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Review of *Arc of the Medicine Line: Mapping the World's Longest Undefended Border across the Western Plains* By Tony Rees

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Arc of the Medicine Line: Mapping the World's Longest Undefended Border across the Western Plains. By Tony Rees. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007. xiv + 393 pp. Map, photographs, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

By 1872 Britain, the United States, and the Dominion of Canada had many reasons to map officially the international boundary along the 49th parallel, a line that Native Americans would come to associate with “medicine” for its power to halt the pursuit of law. Britain and the U.S. both desired to resolve lingering issues as Canada embraced independence. (The northern survey party was officially the *British North American Boundary Commission*.) While the U.S. Northern Boundary Commission advanced the Northern Pacific Railroad, Canada gathered information to plan and build a transcontinental railroad. With the line they drew astronomically, these surveyors, according to Tony Rees, would help “draw the long course of empire in North America to a close.”

Rees narrates the work of the dual independent boundary commissions season by season through the exploits of their surveyors. Using massive zenith telescopes, star catalogs, compasses, and chronometers, the two commissions leapfrogged one another to establish astronomical stations for boundary calculations every twenty miles. The Plains, Rees concludes, “. . . was (and still can be) a place where no report could be dismissed as just a tall tale.” Dressed in sealskin, Hudson’s Bay coats and blankets, buffalo robes, Native-made snowshoes and moccasins, using oxen and dogs, the men lived through -20° to -40° below zero Fahrenheit temperatures and bouts of snowblindness. One group survived by “beating each other with sticks” to free their legs, which had been “instantly encased in a thick coating of ice” after they fell into a creek. The region also served up sweeping prairie fires, swarms of mosquitoes, locusts, black flies, killing horseflies, and wild wind, rain, and dust, as well as “large numbers of sandhill cranes.” Rees’s analysis is lively, but the inclusion of only one

map in the entire book is a disservice to his literary mapping and the nature of the place.

The Americans fretted about securing Congressional appropriations, while the British and Canadians worried about maintaining independence from the Americans, especially with regard to Natives. Rees notes the “fundamental belief among the British that the Sioux and, farther along the line, the Assiniboiné and the Blackfeet, had no quarrel with Her Majesty’s agents” and that “if there were to be ‘Indian trouble,’ it would be on the American side of the line.” The Canadians even hired thirty Métis, “the 49th Rangers,” to thwart association with U.S. Army escorts. The U.S.’s great show of military strength, the Americans fervently believed, however, kept them *and also* the British and Canadians and their supplies safe. Natives were in better positions to know exactly how close were the U.S. forces to *all* boundary camps. Rees concludes, “it is hard not to agree with the American position.”

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