Chapter 6 TRADE AND WAR IN THE WESTERN INTERIOR

You told me last year to bring many Indians, you see I have not lied, here are a great many young men come with me; use them kindly.… Let them trade good goods.… Let the young men have more than measure: roll tobacco cheap, kettles thick.… [G]ive us good measure in cloth, let us see the old measure: do you mind me, the young men love you by coming to see you. —Trading captain's speech, James Isham's Observations on Hudson Bay, 1743 By the middle of the eighteenth century, Native people had carried the fur trade northwest as far as the Athabasca River and Peace River country. As French explorers and traders followed them, a multiracial and multicultural society emerged around the trading posts that began to dot the landscape. In the Subarctic, the expansion of the fur trade unsettled old balances of power between nations, leading to new alliances, conflict, and significant population movements. Meanwhile, on the prairies, a revolutionary change in the lives of the Plains nations was in its early stages.

THE ERA OF THE NORTHERN TRADERS

While the Native people of the eastern Great Lakes and St Lawrence River valley struggled to cope with shifting inter-nation and European alliances, the Assiniboine, Cree, and Ojibwa strengthened their hold on the northern fur trade. The Assiniboine, who lived in the region extending from Lake of the Woods to the forks of the Saskatchewan River, were at war with their Dakota Sioux enemies to the south. The origin of the enmity between the Assiniboine, who were Siouan speakers, and their former Sioux relatives is unrecorded, having occurred sometime during the pre-contact era. With the arrival of Hudson's Bay Company traders, the Assiniboine were able to obtain a steady supply of firearms and metal weapons to use in their ongoing skirmishes. Understandably, they, and their Cree allies, denied the Sioux access to the suppliers of this weaponry. French expansion into their territory, however, provided the Sioux with an alternative source of supply. The growing intensity of the warfare between these two enemies made it unsafe for either group to live in the area between the northwestern shores of Lake Superior and the lower Red River. Consequently, the Assiniboine moved off in a northwesterly direction, and by about 1725, they had deserted the southeastern sections of their homeland. Although some remained in the woodlands, most groups took up buffalo hunting in the parklands and grasslands.

During this period, Cree migrated west and northwest from present-day northern Ontario to take advantage of new trading opportunities in the Nelson River drainage area. In the territory between the Saskatchewan River and the upper Churchill River, they moved into areas already occupied by other Cree. But along the Churchill River and in the lands immediately to the northwest, the Cree began pushing into the lands of the Dene, and considerable bloodshed took place. In the middle and lower Churchill River region, it was the Dene who took the brunt of their blows. Far to the northwest, the Dunne-za, who lived along the Athabasca and lower Peace rivers, also suffered from the Cree advance. They took flight westward up the Peace River, pushing the Tsek'ehne before them into Native land in what is now British Columbia. Apparently the Cree raided even beyond the Rocky Mountains; remains of their war camps were still visible at the close of the eighteenth century along the upper reaches of the Peace River and its tributaries.

The Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713, proved to be a catalyst for more changes to the population map of the western interior. The agreement awarded control of Hudson Bay to the English, yet it left the interior beyond the boundaries of New France open to the traders of both countries. Although this forced the French to abandon their posts on the bay, they retaliated by building a series of new inland posts, which encircled James Bay and Hudson Bay and cut off the HBC posts from the surrounding hinterland. An interconnected network of major waterways—the Native trading network—linked the French posts to Montreal. Native groups along the way welcomed the French and the new economic and military opportunities they brought with them Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye, headed the French advance, beginning in 1727. As commander of the northwestern posts, he was responsible for developing the fur trade beyond Lake Superior and continuing the search for the elusive western sea. From the Cree, La Vérendrye heard embellished accounts of Lake of the Woods and the large lakes of central Manitoba. One of his informants was a Cree chief named Tacchigis, who met La Vérendrye at Kaministikwia post on Lake Superior during the winter of 1728–29. Tacchigis knew the Lake Winnipeg country first-hand. His description of a great “River of the West” (probably Rainy River) and of the Missouri River valley and its Native inhabitants provided by an unnamed slave from the grasslands persuaded the French explorer to head west.

