

Comptes rendus

James Parker, *Emporium of the North*

GRAHAM A. MACDONALD

James Parker. *Emporium of the North: Fort Chipewyan and the Fur Trade to 1835*. Regina: Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism and Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987. 208 pp., maps, photos, ill., biblio. Paper \$15.00, ISBN 0-88977-044-1.

Emporium of the North is a further addition to the growing list of titles that deal with regional or local studies of the fur trade and is particularly welcome, for the "captivating Athabasca" has long been a source of fascination to historians of the North. Ever since 1930 when Harold Innis published his study of Peter Pond, that controversial figure's name has been automatically linked with the history of this part of Canada. The Athabasca region was an important theatre of the fur trade between 1778 and 1821, but the natural inclination to focus on the romance and violence associated with the rivalry between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company gives way in this volume to more sober pursuits. As with many recent students of the fur trade, Parker is more interested in exploring the nitty-gritty of daily life, the logic of the fur trade in the region, the place of the Indians in the trade, and the economic circumstances of the working men. The approach is thematic, and while the homework has been well done, we have the added benefit of receiving a book from one who has had his feet solidly on the ground of Athabasca country. The discussion of the historic location and evolution of fort sites around the Peace-Athabasca delta has clearly been written by one long familiar with the landscape in question. Other topics include a review of the centrality of provisioning and transportation issues in the trade; the character and circumstances of those who made the trade work, including the role of the Chipewyan Indians; and an examination of what it took to make the Athabasca pay: "The Economics of a District Depot."

The author does not overwhelm the reader with social or economic theory and has opted instead for a generally readable and accessible book. Those who are interested in theory will find plenty to chew on nonetheless. He has one main axe to grind and that is to draw attention to the radical shifts in policy, trade success and local well-being that attended the pendulum-like swings of commerce which stimulated conditions of monopoly or competition in the trade. The consequences of these periodic shifts he most strongly sets out in his last chapter "Making the Athabasca Pay." This chapter is a little harder going owing to the number of tables and charts which tend to get in the way of the narrative. Some of these might have been put in an appendix and their implications interpreted in narrative form. This chapter will be of great interest, however, to students of the so-called formalist-substantivist debate, which has taken place with respect to the views of scholars such as A.J. Ray and Abraham Rotstein. The many examples of economic behaviour will allow followers of that debate to further refine their ideas on the ultimate character of native economic man. Parker's own views on these matters may be hinted at in his description of Robertson's efforts to take the Hudson's Bay Company trade firmly and consistently to the Indians of the Athabasca:

Colin Robertson's extravagant display of trade goods and men, in effect, defeated the Northwesters at their own game. He fully realized that the key to winning the Athabasca trade lay in gaining the trade loyalties of the Indians. [p. 132]

In other words, the cultural baggage of the native peoples, their inclinations to trade if and when they pleased, and the continuing role of ceremony in trade might all be considered subordinate to the general interests of the Indians to consolidate some kind of market

understanding with the European traders. For the Indians this meant predictability (in Robertson's view), and for the fur companies, it meant imposing the blessings of monopoly. Shortly after Robertson's initiative the Hudson's Bay Company was able to do precisely that, with the amalgamation of the companies in 1821.

That monopoly also produced tight-fisted effects on the working people, native and European, is also made clear by Parker. One of the favoured techniques employed by the companies to keep costs down was to recapture the men's wages through the company store. This policy of binding the worker to purchasing in the company store was clearly less effective during periods of competition when employees might play one company off against the other and bargain for better wages. Immediately following the 1821 amalgamation, however, according to the Minutes of the Northern Council, George Simpson turned the advantages of monopoly towards the development of a labour-hiring policy akin to debt peonage: "Canadians not in Dept whose Engagements expire this Season have been discharged" (p. 117). In short, the goal was to obtain labour at less than cost. Through an analysis of the Fort Chipewyan journals, Parker suggests that the lot of many debt-ridden labourers became progressively less favourable.

While the economics of the Athabasca trade occupies a central place in this book, there are other interesting themes explored as well. The strategic importance of the Peace-Athabasca focus is outlined, especially through the eyes of Alexander Mackenzie, who saw it as the key to any successful prosecution of the far western trade by the Nor'westers. Thus, Fort Chipewyan was built in 1788 and it was

Mackenzie who first called it the Emporium of the North. Mackenzie himself did not enjoy the isolation imposed on the fur trader in Athabasca, but his search for the route west hinged around the establishment of a successful provisioning base somewhere in the Athabasca country. The rich resources of the Peace-Athabasca delta, particularly fish and waterfowl, and the abundant supply of meat provided by the northern bison (the wood buffalo) virtually predetermined fort locations around present-day Fort Chipewyan. The role of the fisheries in provisioning is emphasized by Parker, and as at certain other important fur-trade locations, such as Sault Ste. Marie, fish is recognized as a vital commodity in the survival of European and native alike. The author also provides us with some interesting observations on fur-trade diet generally and on the process of pemmican preparation.

In taking his study to 1835, Parker suggests that subsequently a stability settled on the Peace-Athabasca trade until transportation improvements brought in by steam-shipping started to alter the means of access to the region.

This book will be suitable for many general readers, and for that reason, one might have wished for a somewhat more comprehensive introduction in order to set the context for many of the prominent personalities who come and go throughout the narrative. For instance, Peter Fidler's role was an important one in Athabasca and elsewhere, but his great cartographic and exploration achievements are more hinted at than explained. For closer students of the fur trade, a very useful bibliographic essay by Patricia A. Myers reviewing fur-trade studies since 1967 concludes the book.