Chapter 7 OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FUR TRADE:

I have told you that we believe in years long passed away, the Great Spirit was angry with the Beaver, and ordered Weesaukejauk (the Flatter) to drive them all from the dry land into the water; and they became and continued very numerous; but the Great Spirit has been, and now is, very angry with them and they are now all to be destroyed. About two winters ago Weesaukejauk showed to our brethren, the Nepissings and Algonquins the secret of their destruction; that all of them were infatuated with the love of the Castorum of their own species.… We are now killing the Beaver without any labour, we are now rich, but [shall] soon be poor, for when the Beaver are destroyed we have nothing to depend on to purchase what we want for our families.… —Fur trader/explorer David Thompson's recollection of an Ojibwa elder's story, late 1790s.

Between 1763 and 1820 the Native people of the western interior were drawn into a no-holds-barred fight between the Montreal-based merchants, assisted by the Iroquois and other eastern nations, and the Hudson's Bay Company. Although this contest for control of the northwestern fur trade eliminated many Native middlemen, it created alternative opportunities for Native people as trappers, provisioners, and labourers. It also sent fur prices soaring and trade-goods prices tumbling. These benefits proved to be costly, however. The bitter fight led to violence in the so-called Pemmican War and to the widespread depletion of numbers of fur-bearing animals, the destruction of game, and alcohol abuse.

GUIDING EUROPEAN EXPLORERS

After the fall of New France, a full-scale effort to reoccupy the old French trading area began in 1765, when the Montreal fur trader Alexander Henry obtained a monopoly on the Lake Superior-region trade from the commander at Michilimackinac. Three years later, the pace accelerated sharply when the British government stopped regulating the fur trade according to the terms laid down by the Royal Proclamation of 1763. This edict addressed a number of pressing Native concerns. Of relevance here, it specified that only licensed traders could take part in the fur trade in "Indian territory" beyond the settled colonies. In 1768, however, the Crown concluded that administration of the business was too costly and passed the responsibility on to colonial authorities, who promptly opened the trade to everyone.

Montreal-based merchants responded quickly by re-establishing or constructing posts at Sault Ste Marie, Grand Portage, the outlet of the Winnipeg River (Fort Bas de la Rivière), on the lower Assiniboine River, at the outlet of the Dauphin River, on the Saskatchewan River near Cedar Lake, at The Pas, and Nipawin. From these bases, they dispatched scores of men to comb the country for furs. In undertaking the expansion program, the Montreal traders openly flouted the provisions of the HBC charter that granted the London company exclusive trading rights in Rupert's Land. The company's factors merely sent a few traders to the interior for exploration purposes and invited various Native groups to visit the bay-side posts.

The surviving accounts of one of these early HBC expeditions provide some very good insights into the role Native people, particularly women, played in European exploration. The expedition was the 1770–72 overland journey of Samuel Hearne from Prince of Wales's Fort (later Fort Churchill) to the mouth of the Coppermine River. Native reports describing this region as being rich in minerals (copper and tar) had prompted Moses Norton, the mixed-blood chief factor of the fort to send Hearne on a gruelling thousand-mile trek on foot to investigate. From two

previous attempts, Hearne had learned three hard lessons. First, expeditions faced certain failure without first-class Native guides; those selected for his first two journeys proved to be totally unsuitable. Second, visitors did not lead guides in their homeland; one had to follow them, at the pace they set for themselves. With these lessons in mind, Hearne chose Matonabbee, a Dene chief who was part Cree, to lead the third attempt. Born at the Prince of Wales's Fort some forty-five years earlier, he had become a prominent trading captain there. Matonabbee taught Hearne the third, and probably most important, key to success: bring Native women. Hearne said that Matonabbee "attributed all our misfortunes to the misconduct of my guides, and the very plan we pursued, by the desire of the Governor [Norton], in not taking any women with us on this journey, was he said, the principal thing that occasioned all our wants." According to Hearne, Matonabbee explained this by pointing out that "[w]hen all the men are heavy laden, they can neither hunt nor travel to any considerable distance; and in the case they meet with success in hunting, who is to carry the produce of their labour? Women were made for labour; one of them can carry or haul, as much as two men can do. They also pitch our tents, make and mend our clothing, keep us warm at night; and, in fact, there is no such thing as traveling any considerable distance, or for any length of time … without their assistance."

