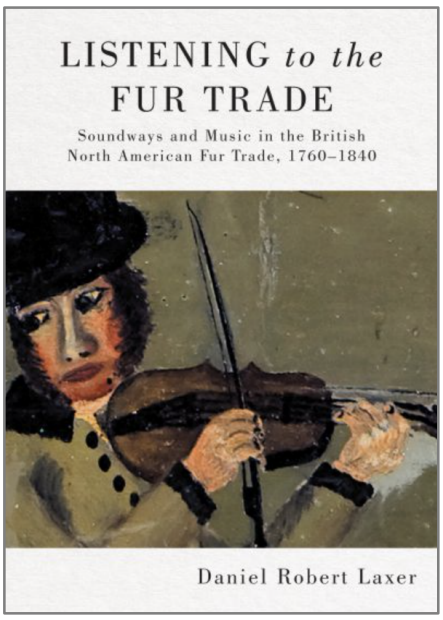

Listening to the Fur Trade: Soundways and Music in the British North American Fur Trade, 1760–1840 by Daniel Robert Laxer. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. 13 photos, 3 maps, 7 tables, 320 pp. ISBN 9780228008590.

Reviewed by Robin Elliott, Faculty of Music, University of Toronto.

As I read Daniel Robert Laxer's *Listening to the Fur Trade*, in which the Hudson's Bay Company looms so large, daily bulletins charted the death throes of that storied Canadian institution, founded in 1670. Let's hope that the fate of the HBC does not portend the demise of Canada itself, currently under threat as we are from our neighbors to the south. It was refreshing to put such worries aside and immerse myself in Laxer's compelling book, which is the third installment in an excellent new series from MQUP, "Studies in Early Canada / Avant le Canada."

Cod first attracted the sustained interest of Europeans visiting the eastern shores of Canada, but it was the fur trade that drew them into the interior, navigating waterways *a mari usque ad mare*. The immense geographic scope of the fur trade is demonstrated by a map at the start of this book (p. xv) showing some 50 trading posts from coast to coast to coast. Laxer's narrative concentrates on what he terms "peak fur trade": the period between the fall of New France and the steep decline of this commercial enterprise in the mid-19th century when cheaper silk hats ended the 300-year European mania for beaver hats. The fur trade has been a leitmotif of Canadian historiography for the past century, from the time of Harold Innis's seminal work in the 1920s onwards. I can pay no greater compliment to Laxer's book than to say it is a worthy contribution to this large, important literature.

Laxer comes from a distinguished family of left-wing Canadian nationalists and public intellectuals, including his grandfather Robert and his uncle James. Like so much of the literature on the fur trade, this book originated in the University of Toronto Department of History, in this case as a PhD thesis completed in 2015. Laxer has done a superb job of reorganizing and updating his thesis for this book, and MQUP matched the author's care and attention by producing a very handsome hard cover book (as well as an eBook).

Laxer defines the word "soundways" as "the methods and understandings of sound-making customs" (p. 108). The term encompasses the cultural and social practices of music, sound, and listening, as experienced by Indigenous peoples and Euro-Canadians. The focus on music and sound constitutes Laxer's original contribution to the vast fur trade literature, and he has meticulously pieced the story together from letters, diaries, journals, and memoirs of fur traders, archival collections of the HBC and its rival the North West Company (the two companies merged in 1821), as well as oral culture, folklore, and folk songs. Laxer's thesis is that music "was a key feature of positive cross-cultural encounters, and it constituted an exchange of intangible culture" (p. 16). Whereas missionaries used music to convert Indigenous peoples to Christianity, fur traders had no such agenda; they did not interfere with Indigenous spiritual practices, and their music making was shared in a spirit of open dialogue and "musical diplomacy" (p. 13) rather than hegemonic control.

Truly interdisciplinary in scope, *Listening to the Fur Trade* draws upon scholarship from sound studies, ethno/musicology, history, political economy, ethnography, folklore studies, and anthropology. Laxer's voracious reading across many disciplines is deployed with a light touch, and his engagement with theoretical ideas is thoughtful and practical. His goal is not to promote a particular scholarly agenda; rather he has scoured an extensive literature (itemized in a 32-page bibliography) to find ideas that will help him to shed light on the many different roles that music and sound played in the fur trade enterprise.

