

BOOK FORUM

**Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History*.
Second edition. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's
Press, 2005.**

First published in 1993, Kerry Abel's *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* presents a comprehensive narrative of Dene history from earliest times to the present. The study offers insights on a number of topics, including Dene involvement with the fur trade and Christian missions, and the place of the Dene in twentieth-century economic and political developments in Canada's subarctic. Drawing on a broad range of sources, Abel presents the Dene as active participants in their history. Reviews of the first edition praised *Drum Songs* for its scope, its detailed discussion of Dene perspectives and its methodological commitment to recovering Dene voices from the past. This second edition of *Drum Songs* includes a new preface discussing recent developments in Dene experiences and changes in the scholarship of Native history. | 1

This forum includes three short responses to the book written by a generation of graduate students familiar with Native history, “new” and “old,” and its developments since the first edition of *Drum Songs*. Each response engages a different aspect of Abel's interpretation and/or methodology. Kerry Abel concludes the discussion by offering a reply to these responses, and her own thoughts on *Drum Songs*' second edition.

Tolly Bradford, University of Alberta

Book Review Editor

It is impressive how Abel manages to construct such a comprehensive history. Her analysis runs from ancient times to the arrival of fur traders, Christian missionaries, Metis freetraders, and Canadian Colonial institutions, up through to the most recent forces and challenges that confront and shape Dene life. Though reluctant to call her study an ethnohistory (xii, xxx), Abel follows the lead of ethnohistorians in utilizing and rectifying a diverse number of sources that include archaeological, linguistic, and written evidence, as well as oral tradition. Through this, Abel is able to challenge both the void in scholarship on Northern Canada and the frequently static notions of Aboriginal life that sees groups as monolithic, homogenous, inert, and ahistorical.

One aspect of the book that remains disappointing, however, is the dearth of Dene voices in the chapters (nine and ten) pertaining to more recent forces and challenges that are confronting the Dene. This omission is vexing in light of Abel's apparent commitment to understanding the social realm, breaking free of the traditional constraints of historical study, as well as the delight that she takes in noting that the monograph has been accessible to more mainstream and contemporary audiences including, presumably, Dene individuals (xv). Further, the "years of considerable upheaval" (xi) that Abel glosses over as well as the recent "years of monumental change" (203) involve significant historic and contemporary issues—such as politics, family, the wage economy, cultural retention, and pathways to a Dene future—that relevant Dene members could help recount and interpret. Acquiring the perspectives of those involved in and living through these events would add a valuable perspective unavailable elsewhere. One cannot help thinking that those intimately familiar with and impacted by the events that Abel describes—including, for

example, the emergence of the Dene Nation—would not view them in exactly the same light that she does. Likewise, the relevance of “alcohol abuse, family violence, and suicide”, the “dislocation and anxiety” due to change, are largely ignored by Abel when there is room for exploration of these significant issues from various vantage points (264). Allocating a greater amount of space towards the latter end of the book would have allowed for an exploration of these topics. Though quick to note that she was not “writing a history of the Dene according to the Dene definition of history” (x), a slightly more inclusive and nuanced history is possible. In spite of this shortcoming, one that may amount to splitting hairs, Abel’s book should be seen as what it is—a groundbreaking, persuasive, and highly relevant study that provides “glimpses of Dene history.” | 3

Christopher A. J. L. Little, University of Western Ontario

Abel tells us that in *Drum Songs* what we will see are ‘glimpses’ of Dene history. Her introduction describes not the Dene cosmology or archaeological origins but instead begins in a canoe shrouded by the warm haze of evening, listening as the ‘throbbing of a drum’ carries Dene culture across the lake, and across time, to the attentive historian. (xiii) Nearing the Dogrib camp, our visitor sees that the celebration of a successful catch of fish is expressed through a spiritual ceremony with dancers enraptured by the ‘mass of humanity’ and hears that ‘stories from the past’ are used to unfold and pass on the meaning of the drum song. (xiii) Like earlier colonial voyeur Richard Finnie, who supplies the book’s first quote, Abel recognizes that such subtleties ‘defy imitation.’(xxxii) The historian who peers for a glimpse into culture must resist following an ethnographic arc that deconstructs and explains the intersections of economics, society and religion. Employing an

historical model that resists this categorization, Abel demonstrates that the continuing cultural integrity of the Dene was based in adaptive resistance to the “European compartmentalization of various aspects of human endeavour.”(143) For example, Abel shows that the recent inability of post-war game regulations to meet the needs of the Dene can not conveniently be explained as a society’s inability to cope with modernity. Instead it is a continuing rejection of the impulse, which began with the NWC and HBC’s arrival, to reorient their life and land-use patterns around a commercial understanding of hunting, trapping and fishing. Abel explains that, even in the midst of crushing epidemics, the Dene selectively adapted aspects of European economy enough to manipulate company rivalries and gain a degree of agency in determining the future of Denendeh.