Most of the territory that Matonabbee guided Hearne through was within the trading sphere of Dene groups. But part of their journey led them into the Dene-Inuit borderlands where an age-old conflict continued between the two groups. Hearne was deeply shaken as he watched Matonabbee's people attack a camp of sleeping Inuit and ruthlessly kill all the men, women, and children. Subsequently, the HBC made repeated but unsuccessful efforts to end the violence. It may be, however, that the organization's very presence intensified the strife in some areas, as the Dene and Inuit tried to limit each other's access to firearms and goods. About the time Hearne and Matonabbee undertook their epic trip, the HBC realized that it would face ruin unless it altered the way it was dealing with the intruders from Montreal. Native groups were taking advantage of the new trading opportunities closer to home. As a result, the company's opponents were acquiring most of the prime fur and winning the allegiance of key Native groups in the bargain. To address this threat, the HBC launched a major expansion program in 1774 with the construction of Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River.

Competition soon became cutthroat as the two rivals embarked on a trading-post building spree. Neither the American War of Independence nor the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, with their North American offshoot—the War of 1812—checked it. Before it came to an end, the rivalry brought chaos to the greater northwest and disaster to many Aboriginal groups. By the time the HBC built Cumberland House, its rivals had been persuaded by the Dene to expand into the fur-rich Athabasca and Mackenzie river areas. The Montreal traders had to amalgamate their small partnerships to muster the financial resources, equipment, and manpower that they needed to reach this new fur bonanza. In the 1770s they began to join together in the Saskatchewan River area, and in 1779 they rallied under the banner of the North West Company (NWC). This new enterprise, like the smaller partnerships it absorbed, united merchant-suppliers located in Montreal with their various fur-trading associates—the so-called wintering partners—who managed operations in the interior and shared the profits.

The Nor' Westers faced formidable obstacles. The Athabasca-Mackenzie region could not be reached from Montreal in a single canoeing season because of the shortness of the open-water period, and the small northern Native canoes lacked the cargo capacity the new company needed. The NWC solved the first problem by organizing a system of canoe brigades and the second by building much larger birchbark canoes. The grandest of these was the massive canot du maître, or Great Lakes canoe, which was about twelve yards long and one and one-half yards across the beam. It could carry at least five thousand pounds of cargo plus a crew of six to twelve. The company used these canoes on the route between Montreal and the western shores of Lake Superior, but beyond Lake Superior, numerous rapids, falls, and countless portages precluded their use. In their place, the Nor' Westers employed the smaller canot du nord. Only eight yards long and slightly more than a yard across the beam, it carried half the cargo and crew of its larger cousin.
Although the Nor' Westers designed these two types of birchbark canoe, some Native groups, particularly Ojibwa who had moved into the Lakehead area, quickly specialized in building the canot du nord for the company. Along all the NWC's routes, Native people sold the cedar root, birch rind, and tar that were needed to build and repair the craft. They also constructed countless numbers of small traditional canoes, which were well suited for travelling between the burgeoning number of outposts and the various district headquarters. Provisioning the NWC crews provided another economic opportunity for Native groups. The French-Canadian and Iroquois voyageurs who paddled the company's canoes between Montreal and Fort William did not have time to hunt or fish for their needs en route. They came to be known as the mangeurs du lard, or pork eaters, because they subsisted on a diet of melted pork fat and hominy made from corn. While travelling, the men supplemented their diet with "country foods" purchased from local Native people. Country foods included staples, such as meat, and delicacies, such as maple sugar, which was prepared in maple bushes throughout the Great Lakes forest region. The NWC explorer Alexander Mackenzie reported that at Sault Ste Marie, Ojibwa "and the other inhabitants [about a dozen Canadians who had intermarried with them] make a quantity of sugar from the maple tree, which they exchange with the traders for necessary articles, or carry it to Michilimackinac, where they expect a better price. One of these traders was an agent for the NorthWest company." Aboriginal people also sold a variety of fish, particularly whitefish, to the brigades, and some Ojibwa groups bartered small quantities of potatoes.

