

Overburden: Modern Life on the Iron Range

Aaron Brown

(Duluth: Red Step Press, 2008. 232 p.

Paper, \$16.96.)

As I write this review in late December, I am peering out my window in the snowy Upper Peninsula of Michigan into the backyard that plays host to my small kennel of Alaskan husky sled dogs. An extraordinary sled dog is given the title “An Honest Dog.” Similarly, *Overburden*, Aaron Brown’s chronicle of contemporary life on the Mesabi Iron Range, deserves to be called “An Honest Book.”

Brown’s title may seem mysterious, especially to those who live outside of Minnesota’s Iron Range, but his choice is ideal. *Overburden* describes the discarded red-hued rocks and soil on the Range’s manmade landscape, the layer stripped from the earth to expose what made the region famous: prized iron ore. This raw material fueled the American industrial revolution of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, supplied the cold steel that helped beat back the “Hun” in World War I and the heavy metal that helped the Allies forge victory over fascism in World War II.

Often this overburden is heaped into gigantic, mountain-like masses—the amassed geological relics of an industry, the by-products of human labor, the towering physical features of what is left of a once booming, now busting, mining life. These huge piles, reminders of the industry’s glory days, are analogous to the thousands of people who struggle to exist on the modern Iron Range as the determined cultural, institutional, and social vestiges of the area’s fascinating mining heritage.

Many Minnesotans have relatives who lived, worked, and played on the red-hued soil of the Range. As people moved out of the area during the bust periods, few others paused to think much about what was happening to those who continued the struggle to exist in an area that both American industry and unrelenting time have seemingly discarded. Brown does the thinking for us in this humorous, intimate look at the place he has called home for most of his life. While his love for the Range shows through in *Overburden*, Brown does not let his writing become transfixed with “Hallmark” aspects of the Range. “There has been corruption and cronyism. The early 20th century turned our towns into cauldrons of ethnic and labor violence. Time spent here reveals pockets of contempt for outsiders by a vocal and beligerent minority. Even many good people here fear change and hold dated views on matters of race, culture, and the



world around us.” It is this honest depiction that will endear Brown’s writing to readers. Good or bad, there is just something about the culture, institutions, and people of the Minnesota Iron Range that continues to fascinate, and Brown captures this.

While Brown does a great job of chronicling the cultural and social psychology of “Rangers,” the book should not be taken as a scholarly history. The author does commit some errors, such as his use of “International Workers of the World” for the Industrial Workers of the World, organizers of one of the most significant labor strikes on the Range in 1916. While Brown may trip a bit with history, this is easily forgiven because it is not history that he seeks to uncover; rather, he excels in giving an intimate, up-to-date chronicle of contemporary life in this remarkable place. This book will undoubtedly be an indispensable tool for historians of coming generations to use in examining what happens during the decline and subsequent struggle for existence by a region and its resolute people.

Reviewed by Gary Kaunonen, a social and labor historian currently working on a Ph.D. in rhetoric and technical communication at Michigan Technological University, where he earned his M.S. in industrial archaeology and history. A native Minnesotan, he is the author of The Finns in Michigan and Challenge Accepted: A Finnish Immigrant Response to Industrial America in Michigan’s Copper Country.

Minong—the Good Place: Ojibwe and Isle Royale

Timothy Cochrane

(East Lansing: Michigan State University

Press, 2009. 285 p. Paper, \$24.95.)

Timothy Cochrane’s goal is to rewrite and decolonize the history of the geographic feature now known as Isle Royale. He reveals the indigenous understandings of this island located in Lake Superior, which was used by Ojibwe communities eventually separated by the border between Canada and the United States. Cochrane is thorough, he provides generous footnotes, and his methodology is transparent. His analysis illuminates the complicated relationship between European and Euro-descent peoples and the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes as well as their differing and nuanced relationships with the land.

Cochrane utilizes the classic ethnohistorian’s method: sifting through archival and archaeological material primar-



ily produced by members of the dominant/colonizing society to recreate the lives of indigenous peoples at a certain time and place. His methodology is enriched by personal interviews with key figures, including the descendants of Portage Ojibwe who used the island. Cochrane's book is an excellent example of historical research that has been immeasurably improved by turning to an often-neglected primary source—contemporary indigenous peoples.

Naming can signify a new beginning, a new life, as well as signaling the arrival or imposition of a new authority. Cochrane recognizes the power of naming and devotes most of a chapter to the naming of Minong, which he argues is the Ojibwe designator for the island now known as Isle Royale. Individuals representing government or corporate interests named and mapped the features they observed or learned about second- or third-hand. In most instances, they erased the indigenous peoples' names for places, objects, events, and even for themselves. Minong became Isle Royale and the Ojibwe name was mostly forgotten, to the extent that the meaning of the word *minong* is somewhat obscure. Cochrane and his primary informants conclude that it most closely translates to “the good place,” a conclusion supported by secondary sources.

Cochrane introduces the concept of fakelore—“false folklore appearing in print”—in the last chapter. This would have been more effectively introduced much earlier, as a discussion of fakelore would have added another layer to his analysis of the political, economic, religious, and racial factors leading to the erasure of Minong as a place of importance for Ojibwe. Bungled or corrupt treaty negotiations on the U.S. side shortchanged the North Shore Ojibwe. Some Ojibwe still argue that Minong was never legally ceded, a controversial stance reported by Cochrane, a National Park Service employee, who includes a disclaimer that “the book does not represent an official National Park Service perspective.”

