

Wallace M. Olson
 Professor of Anthropology
 University of Alaska Southeast
 11120 Glacier Highway
 Juneau, Alaska 99801
 U.S.A.

BEST LEFT AS INDIANS: NATIVE-WHITE RELATIONS IN THE YUKON TERRITORY, 1840-1973. By KEN S. COATES. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. 356 p., 29 tables, index. Hardbound. Cdn\$39.95.

Until recently, historians writing about northern Canada confidently focussed their analyses on the Northwest Territories and Eastern Arctic. If they referred to the Yukon at all, they might casually tack on a chapter at the end explaining that the impact of the Klondike gold rush and the Alaska Highway made the Yukon a special case, somehow different from the "real North." During the past decade, Ken Coates has changed all this by publishing extensively on Yukon history and making this area of regional history a topic of serious discussion in northern studies.

In *Best Left as Indians*, Coates tackles a topic more challenging than in his earlier books — specifically, the relationship between Native and non-Native Yukoners during more than a century spanning 1840 to 1973. His thesis is that despite the "boom-bust" cycles characterizing the Yukon economy, there is evidence of continuity both in the strategies of aboriginal people and in the attitudes and policies of traders, missionaries and government agents who came to the territory. Indigenous people persisted in their commitment to hunting and trapping, hence riding out the uncertainties associated with mineral extraction. And even though successive waves of newcomers came north with conflicting objectives, they shared a good deal both in their paternalistic attitudes toward indigenous peoples and in the segregationist policies they kept reinventing, ensuring that Native peoples remained relegated to the margins of economic and social life.

Coates is at his best when he is mining the historical records, relentlessly hunting down quotations that support his thesis. Where the book disappoints is in the suggestion that it provides an analysis of a *relationship* between aboriginal people and colonizers. A relationship implies more than one perspective, and despite Coates's assertion that the Yukon provides an opportunity not available elsewhere in Canada to "assess the nature of Native choice" (p. 20) and his claim that he is showing aboriginal people as actors rather than as victims, there is little evidence of their perspective here. This may seem unsurprising, when the words inscribed in documents are provided almost exclusively by the traders, missionaries and government agents, but often those observers were lamentably ignorant about what they were describing and invariably their accounts were self-serving.

Coates pays less attention to the ethnographic record than he promises in his introduction and exhibits little curiosity about the range of decisions made by aboriginal people. His willingness to impute motives to indigenous people when he lacks data is a most troubling aspect of the book because the Hobbesian model he uses to explain how aboriginal people made their decisions is both gendered and ideologically grounded in Western cultural assumptions.

Decisions in all societies are socially and culturally constituted. The ethnographic record, based largely on oral accounts, provides extensive discussion about how particular decisions were arrived at during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the southern Yukon, for example, principles of matrilineal descent, matrilineal post-marital residence preferences, partnerships between brothers-in-law, and reciprocal bonds between members of moieties and (in southern Yukon) among members of different clans carried significant weight in important economic and social transactions. Similar principles governed interactions with strangers. While no one would disagree with Coates's statement that "... Natives were not living artifacts — non-economic people caught in the bounds of 'traditional'

society" (p. 244), some discussion of indigenous concepts of society, history and personhood would have contributed significantly to his analysis.

For example, commenting on the controversial government decision to force-register traplines in 1950, he notes that "government agents encountered serious difficulties getting Natives to identify their personal trapline areas; many disputes arose as some trappers seized the moment to expand their trapping lines" (p. 64). Yet, in the southern Yukon, where land was owned and managed by distinct clans, rather than by individuals, the idea that traplines were "personally" owned or could be registered to individuals in the first place presented aboriginal people with the insoluble dilemma. The transfer to individual ownership still causes problems in some communities today and during the 1970s some band councils applied to have traplines reassigned to the community as "group traplines." Reducing discussions of choice to a competitive individualistic model ignores the lived experience of people who participated actively in these same events.

