

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2007

Review of Treaty Promises, Indian Reality: Life on a Reserve

Robert Alexander Innes
University of Saskatchewan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Innes, Robert Alexander, "Review of Treaty Promises, Indian Reality: Life on a Reserve" (2007). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 908.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/908>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Treaty Promises, Indian Reality: Life on a Reserve.

By Harold LeRat with Linda Ungar. Saskatoon, SK: Puri Publishing, 2005. 160 pp. Map, photographs, notes, index. \$ 20.00 paper.

Harold LeRat's book provides details of the history of the early years of the Cowessess First Nation. LeRat, an Elder from the Cowessess Reserve in Saskatchewan, is a farmer/rancher by trade, not a trained historian. Yet he, along with Linda Ungar, has pieced together a narrative based on oral stories, personal reflections, and an impressive collection of archival documents.

LeRat covers many aspects of Cowessess history, including the 1874 treaty negotiations, the occupation of the Cypress Hills and implementation of the starvation policy there, the illegal 1907 land surrender, the multicultural composition of the Cowessess band, Cowessess agricultural history, and his personal experience of attending the residential school and living on a reserve. All of these topics challenge generally perceived notions of First Nations people and their relationships with Métis and with Euro-Canadians. Cowessess is a multicultural band consisting of Plains Crees, Saulteaux, Assiniboines,

Métis, and people of mixed English-Indigenous heritage, among other groups. The band's composition was based on its traditional inclusionary kinship practices, which persisted into the early reserve period. LeRat provides numerous examples of the persistence of this practice.

He notes, for example, that eastern European and French-Canadian immigrants attended the residential school and reserve church for many years. Though the Europeans were generally welcomed, there was at least one attempt to exclude them; but by 1934 there were 5 Polish families, 7 French, 34 Métis, and 107 First Nations families recorded as belonging to the reserve parish. LeRat also recounts that Augustin Pelletier and Annie Two-Voice adopted his mother, a Euro-Canadian. Of his grandparents LeRat states, "My mother needed a home . . . Gus and Annie welcomed that baby, brought her up lovingly. Gus was the only grandfather I knew."

The inclusion of Métis and mixed heritage people on reserves is complicated, since legally they are not the responsibility of the federal government. They are, however, closely related to most Cowessess members. The federal government does not recognize the Métis as being Indian; yet there seem to have been inconsistencies in this policy. LeRat describes how some people who had accepted scrip nonetheless gained recognition and became Cowessess band members. In 1890, LeRat's grandfather's brother, who had married a Métis woman and accepted \$160 in scrip, was allowed back, though his and his family's treaty annuities were withheld until the scrip money was repaid. The Métis wife may have been related to Cowessess people, as she was a Desjarlais, a name of another prominent reserve family, highlighting the importance of kinship ties for Cowessess people. As LeRat states about the Cowessess people's view of inclusion, "whether they were Indian, Métis, or white, it didn't matter."

LeRat states that Chief Cowessess did not accept Christianity or have a Christian name. Interestingly, in *The People Who Own Themselves* (2004), Heather Devine suggests that Marcel Desjarlais, also known as "Gwiwisens," may have been Cowessess. If Cowessess was Marcel Desjarlais, then he may have been related to Pitawewekijik, LeRat's great-grandfather, as Pitawewekijik's second wife was Emilie Desjarlais. Though there is a lack of evidence to conclusively demonstrate that Cowessess was Marcel Desjarlais, it may help to explain the inclusion of Pitawewekijik into the Cowessess band.

This is not a scholarly work. LeRat neither places this story within the context of the existing academic literature nor does he attempt to provide any interpretations

of the historical documents, preferring to let them speak for themselves. Nonetheless, his story does offer a new perspective and voice on the events, people, and circumstances of the early reserve period and therefore makes a contribution to the history of the Cowessess First Nation specifically and of Saskatchewan First Nations in general. **Robert Alexander Innes**, *Department of Native Studies, University of Saskatchewan*.