Beyond Lake Superior, the diet of the voyageurs changed abruptly. In Rainy River and Winnipeg River country, they purchased sturgeon, whitefish, wild rice, and corn from the local Ojibwa residents. Long before the Ojibwa began to live in this region, La Vérendrye's men had bought the same food products (excepting corn) from the Cree. Subsequently, the Ojibwa introduced corn and squash cultivation to the district as well as sugar making, using the Manitoba maple. To capitalize on the growing demand of fur traders for these provisions, the Ojibwa expanded their production and towards the end of the century increased their prices markedly. For the leg of the journey between the lower Winnipeg River and the upper Churchill River, the Nor' Westers turned to the Plains nations for provisions—especially pemmican. The voyageurs worked incredibly long days; they rose before the light of dawn and usually paddled until well past sunset. Because the daily calorie expenditure of the crews was staggering, they needed a highly concentrated source of calories and protein. Pemmican was the ideal food. In addition,

the Nor' Westers bought large quantities of dried meat and fat. They also developed a taste for traditional Aboriginal delicacies such as buffalo tongues and bosses. Obtaining adequate supplies of the provisions was so important to the success of the NWC that it built a string of parkland forts. These posts shipped the foodstuffs they collected to depots at Bas de la Rivière and Cumberland Lake, where they were picked up by the passing Athabasca brigades.

The Prairie Assiniboine and Cree were eager to supply the fur traders but at maximum prices. To back up their demand for high prices for their buffalo tongues, bosses, dried meat, grease, and pemmican, they resorted to clever pressure tactics. Their practice of setting fire to the prairies near the posts in the autumn to keep the buffalo herds away during the winter was particularly effective. Denied the opportunity to hunt buffalo in the winter, the traders faced the prospect of food shortages—even starvation—if they did not buy their food from neighbouring Native people. Because this trade was so lucrative and compatible with their way of life, by the early nineteenth century most of the Plains nations devoted more of their energy to buffalo hunting and food processing than to trapping furs for exchange. When the HBC moved inland beginning in 1774, it had to take a somewhat different approach to the development of its transport system than the NWC. York Factory, which eventually became the company's primary western supply base, lay beyond the limit of usable canoe birch, so it could not buy canoes, or the materials to build them, from local Swampy Cree bands. Although Fort Albany was situated in the canoe-birch zone, neither the company men nor the local Cree knew how to build craft as large as the canot du maître. Drawing on the maritime traditions of its Scottish servants, the HBC men developed an alternative vessel—the broadbeamed wooden York boat. By heaving hard at the oars on the major rivers, or hoisting sails on the larger lakes, a crew of five to seven York boatmen could haul a cargo of up to six thousand pounds. There was a catch, however. Because these boats were too heavy to portage, crews had to drag them overland. To make this task bearable on difficult portages, they cut "roads," trimmed and laid down small trees to serve as rollers, and pushed and pulled the boats over them.

The HBC operated several boat-building works to maintain a fleet of these crucial craft. The facilities at Moose Factory and York Factory on the bay side, and those inland at Oxford House, Norway House, and Fort Edmonton were the most important. At first Orkney servants of the company handled the construction and repair of the York-boat fleets. By the late nineteenth century, the mixed-blood descendants of these men had learned boat-building skills as apprentices and had become the backbone of this small but essential industry. Even before they came to grips with their respective transportation challenges, the rival groups of traders had embarked on an era of destructive competition for furs and provisions that pushed their network of posts into the Mackenzie River basin and over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific slope. The Nor' Westers took the initiative in 1778 when the Yankee ruffian and seasoned trader Peter Pond ventured up the Churchill River and into Athabasca country with four canoeloads of goods. He had received reports of a country teeming with furs from the region's Cree and Dene, who wanted the opportunity to trade without having to undertake the arduous trip on foot or by water to Prince of Wales Fort or York Factory. When Pond arrived on the scene, the local people offered him more furs than he could stuff into his canoes. The trader wanted more than furs, however; he dreamed of finding a route to the Pacific Ocean. But his bad temper led him into violent confrontations with fellow traders, and he was forced to retire in 1789 without realizing his goal.

