

The following is a brief revue of the representative published literature focusing on the Oblates of the Mary Immaculate, operating in Western/Northern Canada, with a discussion of its utility for environmental historians.

**Mid Snow and Ice: The Apostles of the North-West.** By Father Pierre Duchaussois, O.M.I., Litt. D. (trans. Father Thomas Dawson, O.M.I.). London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne Limited, 1923. xiii + 328 pp.

This book sets out to popularize the trials, tribulations, and successes of various Oblates of the Mary Immaculate in their quest to spread Christianity and ‘civilization’ throughout what would become western and northern Canada. Temporally, the work addresses a broad period of Canadian history, from the early explorers and fur traders to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. The work fluctuates between travel narrative, heroic adventure story, and anthropological examination of the ‘savage’ races. Although steeped heavily in missionary-themed rhetoric, the work provides vivid descriptions of western Canadian and arctic environments, as well as interactions with various indigenous bands and tribes. Weather, natural landscape, and meteorological phenomena figure prominently in the book, although always as a backdrop to the missionary narrative. The study is relatively devoid of precise observations and chronology, and its utility for environmental historians is limited to superficial observations on various environmental phenomena and vivid descriptions of the landscape.

**Fifty Years in Western Canada: Being the Memoirs of Rev. A. G. Morice.** By D. L. S. and A. G. Morice. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1930. x + 267 pp.

*Fifty Years in Western Canada* is the biographical account of the work of Reverend Morice during his five decades working in western Canada. This piece begins with various background information on the celebrated Father—birth, early experiences with the Church, training for missionary work—before he began his westward journey. As with all Oblate literature, the interaction with ‘savage’ tribes and efforts to ‘civilize’ remain the dominant theme. The memoirs, however, are replete with dramatic descriptions of western Canadian landscapes, including the impressive geological, hydrological, and atmospheric features. The hardships of travel, and despair of missionaries looking out across “bleak” northern landscapes, figure prominently in the narrative. Temporally and geographically, the volume covers the expansive work of Reverend Morice, and attention to detail and specific observations/measurements are omitted. Important to note, much of A. G. Morice’s *Au Pays de l’Ours Noir* (Paris: Delhomme et Briguet, 1897) are reprinted verbatim in the later section of the book.

**Thawing Out the Eskimo,** By A. G. Morice. Boston: Society for the Propagation of the Faith, 1943. 241 pp.

Whereas *Mid Snow and Ice* provided a grand narrative of western missionary work, and *Fifty Years in Western Canada* addressed the broad scope of an individual career, *Thawing Out the Eskimo* is much more spatially- and temporally-limited study. Focused solely on the Inuit residing on the western shore of Hudson’s Bay, the narrative

recounts the prolonged and taxing efforts of a select group of missionaries to convert the indigenous peoples. Owing to the narrative's limited geographic range, a more comprehensive image of the landscape emerges in *Thawing Out the Eskimo*. Particularly informative are the discussions surrounding the environment's effect on the mission—the seasonal hunting/fishing patterns of the local community, the problems associated with constructing European-style buildings in a northern climate, the nature of early shipping/communication on Hudson's Bay, and the particularly fierce storms that plague the coast to this day. *Thawing Out the Eskimo* echoes the other works in its omission of detailed observations and measurements of local meteorological data, but the limited geographic range of the book allows a much more intimate understanding of the local environment.

**From the Great River to the Ends of the Earth: Oblate Missions to the Dene, 1847-1921.** By Martha McCarthy. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1995. xxiii + 269 pp.

McCarthy's book *From the Great River* is a modified and expanded version of her 1981 Doctoral dissertation, *The Missions of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to the Athapaskans 1846-1870: Theory, Structure and Method*, written at the University of Manitoba and submitted in 1981. The study focuses on the 'complex phenomenon' of social and cultural interaction that occurred with the arrival of the Oblates in Canada's northwest. McCarthy concentrates on the efforts of the Oblates to bring civilization and Christianity to a 'savage' corner of the world, highlighting the composition and tactics of the missions. The study emphasizes aspects of social, economic, and cultural transmission, resiliency, and syncretism stemming from the interaction between the Oblates and the Dene. What emerges is a remarkably human picture of the spread of Catholicism in the region, complete with the challenges (indigenous shamans, the HBC, and Church Missionary Society) and successes (baptisms, local support, translations of the Bible into the Dene language). *From the Great River* attempts to transcend the 'standard' missionary accounts of the northwest, and indeed, provides a new historiographical perspective to subject. The study thoughtfully engages Dene oral histories, and situates the French missionaries firmly within territory that has previously been interpreted as almost exclusively Anglican.

Most notable for environmental historians, McCarthy engages in a thorough examination of Oblate records. The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate were one of the few groups operating in Canada's northwest during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that left written sources—it should be noted, however, that these sources are now scattered throughout numerous archives across western and central Canada. The geographic and temporal reach of the Oblates were second only to the Hudson's Bay Company, and their records present an often-overlook source for historians to draw upon. Most missions created a *codex historicus* that recorded daily events, including meteorological observations, comments on Native and Métis bands in the area, and general observations regarding life in the isolated settlement outposts of the region. Similarly, most Oblates (and some lay personnel) kept journals detailing travel, trade, and interaction with groups throughout the northwest. Written almost exclusively in French,

these records are well-preserved, accessible, and contain valuable information for the inquiring historian.

McCarthy relies heavily on Oblate records in her examination of cultural transmission and cultural interaction that occurred between the Dene and the missionaries. Using the Oblate records, the author is able to draw upon first-hand accounts of the (often awkward) encounters that shaped initial Euroamerican-Native interaction. For example, she highlights the initial Dene disdain for Europeans unable to hunt and trap for their own sustenance, as well as the massive problems associated with Dene and Catholic conceptions of marriage and monogamy. Similarly, the author uses Oblate records to describe the 'harsh' and often foreboding climate the missionaries were now exposed to. McCarthy's work benefits from addressing the primary source notations of these tensions in the Oblate journals, instead of relying solely on (often) outdated anthropological and ethnohistorical studies. The end result is a unique glimpse into a distinctive period of Canadian history.