

Book Review

'As Their Resources Fail' Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba 1870–1930

by Frank Tough
(BC: UBC Press, 1996)

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David Newhouse

'As Their Natural Resources Fail' is an important and critical text for anyone interested in the economic history of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. It examines a subject area that is largely overlooked in most histories of Aboriginal peoples. Professor Tough's book focuses upon the formative years of northern Manitoba society, the years from 1870 to 1930. It is economic history, political economy, social history, legal history and political history woven together into an outstanding study.

Tough examines the transition from traditional subsistence economies of northern Aboriginal peoples to the merchantilism of the fur trade and then to the expansion of new northern resource industries of commercial fishing, transportation and lumbering and the market economy. He argues that Aboriginal peoples played important roles in this transition, that they were not the passive observers of events around them but rather that they responded in rational and creative ways to the new economic environment. Their effective participation, he argues as well,

was repeatedly blocked by government policy and action.

Tough starts with an examination of the fur trade and the development of local economies based upon a mixture of traditional activities and merchantilism, emphasising the relationship between the Hudson Bay Company and local Aboriginal peoples. He then proceeds to a discussion of treaties, the treaty-making process and its effects upon the economies in the area. He argues that treaties were a form of transfer of land from 'tribal commons' to state control to private control and that they were used to contain a 'progressive economic agenda advanced by Indians' After the period of treaty making and subsequent to the decline of the fur trade, he then documents the changing economy of the north and Aboriginal participation in agriculture, commercial fishing and transportation.

Tough has chosen to focus upon a particular area: Northern Manitoba from the northern edges of the Red River Settlement, the Interlake Region including the Pas and Cumberland House on the west and Norway House, Oxford House

David Newhouse, Associate Professor, Department of Native Studies, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario

and York Factory on the East. This narrow geographic focus (albeit a broad economic focus across three different economic systems and 3 generations of people) allows for the development of a more detailed and nuanced picture than is generally shown. For the non-academic reader, the level of detail may seem unnecessary. It is through the details that the picture that Tough wants you to see emerges.

Aboriginal peoples knew what they were doing and knew what they wanted. They clearly understood the economic changes that were occurring around them, they participated in the fur trade and the new resource industries and agriculture and worked as labourers for wages. In some cases, they achieved standards of living that were at least equal to those of their white neighbours. They understood prices and markets and title to land. They understood the principles

of business and knew how to get the best deal for themselves. Yet, we still encounter a familiar story: movement to the economic margins to make way for others.

Tough's work is important to those working in economic development and attempting to stimulate local Aboriginal economies. It points out that there is a history of Aboriginal participation in the market economy, that some of this participation has been successful and that Aboriginal peoples consistently acted to advance their own economic interests whenever possible. This is an important perspective to bring to economic development work. It counters the myth that Aboriginal peoples did not understand economics and were not involved in economic activity. It shows the long history of economic development activism and effort.