A Re-vision of History: Plains Cree and the Aspen Parkland of Western Canada.

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Abstract. A review of literature concerning Plains Cree historical relationships with the aspen parkland belt uncovers a series of colonial misconceptions regarding wholesale population movements from woodland to prairie, which have remained largely unchallenged. Recognizing aspen as a “fire species” provides the opportunity to employ aspen spatial density as a cultural record of a people’s long-term relationship with the land. The role of fire used by the Plains Cree as an ecological management tool is investigated in terms of non-native world views conflicting with native sustainable resource-management practices.

Key words: Plains Cree, aspen, prairies--Canada, aspen parkland belt, fire, history--Canada, ecology--prairie

Introduction

David Mandelbaum, an American ethnographer, claims that the Plains Cree were displaced westward from the forests of northwestern Ontario or eastern Manitoba as a direct result of rapid expansion of the fur trade in the late 1700’s (45-6). These bands apparently became too dependent on European trade goods that they quickly overharvested their homeland and, along with their Assiniboine allies, invaded the forest, parkland, and prairie of what is now western Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and eastern Alberta. Their almost exclusive use of guns forced the rival Gros Ventre, Blackfoot, Peigan, Blood, Slave, and Chipewyan from their ancestral lands, and, in turn, they displaced the Snake, Kutenai, and other groups in southern Alberta. Once Creees were established firmly on the plains, they adopted cultural forms in keeping with their new environment (Russell, 1991, 16-27).

Mandelbaum’s ethnography and history of the Plains Cree is considered the definitive piece of scholarship. In semiotic terms, he has written the “classic text” and a statement privileged enough to define and situate the subject as to actually pre-exist and exceed it (Silverman, 1983, 242-5). His view rarely is questioned in the literature and still is being upheld. Milloy describes Mandelbaum as “the anthropological expert on the Plains Cree” (1991, 59) and fully adopts Mandelbaum’s analysis of Cree cultural history, thereby unfortunately reproducing Mandelbaum’s status as the definitive scholar in this area.

Russell (1991) points out major flaws in Mandelbaum’s work and traces unsubstantiated theorizing back to writings of the explorer Sir Alexander Mackenzie. Russell states that Mandelbaum took Mackenzie’s writings out of context to support his reliance on crisply defined boundaries separating woodland from prairie cultural practices. Mandelbaum’s work relied on a definite break from woodland to plains environment. For the next 200 years, Mackenzie’s comments have been twisted out of context and developed into historical “fact.” Although ethnographic evidence, particularly from Hudson’s Bay Company journals, contradicts this view, Mandelbaum’s interpretation of Plains Cree history continues to persist (Russell, 1991, 84-119). Consequently, his anthropological subjects are encased firmly in a static collective identity.

Russell (1991, 22) shows that, to support his thesis, Mandelbaum denied the role of parkland transition areas in Plains Cree lives. Mandelbaum (1940, 46) believed that Cree ties to the forest were maintained until ca.1820, to which time they gradually became “true” Plains tribe with an accompanying change in forms of cultural expression. But Russell maintained that the aspen-dominated (Populus tremuloides) parkland area was the Cree’s home base, rather than the forest or open plains. This view is supported by the fact that all but two reservations in Saskatchewan are located in the parkland belt (Carter, 1990, xi; Russell, 1991, 218, Bird, 1961, x). The importance of bison movements between the plains and parkland, along with Cree economic reliance on bison, underscores the basis for a seasonal hunting and gathering cycle that included the parkland area to a more substantial degree (Russell, personal communication, 1993). Additionally, aspen stands provided a protective environment during harsh weather and an ecological complex that included many sources of food and important plants.

If we accept Russell’s version of western Cree history, then Cree bands were established on the plains and parkland long before Europeans arrived. Margaret Hanna, curator of the Provincial Museum in Regina, reports that Cree pottery fragments in the Duck Mountain area of western Manitoba date to 800-900 years ago, and Assiniboine pottery in Saskatchewan may be 1000 years old. Hanna (personal communication, 1993) agrees with Russell that Cree movements into southern Saskatchewan observed by European explorers were from population shifts after epidemics rather than a wholesale immigration from the East (Russell, 1991, 213-17), thereby drawing points of perspective set up by Mandelbaum into question.

