
Specialization has divided the world into separate, independent segments. It has undermined the strength of history as a generalist discipline. Life is a composite of many threads and history can only approach reality if it weaves the threads rather than separating them into individual strands. Research and publications in Canadian fur trade history are often composed of individual strands. This occurs primarily because of specialization and the unfortunate division of academia into disciplines. The result is a tunnel vision that does not reflect the real world, where each segment is interdependent on another. For example, at the most basic level it is logical to see geography as the stage and history as the play. To separate them almost guarantees a lack of understanding of the real world. French historians such as Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have written superb history because of an understanding of this interrelationship.

Richard Ruggles’s work underlines the narrow perspectives of fur trade history because it is the first attempt to catalogue, attribute, and analyze a major portion of the magnificent map collection of the Hudson’s Bay Company. The maps were of great importance to the Company and the people who produced them. They were the basis of planning, policy, and expansion. More important, they detailed the growing knowledge and understanding of the spatial relationship of the people and the land. They are essential documentation to understanding the history of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the territories it covered.

This work has gone through much since it was proposed in 1978. It is a logical progression from the research and documentation that has gone into the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives. A great deal of preliminary work was carried out to produce a readable version of the maps. Ruggles’s work required the expertise of many people. The maps are reproduced with excellent clarity, considering the reduction in size and antiquity of the originals. Many will mistake the work for a coffee-table volume, although that is not a bad situation. Public awareness and interest in the past can only serve to encourage support for more research. However, the work is much more than a glossy presentation of arcane documents. These maps and Ruggles’s commentary are an intimate glimpse into the past and present of the region. They provide an appreciation of the history of the region and the people who inhabited it.

Many will ask why the maps are not delivered in a larger format. Maps placed in pockets invariably get lost. Folded maps are difficult to include and hard to use. From the cover, with its reproduction of the Title Cartouche to Philip Turner’s 1794 Map of Northern North America to the detailed compendium of maps both known and lost, this book will increase awareness of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives and the remarkable map collection. There are five parts, with a centrepiece that is a reproduction of 66 of the maps. Part one covers Company mapping policy, the map makers, their techniques, equipment, and contributions of natives. Part two provides a history of mapping divided into eight distinct periods. Part three presents the reproductions and part four the catalogues. Part five tidies up with appendices, glossary, notes, bibliography, and index.

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