

The discussion of Baffinland Inuit subsistence activities and settlement patterns is based mainly on the work of Boas and others and is set in the ethnographic present. Sabo argues that two main adaptive social structures can be identified. Both the rescheduling of resource procurement systems and the continuity of a flexible arrangement in settlement patterns and demographic organization ensure the availability and production of food and act as regulatory social mechanisms that respond to environmental change. Furthermore, two features of Baffinland social organization are identified as means by which adaptation and cultural realignment are encompassed within the wider and larger human ecosystem. These are an elaborate and far-ranging bilateral kinship network and the organizational flexibility of socio-economic groups within individual settlement bands. A characteristic feature of Inuit culture is an intricate and extremely flexible kinship network that allows for the creation of ancillary kin ties beyond consanguineal and affinal arrangements. This allows, in part, for residential flexibility. As an adaptive social mechanism, residential flexibility can also act to constrict extensive networks, so in times of shortage, for example, individual households can merge to form discrete socio-economic units to ensure access to resources.

It is difficult for archaeological research to reconstruct specific features of kinship networks, such as name-sharing, adoption, and fictive relationships. However, it is possible to examine residential flexibility and household structure, and Sabo's archaeological data is also backed up by ethnohistorical data on band organization and settlement location. While there is paleoenvironmental evidence to suggest climatic changes did affect Baffinland Inuit subsistence activities during this 800-year period, Sabo argues that climatic change is only one of several factors contributing to adaptive responses. The varied climate, topography, and ecology of southern Baffin Island does not result in an environmental determinism. Rather it enables successive human populations to develop a long-term process of environmental diversification.

Successful environmental diversification necessitates firstly an ability to acknowledge and incorporate diversity into an existing cultural framework, and secondly to retain a social organizational flexibility that is adaptive and strong enough to withstand this diversity. In reconstructing southern Baffinland Inuit subsistence and settlement systems, Sabo argues that through the utilization of a wide variety of resources and habitats, the prehistoric Thule and historic Inuit have retained a resilient human ecosystem during a long period of continuity and change. (Mark Nuttall, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL.)

NORTH TO ALASKA! FIFTY YEARS ON THE WORLD'S MOST REMARKABLE HIGHWAY. Ken Coates. 1992. Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press. 304 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-912006-55-2.

Some historians are attracted to the unfamiliar in time and place. Others, like the author of this popular history of the

Alaska (Alcan) Highway, are drawn to the familiar. A Canadian specializing in the regional history of the sub-Arctic Canadian northwest, Coates describes himself as 'a child of the Alaska Highway' (first travelled at age seven). He has published widely on his dominant interest, editing and contributing to *The Alaska Highway: papers of the 40th anniversary symposium* (1985). His latest book, commissioned by Public Works Canada to mark the road's half-century, reaches out to a potential audience beyond academia. Its brisk narrative traces the germination of the idea of a highway, summarizing the efforts of those who lobbied for 'The Road' in peacetime, the competing routes, and how the attack on Pearl Harbor provoked the US military to take the geopolitical significance of Alaska seriously. Coates weaves a story rich in human interest and anecdote around the frenzied construction within eight months of the pioneer road. Although the road runs across 2446 km of wild country between Dawson Creek, British Columbia, and Fairbanks, Alaska, the book concentrates on the Canadian four-fifths.

The highway actually consisted of two separate enterprises; the initial road pushed through by American soldiers, and the subsequent permanent highway built by civilian authorities. Coates supplies vignettes of men and women tempted north by high wages, patriotism, the spirit of adventure, and military directive. The most engaging chapter details the hardships and challenges of their lives and describes conditions in the camps and highway communities during the construction. The story progresses through the follow-up operation by the US Bureau of Public Roads — a less celebrated, and rather anti-climactic, exploit (the threat of Japanese invasion had evaporated entirely by 1943). Pursuing an increasingly prosaic topic up to the present, Coates deals with the post-war transition to civilian highway, the hand-over to Canada, the road's maintenance and improvement, the growth of tourist traffic, and, finally, the controversy over paving the Canadian section.

Coates has underlined his versatility within his chosen field and firmly established his credentials as the authority on this particular road. His prose is lively and studded with colourful images, yet generally avoids lapsing into hackneyed reportage. Hyperbole and superlative loom large in his saga, with the physical setting and the project's nature providing plenty of excuse. The black-and-white photographs are evocative and profuse (numbering approximately 100). The inclusion of a restrained number of unobtrusive endnotes illustrates that scholarship need not be a casualty of popular history. Coates and his research assistants have laboured in the archives but the key source is the testimony of 'ordinary folk' who participated in this extraordinary venture ('this is their story'). This deployment of oral history follows David Remley's lead in an earlier history of the highway (*Crooked Road*, 1976). While this is not the kind of book for digging too deep into the integral, yet seamier, frontier topics of disease, alcohol, prostitution, and racial prejudice (involving black soldiers as well as natives), Coates does touch on such issues,

making his study more than just a paean to a vintage piece of frontier-busting.

