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"*The Orders of the Dreamed*": *George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823*. By Jennifer S. H. Brown and Robert Brightman. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988. Maps, illustrations, figures, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 226 pp. \$24.95.

As Amerindian traditional religions gain legitimacy in the eyes of a world dominated by the "big five" (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism), they are coming in for more and more study. Unfortunately, New World belief systems as they existed at the time of first contact have on the whole been very poorly documented, a consequence of the Christian conviction that if they could be called religions at all, they were inspired by the devil. The best records that have come down to us were compiled by the Spaniards, who, in order to destroy the civilizations of Mexico and Central and South America, studied the religions that had given them coherence. In the north, informal native social organization led Europeans to assume there was little in Amerindian belief systems that would be worth the study, so at best they were given cursory attention. Even the small amount of information that found its way into the record has been largely ignored by scholars, who have tended to concentrate on social structure and lifestyle, mainly in the forms of trade, diplomacy, and war.

That this approach was shortchanging what record there was became dramatically evident when fur trade historians Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer S. H. Brown began working on the George Nelson papers, which Van Kirk had found in the Metropolitan Public Library of Toronto. George Nelson (1786-1859) was a minor figure in the fur trade, active in the Northwest from 1802 to 1823; in the annals of Canadian history, he has been overshadowed by his politically active brothers. George's capacities lay in other directions: possessing an open and inquiring mind, he not only learned Ojibway and Cree, becoming fluent in the former (he mar-

ried for life an Ojibway woman who was baptized under the name of Mary Ann), he recorded his observations of life in the Northwest in a journal as well as in letters to his father. In this volume, Brown, in collaboration with anthropologist Robert Brightman, has assembled and annotated these observations as they concern Cree and Northern Ojibway religion and myth.

Nelson, for all his openness toward the northern Amerindian world, never fully succeeded in coming to terms with it. His detailed accounts of "conjuring" and the shaking tent ceremony—rituals that he both observed and participated in—indicate a deep ambivalence. On one hand he was convinced that the shaman did communicate with the supernatural and recognized that the invoked spirits were not necessarily malevolent but could be favorably inclined toward humans; on the other hand, he wondered if this power did not originate with the devil. Very much a man of his time, he saw correspondences between Algonquian beliefs and practices and those of classical antiquity, and he speculated as to whether both foreshadowed Christianity. He defended his own perceptions: "I am by no means inclined to acknowledge myself as superstitious" (p. 81), and pointed out that to deny the possibility of communicating with spirits, even the devil, was to come dangerously close to atheism.

Other aspects of northern Algonquian religious life that drew Nelson's attention included rituals such as the vision fast and acquisition of dream guardians, medical ceremonialism, and an assortment of myths and tales. The windigo complex, to which Nelson gave considerable attention, is perhaps in a category of its own. The leitmotif running through this assemblage of rituals, beliefs, and practices is the underlying unity of the universe, despite the diversity of its particular manifestations. For instance the legend of the origin of beavers explains beavers' "human" characteristics with the fact that they were once humans: the human and animal world are thus reflections of each other (pp. 121-22). The rolling head story and its connection with

the stars and meteors brings in the cosmos, about which Amerindian myths were much concerned.

In listing their cast of characters, explaining their roles, and analyzing themes, Brown and Brightman provide a context that greatly aids in understanding Nelson's text. As they point out, Lac La Ronge in the early nineteenth century might seem remote, but the phenomena Nelson deals with are universal. Scholars will welcome their linking of Nelson's text with publications dealing with these and related areas.

The closing section of the book, in which two Amerindian commentators respond to Nelson's manuscript, shows the continuing vitality of these tales and events of long ago. To the Reverend Stan Cuthand, the text "is like a voice out of the past reminding us of our spiritual history." Once such stories were told orally, but that took time and personal contact, not always feasible today; the way to preserve these tales and traditions for future generations is to put them to paper. Emma LaRocque is not so certain of this, particularly as this recorder was non-Amerindian. She points out that Nelson's grasp of the Cree and Ojibway worlds was not comprehensive, causing him to miss nuances, and warns that the quest for specific ethnographic details should not isolate and distort the Amerindian world view.

Within the limits the editors have set themselves, that of annotating Nelson's text, this work is an important contribution to a wider and deeper understanding of an Amerindian world rich in insights and perceptions, a world far removed from the culturally infantile ABCs to which Europeans once consigned it. It makes no pretense of being a definitive study of Cree and Northern Ojibway religions; that it raises questions is a measure of its success.

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