Book Reviews

MacLaren, I. S. 2024. *Paul Kane's Travels in Indigenous North America: Writings and Art, Life and Times*. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press. Pp. 2424. 4 vols. ISBN 9780228017479, Hardcover $450 CAN.

In the years 1845–1848, the Toronto artist Paul Kane traveled extensively through the many Indigenous homelands of what is now known as the upper Great Lakes, the Canadian prairies, Rocky Mountains, and the Pacific Northwest. In this four-volume set, Kane scholar I. S. MacLaren assembles for the first time the two stages of Kane's manuscript that resulted in his 1859 published work, *Wanderings of an Artis*t (WA): transcriptions of his field notebooks (FN) and the draft manuscript (DMS) that wove Kane's notes into the coherent narrative that would become the published text, also reproduced in these volumes.[1] Following the stages of text is commentary by MacLaren, complemented by Kane's field sketches, watercolors, and studio oil paintings as well as images of some of the objects Kane collected during his travels. Kane has loomed large in Canadian cultural memory, primarily as a painter of Indigenous peoples and western landscapes, but MacLaren's primary focus in *Paul Kane's Travels in Indigenous North America* is the production of Kane's text. WA is the central organizing principle of the volumes which run chronologically and are broken into chapters, each corresponding with chapters in WA.

I agreed to review this book as the summer began, and although I had the great privilege to receive a physical copy of this beautifully designed, printed, and bound, full-color set, at over 25 pounds (12 kg), *Paul Kane's Travels* was not conducive to lugging along on a camping trip or riverside outing. Nevertheless, I found myself carrying the books with me as I traveled through my home state of Washington, following the Columbia River and then north along the Cowlitz River towards Puget Sound. As I retraced much of Kane's route through the region, I delighted in reading passages corresponding to the places he passed through and appreciated MacLaren's careful synthesis of sources to reconstruct the mid-nineteenth-century Pacific Northwest.

1. I am following MacLaren's abbreviation scheme in this review.

This meticulous attention to the places Kane travelled through is key, as MacLaren seeks to understand how Kane the travelling artist became an agent of empire, "effac[ing] the local and particular" and acting as purveyor of the "monocultural 'brown' representations of nature [. . .] the monolingualism and monoculturalism with which imperial and colonial writing is invested" (1.32), producing stock "Five-Vs *indians*" (MacLaren's shorthand for the predominant literary tropes associated with Indigenous peoples in Kane's time: vicious, vain, violent, vengeful, vanishing)[2] in place of the great variety of Indigenous worlds Kane passed through. How did the wild and wooly Kane — an autodidact without formal education, who spelled phonetically and painted portraits for money, a raconteur with a possible Irish "gift of gab", the Kane of his field notes and sketches — become in the eyes of metropolitan elites the Victorian traveler gentleman and an ethnographic authority?

Other questions animate MacLaren's commentary. One is of authorship: who is responsible for the text that became published in WA, the 1859 book attributed to Kane? The second is of authenticity: how faithfully do Kane's sketches, studio paintings, and texts both published and unpublished represent the actual people and places he encountered? Following Kane close to the ground, MacLaren digs deep into regional historiographies, ethnohistorical insight, and comparisons with the work of Kane's contemporaries — George Catlin, for example — without losing sight of the broader frameworks of understanding in which Kane was operating, including the "aesthetic of elsewhere" imposed by imperial travelers that ignored local / historical / cultural particularity in order to incorporate distant places into the framework of empire (1.33). Attention to local detail helps us see how Kane produced knowledge, how he translated what he observed in diverse Indigenous homelands through his own worldview, and how this was again transformed through the aesthetics of empire: sublime nature and the Noble Savage.

The organization of *Paul Kane's Travels*, placing the various stages of Kane's textual and artistic production side-by-side, is also MacLaren's methodology. MacLaren's purpose behind this method is not to find a coherent Kane, the "real" Kane behind the chimera of national icon. Indeed, by "placing on view for the first time three stages of a complex narrative, *Paul Kane's Travels* disturbs more than it orders the artist's verbal

2. MacLaren follows Ojibwe scholar Gerald Vizenor's lowercase "indian" "to refer and draw attention to the constructedness of representations in word or image of Native North Americans" (1.xvii).

identity and throws into question his reliability as a source of knowledge about Native Americans" (1.xxii). As Ted Brasser (Métis / Niitsitapi / Nêhiyawak), who worked with MacLaren on the Great Lakes and Prairie / Plains sections of the project, explains, while Kane "takes one down a 'lengthy trail of deceptions' [. . .] familiarity with that path 'enable[s] us to discern the unexpected and complex interplay of sketches, field notes, studio paintings, and published text'" (1.52).

