

Flora BEARDY & Robert COUTTS, *Voices from Hudson Bay: Cree Stories from York Factory* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996, 158 p.)

*Voices from Hudson Bay* is a compilation of stories told by Swampy Cree Elders as part of the York Factory Oral History Project begun in 1989 and funded by Parks Canada. The Project aimed to complement the considerable documentary research already carried out about York Factory by gathering the oral stories of daily lives and experiences of the Cree people who had lived and worked there during the first half of the 20th century. Flora Beardy, a York Factory Cree woman herself, and historic site interpreter with Parks Canada, conducted the interviews with fourteen Elders, then translated and transcribed the recordings in English. Portions of those interviews make up the bulk of this book and are arranged under eighteen topics or chapter headings.

An introduction by historian Robert Coutts provides a thumbnail sketch of the history of York Factory, from the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company's York Fort in 1684 through historical events which transpired and affected the lives of the Swampy Cree in the area, events such as disease epidemics, animal depletion, changing Company policies and practices, the establishment of Church, school, government agents, and police, and finally the closing of the post in 1957 and subsequent relocation of the people. Following this is a discussion of oral history, its importance in filling the gap left in the social history of York Factory and the difficulties inherent in translation: from Cree to English, and from the oral to the written.

"Oral history," Coutts maintains, "is not a separate branch of history, but is a method to be used together with other sources," such as

photographs and written records (xxxiii). This they succeed in doing, as the interview data are complemented by more than two dozen photographs of people and places in and around York Factory during the period. Further, informative endnotes link the Elders' stories to published and archival documentary history and sources, clarifying, contextualizing and expanding upon the oral stories, but not correcting them, according to Coutts (xxxvi). Three maps locate York Factory for the reader, as well as those locations from which the people used to come to York Factory and to which they eventually dispersed.

Each of the Elders interviewed is profiled in a section of short biographies accompanied by pencil sketches of them. It is not clear why sketches were used and not photographs, but the effect is not displeasing. The biographies, listing parents, grandparents, spouses and children of the interviewees, allow the reader to trace relationships among several of them. Descriptions of their occupations relate to their stories and particular perspectives. The book concludes with a short list of recommended reading and a useful index.

The short length of the book (the transcribed interviews comprise less than 70 pages of text) belies the richness of the data. There is much here to interest scholars of many disciplines. The topics range from observations of the changing animal populations and behavior, the life of the trapper, to work and wages around the HBC post, social history and organization of the people in the area, the church, education and traditional medical care, to older information on the treaty days and ancient oral traditions. Detailed information on building a canoe (42), healing certain ailments (62, 65), and on trapping and snaring appears here (9). Marriage, leadership, and gender roles are also touched on directly or indirectly. Stories of the first airplane seen by the people are popular here, as in other northern areas. Life around the post apparently involved a lot of work, but the Elders remember games and dances along with some humorous events, such as the episode with Mr. Faries' bull and the teacher (58), and how children duped would-be thieves of Company merchandise and returned it for payment (49). Personal reminiscences give colour to the history and add the Cree perspective rarely found in the documents and published histories; a perspective which was there from the beginning, represents constant and cumulative observations and opinions, and which, perhaps, could only be coaxed out by one of their own, such as Flora Beardy.

Generally, Beardy sought direct first-hand information about daily occurrences and lives during the period. The Elders interviewed would be among the oldest still living and much of the data is first hand, however, quite a number of older stories appear here as well. A short section on "Ancient Legends and Traditions" goes back to Wisahkecahk (76). A local legend about the man who had ten wives also appears here, told by his grandson (71). Many other second-hand stories are told, as well as comparisons made by the Elders between their times and those of their parents and grandparents. Contrasts show the great changes these Elders have witnessed. One stated "I remember seeing not too many, the ones they called wigwams. ... I remember seeing smoke coming out of them. Wigwams, the one you see sometimes on TV" (43).

It is not clear how the editors arrived at the particular categories/subject headings used to organize the material. Interview questions (not included in the book), would largely determine the type of data collected, of course. Reference is made to a subjective process of sorting and inclusion; and to the themes which emerged from the Elders' memories in the open-ended interview situations. The result is eighteen different chapters, but boundaries overlap and some material appearing in one section could just as easily be in another. This illustrates the difficulty of imposing categories on oral narratives, however, the editors succeed with only occasional short, choppy fragments. For the most part, the excerpts flow smoothly for oral narrative transcripts.

The stories about a way of life that has largely passed from existence are fascinating. One Elder relates, "A long time ago the youngsters gathered around an elder, like we sit around the TV today" (91). Their teachings were vital to the survival of the younger generations. Today their stories can strengthen the youth by rooting them in a long tradition of working and living in the area and teaching of the variety and complexity of experience intrinsic to the position and role of the Cree in the historic fur trade. This book aids in that endeavour and ensures that valuable knowledge will endure to be passed down the generations of descendants of the Cree of York Factory and shared with others.

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