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*Review of Broken Treaties: United States and
Canadian Relations with the Lakotas and the Plains
Cree, 1868-1885* by Jill St. Germain

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Broken Treaties: United States and Canadian Relations with the Lakotas and the Plains Cree, 1868–1885. By Jill St. Germain. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xxvi + 450 pp. Maps, illustration, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00.

What appears to be another book exploring the broken treaty relationships of the United States and Canadian federal governments turns out to be nothing of the sort. In challenging the long-honored “broken treaties tradition,” Jill St. Germain has written a groundbreaking and welcome revision of the history of treaty- and reservation-making on both sides of the United States-Canadian border.

Using a fresh, comparative approach to the analysis of federal records and the manuscript collections of federal Indian agents and officials, St. Germain focuses on the implementation of the Treaty of 1868 between the United States and the Lakota Sioux, and Treaty Six between Canada and the Plains Cree. Signed only eight years apart and emerging from the Plains West, both treaties stand as “exemplars of the broken treaties tradition.” In the United States the broken treaties philosophy “proved a useful tool in the advancement of an Indian reform agenda” that emphasized policies made in Washington over bilateral treaty relations. This approach—in practice, in Congress, and in the subsequent historical record—accentuated the role of policymakers and Indian agents and de-emphasized tribal agency and treaty rights. “The underlying premise of the broken treaties tradition,” St. Germain asserts,

was “that such agreements were in effect meaningless given the unrepentant U.S. habit of breaking them.” In Canada, an “inverted broken treaties” tradition evolved in which noncompliant tribal groups were viewed as aberrations and malcontents within a treaty system consistently upheld by the government.

In the end, St. Germain asserts that the broken treaties tradition obscured and obstructed a functional negotiating relationship between the Lakotas and the U.S. between 1868 and 1875. She concedes that the events of 1874 and 1875 represented U.S. treaty violations, but contends that “the acquisition of the Black Hills did not have to involve a violation of the Treaty of 1868 and could have been achieved within the flexible parameters” established by the treaty. Conversely, the inflexibility of the Canadian treaty system limited the ability of officials to negotiate the divide between the Crees and the government, leading Indian agents such as Edgar Dewdney to conclude that tribal claims of treaty violations were the work of isolated troublemakers and outside inciters, namely the Métis.

The argument that the broken treaty refrain served as a tool in advancing federal policies is less convincing when applied to treaty and agreement relationships on the Plateau and in the Pacific Northwest, where federal agents negotiated and implemented bilateral agreements with tribal peoples during the 1880s and 1890s. Rather than detracting from this book’s transformative power, this potential contradiction presents an opportunity for expansion of the book’s analysis to the Pacific Northwest and the Canadian Rockies. *Broken Treaties* is a must read for any scholar interested in the history of the Great Plains, federal policy, the western United States, western Canada, or Indigenous studies.

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