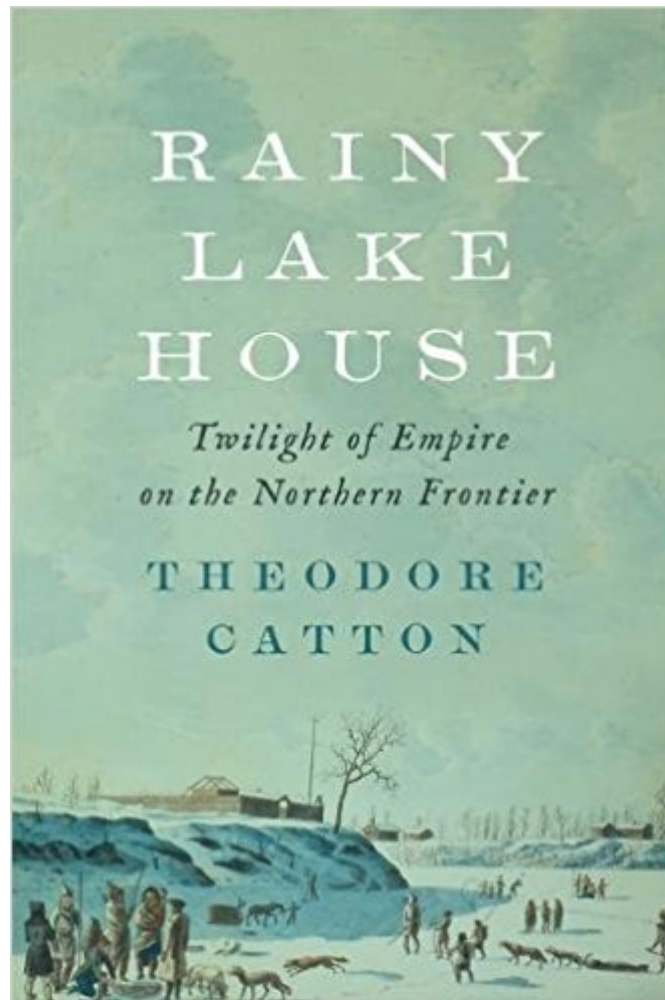


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Rainy Lake House: Twilight Of Empire On The Northern Frontier



Synopsis

In September 1823, three men met at Rainy Lake House, a Hudson's Bay Company trading post near the Boundary Waters. Dr. John McLoughlin, the proprietor of Rainy Lake House, was in charge of the borderlands west of Lake Superior, where he was tasked with opposing the petty traders who operated out of US territory. Major Stephen H. Long, an officer in the US Army Topographical Engineers, was on an expedition to explore the wooded borderlands west of Lake Superior and the northern prairies from the upper Mississippi to the forty-ninth parallel. John Tanner, a "white Indian" living among the Ojibwa nation, arrived in search of his missing daughters, who, Tanner believed, were at risk of being raped by the white traders holding them captive at a nearby fort. Rainy Lake House weaves together the captivating stories of these men who cast their fortunes in different ways with the western fur trade. Drawing on their combined experiences, Theodore Catton creates a vivid depiction of the beautiful and dangerous northern frontier from a collision of vantage points: American, British, and Indian; imperial, capital, and labor; explorer, trader, and hunter. At the center of this history is the deeply personal story of John Tanner's search for kinship: first among his adopted Ojibwa nation; then in the search for his white family of origin; and finally in his quest for custody of his half-Indian children. Rainy Lake House is a character-driven narrative about ambition, adventure, alienation, and revenge. Catton deftly crafts one grand narrative out of three and reveals the perilous lives of the white adventurers and their Indian families, who lived on the fringe of empire.

Book Information

Hardcover: 424 pages

Publisher: Johns Hopkins University Press (August 15, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1421422921

ISBN-13: 978-1421422923

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.3 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #597,563 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #57 in [Books > History > Americas > Canada > Pre-Confederation](#) #88 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Canadian](#) #161 in [Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Home Improvement & Design > Small Homes & Cottages](#)

Customer Reviews

"A journey into the complicated environment of the North American interior in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Written with clarity and energy, this book tells its story through the remarkable device of a triple biography." (Gregory Evans Dowd, author of *Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier*) "Catton makes me think that there must be a gene for historical writing. In this marvelously crafted book, he uses a quarrel over the custody of children in the early nineteenth century to reveal the fraying of the hybrid Indian/white world of the lands neighboring the Great Lakes. This is a deeply human story of a nineteenth-century world that was in the midst of great change. A compelling, surprising, and dramatic account that reads like historical fiction." (Richard White, author of *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*)

Theodore Catton is an associate research professor of history at the University of Montana. He is the author of *Inhabited Wilderness: Indians, Eskimos, and Alaska's National Parks and American Indians and National Forests*.

