

*Beneath the Backbone of the World: Blackfoot People and the North American Borderlands, 1720-1877.* Ryan Hall. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781469655154

In *Beneath the Backbone of the World*, Ryan Hall argues that the Blackfoot were the creators of a borderland region of their own making. It was a borderland formulated between rival British and American trading companies that positioned the Blackfoot as a powerful force in the northern Great Plains. Hall's work centers on the Niitsitapi, the Real People, Blackfoot-speaking peoples, made up of the three nations of the Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika. The homelands of these communities, situated in the northwest Great Plains, straddle a modern borderland between the United States and Canada. This geography of their homelands resting at the base of the backbone of the world paired with savvy diplomacy of Blackfoot leaders enabled the community to resist encroaching Europeans throughout the nineteenth century.

Over the last two decades, borderlands historians have recentered Indigenous communities at the heart of their analysis of North American history. These borderlands largely have centered on the American southwest though increasingly scholars have noted borderlands spaces in North America along the U.S.-Canadian border including the Great Lakes. These spaces between European empires and Native nations created opportunities for rapid cultural exchange as well as places prone to rapid shifts in power dynamics. Hall's research is an expansion of these studies, arguing that in order to better understand the history of the Great Plains, scholars must expand their definition of early North American history and incorporate the histories of tribal nations in their narratives of power, empire, and change. His concise volume accomplishes a great deal of this heavy lifting as he traces Blackfoot history between 1720 and 1877. The Blackfoot are depicted as a powerful nation who used their position at times to facilitate trade with Europeans and at other times to block British and American traders and their

ambitions for reaching tribes living farther west in the Rocky Mountains. However, carefully noted is that the Blackfoot were not all powerful and were at times devastated by losses brought on by disease and exacerbated through settler colonial policies enacted by the British-Canadian and American nation-states.

Hall's exploration is divided into three sections. Part I "Homelands" (1720-1806) explores how the Blackfoot's geographical locations allowed for tribal leaders to foster a borderland region that greatly benefited Blackfoot communities economically, militarily, and diplomatically. As the Blackfoot increased their trading relations with Europeans, they sought to avoid reliance on Cree intermediaries while securing their status as middlemen traders between European traders and tribes living in the Rocky Mountains.

Part II "Boundaries" (1806-1848) opens with Lewis and Clark's "Corps of Discovery" and the Americans' attempts to solidify peaceful trade relations with not only the Blackfoot, but with Rocky Mountain tribes as well. These trade overtures represented an economic threat to the Blackfoot's position as middlemen in the Great Plains trade network. Using their key position, the Blackfoot played the American and British trading companies off one another. Here, Hall's analysis extends the lens of the fur trade. As Hall explains in his introduction, the fur trade is not a new subject of historical inquiry, but rather than further explore the social world of the fur trade, Hall is interested in investigating how the fur trade was used to manipulate political and diplomatic connections between Indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans. He does this by exploring the economic power the Blackfoot were able to secure and diplomatic demands leaders were able to extract from British and American traders.

Though the Blackfoot increased their power in the region through the fur trade, Hall argues that Blackfoot influence in the region increasingly became tied to the continued existence

of the delicate borderland region. In Part III “Collisions” (1848-1870) this became increasingly problematic as relations in the region shifted between 1848 and 1870. The Americans sought to expand their authority and secure lands for settlement by engaging in treaties with the Blackfoot. The Blackfoot also sought new treaty relations with the Americans, but the two sides differed in their understandings of what these new agreements would mean. Whereas the Americans understood the 1855 treaty as signifying an important step to securing white settlement of the region, Blackfoot leaders saw the treaty as a way to force the Americans to distribute gifts, strengthening their own positions within the community. These goods also provided yet another means of supporting the community as bison herd populations fluctuated during the second half of the nineteenth century. These differing understandings of the 1855 treaty came into further conflict following the American Civil War as violence and disease spread further west across the Great Plains.

Hall’s work is rooted in the vast geographical homelands of the Blackfoot people. While there is much left to unpack, Hall weaves together well broad descriptions of Blackfoot social, economic, and political life through the human lens of lives of key Blackfoot leaders like Bull Back Fat, Good Woman, Iron Shirt, Red Crow, Medicine Snake Woman, and Lame Bull. Hall’s research builds upon recent studies of the Comanche, Ute, and Lakota adding additional nuance to the history of Indigenous North America. *Beneath the Backbone of the World* is well researched and contributes a nuanced interpretation of the history of the borderlands of the northern plains while acknowledging the history of the Blackfoot continues on today.

Jacob Jurss, Adjunct Professor of History, Metropolitan State University and University of St. Thomas