

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Indians Of Canada : Cultural Dynamics . By John Price

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/70k2b2s0>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 3(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Clifton, James A.

Publication Date

1979-03-01

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/>

Indians Of Canada: Cultural Dynamics. By John Price. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall of Canada, Ltd., 1979. 261 pp. pap. \$7.95

Aimed at a Canadian readership the potential audience for this finely constructed, tightly written, beautifully designed, and inexpensive little book is actually much larger. Literally packed with relevant information, sound and penetrating generalizations, and fresh, perceptive insights of continental scope, *Indians Of Canada* is highly recommended as a first choice reading for anyone wanting a basic introduction to North American Indian cultures, histories, and contemporary political-economic currents. It should be acquired by all public, college, and local libraries and by anyone with an interest in the native peoples of North America, while its use as a text should not by any means be restricted to courses on Canadian Indians alone.

Unlike most authors trying to cover several culture areas and developments in smallish books, the author does not overwhelm his readers with a maze of weakly organized detail. Instead John Price displays an unusual talent for the telling summary, for striking just the right balance of insightful interpretation and factual array, and for drawing out the most economical conclusion and example.

Structure and pattern, of course, are the key to grasping and mastering such a diverse, cumbersome, and wide ranging body of information that is the scholarly knowledge of North American Indians: part of this author's successful handling of this problem is the underlying design he has devised to foster creative understanding. Five regional (or culture area) chapters form the core of the book: Arctic, Sub-Arctic, Northeastern Farming, High Plains, and Pacific Coast. But Price does not rest content with the conventional culture area summary. Instead each regional chapter is carefully focused on a key theoretical issue illustrating the unique dynamics of the particular area. Each chapter is further focused on a case: the Pacific Coast chapter concentrates on the political-economy of a fishing chiefdom, while the Arctic chapter stresses environmental adaptations. The discussion of Sub-Arctic hunting bands lays out the distinctive patterns of acculturation characterizing these peoples; warfare among tribal farmers is the well selected problem

focus of the Northeast; and the impact of that major transportation revolution caused by the introduction of the horse to the high plains is the pivot point of the Plains chapter.

A strong sociocultural evolutionary scheme underlies all these presentations, and Price employs evolutionary interpretations as well to draw together the introductory essays on race and prehistory, language, and cultural dynamics, linking these productively to the five areal chapters, and then tying the whole to the final chapter on the modern scene. In an already strong book, this concluding chapter is especially noteworthy, for there the author summarizes and interprets a remarkably large body of recent survey research on the conditions and prospects of the native peoples of Canada. However, perhaps the most striking feature of Price's writing is his capacity for communicating the human sense of the diverse culture patterns and experiences of Canada's Indians, ancient as well as modern. None of those dry and dusty arrays of abstracted culture traits that mar most textbook writing about Indians is evidenced here: Price's Indians of Canada are vital, three-dimensional people.

This reviewer was particularly struck by the wide range of original insights and interpretations presented in this book. These range from discussions of the survival functions of Inuit art to freshened understanding of Iroquoian warfare. Similarly, and with striking honesty, Price blows the froth off the modern legend that "the Indian" was some sort of a natural conservationist, shooting a fatal arrow into the vitals of that particular racial stereotype. His presentation of the evolution and internal weaknesses of the Iroquois confederacies, and his frequent display of comparative insights into continental developments and issues are further examples.

Prentice-Hall of Canada also deserves some of the credit for designing such a handsome, useful book. From the full-color cover painting by Norval Morrisseau to the inclusion of both a name and a subject index, the designer deserves a very well done grade. The text is further embellished by numerous outline maps and tables, particularly so by the inclusion of twenty-three sepia half-tone prints well selected (and succinctly criticized) from the work of Paul Kane, George Catlin, and Edward S. Curtis.

