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*Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their
Representations* (review)

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(Review)

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cultural force in northern Labrador” (61); Germans made important contributions to mapping the region and documenting its flora and fauna (54); German “brew-masters deserve credit for the high quality still attributed to Newfoundland beers” (170); “nothing but the best and most up-to-date technology” in the form of electric generators were supplied by Germans (76), but the world wars erased “the memory of the pre-World War I community’s existence and contributions” (304). Here Bassler reaches back to the model of earlier ethnic histories that felt the compelling need to justify their ethnic group’s place in the Canadian story.

Vikings to U-Boats adds an important chapter to the history of Newfoundland and Labrador. Its focus on a small colony of the British Empire that eventually became part of Canada also sheds new light on the German-Canadian story. Particularly important for Canadian history is its analysis of how media-generated fear jaded public memory as it related to a small minority in a specific local environment, and how that fear affected that minority as it came to influence the workplace and public policy.

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Ute Lischke and David T. McNab, eds. *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2005. 377 pp. Bibliography. \$34.95 sc.

Walking a Tightrope constitutes a remarkably unified presentation for a book of readings. Primarily based on information derived from eastern Canada, thirteen of the seventeen contributors live in that region. Two contributors are located at institutions in the United States, one at the First Nations University of Canada, and one at the University of Turku in Finland. One of the contributors, Olive Dickason, represents both East and West with her academic writings.

Walking a Tightrope begins with a poem, “Goodbye, Wild Indian,” by Lenore Keeship-Tobias, in which she expresses the hope that negative stereotypes of Canada’s Indigenous people will soon vanish. The poem is followed by three major parts of the book: a) Reflections on Walking a Tightrope (five chapters); b) Historical Representations (five chapters); and c) Literary and Cinematic Representations (four chapters). The book is an attempt to update perceptions of Canada’s First Nations in a variety of literary sectors, many of the articles referring to or building on Daniel Francis’ *The Imaginary Indian* of 1992. In the preface the editors express the hope that the Canadian literary community has passed the previously held dualism of “Good

Indians” versus “Bad Indians.” A decade ago the notion of Good Indians simply referred to those who remained colonized, civilized, and peaceful. Bad Indians were those who “were involved in such actions as blockades and resistance out of actions of peace — to protect their lands and other Earth” (xvii).

The first two chapters of *Walking a Tightrope* by Drew Hayden Taylor and Philip Bellfy set the stage, albeit in a light-hearted, non-academic manner. Chapter 3, by David Newhouse, emphasizes the need for academics to recognize the importance of oral tradition in gathering data from Aboriginal communities. This concern is echoed in several later pieces as well. Chapter 4, in fact, constitutes a collection of interviews with the author’s aunts in Point Anne, Ontario. This section concludes with a piece by Mark Dockstator discussing Aboriginal representations in the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

The second collection of five essays offers more substance, at least from an academic point of view. Olive Dickason starts with a summary-type essay regarding historical representations of Aboriginal people, followed by an analysis of nineteenth-century perspectives by Karl Hele. In the next essay Winona Wheeler is unnecessarily unkind when she uses terms like “anemic” (192) and “colonialist intellectual hegemony...condescension” (206) in describing J. R. Miller’s historical biography of Chief Big Bear. But the best is yet to come; this is in the form of an essay by Stephen Bocking (chapter 9) entitled “Scientists and Evolving Perceptions of Indigenous Knowledge in Northern Canada.” Bocking makes a number of significant statements about changing attitudes about Indigenous knowledge in the scientific community. The section concludes with an essay by Dennis Bartels and Alice Bartels featuring a series of interviews with individuals from the Mi’kmaq community appropriately entitled, “Mi’kmaq Lives: Aboriginal Identity in Newfoundland.” Once again the validity of oral tradition is documented.

The four final chapters of *Walking a Tightrope* center on cinematic and literary representations of Canada’s Native people. In the first essay, editors Lischke and McNab describe representations of Aboriginal people in East German films and Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse analyzes film about the Kwakwaka-wakw (formerly Kwakiutl) people. Bernie Harder discusses the poetry of Anishinabe writer Armand Ruffo (chapter 13) and Janne Korkka focuses on the portrayal of Native people in the historical fiction of Rudy Wiebe. Apparently Native people come off quite well in Wiebe’s novels.

This is a fairly easy book both to read and to digest. Contributors have generally employed a variety of techniques to keep the reader’s attention. The easy-to-read print is an added bonus. Anyone interested in catching up on literary portrayals of Canada’s Eastern First Nations may want to spend some time with this book.

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