In preparation for the journey, La Vérendrye arranged for a Cree by the name of Ochagach to guide his party. Little is known about this man except that La Vérendrye was confident he was loyal to the French and would not desert the expedition en route. The Frenchman wrote in his diary, “I gave him a collar by which, after their manner of speaking, I took possession of his will, telling him that he was to hold himself in readiness for such a time as I might need of him.” Ochagach drew a nowfamous map that showed, in a style reminiscent of modern bus- or subway-route maps, the canoe route leading from Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg. Another band of Cree from the Lake of the Woods visited La Vérendrye that same winter, and their leader, a very elderly man named Mateblanche, produced a nearly identical map. Aided by Cree maps and guides, La Vérendrye built a line of posts from Lake Superior to the lower Saskatchewan River between the late 1720s and early 1750s. He also visited the Mandan villagers to the southwest. These seemingly harmless activities actually unleashed forces that radically changed the Aboriginal world of the upper Great Lakes region and the western interior. First, La Vérendrye’s posts displaced the northern Ottawa and Ojibwa nations of the Lake Superior country from their positions as middlemen in the French fur trade. These groups had been struggling to maintain their role as intermediaries since the 1690s when coureurs de bois started to push past them. La Vérendrye’s incursion into the boundary-waters area of what is now northern Ontario and Minnesota was even more disruptive, because he allied himself with the Cree. Their Dakota enemies, who were already allies and trading partners of other Frenchmen located farther south in the upper Mississippi River area, regarded La Vérendrye’s alliance with the Cree as a breach of faith. In 1736 the Dakota attacked some of the explorer’s forces near Fort St Charles on Lake of the Woods, killing nineteen men, including one of La Vérendrye’s sons. As the violence escalated, the northern Ojibwa broke their alliance with the Dakota and joined forces with the Cree and Assiniboine. One long-term consequence of this new pact was that the northern Ojibwa began to migrate into former Cree territory in present-day northwestern Ontario, where their descendants live today. The warfare in the

Mississippi River headwaters' country continued well into the nineteenth century and eventually spilled over into the Red River valley.

La Vérendrye's actions in the interior provoked only a slight reaction from the HBC, which remained committed to doing business at its bayside posts. It dispatched the occasional small expedition inland to check on French activities and to encourage the various Native groups to trek to the bay. It also asked Assiniboine and Cree clients to act as ambassadors on the company's behalf, sending them away with small assortments of goods to distribute to potential trading partners. In doing this, the company officers badly misread the situation, because their emissaries were using every means at their disposal to protect the lucrative trading networks they had built. They were highly successful in blocking others from visiting HBC posts. The Cree and Assiniboine maintained their hegemony south of the Churchill River until 1774, when the company moved inland to establish direct contact with Native trappers. North of the Churchill River, the Cree lost ground, beginning in 1717, when the HBC built Fort Churchill to gain direct access to the Dene. A remarkable Dene woman named Thanadelthur (Jumping Marten) was largely responsible for this turn of events. She had been captured by Cree raiders in 1713 but escaped shortly thereafter. In 1714 she made her way to York Factory and discovered to her surprise that the "stone house people," a term the Dene used to describe the HBC traders, supplied the Cree with their new weapons. She was determined to gain access to these arms for her people so that they could fight back against their Cree foes. Thanadelthur also realized that the household goods the English had to offer could make her life, and that of other Dene women, much easier. In 1715 she enticed the chief factor at York Factory, James Knight, to send an expedition to her nation by telling him of its furs and yellow metal (native copper). Thanadelthur guided the party, which included 150 Cree who had promised Knight they would make peace with the Dene. Starvation forced the expedition to break up into smaller parties, and one of these attacked a Dene group, putting the whole enterprise in jeopardy. Thanadelthur, however, persuaded her people—after talking for days until she was hoarse—not to seek revenge. She arranged a temporary peace with the local Cree and returned to York Factory, where she lobbied to have her brother made a trading captain and a post opened for the exclusive use of her people. Eventually Knight agreed. Tragically, before work on the new post began, an epidemic swept through the Native population at York Factory, and Thanadelthur died in February 1717. Before she died, she trained a young company servant to be an emissary to her people by instructing him in their customs and telling him how to trade with them.

Once armed with a steady supply of English weapons, the Dene lashed back at the Cree and began to build their own trading network with other Athapaskanspeaking people who lived farther inland, towards the middle and lower Mackenzie River valley. The increased involvement of the Dene in the fur trade had two dramatic effects on this group: it drew them into the full boreal forest to trap furs and it forced them to learn how to use canoes. At first, they had journeyed to Hudson Bay on foot, taking up to three years to complete a return trip, with loads probably limited to under one hundred pounds a person. Canoes greatly reduced downstream travelling times and allowed the Dene to carry substantially more.

