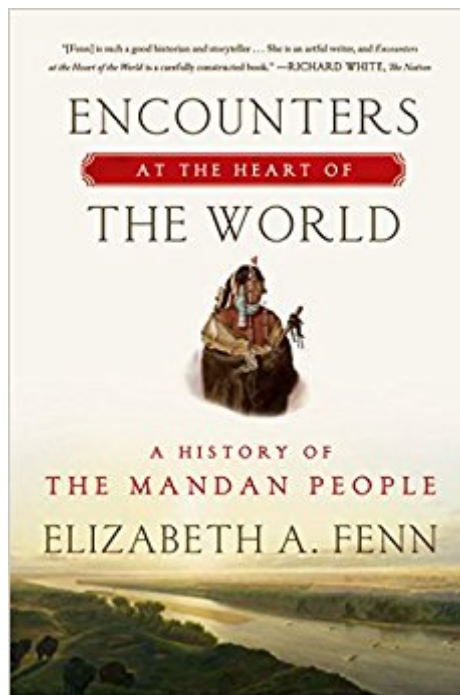




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# Encounters At The Heart Of The World: A History Of The Mandan People



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for History *Encounters at the Heart of the World* concerns the Mandan Indians, iconic Plains people whose teeming, busy towns on the upper Missouri River were for centuries at the center of the North American universe. We know of them mostly because Lewis and Clark spent the winter of 1804-1805 with them, but why don't we know more? Who were they really? In this extraordinary book, Elizabeth A. Fenn retrieves their history by piecing together important new discoveries in archaeology, anthropology, geology, climatology, epidemiology, and nutritional science. Her boldly original interpretation of these diverse research findings offers us a new perspective on early American history, a new interpretation of the American past. By 1500, more than twelve thousand Mandans were established on the northern Plains, and their commercial prowess, agricultural skills, and reputation for hospitality became famous. Recent archaeological discoveries show how these Native American people thrived, and then how they collapsed. The damage wrought by imported diseases like smallpox and the havoc caused by the arrival of horses and steamboats were tragic for the Mandans, yet, as Fenn makes clear, their sense of themselves as a people with distinctive traditions endured. A riveting account of Mandan history, landscapes, and people, Fenn's narrative is enriched and enlivened not only by science and research but by her own encounters at the heart of the world.

## Book Information

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: Hill and Wang; Reprint edition (March 17, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374535116

ISBN-13: 978-0374535117

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 60 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #92,104 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #155 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Colonial Period](#) #177 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Native American Studies](#) #239 in [Books > History > Americas > Native American](#)

## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** Anyone who has seen the sensitive portraits of Mandan chiefs painted in the

1830s by George Catlin and Karl Bodmer will be captivated by Fenn's exhaustively researched history of the tribe that once thrived on the upper Missouri River in present-day North Dakota "at one time the center of northern Plains commerce. Peaking at a population of 12,000 by 1500, and still a vital presence when Lewis and Clark visited in 1804, the Mandans were besieged by a daunting succession of challenges, including Norway rats that decimated their corn stores, two waves of smallpox, whooping cough, and cholera, reducing their numbers to 300 by 1838. Piecing together the journals of white visitors to this then unmapped land "from the French explorers Lahontan in 1688 and de la Vérendrye 50 years later, to Lewis and Clark, and later Prince Maximilian accompanied by Bodmer, the Swiss painter "and the annual reports to the commissioner of Indian Affairs, Fenn weaves the historical fabric of this proud people, enhanced by archaeological and climate studies tracing their migrations, food sources, and intertribal conflicts. Simultaneously scholarly and highly readable, Fenn's contribution enriches our understanding of not just Mandan history but also the history and culture of the pre-reservation northern Plains as well. --Deborah Donovan --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Encounters at the Heart of the World shows readers that there is much more to Mandan history than merely their suffering at the hands of Euroamerican epidemiology . . . Fenn relies upon deep archival research and a felicitous prose style to bring this forgotten world to life, starting with the Mandans' ancestral migrations from places south and east before their coalescence around the year 1400 in a fifty-mile stretch along the Missouri between the mouths of the Knife and Cannonball rivers. And what a rich and vibrant culture it was. Some of Fenn's best work concerns the material and social life of the Mandans . . . Perhaps the most compelling portion of the book is Fenn's recreation of Mandan cosmology and religious life, particularly the Okipa ceremony, an elaborate and intricate ritual performed every summer . . . The Mandan story is a reminder that even the most flourishing societies can be brought low, in virtually an instant, by the unpredictable workings of the natural world (to say nothing of human foes). But Fenn's account tells us also that cultures can persist and even recover in the wake of such awful devastation. • Andrew Graybill, *The Daily Beast* Elizabeth Fenn's *Encounters at the Heart of the World* is a book about those scraps--and about the author's personal encounters with them. It is a book of fragments or, as Ms. Fenn describes it, "a mosaic . . . pieced together out of stones from many quarries." . . . Somehow the fragments cohere into a more compelling portrait than a more linear brush, and a less personally visible artist, could have painted . . . Ms. Fenn is most compelling when she applies her detective skills to things scientific, medical and ecological . . . Ms. Fenn's mosaic brilliantly overcomes the