Discussions of social relations present even more difficulties because the account is so highly gendered. The author proposes that historically the most significant contact between Native and non-Native Yukoners occurred as a result of relationships between white men and aboriginal women. Grounding his argument in a discussion of non-Native males' "sexual needs" (p. 84) and "romantic and sexual desires" (p. 89), Coates moves even further away from his earlier objective of explicating "the nature of Native choice" because his discussion becomes phrased almost exclusively in terms of how white men represented their choices to consort with aboriginal women. Any reference to choices made by women is dismissed, again with reference to an individualistic model: "... there is little documentation to indicate why Native women accepted non-Native traders as mates, beyond the likelihood that they did so for personal gain and to solidify trading relations between the company and the band" (p. 77-78). Surely some reference to women's control of their *own* sexuality in a society where principles of matrilineal descent are important and where women were unlikely to see themselves as property of men might expand any discussion of precisely *who* was making *what* choices.

Various assertions about customary marriage are uncritically advanced. He quotes the remark of a police officer in 1909 commenting on alliances with white men, "that Native women had been taken according to Indian custom, in which the man paid \$50 to \$100 to the parents and took the woman as his wife" (p. 87). Such a startling misinterpretation of conventional marriage arrangements surely deserves some commentary. Marriage signalled a relationship between members from opposite moieties and distinct clans rather than between two individuals. The alliance set in motion a complex system of exchanges ensuring that those clans recognized their ongoing relationship. A sense that the author may not fully appreciate this himself is reinforced a few pages later when he makes a distinction between marriages sanctified by the Anglican church and those "informally constituted marriages, usually ratified *only* according to Indian custom . . ." (p. 89) (my emphasis). Likewise, his comment that even under missionary influence "such old practices as polygamy, trading of wives and discarding of partners continued" (p. 129) seems unexamined. Evidence from missionary journals as well as from oral tradition confirms that it was *missionaries* who enforced "discarding of partners" because of their insistence on monogamous unions. Without some critical commentary accompanying such statements, the author's intention in citing them remains obscure.

In the discussion of church, state and Native people, problems of perspective continue. As sources for a description of Native religion, he cites three Anglican Church missionaries, Canham, Kirkby and McDonald, who may not have been the most reliable informants and who give a simplistic view of aboriginal beliefs that says rather more about Anglican missionaries (p. 166). Oddly enough, Coates then goes on to cite derogatory comments made by these same missionaries as evidence of their racism, raising questions about their credibility as experts on Native spirituality. Again, an evolutionary model is

invoked: "[G]iven [aboriginal peoples'] unstructured form of pre-contact beliefs, the missionaries' message provided a framework and ritualistic form for dealing with religious matters" (p. 134). Scholars of subarctic world view, including Robin Ridington, Catharine McClellan and others, have advanced quite the opposite perspective, that Athapaskan belief systems provided a systematic framework within which missionaries' rather programmatic teachings could be incorporated and evaluated.

What this book lacks most is some sense of historical consciousness of indigenous actors. Increasingly, historians working in areas where history has been compiled exclusively from colonial documents are questioning the rules and conventions that govern the production of knowledge about the past. The widely discussed issue of voice — which voices get included in history and which ones get left out — is not trivial. Coates does a service by laying out such a complete and annotated record of colonial documents, but his sometimes uncritical use of that record — leaving his reader to guess whether he concurs or disagrees with the statements he cites — is extremely problematic. Advancing the cultural, ideological and gender biases in those accounts presents a teleological outcome and thwarts his stated objective of documenting a *relationship*. As aboriginal people continue to record their own oral traditions about these same events, their stories may redress the imbalance in the written record by complicating our views about how northern history is to be understood.

Julie Cruikshank
Museum of Anthropology
6393 N.W. Marine Drive
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
V6T 1Z2

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CANADIAN NORTH. By ROBERT M. BONE. Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1992. xi+284 p., 30 figs. and maps, 42 tables, index. Softbound. Cdn\$19.95.

The Geography of the Canadian North is an admirable volume, the clarity, sensitivity and balance of which recommend it highly to both lay readers and instructors of courses on northern Canada.

