Compared to its eastern equivalents, the history of printing in the Canadian Northwest has garnered meagre critical attention. This is a pity, since its inception promises to be as interesting to linguists and cultural historians as to bibliographers and textual scholars. *The Beginning of Print Culture in Athabasca Country* is, therefore, a pioneer endeavour in two senses: not only does it open wide a previously under-explored chapter in Canadian print history, but it does so by interpreting a species of text uniquely representative of its time and place of origin.

It may surprise us to learn that the first books printed in Athabasca Country—the region northeast of Edmonton, Alberta—were produced on a Paris-made printing press housed in the Oblate mission of Notre-Dame des Victoires at Lac La Biche (xiv). More surprising is that, even though they consisted of devotional matter appropriate to their missionary purpose, these books were printed not in French, or English, or Latin, but in the syllabics of five different Aboriginal nations (xv). Demers, McIlwraith, and Thunder’s volume presents a facsimile and translation of the most extensive of these texts: a prayer book in Cree syllabics printed in 1883. Its author—Father Émile Grouard—is as much an object of the translators’ interest as the text itself, for it is in the life of this “forgotten pioneer of print culture” (xv) that we witness an extraordinary confluence of European and Aboriginal thought.

Indeed, to this reviewer (who is an expert neither in Cree syllabics nor in Catholic liturgy), the most illuminating parts of *Print Culture* were its nominally peripheral components: the introductory essay by Patricia Demers and the afterword by Demers, McIlwraith, and
Thunder. Demers sketches the trajectory of Grouard’s missionary career, focusing in particular on his apprenticeship to the art of printing and his assiduous study of Cree and other First Nations languages. As Demers argues, the primary object of Grouard’s enterprise was not assimilation but communication (xiv); hence, he believed that the devotional texts disseminated by the mission ought to be printed in the language of the Indigenous peoples, rather than the language of the colonizers. The result is a uniquely hybrid text: a prayer book whose fundamentally Western modes of teaching and thought are shaped by the linguistic parameters of Aboriginal speech. In this sense, Demers suggests, Grouard’s *katolik ayamehwi-masanahikan* (Catholic Prayer Book) is significant not only because it heralds a shift from oral to print culture in the Canadian Northwest, but also because the “textualized orality” of the Cree syllabics reveal a highly nuanced “give and take” between the culture of the catechized and that of the catechizer (ix).

In the afterword, Demers, McIlwraith, and Thunder further explore this “give and take” by reflecting on some of the challenges they encountered when transcribing and translating Grouard’s syllabics back into English, and how these difficulties must mirror, to a certain degree, the challenges first faced by Grouard when undertaking the indigenization of his Catholic catechism. Several pages are given over to detailed commentaries on some of the more perplexing passages of the original text—commentaries that will serve as much to satisfy the curiosity of linguistic scholars as to mollify syllabics experts who might take issue with the inferences in meaning that the translators inevitably make.

The Prayer Book proper, whose facsimile and translation occupy a capacious 444 pages between introduction and afterword, is a true gift to anyone interested in the intersection of language, culture, and printing. The entire original text, which consists of prayers, catechism, and a hymnal, is photographically reproduced and accompanied by three “avenues of access” (xi): a direct transcription of the 19th-century Cree Syllabics, a transliteration of the Syllabics into current Standard Roman Orthography, and a translation into English. By offering these multiple avenues into the text, the book provides readers with a unique opportunity to examine the transformations and subtle shifts of meaning that occur at the “interface of oral culture and textual representation” (445). The term “unique” is not used frivolously; as the translators point out, there is currently “no comparable examination and reconstructive translation” of a text of
this kind (445). Hence, it is here and nowhere else that a reader can examine the many surprising hinges on which missionary message pivots to find articulation in Cree. Even readers untutored in Cree will be fascinated by Grouard’s phonetic renderings of Latin into syllabics (“kloria in ekselsis” [26]) and by the ways in which Catholic metaphor is adapted to New World sensibilities (the apple of Eden becoming a handful of berries [110]).

Of course, no work that revisits Canada’s missionary history will be received without controversy. Demers acknowledges that this edition treads a precarious political tightrope, being a study both of Native languages (good) and of Christian evangelization of Aboriginals (dubious if not downright bad) (ix). However, this paradox is perhaps the book’s best defence, since it points to a more nuanced collection of motives underpinning the production of Grouard’s Prayer Book. Demers exhorts the reader to bracket the egregious outcomes of the missionary enterprise in order to consider the earlier, more “idealistic phase” in which Grouard laboured (ix), and “not to belittle or demonize the missionary, but to try to enter his mind” (xii). Hence the facsimile and the tripartite transcription and translation: by reproducing the text in full, and by offering as many “avenues of access” as possible into the Cree Prayer Book, Demers, McIlwraith, and Thunder grant readers the opportunity to enter the mind of its author, and to judge for themselves what emerged, and what was lost, in the production of the text.

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Edwards and Saltman have an ambitious plan: to portray the history of children’s book art as part of the history of publishing in Canada, and to analyse the rise of Canadian cultural awareness through its reflection in picture book history. There is a need for such an analysis, and few authors are as well qualified to address it. Edwards is the Chair of the Department of History at Douglas College. Saltman