

Chris M. Cannon. *In the Footsteps of the Traveller: The Astronomy of Northern Dene*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2025. 421 pages. ISBN 978-1-77284-098-8. \$34.95 pbk.

*In the Footsteps of the Traveller: The Astronomy of Northern Dene* by Chris M. Cannon addresses the physical and cultural astronomy of the northern sky, and specifically examines the constellation known as Yahdii (the Traveller, in Gwich'in). Cannon takes the reader along on his journey to recognize *Yahdii* and then to explore the compelling body of Dene knowledge about the constellation. As explained by the author, "the Traveller embodies a massive epistemology for understanding Dene conceptualizations and relationships with the land and sky that integrate into a more holistic cosmology, world view, and spirituality than has been previously described in Northern Dene studies." (Page 23)

The book documents countless conversations, field experiences, and recorded meetings among Elders as organized by eleven distinctive Dene cultures. The first two sections of the book are organized by culture. Within each section, the constellation is identified by its Indigenous name and the literal English language translation of the name. A table in each section also identifies asterisms (an observed pattern or group of stars in the sky) within *Yahdii* as described by members of that cultural group. For each asterism, the Indigenous language name for the asterism, a literal English language translation of the name, and a list of the stars it encompasses are provided. Cultural understandings about the constellation from each culture reveal its physical characteristics and behaviors in detail. Beliefs about the Traveller vary from one group to the next. Cannon documents the stories each culture shares, addressing the Traveller's formation, family members, personal habits, powers and interactions with the physical world—including animals and humans on the Earth. Recorded conversations about this constellation are documented in the original language spoken. When a language other than English is spoken, the corresponding direct translation is provided.

The book takes readers deeply into the fields of Indigenous astronomy and atmospheric science as historically documented and used by the Dene for reckoning time, forecasting weather, navigation and other purposes. In addition to the Traveller, the book addresses Indigenous observations and beliefs about the sun and moon, eclipses and other atmospheric and sky phenomena. These cultural holdings, which are based on observations made at high latitudes over countless generations have enabled the Dene to adapt and thrive in their environment. Indigenous wisdom, built through application of these consistent, long-term observations, can be a valuable resource to society. It supports or validates the instrument-driven data used in Western science. It also underscores both the need for research in these fields, and the value of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration.

Cannon finds a good balance between academic writing and informative storytelling. He spends enough time on character development to engage readers and also to support growth in understanding the differences between Native and non-Native cultures in regard to communication and knowledge sharing. Cannon's documentation of the Traveller as

distinguished by each cultural perspective underscores that Indigenous people are not homogeneous, and that cultural and linguistic differences enhance and expand our knowledge and understandings in empowering ways.

Cannon introduces Paul “Snook” Herbert as a mentor and a source of extensive cultural, ecological and geographic knowledge for Interior Alaska. As Cannon reveals his early and ongoing collaboration with Snook and other cultural guides, we see how learning is mentored by Elders in ways that place learners on the land, connecting to the natural world and developing knowledge about it through one’s senses.

The book is valuable as a science reference and as a cultural orthography compiled over a decades-long time span. Oral histories and experiential knowledge that were shared by more than 65 Dene Elders from 34 northern communities across Alaska and Canada are now preserved in print. This is particularly meaningful to society, since otherwise, stories told by the oldest generation in the culture, and often spoken in the culture’s endangered heritage languages, may be lost forever. Cannon treats this sacred knowledge with corresponding care. Each story is credited to the person and culture from which it came, validating the authenticity of the content and respecting the source of the intellectual property.

Cannon’s style of writing is detail-oriented, while also engaging and easy to read. The content will satisfy those interested in sky knowledge and those interested in Indigenous knowledge systems. Meticulous documentation is paired with a compelling story of the author’s personal journey from curiosity to understanding in a rich and often challenged field of science.

The book artfully provides a glimpse into the ways of teaching and learning the Dene, and many other Indigenous groups have employed since time immemorial. Such a comprehensive chronicle of these topics cannot be found under any other single title.

The list of figures and tables in the beginning of the book, and a lengthy bibliography and extensive index at the end facilitate use of the book as a reference tool. *In the Footsteps of the Traveller* should be on the bookshelf for anyone curious about Indigenous languages and cultures. The research is well-described to be understandable by a broad audience. The logistical complexity of the work makes publishing such a readable and accurate book an amazing feat.

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