

## “Jean Barman — Vernacular Historian”

Heather Devine

Volume 27, numéro 2, 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040568ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040568ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce document

Devine, H. (2016). “Jean Barman — Vernacular Historian”. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 27(2), 136–146. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040568ar>

### Résumé de l'article

*Au cours de la dernière année, plusieurs nouvelles publications d'excellente qualité se sont focalisées sur l'histoire des communautés canadiennes-françaises métissées de l'Ouest canadien et du nord-ouest du Pacifique. L'un de ces livres, French Canadians, Furs and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest de Jean Barman, mérite une attention particulière en raison du fait que son auteure a recherché et utilisé avec brio des voix « vernaculaires » comme sources historiques. C'est pourquoi on qualifie parfois Jean Barman d'historienne « vernaculaire » ou populaire. Qu'est-ce que l'histoire vernaculaire? Est-ce le produit d'une méthodologie ou d'une vision du monde? En outre, une approche vernaculaire de l'histoire peut-elle aider les historiens à se frayer un chemin dans le champ de plus en plus politisé des études autochtones? L'auteure de l'article, poussant la réflexion dans ce sens, partage avec Jean Barman quelques expériences personnelles pouvant illustrer la complexité des questions entourant aujourd'hui la pratique de l'histoire autochtone.*

## “Jean Barman — Vernacular Historian”

HEATHER DEVINE

### *Abstract*

*Over the past year, several excellent new publications focused on the histories of mixed-race French-Canadian communities in western Canada and the Pacific Northwest. Of these books, Jean Barman's French Canadians, Furs and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest merits special attention, because the author has successfully sought out, and integrated, vernacular voices as historical sources. And for this reason, Jean Barman is sometimes referred to as a “vernacular,” or grassroots historian. What is vernacular history? Is this genre a product of methodology or of one's worldview? And can a vernacular approach to history help scholars navigate the increasingly politicised environment of indigenous studies? The author reflects on these questions, by sharing some of her personal experiences with Jean Barman that illustrate the complexity of the issues surrounding indigenous historical practice today.*

### *Résumé*

*Au cours de la dernière année, plusieurs nouvelles publications d'excellente qualité se sont focalisées sur l'histoire des communautés canadiennes-françaises métissées de l'Ouest canadien et du nord-ouest du Pacifique. L'un de ces livres, French Canadians, Furs and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest de Jean Barman, mérite une attention particulière en raison du fait que son auteure a recherché et utilisé avec brio des voix « vernaculaires » comme sources historiques. C'est pourquoi on qualifie parfois Jean Barman d'historienne « vernaculaire » ou populaire. Qu'est-ce que l'histoire vernaculaire? Est-ce le produit d'une méthodologie ou d'une vision du monde? En outre, une approche vernaculaire de l'histoire peut-elle aider les historiens à se frayer un chemin dans le champ de plus en plus politisé des études autochtones? L'auteure de l'article, poussant la réflexion dans ce sens, partage avec Jean Barman quelques expériences personnelles pouvant illustrer la complexité des questions entourant aujourd'hui la pratique de l'histoire autochtone.*

## Introduction

Over the past year, I had the opportunity to review four scholarly books dealing with similar topics — the historical experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in frontier regions; and the intersections of race, social class, and geography in determining the personal and family trajectories of minority populations in the nineteenth century. These volumes have also focused largely on mixed-race people of French-Canadian ancestry in western Canada and the Pacific Northwest. Of these books, Jean Barman's award-winning volume *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* was the first that I reviewed, which provided a useful context for considering the books that followed.<sup>7</sup>

For this essay, however, I intend to focus on Jean Barman's approach to telling the story of French Métis families in a time of profound social, economic, and political change, and why Dr. Barman's past and present narratives resonate successfully with readers.

## Jean Barman — A Vernacular Historian

In preparation for this session, I stewed for a long time, wondering whether I should concentrate solely on Jean's writing or venture into talking about Jean Barman herself. For many years I did not know her personally, but I had a long acquaintance with her published work. I was also unaware of any similarities between our scholarship, until it was pointed out to me at a conference, several years ago, by historian and Canadian Historical Association (hereinafter CHA) past president Lyle Dick, who informed me that I was a "vernacular historian," as was Jean Barman. At the time, I was embarrassed to tell him that I didn't know what a "vernacular historian" was, but I thought to myself, "if Jean Barman is a vernacular historian ... well, then I'm okay being a vernacular historian as well!"

