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Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xx + 414. Maps, tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8032-8790-7.

Review by Michael A. McDonnell, University of Sydney.

In 1815, North West Company clerk Daniel Harmon described the voyageurs whose labours sustained his career as “fickle & changeable as the wind, and of a gay and lively disposition....they make Gods of their bellies, yet when necessity obliges them...they will endure all the fatigue and misery of hard labour & cold weather &c....They are People of not much veracity....[but] by flattering their vanities (of which they have not a little) they may be made to go through fire and water” (quoted on p. 3). Over one hundred and seventy years later, popular Canadian writer Peter C. Newman summed up the voyageurs as a “remarkable ragbag of magnificent river rats” and “cockleshell heroes on seas of sweet water” (quoted on p. 2). Historians have done little better in advancing our knowledge or understanding of fur trade workers. Despite a huge body of literature on the fur trade, the voyageurs that made this exchange possible usually warrant a mere paragraph or two, or are often ignored altogether. In one of the few studies devoted to the voyageur, Grace Lee Nute’s conclusions in 1931 both reinforced the stereotypes and eulogised the (continued) state of our knowledge of the topic: “His canoe has long since vanished from the northern waters; his red cap is seen no more...his sprightly French conversation, punctuated with inimitable gesture, his exaggerated courtesy, his incurable romanticism, his songs, and his superstitions are gone” (quoted on p. 2).

Fur trade workers--more popularly known as voyageurs--were integral to the early modern fur trade and thus to the European exploration and colonisation of North America. They provided the bulk of the labour involved in carrying and paddling out thousands of pounds of fur each year--offering incentives for new European rivalries, negotiating complex relationships with indigenous trading partners, and creating a skeletal framework upon which Europeans and Native Americans built, for better or for worse, a New World. Yet as the quotes above remind us, they have been rewarded with little more than historic condescension, and contemporary idealisation and romanticisation. As Carolyn Podruchny notes, voyageurs occupy a central place in the mythology of nation-making in Canada. In the northern United States too, they are depicted alongside rugged mountain men and rough-hewn farmers as hardy men who conquered the wilderness and settled the frontier. In both countries, as Podruchny points out, images of voyageurs are used to sell everything from beer to buses, as well as to promote anything from wilderness tourism to National Parks.

In this meticulously researched book, Podruchny aims--and succeeds--in reaching beyond the stereotypes of the hardy voyageur that dominate popular and academic visions and in breathing life into the study of this oft-neglected but vital group of early modern labourers. Estimating that perhaps as many as 3000 labourers worked in the fur trade at any given moment, Podruchny is keen to illuminate the lives of these mostly French Canadian workers who paddled canoes, transported goods, and staffed the interior posts of the northern North American fur trade. In chapters depicting the working lives of these voyageurs, Podruchny gathers together an astonishing array of fragmentary evidence to reveal the everyday lives of her subjects--from what they ate, to what they worshipped, to how they structured their working relations and the intimate relationships that often meant the difference between life and death in the *pays d'en haut*.

Examining the world of the voyageurs using the metaphor of “the voyage,” Podruchny’s thematically arranged chapters range widely. The opening chapter, for example, explores the organization of the trade, recruitment practices in the St. Lawrence valley, and the contracts and wages negotiated or imposed by merchants attempting to establish a clear hierarchy to structure workplace relations throughout the interior. Servitude, subordination, and negotiation are themes continued in subsequent chapters on the labour of the journey and the ways in which canoemen negotiated not just the hardships of long-distance travel, but also an elaborate hierarchy amongst themselves. However, they also had to negotiate a contractual relationship with merchants and clerks that amounted to a master-servant relationship typical of indentured servitude in New France and other colonial places. Attending to the “performative aspects of cultural hegemony,” Podruchny illuminates a “theatre of misrule” (p. 17) through ritual and work practices that allowed voyageurs a considerable degree of flexibility and fluidity vis-a-vis their conditions of employment.