In the author's words, "The main thrust of the text is the matter of northern development and its impact on the environment and Native people." Four concepts organize the analysis. The first is the distinction between the arctic and subarctic regions of Canada's North. This distinction assists the author to avoid overgeneralization while covering both the provincial and territorial Norths. Also, the causal relationships that he identifies in each region, for example between the availability of transportation systems and the type of non-renewable resource development that appears, help the reader to understand patterns of development in the other region and to appreciate the basic principles of social and economic geography that underlie the text. The second concept restates the basic thrust of the book: the process of development is the fundamental determinant of the social geography of the North. Unfortunately given the centrality of the concept for the book, the author fails to define development or to explore at the conceptual level the complexities that arise when an attempt is made to weigh the costs and benefits or to assess the level of development of structurally very different economies, such as are found in the North. Third, the book relies heavily on a core-periphery analysis to gain insights into the direction of northern development. The fourth premise from which the book proceeds is that "frontier dualism" — the presence of Native and non-Native peoples with distinctive but interacting economies and cultures — constitutes the major social and economic distinction and poses the most fundamental policy issues in the North.

The book opens with concise and highly informative discussions of the climate, geomorphology, history and demography of the North. It then examines what might be termed the "industrial resource development" economy, encompassing both non-renewable resource extraction and the exploitation of forest and hydro-electricity resources.

The book then describes the Native population of the North, its economic patterns and the problems and choices that confront it.

The handling of the two economies is comprehensive and balanced. Throughout, the argument draws effectively on a rich base of very recent research. This currency and depth both make the book a useful reference work for the present and suggest that it will retain its relevance well into the future. The author treats each of the economies and the difficult economic prospects facing the North frankly. In reporting egregious examples of environmental degradation caused by industrial resource development, he extends his analysis beyond impersonal abstraction to demonstrate that these projects usually profoundly victimize aboriginal people. He also fully documents the failure of these projects to contribute to the lasting strength of the northern economy and to offer either long-term or abundant short-term employment for Native workers.

At the same time, while recognizing the economic, social and cultural importance of wildlife harvesting for Native people, he notes the inability of this economy to provide them the cash income they need. He also anticipates that anti-fur agitation, a high rate of Native population growth and the concentration of Native people into communities are likely in the future to reduce, not so much northern Natives' involvement in the traditional economy, but the role it can play in their overall personal economic strategies. In this context he provides one of the clearest statements of the options among which native people can choose, including the traditional economy, fly-in employment on resource projects, transfer payments, community-based economic development and employment with public and aboriginal governments and agencies. In discussing employment prospects, he repeatedly returns to the theme of the urgent need to increase the level of educational attainment of Native students.

The Geography of the Canadian North does suffer from one serious deficiency — its treatment of the evolving pattern of northern governmental and quasi-governmental institutions. The discussion of land claims is generally skimpy. Aside from one opaque reference, there is no examination of Native participation in agencies established by land claims settlements to regulate wildlife harvesting and land uses incompatible with the traditional economy. This is a critical topic because these agencies are intended to be the means by which land claims will secure the future of the traditional economy. The discussion also fails to report the resistance of the federal government to fully empowering these agencies. The reader is left unclear about the real ability that claims might and actually do give northern Natives to protect the traditional economy, but with the mistaken impression that this ability is greater than is truly the case.

The reader is incorrectly informed at several points that land claims create regional aboriginal governments. While this did result in the James Bay and northern Quebec case, the northern claims settlements currently being contemplated and the Inuvialuit settlement of 1984 do not create regional governments. Indeed, the categorical refusal of the federal government to negotiate the creation of such governments as part of the claims settlements has significantly delayed and complicated the claims process. In general, the treatment of the ways in which northern political institutions are evolving and the future impact of this evolution on the dual economies of the North stands out for its vagueness and superficiality, particularly when contrasted with the deft and thoughtful treatment of so many other topics in the book.

With this exception, *The Geography of the Canadian North* compares most favorably to any of the books written in the last decade on the subject of northern development. It is a judicious and insightful discussion of this important subject, valuable reading for both newcomers to this important subject and readers well versed in it.

Gurston Dacks
Department of Political Science
The University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T6G 2H4