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## Review of Big Bear: The End of Freedom By Hugh A. Dempsey

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*Big Bear: The End of Freedom.* By Hugh A. Dempsey. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984. Notes, bibliography, index. 228 pp. \$22.95.

Like his previous publications on *Crowfoot* (1972), *Charcoal's World* (1978), and *Red Crow* (1980), Hugh A. Dempsey's *Big Bear: The End of Freedom* (1984) makes extensive and effective use of Indian legends and oral data. Who knows if the visions and mystical experiences of Big Bear, as told to Dempsey by native informants, are true or accurate; and who cares? The stories are entertaining, illuminating, probably possess the substance of truth, and would certainly be as authentic as much of the written records of those days. The Indian oral reminiscences are more than complemented by a careful research of the standard

primary and secondary sources for the period.

The focus of the book is a finely crafted character analysis of Big Bear, the spiritual and political leader of a band of Canadian Plains Cree during the 1870s and 1880s. Irretrievably wedded to the traditional nomadic way of life of the Plains Indians, yet confronted by the disappearance of the buffalo, starvation, the intrusion of the railroad and the inexorable advance of settlement, Big Bear tried to ensure the future survival and prosperity of his people through a united Indian confederation and a peaceful accommodation with the new Dominion government. A sage, impressive, stubborn, and patient leader of great stature, Big Bear fully understood the significance of the events overtaking him and his people.

In an attempt to gain full compensation for the loss of traditional lands, he delayed signing Treaty Six and refused to select a reserve. This obstinacy provoked government officials to declare him "the leader of the most worthless and troublesome Indians we have" (p. 107). With the prominence of Louis Riel and the Métis, and the outbreak of the North West Rebellion in 1885, the militants in his band deposed Big Bear and lashed out in one final desperate defense of the old order.

The book is sound, but not entirely flawless. Although Dempsey has found official Canadian spelling in denoting Blackfoot and Peigan, rather than the previously used American form of Blackfeet and Piegan, he does not use *Saulteaux* which might better describe those plains people whom he refers to as Ojibwa. As well, Big Bear was surely taller than 4'5" as Dempsey states (p. 81). In group photographs, Big Bear does not appear dwarfish, and the penitentiary records list him as 5'5 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". The conclusion (pp. 201-2) is a reasonably balanced analysis of Indian-government relations in the Canadian West, and Dempsey alludes to the fact that the astute Big Bear anticipated the need for the current "treaty renovation" process now underway by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. Yet Dempsey largely dismisses the difficult challenges for the federal govern-

ment in Ottawa, which was faced with a vast amount of recently acquired distant territory to administer and police and with genuine financial and economic problems. Reduced expenditures and responsibilities for the several tribes of roving Plains Indians were but a part of the overall problem.

Finally, Dempsey's assertion to the contrary, there have been numerous newspaper accounts, published journals, articles, and books on Big Bear and his times. For more than one hundred years this extraordinary and patient native leader has been prodded, probed, and analysed by anthropologists, ethno-historians, and their fellow voyeurs.

Throughout his life, all Big Bear ever wanted was to be left alone. Let's give him a rest. With the publication of Dempsey's timely and appropriate "definitive" study in this centennial year of the North West Rebellion, perhaps we can now all allow Big Bear finally to enjoy not the end but the beginning of freedom.

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