Pond's protégé, Alexander Mackenzie, took up the search for a river to the Pacific Coast. First he moved Pond's advance base from the lower Athabasca River to the shores of Lake Athabasca, where he established the first Fort Chipewyan. He then hired the Aboriginal men and women he would need to carry out his grand scheme in the late spring of 1789. "We were accompanied also," Mackenzie wrote, "by an Indian, who had acquired the title of English Chief and his two wives, in a small canoe, with two young Aboriginal people; his followers in another small canoe." The two women helped paddle the canoe, and made and repaired moccasins and clothing, and the men served as interpreters and hunters. The leading Native man "was one of the followers of the chief who conducted Mr. Hearne to the copper-mine river [Matonabbee had died in 1782], and has since been a principal leader of his country-men who were in the habit of carrying furs to Churchill Factory … and till of late very much attached to the interest of that company. These circumstances procured for him the appellation of the English Chief." Mackenzie's journal is a one-sided account of his trip, intended as selfpromotion, but it does provide us with a picture of the kind of strained relations that sometimes existed between Native guide-interpreters and European explorers. Setting out from tiny Fort Chipewyan, the Nor' Wester was optimistic about reaching the Pacific Ocean. Imagine his bitter disappointment a month later when the river that now bears his name led him to the Arctic coast. On the way back to Fort Chipewyan, Mackenzie took out his frustrations on the English Chief. He accused him of frightening off a camp of unidentified Native people and pilfering some of their belongings. His guide "was very much displeased that I had reproach'd him, and told me so. I [had] waited [for] such an Opportunity to tell him [what I thought of] his Behaviour to me for some time past, that I had more reason to be angry than he, that I had come a great way at great Expence to no Purpose, and that I thot. he hid from me a principal part of what the Aboriginal people told him respecting the Country &c. for fear that he should have to follow me, and that his Reason for not killing game, &c. was his Jealousy." Apparently the English Chief reacted strongly to this tonguelashing. Mackenzie said he "got into a most violent Passion, and said, we spoke ill, that he was not jealous, that he had not concealed any thing from us, and that till now there were no Animals, and that he would not accompany us any further tho' he was without Ammunition."

This bad-tempered exchange makes it clear that Mackenzie, like all the European explorers before him, had to learn the hard way that it was not wise to "lead" Native guides through their own country. He had to make amends the next day "as I could not well [do] without them." We have no way of knowing whether the English Chief withheld information he gathered from informants. He and his followers were clearly seasoned traders, and the chief may well have tried to screen information to protect potential trading secrets. After all, a succession of native middlemen had done so since the days of Champlain. In any event, Mackenzie had embarked on the wrong river and neither his guides nor the local people they queried knew the way to the Pacific Ocean. Although he was frustrated and angry, Mackenzie did not give up his quest. In the autumn of 1792, he again set out from Fort Chipewyan, but this time he and his party headed west up the Peace River. Warfare between the Cree and Dunne-za for control of the Peace River country had ceased, and the Cree's westward expansion had ended in the vicinity of Vermilion Falls (Fort Vermilion, Alberta). A smallpox epidemic, which ravaged nations in much of the western interior in 1780 and 1781, may have been partly responsible for this turn of events; it hit the Cree particularly hard, momentarily sapping their military strength. Mackenzie

spent the winter of 1792–93 near the confluence of the Peace and Smoky rivers in a small trading post his men built. In the spring he soon learned that crossing interior British Columbia, known then to Europeans as New Caledonia, was much more challenging than the route to the Arctic. The terrain of the cordilleran country was extraordinarily rugged and most of the major rivers had terrifying white-water stretches. Mackenzie frequently had to make major decisions about the route when faced with several tempting possibilities. Once again, he had to depend on the information provided by his Aboriginal guides and interpreters, and once again he was not comfortable with the situation and only grudgingly admitted his need.