Since that time, I have read a couple of Lyle Dick's published articles on the subject of vernacular history, which he defines as

the craft of history performed at a “grassroots,” or community level.<sup>8</sup> As with literature and architecture, vernacular history is produced by the common people; that is, by amateur historians, in local contexts, generally writing about local events from the past. Dick goes on to say that “historians have ranged from community historians to individual scholars to so-called history buffs, and their practice has assumed many forms, from informal pioneer reminiscences to highly crafted works of scholarship, exemplifying varying levels of talent, experience, and imagination.”<sup>9</sup>

A significant feature of grassroots history is its incorporation of personal experiences as well as drawing on original documents and interviews; creative works, such as spoken word, music, poetry, and visual art; and objects and ephemera collected directly from community residents. Practitioners of vernacular history do not always follow research and publication conventions, such as citation of sources, but their work is now on the cutting edge of a shift in the humanities and social sciences: they place themselves within the account of their subject and deliberately illuminate how their interactions with their subject have shaped their interpretations and production of history. Indeed, Dick points out that vernacular historians — and the histories they produce — are marked by “a passionate involvement with their subjects of study.”<sup>10</sup> In addition to being passionate and involved with their subject, vernacular historians are “dialogic” in the Bakhtinian sense, in that a vernacular historical account may be revised as time passes, in response to different readers’ reactions or to reflect a changed socioeconomic or political context. Because vernacular historians may make informal additions, deletions, or other revisions to their oral or written narratives without attribution, professional historians view these documents as untrustworthy sources of information. However, while grassroots historians may challenge dominant narratives of historical events by writing revisionist accounts that may cite previously unheard or professionally discredited sources, it should not be assumed that vernacular and professional historians are necessarily binary opposites in terms of their values and attitudes,

and written products.<sup>11</sup> It should be remembered that grassroots historians may be the literary élites of their home communities, but not necessarily their political or social leaders. Indeed, the development of literacy is a function of access to, and success in, formal educational settings. The mastery of literacy and numeracy is also the gateway to enhanced economic and social mobility in industrial and post-industrial societies. In collectivities that are economically and socially marginalized from the mainstream, access to an education may actually estrange a grassroots historian from his fellow community members. So there is often an internal tension, even ambivalence, in the work of vernacular historians, characterized by the occasional, even unsettling grassroots expression or endorsement of what are normally considered the values and attitudes of the larger society.

So there are some intriguing ideas here about vernacular scholars and about vernacular scholarship. Obviously Jean's scholarly works are definitely highly crafted works of scholarship. So what makes her work different from mainstream historical offerings?

The critical difference in Jean Barman's scholarship that sets her apart from other professional historians of her caliber is her egalitarian point of view, which is embodied in her eclectic research methodology. Other historians might possibly be accused of elitism in their choice of historical topics (i.e., great men or women; major political events; important battles), their choice of primary or secondary sources (i.e., only written sources or eyewitness accounts from "credible" eyewitnesses of European origin), or their intended audience (i.e., educated and/or academic). Jean, however, views her topics, sources, and potential audiences in a refreshingly proletarian fashion. Moreover, Jean loves to collaborate with other researchers, as evidenced by the numerous anthologies that she has co-edited with other historians. Jean's methodology embodies a vernacular approach towards historical production, a perspective that would have any and all historical topics open for study, where primary sources are evaluated on their own intrinsic merits, where good historical scholarship should be intelligible by, and accessible to, a variety

of readers, and where a spirit of camaraderie infuses all aspects of historical production.

Jean Barman's work speaks to us because she combines excellent historical research and writing with a *passion* for her historical subjects — a trait that is considered intellectually weak by many traditionally-minded historians practicing today. She has devoted much of her career to telling the stories of people who were marginalized, or forgotten altogether, in the dominant historical narratives of British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest, many of which focus on British Columbia's Indigenous communities. Unfortunately, the average reader is unlikely to be aware of the variety, and the consistent quality, of Barman's research over the years.<sup>12</sup>

However, not all of Jean's many readers were as impressed with her latest book as I was. Recently, a transplanted Québécois living in British Columbia contacted me by e-mail, claiming that I had let Jean Barman "off the hook" in my review. The reader (whom I have chosen to keep anonymous) suggested that Jean's use of the term "French Canadian" placed all of the historical actors into one homogenous category that did not represent their complexity, noting that many of the people discussed in the book were NOT French-Canadian, but were Franco-American or "métis." The reader also suggested that French Canadians would call themselves "Canadien" or "Canayen" and that the term "French-Canadian" was something that a WASP would use.