shortcomings of her written and archaeological sources . . . Readers who follow her toward, but never quite into, the heart of the Mandans' world will be richer for the journey.ââDaniel K. Richter, *The Wall Street Journal*â

Relying on fragmentary documentary records, discoveries by archaeologists, imaginative detective work, evidence uncovered by anthropologists, geologists, climatologists and nutritional scientists, plus paintings and drawings by frontier artists George Catlin, Karl Bodmer and others, Fenn pieces together a rich and remarkably detailed history of this nearly forgotten tribe . . . The product of her work is this wonderfully interesting book that should finally help the Mandans claim their rightful place in history.ââSteve Raymond, *The Seattle Times*â

Anyone who has seen the sensitive portraits of Mandan chiefs painted in the 1830s by George Catlin and Karl Bodmer will be captivated by Fenn's exhaustively researched history of the tribe that once thrived on the upper Missouri River in present-day North Dakota--at one time the center of northern Plains commerce. Peaking at a population of 12,000 by 1500, and still a vital presence when Lewis and Clark visited in 1804, the Mandans were besieged by a âdaunting succession of challenges,' including Norway rats that decimated their corn stores, two waves of smallpox, whooping cough, and cholera, reducing their numbers to 300 by 1838. Piecing together the journals of white visitors to this then unmapped land--from the French explorers Lahontan in 1688 and de la Vérendrye 50 years later, to Lewis and Clark, and later Prince Maximilian accompanied by Bodmer, the Swiss painter--and the annual reports to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Fenn weaves the historical fabric of this proud people, enhanced by archaeological and climate studies tracing their migrations, food sources, and intertribal conflicts. Simultaneously scholarly and highly readable, Fenn's contribution enriches our understanding of not just Mandan history, but the history and culture of the prereservation northern Plains as well.ââDeborah Donovan, *Booklist* (starred review)â

Historians thought this book could not be written--a history of a world far from document producing Europeans. Elizabeth A. Fenn has done it, and she has made it a page-turner. Her breathtaking accomplishment will make us see American history in an entirely new way.ââKathleen DuVal, University of North Carolina; author of *The Native Ground*â

In this innovative and illuminating book, Elizabeth A. Fenn reorients early American history toward the geographic center of the continent. There, long before the arrival of colonists on the Atlantic coast, the Mandan people built one of the most important and enduring trading centers in America. Using tools from archaeology, anthropology, and epidemiology, Fenn reconstructs their remarkable story and recounts it in absorbing and transparent prose.ââClaudio Saunt, University of Georgia; author of *West of the Revolution*â

We have been conditioned to view early American history from coastal places inward, but what if we did the opposite and viewed developments from the deep

interior outward? Elizabeth A. Fenn's engrossing new book does just that--and to stunning effect. The seemingly isolated Mandan villages in the center of North America emerge as pivotal places where many life-altering forces converged--from European trade and epidemics to the Lewis and Clark expedition. The Mandan history of struggle and resilience is filled with drama.

