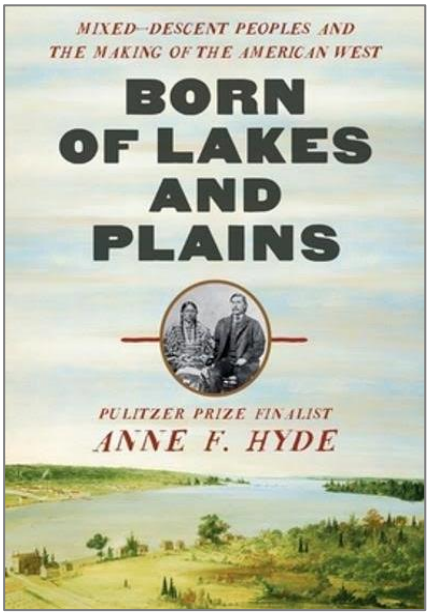
STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVII, 4, 2022, p. 529 - 532
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOKS

Anne F. Hyde, *Born of Lakes and Plains: Mixed-Descent Peoples and the Making of the American West.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022, 442 p.



It is a privilege for me to review this book for many reasons. First of all, it represents today's best American research in matters of history, anthropology, mentalities, traditional culture: it is vivid, enlightening, enjoyable. As a book about politicians' cynicism and abuse, invasion of neighbours' territories, utmost violence, gruesome battles and raids, atrocities, massacres, unlimited cruelty – it was first published in the spring of 2022, this fateful year for our entire world peace. As such, it echoes a kind of atmosphere nowadays rendered familiar once again, unfortunately, though in some other parts of the same world. As usual, those who suffer are families of people with no decision power, but with the stamina of good survivors.

Moreover, this volume has the outstanding merit of changing its reader's previous approach of some essential aspects of American history and civilization, such as the essential importance of the *American Indigenous peoples*, and then of their *mixed-descent families*, in both these fields of study; their quest for identity; last but not least, the traps of racist theories. But it also has the merit of (deeply and dramatically) refreshing the reader's understanding of the finest classic American literature, due to this most accurately and brilliantly provided historical context thus recovered from the shadows of the past.

For instance, in my case, William Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha* remains a fascinating mystery, despite my almost three decades of assiduous research of it. Yet now, after reading *Born of Lakes and Plains: Mixed-Descent Peoples and the Making of the American West* by Anne F. Hyde[1], I may return to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha from an

[1] Professor Anne F. Hyde is a Pulitzer finalist as the author of numerous other impressive volumes studying the "Making of the American West". She teaches history at the University of Oklahoma, USA.

incomparably better viewpoint. For Yoknapatawpha[2] has never been just about the South, whether "Old" or "New". It is at least as much about the West, whether "Wild" or "civilized" – just as Huckleberry Finn would put it, voicing his own rebellious mastermaker, Mark Twain.

On the other hand, Anne F. Hyde can tell a love story quite well, up to the rewarding wedding moment, and especially afterwards. As a cool historian, she can plead for the old novelistic plot pattern of the "reasonable" *marriage contract*, in which mind and soul merge ideally, and is persuasive in a manner at once warm hearted, full of feminine insight and irony, not quite beyond compare to that of the classic novelist of manners. After all, the contemporary American historian's message in a nutshell is that love prevails against any legal absurdity.

Marriage has always been a risky alliance. The spider-web-like network of economic and social relationships revealed in this book as yielded by the ancient institution (or rather *survival-strategy*) of *marriage* – allegedly "free-willing" and "under no constraint"– is amazing. All the more so since this book studies particularly *intermarriage*. *Hope, courage, commitment, devotion, resilience* – this is the minimum *moral basis* that the young couple should contribute to the survival contract of complex partnership. Within the *five main families* whose *mixed-descent genealogies* the author has followed up by means of intricate/perverse census documents and archives, ever since the 17th century until (almost) today, this survival partnership has been shared by (one or more) Native American women married to (one or more) White men, coming from France, England, Canada or America. This *moral basis* has been crucial, from one generation to the next. *A family* is supposed to promise its offspring that kind of protection and affection, especially required by survival in such *a tough country and climate*, as those of the Northern American continent (i.e. Canada and the US), as this book demonstrates so convincingly.

The family *business basis*, on the other hand, was originally *fur trade*; then it became *bison hide trade*. Contemplating this *intermarriage trade foundation* may again bridge the gap between the historical past, here rekindled to life, and our own contemporary issues. Because *fur trade* has lost so much of its appeal today, not only since humans have become more seriously concerned about their fellow animals' lives, but also since *global warming* has imposed itself as an issue endangering the lives of "all creatures great and small", humans included. Who wants *fur* anymore today? Yet for centuries on end, *fur* was not only one of the (European) royalties' luxuries, but also generally useful as a shield against the terrible winter frost. It is a question that makes the same reader here remember Herman Melville's (pseudo-whaling) masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*. Who needs white-whale sacrifice today, when we can just turn on the light, taking the precious gift of electricity for granted?

[2] Let us remember here that, according to Faulkner himself, in the Chickasaw people's language Yoknapatawpha means "*water-flows-slow-through-flat-land*". In other words now, possibly the kind of *plains* Anne F. Hyde writes about in her book.