One year after *Drum Songs*’ 1993 publication, Native history in Canada faced the challenge that its hallmark concept of *agency* was really, according to Brownlie and Kelm, an alibi used to cover and ‘defend the motives of colonial society.’ As the preface to the second edition explains, *Drum Songs* was caught between an historical establishment still hostile towards the new social history and an emergent postcolonial critique. Is Kerry Abel a ‘colonialist alibi?’ No; but her sources certainly are, and to a great extent ‘history’ as a colonizing mechanism itself requires constant reflection and self-scrutinizing. The new preface shows that Abel has maintained an awareness of the literature and debate, but her sweeping dismissal of an archetypal *post-modern theory* as convenient vocabulary indicates fractures in an empirical method she might prefer were not there: Are Dene stories written down by white trappers really constitutive of ‘oral testimony?’ Do the captioned but unidentified photographs that open the book present

open windows into Dene history or, as Carol Payne has suggested, are these the actual ‘embodiment of imperialism?’ Finally, as we must ask of Richard Finnie, Alexander Mackenzie, and all those who have written about the north, where does the ‘glimpse’ of Dene history end and their own historical vision begin?

Matt Dyce, Carleton University

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In this work, Abel skillfully highlights the ability of small societies to maintain their cultural distinctiveness in the face of external pressures to change. New information is primarily located within the ‘Preface to the Second Edition’, where Abel extends her discussion of Dene creative adaptability to talk about issues that arose in the 1990s, such as the new proposal to build a natural gas pipeline from the MacKenzie Delta region to Northern Alberta (xxi). In this same section, Abel notes that, at the time of its release, *Drum Songs* contributed to the question of the impact of colonialism and imperialism on indigenous peoples around the world (xvii). Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I am curious to know what contemporary debates Abel feels *Drum Songs* contributes to. Is its relevance limited to the debates of the early 1990s, or have other issues emerged that *Drum Songs* calls attention to?

Another aspect that sparked my interest in Abel’s work pertains to her central thesis of the ability of the Dene to maintain their cultural distinctiveness despite imposed pressures to adapt to ‘modern’ society. In her last chapter, she suggests that conflict between the Dene and Ottawa did not escalate into a situation where the Dene were backed into a corner because of geography, among other things (268). This caused me to wonder whether the Dene ability to survive as a culturally autonomous people would have been compromised more if their land was geographically

appealing to the Canadian state: would the Dene have been as successful in their ability to resist change? Along the same line, I also wonder how internal contradictions and fissions within the Dene nation affect the maintenance of their cultural distinctiveness. Abel observes that there are contemporary challenges in Dene society due to language barriers between Elders and children, in addition to greater Native participation in the Canadian capitalist economy and political system (264). I had hoped that Abel would have addressed these issues in greater detail, as they seem extremely relevant to discussions focused on contemporary cultural distinctiveness.

Overall, I found *Drum Songs* a highly interesting read – it is a book that can appeal to both popular and scholarly audiences.

Sadie Donovan, University of Western Ontario

Response:

When McGill-Queen's University Press proposed a second edition of *Drum Songs*, I confess that I was rather ambivalent about the project. After all, eighteen years is almost a scholarly lifetime – really an entire generation – and were I to attempt a similar project today, the result would be entirely different. Indeed, I would probably *not* attempt a similar project today. Ten years ago, I stopped working in the field of First Nations history for two reasons. First, I had grown tired of what seemed to be an endless discussion of the same issues (voice appropriation, victimization, advocacy) in which very little that was new or imaginative seemed to have been proposed. Second, I was disturbed by the limited impact of the new First Nations history on Canadian historiography more generally. The same debate had developed in women's

history. As a separate field of study, it initially had no influence outside the small group of its specialist practitioners, so compartmentalized had scholarly history become. I agreed with those historians of women who argued that women's experiences and perspectives had to be incorporated into all social, economic, and political analyses. While that has been happening for women's history, it is much less evident for First Nations history. Aboriginal people are still just tacked on with the geography in the introductory chapter of too many textbooks, and the "big" questions of Canadian historiography continue to be debated without reference to the role of Aboriginal people or the use of interpretive techniques generated by scholars of First Nations history. To practise what I preach, I gave my latest book (*Changing Places: History, Community, and Identity in Northeastern Ontario*) an important Aboriginal storyline even though the study is not cast as First Nations history.

