

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Best Left as Indians: Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territory, 1840-1973. By Ken S. Coates

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3qc7n24t>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 16(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Braroe, Niels Winther

Publication Date

1992-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

languages accessible, his results are at times a bit frustrating for scholars. His transcriptions of California languages are not accurate, giving everything an English sound (as when he renders Madesiwi *Modes'se*), and sometimes his cross-cultural equivalents seem off. What subtle differences did he obscure in translating *Annikadel* as *God*, for instance?

Yet he worked long and hard and with standards and perceptions finely tuned by his scientific disciplines, medicine and biology. From his vast ethnological collections, many wonderful things will no doubt continue to emerge and reemerge, as *Annikadel* does now. It is a little like the dream-history itself, where the most powerful and creative people are often the smallest—Mouse, Kangaroo Rat, and, of course, Little Lizard.

Thomas Buckley

University of Massachusetts, Boston

Best Left as Indians: Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territory, 1840–1973. By Ken S. Coates. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. \$39.95 cloth.

The title of this book is taken from remarks by a white official, made at the turn of the century, who believed that white influence did nothing but damage to Yukon Indians. He thought that they were quite capable of supporting themselves by traditional subsistence pursuits. His represents one pole of opinion, alternating with that which sees assimilation of natives into the Euro-Canadian mainstream as the most desirable policy. No matter which view prevailed at any given time, the outcome has been the same from the start: Yukon natives have been at the periphery of the dominant society.

Coates makes extensive use of archival records, governmental, commercial, and ecclesiastical. This is not, he acknowledges, an ethnohistorical study. There are no native voices in the form of autobiographical or oral history narrative, elicited from Indian informants. The book is focused on "the non-Native forces at work in the Yukon Territory [with] no attempt . . . to use historical methodology to assess the ramifications of European expansion on Native social organization and internal mechanisms of control" (p. xix).

Coates mines anthropological sources minimally, and not al-

ways knowledgeably when he does. He writes, for example, of Indian society as "matriarchal" (p. 6) and in another context concludes that "[t]he Indian's spiritual vision should be characterized more as world view than as a religion, since it lacked most of the ceremonial regularity associated with the Christian faiths" (p. 116). Neither of these usages is in accord with current anthropological custom.

Rather than arbitrarily breaking Indian-white contact history into chronological periods, Coates divides his book into four sections, each treating a "theme" and its historical course since the mid-nineteenth century. The first three are economic relations, the nature of social contact between Indian and Europeans, and the influence of the church and state on Yukon natives. A last section treats the period since 1950, examining all three categories of contact in the emerging "New North."

In many respects, the Yukon fur trade follows the same pattern as that elsewhere in North America, although beginning later and on a lesser scale. Commerce overlaid existing native trade networks, but well-positioned Indian groups worked to maintain and exploit middleman positions once Europeans arrived. A network of trading centers built on the familiar credit system developed, in which Indians participated actively to maximize interests. As an economic pursuit, fur trading lasted until the mid-twentieth century. Coates observes that trade did not supplant subsistence hunting; Indians continued the ancient yearly round, even with the spread of trading posts, small family hunting groups dispersing into the bush in winter. While trade did bring economic change to the Yukon Indians, they preferred a "tangential and peripheral accommodation which permitted a continuation of harvesting practices."

Beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth century, mining transformed the Yukon to a dual economy, although, again, Indians were marginal to it. They provided services as guides, transporters, and provisioners. Up to and during the Klondike gold strike, they rarely abandoned hunting/trapping to join in placer mining. When mechanized dredger technology replaced prospecting claims after the turn of the century, few Indians found wage labor as operatives. Coates attributes their marginality to racist exclusion by whites, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Indians' preference for a life of independence. Up until 1900, few Indians lived near scattered mining operations year-round.

In the 1940s, the Yukon experienced a massive influx of men and

capital with the construction of the Alaska highway and pipelines. Indians, again, played a limited role in the undertaking, supplying only a few unskilled, casual workers. During this time, the fur trade continued in much the same manner as before.

Part 2 of Coates's book records the history of social contact between whites and natives. Although the former outnumbered Indians after the gold rush, they were essentially a population of transients. Since most were males, the result was increased contact between white males and Indian women. In part, this was because white settlements were sharply segregated, a pattern implemented by educational, medical, and church institutions, not just economic ones. The offspring of Indian women and whites never gave rise to a mixed-blood ethnic enclave, as in other parts of Canada. Coates gives some attention to problems created by the illicit trade in alcohol during this period.

Mining towns and settlements were located along the Whitehorse-Dawson corridor. Segregation was facilitated by setting aside native "reserves" near towns but apart from them. Sheer racial prejudice worked to enforced separation, as did illegal measures like curfew regulations. Not many Indians found jobs in towns, and the reserves themselves supported a highly seasonal, mobile Indian population.

Coates writes that "the coming of the Alaska Highway [in 1942] increased the frequency of interracial contact, but did not alter the basic relationship between the races" (p. 99). Alcohol use continued to be a problem, and venereal disease became "virtually epidemic among young Native women" (*ibid*).

If the posture of white economics operated principally to the neglect of Indians, the church and state worked with deliberate intent. Both did so "from the conviction that Native people had to be kept apart . . . until an undefined time when they were ready for more complete integration" (p. 111). The Anglican church, of course, sought to undermine Indian belief and replace it with Christian values. No matter the number of baptisms; as late as 1950, missionaries acknowledged the persistence of Indian religious traditions. Coates thinks that "the Indian world view survived because the Native's world remained substantially intact; the two were inseparable. . . (p. 134)."

