written. Correcting these images requires starting at the beginning, and it is not simply a matter of rewriting what has already been done. New research has to be conducted in the various archival collections across the country, and records that have received little attention to date, such as accounting records, need to be exhaustively explored. In conducting this research and presenting our results, the urge to overcompensate for past wrongs and inaccuracies by placing the Indian on a pedestal must be resisted. If the latter course of action is taken, a new mythology that will not stand the test of time will be created. Even more serious, it would probably serve only to perpetuate the warped images that such research set out to destroy, because it would fail to treat the Indians as equals with their own cultures and sets of values. Finally, if one of the objectives of studying the fur trade is to attempt to obtain a better understanding of Indian-white relations, it must be based on solid objective historical research.

The Role of Native American Women in Fur Trade Society

SYLVIA VAN KIRK

In essence the history of the early Canadian West is the history of the fur trade. For nearly 200 years, from the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670 until the transfer of Rupert's Land to the newly created dominion of Canada in 1870, the fur trade was the dominant force in shaping the history of what are today Canada's four western provinces.

This long and unified experience gave rise in western Canada to a frontier society that seems to me to be unique in the realm of interracial contact. Canada's western history has been characterized by relatively little violent conflict between Indian and white. I would like to suggest that there were two major reasons why this was so. First, by its very nature the Canadian fur trade was predicated on a mutual exchange and dependency between Indian and white. "The only good Indian" was certainly not "a dead Indian," for it was the Indian who provided both the fur pelts and the market for European goods. New research has revealed that not just Indian men but also Indian women played an active role in promoting the fur trade. Although the men were the hunters of beaver and large game animals, the women were responsible for trapping smaller fur-bearing animals, especially the marten whose pelt was highly prized. The notable cases of Indian women emerging as diplomats and peacemakers also indicate that they were anxious to maintain the flow of European goods, such as kettles, cloth, knives, needles and axes, that helped to alleviate their onerous work role.

The second factor in promoting harmonious relations was the remarkably wide extent of intermarriage between incoming traders and Indian women, especially among the Cree, the Ojibwa, and the Chipewyan. Indian wives proved indispensable helpmates to the officers and men of both the British-based Hudson's Bay Company and its Canadian rival, the North West Company. Such interracial

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[illegible] fur trade society and were sanctioned by an indigenous rite known as marriage *à la façon du pays*.

The development of marriage *à la façon du pays* underscores the complex and changing interaction between the traders and the host Indian societies. In the initial phase of contact, many Indian bands actively encouraged the formation of marital alliances between their women and the traders. The Indians viewed marriage in an integrated social and economic context: marital alliances created reciprocal social ties that served to consolidate their economic relationships with the incoming strangers. Thus, through marriage, many a trader was drawn into the Indian kinship circle. In return for giving the traders sexual and domestic rights to their women, the Indians expected reciprocal privileges such as free access to the posts and provisions.

The Indian attitude soon impressed upon the traders that marriage alliances were an important means of ensuring good will and cementing trade relations with new bands or tribes. The North West Company, a conglomerate of partnerships that began extensive trading into the West in the 1770s, had learned from its French predecessors of the benefits to be gained from intermarriage, and it officially sanctioned such unions for all ranks, from *bourgeois* (officer) down to *engagé* (laborer). The Hudson's Bay Company, on the other hand, was much slower to appreciate the realities of life in Rupert's Land (the name given to the chartered territory of the Hudson's Bay Company encompassing the vast drainage basin of Hudson Bay). Official policy formulated in faraway London forbade any intimacy with the Indians, but officers in the field early began to break the rules. They took the lead in forming unions with women related to prominent Indian leaders, although there was great variation in the extent to which their servants were allowed to form connections with native women.

Apart from the public social benefits, the traders' desire to form unions with Indian women was increased by the absence of white women. Although they did not come as settlers, many of the fur traders spent the better part of their lives in Rupert's Land, and it is a singular fact in the social development of the Canadian West that for well over a century there were no white women. The stability of many of the interracial unions formed in the Indian Country stemmed partly from the fact that an Indian woman provided the only opportunity for a trader to replicate a domestic life with wife and children. Furthermore, although Indian mores differed from those of whites, the traders learned that they trifled with Indian women at their peril. As one old *voyageur* (canoeman) explained, a man could not just dally with any native woman who struck his fancy. There was a great danger of getting his head broken if he attempted to take an Indian girl without her parents' consent.