Then there is also the mysterious "Ikkemotoubbe: a dispossessed American king", in Faulkner's 1945 "Appendix" to *The Sound and the Fury*. He is only mentioned there, within the entire Faulknerian diegesis. Yet he is an essential Indigenous American ghost of allegorical Yoknapatawpha.

In the precocious beginning of the (same) reader's career, always fond of American literature, James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo's *Leatherstocking* diegetic cycle provided an exotic, adventurous challenge of the imagination. Only much later on did the voices of Bumppo, the lonely white scout, and Chingachgook, the tragic Mohican father-figure – talking together as friends about the correspondence and differences between their *mother tongues* and their traditional representations of cosmogony, life and death – acquire their true *elegiac* meanings. The same suggestion of inhuman sacrifice of a *natural and native world for ever lost now* can be found now between the lines of Hyde's dense book. Beyond her huge effort of gathering *facts*, the author proves here a genuine *literary* narrative gift, which can only render her work ever better suited for anyone else's study and rereading. Because Anne F. Hyde does (indirectly) interpret these historical facts, just like a refined *writer*, without pushing the reader to conclusions.

Hyde emphasizes particularly the importance of *languages*, *translation*, *chronicles,* a quality which renders her book *self-reflexive,* as it deals with the (d)elusive *power of words* all along the much troubled American history. The book actually culminates with the evocation of George Bent, a *mixed-descent* offspring himself, "White and Cheyenne, [. . .] removed from Colorado to Oklahoma" (Hyde 2022, xix) – an early 20th century chronicler of Native American history as partly his own life-experience, but also a possible example of that old ironical phrase "*traduttore – traditore"* (i.e. translator and traitor).

On the other hand, Native American *reservations* still exist in today's US. Hyde's book presents an impressive account of these reservations, ever since their beginnings, sustained by accurate maps and photographs. For many American *mixed-descent families*, as well as for the ever fewer American Indians, these reservations have represented sometimes *shelters,* yet some other times – *prisons*.

Hyde's book consists of twelve chapters, with well-nuanced subchapters. The foreign reader, perhaps acquainted with rather conventional American scholars' approaches of such upheaval moments in American history and civilization as: the Revolutionary War of Independence, the Louisiana Purchase, the Civil War, the Gold Rush, will be surprised by this new viewpoint. Because here such momentous historical changes are recaptured from these *mixed-descent families*' points of view. For those people involved in *fur trade*, and then in *bison-hides trade*, whether living and working on Canadian or (what would eventually become) American territories, such overpowering events came implacably, challenging their resilience and resources of self-adjustment.

The Prologue, so poetically entitled "Seasons of Marriage and War", presents the beginnings of *fur pelts trade* on the Northern American continent, even earlier than the 17th century; it sums up the entire book's plan, therefore is good to revisit after having read the entire book through. Adventurous immigrants from France, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, once crossed the Atlantic, ready for a new life, and likewise ready to share it with daughters of Indigenous people's chiefs. And yet:

> *Marriage, central to alliances, did not mean a lifelong commitment to a single person*. For an Ojibwe woman, marriage was only one relationship in a mesh of kin, far less important than her relationships with her father and her brothers.

> She owed her actual family responsibilities – providing protection, resources, and comfort – to a *clan* who shared an animal relative, a "nindoodem". Cranes, bears, catfish, loons, martens, wolves, moose, and a dozen more beings *connected the human world to the nonhuman one*, connections that were essential for a successful life in North America. *A marriage outside one's clan was a strategic relationship. It strengthened ties to other villages and clans and was essential to meeting clan needs for hunters, warriors, or parents*. (Hyde 2022, 8; my emphasis)

Nevertheless, *White European fur traders*, such as "Henry Hudson and the English traders who followed him to Hudson Bay, teaching them how to survive winter and find fur" (Hyde, p. 12), came as *intruders* upon a traditional Indigenous *modus vivendi*:

> *The trade in furs with Europeans unbalanced long-established political relationships between Native nations. The new source of wealth empowered Native people to purchase allies and weapons*. Gunpowder and muskets were revolutionizing warfare across the globe in the early 1700s, and North America was no exception. *The Iroquois Confederacy, long a power in the northeast, became a superpower with guns it obtained from English traders. For other nations like the Cree, the fur trade brought missionaries, new diseases, and few guns. Intermarriage remained crucial to their efforts to protect power and manage the costs of killing, which had become easy*. (Hyde 2022, 13; my emphasis)

For the sake of their new *mixed-descent families*, those first Indigenous wives were ready to accept double names, for instance Ozhaguscodaywayquay (i.e. Green Prairie Woman) became Susan to her English speaking family members. Hyde's research offers so much more than just these recovered original names: it makes the reader wonder about those women's *double personalities*, their gift for *foreign languages*, and their *psychological sophistication*.

These are just in a nutshell the most obvious qualities of Anne F. Hyde's latest book. Even if she may never start a novelist's career, this volume remains a generous source of inspiration for writers to come. They could be today her students, inspired by her research and lectures.

On the other hand, this book also deserves a Romanian version as soon as possible. A good translation into Romanian could be so much more persuasive and useful than my enthusiastic review.

Anca PEIU
University of Bucharest
Bucharest, Romania
Email: anca.peiu@lls.unibuc.ro