fur Trade*. In a massive, elegantly appointed anthology, she has provided graduate students with a comprehensive summary of modern scholarship in the field, instructors with a sophisticated and variegated classroom tool, and scholars with an invaluable historiographical reference.

The geographical and chronological breadth of the book is notable by itself. It begins with the early contact period in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, proceeds westward to the American Fur Company, the last "rendezvous," and concludes in Alaska at the end of the nineteenth century, a journey of more than 3,000 miles and nearly 300 years. This approach stands in marked contrast to most collections, which tend to focus on a period or region.

Sleeper-Smith organizes her material into themes that run through the vast sweep of the trade. She begins with a thoughtful essay, "Cul-

tures of Exchange in a North Atlantic World," which summarizes current scholarship. Part two, "Indian Voices," provides a mix of primary accounts by Claude Allouez and Chrétien Le Clerque and articles by Bruce J. Bourque, Ruth H. Whitehead, and D. Peter MacLeod correcting the traditional portrait of Indians as passive "victims" of the fur trade. That section concludes with a sharply drawn essay by Donald F. Bibeau on white historians writing Indian history. Part three, "The Social and Political Significance of Change," presents work by D. W. Moodie, Bruce M. White, Mary Black-Rogers, James L. Clayton, Gail D. MacLeitch, W. J. Eccles, and Richard White that describes the trade as a dynamic political and social process in which both whites and Indians evolved new economic and diplomatic structures in response to one another. Part four, "The Cloth Trade," includes essays by Arthur J. Ray, Timothy J. Shannon, Dean Anderson, Gail DeBuse Potter, Allen Chronister, and James A. Hanson challenging older assumptions about the products exchanged in the trade. These pieces also make clear that Indians knew what they wanted; they had a clear sense of quality and little use for shoddy. Part five, "Gender, Kinship, and Community," provides work by the editor, Sylvia Van Kirk, Jennifer S. H. Brown, Jacqueline Petersen, Helen Hornbeck Tanner, and Carolyn Podruchny questioning traditional portraits of the trade as a uniquely masculine profession and presenting compelling arguments that women performed important roles in the commerce and in the communities that arose to support it.

All told, *Rethinking the Fur Trade* is a remarkably comprehensive collection of important modern work. I found only one notable omission. The ghost of Harold Adams Innis clearly walks abroad in much of the material presented here. His *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* is both cited and challenged, particularly in the section on the cloth trade. Given the extent to which his 80-year-old book continues to inform the debate, I wished that Sleeper-Smith had included some of the literature on its strengths and weaknesses, particularly W. J. Eccles, "A Belated Review of Harold Adams Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*," *Canadian Historical Review* 60 (1979), 419–41; and Hugh Grant, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Innis, Eccles, and the Canadian Fur Trade," *Canadian Historical Review* 62 (1981), 304–29. This is, however, a quibble. *Rethinking the Fur Trade* is an invaluable book that has already rescued me from at least two historiographical gaffes in my own research; insights I had thought new and clever turned out to be rather less so. I suspect I will not be alone.