

“I Will Fear No Evil”: Ojibwa-Missionary Encounters Along the Berens River, 1875-1940
by Susan Elaine Gray
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paper.

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Susan Gray, a research associate at the University of Winnipeg and an award-winning scholar of Algonquian history and cultures, has written a new and fascinating book. Rich in history and storytelling, *“I Will Fear No Evil”* is about the Ojibwa and missionary encounters along the Berens River. Covering the years from 1875 to 1940, Gray takes us to life in this remote community situated 270 air kilometres north of Winnipeg. Life is slower here for the Ojibwa, or *Saulteaux*, as they term themselves in French, who live close to the land. But the remoteness does not mean they have not been touched by the outside world and have not known change.

Before contact with the Euro-Canadians, the Natives were hunter-gatherers. They fished the rivers and hunted the woods and meadows for sustenance. Their spirituality was connected to the land, which they deeply respected, and a severing of this connection was unthinkable.

When white colonists came to Canada, their aim was to have missionaries go into the Native communities and convert them to Christianity. There was no thought of preserving the Native culture, a culture that had existed for thousands of years. To colonial eyes, the Indigenous peoples worshipped paganism and the sooner they were converted the better – this was the view of first the Methodists, then the Catholics, who came later. After the influx of colonists, the Indigenous peoples were persuaded to follow an agrarian way of life, a life alien to their political, economic and social structure. Because of the degree of differences, the two worlds collided. The missionaries with their zealous and intrusive message of conversion proved devastating to the Aboriginal cultures. Children pulled from their homes and placed in residential schools underwent humiliating practices. Along with their prayer books, the missionaries brought diseases – smallpox, measles, the Spanish flu of 1918 – and the Natives, having no immunity, perished. Whole communities were decimated by the contagions.

Part of the Ojibwa culture is “to avoid offending others; therefore, putting on a friendly front, suppressing one’s own opinions and being helpful are beneficial” (108). In time the Natives did accept the Christian gospel but they were unwilling to let go of their beliefs in other world spirits, among them the Thunderbirds, the memengwesiwas (small people who live inside rock cliffs) and the bawaagamag (guardian spirits). These were sacred beings to the Natives. As well, the peoples did not wish to end the shaking tent ritual or the drum dances, for they believed the rituals were aids to their spiritual well-being.

Often, especially in times of sickness, when the missionaries’ prayers were of little help, the Natives turned to their spirits. A strange thing took place along the shores of the Berens River: the residents began to question the missionaries. They were not as pliable or acquiescent as first thought. Used to having control of their communities, they wanted to continue this governance.

As the missionaries spent more time in the communities, they started to realize their message of conversion was turning into a battle, that perhaps they had been too rigid in their thinking. Gradually and with much contemplation, the missionaries learned “to bend to Native ways . . .” (61) Gray terms this “fusion of cultural traditions” syncretism (xi). The combination of disparate beliefs then became an introduction in which the teachings of the missionaries and the Ojibwa blended.

To confirm her perspective, Gray uses the stories of the Natives; for example, how a group of Natives displeased with the Methodist minister would cross over to the Catholic church and attend that service, or vice versa, until the missionary could be persuaded that his opinion was not the only one in the community.

In her conclusion, Gray emphasizes that neither the Natives’ nor the missionaries’ voices alone can be accepted as the ultimate truth. She suggests their views be like windows to understanding, that they are “lenses . . . tinted by the colours of individual experience and personality” and that “these lenses continually overlay one another, yielding a myriad of shades and patterns.” (161)

“I Will Fear No Evil” is an important work and not only for academics. Too often materials relating to the Indigenous peoples tend to be insufficient in scope or one-sided, but Gray’s book allows the voices of the missionaries and the Natives to speak for themselves. Her in-depth analysis sheds a new light on the Ojibwa/Saulteaux of Berens River, one that could prove helpful in the healing of other fractured societies.

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.

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