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Review of Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers by Mark Čronlund Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson

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In this intensely provocative book, University of Regina professors Anderson and Robertson contend that newspapers have played a central role in the Canadian colonial project through their representation of Aboriginal peoples over the past 140 years. Despite having become less overtly racist in tone and terminology since the late nineteenth century, Canadian newspapers have nevertheless persisted in framing Aboriginal peoples within three essentialist tropes: depravity, innate inferiority, and a stubborn resistance to progress. These tropes have
Anderson and Robertson trace the continuity of colonial stereotyping through forty-two English-language newspapers published between 1869 and 2009. Their analysis of this material is organized chronologically around twelve events, six of which are particularly relevant to Great Plains history: the sale of Rupert’s Land to the Dominion of Canada in 1869; the North-West Rebellion and the subsequent hanging of Louis Riel in 1885; the completion of a federal report on the social and economic status of Aboriginal peoples in 1948; the release of the federal government’s 1969 White Paper, proposing sweeping changes to Indian policy in Canada; the passage in 1985 of federal Bill C-31, which addressed sexual inequalities enshrined in the Indian Act; and the provincial centennials of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 2005.

Interpreting newspaper coverage of these events in the light of discourse and hegemony theory, Anderson and Robertson deliver a stinging indictment of the English-Canadian media establishment, past and present. They raise deeply troubling—but potentially salutary—questions about the norms dictating journalistic writing in a country that prides itself on tolerance, equality, and multiculturalism. In so doing, however, Anderson and Robertson tend to neglect the possibility of challenging the colonial imagery that pervades Canada’s English-language newspapers. Colonialism, in their view, is woven too tightly into the fabric of English-Canadian culture and society to be resisted in a meaningful and sustainable way. This argument is overly deterministic, discounting as it does the agency of individual journalists and the variability of Canadian reading publics. It privileges structural determinants to the virtual exclusion of individuals and events. Yet it is an important argument to make, and Anderson and Robertson defend it deftly in this well-researched, well-written, and thought-provoking study.

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