McManus on Binnema, 'Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains'

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Long Durée Meets the Northwestern Plains

Ted Binnema's *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* won the CHA's Prairie Region book prize in 2003 and deservedly so: it is a remarkable scholarly achievement which brings several fields of research together in one pathbreaking monograph. It uses archeological, ecological, anthropological, and documentary evidence to create a political, diplomatic, and military history, which rests firmly and appropriately on an Annaliste-style long durée environmental history without the Annales emphasis on culture. As a result it is a new and very different kind of "native history."

Scholarship about the region has been dominated by tribal histories and an anthropological focus on culture, and Binnema was determined to avoid those paths: "I intended from the beginning to explore North American Indian history in a way that would recognize the reality of intraethnic communities and interethnic connections" (p. xii). The human history of the region is far more complex than just a set of stories about "cultural contact, cultural clash, cultural change, or cultural continuity," because it was "a geographical region and a diplomatic and military reality" (p. 3). This move away from a cultural analysis means the book focuses on "the political, diplomatic, military and environmental" history of the area and the full range of human interactions (p. 10).

Binnema begins the study by taking the land and the space seriously, and then building the layers of his analysis on top. The first chapter, "A Good Country," provides an ecological and environmental overview of the region. Land which would later be called "Palliser's Triangle," and get a bad reputation in Canadian history as well as the current political discourse, was, for centuries, the heart of the best bison foraging territory on the continent. This abundance "attracted indigenous societies from all directions" (p. 35) and so the next chapter focuses on "The Annual Cycle of Bison and Hunters." The large herds meant that the aboriginal groups in the area could organize in bigger hunting bands than many of their neighbors, giving them distinct social, economic, and military advantages over those neighbors (p. 54).

The different human responses to this set of environmental factors and the temporal breadth of Binnema's study are shown in the third chapter, "Trade, Warfare and Diplomacy from A.D. 200 to the Eve of the Equestrian Era" in the early-eighteenth century. It examines the "pedestrian era" of the
northwestern plains long before the acquisition and incorporation of horses. He chose A.D. 200 to begin this section because that is the approximate era when the bow and arrow replaced the spear and atlatl as the weapon of choice in the region, and when the human population began to rise dramatically. Focusing on trade, warfare, and diplomacy highlights this chapter's argument that native “communities interacted not only competitively but also cooperatively” during these centuries (p. 59). In the following chapter, "Migrants from Every Direction: Communities of the Northwestern Plains to 1750," Binnema draws on archeological, anthropological, and written sources to begin the denser layers of the complex human history of the region. The "great diversity of human communities" which existed in the region by 1700 was a result of centuries of migration. Some groups had "battled their way onto the northwestern plains, while others arrived with little resistance," but each group's behavior "during the equestrian era was influenced by its history and its relationships cultivated during the pedestrian era" (p. 85).

Binnema is careful to note the centuries of change and adaptation that the region’s human communities had undergone before the eighteenth century, but the next two chapters leave no doubt that the arrival of horses, guns, and European diseases during that century "revolutionized patterns of human interaction" (p. 87). In chapter 5, "The Horse and Gun Revolution, 1700-1770" he discusses how the two had a major impact on war and diplomacy but less of an impact on culture. Some groups were able to expand their territory and force their enemies to retreat, until their enemies were also armed and mounted and could then push back. This chapter shows the early tentative presence of Euroamericans in the region, but they would have to await subsequent developments to establish a permanent presence. The critical development is explored in chapter 6 "The Right Hand of Death, 1766-68." Diseases like smallpox killed far more people in the northwestern plains than guns ever did, forcing decimated groups to merge with larger groups and turning many away from war towards subsistence. Euroamerican traders were able to take advantage of the changing situation to solidify their presence in the region, and "moved westward to the margins of the northwestern plains" (p. 109). Yet whites would remain bit players in the region for decades, as Binnema's last two chapters demonstrate.

Chapters 7, "'Many Broils and Animosities,' 1782-95," and 8, "The Apogee of the Northern Coalition 1794-1806," trace the rise of the Blackfoot's military dominance and their alliance with the Cree and Assiniboine which allowed all three to dominate the region. Although Euroamericans were now a constant presence, "the posts became what the most powerful local bands wanted them to be" (p. 167). The increasingly strained relationship between the Blackfoot and their former allies the Cree and Assiniboine finally came to an end in 1806 over leadership and trade issues, leading to the great nineteenth-century rivalries between the Blackfoot and their new allies the Gros Ventre and Sarcee, and their new enemies the Cree and Assiniboine.

Binnema notes in his conclusion that while “the arrivals of the bow and arrow, the horse and gun, Old World diseases, and Euroamerican traders were among the important milestones in the history of the northwestern plains between A.D. 200 and 1806," the horse and gun in the eighteenth century represented "probably the most dramatic turning point in this entire period. The chronically uneven distribution of horses thereafter encouraged the development and retrenchment of two interethnic coalitions of bands" (p. 198). More importantly for the scholarship, Binnema stresses that the Euroamerican traders were “influential but not powerful participants in events in the region” and that there is little evidence that they caused a cultural crisis (p. 199). There are a lot of books providing a
range of answers to the question “what happened when the white guys showed up?” and Binnema has
done several fields a huge favor by choosing to ask and answer different questions.

The first two chapters may move too slowly for a non-specialist who is not particularly interested in
the ecology or archeology of the northwestern plains; the long durée approach may not suit readers
who feel the heart of the argument is in the last few chapters; and the move away from a cultural
analysis certainly puts the book out of step with the dominant models. But Binnema's careful layering
of information in the early chapters is one of the outstanding features of the work, and shifting his
analysis decisively away from a culturalist model allows him to write a much better history.
Euroamericans are taken out of the center of the picture and put in their more historically accurate
place at the margins, which frees up the space to examine the military, diplomatic, and political
relationships between aboriginal groups, between different tribes within the same group, and
between different aboriginal groups and Euroamericans. These topics have received little attention
from North American scholars, and it is this willingness to ask different questions and tackle a wider
range of sources and a longer period of time than most recent monographs which makes Common
and Contested Ground an outstanding work.


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