

**CREE NARRATIVE: EXPRESSING THE PERSONAL MEANINGS OF EVENTS.** BY RICHARD J. PRESTON. *Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1976 (National Museum of Man Mercury Series. Canadian Ethnology Service Paper no. 30). 308 pages. \$3.50.*

This is one of those deceptively ordinary-looking books in which the author sets out to examine a set of data using his own declared methods and assumptions, on the basis of which he arrives at a number of conclusions. The method turns out to be very unclear, and some of the assumptions unwarranted, but despite this the data themselves (in this case the narratives, which in fact cover a broad range of verbal material, including myths, stories, songs, and a public ceremony involving a discourse between a shaman and various spiritual beings) are of such high quality, and the conclusions in most cases make such good sense, that one can conclude that the author's intuition is perhaps to be trusted, even if his argument is difficult to follow.

Richard Preston is one of a large number of anthropologists sent to northern Canada by the University of North Carolina to serve his apprenticeship, and is one of the few who remained long enough to make a major contribution there. For years, he returned every summer to James Bay, and produced a long list of unpublished mimeographed papers on a wide variety of topics. On the basis of this research he wrote a doctoral thesis, and this has now appeared, much rewritten, as a monograph, whose title suggests that it is an analysis of a number of different forms of Cree narratives.

The work is in fact a lot more than that; it is a vehicle for many of Preston's conclusions about what for him is the essence of Cree culture. At times, he enlarges his scope even further to include peoples other than the Cree; he approves of Hallowell's material on conjuring among the Northern Ojibwa, and quarrels with Speck's notion of Mistapeo among the Montagnais-Naskapi, although Speck himself never in fact discussed the East Cree in the work referred to. Of course, it is always hard to draw firm cultural (or even linguistic) boundaries through the area of the Northern Algonkian, but when we realize that Preston's research and the narrative material on which the book is based all come from the quite restricted East Cree area, and most of it out of the mouth of a single Rupert House individual, these sudden expansions in perspective seem daring to say the least.

Furthermore, Preston's grand view is as little bound in time as it is to a region. For example, for the best part of two chapters, he examines the topic of Cree attitudes to the

hardships of life in the bush. In this connection, as in others, he writes of the timeless quality of Cree culture, rather than about the attitudes of a group undergoing particular experiences in a specific period of the twentieth century. Although some might argue that this perspective is an appropriate one for an anthropologist to take when examining mythic material, much of the evidence Preston uses to throw light on attitudes to starvation are, in fact, direct accounts of relatively recent events. He does not make it clear that, instead of being the occasional result of normal hunting failures, these events form part of an actual period of starvation in the early part of this century, when the East Cree experienced shortages of many of the animals on which they were most dependent. Although shortage of game is no longer a serious problem for the East Cree, most of them now beyond middle age have personal experience of these times of starvation, and have lost friends and relatives to it. If Preston had outlined the historic setting in which these hardships occurred, he would have been able to clarify an otherwise apparent ambiguity in the attitudes of the Cree: namely, that they have an obsession with stories in which the characters have to deal with starvation and the hardships of the bush, but at the same time do not feel themselves to be at the whim of an unpredictable and merciless environment. Preston argues well against this latter popular misconception by pointing to the stress that is laid by the Cree on competence under all circumstances. Even with this competence, however, some of them have experienced hardships in relatively recent times. It is important to see how they did so, and under what particular circumstances, in order to judge the significance of these recently recorded narratives.

It is a pity that the introductory basic background material on the Cree of the east coast of James Bay is skipped over very lightly, because the area is not well known anthropologically, except to specialists, and the text-book coverage of the area is generally incomplete, inaccurate, out of date, and often out of print. The author spends a great deal of time explaining his aims, which are ambitious, and his methods, which involve a phenomenological approach to culture. He apparently seeks through intuition and induction to experience the culture very much in the way that a Cree does, and then to return to his own world to translate its essence so that it can be understood by the non-Cree. The significance of this method, and his explicit or implicit rejection of other analytic methods, can be more easily followed in the later chapters, where he analyses the variety

of narrative material.