• Pekka Hämäläinen, University of California, Santa Barbara; author of *The Comanche Empire*

• Following the Mandan people from their precolonial independence through their adaptation and survival against fierce odds, Elizabeth A. Fenn presents new dimensions of American life all the way from the fifteenth century to our own time. Her book offers a spectacular demonstration of how much is needed to understand just one place and one people, and how that understanding can then illuminate a very large world. Any reader with an interest in colonial, western, and Native American history will gain from reading *Encounters at the Heart of the World*.

• Edward Countryman, Southern Methodist University; author of *Enjoy the Same Liberty*

• By recovering the history of a set of native villages at the very heart of our continent, Elizabeth A. Fenn brilliantly shows how we can rethink the past. Working from the native center rather than the colonial and coastal periphery, Fenn deftly reveals the haunting interplay of nature, humanity, loss, survival, and memory in the lives of the Mandans and their neighbors, who both shared and violently contested a demanding yet beautiful land.

• Alan Taylor, University of California, Davis; author of *American Colonies*

• For almost three centuries, the Mandans' society of farmers and traders dominated one of North America's greatest networks of exchange, hosting and bartering with the French, English, and Spanish; with the Hidatsas, Arikaras, Assiniboines, and Lakota Sioux; and, later, with the hustlers, soldiers, hunters, and artists of the new United States. The Mandan saga is, like all human stories, replete with joy and tragedy, triumph and despair. Drawing on a staggering range of sources, Elizabeth A. Fenn has recovered it and brought this very American story to life.

• Charles C. Mann, author of *1491* and *1493*

The Mandan helped Lewis and Clark and Sakajawea joined them there. I have read a number of books on the Native Americans and this is the first on a tribe of farmers and traders. It is a refreshing change from reading about fighters and raiders. The scholarship is superb and it is obvious Elizabeth Fenn spent time there. Of course, it is sad, too, because disease acquired from the whites who they helped so much pretty much wiped them out. For anyone interested in Native American culture this is a book they should have on their library shelf.

Elizabeth Fenn is a brilliant and talented writer. She makes history come alive. She has respect for

and spiritual insight into the lives of the Nueta, the Mandan. Every sentence is lovingly crafted. What a joy to read a work where every phrase offers a unique image and not a single word is wasted. Other than Bowers' book, Professor Fenn's seminal work is the definitive contemporary treatise on the history and life ways of the Mandan people. You will love this book!

With minimal documents or artifacts Elizabeth Fenn has written a compelling history of the Mandan Indians. Through Mandan interaction with other tribes the book also includes insight portion to the life of the Cheyenne, Sioux, Lakota, and other Plains Indians. The main focus is their agrarian lifestyle, and conducting trade with other tribes. The book presents little known discussed information, and breaks down misconceptions of Indian lifestyle. The Mandan raised a sufficient amount of corn, tobacco, and vegetable for trade. Migratory Plains tribes visited Mandan villages to exchange buffalo meat and hide for agriculture products the Mandan raised. Fenn argues that this trade enabled the tribes to maintain a balanced diet. The Mandan also interacted and traded with the French, British, Americans, and to a very limited degree the Spanish. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of Mandan life, housing, raising crops, peace and warfare, introduction of horses, disease etc. within each chapter events are presented in chronological order constructing a full view perspective of their lifestyle, and events that impacted the tribe. Life changed for the Mandan when they were first stricken by smallpox in 1791. The Mandan comprised approximately 13 clans after the plague there were seven. An outbreak of smallpox in 1837 decimated the tribe closing the book. My issue with this book is first Fenn injects her own personal narrative in the early chapters which has no pertinence to her topic. It would have been more appropriate to include these musings in the introduction. Unfortunately there is little historical record to draw from causing the content to be somewhat dry, but also wanting me to know more. *Encounters at the Heart of the World* needs to be applauded for its contribution for a history that is seldom discussed.