CATTON, Theodore. *Rainy Lake House: Thoughts of Empire on the Northern Frontier*. Johns Hopkins. 2017. 432p, illus., maps, notes, index. Catton, associate research professor of history at the University of Montana, is the author of several books on the Old West, exploring our country's national park system and forests and early relations with the indigenous natives. This book builds on his earlier published work but significantly expands the focus. Catton does in this book what conscientious historians do well: he takes an apparently localized incident and by teasing out its connections and ramifications, enlightens us on larger, more enduring issues—in this case, our ambivalent relationship with the native Americans we early dispossessed of their lands, livelihood and dignity. The book is especially interesting because of the time, the 1810s through 1823, and place, the borderlands of Lake Superior, where in the aftermath of the War of 1812, American and British traders fought over a lucrative though already diminishing fur trade. In September 1823, three men from three different cultures come together at Rainy Lake House, a Hudson's Bay Company trading post near the Boundary Waters (between the US and Canada). John McLoughlin was a part-time physician and fulltime proprietor of the post. Major Stephen J. Long was on a surveying mission to plot the northern prairies from the upper Mississippi to the 49th parallel. John Tanner, was a "white Indian." He had been captured as a boy, kept as a slave for a while but then adopted by an Ojibwa mother. He was there

to seek McLoughlin's and Long's assistance in recovering his two young daughters, whom he believed were being held captive by fur trappers in a nearby fort. This is a study of mis- and part-communication: Tanner's request filtered through McLoughlin's and Long's preconceptions about the primitiveness of Indian culture. They had their own ideas about whether Tanner was any longer even salvageable for white society. There are gaps in the historical record. There are times when a log was not kept and there are omissions in Tanner's own account of his life but Catton is fortunate to have Tanner's autobiography, dictated later in life to an English-speaking writer, and McLoughlin and Long left behind their journals, diaries, and reports. Out of these Catton has fashioned a narrative ripe with adventure, betrayal (Tanner's Indian wife and mother-in-law collaborated in an assassination attempt against him) and revenge. Around the central narrative, largely about Tanner's attempts to create a stable family around him, Catton tells other stories: of the on-again off-again warfare between Hudson's Bay Company and American Fur Company traders; America's early explorations of the virgin Midwest; wars and alliances among tribes, and in particular the running feud between Ojibwa and Sioux, and the advantages each brought to the fight) and he enlightens us on the minutiae of Amerindian and trader camp life and ways in that now distant age. There is a running account, spread across several chapters, that describes how a young man, in this case, a white transplant- acculturates to his adopted family and tribe. He writes of Tanner's two marriages --both were consecrated Indian-style, not western- and discusses Tanner's relation to the most important figure in his life as an Ojibwa, his stepmother, who was a figure of prominence in her tribe. Catton describes in detail how Tanner became a hunter and discusses the rites to celebrate his successes. He comments on the socializing role of war in Indian society. It is doubtful that Tanner would ever have deserted Indian society if his tribe had not deserted him. After the appearance of the Shawnee Prophet Tenskwatawa ca. 1808, more and more of his tribe mates began to look askance at him, as inauthentic because white-skinned. Westerners' attitudes toward Indians were hardening too during these years. Eventually, Tanner was left with no world. He could be neither Yankee nor Ojibwa. His later years were not happy.

This fascinating history of the early 19th century concerns the interior of America, when the frontier ethos of fur trappers and traders, explorers, pioneers and Native-American tribes confronting the very first interloping white settlers, began to yield to the Manifest Destiny juggernaut. Rainy Lake

House concentrates on events in the area known as the Boundary Waters: the Great Lakes region on the border between Canada and America. This was a region that was originally frequented by French trappers and was contested during the French and Indian War, so its history is complex and conflict was not unknown. The events occur around 1823: the same period that the film *The Revenant* depicts comparable frontier isolation with such forlorn beauty. This post-Revolution, pre-Civil War period is the bedrock upon which the American future was constructed. *Rainy Lake House* tells the interlocking biographies of three men: Dr. John McLoughlin, who is in charge of the Hudson's Bay trading post, Major Stephen Long, an army officer, and John Tanner, a white man captured, enslaved and then raised by Indians when he was adopted by an Ojibwa mother. Each man, *Rashomon*-like, interprets similar events in a fundamentally different way. The threat of conflict and/or violence overshadows all three lives in what is still a frontier region whose fate is yet to be determined. It is the region's complex history, so skillfully depicted in its trio of biographies, that makes this book so fascinating. Author Theodore Catton, whose historian's heritage is a great one, has written a significant work of history that reads like a novel and it is hard to put down.

Take special note of the title's second part: *Twilight of Empire on the Northern Frontier*. It will afford you a further glimpse into what this very thorough book is about. *Rainy Lake House* was a fur trading post which was most active on the border of Canada and the United States during the period of the late 1700s and the early 1800s. It was a place where the three main characters in this book, Dr. John McLoughlin, a Scottish native of Quebec and proprietor of *Rainy Lake House*, Major Stephen H. Long (who was an explorer for the US who held Lewis and Clark in high esteem), and John Tanner, a white American who had lived among the Indians so long he was assimilated into their culture almost fully, met in September of 1823. Each of these men had a small but marked effect on the others. The author has taken their perspectives to give the reader an honest view of what life was like during this time period in this very harsh, rough and beautiful area. You will read about each one in turn and then go back to follow each one at a different point in his life. Each has his strengths and his weaknesses. Each has been beautifully depicted by author Theodore Catton. If you love works by historians such as Stephen Ambrose, you will be fascinated by this book.

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