MacLaren lays out this path for the reader. Each chapter of *Paul Kane's Travels* corresponds to a chapter in WA. After a brief synopsis of the chapter ahead, the FNs are presented: often unadorned and pithy descriptions of people, places, and events written during Kane's travels. Following the FNs are transcriptions of the DMS, penned by at least two different scribes, neither of whom were Kane (or his wife Harriet Clench Kane) and who remain unidentified to this day. MacLaren's transcriptions of both the FN and DMS include notes describing the material conditions of the notebooks and flag when the handwriting — and thus authorship — changed in the case of the DMS. The published work, WA, is then presented in facsimile inlays giving the impression that a yellowed copy of the book itself is embedded within the pages.

Following the presentation of Kane's texts, MacLaren then proceeds, page by page through WA, deconstructing the text, reconstructing the history, and going deep into the many worlds in which Kane found himself during his sojourn. This presentation allows students of Kane and his life and times to focus on whatever aspects of the production of the text is relevant to their research. Additionally, readers can make their own observations and draw their own conclusions regarding the discrepancies between the FN, DMS, and WA and take or leave the extended commentary by MacLaren that follows.

MacLaren's page-by-page analysis and contextual framing assemble a cornucopia of relevant resources, including rich bibliographic information for those wanting to study particular places like the Red River Settlement, the Northern Rockies, or the Columbia Plateau or particular topics like the day-to-day life of voyageurs, Métis buffalo hunting, or the social world of the lower Columbia River as it shifted from a fur trade world to one of USAmerican (MacLaren's neologism) settlement. These volumes are thus better suited to be used as reference books than as a work to be read front to back.

Although the format of these volumes is not conducive to a coherent narrative (beyond the one imposed on Kane's travels in WA), MacLaren provides a major contextual insight, binding these volumes together

through a common refrain. The time that elapsed between these three iterations of Kane's account is of crucial importance. MacLaren points out that in the time between Kane's actual travels in the mid-to-late 1840s and the publication of *Wanderings of an Artist* in 1859, significant demographic, economic, and sociocultural changes took place. This ten-plus-year gap saw major shifts in attitudes towards Indigenous peoples: from the "noble savage" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the "Five-Vs *indians*" of the latter nineteenth. In geopolitics: Britain relinquished its claim to Oregon and USAmerican settlers began pouring into the Willamette Valley. In scientific culture: by the mid-1850s there was a growing emphasis on objective and detached observation.

MacLaren sees these historical shifts as both complicating a clear view of the production of WA but also explaining the broader transformations that occurred between the FN / portrait log (PL), the DMS, and WA / studio portraits. The transformation of Kane's work indexes these broader historical changes as both a product of them *and* producing a knowledge presenting these changes as natural and inevitable. As MacLaren explains, "There was cultural capital in documenting in image and word not just 'vanishing' peoples but also a vanishing age. North America was acquiring the antique varnish that its settlers craved even as the Myth of Progress steamed 'civilization' onward. Kane's book added more such varnish" (1.118). Instead of "discovering" new places, the Kane of WA was doing the work of providing a prehistory of Western Canada (and to a lesser extent, US settlement in the Pacific Northwest) in which Indigenous peoples would disappear with the inevitable progress of civilization.

Ethnography, which was congealing into a systematic discipline by the mid-nineteenth century, was central to naturalizing this myth of the disappearing Indian. Kane did not embark on his tour of the west as an aspiring ethnographer, yet his section on Chinookan people of the lower Columbia comes the closest to resembling ethnographic writing and has been widely mined, often uncritically, for ethnographic information by historians of the region.[3] While MacLaren does consult classic histories on

3. Although Kane gathered his ethnographic knowledge secondhand, his self-portrayal in WA as an eyewitness, MacLaren argues, brought his stamp of authority to the text. Discrepancies between the handwritten accounts and Kane's published work matter, not just to help us understand how he was transformed from a rough raconteur into a gentleman traveler and genteel artist, but because they might have real world consequences for contemporary Indigenous peoples. For example, in the FN and DMS, Kane accurately identifies a village near Fort Victoria on what is now Vancouver Island,

the lower Columbia, early twentieth-century anthropological works, and the expertise of Indigenous knowledge holders, he misses an opportunity to engage with work on Chinookan, Salishan, and Sahaptin worldviews that could have helped readers see the gap between Euro–Euroamerican perceptions of *Five-Vs indians that* Kane's oeuvre helped to establish (and that continue to echo through scholarship) and how diverse groups of Indigenous people understood power, authority, human-nonhuman relationships, and the source of law.