One producer of fakelore has been the National Park Service. To “sell” a park's image as natural to tourists, it has customarily described the lands encompassed either as uninhabited wildernesses or as having been inhabited in the far-distant past by American Indians who lived closely with nature and who could be counted among the natural wonders. Cochrane refers to this park practice while noting that there was a difference with Minong, in part because it was seen as a potential source of copper. A narrative involving the ancient presence of indigenous copper miners existed before the park was conceptualized, so this was not invented by the Park Service, but the narrative did serve multiple purposes. Descriptions of ancient copper miners served to naturalize the exploitation of this resource by non-Indians

in the 1800s and also served to erase more recent Ojibwe uses of Minong by situating non-Western use of the island in the distant past. Cochrane effectively deconstructs misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Ojibwe beliefs, practices, and stories about Minong and about Lake Superior. He turns to a discussion of Ojibwe spirituality, through which he locates Minong at the center of North Shore Ojibwe cosmology, revealing a significant depth of knowledge as well as sensitivity and respect.

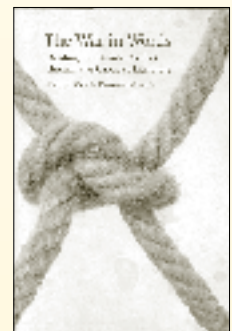
I was disappointed with Cochrane's sketchy description of the founding of the park at Isle Royale. His conclusion is titled “The Good Place Today,” leading the reader to anticipate more detail than is forthcoming. Hopefully, Cochrane will write a sequel developing the conclusion into a full-length book, which would add to a small but growing literature on the relationship between parks and indigenous peoples.

Reviewed by Julie A. Pelletier, associate professor of anthropology and American Indian studies at the University of Minnesota—Morris, a former Indian boarding school that offers an Indian tuition waiver. Her research and applied interests include indigenous identity, Indian gaming, research ethics and methodologies, and the pedagogies of anthropology and American Indian studies. She worked as a park ranger and assistant park manager at Ingham County Parks in Michigan for several years.

The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature

Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 363 p. Cloth, \$60.00.)



In her book, *The War in Words*, Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola delves into what is one of the most hotly contested topics in Minnesota history—the ongoing legacy of the 1862 Dakota War. Illustrated by a knotted rope on the cover, the title has a double meaning, referring to both the *war* in words, as in information about the Dakota War, and the war in *words*, referring to the range of perspectives displayed within the book's narratives themselves.

Early on, Stodola suggests that captivity narratives act as a form of cross-cultural conversation. Acknowledging that non-Dakota voices have dominated historical thought, the book organizes Dakota and non-Dakota narratives into separate segments. We are given a general preface to the

material, a chapter on methodology, and a brief historical perspective on the war, followed by 12 narratives written by European Americans, 12 narratives written primarily by Dakota mixed bloods, and a conclusion.

What interests me in reading this book is the specific context it provides around an event as complex as the 1862 U.S.–Dakota War, especially when early historical accounts favored European American viewpoints. Organizing each narrative within a specific theme provides room for Stodola to comment, or to allow other scholars to comment, on topics such as captivity and cultural stereotypes. Stodola informs us that “reinforcing pejorative, essentially propagandist stereotypes is arguably the most pervasive cultural work the European American accounts performed.” The narratives are placed within the broader context of captivity narratives in general, allowing us to see parallels or, in the case of Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, a writer making an explicit effort to tell a balanced story.

In the preface Stodola shares a personal captivity story from her own Armenian relatives, an anecdote that helps explain why this particular topic has fascinated her through several decades of research. It is clear from the first pages that Stodola has taken great care in crafting a balanced analysis of her material. She quotes from a wide variety of sources and scholars, including well-known Dakota historians and critical writers.

With each narrative, Stodola provides background that helps the reader understand something of the earlier experience of the writer, the possible motives for publishing an account, whether that account changed over time, and if there is reason to suspect editorial intrusion. What she does not do, however, is provide the narratives themselves or even lengthy excerpts. Lacking the first-person narrative for com-

parison, the reader is asked to accept the author’s interpretation without benefit of reading the actual text.

It is challenging, if not impossible, to interpret a historical event as divisive as the U.S.–Dakota War without privileging one side or the other, no matter how deliberately a writer might work toward objectivity. The author serves as a filter between the reader and the material, framing the question and selecting the voices to be heard. In the conclusion, Stodola suggests that all those who took part in the war “clashed over the place they called, or wanted to call, home,” which resulted in multiple forms of displacement. She refers to the thousands of white settlers who left the state following the conflict, and the many Dakota who fled, became culturally conflicted, or served as scouts because they could not bear to leave their homeland. Yet nothing is said about the immense difference between losing one’s homeland, as the Dakota did, and losing a homestead on land that was obtained through coercive treaties, using culturally oppressive means that contributed to the war itself. Nor do we hear of the settlers who benefited from the forcible removal of Dakota from the state, or the hundreds of Dakota who died afterwards at Fort Snelling and Crow Creek from starvation and disease.

While it is true that everyone involved in the war suffered, ongoing efforts at reconciliation must come not only from true understanding, as the conclusion suggests, but must also include justice for the harms that Dakota people have suffered.

Reviewed by Diane Wilson, author of Spirit Car: Journey to a Dakota Past, a family memoir that dates back to the 1862 war. Wilson is the operations director for Dream of Wild Health, a Native-owned farm in Hugo, Minnesota.



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