This attention to performance and ritual also helps Podruchny recognise that work and labour were only one of many sites at which voyageurs forged a sense of identity so intimately tied to their occupation. Shaped by their French-Canadian lower-class origins, the indigenous peoples they met (and with whom they traded and had intimate relations), and the places through which they travelled and tarried, the lives of voyageurs were dictated by more than the nature of their employment. Thus diverse chapters explore the cosmology of labouring Catholic workers through the rituals practised on the journey westward, the kinds of celebrations and cultural transformations evident at the annual rendezvous, and the dynamic observance of the annual calendar of festivals that mimicked but did not always match the calendar of Catholic feasts observed by habitants in the St Lawrence valley. In addition, Podruchny is careful to explore the worlds of labourers who elected or were forced to spend extended periods of time at interior fur trade posts, and among indigenous communities. Drawing on the work of a host of several scholars of the ‘tender ties’ of fur trade relations, Podruchny finds that many voyageurs formed ties with indigenous women, but a pattern of ‘fluid monogamy’ resulted from the often transient lives of both parties.

Finally, Podruchny begins to explore the question of what voyageurs did after they left the service, making it clear that further work needs to be done on exploring the influence of returning voyageurs on the society and culture of Lower Canada. Indeed, the study also shows a pressing need to follow the voyageurs further into the Native American communities they joined and into the interior communities that they helped form. The book also raises questions about the importance of the voyageurs more generally. While Podruchny’s focus is on reconstructing the material and spiritual world of the voyageur, the revealing insights suggest that much more could be said about the ways in which voyageurs shaped European expansion itself. They clearly had an important influence on many phenomena, including the nature of contacts with indigenous people, frontier architecture, the notion of servitude in New France, and the fur trade itself—to name but a few. The wide range of topics that Podruchny has opened up for further study is testimony to the variety and depth of the subjects she covers here.

*Making the Voyageur World*, then, is a richly insightful and suggestive work. This is a considerable achievement, given that the topic posed not inconsiderable problems. Like Native Americans, voyageurs rarely appear with their own voice in the archives. Unlike Native Americans, there has been little scholarly or even popular interest in gaining a better understanding of the lives of these workers in the historic past. Thus Podruchny has had to undertake painstaking primary research in combing a massive array of writings by fur trade merchants, clerks, and travelers from the Hudson’s Bay and North West Company records to tease out and analyse references to the workers about whom they wrote. She was also forced by the fluidity that characterised voyageurs’ lives and the fragmentary records to make an ambitious reach: to capture a glimpse of a notoriously mobile workforce, covering a vast area in the Northwest, over a long stretch of time. That glimpse, as rich as it is, is perhaps unavoidably static.

Indeed, at times Podruchny's work reads more like a rich anthropological exploration rather than an historical study. Though mindful of and sensitive to subtle changes over time, the records hardly allow her to do much more.

The fragmentary sources also push Podruchny to theorise, and sometimes speculate, in place of evidence. This leads to some awkward theoretical and historiographical intrusions into the text. Drawing from an eclectic range of thinkers and historians from Michel Foucault to Antonio Gramsci, and Pierre Bourdieu to E. P. Thompson, Podruchny tries to make sense of the limited evidence available. But that evidence would be more compelling, I suspect, without an explicit explanation that voyageurs gained "symbolic currency" by playing and winning at cards (p. 185). Likewise, in such a sensitive recreation of a past world, more modern assertions are jarring. One example might suffice: "Aboriginal agency and bargaining for better working conditions may have served as an example to voyageurs and introduced new ideas about their own potential freedom and power....This knowledge would have increased voyageurs' bargaining power, given them confidence about the security of their jobs, and increased their sense of self-worth as employees" (p. 220). And finally, in the admitted absence of any evidence about voyageur homosexuality, three pages of discussion of the subject added little to the analysis (pp. 196-99).

These are admittedly minor quibbles with such a rich book. But they are the kind of concerns that might prevent this book from appealing to a wider audience. And that would be a shame, because *Making the Voyageur World* deserves a wide audience. Clearly aimed at academics, it should also end up in the bookshops of National Parks and featured at the festivals that commemorate the histories of the voyageurs. The book is packed with insights and provides a rich portrait of the voyageur experience. It is also comprehensive, and will be a starting point for anyone wishing to take up Podruchny's challenge to pursue some of the many implications of the book. Indeed, *Making the Voyageur World* should become a standard text for anyone wishing to understand the dynamics of the labour--and people--that literally powered the fur trade, and thus the European colonisation of North America.

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