Cree’s Use of Fire in Aspen Parkland

If we consider Russell’s proposal that the aspen parkland was a major element of Plains Cree habitat, then tracing ecological relationships between the Cree and this complex habitat may be useful in future anthropological work. Use of fire by Parkland Cree (Russell 1991) suggests that “Parkland” may be a more appropriate modifier term than “Prairie”) as a tool for maintaining a desirable ecological balance is a major component of their overall adaptive strategy. Descriptions of native fire technologies by Stewart (1956), Pyne (1982), Wright & Bailey (1982), and Lewis (1982) indicate that burning by natives is a determining factor in the formation and maintenance of North American grasslands.
Northern Plains First Nations systematically and routinely burned the woods and prairie for a number of reasons: as a tactical device (Pyne, 1982, 72; Russell, 1991, 97-8); to stimulate soil fertility (Pyne, 1982, 74; Hughes, 1983, 66; Lewis, 1982, 15; Stewart, 1956, 120); to manipulate distribution of game (Pyne, 1982, 75; Hughes, 1983, 56; Lewis, 1982, 31-4); to clear underbrush for improved visibility and ease of travel; and to reduce large uncontrollable fires fuelled by deadfall and dead grass (Ray, 1971, 279-80). Cree economic and cultural production are integral factors in their interdependent relationship with prairie/parkland ecology, thereby physically locating them in ecological transitional zones. Mandelbaum’s attempts to locate them otherwise may be ideologically intriguing, but his analysis fails to recognize the historical validity of Cree practice.

Aspen’s ability to grow vigorously and reproduce by cloning makes it well suited to prairie soil. These growth dynamics enable encroachment onto the prairie, thereby expanding the parkland. Periodic fires burn off aspen stems, which stimulates vigorous resprouting. However, annual or extremely hot fires eventually weaken the clone, allowing grasses and small brush to gradually push back the parkland boundary. In the northern prairies, fire suppression by European settlers enabled aspen parklands to expand significantly (Lewis, 1982, 24; Bird, 1961, 38). If fire is acknowledged as a technology utilized by the Cree to manage the aspen parkland, then these people can be located and is situated in the parkland belt for many centuries before the arrival of European explorers.

Lewis (1982) provides a strong case for the systematic use of fire by natives. A 72-year-old Cree from the Frog Lake area near the North Saskatchewan River at the Alberta-Saskatchewan border described:

It used to be all prairie here; now it’s mostly forest. My father told me that long time back there were plenty of buffalo here, all the way (north) to Cold Lake. We were Plains Cree, not like those buffalo people up north. Now it’s all bush here too. (Lewis, 1982, 24)

Europeans’ Control of Fire Practices

Ethnographic evidence apparently confirms that interruption of Plains Cree resource practices substantially increased forest encroachment on the open prairie. Historically, the question of anthropogenic uses of fire is linked with events such as development of the forestry service, settlement of the land, and loss of the commons in North America. Pyne (1982) believes that American foresters were in contact with American natives, knew of their “light-burning” techniques, and systematically prevented burnings by establishing repressive bureaucratic structures.

In England the forester had been a hated official since medieval times, an introduction of the Norman overlords and the means by which the folk were deprived of many traditional rights of access to the woods. In the United States, too, though in a more benign form, he was again seen as the official of foreign powers and ideas and as the enemy of folk usage of forest and range. The issue of proper fire practices became more than a question of technique: it developed into a political protest against intrusion by professional forestry, a European import, and against the enclosure of common lands. (Pyne, 1982, 100)

Apparently, in the late nineteenth century, European-influenced fire control measures were linked to issues of displacement of inhabitants, both native and non-native, from common lands. Propaganda wars fought by emerging governmental administrations actively devalued folk and native skills and attitudes concerning prescribed burning (Pyne, 1982, 80-1; Schiff, 1962, 36-7). It was during this period (1870-1889) that native groups signed prairie and parkland numbered treaties in Western Canada (Dickason, 1992, 274). Numerous American forestry-inspired fire-control measures were put in place to facilitate settlement.