DOING BUSINESS

In their descriptions of the evolving trading practices of Assiniboine and Cree middlemen, HBC records reveal that a small number of influential Native leaders controlled the business. At York

Factory, the post that collected the largest number of furs, fewer than twenty Aboriginal trading captains brought in most of the post's returns in the 1740s. This meant that post managers, or chief factors, had to do everything in their power to curry the favour of the leaders, the "lieutenants" who accompanied them, and other followers. Gift exchange remained the most important way of doing this. As competition with the French heated up, the exchange ceremonies became more and more elaborate. Trading parties put ashore to dress in their finest clothing just before coming within sight of York Factory. According to HBC traders' descriptions, once properly attired "they re-embark and soon after appear in sight of the Fort, to the number of between ten and twenty [canoes] in a line abreast of each other. If there is but one captain his station is in the centre, but if more they are in the wings also; and their canoes are distinguished from the rest by a small St. George or Union Jack, hoisted on a stick placed in the stern of the vessel." When the flotilla of canoes drew near York Factory, "several fowling-pieces are discharged from the canoes to salute the Fort, and the compliment is returned by a round of twelve pounders." After landing, the visitors set about making camp while the trading captains and lieutenants walked inside the fort to pay their respects to the post commander and his officers. Andrew Graham, who was in charge of York Factory in the late eighteenth century, described what happened next: "Chairs are placed in the room, and pipes with smoking materials produced on the table. The captains place themselves on each side of the Governor.… The silence is then broken by degrees by the most venerable Indian.…" This leader announced "… how many canoes he … brought, what kind of winter they have had, what natives he has seen, are coming, or stay behind, asks how the Englishmen do, and says he is glad to see them." Then it was the factor's turn to welcome them, saying "he has good goods and plenty; and that he loves the Indians and will be kind to them. The pipe is by this time renewed and the conversation becomes free, easy and general."

In the course of this speech making by both sides, the factor gave the most prominent Native leader a "captain's outfit." In Graham's time, this attire must have been striking: "A coarse cloth coat, either red or blue, lined with baize with regimental cuffs and collar. The waistcoat and breeches are of baize; the suit ornamented with broad and narrow orris lace of different colours; a white or checked shirt; a pair of yarn stockings tied below the knee with worsted garters; a pair of English shoes. The hat is laced and ornamented with feathers of different colours. A worsted sash tied round the crown, an end hanging out on each side down to the shoulders. A silk handkerchief is tucked by a corner into the loops behind; with these decorations it is put on the captain's head and completes his dress." Following this first round of the exchange, the company officers and the Native leaders trooped out of the fort and on to the camp for another round of speeches. The meeting took place in a specially prepared tent where "a clean birchrind or beaver coats are spread on the ground for the chief to sit on." After receiving the factor's presents—mostly brandy, food, and tobacco—"the Chief then makes a speech to his followers, and then orders his lieutenant, or some respectable person, to distribute the present, never performing this himself." One or more days of revelry followed before the band made their return gift of furs (called the puc'ca'tin'ash'a'win in Cree) to the chief factor. The trading captain collected a fur pelt from each of his followers and presented them on their behalf during a grand calumet, or pipe-smoking, ceremony. Chief Factor Graham noted that the ceremony was "necessary to establish confidence, [and] it is conducted with the greatest solemnity.… The Captain walks in with his calumet in his hand covered with a case, then comes the lieutenant