The guides teased him about his arrogance. On June 23, 1793, for instance, he called them together to determine whether it was better to continue to follow the river they were on (the Fraser), or abandon it and head to the Pacific Coast along one of its branches (the Black Water River, which is now called the West Road River). He wrote in his journal, “At the commencement of this conversation, I was very much surprised by the following question from one of the Indians: ‘What,’ demanded he, ‘can be the reason that you are so particular and anxious in your inquiries of us respecting a knowledge of this country: do not you white men know everything in the world?’ This interrogatory was so very unexpected, that it occasioned some hesitation before I could answer it.” Once Mackenzie regained his composure, he replied that “we certainly were acquainted with the principal circumstances of every part of the world; that I knew where the sea is, and where I myself then was, but that I did not exactly understand what obstacles might interrupt me in getting to it; with which he and his relations must be well acquainted, as they had so frequently surmounted them.” Mackenzie opted for the western route over that of the Fraser River, wisely believing his informants had correctly stressed the dangers of the latter. What he did not know was that his guides had also minimized the distance and difficulties of proceeding via the Black Water River. Travelling partly by canoe and partly by foot, Mackenzie reached the Bella Coola River at Friendly Village on July 17, 1793. There he obtained new canoes and continued onwards, feasting on salmon and dishes of fish roe at successive Nuxalk villages as he went. Three days later, he finally reached the Pacific Ocean at North Bentinck Arm. The two-hundred-year-old European overland quest to reach the Pacific had ended at last. Native men and women had guided the newcomers from coast to coast. Most had welcomed the Europeans into their territories, usually in the hope of improving their trading position or gaining new allies in struggles against old foes. They allowed the strangers to move into other nations’ territories only reluctantly, seeing a golden economic opportunity pass with them.

THE LEGACY OF EXPANSION

From the 1780s to the early nineteenth century, the HBC and the NWC built numerous posts throughout the sprawling country between James Bay and the Moose River to the southeast, and between Lake Athabasca and the lower Peace River to the northwest, as each tried to counter the advances of the other. Between 1797 and 1804, the New NWC (better known as the XY Company because of the brand marks it used) joined in. The XY Company included a number of dissidents from the NWC, Mackenzie among them. The ruthless competition among the three rival companies had positive and negative effects on the lives of the Native people who became entangled in it. On the positive side, the companies flooded the countryside with trade goods, and no Native group had to travel very far to buy them. In the contest to win the business of local Native people, the HBC men and the Nor’ Westers showered their clients with

presents. Most hunters and trappers began to receive the kind of treatment the French and HBC had previously reserved for trading captains; they gained access to liberal credit and they were given ever more favourable rates of exchange.

The proliferation of trading posts and the growing number of canoe and boat brigades plying between them created a soaring demand for manpower at the time of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe and the War of 1812 in North America. Under these circumstances, it was very difficult to recruit men in Europe, so the HBC turned to the mixed-blood population of Rupert's Land during the beginning phases of its inland expansion program. (It was partly the need to hire these men that had led the company to abandon its hundred-year-old prohibition against country marriages.) The HBC also needed Native men for brigade duty and other work. From its inception, however, the HBC had a policy of not hiring "Indians" full-time because the directors were eager to keep trappers in the bush, generating the industry's wealth. Even in this time of labour shortages, it still hired "Indian men" only for part-time summer work. One result of this policy was that the designations "Indian" and "mixed-blood" came to have more of a lifestyle than a racial connotation. Indians did most of the trapping and for the most part lived a traditional lifestyle, whereas mixed-bloods worked as full-time and part-time company workers. The HBC also actively recruited French Canadians and Iroquois, mostly Mohawk, in Lower Canada.

