

**Stephen R. Bown, *The Company: The Rise and Fall of The Hudson's Bay's Empire***, Toronto, ON: [Doubleday Canada](#), 2020, ix + 486pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth; ISBN 9780385694070, \$37.00, Paper; ISBN 9780385694094, \$24.95.

*The Company* may be a history of the Hudson's Bay Company, however, author Stephen R. Bown is not a historian, but he is a fine writer. Bown's book is digestible and easy to read, and for the most part is presented in a well-written and captivating manner. The book is chronologically divided into predictable sections – Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médard Chouart des Groseilliers's fateful meeting with King Charles II that resulted in a Royal Charter, the battle for Hudson Bay between England and France in the period prior to the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, the day-to-day operations at the Bay, Samuel Hearne's epic journey across the Barren Grounds to the Coppermine River, the fur trade rivalry (and eventually war) between the HBC and the British peddlars out of Montreal who later formed the North West Company, and George Simpson's strict reorganization of the post-merger Company. Indeed, all standard fare for anyone familiar with Hudson's Bay Company or fur trade history.

The book's promotional copy espouses that the "story of the Hudson's Bay Company" "hasn't been told in a book for over thirty years," which invites comparison (perhaps unwisely) to Peter C. Newman's polarizing three volume series relating the history of the HBC published between 1985 and 1991. Moreover, this statement is untrue. Many excellent, insightful, nuanced, and very readable works on the history of the HBC have come out in the past few years. Ann M. Carlos and Frank D. Lewis's *Commerce by a Frozen Sea: Native Americans and the European Fur Trade* (2011), Ted Binnema's *"Enlightened Zeal": The Hudson's Bay Company and Scientific Networks, 1670-1870* (2014), and Scott Stephen's *Masters and Servants: The Hudson's Bay Company and Its North American Workforce, 1668-1786* (2019) come to mind immediately. While finely presented and well-written, I do not see how *The Company* is a "brilliant retelling", of the history of the HBC. Scholars of the fur trade, Indigenous peoples, and early Canadian history will sadly find nothing new or innovative here. There are no unique arguments or original research, nor is it even particularly up to date on the scholarly literature, which does not make it even an effective synthesis either. The lack of scholarly insight is further driven home when one peruses the endnotes (as sparse as they are), bibliography, and especially the "further reading" section where the author recommends mostly other popular histories.

Judging from the citations, it appears that the author never set foot in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, perhaps due to the closures from the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it might not have been a bad idea for the historian writing the definitive retelling of the Hudson's Bay Company to at least peruse a few original post journals rather than mining quotations from the published work of other authors. Today, would be historians can access the company's archives in the comfort of their own homes after the HBCA completed (in November 2019), a large-scale microfilm digitization project. They digitized 1,052 reels of microfilm, encompassing over 10,000 volumes of the pre-1870 records kept at almost five hundred HBC posts. This book represents no archival research. While the dustjacket boasts of the author's "deeply researched scholarship," the book's lack of engagement with both archival

records and scholarly literature belies his credibility as a historian rather than a storyteller.

While Bown's prose is clear and effective, certain individuals are occasionally reduced to two-dimensional stock characters (replete with superfluous descriptive adjectives) rather than fully fleshed out human beings. For example, overseas governors Charles Bayley is a "formerly rambunctious religious quack" (58), and James Knight is "an unpredictable rogue and a peripatetic dreamer" (94). This two-dimensional characterization occasionally extends to stereotyping whole ethnic and social groups, the French-Canadians in particular are consistently portrayed as stubborn, vain, boastful, insatiable, and roguish. Radisson and Des Groseilliers are "rascally bushrunners"(430), and "charming rogues from New France," (13); Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville is a military genius but also "irrepressible" and "ruthless" (75-76); Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye is an "indomitable wanderer" and also a "charming rogue" (198).

To the author's credit, however, Indigenous figures like Thanadelthur, Attickasish, Matonabee, and Chief Peguis are given equal weight and consideration alongside more well-known European figures of the Company's history. Yet, these Indigenous "heroes" are chosen for the most part because their exploits are considered to have been of great assistance to the white European heroes, like James Knight, Anthony Henday, Samuel Hearne, and Lord Selkirk. Their descriptions generally conform to the image of the "noble savage." These Indigenous "heroes" are not only friendly, courteous, and hospitable to the invaders of their lands, but also possess a handsomeness of physique with great stamina, endurance, and physical prowess. Thanadelthur is "attractive, vivacious, and an uncommonly gifted orator" (96); Matonabee is "Tall, muscular, handsome and charismatic" (168); the residents of a Nuxalk village, who assisted Scottish explorer Alexander Mackenzie on his voyage to the Pacific, are described as "muscular and vigorous" (234). In the book, the Kanien'kehá ka (Mohawk) voyageurs from Kahnawake and Kanasatake are reduced to two-dimensional "Mohawk mercenaries" (82), who were "good enforcers" (287), and "were more aggressive" (288), than their French-Canadian counterparts. Jean Barman's *Iroquois in the West* (2019), (which is not cited in the book's bibliography) provides a much more fleshed-out, sympathetic, and nuanced portrait of Kanien'kehá ka voyageurs from the Saint Lawrence valley who participated in the nineteenth century Northwest fur trade.

It is also unclear why the author refuses to employ Indigenous autonyms (the names by which peoples and communities refer to themselves) using "Iroquois" instead of "Haudenosaunee," "Huron" instead of "Wendat," "Montagnais" instead of "Innu," and "Blackfoot" instead of "Niitsítapi." By using autonyms, historians are able to represent Indigenous peoples in the way they choose to represent themselves, and therefore honour the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-representation and self-determination. There were also some errors that stood out throughout the text. For example, why is the French fort on the lower Saskatchewan River "Paskova" (180). This appears to be a new spelling, the French referred to their fort as Paskoya, Paskoyac, or Pasquia, and the British referred to it as Basquia, spellings which are both derived from the Cree word "Opāskweyāw," which means "narrows between woods." Perhaps a more rigorous peer-review might have flagged some of these mistakes.

Business historians will find little in *The Company* that is worthwhile. It provides a rudimentary assessment of the HBC's day-to-day trade operations and commerce with Indigenous peoples, such as how the Made Beaver (MB) functioned as a standard unit of economic evaluation, but for a more a more detailed assessment, business historians in particular would be better off consulting the excellent works of Ann M. Carlos and Frank D. Lewis. Even Arthur J. Ray and Donald Freeman's earlier work from the 1970s and 1980s would be valuable. In his conclusion, Bown admits that his interests are not the "technical minutiae" of how the Company operated, but rather how "relationships over the generations" had such "a profound influence on the course of history" (430). Indeed, this is neither a commercial, environmental, or labour history but rather a history of the people (read: heroes), who the author believes, shaped "the course of history" and played a role in "the story of modern Canada's creation." Regretfully, this story has been told again and again. This paint by numbers history of the Hudson's Bay Company will be of little interest or value to scholars of the fur trade.

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