

Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade

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Book Reviews and Notices

Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade, by Carolyn Podruchny. France Overseas: Studies in Empire and Decolonization. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 416 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 paper.

Reviewer Patrick J. Jung is assistant professor of history at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. His research interests include the Great Lakes fur trade.

Carolyn Podruchny asserts that her purpose in writing *Making the Voyageur World* is to “contribute to the history of plebeian peoples who did not leave a documentary record yet who had a significant impact on the social and cultural landscape of early North America” (x). This characterization is amply true of the French Canadian men who worked as voyageurs, for, as Podruchny notes, only one letter penned by a voyageur is known to exist. Despite that obstacle, she has produced a work that provides the most detailed history yet of the material, cultural, and social worlds of the men who were the foundation of the North American fur trade.

Podruchny contends that the voyage into the Canadian hinterlands was a metaphor that organized the lives of voyageurs. Over the course of ten chapters, the author skillfully uses that device to examine the unique customs that the voyageurs practiced. Mock baptisms were performed at various points in order to initiate new men into the fur trade. The bourgeois and clerks for whom the voyageurs worked were fêted with maypole celebrations. Songs were sung to pass the time as the voyageurs paddled hour after grueling hour along the waterways of the *pays d'en haut*, or the country west of Montreal. It was a world characterized by backbreaking toil, sparse provisions, and long winters spent at remote forts. However, voyageurs also enjoyed the festive Lake Superior rendezvous, the celebration of traditional French Canadian holidays that provided connections to their homes in the St. Lawrence River valley, and the development of new economic and familial connections with aboriginal peoples.

Podruchny focuses on the Canadian fur trade during the period from 1763 (when Britain assumed sovereignty over Canada) until 1821 (when the Hudson's Bay and North West companies merged), although she includes examples from earlier and later periods. Podruchny noticeably omits any substantive examination of the fur trade south of the Great Lakes, although this is a minor criticism. The fur

trade in the geographical domain of the United States was, in many ways, qualitatively different from that of the Canadian fur trade to the north. For example, while the fur trade in Canada was conducted at permanent and semi-permanent forts, the fur trade south of the 49th Parallel during this period was generally carried out at settlements such as Detroit, Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, and Chicago. Nevertheless, French Canadians and their descendants constituted a significant portion of the labor force of the American fur trade into the 1840s, and, thus, there were significant parallels with the Canadian fur trade. That is why Podruchny's work is so valuable: scholars who study the fur trade in the Great Lakes and the Mississippi and Missouri river valleys will find a great deal of material in Podruchny's book that is applicable to those regions. Moreover, her excellent examination of the many kinds of sexual and marital relations that voyageurs had with aboriginal women will appeal to scholars of North American métis (mixed-blood) populations.

Podruchny's citations and bibliography display her exhaustive research, particularly in the papers of the Hudson's Bay Company and the companies that operated from Montreal, such as the North West Company. Podruchny also demonstrates a superlative understanding of the secondary literature as well the various works on social theory that she deftly employs in her examination of the voyageur world. Yet she does so without resorting to the opaque jargon that often obfuscates rather than illuminates much of contemporary historical writing. Indeed, Podruchny clearly has produced a seminal work.

Friedrich Hecker: Two Lives for Liberty, by Sabine Freitag, translated and edited by Steven Rowan. Columbia: University of Missouri Press for the St. Louis Mercantile Library, University of Missouri–St. Louis, 2006. 494 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, name index. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Alison Clark Efford is a doctoral candidate at Ohio State University, where she is working on a dissertation on German immigrants and American citizenship during Reconstruction.

Friedrich Hecker—failed German revolutionary, Illinois farmer, and Union army colonel—was the sort of man who enlivened the rural Midwest during the nineteenth century. Drawing on the archives of two continents, German historian Sabine Freitag has meticulously researched Hecker's transatlantic life. Steven Rowan's translation now makes Freitag's revised dissertation accessible to an English-speaking audience. This biography contributes to our understanding of the global dimensions of midwestern history.