The Montreal-headquartered NWC led the way in recruiting Iroquois, who played a crucial role in the fur trade of the western interior. Initially, the company retained Mohawk from the Montreal area for brigade work. It considered these men to be superior even to French Canadians. As the NWC trader Colin Robertson explained, "I have frequently heard the Canadian and Iroquois voyagers disputed as regards their merits, perhaps the former may be more hardy or undergo more fatigue, but in either a rapid or traverse, give me the latter, for their calmness and presence of mind which never forsakes them in the greatest danger." The fearless men usually signed one- to three-year contracts to work as voyageurs, and a few hired on to serve as interpreters. In the interior, the NWC needed fur and provision hunters at many of its posts. Consequently, a substantial number of these men later signed additional contracts to serve in these capacities.

The heaviest recruiting of Mohawk took place after 1790, during the height of the trading companies' battle for furs and provisions. Between the early 1790s and 1815, the North West and XY companies hired more than 350 Mohawk. Most were hired by the NWC between 1800 and 1804, when the company was expanding rapidly. After 1815, the HBC responded by hiring these talented men too, using them to muscle its way into the crucial Peace River country, which had game resources essential to westward and northern expansion from Lake Athabasca. The NWC had been using strong-arm tactics to bar the entry of its old rival into the Peace River valley. In hiring Mohawk, the HBC hoped to gain an aggressive labour force that was not as easily intimidated as Orkney men were. The strategy worked and broke the NWC's hold on the territory.

The ballooning labour forces of the trading companies meant that there were many more mouths to feed. Most of the men had families to provide for, and this added to the problem. By today's standards the food allowances were mind-boggling; HBC men were entitled to nine pounds of fresh meat a day, or the equivalent in dried provisions. The companies hired armies of Native hunters and fishers to stock the larders of the trading posts. Fisheries operated by

local men and women were often the main food suppliers of posts in the boreal forests where game resources could seldom support permanent establishments. On the prairies and in the parklands, Native nations continued to cash in on the mushrooming provision market. They also benefited from the heightened demand for hides and babiche (leather pack-cords), which were used in packaging furs and trade goods for transportation and storage.

THE PEMMICAN WAR

The HBC and NWC contest for sources of food for their employees culminated in the Pemmican War at Red River. In 1810 Thomas Douglas, 5th Earl of Selkirk and a major shareholder in the HBC, persuaded the company to establish an agricultural colony in the Red River valley to provide additional foodstuffs and, in time, a new pool of labour. On June 12, 1811, the company gave Selkirk a land grant of 116,000 square miles in what is now Manitoba and North Dakota. Selkirk wanted to avoid any trouble with local Native people over the establishment of the new community. He instructed his first governor, Miles Macdonell, to proceed cautiously and offer to purchase the land if the Native residents objected to the plan. Selkirk also ordered Macdonell to build a well-fortified post to intimidate them. As it turned out, his strategy was unnecessary. When the first settlers arrived at Red River in 1812, Chief Peguis and his Ojibwa followers welcomed them. The Peguis group members were themselves newcomers to the area. They were in the vanguard of the westward-moving Ojibwa and had been welcomed to the area by the Cree. Unlike Peguis's band, the Nor' Westers were very hostile to the colonists. With good reason, they regarded the Selkirk scheme as a direct provocation. The colony lay astride one of their major provision-supply lines from the prairies, and it threatened the flank of their trade route from Lake Superior to Athabasca. They were determined to deter settlement. Their first move was to persuade the prairie Métis to join them as allies, so NWC provocateurs appealed to this group's growing sense of identity to spur them into action against the new settlers. They reminded the Métis that because the Aboriginal ancestry of their mothers gave them a birthright to the land, the HBC had no right to grant any part of the territory to Selkirk or anyone else without their consent.