It is significant that, just as in the trade ceremony, the rituals of marriage *à la façon du pays* conformed more to Indian custom than to European. There were two basic aspects to forming such a union. The first step was to secure the consent of the woman's relations; it also appears that the wishes of the woman herself were respected, for there is ample evidence that Indian women actively sought fur trade husbands. Once consent was secured, a bride price had then to be decided; though it varied considerably among the tribes, it could amount to several hundred dollars' worth of trade goods. After these transactions, the couple were

usually ceremoniously conducted to the fort where they were duly recognized as man and wife. In the Canadian West marriage *à la façon du pays* became the norm for Indian-white unions, which were reinforced by mutual interest, tradition, and peer group pressure. Although ultimately "the custom of the country" was to be strongly denounced by the missionaries, it is significant that in 1867, when the legitimacy of the union between Chief Factor William Connolly and his Cree wife was tried before a Canadian court, the judge declared the marriage valid because the wife had been married according to the customs and usages of her own people and because the consent of both parties, the essential element of civilized marriage, had been proved by twenty-eight years of repute, public acknowledgment, and cohabitation as man and wife.

If intermarriage brought the trader commercial and personal benefit, it also provided him with a remarkable economic partner. The Indian wife was possessed of a range of skills and wilderness know-how that would have been quite foreign to a white wife. Although the burdensome work role of the nomadic Indian woman was somewhat alleviated by the move to the fur trade post, the extent to which the traders relied upon native technology kept the women busy.

Perhaps the most important domestic task performed by the women at the fur trade posts was to provide the men with a steady supply of "Indian shoes" or moccasins. The men of both companies generally did not dress in Indian style (the buckskinned mountain man was not part of the Canadian scene), but they universally adopted the moccasin as the most practical footwear for the wilderness. One wonders, for example, how the famed 1789 expedition of Alexander Mackenzie would have fared without the work of the wives of his two French-Canadian *voyageurs*. The women scarcely ever left the canoes, being "continually employ'd making shoes of moose skin as a pair does not last us above one Day." Closely related to her manufacture of moccasins was the Indian woman's role in making snowshoes, without which winter travel was impossible. Although the men usually made the frames, the women prepared the sinews and netted the intricate webbing that provided support.

Indian women also made a vital contribution in the preservation of food, especially in the manufacture of the all-important pemmican, the nutritious staple of the North West Company's canoe brigades. At the posts on the plains, buffalo hunting and pemmican making were an essential part of the yearly routine, each post being required to furnish an annual quota. In accordance with Indian custom, once the hunt was over, the women's work began. The women skinned the animals and cut the meat up into thin strips to be dried in the sun or over a slow fire. When the meat was dry, the women pounded it into a thick flaky mass, which was then mixed with melted buffalo fat. This pemmican would keep very well when packed into ninety-pound buffalo-hide sacks, which had been made by the women during the winter. But pemmican was too precious a commodity to form the basic food at the posts themselves. At the more northerly posts the people subsisted mainly on fish, vast quantities of which were split and dried by the women to provide food for the winter. Maintaining adequate food supplies for a post for the winter was a precarious business, and numerous instances can be cited of Indian wives keeping the fur traders alive by their ability to snare small game such as rabbits and partridges. In 1815, for example, the young Nor'Wester George Nelson would probably have starved to death when provisions ran out at his small outpost north of Lake Superior had it not been for the resourcefulness of his Ojibwa wife who during the month of February brought in fifty-eight rabbits and thirty-four partridges. Indian women also added to the diets by collecting berries and wild rice and making maple sugar. The spring trip to the sugar bush provided a welcome release from the monotony of the winter routine, and the men with their families and Indian relatives all enjoyed this annual event.