Sound-making objects discussed here include bagpipes, bugles, canons, church bells, drums, fiddles, flutes, jaw harps, muskets, and tambourines, as well as Indigenous drums and rattles. Sounds of the environment that feature prominently include river rapids, thunderstorms, waterfalls, and an extraordinary rock on La Cloche Island, near Manitoulin Island. Visiting that rock on 1 September 1761, the fur trader Alexander Henry (the elder) noted "there is here a rock, standing on a plain, which, being struck, rings like a bell" (p. 125). The rock subsequently became a tourist attraction, as an illustration of a postcard from the 1920s (p. 128) demonstrates.

In addition to discussing the fur trade soundscape, Laxer looks at musical repertoires such as paddling songs (*chansons d'aviron*), voyageur songs, folk songs, *chansons en laisse* (as studied by Conrad Laforte), rubbaboos (polyglot cross-cultural songs), diverse Indigenous musical practices (including intriguing birch bark musical scrolls known as *Wigwaasabak*, p. 157), and European, Métis, and Indigenous fiddle traditions.

Fiddle music rightly features prominently in the book, and Laxer notes that his five years of fiddle lessons with Anne Lederman "changed how I listen to the past" (p. xi). The dust jacket features a detail from a fine folk-art portrait of a fiddler dating from ca. 1800 that was recently discovered at York Factory, on the south shore of Hudson's Bay. The fiddle was easily transportable, an indispensable accompaniment to dance and other social occasions, and a source of solace during long, lonely stays far from others. A poignant letter from the fur trader John Askin, written in Michilimackinac (in modern day Michigan) in 1778 laments that a shipment from Montreal did not contain the violin he had requested: "a fiddle which I had mentioned in that memoir is left out, &

tho' such an omition [sic] can be of no consequence [sic] to persons who can supply the want at the next Shop, it is so different here … please purchase one for me at Montreal without fail" (p. 196). Brought to Canada in the 17th century, the fiddle was quickly taken up by Indigenous and Métis peoples. In a journal from 1760–61, Warren Johnson noted that in the Mohawk Valley, "I heard an Indian playing many European Tunes, & pretty well on the Fiddle" (p. 195). Laxer adds that Red River Métis fiddling is "the most well-known syncretic musical form that developed during the fur trade" (p. 227). He also cites (p. 17) Roland Sawatzy's fascinating article that traces how a violin made in London ca. 1800 was later owned by Pierre Bruce in the Red River settlement and served multiple generations of the family as a marker of their evolving Métis identity.[1] Using John Blacking's definition of music as "humanly organised sound," Laxer notes that in the fur trade, "what a piece of music was or is, with its precise notes and lyrics, is less significant than how it functioned" (p. 14). Indeed, in this book Laxer shows in detail how music served an impressively wide variety of purposes: as a gift of knowledge, a form of diplomacy, an honour bestowed, a way of establishing cross-cultural communication, a bond of trust, an accompaniment to dancing, a marker of power and authority, a form of relaxation, a means of combatting loneliness, a way of synchronising paddling, a diversion from hunger, pain, and deprivation, an emotional release, an aid to bonding and courtship rituals, a way of harnessing and manifesting spiritual power, an aid to hunting and healing, and as an essential part of spiritual ceremonies or religious observations. Although bound up with considerations of social class, music just as often served to erode those very social distinctions and class hierarchies in the fur trade and helped to smooth Indigenous/settler relations. Without music, the course of the fur trade would have run much less smoothly.

In addition to charting the function of music, sound, and dance at the height of the fur trade, Laxer offers some compelling portraits of individual musicians, such as Edward Ermatinger, whose collection of voyageur songs with lyrics was edited by Marius Barbeau for publication in 1954; the Métis fiddler Peter Erasmus, who lived to be nearly 100 years old; Pierre Falcon, the "bard of the prairies" (p. 153); and the fur traders Alexander Henry (the elder), Alexander Mackenzie, and David Thompson, all of whom left detailed accounts of their musical encounters with Indigenous peoples. Music clearly filled a very important role in the lives of these men, and of so many others, both Indigenous and Euro-Canadian, who lived by the fur trade.

Laxer has provide a fascinating, insightful exploration of the fur trade soundscape, offering unique perspectives on musical and sonic exchanges and interactions between Indigenous and Euro-Canadian peoples. His thorough research and engaging writing style make this a valuable addition to the fields of ethno/musicology, sound studies, and history, as well as a novel and welcome contribution to the extensive literature on the fur trade.

[1] Roland Sawatzky, "From Trade Routes to Rural Farm: The Biography of the Pierre Bruce Fiddle," *Agricultural History* 92/2 (Spring 2018): 244–60. The Bruce family donated the violin to the Manitoba Museum in 1991.