

Recensions – Book Reviews

HENRY T. LEWIS. *A Time for Burning*. Edmonton: Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, Occasional Publication Number 17. 1982. 62 pages. \$5.00.

This short book reconstructs traditional means of land management practiced by the Algonkian and Dené peoples of Northern Alberta. Its author spent the summers of 1975 to 1977 interviewing elderly men who remembered traditional means of improving landscapes by controlled burning. Controlled burning ended when the forest rangers and RCM police arrived, as late as World War II in some parts of Alberta.

This was very much a project of urgent anthropology, since a number of the elderly men Lewis interviewed died before the book saw print. The author's sense of urgency was no doubt heightened by a scholarly climate of opinion which seldom credits foraging peoples with any sort of resource management. In the popular imagination also, the myth of noble savagery has given place to the Indian as 'ecological hero', who co-exists intimately but *passively* with nature. Lewis has shown commendable persistence in bringing his project to fruition, overcoming practical difficulties and the skepticism of colleagues and public alike.

Let us touch on the author's findings. Lewis found that his subjects used controlled burning to improve the browse available to game animals and livestock, to maintain trails, to open up campsites and homesteads, to improve garden plots, and as a preventive measure to forestall dangerous summer fires. Furthermore, nearly all his informants felt that Northern Alberta's landscape had grown worse since they were forced to stop burning parts of it. They noted that it is now more difficult to travel through the bush, that gardens were less productive, there was less feed for game, livestock and migratory waterfowl, and more blackflies and mosquitoes! Orators nowadays like to declaim on how much Indians can teach the rest of us about living in harmony with nature. Lewis shows that natives indeed have much to teach us on this score, though 'harmony' may be found in the midst of fairly active intervention in the landscape. Author and publisher are to be commended for enlarging our view of resource management among hunting peoples.

Bruce Cox
Carleton University