As in other preindustrial societies, the Indian women's role also extended well beyond domestic maintenance as they assisted in specific fur trade operations. With the adoption of the birchbark canoe, especially by the North West Company, Indian women continued in their traditional role of helping in its manufacture. It was the women's job to collect annual quotas of spruce roots, which were split fine to sew the seams of the canoes, and also to collect the spruce gum that was used for caulking the seams. The inexperienced and understaffed Hudson's Bay Company also found itself calling upon the labor power of Indian women, who were adept at paddling and steering canoes. Indeed, although the inland explorations of various Hudson's Bay Company men such as Anthony Henday and Samuel Hearne have been glorified as individual exploits, they were, in fact, entirely dependent upon the Indians with whom they traveled, being especially aided by Indian women. "Women," marveled one inlander, "were as useful as men upon Journeys." Henday's journey to the plains in 1754, for example, owed much of its success to his Cree female companion, who not only provided him with a warm winter suit of furs, but also with much timely advice about the plans of the Indians. The Hudson's Bay Company men emphasized to their London superiors that the Indian women's skill at working with fur pelts was also very valuable. In short, they argued that Indian women performed such important economic services at the fur trade posts that they should be considered as "Your Honours Servants." Indian women were indeed an integral part of the fur trade labor force, although, like most women, because their labor was largely unpaid, their contribution has been ignored.

The reliance on native women's skills remained an important aspect of fur trade life, even though by the early nineteenth century there was a notable shift in the social dynamic of fur trade society. By this time, partly because of the destructive competition between rival companies that had flooded the Indian country with alcohol, relations between many Indian bands and the traders deteriorated. In some well-established areas, traders sometimes resorted to coercive measures, and there were cases where their abuse of Indian women became a source of conflict. In this context, except in new areas such as the Pacific Slope, marriage alliances ceased to play the important function they had once had. The decline of Indian-white marriages was also hastened by the fact that fur trade society itself was producing a new pool of marriageable young women—the mixed-blood "daughters of the country." With her dual heritage, the mixed-blood woman possessed the ideal qualifications for a fur trader's wife: acclimatized to life in the West and familiar with Indian ways, she could also make a successful adaptation to white culture.

From their Indian mothers, mixed-blood girls learned the native skills so

necessary to the functioning of the trade. As Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company emphasized in the 1820s, "It is the duty of the Women at the different Posts to do all that is necessary in regard to Needle Work," and the mixed-blood women's beautiful bead work was highly prized. In addition to performing traditional Indian tasks, the women's range of domestic work increased in more European ways. They were responsible for the fort's washing and cleaning; "the Dames" at York Factory, for example, were kept "in Suds, Scrubbing and Scouring," according to one account. As subsistence agriculture was developed around many of the posts, the native women took an active role in planting and harvesting. Chief Factor John Rowand of Fort Edmonton succinctly summarized the economic role of native women in the fur trade when he wrote in the mid-nineteenth century, "The women here work very hard, if it was not so, I do not know how we would get on with the Company work." With her ties to the Indians and familiarity with native customs and language, the mixed-blood wife was also in a position to take over the role of intermediary or liaison previously played by the Indian wife. The daughters of the French-Canadian *voyageurs* were often excellent interpreters; some could speak several Indian languages. The timely intervention of more than one mixed-blood wife was known to have saved the life of a husband who had aroused Indian hostility. Indeed, in his account of fur trade life during the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly after 1821, Isaac Cowie declared that many of the company's officers owed much of their success in overcoming difficulties and maintaining the Company's influence over the natives to "the wisdom and good counsel of their wives."

In spite of the importance of native connections, many fur trade fathers were most concerned to introduce their mixed-blood daughters to the rudiments of European culture. Since the place of work and home coincided, especially in the long winter months, the traders were able to take an active role in their children's upbringing, and they were encouraged to do so. When the beginnings of formal schooling were introduced at the posts on the Bay in the early 1800s, it was partly because it was felt to be essential that girls, who were very seldom sent overseas, should be given a basic education that would inculcate Christian virtue in them. Increasingly fathers also began to play an instrumental role in promoting the marriage of their daughters to incoming traders as the means to securing their place in fur trade society. In a significant change of policy in 1806, the North West Company acknowledged some responsibility for the fate of its "daughters" when it sanctioned marriage *à la façon du pays* with daughters of white men, but now prohibited it with full-blooded Indian women.

