

Scott P. Stephen, *Master and Servants: The Hudson's Bay Company and its North American Workforce, 1668-1786*. Edmonton: [University of Alberta Press](#), 2019, xxxix + 407pp., illustrations, maps, plans, notes, bibliography, index. Paper: ISBN 978-1-77212-337-1, \$44.99, EPUB: ISBN 1-77212-497-2, \$44.99, Kindle; ISBN 978-1-77212-498-9, \$44.99, PDF: ISBN 978-1-77212-499-6, \$44.99.

Older than the Bank of England by twenty-four years, the Hudson's Bay Company is in its 350<sup>th</sup> year of continuous operation. One might be tempted to think that at this point we must surely know all that there is to know about the Company and its operations. Yet that is not so. In this study, Stephen examines the management of the Company's workforce during its first century of operation. That the company survived was in part due to luck – to the outcome of European wars which were beyond its control. If France had been the victor in the War of the Spanish Succession, then the Treaty of Utrecht would no doubt have ceded Hudson Bay to the French and the Hudson's Bay Company posts handed over to France. Fifty years later, if France had emerged victorious in the Seven Years War, not only would the Hudson's Bay Company future have been changed but also too that of Canada. While influencing the fortunes of war lay outside the Company's ability, the internal management of the company lay firmly within its grip.

As Stephen rightly notes, the HBC was a small, undercapitalized company entering a market about which it knew virtually nothing. It was not only a newcomer to the fur trade but it sought to organize a trade in a harsh physical environment with little knowledge of the demands of its potential customers and suppliers. The location of the Company posts reduced contact between the head office and the factories to one ship a year which brought answers for questions raised during the previous year of trade. Much of the literature to date has focused on the operation of the trade, the nature of the interactions between Indigenous consumers and traders, control of agency at the Bayside posts, and the market for furs in London. Stephen asks us to change our focus from the trade per se to examine the nature of company relationships with its workforce. In doing so, he addresses both an important topic and one that has virtually been ignored to this point.

Each HBC post or factory had a complement of men ranging from a governor, chief trader, or factor, accountant, surgeon, apprentice, armourer, warehouse keeper, carpenter, smith, tailor and labourers, each of which played a particular role. In this study, Stephen conceptualizes the labour relations within the factory along the lines of an English household, where one had a patriarch/master, steward, wife, apprentices, children, and servants, thus thinking of the post as a 'household' factory. In the household, there is one person in charge and each has a particular role defined by law, custom and social convention, and Stephen spends some time discussing how this structure captures the organization of the Bayside posts. Indeed, the words *Masters and Servants* in the title allude to this household relationship, to the nature of the interaction between master and servant, and to how a master and how a servant was supposed to behave. Of course, there were two levels of the master/servant relationship which have to be considered. There was the relationship between various parties living and working in a Bayside post and then the relationship between those working at the posts, be they master or servant, and the elected directors at the head office in London.

The book tackles these questions by examining the social nature of the relationship, interrogating issues of patronage, brokerage, friendship, the diligent worker and the idle fellow. Each of these terms had a meaning in the context of late seventeenth and eighteenth century England and, as Stephen argues, it would be a context that was understood by all parties even if not necessarily always accepted by all parties. Stephen analyses these roles through an examination of what he terms the 'public discourse' or the bilateral correspondence between the servants at the Bay and their masters in the London head office, as well as the instructions from the company's directors to those who recruited the servants for the trade. Rather than a chronological examination, each chapter has a particular focus with the analysis coming from texts through the one hundred and twenty years from 1688 to 1786. The strength here is that one is presented with the actual language of the interactions; at the same time the reader does not get a sense of how the meaning of diligence or faithfulness might have changed over the hundred years of letter writing or what diligence meant exactly for a labourer relative to a carpenter or accountant.

For all the focus on the labour relations within these posts, there is little attention paid to the nature of the labour structure in the posts by which I mean the number of men at a post, how this changed over time, or what the work in a particular position entailed. How, in fact, did these Bayside posts operate over the course of a year between the departure of a vessel and the arrival of the vessel the subsequent year? In *Masters and Servants*, Stephen focuses on the workforce in the Bayside posts which is much needed and will form the basis for further work on the topic.

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