

The Beginning of Print Culture in Athabasca Country. A Facsimile Edition and Translation of a Prayer Book in Cree Syllabics, By Father Emile Grouard, OMI. Translated by Patricia Demers, Naomi McIlwraith and Dorothy Thunder. The University of Alberta Press, 2010, hbk., CND\$100/USD\$100/£ 64.99. ISBN 13: 9780888645159.

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Anyone who has ever valiantly tried to render a nuanced saying from one language system to another will deeply appreciate this book: it is a virtual briar patch of translation issues. Not only has it crossed those famous linguistic lines between French and English, but its main text is Syllabic Cree, a system of communication founded on controversies of authenticity and a symbolic, referential collection of signifiers. It also builds upon the delicate time period in Canada between oral and written, a time now regarded as dogmatically colonialist and assimilationist. The volume invites us to try to push ourselves back into a cultural moment before that; a time that may be almost impossible to grasp now. This is a period when not one Cree book had ever been published in Athabasca. So was Grouard's Prayer Book a tool of repression? Can the labour of hauling a French Press from Paris to the Lac La Biche Mission and producing thousands of copies be only part of the Churches' complicity in subsuming Indigenous languages to the greater control of European hegemony? Thankfully, no on both counts. Demers, McIlwraith and Thunder have openly noted the various cultural glasses we look through today, and warned us that, while we know some things of that moment and place, we should not assume that we know everything that transpired. Indeed the moment itself may well have been conflicted in its way of seeing itself.

For example, the fact is that Grouard insisted that Indigenous languages be learned, that communication with Indigenous people take place in their languages, and that the cultural matrix of the people be honoured and respected. Extraordinary given the universal condemnation one hears in a post-residential schools Canada. Thus his Prayer Book is grounded in the lived experience of his mission's audience, even as it adheres to Hebrew or Greek meanings behind its early Christian roots; clearly a hybridized product. For example, when paper was not available, he used moose hide to print these syllabic idioms, so his parishioners engaged with this new piety through a well-known trusted, household medium.

What attractions will Religious Studies students find in *The Beginning*

of Print Culture in Athabasca Country? A great deal, including many issues relating to the role of culture in the transference of religion in general, and to Christianity and Indigenous traditions in particular. To give but one example, God is rendered in Grouard's Prayer Book by Manitou, a word of singular gravity in Cree ideology (note it is capitalized). But why use manitou? If we think back two centuries earlier, the Jesuits had composed the famous Huron Carol using the term *gitchimanitou*, a word true to Cree conceptions of the positive and the good in the universe. What had been ignored by the missionaries at that moment of Canadian religious history was the Cree "theological" matrix of the word; Cree conceptions had actually construed the greatest force and energy in the universe to be eternally depicted in both positive and negative idioms, that is, as *muchimanitou* and *gitchimanitou*. Grouard's text speaks only of a good God, but it uses the adjectival *mitiyeow* with the root word *manitou* as a noun. This text reveals, then, that when Christianity was presented to the Athabasca Cree, already *manitou* had undergone considerable change—from a word signifying absoluteness and positive force/power in Cree to a word capitalized in the European languages to indicate "God" as used by Christian texts. Clearly it now had European assumptions of divinity. On the face of it, this was appropriation of a word, or really a root-word, and imbuing it with quite different meanings than it had originally had. One could conceive of this appropriation as a grafting on to a Cree cosmological system of a different system. The process involved a kind of hitch-hiking, that is, the ultimateness enshrined in the Cree term became the basis upon which the Christian concept of God was constructed. Yet surely we should ask: What was to become of those negative aspects inherent in *muchimanitou*? In short, can the term "Manitou," now baptized as a Christian word, be used without the echo of its original, anti-Christian diversity. What happens to the great negative power of the Cree system?

Certainly this might be seen as adaptability with Christianity (and its missionaries) able to adjust the Christian theological system to accommodate itself to whatever cultural format was available in order to "speak the religion" in the local vernacular. The question remains, what processes were in place that allowed Christianity to appropriate the term from a diffuse and multi-dimensioned power into the absolute, personal, good divinity of Christianity? Had the Cree of Athabasca, long used to international trade, travelling prophets, and continental medicine people actually already been prepared for alterations of their cultural foundations even before the coming of Grouard and his associates? Had the use of *manitou* already gravitated to other uses through interaction with other Indigenous systems? Or was this a blatant modification imposed by Grouard and other missionaries?

There are many other intriguing issues buried in this fascinating text. In

sum, students of the interaction of European and North American cultures will find much here to ponder. It is a fine text, beautifully rendered and highly nuanced. A commendable effort by the author-translators, the University of Alberta Press and its talented designers. But of all, it is a text to savour for its insight into a critical moment in religious life in Alberta.