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Einar Odd Mortensen Sr. with Gerd Kjustad Mortensen, eds.  
Ingrid Urberg & Daniel Sims, *The Fur Trader. From Oslo to Oxford House*, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press 2022,  
ISBN 9781772125986, 224 pp + maps & photos.

It seems implausible: in 1925 a twenty-three-year-old from the vicinity of Oslo, with no expertise with fur and whose image of "North American Indians" was drawn from the Romantic fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, lands a job as a fur trader in Canada, apparently based on the assumption that all Norwegians know about fur (p. 12). After three years, this man returns to Norway and writes account of his experiences for posterity. That unlikely scenario describes the narrative published here. The young man was Einar Odd Mortensen (1902–1968), who spent three winters as a trader in the regions around Oxford House and Pine Bluff in northern Manitoba. The docu-

ments from which this account is derived formed an incomplete narrative written by Mortensen relatively soon after he returned to Norway in 1928, either with an eye to publication or for the entertainment and edification of his family. In the early 2000s, Mortensen's daughter-in-law and son (Gerd Kjustad Mortensen and Einar Odd Mortensen, Jr.) produced a manuscript based on the incomplete memoir, which was published in Norway in 2007 as *Pelshandleren. Mitt liv blant indianere i Nord-Canada 1925–28. The Fur Trader*, the result of further collaboration with Ingrid Urberg, a Scandinavian Studies scholar, and Daniel Sims, a First Nations Studies scholar, comprises an English translation of the manuscript, together with an introduction and annotations. For several reasons, scholars without facility in Norwegian should welcome this English translation of a fur trader's story.

Thanks to the practices of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), there is a remarkably abundant documentary record relating to the history of the fur trade and the history of Indigenous people in present-day northern Canada for more than a century before 1900, but the HBC's records are less abundant for the period thereafter. More importantly, there are few historical documents written from the perspectives of non-HBC fur traders in subarctic and arctic Canada, whether they be small independent traders or representatives of the Revillon Frères, a large international Paris-based company that had a significant presence in northern Canada in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Given that Mortensen and his intended audience were Norwegians, this memoir is least problematically approached as a primary source for research into 1920s–1930s Norwegian *perceptions* of Canada, the fur trade in Canada, and the Indigenous people of northern Manitoba, including some of the Romantic and stereotyped perceptions Mortensen harboured before he arrived in Canada, and the degree to which his perceptions were and were not changed by first-hand experience. Although this memoir was published in the early twenty-first century, it is based on documents written many decades earlier (and minimally edited), and it thus reflects Mortensen's perspectives when he was a young man freshly returned to Norway. Mortensen's derogatory descriptions of Indigenous people were probably typical of the views of many non-Indigenous people of the day in Europe and North America, although scholars should aim for deeper insights than the simplistic characterization of Mortensen's ethnocentric comments as "racist."

Mortensen's account is also valuable because it was intended to explain, from the perspective of someone who was new to the fur trade to an audience entirely unfamiliar with the fur trade, how the fur trade was conducted at the time. For that reason, it reveals aspects of the mundane day-to-day conduct of the fur trade in the 1920s that typical business records do not mention. Scholars who believe that they are able—despite the ethnocentric lens through which Mortensen viewed reality—to extract reliable evidence about the history of the fur trade in northern Manitoba in the 1920s, may find it to be a rich source of evidence—albeit from the perspective of an independent fur trader—that cannot be found elsewhere. For example, although the editors downplay the anecdote, Mortensen obviously wanted his readers to know that he could purchase a pair of moccasins from a woman for a dollar, and sell them to the woman's neighbour for three dollars a few days later. "Indians," he remarked, "do not trade among themselves" (p. 49).

Mortensen's account, interpreted cautiously of course, will also be useful for those seeking to understand Indigenous life in northern Manitoba in the 1920s. Mortensen explicitly stated that he was disappointed that Cree of Manitoba were nothing like the Indians of James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (pp. 57, 60). But he was probably less aware that he was influenced by other European tropes about North American Indigenous people. For example, his comment (p. 60) that "a few isolated tufts of beard are all they can manage," suggests that he was influenced by the stereotype of the effeminate Indian that dates back at least as far as the Enlightenment. The account also shows that Mortensen was influenced by myths of the stoic Indian and the warrior Indian.

On the other hand, many of Mortensen's descriptions of aspects of daily life among the Cree are unvarnished, sometimes in refreshing and sometimes in unsettling ways. Salvage anthropologists of the early twentieth century were so intent on discovering the "pure Indian" of pre-contact, that they typically showed little interest in the lives lived by their informants, sometimes going so far as to examine children's dolls to try to describe the traditional Indigenous material culture. In that regard, Mortensen's observation of Cree habiliments in the 1920s is refreshingly frank. He explained that moccasins were the only "traditional" clothing the Cree wore, although they invariably wore galoshes over their moccasins during the summer (p. 60). While scholars conducted field work into Indigenous languages, most did not mention, as Mortensen did, that most Cree in northern Manitoba could read and write in the Cree syllabics invented by the Methodist missionary James Evans. Interpreting Mortensen's descriptions of Indigenous work habits, alcohol consumption, hygiene, and gender relations would be a fraught endeavour. Mortensen frankly admitted that

if one considers that I come from a country with municipal dental care and school breakfasts for children, ... I will, naturally, only be giving a one-dimensional and biased impression, and a superficial description at that. (p. 60)

Given the dearth of other documents (and lack of documents written by Indigenous people in the region), the Mortensen's narrative, used cautiously, contains useful evidence about Indigenous life in northern Manitoba in the 1920s. In sum, though not unproblematic as a source, Mortensen's story is rich with evidence.

Scholars seeking to wring the most out of this narrative will find contextual information in the introduction and annotations useful. However, the publisher and editors clearly had an audience of non-specialists in mind—the book includes a "Readers Guide and Discussion Questions" but no index—which may explain why parts of the introduction and many of the explanatory annotations are didactic and simplistic. In the end, readers of this journal are likely to be most interested in the fascinating text of the narrative.

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