

THE PEOPLE OF DENENDEH, ETHNOHISTORY OF THE INDIANS OF CANADA'S NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

BY JUNE HELM WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY TERESA S. CARTERETTE AND NANCY O. LURIE.

(IOWA: UNIVERSITY OF IOWA PRESS, 2000. ISBN: 0877457352, \$39.95). CLOTH, 387PP., MAPS, BIBLIO., INDEX.

Reviewed by Camille Bernier, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The People of Denendeh is the culmination of fifty years of detailed research by June Helm among the Dene of the Northwest Territories, Canada. The book is a compilation of self-contained essays drawn from previously published writings; her unpublished field notes and those of her field companions, Nancy O. Lurie and Teresa Carterette; nineteenth century writings; and narratives by several Dene themselves. Helm's objective is "to offer a record of ways of life that, for all of us, grow dimmer as they recede year by year into the past" (p.xi).

The volume is organized into three parts. Part one includes concise analyses of social organization, community and daily life as it existed fifty years ago for the Mackenzie Dene. Helm outlines the routines, rhythms and rigors of seasonal bush living – hunting, gardening and snaring practices, settlement patterns, trading fort congregation, and the economics of the fur market. She considers the intricacy of European-Indian relations, specifically the impact of a fluctuating fur market and the desire for Western goods.

In part two, Helm reviews the history of the Dene from early contact to the stabilization of the fur trade. In the final chapter, she returns to the 1970's with a critical look at Dene-government relations. She demonstrates the complementarity of archival history and oral tradition by interweaving the accounts of missionaries, fur traders, and early explorers – obtained from published and archival sources – with the words of Dene individuals discussing their memories of "the old time way," mission life, and early treaty years. In the final chapter of this section, the author presents the testimony of scores of Dene people given during the 1975-76 hearings of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. Their poignant comments focus primarily on the personal and communal struggles encountered by the Dene following contact and the subsequent imposition of western systems of governance and education. Many Dene reflect on the loss of

self-reliance in the wake of assimilation and lament the dependency fostered by the western system.

In Part three, entitled 'Being Dene,' Helm considers traditional knowledge and customs. She attends to the meaning and manifestation of *in'kon* or power; concerns and practices regarding blood and femaleness; and *nakan*, or 'bad Indians' who are believed to prowl the bush in springtime. Four well-known Dene legends – *Always Walking*, *The Copper Woman*, *The Origin of the Dogribs*, and *The Captive Woman* – are included to impart salient Dene cultural understandings. There is also a detailed discussion of the Dogrib hand game and the tradition of brew drinking.

Helm combines her use of archival materials, tribal oral tradition and histories, and documented accounts of Indian life in the subarctic to shed light on decades of both change and continuity before and after contact. This holistic approach not only provides the reader with an excellent ethnological understanding of the Mackenzie Dene, but also a perspective on the processes of culture change from the standpoint of the *longue dureé* in Dene culture. The essay entitled *Dogrib Oral Tradition as History: War and Peace in the 1820's*, stands out as an exemplary contribution to understanding Indian historicity. The essay synthesizes written historical accounts with the oral accounts of twelve Dogrib individuals underscoring the importance of oral tradition to comprehending and interpreting events of the past.

This book is remarkable for the breadth and depth of the ethnographic research on which it is based. Helm's research activities in the region spanned the period from 1951-1975, providing her with a comprehensive and longitudinal perspective on the Dene. Although the historical run of the text ends with the 1970s, Helm provides current updates on several issues. For example, in part one, detailed discussions of fall caribou hunting in 1820

and in the 1960's is followed with commentary on caribou hunting in 1999 that now can include the use of satellite maps. Helm also adds contextual documentation throughout the book in the form of brief explanatory notes to clarify and enrich the readers understanding.

This corpus of work is very accessible, generally free from fashionable jargon. The essays will undoubtedly be of interest to any anthropologist or historian seeking to understand the Canadian Subarctic, and are also useful to scholars studying North American Indian peoples for the ethnological and ethnohistorical information they provide. In addition, this corpus of work will be of value to anthropologists working farther afield who have an interest in processes of culture change. Finally, Helm's work is a wealth of knowledge for Dene themselves, as it provides tremendous insight into the persistent identities and richly textured lives of their ancestors.