As an enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation...I enjoyed this book immensely. Ms. Fenn's 10 year journey of research has pieced together the most comprehensive volume of the history of the Mandan people to date. I learned how my ancestors were highly regarded for their hospitality, their agricultural skills and commercial trading prowess. I found it painful to try and comprehend the tragic monumental losses my people endured from the diseases to which they were exposed, but found pride in their ability to endure. This is not just the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition. She has given a new perspective and interpretation of our own American History. She deserved the Pulitzer Prize.

In *Encounters at the Heart of the World*, Elizabeth Fenn effectively paints a picture of the Mandan people of North Dakota as a proud, spiritual, sedentary society based on farming and trade. Yet, through the effects of the Columbian Exchange—most importantly horses, rats, and disease—the Mandan people went from a rich and powerful culture with a strong hegemony over the region, to a group of desperate survivors, struggling to continue their way of life. Despite all the hardships, the spirit of the Mandan people endured well into the nineteenth century. Every sedentary society needs an agricultural staple, and for the Mandan, corn was it. The surpluses of maize that the Mandan were able to produce served them not only as a food source, but as a resource for trade. Indeed, many of the surrounding tribes would often descend on the Mandan towns of Ruptare and Mih-tutta-hang-kusch, making the towns the center of the northern plains universe.... bustling with commerce and diplomacy (279). It is this wealth in agriculture and trade that allowed the Mandan people to flourish into the thriving society of approximately 12,000. Yet, due largely to the effects of European contact, Mandan society was about to meet a plethora of challenges. Among the first of these challenges was the horse. Initially, the horse seemed like a good thing. It brought wealth through trade, and made it possible for Mandan hunters to hunt more effectively and over greater distances. However, the horse also brought with it increased danger due to mounted enemies, and, perhaps worse of all, the horse proved to be a vehicle for the spread of diseases. Quickly the vast Mandan trade network was able to spread as far as Mexico, a fact gleaned from the Mexican-style saddles and bridles bartered by the Mandan. As products made their way from Mexico, so did smallpox. According to Fenn, the very traits that made the Mandan so prominent worked against them. Their long-distance contacts ensured that the virus reached their towns. Mandan numbers and population density made transmission highly likely (159). The diseases would come in waves. To make matters worse, Norway rats emerged on the scene. Unlike the local variety of mice, this new species of rodent had the ability to burrow its way into the buried Mandan caches of food. With the loss of their food stores malnutrition became prominent, and the Mandan became further susceptible to the unrelenting waves of disease. In the end, the Mandan civilization would be left with just three hundred survivors. Despite, or perhaps in spite of the hardships, the Mandans never ceased being Mandan. The Mandan's material world had unraveled, but their history and identity remained (329). At the center of Mandan culture lays the Okipa; an elaborate, complex, and symbolic ceremonial dance that adapted to the needs of the people, and that served as a steadying force (101). The Mandans were able to turn to the Okipa in order to maintain their

spiritual and cultural sense of themselves. In the end, the Mandans of both Ruptare and Mih-tutta-hang-kusch were forced from their homes as refugees of disease and warfare with neighboring tribes. Eventually, they resettled at the town of Like-a-Fishhook, joined by the equally devastated Hidatsas and Arikaras people. Yet, that didn't last long as, in the 1880s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs forced most of the remaining Mandan, Hidatsas, and Arikaras from their village and into individual allotments. Now scattered and weakened, the United States government attempted to finish off the Mandan people by banning the practice of their beloved Okipa. Overall, I found this book to be a thorough examination of the story of the Mandan people. I enjoyed the chronological layout of the book, and the easy reading style. 336 pages went by surprisingly fast. My biggest criticism is that Fenn failed to paint a clear picture of the ongoing legacy of the Mandan people. She covers archaeological sites in detail, but fails to talk about some of the other aspects of Mandan society that may persist today. What happened to the survivors of Like-a-Fishhook who were forced to take up plots of land? Fenn introduces Cedric Red Feather, a Mandan turtle priest and Okipa Maker, who she interacted with in 2011 (336). Does this mean that the Opika is still practiced today? How strong is the Mandan culture and tradition today? How many Mandan are left? Does the US government recognize them? I find myself turning to the internet to discover the answers to these questions that Fenn did not answer.

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