However, these practices ultimately would generate more devastating fires in western Canada than had occurred before European occupation (Pyne, 1982; Schiff, 1962; Stewart, 1956). Suppression of native fire practices was thought to be an effective component in taming nature, yet the actual effect has been contradictory. Pyne (1982, 99) argues that the loss of grasslands to choked “forest weedlots” and “impenetrable thickets” has been the legacy of European settlements in the prairies (99). Aspen “thickets” are so difficult to control that aspen is a “weed” tree (Graham et al., 1963, 2), requiring increasing resources to control its spread.

For Parkland Cree, the question of the historical treatment of their identity and claim to the land is inextricably linked to physical evidence of their burning practices. Lewis and Ferguson (1988, 60) point out that:

The forests, parklands, and prairies of North America had already been greatly influenced and actively managed by aboriginal peoples’ widespread uses of fire. The goals of Indian uses of habitat fires were predominantly technological, with the added awareness that fire is a tool of enormous potential and that it has complex and important ecological consequences.

In classic texts of Western Canadian history, the Plains Cree, subsequent to “invading” the west, appeared to adopt practices of self-interested middlemen in the fur trade. Their primitive condition of living at one with nature thereby was forsaken. Mandelbaum (1940) believed that Cree used guns to invade their neighbors and caused large-scale resettling of other native groups in the western territory. As a consequence of these actions, the Cree surrendered their forest homelands to take up residence on the open prairie. To make matters worse, the Plains Cree appeared (to the Europeans) to be abusing their new homelands by constantly setting it ablaze. A series of oppositions (conqueror/vanquished, war/peace, strife/stability, prairie/forest) were set up in classic texts that eroded European romantic illusions of the Indian as a “child of nature.” The Indian, in this case the Plains Cree, was vilified by scholarly research of the day and strategically associated in the public’s mind with the negative side of the oppositions. As a consequence, the Cree were regarded conveniently, through their destructive practices, to have relinquished all rightful claim to the land. Hence, the hordes of foreign settlers felt justifiably free to occupy the prairies and, in the process, to replace aboriginal technologies with their own.

Further degradation of the generalized “Indian” is demonstrated by the European view of fire. Rather than imagining parkland landscape managed by fire technology for many centuries, European invaders, ignoring the necessary relationship between land and fire, focused uniquely on fire as a destructive force, inherently terrifying and uncontrollable, an apocalyptic power to be placed under firm control for everyone’s benefit (Pyne, 1982, 33). Europeans laboring under this misconception could not begin to imagine the land they had “discovered” as a sustainable resource with a long history of native management. Although they cannot have been blind to the positive evidence of native firing practices, they were unable to cast themselves as anything less than superior conquerors of primitive and virginal territory. In fact, romantic ideas of primeval forest and unclaimed grassland wilderness were essential to the European invaders’ view of themselves as rightful inheritors, entitled to the land. This self-aggrandizing myth continues to hamper the prevailing Eurocentric world view in its recognition of the long-term efficacy of native technologies. Russell’s deconstruction of Mandelbaum’s Plains Cree myth offers a cogent and generative critical challenge to an ecologically destructive world view.
Conclusions

The absence of reliable written records or eye-witness accounts of Plains Cree history enhances and legitimizes biological and ecological "records" as new foundations for creative methodologies. Examination of ecological patterns and practices such as fire usage potentially can provide more sensitive and thoughtful revisions of historical records and inform ecologically sound management of both prairie and parkland resources. Finally, in more immediate political and economic terms, a re-visioning of Plains Cree history holds enormous implications for upcoming land claims settlements, where use and occupancy criteria must be established so that native groups can regain control of their homelands.

Literature Cited


