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"Enough to Keep Them Alive": Indian Welfare in Canada, 1873-1965 (review)

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At Kahnawake, Catherine Tekakwitha enveloped herself in an environment that was unquestionably Christian—at least as measured by the certainty of religious indoctrination and strong prohibitions against drunkenness and sexual “impurity” (enforced more by Native people than French clergy). In terms of kinship, residence, and subsistence patterns—as well as in its considerable political autonomy—Kahnawake remained a Native world. There, women like Catherine Tekakwitha struggled to make sense of Catholicism on their own terms, sought the sacred in familiar ways, modeled their behavior after the nuns whose practices they imperfectly understood (but perfectly knew to be a source of power), and devoted themselves to extreme forms of collective physical penance that went far beyond the private “disciplines” that their French priests condoned.

Such practices probably led to Catherine’s death in 1680. The stories of her pious end and of the miraculous cures attributed to her through the years highlight the second way in which Catherine Tekakwitha was both Catholic and Mohawk. Nearly everything known about her earthly life traces back to the writings of two Jesuit priests who knew her at Kahnawake. Pierre Cholenec and, especially, Claude Chauchetière, cast their narratives in the complicated tradition of Catholic hagiography. Anything identifiably Mohawk in Catherine Tekakwitha’s life must be carefully inferred from their overdetermined stories of the Blessed Catherine. The vexed chore leads Greer to make his book virtually a dual biography of Tekakwitha and Chauchetière, whose own tortured spiritual life found meaning in her death and miracles.

Greer succeeds better than any previous scholar in untangling the strains, but, in the end, more of the Catholic than of the Mohawk remains in the story. “When I first visited Kahnawake in 1993,” Greer confesses, “I had difficulty finding anyone interested in talking about Catherine Tekakwitha” (200). From the earliest days after her death, French Canadians, not Mohawks, almost exclusively claimed to feel the power of her spiritual intercession. Today, her greatest following is among Indian Catholics in the United States, rather than in Canada, where the Tekakwitha Conference finds her a powerful symbol of their efforts “to unify Native Catholic voice, presence and identity” (201). To them, she will always be Kateri, not Catherine.

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“Enough to Keep Them Alive”: *Indian Welfare in Canada, 1873–1965*. By Hugh Shewell (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004) 441 pp. \$60.00 cloth \$35.00 paper

Canadians found comfort for decades in the assumption that their government’s treatment of Indians was more compassionate and humane than the stereotypically aggressive, militaristic actions of the United

States. *Enough to Keep Them Alive* provides a critical and insightful perspective on this important policy field, arguing that, “welfare—relief, social assistance—has been used by the state as a weapon to undermine First Nations cultures and to induce their assimilation and hence disappearance into the dominant Canadian economic and social order” (ix).

Although the majority of the text is devoted to a careful and well-researched reconstruction of Canadian policy, Shewell’s book situates administrative developments within broader political, social, and cultural contexts. He draws comfortably on the work of Said, Wolf, Noël, and Wallerstein, among others.¹ He takes a Marxist approach to the issues at hand, arguing that “Euro-Canadian civilization—liberal democratic capitalism—has laid waste to aboriginal peoples and their cultures” (4).

Shewell looks first at the context of relief and the broader role of government in society at the time of Confederation. He then relates the provision of relief to administrative efforts to subjugate the Indians. The book then examines how government efforts shifted to tie the provision of support to citizenship. In what are the two most important chapters in the book, Shewell describes the role of social sciences during the post-war period in defining Indians and then discusses the evolution of the bureaucracy of Indian welfare. The latter chapter is particularly useful in understanding how welfare evolved from the provision of emergency supplies in times of hardship to a complex economic and political relationship between Indians and the government of Canada. The final chapters include a study of the transition to increased provincial involvement in Indian welfare and an (overly long) conclusion that considers the theoretical and conceptual issues raised by the history of government relief and welfare payments to Indians.

Enough to Keep Them Alive examines policy and public administration without becoming overwhelmed by political details and personalities. Shewell pays particular attention to the political culture of public administration and to the manner in which bureaucratic processes reflect dominant ideologies. Most significantly, the author does not treat Indian policy in isolation but instead relates developments in the field to broader national and international trends in concepts of citizenship, minority rights, and the ideology of industrial capitalism. Shewell’s study has much to recommend it, including its comprehensive assessment of national policy and administrative assessments and strong theoretical elements. Unfortunate, but understandable given the nature of the archival record, is the fact that comparatively few aboriginal voices appear in the study. In the tradition of much Canadian scholarship on aboriginal issues, *Enough to Keep them Alive* is strongly, even stridently, political.

The advocacy that runs through the book adds to the intensity of the argument but raises concerns about its partisanship. In his provocative chapter on the political influence of the social sciences after World

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 2003); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1982); Lise Noël, *Intolerance: A General Survey* (Montreal, 1994); Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-System Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, 2004).

War II, Shewell argues that “the social science introduced a new culture into Indian Affairs that allowed the government to reinvent paternalism based on the ‘benevolence’ of secular understanding, knowledge, and the tools of social engineering. The social sciences simply furthered the state’s aims and provided the knowledge and rationalizing to legitimate state activities in First Nations communities” (227). Shewell and others appear to be as confident in their analysis about the best means of addressing aboriginal needs and aspirations as the post–World War II social scientists were in their assessment of the options facing First Nations in Canada.

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Political Culture and Institutional Development in Costa Rica and Nicaragua: World Making in the Tropics. By Consuelo Cruz (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005) 281 pp. \$80.00

Genuine comparative treatments in both political culture and history are challenging because authors must be equally knowledgeable not only in two disciplines but, as in this case, about two countries. Cruz maintains a consistently comparative approach with great assurance throughout the entire book, although each country is discussed in separate chapters. Her deft and absorbing handling of the historical analysis is the highlight of the work. On the other hand, her presentation of the political and cultural theory relevant to the topic is swallowed in dense academic jargon that frequently seems unnecessary and is sometimes baffling.

The author’s argument is “that political culture is best defined as a system for normative scheming embedded in a field of imaginable possibilities” (3). Political culture in the book’s context in turn derives from a Manichean synthesis created at the time of Nicaragua’s conquest, balanced by a Manichean exceptionalism from the earliest conquest history of Costa Rica. This point does not actually explain anything, except to say that the two countries had different histories, but Cruz uses the terms to contrast the two societies from that moment to current times. Cruz argues that political culture or identity shapes politics by forcing participants to engage in normative scheming, which gives rise to different fields of imaginable possibilities and different regimes of arbitration.

To put the argument in historical terms, Cruz points out the way in which Costa Rica immediately following independence from Spain pursued an emphasis on peace and wide landownership, insulating itself from the regional turmoil of Central America by the 1830s. Thus, Costa Rica’s “exemplary civility” and its self-identification as an exceptional nation were evident at all times. Nicaragua, however, institutionalized confrontation amid civil wars and struggles for regional preeminence. By the 1920s, Costa Rica’s “possibility mongers” sought the emergence