This lack of engagement with Indigenous worldviews is reflected in the occasional use of past tense to describe Indigenous practices. For example, First Salmon Ceremonies are not something of the past but continue to structure the cultural, spiritual, and political life of Chinookan and other Indigenous nations of the Pacific Northwest. This use of past tense, as well as uncritically quoting ethnohistorians' description of the Ceremony as "Shrouded in spirituality" (quoting Joseph Dupris) or as "ritual behaviours tend[ing] to cluster around economically important animals", (quoting Robert Boyd) misses the fundamental place salmon have had and continue to have as relatives and treaty partners with humans — part of political and legal structures beyond mere "resources" for survival or part of a vague spiritual patina dressing up economic necessity (2.447–48). Seeing it thusly would have helped to make the "Indigenous North America" referred to in the book's title more three-dimensional. Still, the objective of MacLaren's book is to follow Kane through his travels and his meticulous compilation of sources around every place, event, object, or person depicted in Kane's texts or images, including otherwise hard to find anthropological or ethnohistorical sources, can be of use to those who wish to apply Indigenous ontological or epistemological frameworks to them.

And this is precisely what MacLaren sets out to do: "preparing the ground" for Indigenous scholars "by establishing a more complex understanding about Kane's travels and about his writings, sketches and paintings" (51). He succeeds in creating such a source book and takes care to consult Indigenous scholars and knowledge-keepers when he can, to

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British Columbia, as a Songhees village, but WA describes it as Klallam. This discrepancy became important in a 2006 land rights case in which the Songhees and Esquimault / Xwsepsum First Nations needed to prove past occupancy of the village site. Expert witnesses knew about the FN and DMS and using these as evidence, they were able to convince the BC and Canadian governments that the "eyewitness account", not the derivative book (even though published at the metropolitan center, the "irreproachable centre of all things known in the mid-nineteenth century") held the greater authority (1.60).

provide Indigenous place names, and to tease out the archival traces of real Indigenous peoples buried under the patina of "Five-Vs *indians*" and Noble Savages. To truly do justice to the Indigenous North America of the mid-nineteenth century, MacLaren would have had to produce some 40 four-volume sets, each rooted in the unique perspective of each Indigenous nation that Kane met in his travels.

The satisfaction I gained from reading the sections of these volumes in the particular places to which they refer as a historian of the Pacific Northwest and a settler there, speaks to the broad uses these volumes can have for scholars working in a variety of regions, peoples, and topics covered by Kane's travels. In addition to their utility for Indigenous scholars or those that work in Indigenous histories, these volumes can be useful to environmental historians. MacLaren pays close attention to the environmental changes Kane was often observing firsthand and the attitudes towards nonhuman nature projected onto the landscapes Kane traveled through (like depictions of Indigenous peoples, nonhuman beings and landscapes were transformed through the process of publication and studio rendering). These volumes can be of use to those working in animal studies as MacLaren provides extended discussions on animal encounters and their representations in Kane's and his contemporaries' work: bison, wolves, bears, and moose all make appearances. For those working on areas now bisected by the US-Canadian border, these volumes bring together archives often separated into national designations.

This is obviously a labor of love and great care — a gift of a scholar's life's work. And by love, I mean a commitment and a curiosity to get closer to the complexity of his subject. Rather than a simple hagiography, MacLaren seems driven by a hunch that the Kane of his field notes is much stranger than the Victorian gentleman conveyed by WA and while the former figure may always be elusive, the production of Kane-as-gentleman-traveler can be glimpsed through the different stages of the texts attributed to him. One particular anecdote illustrates MacLaren's project well. At The Pas (in what is now known as Manitoba), Kane convinced a Nehiyaw (Cree) man to share the contents of his otter skin medicine bundle, which Kane notes were "to depe for my comprehension" (2.140). In this short phrase, the Kane of the FNs displays humility, a willingness to admit that he does not know. By contrast, Kane of the WA describes the contents of the medicine bundle as "perfectly incomprehensible", a much more dismissive attitude, "a hint, without admitting as much, that the persona has no interest in knowing more" (2.192). MacLaren's close

attention to these small deviations between Kane's manuscripts is where much of the value of *Paul Kane's Travels* lies. Though these details may seem insignificant, when accumulated, they construct a different Kane than the one that too many scholars since have taken for granted as the gentleman traveler, the detached observer, the authoritative voice incorporating the peripheries into the metropole.

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