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# The Power of Promises: Rethinking Indian Treaties in the Pacific Northwest

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Book Review.

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**The Power of Promises: Rethinking Indian Treaties in the Pacific Northwest.** By Alexandra Harmon, Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, Contributor John Burrows (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. 384 pp., maps, notes, index. \$28.95 paper.)

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Indian treaties served the United States well between the 1780s and 1871. The nation legitimized the acquisition of land and resources and asserted its sovereignty to an audience of native nations, foreign competitors, and constituent states. Great Britain had provided the model for American treaties and continued its practice through the nineteenth century, and Canada, an autonomous member of the United Kingdom, recently renewed treaty negotiations with the First Nations. In the American states of the Pacific Northwest and the neighboring province of British Columbia, native activists have ensured that treaties are not relics but vibrant, evocative documents open to challenge, interpretation, and indigenous purposes, though governmental power inequities continue to limit the effectiveness of these efforts. Taken together, the eleven essays in this volume flesh out many important parts of the treaty narrative of the Northwest.

The essays focus mostly on the border area of the Northwest coast in Washington State and British Columbia. They explore the advent of regional treaties and their cultural, political, and legal significance over time. The book grew out of a conference at the University of Washington in Seattle and well reflects the high level of scholarship developing about the native Northwest. In the introduction, editor Alexandra Harmon, a historian and former tribal attorney, provides a succinct explanation of the projects' evolution and notes the value of the writers' varied perspectives as lawyers, historians, and anthropologists. The individual contributions are relatively brief and tightly focused. Given the breadth of coverage, more context and historical background in the introduction might have been merited, but the order of the essays effectively situates readers. The individual essays tend to include significant general information before delving into specific topics, so expect more redundancies than would be acceptable in a monograph.

In part one, "Colonial Conceits," the first essay, by Ken McNeil, explains the legal history of the treaties, and the second, by Paige Raibmon, explores the culture and politics of treaty geography through the novel approach of family history. Raibmon creatively emphasizes the important relationship between the local and the state. In part two, "Cross-Border Influences," two essays examine legal precedents shared between the Anglo judicial systems of Canada and the United States, including, of course, fishing rights. Part three, "Indigenous Interpretations and Responses," might alternatively have

been called the “unintended consequences” of treaty policy. The four essays sketch native attempts to harness the power of treaties, which had earlier dispossessed their ancestors and them, and demonstrate why those efforts so often failed on the uneven ground of colonialism. Part four, “Power Relations in Contemporary Forums,” includes three essays that demonstrate how the past—with treaties (and modern “substitutes”) at the center—continues to be reimagined and refashioned to meet the needs of new generations. Impressively, the essays examine nineteenth- and twentieth-century law and legal theory, changing indigenous perceptions, cross-border colonial relations, and ongoing contests over the nature of treaties and treaty making.

Regional and treaty specialists will want this collection. As well, the U.S.-Canadian connections should broaden its readership into the growing areas of transnationalism and comparative colonialism/indigeneity. Individual essays will probably find their way onto course syllabi, though the entire book may be suitable only for a very specific upper division or graduate seminar.

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**We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom.** By Tisa Wenger. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xx + 333 pp., preface, acknowledgments, introduction, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

Brandi Denison, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

What is religion? Who can define “religion”? What are the implications of religious freedom? Tisa Wenger’s *We Have a Religion* explores these questions through the previously understudied 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance controversy. Using Catholic mission records, archived oral histories, personal papers, and Bureau of Indian Affairs correspondence and records, Wenger argues the dance controversy “illuminates how some Native Americans first began to make use of the legal argument for religious freedom” and thus challenged “dominant cultural conceptions about what counted as religion” (xiii). As a cultural and intellectual history, this text provides a concrete example of mechanisms that create human conceptions of religion. It is an important contribution to the study of Native American religions, as it is a shift from traditional anthropological analytical categories (i.e., describing rituals, practices, and sacred stories) to an analysis of the historical and cultural processes that shape “religion.”

In the early twentieth century, activists attempted to suppress the