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Drum Songs, like all historical writing, was very much a product of its times, so I am pleased to see that it still resonates with a new generation of scholars and provokes as much thoughtful debate as ever. The questions raised by the contributors to this forum are all valuable and important discussion points because they also apply to the study of both First Nations history and history more generally. Is the discipline of history as practised in western culture so fully a product of the imperialist impulse (indeed, an "embodiment of imperialism" as Dyce/Payne suggest) that it cannot be turned inside out to study imperialism itself? Should historians' tools be used to study contemporary events? How should the historian understand and incorporate the concept of voice?

On the question of history as imperialism, I have always believed that the historical thinking which dominates public discourse in Europe and North America is entirely culturally based (or a cultural construct, if you prefer the current phraseology). Thus it has both shaped and been shaped by other cultural productions such as capitalism, liberalism, and, of course, imperialism. Anyone who studies another culture cannot possibly escape such a conclusion. Indeed, I think one of the most valuable results of studying other cultures is this kind of insight into one's own. On the other hand, the realization that "history" is a cultural construct that has been used for ends we no longer find palatable is not a legitimate reason to dismiss history entirely. I still see the utility of many of its tools for the deconstruction and reconstruction of the worlds that have gone before us. It is the most useful process I know for finding explanations of why things might be as they are and suggestions for ways to avoid repeating past mistakes. In the process, I believe we are also deconstructing and reconstructing our concept of history itself.

The question of historical analysis of contemporary events, as raised by Donovan and Little, is an interesting one as well. During the last few years of my teaching career, an increasing number of students applied to our graduate program to study what we aging professors felt were topics more appropriate to the departments of political science, sociology, Canadian Studies, and the like. These applications led inevitably to discussions of how old something had to be before it was history. The point was not so much a debate about time as one of method. Privacy laws and archival practices mean that traditional historical research methods become exceedingly difficult to apply to evidence left by recent events (meaning less than fifty to seventy-five years) and

without that source base, historical interpretive techniques are impossible. On the other hand, if you dismiss documentary sources and scholarly detachment as remnants of nineteenth-century ideas about scholarly (or “scientific”) history, then it becomes difficult to argue that a study of the Bloc Québécois or the Somalia inquiry or diamond mining in Denendeh is not a valid undertaking for the historian. When I wrote *Drum Songs*, I did not deal at length with contemporary events partly because I was still operating in the paradigm that suggested such analysis was better left to others. Of course, there were very practical reasons as well. Gathering information for contemporary events is incredibly time-consuming because there is simply so much out there in our information society, and I had already spent more years than I had anticipated on the book. Furthermore, publishers develop anxiety levels in direct proportion to the length of a manuscript, and as it was, the production and financing departments at the press were making very unhappy noises! Practical considerations aside, though, the question of what makes grist for the historian’s mill gets at the heart of how we want to define history. | 9

The question of historical method also leads to the third important issue raised in this forum: oral history and voice. Much ink has been spilled on the subject already, so I would like to contribute just a few brief observations here. First, I completely agree that the Dene voice is rather muted in *Drum Songs*. The fact that I was unable to convey more was one of my biggest disappointments in the book and the primary reason that I sub-titled it *Glimpses of Dene History*. I tried – repeatedly – to interest a variety of people of Dene ancestry in participating. But at the time, people were preoccupied with land claims and pipelines and philosophical debates about self-government; “history” just did not

seem very relevant to anyone. I am pleased to see that the situation has changed across Canada as well as in Denendeh, and history is now being recognized and used as a tool for cultural and political ends by many Aboriginal people. Perhaps I might get a different reception were I to begin the process today. On the other hand, I have begun to wonder whether oral history is really even possible in the ways its theoreticians claim. It is exceedingly difficult to work with living partners in the historical enterprise. One school of thought has it that the researcher must be part of the community, becoming integrated with and experiencing the life of the people whom s/he interviews. I used to think that was a promising idea, until my latest brush with oral history. It involved a community in which my family and I had lived, so I thought I would be ideally placed for some insider conversations. How wrong I was! Unlike my previous experience with *Drum Songs*, I found that many people were quite willing to talk to me, but I soon realized that they were all from a particular circle. They wanted to talk to me because they knew my parents; others avoided me for precisely the same reason. It seems that being too much a part of a community is just as problematic as being an outsider. The circle dividing insider from outsider (or “us” from “them”) just gets smaller and smaller. It saddens me considerably that many people seem to believe that the only human condition we can truly understand is the condition of one – ourselves.

And so I find myself at the end of my scholarly career knowing far less than I did at the beginning. But I am delighted to see that the new generation of scholars as represented in the contributors to this forum and its readers are still asking what I think are fundamentally important questions. And I look forward to

reading the answers you develop in your own work in the years to come.

Kerry Abel, Independent Scholar

Ottawa, Ontario