and the wives of the captains with the present, and afterwards all the other men with the women and their little ones." According to Graham, "The captain covers the table with a new beaver coat, and on it lays the calumet or pipe; he will also sometimes present the Governor [chief factor] with a clean beaver toggy or banian to keep him warm in the winter." Then the Native leader offered his group's gift. A period of silence followed, which the factor eventually broke by lighting the pipe and passing it around. In the next part of the ceremony, the trading captain and the factor exchanged lengthy speeches. In the course of his address, the Native leader reconfirmed his people's friendship towards the HBC, mentioned any of the troubles his followers had experienced with the previous year's supply of company goods, and detailed the hardships they had experienced over the winter. Before concluding, the captain politely demanded that his people receive fair treatment—or they would trade with the opposition. In reply, the post manager told his clients that the company laboured very hard on their behalf and that it would treat them better than anyone else would. Only after the completion of the ceremony were the two parties ready to barter. The trading itself was highly structured. Each Native client transacted his or her own business through a so-called hole-in-the-wall, or small wicket, situated in a wall between the warehouse and the trading room. The HBC conducted its affairs this way to minimize pilfering. The trading captain, on the other hand, kept a watchful eye on the proceedings from behind the counter on the warehouse side to make sure that the clerks adhered to the agreement he had struck with the chief factor regarding the general prices for furs and goods. Prices were expressed in terms of made beaver, or the value of a prime winter beaver pelt. The HBC trader offered a customer a price for his or her entire bundle of furs, taking into account the quality and variety of pelts it contained. The client dickered with him over what that price should be. Although barter was commonplace, credit transactions predominated from the beginning. Regular hunters, trappers, and trading partners received "outfits" of staple goods as advances to carry them over the winter. Hatchets, knives, firearms, ammunition, trapping tools, net lines, and twine were the main subsistence items, but a few other goods—particularly tobacco—were also included in an outfit.

Credit trading was very compatible with the Aboriginal tradition of sharing food and material goods with close friends. The cyclical nature of animal populations meant food and fur shortages were recurrent, so when a trader developed social and economic bonds with a particular Native group, they would have expected him to provide what they required in times of need. Conversely, the group recognized an obligation to return a trader's kindness as soon as they were able to do so. These considerations would explain why Native people who dealt with the HBC initially saw their debts as being personal obligations to individual traders rather than to the organization. From the European perspective, advancing outfits was a way of staking a claim to the furs their clients would harvest in the future, thereby preventing them from falling into the hands of competitors. Credit also ensured that a trader's clients always had the tools they needed to hunt and trap, even when the number of furs in their bundles did not provide enough income to buy these necessities. Credit trading proved to be one of the enduring features of the business; Native people believed they had a right to it.

Kinship ties reinforced economic bonds between traders and local Native groups. At first, the HBC directors prohibited their officers and men from becoming too "familiar" with Aboriginal women. In 1682 they wrote to Governor John Nixon, "We are very sensible that the Indian Weoman resorting to our Factories are very prejudiciall to the Companies affaires, not only by

being a meanes of our Servants often debauching themselves, but likewise by embeazling our goods and very much exhausting our supplies." They continued, "It is therefore our possitive order that you lay your strict Commands on every Chiefe of each Factory upon forfiture of Wages not to Suffer any Woeman to come within any of our Factories." This policy was completely unrealistic. It did not take into account Native trading practices or the social needs of men and women. Aboriginal women and their kin sought trading privileges through marriages with the newcomers, and the lonely company men welcomed female companionship. Many long-lasting liaisons resulted, which drew HBC traders, as well as their French counterparts, into local Native social orbits. These "country marriages" often had heartbreaking consequences for Native women when their spouses retired to their homelands, or when their children were sent away for schooling.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the HBC directors recognized that they could not prevent inter-racial liaisons and country marriages, so they lifted the ban against fraternization. By that time many people of mixed ancestry lived near the posts and among the various nations. HBC men called them "mixed-bloods," "country born," or "citizens of Hudson Bay." The French called their offspring of mixed descent bois-brûlé or Métis. Although Native people developed strong ties with traders, it did not prevent them from using the rivalries between the English and the French for their own advantage. They sharply criticized merchandise to pressure the traders to bring in the quality and variety of goods they wanted, and they also used comparative shopping to press for better rates of exchange. In 1728 Thomas McCleish, who was chief factor at York Factory, wrote to the London directors complaining bitterly about the withering criticism he was receiving from his clients: "Never was any man so upbraided with our powder, kettles and hatchets, than we have been this summer by all the natives, especially by those that borders near the French." McCleish added a warning: "The natives are grown so politic in their way in trade, so as they are not to be dealt by as formerly … now is the time to oblige the natives, before the French draws them to their settlement … for here came at least forty canoes of Indians this summer, most of them clothed in French clothing that they traded with the French last summer. They likewise brought several strong French kettles and some French powder in their horns, with which they upbraided us with, by comparing with ours."