The Métis rallied to the Nor' Westers' cause, and the bungling Macdonell played right into their hands. Unable to feed themselves from the start by farming, the colonists had to turn to the local Ojibwa and Métis for supplies of pemmican, meat, and grease. To deal with the problem of chronic food shortages in the settlement and to assert his authority over the region, Macdonell issued a proclamation early in 1814 that banned the export of most provisions from the "Territory of Assiniboia" for one year. The following July, he banned the hunting of buffalo on horses near the settlement to prevent Métis from stampeding the herds out of reach of settlers and local Ojibwa. Writing later of the ban, Macdonell noted, "The people in general were well pleased with the restriction, as only a few of these [Métis] had hunting horses, about five or six, the chief of whom was Beaulino, the Northwest hunter." Of course the Métis ignored the edict. Not only did they prefer to hunt on horseback, but they were also intentionally keeping the buffalo herds away from the local posts and the colony in order to monopolize the provision trade, a well-established Native tactic. Although the Nor' Westers did not really object to the ban against "running" buffalo on horseback because it served their interests too, they decided to oppose it as a ploy to undermine Macdonell's authority. The harassed governor reported: "Repeated accounts reached us from fort Daer [Pembina] that the cattle [buffalo] were driven from our

hunters by Beaulino…and othersrunning them on horseback … that our hunters could not kill a sufficiency of cattle; that when they would be crawling on their bellies after a herd of buffalo on the snow, a party of horsemen would come before them and drive away the herd."

As the Pemmican War heated up, the local Ojibwa and Métis chose opposite sides. The Ojibwa rallied behind Macdonell because they were also disadvantaged by the hunting practices of the Métis. Most of the Métis were firmly behind the NWC. Agents of the company helped them draft a petition to the Prince Regent in which they claimed the land and asserted that the HBC was taking it, along with their right to hunt. After a few minor skirmishes, the two opposing groups had a major confrontation on June 19, 1816, on the open plain, just northwest of the forks of the Assiniboine and Red rivers. At a place called Seven Oaks, Robert Semple, who had become governor of the colony in 1815, and a group of his men tried to stop a party of Métis from attacking the settlement. In the bloody encounter that followed, the Métis, commanded by one of their own leaders, Cuthbert Grant, killed the governor and twenty of his men. One Métis died in the fight. Immediately afterwards, the Nor' Westers and their Métis allies forced the colonists to abandon the settlement.

Selkirk was on his way to the colony with new settlers, a group of discharged Swiss soldiers, when he heard about the Battle of Seven Oaks. He retaliated by raiding Fort William at the head of Lake Superior, where he seized a number of the NWC wintering partners for treason and conspiracy and confiscated a large quantity of furs as indemnity for the losses he had suffered at Red River. Selkirk then continued on to Red River and re-established the colony. Violence prevailed in the northwest for another six years. In the long term, the greatest significance of these hostilities was that they helped reinforce the evolving sense of nationhood among the Métis, a people who already thought of themselves as different from either of their ancestors. Today, Métis elders believe that the Michif language, which was in its formative stages of development at the beginning of the nineteenth century, contributed to this sense of solidarity.

The conflict also led to the signing of the first land treaty in the northwest. To ensure the continuing support of Peguis's people, Selkirk decided to obtain their consent before new settlers occupied a portion of their lands. In the summer of 1817, a treaty was signed, under which the chief and his elders granted the colonists the right to use the land lying within two miles of the riverbanks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers (as far west as Portage la Prairie); at the forks of the Red River, and at Pembina the corridor extended to six miles. In exchange, Selkirk agreed to a yearly payment "consisting of one hundred pounds weight of good and merchantable Tobacco" to the Ojibwa at the forks and to the Cree at Portage la Prairie. It is somewhat ironic that the first western land treaty was concluded by groups that were both newcomers to the region. Much later, just two years before his death in 1864, Peguis complained that the colonists had not abided by the terms of the agreement. By that time, the settlement extended well beyond the two-mile corridor and had begun to encroach on his people's land. The Cree, on the other hand, never accepted the treaty and maintained that Peguis had no right to negotiate it in the first place.