But Prentice-Hall deserves most of the blame for not exercising more careful editorial oversight on the manuscript. Unfortunately, there are entirely too many stylistic lapses marring the surface of

an otherwise unblemished book. The author seems, for example, to have an unusual capacity for confusing nouns with adjectives, for misplaced commas, and for constructing contorted sentences that leave the reader too often groggy. Additionally, the inapt selection of qualifiers and word order sometimes reverses or conceals the author's intent. In discussing the Arctic small-tool tradition (p. 10), for example, Price surely meant to attribute this tradition to "this paleolithic people," rather than "the Paleolithic people". His discussion of "idiocultures," (p. 39) is simply unintelligible to this reader (and may reveal no more than an unnecessary declaration of faith in the obsolete doctrine of "cultorology"). His phrasing "ethnographic present times" clearly confuses an antiquated literary device with a chronological era (p. 42). In his discussion of the Canadian national kinship system (p. 49) he seems to be saying that the terms and distinctions are so foreign to them that Canadians cannot understand them, which can hardly be true. A reassessment of the causes of the Hurons northward migrations (p. 136) says that "the soil [in the north] was as good as or better than the soil in the area they came from," which clearly reverses his meaning. "Weak" rather than "mild alliances" seems to have better characterized Huron inter-tribal relations (p.138); "while the Hurons remained divided in their response" instead of "though the Hurons remained . . ." (p. 155); and "a new kind of war, involving genocide" or "genocidal war" rather than "genocide war". Finally, the phrasing "American horse Neolithic" is confusing as well as less than felicitous (166-67), without further explanation, while the frequent use of the Canadian shorthand "B.C." in some contexts will stir Americans into thinking in terms of Christian eras rather than Canadian provinces.

A book with such scope cannot hope but to contain a small share of errors of fact and overdrawn if not mistaken interpretations. It is doubtful, for instance, that there is anything more "natural" about North American Indian "signals" (i.e. gestures) than "symbols" (i.e. speech), since both are culturally conditioned (p. 21). The Potawatomi, in fact, did not begin settling in southwestern Ontario until the summer of 1833, not the 1600s (p. 27). The status of Greenland has long been that of a Danish county, not a protectorate (p. 41). The author's stressed conclusion that personalized relations between Europeans and members of band-level societies were very rare (p. 84) is either much too strong or it hinges on non-shared definitions; but either way it ignores the

highly personalized relations between many French, Scots-Irish, and Anglo-Saxons and the Ojibwa and Cree. Finally, Price's treatment of the Hurons as a single, unitary tribal society squares neither with well known facts, his own otherwise careful use of the technical word "tribe," or his own sterling presentation of the Hurons' inter-tribal alliances. But again, these are minor matters that do not much detract from this book's high merit. *Indians Of Canada: Cultural Dynamics* deserves the highest recommendation as reading for both personal satisfaction and intellectual profit.

James A. Clifton
University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

Native Studies: American and Canadian Indians. By John A. Price. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Ltd., 1978. 309 pp. pap. \$8.95

Native Studies contains twenty-one chapters "organized in a sequence for use as an introduction to U.S. and Canadian Indians" (p. ix). Written by a Canadian anthropologist, the book is designed for use in Native American study programs on both sides of the border, as well as for the general reader. The first chapter deals with Indian Studies programs in both countries, and throughout the book there is a heavy emphasis on current Indian problems, for example, drinking, stereotyping in motion pictures, militance within the native movement, and the like. At the same time, there are chapters on physical anthropology and linguistics, religion, acculturation and the like that might have come out of a more conventional anthropological or historical text.

One of the major faults of the book is characteristic of anthropologists when they attempt to write history. Anthropologists are so used to describing what they see or what was said, that they sometimes fail to perform the historian's function of sorting through appearances to arrive at the facts. Price's chapter on current radical protest, for example, suffers from this failing. We are told what the protestors assert, but rarely what the truth is.

Another example of the book's thin veneer of historical depth is Price's treatment of treaties. He notes that the French and Spanish did not make treaties, while the British originally made treaties "to salve [their] consciences" (p. 253). What, then, are we to say about