On the northern trading frontier, alcohol was not yet having a disruptive influence on Native societies. Nonetheless, James Isham noted that among the Cree, "These Natives are given very much to Quarrellg, when in Liquor having Known two Brothers when in Liquor to Quarrell after such a manner, that they have Bitt one anothr. nose, Ears, and finger's off, Bitting being common with them when in Liquor.—they also are Very Sulky and sullen, and if at any time one has a Resentment against another, they never show itt, till the Spiritious Liquor's work's in their Brains, then they Speak their mind freely." The Cree, like all the nations of pre-contact Canada, had no prior experience with an intoxicant as powerful as the alcohol in brandy or rum. Because they lived most of the year in small, closely knit groups, where survival depended on conformity and co-operation, they had few outlets to express the personal resentments that inevitably arose. Drinking alcohol, which impairs judgement and reduces inhibitions, facilitated the expression of these feelings. Unfortunately, the way Native people and Europeans dealt with each other in the fur trade encouraged alcohol abuse. Rival traders attempted to court the favour of Native groups by displaying greater generosity than their opponents. Their expenses spiralled upwards as a result. To reduce costs, traders gave away larger quantities of

watered-down alcohol. They also encouraged their Native clients to buy more alcohol to address another business problem. Because their mobile lifestyle made the accumulation of goods impractical and social mores discouraged it, trappers harvested only the number of pelts they required to satisfy their immediate demand for goods. When competitive fur markets sent fur prices soaring, trappers responded by harvesting fewer pelts, much to the dismay of European traders. However, once the trappers became addicted to alcohol, this changed, because they mostly drank it at or near the trading posts. It was too heavy to carry inland. In the early decades of the northern fur trade, when Native groups visited posts infrequently, their members had little opportunity to become addicted. Greater access in later years would lead to abuse.

Tobacco, on the other hand, could be easily carried and fetched good prices. Native people were particularly fond of Brazil tobacco—a molasses-treated tobacco that was twisted in long ropes and sold in bundles called “carrots.” The HBC went to great lengths to obtain the finest Brazil for its clients from the tobacco markets of Lisbon and Oporto, Portugal. By the mid-1700s, the inland nations sold a substantial portion of their highestvalued lightweight furs, such as prime beaver and marten, to French traders. In return, they usually bought lightweight high-priced goods. These were the only kinds of commodities that the French could afford to handle in any quantity, because their lengthy overland canoe transportation system linking Montreal to the far northwest had very limited capacity. Native people turned to the HBC for a greater variety of merchandise; the company had the advantage of cheap ocean transportation right to the doorsteps of its posts. For the same reason, the English traders could accept lower-valued, bulky furs. Some of the nations in what are now Manitoba and Saskatchewan responded to this situation by beginning their annual trading round with a visit to the French posts. Afterwards some of them would continue on to Hudson Bay to buy items that were not available from the French. Those who chose not to make the arduous voyage gave their kinfolk the balance of their furs along with a “shopping list” of the things they wanted purchased on their behalf at the HBC posts.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A REVOLUTION ON THE PLAINS

Although the fur trade had an impact on the lives of the Plains peoples by the mideighteenth century, there is little doubt that the most profound change taking place among them at the time was their acquisition of horses. At a much earlier date, the Spanish had introduced the animals to the southern plains. From there they spread northward through Native trading networks and horse-raiding activities. La Vérendrye did not see any horses in the southern Manitoba area in the 1730s, but he did find them at the Missouri River Mandan villages during his visit there in 1739. Shortly thereafter, Plains Assiniboine and Cree began to acquire horses, and by the middle of the eighteenth century their western neighbours, members of the Siksika confederacy, had them too.

Horses greatly increased the mobility of those nations who had enough animals for everyone, and they quickly became the primary symbol of wealth on the plains. In these very competitive and highly status-conscious societies, a man’s social position was soon dependent on the number of horses he possessed and the daring he displayed in getting them. Men sometimes took their best horse into their lodge at night to protect it from marauders. Taking such animals was a great coup that earned the raider the highest esteem of his compatriots. As a result,

inter-nation conflict rapidly escalated as horse raiding became a central feature of Plains culture. At the same time that the Plains Assiniboine, Siksika, Cree, and Ojibwa were acquiring horses, they were buying firearms through the fur trade. The smoothbore flintlock muskets were not well suited to buffalo hunting on horseback, however. For this reason firearms did not become important hunting weapons until later, when percussion-cap muskets and rifles became available in the nineteenth century. It was in the realm of warfare that firearms had their first major impact. By the mid-eighteenth century these armed equestrians were well on their way to becoming unrivalled military forces. Until the destruction of the buffalo herds in the late nineteenth century altered their way of life, they would represent a threat that the Europeans and Canadians could not ignore.