As mixed-blood wives became "the vogue" (to quote a contemporary), it is notable that "the custom of the country" began to evolve more toward European concepts of marriage. Most importantly, such unions were definitely coming to be regarded as unions for life. When Hudson's Bay Company officer J. E. Harriott espoused Elizabeth Pruden, for example, he promised her father, a senior officer, that he would "live with her and treat her as my wife as long as we both lived." It became customary for a couple to exchange brief vows before the officer in charge of the post, and the match was further celebrated by a dram to all hands and a wedding dance. The bride price was replaced by the opposite payment of a dowry, and many fur trade officers were able to dower their daughters quite handsomely. Marriage *à la façon du pays* was further regulated by the Hudson's Bay Company after 1821 with the introduction of marriage contracts, which emphasized the husband's financial obligations and the status of the woman as a legitimate wife.

The social role of the mixed-blood wife, unlike that of the Indian wife, served to cement ties within fur trade society itself. Significantly, in the North West Company there were many marriages that cut across class lines as numerous Scottish *bourgeois* chose their wives from the daughters of the French-Canadian *engagés* who had married extensively among the native people. Among the Hudson's Bay Company men, it was appreciated that a useful way to enhance one's career was to marry the daughter of a senior officer. Whatever a man's initial motivation, the substantial private fur trade correspondence that has survived from the nineteenth century reveals that many fur traders became devoted family men. Family could be a particular source of interest and consolation in a life that was often hard and monotonous. As Chief Factor James Douglas pointedly summed it up, "There is indeed no living with comfort in this country until a person has forgot the great world and has his tastes and character formed on the current standard of the stage . . . habit makes it familiar to us, softened as it is by the many tender ties which find a way to the heart."

However, the founding of the Selkirk Colony in 1811, the first agrarian settlement in western Canada, was to introduce new elements of white civilization that hastened the decline of an indigenous fur trade society. The chief agents of these changes were the missionaries and the white women. The missionaries, especially the Anglicans who arrived under the auspices of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1820, roundly denounced marriage *à la façon du pays* as immoral and debased. But while they exerted considerable pressure on long cohabiting couples to accept a church marriage, they were not in any way champions of miscegenation. In fact, this attack upon fur trade custom had a detrimental effect upon the position of native women. Incoming traders, now feeling free to ignore the marital obligations implicit in "the custom of the country," increasingly looked upon native women as objects for temporary sexual gratification. The women, on the other hand, found themselves being judged according to strict British standards of female propriety. It was they, not the white men, who were to be held responsible for the perpetuation of immorality because of their supposedly promiscuous Indian heritage. The double standard tinged with racism had arrived with a vengeance.

Both racial prejudice and class distinctions were augmented by the arrival of British women in Rupert's Land. The old fabric of fur trade society was severely rent in 1830 when Governor Simpson and another prominent Hudson's Bay Company officer returned from furlough, having wed genteel British ladies. The appearance of such "flowers of civilization" provoked unflattering comparisons with native women; as one officer observed, "This influx of white faces has cast a still deeper shade over the faces of our Brunettes in the eyes of many." In Red River especially, a white wife became a status symbol; witness the speed with which several retired Hudson's Bay Company factors married English schoolmistresses after the demise of their native wives. To their credit, many Company officers remained loyal to their native families, but they became

painfully anxious to turn their daughters into young Victorian ladies, hoping that with accomplishments and connections the stigma of their mixed blood would not prevent them from remaining among the social elite. Thus, in the 1830s a boarding school was established in Red River for the children of Company officers; the girls' education was supervised by the missionary's wife, and more than one graduate was praised for being "quite English in her Manner." In numerous cases, these highly acculturated young women were able to secure advantageous matches with incoming white men, but to some extent only because white ladies did not in fact adapt successfully to fur trade life. It had been predicted that "the lovely, tender exotics" (as they were dubbed) would languish in the harsh fur trade environment, and indeed they did, partly because they had no useful social or economic role to play. As a result, mixed marriages continued to be a feature of western Canadian society until well into the mid-nineteenth century, but it was not an enduring legacy. Indian and mixed-blood women, like their male counterparts, were quickly shunted aside with the development of the agrarian frontier after 1870. The vital role native women had played in the opening of the Canadian West was either demeaned or forgotten.

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