Education, in the hands of the church until after the war, had somewhat the reverse effect of that intended. Schooling failed to prepare students for economic integration, but it did "destroy the children's faith in their own culture" (p. 136). This was especially

so for residential schools like that at Carcross, which had the destructive effect of separating children from their families, but leaving them ill-equipped for work opportunities, which did not exist anyway.

Government native policies varied over time, were often vaguely stated and ambiguously implemented. No inclusive treaties were made with Indians, establishing aboriginal land claims, and the territory itself lacked full representative government. Initially, the policy of the Canadian government favored protection of Indian access to hunting territories rather than assimilation, although the interests of miners were given first consideration. When some Indian reserve lands were sought by white developers, Indians were simply relocated. The government encouraged but did not actively create Indian tribal/band political leadership; a band council of Moosehide Indians, for example, did not appear until 1921 and then had very limited powers of self-rule.

After the war, a "new era" of government-native relations began. Existing programs, such as in education and medicine, were expanded. The family allowance paid to all Canadians was extended to natives but was paid in goods, not cash. The requirement that children be enrolled in school in order for the family to receive payment had the effect of confronting families with the hard choice between settling on reserves near towns or maintaining seasonal mobility. Nevertheless, until 1950, the government view was that "hunting and trapping offered the best prospects for Yukon Indians" (p. 185).

The final section of Coates's book deals with post-1950 Yukon economy and society and the Indians' place in it. After the war, there was a sharp decline in the fur trade, although Indians did continue to rely on hunting for a great part of their subsistence. The mining industry flourished, but there was little possibility for Indians to earn cash in it. The Yukon Native Brotherhood, formed in 1968, encouraged the native handicraft industry, but this, plus work as hunting guides or domestic and casual laborers, hardly provided a realistic opportunity for natives to join a developing cash economy. Indians were increasingly recipients of government welfare, as the economic gap between them and whites widened.

In the mid-1950s, the government began a program of consolidating and centralizing reserves in order to better service native populations. In the following decades, various programs aimed at improving housing, education, and health care. Still, community

"pathologies" of familiar sorts persisted: alcohol abuse, family disorganization, and so on. At the same time, according to Coates, "government agents discovered that Yukon Indians did not particularly want to become white men. The native determination to preserve their culture undermined the foundation of government programs for Indian people."

The substance of government policy all along had been that Indians had no aboriginal rights in their territories. The instigation of registration of traplines in 1950, for example, attempted to "impose Canadian concepts of land ownership and tenure on the Yukon Indians" (p. 232). In 1973, the Yukon Native Brotherhood tabled a comprehensive land claim that became the source of heated controversy. It signaled a departure from older forms of Indian leadership, in which councils merely communicated the government's arbitrary decisions downward to scattered bands. One event that characterizes the climate of the time was the conflict over the drilling by Northern Oil Explorers, which Indians saw as threatening a large muskrat-trapping area that supported village economy. Since Indians had difficulty convincing the government of the legitimacy of their claim, this and other complaints led Indian leaders to recognize the need for a territorywide representative body. Initially, government funding grants supplied the YNB with resources to prepare numerous reports and proposals for change in Indian circumstances.

Events of the last two decades are beyond the scope of Coates's book, although he does provide a sketch of them. The major thrust is increased political participation of Indian organizations and a movement toward greater economic and cultural self-determination. He notes some gains that have been made, notably the signing in 1990 of an agreement in principle regarding land claims that returned some lands to Indian control.

Coates concludes his book with the observation that recent events demonstrate a creativity and adaptability among native people that has been characteristic all along, albeit less visible to whites in the past. He does briefly compare the Yukon situation to some others in the south: for example, the Northern Ojibwa and the Beaver Indians of British Columbia.

Yukon Indian-white history does invite comparison to processes of conflict and accommodation elsewhere. One obvious example is the struggle of the Quebec Cree to preserve and develop a northern hunting/trapping-mixed economy of self-determination. Both Quebec and the Yukon supported native

populations of loosely connected bands, with no central political leadership and authority. There are resemblances that are critical: Both white economies seek to exploit natural resources--minerals in one case, hydroelectric power in the other. One of the most significant parallels is that development schemes seem to stimulate sophisticated, effective, and aggressive Indian political organizations where none existed before. In both cases, Indians have responded creatively and constructively to threatened cultural identity. There is an interesting and relevant literature on frontier society/culture, as represented by the work of S. Thompson and colleagues, that would have guided Coates in exploring comparative generalizations.

Nevertheless, Coates's book provides a useful overview of Indian-white contact. In this, he fulfills what he sets out to do. We do not receive, for any period, a vivid picture of how life is lived within Indian villages and reserves, or within the boundaries of white communities, but he provides a continuous historical thread that describes points of intersection of the two, as is his goal. I have but one minor quibble, and that is the absence of maps, which would be an aid for those of us unfamiliar with this part of the world.

Niels Winther Braroe

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Blackfoot Grammar. By Donald G. Frantz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. 159 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

Blackfoot is a small language, with fewer than five thousand speakers. As is usual with small languages, it has not enjoyed a great deal of scholarly attention. And yet the work that has been done (all in this century) is of unusually high quality.

The earliest significant attention to Blackfoot was that of C. C. Uhlenbeck, the great Dutch Indo-Europeanist and general linguist, whose fieldwork began in 1910 among the South Piegan in Montana. Uhlenbeck considered his grammar of Blackfoot (published in 1938) to be one of the major accomplishments of his life. From the perspective of the present, one must give that credit to his texts, which, in terms of bulk, richness, and content, could not be collected today.

The next significant contribution to the codification of the