

The Souris Plains in 1491

A Fresh Look at Pre-Contact Society

A popular recent book by American author and science/history writer Charles C. Mann bears the title “1491: New Reflections of the Americas Before Columbus”. It presents us with a look at North and South America at that point. It was an America as yet largely untouched by the rest of the world. Yes, the Vikings had visited the northern reaches of the continent, but they had retreated without very much lasting impact.

What was life like in the Americas at that time? What was life like on the Souris Plains? In Southwestern Manitoba a series of cultures had developed great skill in hunting and using the buffalo. They depended on them for nearly everything; food, shelter, clothing and tools.

Elsewhere in North America the Inca, Mayan and Aztec civili-

zations of Central and South America had erected large cities. The Anasazi, or Ancient Pueblo Peoples were building cliff dwellings in Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico. To the east the Iroquois and Huron civilizations flourished in their large villages.

The north-central plains were one spot in North America where agriculture, specifically cultivating the soil, wasn't important. It was the development of agriculture that prompted civilizations around the world to transfer from the nomadic lifestyle of the hunter-gatherer to the village lifestyle of the farmer.

Turns out that the people here had pretty good reasons for their mobile lifestyle. It worked for them.

The climate often wasn't really suitable for agriculture, and the demands of planting, nurturing and harvesting crops keeps one fairly close to home. Ask an older farmer how many holidays he had in his younger days.

To the European observer, the lifestyle of the Plains People was deemed unsophisticated, lacking in creature comforts. Perhaps they were overlooking that in Europe alongside incredible wealth, the majority lived in crowded disease-ridden communities, faced malnutrition, ongoing wars, and plagues. Europe-

ans liked to consider the mobile lifestyle “improvident” and claimed it carried an unnecessary risk of food shortages. Perhaps they had forgotten the recent famine caused by the potato blight, which claimed about a hundred thousand lives across northern Europe in the late 1840's.

Another myth about the Plains Lifestyle was that it increased the likelihood of war. Any reading of European history in the centuries surrounding 1491

will reveal uncountable wars and uncountable deaths. Then there were periodic diversions such as the Spanish Inquisition.

It should come as no surprise that everything that European newcomers reported about this new land was, of course, filtered through their worldview. “1491” is one of

several recent attempts to put some balance into the interpretation of the North American story.

It could be perceived from a European perspective that life on these plains was simpler, but a case can be made that the majority of people were happier, healthier and less oppressed than the average European.

They had adapted to their surroundings. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle was the logical choice for the time and place. In other places, and at other times, other strategies were needed.

Sources:

Mann, Charles C. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*. Vintage Books, 2006.

Weatherford, Jack. *Indian Givers*. Broadway Books, 1989.

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▲ Research at places like the Brockinton National Historic Site have yielded evidence of diverse and complex cultures that traded widely and adapted well to prairie conditions. A short visit in 2018 resulted in several interesting finds.