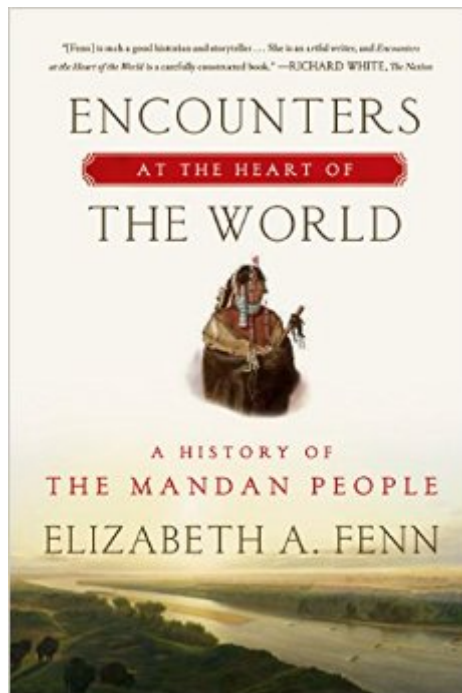


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# Encounters At The Heart Of The World: A History Of The Mandan People



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

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!

The Mandan, a semi-sedentary tribe in modern North Dakota, are ethnologically a well studied group, but there are only a few historical works about this important tribe, so Elizabeth A. Fenn's book is at the moment the only study which offers an overview of several centuries of Mandan history, from pre-columbian times till the mid 19th century. In contrast to many other ethnohistorical studies of certain Plains groups, Fenn has tried to write a most likely scenario of pre-contact times, piecing together the sparse informations of the recent archaeological finds. Unfortunately, this includes a lot of speculation. On safer ground, especially the period after the mid 18th century, when accounts of travellers, explorers and traders offer at least some insights into Mandan society and history, the author composed a convincing picture of the life in the Mandan villages, which were one of the most important centers of commerce in the whole Plains regions. This is the best part of the book, showing how events in far away places shaped and influenced the life of these Native Americans on the Upper Missouri. Well researched, these chapters describe meticulously many social and economical aspects of Mandan culture, as well as important historical processes during this turbulent period. Quite unusually, Elizabeth Fenn intersperses throughout the whole book short chapters, in which she describes her own experiences during visits to the historical locations. While these chapters offer few if any scientific informations, they show the reader some glimpses of the author's motivations, which is *mucho simpatico*. The climax of the book is the account of the tribes nearly demise during the epidemic of 1837/38. Unfortunately, the book more or less ends here, except for an epilogue which provides a short sketch of the tribe's later fortunes. While the author repeatedly hints that the Mandan, despite there diminished numbers, preserved their customs and their extremely complex ceremonialism - the big question would have been "How?". In the post-epidemic period after 1838, the Mandans population fell to a critical size, they had to face the increasing pressure of several hostile tribes, and after combining with their longtime allies the Hidatsa and their longtime rivals the Arikara in the large multiribal settlement called Like A Fishhook Village, they as the smallest group were constantly in danger of loosing their identity. Nevertheless, they survived as a coherent ethnicity. An analysis of their strategies would have been a central point of any serious historical research, and its total lack is for me the most serious deficiency of this otherwise well written book, which offers many valuable informations for the general reader, but less

for an ambitious student.

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.

The author has pulled together many sources of information on the Mandan / Hidatsa tribe.. She has succinctly put them together in a readable and informative book. I enjoyed the book immensely because there is very little out there about this particular tribe.

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.

With minimal documents or artifacts Elizabeth Fenn has written a compelling history of the Madan 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.

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