

## Book Review

**Chris M. Cannon, *In the Footsteps of the Traveller: The Astronomy of Northern Dene*.**

University of Manitoba Press, 2025. Hardcover, 449 pp. ISSN 1928-1722. \$70 USD

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Chris Cannon's *In the Footsteps of the Traveller* is a groundbreaking and beautiful book. Beyond the lovely photographs, significant illustrations, and glossy production, its beauty lies in Cannon's careful recording and synthesis of Dene knowledge from across much of northern North America.

*In the Footsteps of the Traveller* details astronomical expressions of the mythic cycles of the Traveller-Transformer. The Traveller is a central figure in Dene cosmology, one who made the world into the form it has today and taught people the proper ways to live. The first half of the book characterizes and explains the Traveller constellation as understood by eleven different Dene peoples. Cannon separates these accounts into two chapters. The first describes the contents of Traveller narratives and includes expansive tables and figures showing the relationship between stars, asterisms, and the bodily figure of the Traveller. In the second Traveller chapter, Cannon takes readers to different Dene communities and, there, introduces us to community-based, newer ideas about the meanings of the stars and constellations. These meanings include syncretic understandings of the relationship between Dene spiritual beliefs and ideas from Christianity. To be a Dene astronomer, Cannon notes, is to be a particular kind of person, one who is humble and spiritually aware. And, throughout these first chapters, Cannon shows that the movement of the Traveller reflects the movements of people in the world and through their lives; Dene astronomy is set in both metaphor and reality.

The book continues with astonishing detail of Dene knowledge of other celestial phenomena. Cannon writes about Dene understandings of time and wayfinding. The book includes rich presentations of solar and lunar knowledge, understandings of the

northern lights, rainbows, the weather, sun dogs, and thunderbirds. The wide range of topics covered make significant contributions to Dene ethnography and provide a reference guide to all things related to the sky, day or night. It is carefully organized with much of the information presented accessibly in 58 figures and 32 tables. Cannon's tables show, notably, astronomical notation alongside Dene appellations, meaning that the comparison of information between knowledge systems is explicit. Appendices which summarize the names of the Traveller across languages and tell the story of the "cosmic hunt" in inter-linear translation support the text. This is a book that readers will return to again and again.

This book is majestic and instructive in its methodologies. It is based on Cannon's extensive and long-standing personal and professional relationships with knowledgeable Dene thinkers and storytellers. Cannon learned with and from more than sixty Dene Elders. Cannon also folds into the book extensive Indigenous knowledge contained in northern ethnographies. The result is a complex and sophisticated presentation of northern aerial phenomena from Indigenous perspectives. As Cannon puts it: "Drawing from a comparative and multi-sited approach using experiential learning, this book explores the ways in which Northern Dene peoples perceive, conceptualize, and integrate the sky and its contents into systems of knowledge, practices, world view, cosmology, and spirituality" (Cannon 2025, 1). This has been a massive undertaking, involving work with and an understanding of the knowledges of dozens of northern peoples. It is a testament to long-term and sustained relationships of trust and respect between Cannon and his Dene colleagues. Indeed, the book presents a masterclass in experiential ethnography and land-based learning. It demonstrates the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems to scientific inquiry while highlighting the integration of astronomical knowledge and social values in the lives of Dene people.

The holistic presentation of Indigenous knowledge of the sky, land, people, animals, social values, and history models one productive way in which community histories can be told. The vastness of the astronomical knowledge in this book will, I believe, inspire other communities and their knowledge keepers to document these understandings. *In*

*the Footsteps of the Traveller* will appeal to peoples of Dene ancestry and heritage, academics who work in northern Canada, and astronomers alike. I also believe that this book is a gem that will excite any reader who feels a desire to watch and to know the night sky. Readers will find pleasure, even joy, in this book regardless of their existing knowledge of Dene ethnography and languages, or their experience with astronomy.

*In the Footsteps of the Traveller* is a sweeping presentation of the ethnographic record on northern astronomy. Brief nods to traditions of astronomy outside of Dene lands serve to extend value of this work. Cannon convincingly overturns the idea that Dene astronomical knowledge is unknown. He also argues rightly that we must document this information as Elders pass away and as the access to dark skies diminishes. This book is a course in northern aerial phenomena, a reminder of the intricate understandings of our world held within Dene knowledge systems, and a humbling acknowledgment of the place of people in a big world. In sharing this body of knowledge with a larger audience, Cannon and the knowledge keepers who taught him have given readers a set of beautiful ideas to reflect on whenever they encounter the night's sky.

## **References**

Cannon, C. M. (2025). *In the footsteps of the Traveller: The astronomy of Northern Dene*. University of Manitoba Press, 2025