Liam Frink

A Tale of Three Villages: Indigenous-Colonial Interactions in Southwestern Alaska, 1740–1950. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016. Pp. 169. Hb, \$55.

In the popular imagination of colonial settlers in the “lower forty-eight” contiguous states of the United States, Alaska has been reckoned as “the last frontier”—a remote, “wild” place, rich in natural resources, and, for the enterprising Christian missionary, home to souls for harvesting. The history of Catholic Alaska begins relatively late, following the purchase of the territory from Russia in 1867. More recently, Alaska has become known as a landscape of shame for the Catholic Church, following revelations of child abuse in the Diocese of Fairbanks.

Liam Frink’s study of Yup’ik Eskimo life focuses on a liminal period of transformation that witnesses the first contact with Catholic missionaries along the southwestern Alaskan coastline, and the beginnings of transition to a market-based socio-economic community formation. But Frink is at pains to emphasize that, unlike the once fashionable patronizing narrative standard, Yup’ik people were neither Edenic, timeless, “pristine” beings, nor purely passive victims of colonization. Pre-colonial internal dynamics coupled with regional systems of trade and conflict, laid the foundations for the ways in which colonization was experienced when it eventually came. Much of this was tied to traditional subsistence lifestyles, and the gradual shift towards a cash economy throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It is a foundational premise of this text that intra-indigenous social dynamics are as important to study as indigenous-settler engagement.

The history of coastal Alaska does not begin with the arrival of Europeans, and Frink devotes considerable time to what he calls the “Late Prehistoric Period,” which stretches until 1833 (42). As an archaeologist, Frink stays true to form in his meticulous detailing of Yup’ik geography, architecture, and diet. As a subsistence-based community, much of the social organizing—in terms of gender roles, labor, and domestic life—were deeply enmeshed in questions of food and shelter. But they were not stagnant. The three different villages that the ancestors of modern Chevak inhabited evolved structurally—they *looked* different on the most fundamental levels—to reflect deeper changes in group identity.

In some ways, *A Tale of Three Villages* really is the history of the geographic region itself. There is exceptional detail given, for instance, about the construction of Yup’ik housing units, but relatively little about humans, except insofar as they are present in these settlements. It is, in this way, a hyper-local history. Rather than devoting much attention to larger indigenous histories in the area

we now know as Alaska, or the larger Catholic missionary project, characters come in and out of focus depending on their residence within the villages. John Fox, S.J., who oversaw multiple migrations of the church community and founded the Little Sisters of the Snow, takes center stage for much of a chapter, but as soon as he transfers deeper into the Alaskan interior, he disappears altogether. Moreover, there is scant attention to the subject of child abuse, which shadows the history of Catholicism in this region, as elsewhere—even if the most well-documented incidents occurred outside the timeline constraints of this study. If anything, *A Tale of Three Villages* leaves the reader wanting more. We learn much about the exterior lives of community members, but are left to infer much of the interior. Perhaps this is a limitation based on archival scarcity, but it is fascinating to imagine.

Frink's history foregrounds the perspective of the Yup'ik community itself. In this way, it is the opposite of a conventional study of colonial history, which categorizes indigenous lives as worthy of commentary only insofar as they feature in the manifest destiny triumphalist narrative. This text is remarkable in its capacity for descriptive visualization of pre-industrial Yup'ik lifeways. And while colonialism is certainly not minimized in this narrative, it is complexified, by attending to the tides of indigenous community life prior to and throughout Christian proselytizing.

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