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Review of *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study* By David G. Mandelbaum

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The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study. By David G. Mandelbaum. Canadian Plains Studies no. 9. Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1979. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xvii + 400 pp. \$14.50 paper.

The Canadian Plains Research Center has provided a new and amended version of the *Plains Cree*, a classic of plains anthropology first published more than forty years ago. The earlier volume, available under the imprint of the American Museum of Natural History (*Anthropological Papers* 37, Part II, 1940), is a portion of a much more extensive work completed by Mandelbaum as a Ph.D. dissertation at Yale University during 1936. The complete document is published here for the first time.

The earlier version is essentially a description of the "buffalo-hunting way of life . . . of the Plains Cree" (xiii). It was significant because it tapped a remnant of a cultural type even then only a memory, and presented it with clarity, understanding, and objectivity. More important, however, because the Cree were not indigenous to the plains, Mandelbaum explored their metamorphosis from woodland hunters to equestrian plainsmen-entrepreneurs and warriors. The newly published sections (2 and 3) elaborate the theme of change and add ethnohistoric and comparative data in abundance. The ethnohistoric context and ecological emphases are remarkably current and focus upon "why and how Cree culture changed when some of the Cree changed their habitat,

economy, and general environment" (xiii). This is particularly crucial in the plains because so many of the historic Native Americans customarily identified as "Plains peoples" came from elsewhere, and quite recently. Indeed, much of the regional history and prehistory can be cast as a process whereby peoples choose or are forced to alter a preexisting cultural set or direction. It has been suggested that much of the plains had no indigenous population and was thus strictly a recipient of peoples and ideas. While such a notion cannot be entertained seriously, many of the typical tribes, such as the Cheyenne, Comanche, Cree, and Dakota, are recent immigrants from the woodlands and mountains fringing the borders of the plains.

For the Cree, the process of cultural, economic, and political change is clear. First came the establishment of European trading posts in the historic Cree homeland west of James Bay. Responding to the attractiveness of the novel European wares, the Cree intensified their fur trapping because peltry was the sole currency that would satisfy their new-found desires. These in turn created new dependence on the traders and thus new pressures on fur-bearing creatures, and ultimately led to the exhaustion of the resource. As European goods such as firearms became necessities and the supply of furs needed to procure them diminished, some Cree moved toward fresh resources, in this case westward and southwestward toward and gradually into the prairies. Mandelbaum describes the process: "From 1740 to 1820 the Cree were expanding to their widest limits. Although some bands were out on The Plains, they had not completely severed themselves from the forest. Toward the end of the period, the Cree on the prairies had largely ceased to waver between the two environments and were abandoning excursions into the woodlands" (p. 46). Thus the Plains Cree became a distinctive, identifiable unit, separate but retaining strong ties with their Woodland kinsmen who remained at home. They became plainsmen, dependent to a degree upon European-based trade but relying also upon the abundant bison of the grasslands.

The new plainsmen flourished; during the eighteenth century they expanded over the grasslands of the northern plains, and some forays carried them even beyond Lake Athabaska. They became a military power of consequence as they sought to control an expanding fur trade. Ultimately, the Plains Cree dominated an area asserted to be greater than the territory of any other North American group. They remained an important and powerful people until the nineteenth century, when smallpox, diminishing bison herds, and a declining fur trade reduced them to a relatively impotent status.

The methodology and theoretical bent of *The Plains Cree* is an old one. History was sought through identification and intercultural comparison of data units called traits. Although cultural similarity or parallelism is no sure proof of historical relationship, the conclusions offered by Mandelbaum have not been indicted. Operationally they can be considered as historical statements.

The Cree were among the latest intruders into the plains, but they quickly acquired an overlay of Plains traits and did so easily because there already existed a long-standing concordance between the cultures of the Woodland and the northern plains. The large and generally dependable subsistence base provided by the bison herds helped to intensify preexisting institutions. Thus the large summer gatherings that were typical on the plains became the usual pattern, not as an innovation but rather as an enlargement of the annual rendezvous already long established in the forests. Similarly, with larger gatherings of longer duration made possible by more abundant food supplies, ceremonial life flourished among the Cree; in particular, they adopted the Sun Dance of the plains people.

It has been argued that the adaptive pattern shown for the Cree is general for the plains. Although historical circumstances are ideosyncratic, surely the argument has substance.

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