

Gail Helgason, *The First Albertans: An Archaeological Search*

RICHARD E. MORLAN

Gail Helgason. *The First Albertans: An Archaeological Search*. Edmonton: Lone Pine Publishing, 1987. 222 pp. Paper \$12.95, ISBN 0-919433-19-7.

The goal of this book is to open the reader's imagination to prehistoric Albertans. Eight chapters are devoted to this objective. The title of chapter 1, "Two Worlds Meet," commemorates the first direct contacts between native people and Europeans in Alberta, but most of the chapter is concerned with the concept of prehistory and the methods of archaeology. Chapter 2 describes the Ice Age origins of the first North Americans and "The Mystery of the Ice-Free Corridor" through which they are thought to have passed to reach land now included in Alberta.

Chapters 3 and 4 summarize the prehistory of the plains and foothills in southern Alberta, while chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to a similar summary of the forests of northern Alberta. Historical archaeology is treated in chapter 7, and chapter 8 attempts a retrospective glance at "The Legacy of the First Albertans." An appendix lists the names and addresses of Alberta Provincial Historic Sites, museums, and societies. The glossary contains descriptions and definitions of terms that are italicized in the text (note that *burin*, a term on page 172, was missed), and a two-page bibliography closes the book.

Each of the main chapters consists of a narrative followed by one or more descriptive vignettes that provide added details on places and ideas mentioned in the narrative. The vignettes are set in a different typeface and are bordered by vertical lines to distinguish them from the narrative. The contents of the vignettes are interesting, and they are probably essential to a reader who has not previously been acquainted with Alberta prehistory. Functionally, however, they are lengthy footnotes and interrupt the flow of the narrative.

Such interruptions might be easily overlooked if the narrative itself swept with sufficient force from one chapter to the next, but even within chapters the narrative is broken into segments that sometimes occur in

surprising order. The Besant phase, named for a type of projectile point, is introduced on page 92, but on page 94 we are given a discussion of the egalitarian nature of Plains Indian societies. By the end of page 96, the subject has shifted back to the projectile point sequence to describe Avonlea arrow points. Most of the book has this disjointed character. At first I found it refreshing to consider this subject without strict reference to a time scale, but eventually I felt as if my watch were broken, running now for two hours and then for only 15 minutes. Throw in the vignettes, and you might as well throw away the watch! As an archaeologist, I feel that the sweep of time is as important as the immense spatial panorama to an understanding of Plains prehistory.

Despite the loosely connected presentation, some important themes are well expressed. The use of ethnographic data and model building to flesh out the bare bones of archaeology is implicit in many passages and explicit in a few. The narrative goes well beyond a mere listing of the material culture traits that are used to distinguish various prehistoric peoples. There is an excellent portrayal of the contrast between dependence on bison in the south and the seasonal use of a wide variety of resources in the north. The text is lavishly illustrated with sketches and photographs, and Don Inman's paintings, many of which are superbly reproduced in colour, deserve special mention. These contributions alone should fire the reader's imagination.

This book project was initiated and guided by officers of the Archaeological Survey of Alberta (Historical Resources Division, Alberta Culture). In my opinion, the public funds that have supported the project have been well spent. All three prairie provinces have now produced popular accounts of the past, although not always with public money. The three accounts differ in style, thematic organization and theoretical orientation, and it will be interesting to observe their success as vehicles for the dissemination of prehistory and history to the public.