The fur trade had an adverse impact on the region's Native people in several other important ways. The wild and relentless scramble for furs and country food depleted fur and game animals in the woodlands south and east of the Churchill River. The areas that suffered first, and to the greatest degree, lay near the major travel routes, supply depots, and trading posts. The exhaustion of beaver stocks in the territory between Lake Winnipeg and James Bay, known to

fur traders as the “Petit Nord,” is a good example. Once this had been prime beaver country, but by the 1790s the beaver had become scarce all along the north shore of Lake Superior, the Rainy and Winnipeg rivers, the east side of Lake Winnipeg, and the Hudson Bay and James Bay lowlands. By 1800 beaver were in short supply in the lands bordering the Hayes and Albany rivers, and by 1820 they were scarce throughout the region. Large-animal populations were wiped out too. As early as 1800, caribou herds had vanished from the Hudson Bay and James Bay lowlands, radically altering the economic lives of the Swampy Cree. Twenty years later, caribou and moose were so scarce in Rainy River country that the HBC had to import buffalo hides so that some of the local Ojibwa could make moccasins for themselves. Buoyant fur and provision markets alone do not account for this spreading crisis. The proliferation of trading posts meant that Native groups had ready access to trade goods. The cargo capacity of their small traditional canoes no longer set limits on their consumption, as it did when they had had to travel great distances to trade. Indeed, during this era, trading-post Native groups became commonplace; they lived very close to company establishments and visited them at will. The ready availability of trade goods promoted greater consumer demand, which could only be satisfied by obtaining more furs as payment.

Mohawk and other newly arrived groups (mostly Nipissing, Ojibwa, and other Algonquian-speakers) had an even more devastating impact on northwestern wildlife. The NWC hired Mohawk trappers wherever local nations did not produce the quantities of furs desired or where they refused to switch their allegiance from the HBC to the NWC. In some districts, the NWC used these people to strip the country of furs in the hope of bankrupting the XY Company. In the end, neither company could sustain the ruinous practice, and they merged in 1804. The Mohawk were the best trappers in the northwest; they devoted themselves single-mindedly to the endeavour, whereas local people incorporated commercial trapping into their normal seasonal round of activities. The Mohawk routinely used European steel-spring leg-hold traps in conjunction with castorum bait, which they made from the sex glands of male beavers. This combination led to the indiscriminate slaughter of male and female animals. One Nor’ Wester said the skilled and ruthless immigrant trappers were largely responsible for seriously depleting the beaver population of the Saskatchewan district by 1802. They then moved on to the Athabasca and Peace River country, where they had a similar impact on fur stocks just before the HBC moved into the region. In fact, by that time Mohawk trappers were already working beyond the Rocky Mountains in New Caledonia, where the NWC had constructed Fort McLeod (1806) and Fort St James (1807). Needless to say, local people often resented the depredations of the intruders. Nonetheless, many Mohawk remained in the West as “freemen,” or men without contracts, when they retired from the NWC. They intermarried with local women and eventually lost much of their cultural distinctiveness.

In addition to eroding the economic base of woodland Native people, the fur trade struck at the heart of their social organization. Rampant abuse of alcohol was the major culprit. In the prairie and parkland areas, Native trading parties routinely sent one or two emissaries to a post to announce their arrival in the area. Stiff competition forced traders to send these messengers back to their kinfolk with small supplies of alcohol and tobacco to encourage them to stop at their post rather than a rival’s. The visitors would receive more presents as soon as they arrived at the post. Aboriginal people bought greater quantities of liquor each year and the traders sold, or gave away, wooden casks to help them to carry it away. Once spirits became readily

available locally, alcohol abuse became endemic. The fight for the business of local nations undermined the ability of elders to lead their people. Traders appointed local persons to represent them if the chief refused to do so. The competing traders then showered their respective “captains” with goods to promote them in the eyes of their fellow group members. In the end these efforts proved to be counterproductive: establishing rival leaders simply created new social problems, which repeatedly surfaced during drinking bouts at the posts and promoted domestic and inter-nation violence. Sometimes fur traders found themselves caught in the crossfire. By 1820 it was clear to Native people and traders alike that the fur trade could not survive much longer unless some kind of order was restored.