One wonders whether anything worthwhile remains to be said about the Alaska Highway (as distinct from a series of parochial discussions of its impact on individual communities). If any aspect has been under-studied, it is the Alaskan portion. This reviewer has made a modest contribution by addressing (in a study of Alaskan engineering projects) the role of frontier images during promotion and construction, the environmental impact, and those who felt that the drawbacks of an overland link with the rest of the USA outweighed the benefits. Yet we still don't know enough about its impact on Alaskan natives.

North to Alaska! is aimed at increasing number of Southlanders who take the road to Alaska in response to the call of the wild. Author and publisher no doubt hope this book will grace motel lobby coffee tables and gift shop shelves as often as libraries. For those vicarious, summer pioneers searching for the last frontier in their motor homes and luxury coaches, it will prove the most useful and durable of souvenirs. (Peter A. Coates, Department of Historical Studies, University of Bristol, 13–15 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1TB.)

OTTER SKINS, BOSTON SHIPS AND CHINA GOODS: THE MARITIME FUR TRADE OF THE NORTHWEST COAST, 1785-1841. James R. Gibson. 1992. Montreal, Kingston, and London, McGill-Queen's University Press. 422 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-7735-0829-5. £29.95.

The sea-otter or maritime fur trade was an international economy that developed in consequence of Captain James Cook's third voyage of exploration to the Pacific and his visit to Nootka Sound and the Gulf of Alaska in 1778. For the previous half century, the Russians had kept the secrets of the trade from the wider world. By the last decade of the eighteenth century Boston traders had come to dominate a trade that had been, for a short time, British led. Until the 1840s an ever dwindling trade in sea-otter pelts connected the northwest coast of North America to the ports of London, Boston, and Montreal. The depletion of these sea mammals ended the trade, whose major market, unlike the beaver, was in Canton and Macao, where Chinese mandarins used sea-otter pelts for decorating clothing. For a brief period of time, therefore, 'the ermine of Asia,' as the sea otter was known, played a substantial role in Pacific Ocean history and in the interrelationship of Russian, Boston, and British traders, northwest coast native peoples, and Chinese consumers and traders.

Gibson's study is international in its scope, and it begins with an assessment of northwest coast native practices and trade. The pre-contact internecine trade was changed by the coming of Cook and other European traders, and it went through several changes as Russian, British, and American ships came to the northwest to trade. The author describes the fluctuations of the trade, and explains how ascendancy passed from trader to trader and even from nation to nation. Using the very large corpus of

ships logs, hitherto unused in such a systematic way, he has reconstructed the main features of the trade, from the offshore islands of British Columbia and Alaska to the Pacific Islands, where ship crews would rest and replenish supplies, to Canton and Macao where sea-otter pelts would be exchanged for porcelain, tea, silk, and other commodities, and to Boston and London, where oriental produce would be offloaded and hardware and other merchandise loaded for the Pacific Northwest. The author documents the several phases of this trade, and he explains how smaller, more economically operated American vessels had a distinct advantage in out-trading rivals from other countries. Moreover, he demonstrates that British traders were frequently hindered by circumstances of war (1792-1815) and by chartered corporate restrictions possessed by the East India Company. Hitherto unexploited Russian sources add a valuable dimension to the story.

Of his numerous tables and appendices, that entitled 'Trading and hunting vessels on the Northwest Coast, 1785-1841' may be singled out in value. It lists by nationality and year each and every vessel engaged in the trade; it is based on a wide array of cited sources. Other tables recount the value of American exports to the northwest coast, the value of American fur sales at Canton, Hudson's Bay Company ships in the coast trade, British and American sea and land fur returns, number of foreign ships at Canton during 1787-1833, furs imported by American vessels at Canton, prices of sea otters in Canton, and commodity composition by value of American imports at Canton. This book is richly illustrated, fulsomely footnoted, and has an excellent bibliography and index. It is only to be regretted that there is no ships' names index.

Many years ago Judge F.W. Howay began the laborious research of describing and analysing the maritime fur trade. While Howay's research will always be central to our understanding of this branch of commerce, it is important to note that Gibson has provided the first scholarly assessment of an international economy. He does not strain for any final thematic explanation, but his treatment of subthemes, such as muskets serving as trade items for Pacific Northwest natives, adds significantly to the discussion of this contentious subject and enriches our understanding of natives aspect of the trade. This is an important and original book and a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of the sea-otter trade and of the human activities that ensued as merchant mariners sought to carry pelts from Nootka to Canton, and in the process brought the wider world into an interrelated trading network. (Barry Gough, History Department, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada.)

THE AURORA WATCHER'S HANDBOOK. Neil Davis. 1992. Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press. 230 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 0-912006-60-9. \$20.00 (US).

The aurora (northern or southern lights) is one of the most spectacular and awe-inspiring of the many optical phe-