I find nothing wrong with subjecting this material to an analysis of themes, which can then be summarized in such a way as to reveal some central aspects of the culture. It is unclear, however, why, in order to do this, Preston argues, as he does in the last chapter, that there exists an underlying unity in all Cree narratives, and furthermore claims, in an appendix, that the distinction which the Cree themselves make between *atayohkan* 'myths' and *tebaciman* 'stories, news' does not amount to a dichotomy, but rather indicates that the types of narration of events are located on a continuum. For these, as well as for many of his other minor conclusions, the author does produce evidence, which in itself is however often unconvincing. One therefore begins to suspect that he has other reasons for these conclusions, drawn perhaps from his general background knowledge of the culture, rather than those found in the material he quotes.

The major conclusions drawn in the study are that the Cree have a cultural uniformity characterized in part, paradoxically, by a stress on a certain form of individualism; that they place emphasis on the development of competence; and that they have the idea of a love relationship existing ideally between the hunter and his prey. All of these features are both intriguing at first glance and of great help towards an overall appreciation of the Cree. Despite his sensitivity, the author has a tendency to take his narratives too seriously, and to rely too much on one major informant. It is to be hoped that this work will turn out to be in the nature of a progress report by the author in his humanistic quest for a way of making the Cree more familiar to us.

*Adrian Tanner*

**SOILS OF THE POLAR LANDSCAPES.**  
BY JOHN C. F. TEDROW. *New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1977. 639 pages, illus. \$60.00*

In this volume, John Tedrow has provided the first comprehensive view of soil conditions across the world's polar lands. Until now, soils of the polar regions have been described primarily in isolated locations and have not been examined from a circumpolar perspective. Thus, most texts about pedology provide a few soil descriptions from cold regions and only generalizations about vast areas of tundra and the lands beyond.

Professor Tedrow has summarized his own investigations of soils in the Arctic and Antarctic over twenty-five years, and has integrated his studies with the most significant findings of other pedologists who have worked in polar regions. The resulting book is a

milepost in the description of soil characteristics and associated landscapes of the cold regions of the earth. Moreover, it provides a major point of departure for refining concepts of soil genesis and classification for these areas.

The pattern of soils on the polar landscapes that emerges is one of considerable pedological variety. Although major genetic soil characteristics permit the identification of a tundra soil zone, a subpolar desert zone and a polar desert in the Arctic, and a polar desert zone and a cold desert zone in the Antarctic, soils within these zones are complicated by variations in the lithology of geological materials, differences in the age of land surfaces, variations in soil drainage, and local or widespread accumulations of salts. In addition, the characteristics of polar soils are further complicated by features normally absent in other regions: permafrost, ground ice, solifluction, frost phenomena and patterned ground.

Through an organizational framework developed in the first portion of the book, each of these factors is described and illustrated with soils from arctic Alaska, northern Canada, Greenland, Norden, northern U.S.S.R., Antarctic and selected alpine locations. Discussions of soils in the field are frequently supplemented with micro-morphological descriptions and mineralogical and chemical data.

It is interesting to note that the problem of separating the influence of climate and land-surface age on the genesis of soils is a significant pedological question in the polar regions, as it is elsewhere. This problem is specifically illustrated by the strongly-weathered reddish-yellow soils of Banks Island, Canada — soils that appear out of place in the polar environment. In addition, the distribution of soil-forming materials may complicate the regional pattern of soils in polar areas. In certain locations, aeolian sediments dominated by silt and clay appear to inhibit the development of strongly-leached mineral soil horizons that would be expected under the acid, organic surface layers of the northern forests and tundra.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this volume is the assembly under one cover of information about polar soils and their circumpolar distribution. This perspective provides the first step in interpreting the similarities and differences in soil behaviour from one polar area to another.

Professor Tedrow's book is the major reference for future studies of the pedology of polar soils. It belongs in the libraries of polar scientists and in the duffle bags of those who study the soils of polar landscapes in the field.

*James V. Drew*