

Forgotten founders

North American history usually begins with the arrival of Europeans. A new book tells a larger story

Canada's First Nations
A History of Founding Peoples
 From Earliest Times
 By Olive Patricia Dickason
 McClelland & Stewart, 590 pp, \$24.95

BOYCE RICHARDSON
 SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Until recently, Canadians have been brought up to believe that the history of their country began in the 16th century with the arrival of French explorers.

In traditional Euro-centred histories of Canada, Amerindian societies were usually portrayed as crude and primitive, their role in the development of Canada as passive and unproductive. In fact, she says, the Amerindians played an active role in development of the country, and their participation was essential to European success in almost every area of life.

The contemptuous historical approach to the Amerindian contribution has been replaced in the last quarter century by that of a new breed of ethnohistorians (led by Bruce Trigger of McGill), who have begun to redress the shocking imbalance in the way Canadians perceive their own story. They have given us many excellent books (some of them, indeed, are quite marvellous) on different aspects of the story. Consequently, we are beginning to know more about the role played by various aboriginal nations, their many notable leaders, and all this work has been an important contribution to the gradual turnaround that appears to be underway in public attitudes towards the native people.

Yet in spite of these efforts, negative attitudes have remained hard to shake, lurking not far beneath the civilized



Mato-topé, a Mandan chief painted by Karl Bodmer in 1834, is in *Indians of North America*, an illustrated survey of Indian culture and history.

vener of Canadian life, as the rock-throwers of Châteauguay demonstrated in 1990. Within the last five years three provincial inquiries have denounced the systemic racism in the justice system toward aboriginals, and these prejudices persist at the intellectual, as well as the visceral level: at least two major judgments from provincial supreme courts concerning land disputes in

northern Ontario and B.C. have recently been based on the same ill-informed views of native societies that Europeans brought to the continent 400 years ago.

Dickason's contribution to this educational process has been to try to pull the whole story together into one volume, to give Canadians a more balanced appreciation of the story. Not many people have ever tried to do this,

the story being geographic con disadvantage of at times one accumulated de facts and mo pretation.

Dickason has even-handed, ur perhaps to com bias of her Méti: the University o she is the autho on aboriginal iss an adventureson living on a m Manitoba and v Canadian news *Gazette*.

Perhaps bec experience, Dick flat, objective al broad perspectiv at old relationsh.

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