



First Nations and the Fur Trade in Western Canada



The Fur Trade

First Nations have been trading in North America since time immemorial. As a result, when Europeans arrived in North America in the late 15th century, these existing trade networks made it easier for Europeans to access First Nations trade markets. The trade between First Nations and Europeans was one of mutual desire – Europeans desired the furs and food that First Nations possessed and First Nations desired certain goods that Europeans possessed. Through trade “both societies exchanged technologies and material goods that made their lives easier in their common environment.”¹

Europeans began to participate in earnest in a western fur trade starting in 1668, when Medard Chouart Des Grosseilliers and his brother in law, Pierre Esprit Radisson (or as the First Nations called them, “gooseberry and radishes”) embarked on a historic trading mission to Hudson’s Bay. Spurred on by a Cree promise that prime furs could be found beyond Lake Superior and backed by the King of England, Charles II, Radisson and Grosseilliers returned from their journey to Hudson’s Bay with prime beaver pelts that fetched top price in Europe for their expedition’s investors.² As a result of this find of prime beaver pelts, the British Crown granted a charter to the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) granting them title to all the land that drained into Hudson’s Bay, or what would become known as Rupert’s Land. Rupert’s Land was roughly 1/3 the size of Canada and incorporated present day Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Northwest Territories. The HBC and the French, who had forts as far west as Fort a la Corne in modern day Saskatchewan, engaged in fierce competition over European trade supremacy in the

west. After the defeat of the French in North America in 1760, the French trading empire collapsed, but it was soon re-occupied by the North West Company (NWC), a group of Montreal based Scottish and British traders.³ The HBC and the NWC merged in 1812, bringing an end to the competition between European trade rivals in North America.

While the British Crown gave no real thought to the rights of the First Nations that lived in Rupert’s Land, they did have the understanding that they needed to obtain the First Nations permission in order to trade, travel and build posts on their land.⁴ On May 29, 1680, John Nixon, the HBC’s Canadian Governor, issued the following instructions:

Wee judge [it] would be much for the interest and safety of the Company, That...In severall places where you are, or shall settle, you contrive to make compact wth. the [Native] captns. or chiefs of the respective Rivers and places, whereby it might be understood by them that you had purchased both the land & rivers of them, and that they had transferred the absolute propriety to you, or at least the only freedom of trade.⁵

The HBC also followed the example of the French, by incorporating First Nations practices as much as possible into the trade. As the HBC built a trade network with First Nation allies that spanned modern day Canada, the HBC borrowed, adapted, and to an extent, standardized First Nations protocols. The trade alliances between First Nations and HBC traders were renewed annually through such ceremonies as the smoking of the sacred pipe, the exchange of gifts and arranged marriages.⁶ The smoking of



First Nations and the Fur Trade in Western Canada



the sacred pipe was undertaken with great seriousness before trading began and was a sign of good relations between the two parties. First Nations would sometimes even leave the pipe with their trading partners, but if proper protocol and conduct was no longer displayed by the HBC it was possible that the First Nations would take the pipe back, indicating the end of the trade relationship.⁷

A gift exchange would also occur between the two parties. Every member of the First Nations trading party would contribute to the collective giveaway, which was called *Puc ci tin ash a win* in Cree.⁸ *Puc ci tin ash a win* is a ceremony of mutual benefit in that the First Nations expect to receive good will and a spiritual blessing in return for their presents. First Nations people also received medicines and HBC uniforms from the traders. Medicines were shared with First Nations to show the willingness of the HBC to help First Nations combat diseases they had no immunity to.⁹ Uniforms were given to First Nations chiefs in order to acknowledge their leadership position and hopefully, win their loyalty.¹⁰

The HBC also had a history of extending credit to First Nations hunters and trappers. Trappers were given the goods and supplies they needed to hunt as credit against next year's return. By doing this, the HBC was engaging in a family-like practice, as they were extending credit in times of need just as First Nations families would share amongst themselves. The HBC would extend credit for two or more years if the hunting was poor and the credit system ended up becoming a safety net for First Nations people.¹¹ Extending credit to First Nations ensured the HBC that they would be the recipient of a certain number of pelts and it also showed First

Nations that their loyalty and well-being were also extremely important to the HBC.

As the wildlife became scarce and contagious diseases spread throughout the prairies in the 1800s, the HBC took other measures to protect its interests. The HBC would administer vaccines against smallpox, while giving relief and medicine to the sick and the elderly. By investing in First Nations livelihood and providing sustenance during the hard times, the HBC was not only protecting their interests, they were also conforming with the First Nations' principles of good relations:¹²

Thus, before 1870, the economic safety net remained in place for the HBC's Aboriginal customers in the form of a debt system (to address the short-term problems which its able-bodied clients faced from time to time earning their livelihood) and in the form of sick and destitute relief (for the chronically infirm). As well, whenever the local hunts failed, the company supplied food (rations).¹³

Maintaining good relations with First Nations was of the utmost importance to trading companies like the HBC if they wished to have any kind of success in North America. By engaging in First Nations ceremonies and taking care of First Nations people in times of need, the HBC understood that to gain access to the land they needed the good will of First Nations, a belief that was also understood by the Crown during the Treaty-making period. The fur trade is also important to Treaty-making because many of the precedents that were developed during the fur trade period were later adopted during the Treaty-making period. The numbered Treaties on the prairies include many provisions that



First Nations and the Fur Trade in Western Canada



were first developed during the fur trade, including the giving of rations and medicines during hard times. Furthermore, many of the ceremonies that were a part of the fur trade process were also engaged in by the Crown and First Nations during Treaty negotiations. The fur trade created the basis of the relationship between First Nations and Europeans and it was a tradition that was carried forward by the Treaties between First Nations and the Crown.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. *Volume 1: Looking Forward, Looking Back*. (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1996) 101.
- ² Arthur Ray, *I have Lived Here Since the World Began: An Illustrated History of Canada's Native People*. (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1996) 69.
- ³ Sarah Carter, *Aboriginal People and the Colonizers of Western Canada*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 48.
- ⁴ Ray, 70.
- ⁵ Quoted in Ray, 70.
- ⁶ Jim Miller, Arthur Ray and Frank Tough. *Bounty and Benevolence: A History of Saskatchewan Treaties*. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000) 10.
- ⁷ Miller, et.al., 17.
- ⁸ Ibid., 11.
- ⁹ Ibid., 16.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 13.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 18.
- ¹² Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt, *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream is that Our Peoples Will One Day be Clearly Recognized as Nations*. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000) 19-21.
- ¹³ Miller, et.al., 23.