Canadian Military History

Volume 28 | Issue 2 Article 5

10-2-2019

Review of "Renatus' Kayak: A Labrador Inuk, an American G.I. and a Secret World War II Weather Station" by Rozanne Enerson Junker

Isabel Campbell

Rozanne Enerson Junker. *Renatus' Kayak: A Labrador Inuk, an American G.I. and a Secret World War II Weather Station.* Gatineau, Quebec: Polar Horizons, 2017. Pp. 178.

As the title hints, this book was inspired by a seal skin kayak model built by Renatus Tuglavina, a Labrador Inuk. Rozanne Junker began researching this book after receiving the model from her elderly uncle, Elwood "Woody" Belsheim. Many years before, when Woody was serving as an American radio operator stationed in Hebron, Labrador, Renatus had given Woody the model as a gift.

This book traces a serendipitous journey of research, closely following the lives of the two main characters, Woody and Renatus. Woody, born to a North Dakota farming family during the Depression, lost his mother at age ten, and later worked in construction before joining the military during the Second World War. With good technical skills, he proved well suited to his posting to the isolated weather station in Labrador during 1944-45. There he met Renatus, the Inuk hunter, sealer, and leader who created the kayak model. In his younger years, Renatus had led an Inuit uprising in 1933. He and fellow "rascals" broke into the Hudson's Bay store several times to steal goods in protest over stringent Hudson's Bay Company policies which had made it difficult for hunters to obtain ammunition (p. 63). As a result of these crimes, Renatus served two months of hard labour in the Newfoundland Twillingate jail, but returned to Hebron well fed and celebrated as a hero among his people.

Junker does a remarkable job describing these two men's lives, including short contextual histories of Northern Labrador and of the global war which broke out and brought these two unlikely companions together. She includes touching, relevant details about their families and communities, and especially about Hebron before and after its tragic resettlement in 1959. While this work is a fascinating example of microhistory, utilising a narrow focus to throw light upon a larger experience, it is not without some surprising flaws.

Notable scholars, such as Steven High, Kenneth S. Coates, William Morrison, and others, have documented and analysed the impacts of global economic changes as well as the American military

presence in Canada and elsewhere.[1] These standard sources might have provided a helpful constructive framework for broader analysis of the particular lives presented here. The transformations wrought by colonial influences and military installations were part of a global process, something not fully explored within the confined focus of this particular volume. Similarly, the recent historiographical trend in the history of emotions, which addresses cultural variations, might also have added some academic depth to this short piece.[2] Some of the insightful quotes about cultural tensions and disagreements lack academic analysis which might give them greater meaning. At times, parts of the book seem merely anecdotal and slightly disconnected from the whole.

An important sub-text covers the love story between Woody and Renatus' daughter, Tabea "Harriot" Tuglavina. Harriot appears in the book almost wholly through the white masculine gaze of her lover. Woody was just twenty-two years old when he met the eighteen year old Harriot. Although he had many girlfriends, she became his first lover and he felt like a part of the Tuglavina family. Harriot was already pregnant when they met and she gave birth to a healthy boy only five months later. There is little independent evidence about Harriot's perceptions of the American presence in her life and its place among her other relationships and deep connections within the Inuit community. Unlike most in the community, the Americans had a good supply of condoms. Woody likely used them because Harriot never had a child with him which might have created an enduring connection between them. As it was, the relationship did not last long.

[1] See, for example, Steven High, *Base Colonies in the Western Hemisphere* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Steven High, *Occupied St. John's: A Social History of a City at War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); Kenneth Coates and W.R. Morrison, *Land of the Midnight Sun: A History of the Yukon*, 2nd Edition (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); and Kenneth S. Coates, *A Global History of Indigenous Peoples: Struggle and Survival* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[2] Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49, no. 2 (2010): 237-265; Susan J. Matt, "Recovering the Invisible: Methods for the Historical Study of the Emotions," in *Doing Emotions History*, Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 41-53; and William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Junker generally accepts Woody's romanticised version of the relationship at face value, painting Harriot as a kind, generous woman who likely pined for Woody after he left. Junker touches upon Woody's underlying guilt and his end-of life curiosity about Harriot and Renatus as he looked back and wondered what had happened to them all. Junker emphasises that Woody had no choice but to leave when he was reposted in August 1945. She does not consider that he might have chosen to return to Labrador after the war or to have followed up on the relationship with Harriot through various other means. According to him, "I always hoped she would marry a guy who truly loved her and would give her a good life" (p. 108). There was, however, no such Cinderella ending for Harriot or her family.

Unbeknownst to Woody who had moved on to establish his own career and family in the western United States, Harriot gave birth to a daughter in 1947. Following the norms of her culture, her first two children before marriage were adopted within her maternal family. She married some months after this second birth and had two more children with her Inuk husband. Junker carefully acknowledges the cultural practices which welcomed all births, especially in view of the high infant mortality rate. She also reveals many negative impacts of various colonial contacts upon Inuit life and health, while allowing us tantalising glimpses into traditional Inuit lives and the transformations wrought on communities subjected to factors beyond local control.

With determination, imagination, and resources perhaps not easily available to her uncle, Junker tracked down the Renatus family and uncovered a series of tragic deaths.[3] Renatus died less than a year after Woody left, leaving behind a widow with five children. Harriot herself died in 1953 during childbirth with her fourth child. All of Harriot's children had died. The two from her marriage died in early childhood from exposure to infectious diseases introduced to the north by white visitors. The other two survived the relocation of Hebron. Her first son, Joseph K.A. Tuglavina, died "at age 51, of cancer abetted by alcoholism" (p. 128). Her daughter died of severe trauma to the head in 1982. Junker leaves no stone unturned in

[3] However, Woody could have written to the Moravian missionary serving in Hebron after his departure from Labrador. While this missionary disapproved of the American influence, he acted as a translator and carried out supportive tasks, including successfully filling one of Woody's teeth during his posting.

tracking down these events and while we learn little about how this last death occurred, other details about alcoholism, domestic violence, and social disruptions paint a dismal picture of Inuit life among the Hebron relocation survivors.

The book itself is simply written. I read it the first time in a single night, unable to stop turning its pages, and driven to find out more. However, it should be read along with broader studies about the impacts of globalisation and militarisation upon Indigenous culture, for Renatus' kayak represents something far larger than one elderly man's romanticised memories and another's creative endeavour. Rather, it represents a lost world and the book, despite the author's fruitful and impressive labours, does not allow us to recapture the voices of the women, children, and others whose words have disappeared.

ISABEL CAMPBELL, DIRECTORATE OF HISTORY AND HERITAGE