

Review

Robin Jarvis Brownlie, University of Manitoba

Helen Agger, *Following Nimishoomis: The Trout Lake History of Dedibaayaanimanook Sarah Keesick Olsen* (Theytus Books, 2008). Xvi, 279 pp. ISBN 978-1-894778-60-2.

This unique book, product of a lengthy and intensive mother-daughter collaboration, has much to offer readers interested in Aboriginal peoples and cultures, oral history, and colonization. Helen Agger set out to chronicle her mother's life experiences, especially those of growing up Anishinaabe in an Anishinaabe homeland as Euro-Canadian encroachment steadily intensified. The book offers a vivid glimpse into the ways the Anishinaabeg of Namegosibiing (now Trout Lake, Ontario) understood themselves and their surroundings, as they lived off the land and in balance with the natural world. It also shows how they viewed the colonizers' actions and how they sought to retain a space for their own ways in the midst of growing interference by settlers and the state. The author's goals are clearly laid out in the introduction: to help mend the divisions in the Anishinaabe community caused by residential schools; to "capture a glimpse of the Gichi Anishinaabe wisdom" that formerly helped guide people's lives; and to help correct the misconception that her people's homeland was a "wilderness" devoid of human activity and occupation (7). I know of no other book, replete as it is with the small details of living, which conveys so many facets of Anishinaabe daily life and worldview. In the first half of the book, Agger depicts the life followed by her mother's family in the years from the 1920s to the 1940s, as they worked to maintain a traditional pattern of land and resource use, gaining most of their living from hunting and fishing. The second half documents Dedibaayaanimanook's adult life, most of it lived on Namegosibiing, but in a largely *wemitigoozhi* (white/ non-Aboriginal) context.

As an oral history, this text reflects an arduous process, based on close collaboration and a careful adherence by Agger to her mother's preferences. Compiled over the course of ten years, the book is based on many conversations between mother and daughter, the former speaking Anishinaabemowin, the latter English. Since Dedibaayaanimanook was not comfortable with having her voice recorded, Agger took written notes of these exchanges. Agger uses many Anishinaabe terms and phrases in the text, conveying their meanings in the English sentences that follow. A lengthy glossary at the back supplies translations for many, though not all, of these words.

Dedibaayaanimanook, Agger's mother (later known in the newcomer society as Sarah Keesick Olsen), was born in 1922 in what the colonizers

designated as northwestern Ontario. The centre of her ancestral homeland was Namegosibiing, which translates as Trout Waters, located northeast of the town of Red Lake and north of the cities of Kenora and Dryden. Her parents raised her steeped in Anishinaabe culture and lifeways, influenced strongly by her beloved paternal grandfather, Giizhik, a powerful healer and medicine man. *Nimishoomis* means “my grandfather,” and thus the book’s title conveys Dedibaayaanimanook’s decision to follow her grandfather’s teachings. Because of intense headaches that have plagued her all her life, Dedibaayaanimanook was not sent to residential school, and there was no local school. Thus her childhood was disrupted only peripherally by *wemitigoozhi* cultural influences. Reserve boundaries and Indian agents had little impact in her life, which was shaped by predictable seasonal movements, mostly by canoe, between locations that offered resources for the family. Her family interacted in certain ways with the newcomer society, which became increasingly unavoidable because of the depletion of animal resources caused by logging, mining, and commercial fishing. But all this was handled and understood within an Anishinaabe cultural framework. Thus, the book depicts the experience of encroachment from an Anishinaabe perspective.

The book’s main focus is daily life, with a particular emphasis on Anishinaabe terms, values, activities, and practices. As Agger notes in the introduction, the project originated with her realization that Dedibaayaanimanook’s grandchildren knew little of her upbringing in a traditional Anishinaabe family (2). The first five chapters (of nine) are primarily about daily living, describing food-gathering activities, short- and long-distance travel around the homeland, incidents that occurred, and terms for all kinds of things, such as times of year and particular ice forms. There are stories about curses and healing, describing how the special spiritual powers Anishinaabe people nurtured were used for both good and ill. There are hunting stories, animal lore, and tales of family interaction. What is noteworthy in Dedibaayaanimanook’s story, Agger communicates, is not so much its events, but the cultural framework in which they occurred, which has been so greatly eroded since then by the influence of the *wemitigoozhi* world. Dedibaayaanimanook experienced a full-fledged, wholistic Anishinaabe world, lived and understood entirely in the Anishinaabe language, painstakingly preserved from outsider interference. That this occurred in the middle years of the twentieth century is remarkable. More importantly, it illuminates a good deal about the Anishinaabe culture that Agger and other contemporary descendants wish to record, retrieve, and reinvigorate.

Helen Agger makes clear at the outset that her agreement with her mother was to respect the choices, inclusions, and silences that resulted from her traditional Anishinaabe upbringing. Accordingly, there were restrictions on speaking about certain people who were deceased and unpleasant subjects were

avoided. Among other things, this approach meant that some of the more painful effects of colonization, particularly growing problems with alcohol among Anishinaabeg, were excluded from the text. The decision is understandable in many ways, but it means that the story told here is incomplete, as Agger emphasizes in the introduction. “The sickness of alcoholism, along with all of its worst consequences, were daily realities for Namegosibii Anishinaabe people to some degree.... Readers are urged not to forget about the fact that the ubiquitous effects of alcoholism existed every day in people’s lives, particularly as the narrative moves into the early 1950s” (5). The fact is, however, that it is difficult to bear this in mind while reading the book, since it is never mentioned and there is little to cue the reader to the issue. These choices have clearly heightened the typical effect of interviewing older people about their lives, that is, the preference for remembering primarily positive, even nostalgic, memories and suppressing painful experiences. How much it distorts the reader’s sense of Dedibaayaanimanook’s life is impossible to tell, but certainly this account is selective. A few sentences here and there allude to interpersonal conflict and personal difficulties of relatives, but the references are brief and extremely careful. The effect is particularly pronounced in the chapters dealing with her childhood, while the second half of the book, covering her adult years, is more open about difficulties. Dedibaayaanimanook married a *wemitigoozhi*, a Norwegian immigrant who introduced commercial fishing to Namegosibiing, and who had his own difficulties with alcohol. Because of marrying “out,” and because of her husband’s attitudes about her family and culture, she became distant from many of her relatives and was able to impart only bits and pieces of her language and culture to her six children.

Helen Agger has recorded a lost world, destroyed by the Euro-Canadian, industrial approach to land use and the state campaign to assimilate First Nations people. This book is one important attempt to capture the memory of that world, as contemporary Anishinaabeg seek to regain the strengths, skills, and knowledge on which it was founded.