I've raised the topic of this person's e-correspondence for several reasons. First of all, the critic was very selective in their critique of the book, having avoided reviewing the book's preface and endnotes. It is in these sections of the book where Barman discusses her efforts to supplement and further clarify her documentary research by consulting directly with Indigenous "grassroots" experts possessing French-Canadian ancestry, people such as David "Chalk" Courchane, who is a knowledgeable and active avocational genealogist and historian, and who is cited in the body of the text as well as in the notes. Another vernacular historian cited by Barman is David Lewis, tribal historian for the Grand Ronde Indian Reservation in Oregon.<sup>13</sup> While these indi-

viduals are not “Canadiens,” they are most certainly members of the Indigenous source communities featured in this book, and it is clear that Barman actively sought after, and incorporated, their critical input. This, to my mind, is respectful academic discourse — and such consultation of avocational experts would have been unheard of in academic circles not that long ago.

But what really concerns me about the aforementioned critic’s response to Jean’s book, is that I sense that it really did not matter to this person whether or not Jean attempted to consult with representatives of source communities, or not. This critique of Jean’s book highlights a rather disturbing trend that has emerged in various specialties of social history: the idea that scholars deemed to be “outsiders,” that is, not a member of the historical group under study (e.g., Indigenous; African-American; LGBTQ, to name a few common examples), are no longer welcome to research and write these histories. Several critical anthologies exist, for example, that are devoted to deconstructing the scholarship of non-Indigenous historians.<sup>14</sup> The concerns raised by activist scholars are numerous and legitimate. They argue that a great deal of modern historical research does not explore the historical background of, or provide meaningful solutions to, the contemporary problems that Indigenous communities face.

Native intellectual activists and our non-Native allies are growing in number, and most of us are concerned about this issue, much to the discomfort of established historians who have maintained their power base in Native history and in Native studies as a whole. Indigenous intellectuals are also becoming increasingly vocal in their objections to the way their ancestors have been portrayed or ignored in works of history, and how those images and absences in stories about this country’s past translate into the present. We are impatient with scholars who continue to profit from editing anthologies of essays focusing on familiar topics we’ve seen repeatedly and composing stories that are useless as tools of decolonization. Our impatience

also stems from facing gatekeepers determined to keep Native intellectuals who have much to say out of the picture and from being denied tenure or promotion (or at least receiving it only after resorting to formal complaints or legal action) and funding for projects, in addition to receiving poor evaluations from patriotic students who don't want to hear about colonialism in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Although many of these critiques originate with activist scholars in the United States, one should not assume that they do not reflect the Canadian situation. While it is understood that the development and implementation of American Native policy evolved differently from Canada's (for a variety of reasons), the negative consequences for Indigenous people on both sides of the border are, unfortunately, the same. It is no surprise that the frustration and anger felt by Indigenous scholars would eventually spill over into academic gatherings, and be directed against non-Indigenous researchers.

I was attending an Indigenous women's conference many years ago, and Jean Barman also happened to be there. After a busy day of sessions, the two of us were walking back to the university residences where we were staying, when we encountered two other conference attendees — foreign delegates that we did not know. When Jean acknowledged them with a cheery "Hello," the two women looked coolly at Jean and then pointedly ignored us and walked away. Jean shrugged it off, and we carried on to our lodgings. But I was embarrassed and appalled — shocked, really — by the behavior of these women who chose to deliberately snub someone because of the colour of their skin — which, in this case, was white. Later in the conference, a coterie of activist women disrupted the final plenary session of the conference by verbally attacking the organizers for allowing non-Indigenous and non-female scholars to participate in the conference.

Another issue that has reared its ugly head in minority academic circles is the fact that several prominent scholars claiming Indigenous status have turned out to be non-Indigenous, with



no biological Indigenous ancestry. There are also those scholars who claim indigeneity culturally and socially, despite an inability to document this ancestry in any evidential way, other than a few anecdotal references to one or two Indigenous ancestors a couple of centuries removed. We have seen this scenario before — the phenomenon of “playing Indian” has a very long history in literature and in cultural practice — but it is only since Indigenous activists have earned their own Ph.D.s has the issue of Indigenous “fakes” or “wannabees” in academia been forcefully addressed.

It must be acknowledged that non-Indigenous scholars who pursue academic postings claiming to be “Indigenous” not only run the risk of suppressing and/or distorting authentic indigeneity, but their tenured presence in universities actually acts as a physical barrier to Indigenous scholars seeking employment in post-secondary institutions. The anger against these fraudulent individuals is legitimate — morally, professionally, and economically. However, we must be mindful that we should *not* conflate the activities of non-Indigenous scholars who have *never* misrepresented their ethnic or racial identities, with those who have willfully misrepresented themselves as something that they are not.

We forget that it was the postwar generation of largely non-Indigenous scholars searching for new approaches to investigating and writing social history in Canada, that were responsible for the wholesale reassessment of conventional Indigenous and minority histories over the last few decades. Jean Barman was a member of this cohort. When these researchers began their careers, minority histories (and Indigenous histories in particular) were not always considered to be legitimate scholarly topics in history departments still preoccupied with the study of Euro-Canadian male élites. Another characteristic of these new scholars was their interdisciplinary bent. They realized that many of the primary documents analyzed by previous historians were intrinsically flawed because the original creators of these sources — fur trade employees, military and police officers, members of the church, politicians, and ordinary citizens — did not possess a solid understanding of the world views and lived cultures of ethno-cultural minorities. This lack of knowledge resulted in historical

analyses that were often biased, inaccurate, and incomplete, but considered legitimate because they were produced by educated Euro-Canadian élites whose right to interpret minority history was never questioned. However, the new generation of postwar researchers, inspired by the social justice movements emerging across North America, chose to adapt the methodological and analytical tools of cultural anthropology and the French Annales School to reassess and rewrite North American history “from the bottom up.”

Social historians have not always been completely successful in rewriting the historical canon in a way that is acceptable to ethnocultural, racial, and gender minorities. Despite their desire to shift the historical focus to ordinary people, rather than élites, the scholars of the late twentieth century continued to see their Indigenous historical subjects through an ethnocentric lens. As minority scholars are quick to point out, comparative wealth, physical security, and “white privilege” still separate mainstream scholars from the subjects of their research, even if their methods and analysis are intended to be “progressive.”

Unfortunately, the economic and cultural gulf that separates Indigenous communities from the mainstream can effectively prevent genuine engagement with, and accountability to, grassroots communities. Some mainstream scholars are unwilling to surrender their academic freedom. They prefer to conduct research and disseminate their findings as they see fit, regardless of the wishes of the individuals and communities they study. They may be uncomfortable confronting and acknowledging the connection between historical wrongs and contemporary social dysfunction, especially when it is pointed out to them by community members. Rightly or wrongly, the new methodological approaches demand of their practitioners a non-authoritarian, egalitarian *persona*, because the success of one’s research is largely dependent upon accepting source communities as partners, even directors and arbiters, of community-based research.

Jean Barman’s Sir John A. Macdonald Prize comes at a fitting juncture in Canada’s ongoing history of Native peoples. We are experiencing a sea change in the research attitudes and

practices deemed acceptable for those who write and teach Indigenous history. More emphasis and more government funding are directed toward community-based and, more importantly, community-directed projects. The interests and talents of “outside” scholars in these initiatives, may be subsumed, marginalized, or rejected altogether — sometimes to the detriment of the projects themselves.

The generation of mainstream historians who have retired in the last ten years are perhaps the last remaining group of scholars whose career trajectories were shaped by the extensive reading, writing, publishing, and teaching demanded by Western post-secondary institutions, yet meliorated by the social and political consciousness of the 1960s. It is rather unfortunate that some of the new generation of scholars in Native History seem content to cast these senior scholars, and what they consider to be their epistemological (and racial) shortcomings, into the intellectual trash heap, especially since it was the postwar, and especially 1960s era scholars who mentored many of the younger academics who clamour to replace them now. What ever happened to the concept of “allies”?

Jean Barman’s work soars above the others because she combines her mastery of the historical sources with empathy and respect for her historical “actors.” That many scholars — and institutions — have recognized her unique skills should be no surprise. And I am grateful to the CHA for providing this opportunity to honour an outstanding historian and her body of work.

\*\*\*

**HEATHER DEVINE** is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Calgary. Her research and teaching specialties include Canadian Native History, American Indian Policy, Museum and Heritage Studies, and Western Canadian ethnic history, with a particular focus on Métis ethnohistory. She is the author of *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660–1900* (2004), winner of the Harold Adams Innis Prize for 2004–2005.

**HEATHER DEVINE** est professeure agrégée au Département d'histoire de la University of Calgary. Son expertise, tant au plan de la recherche que de l'enseignement, s'étend à l'histoire autochtone canadienne, à la politique américaine à l'égard des Autochtones, à l'étude des musées et du patrimoine, de même qu'à l'histoire des communautés ethniques dans l'Ouest canadien, avec une attention particulière sur l'ethnohistoire des Métis. Elle est l'auteure de *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660-1900* (2004), auquel fut décerné le prix Harold Adams Innis Prize en 2004-2005.