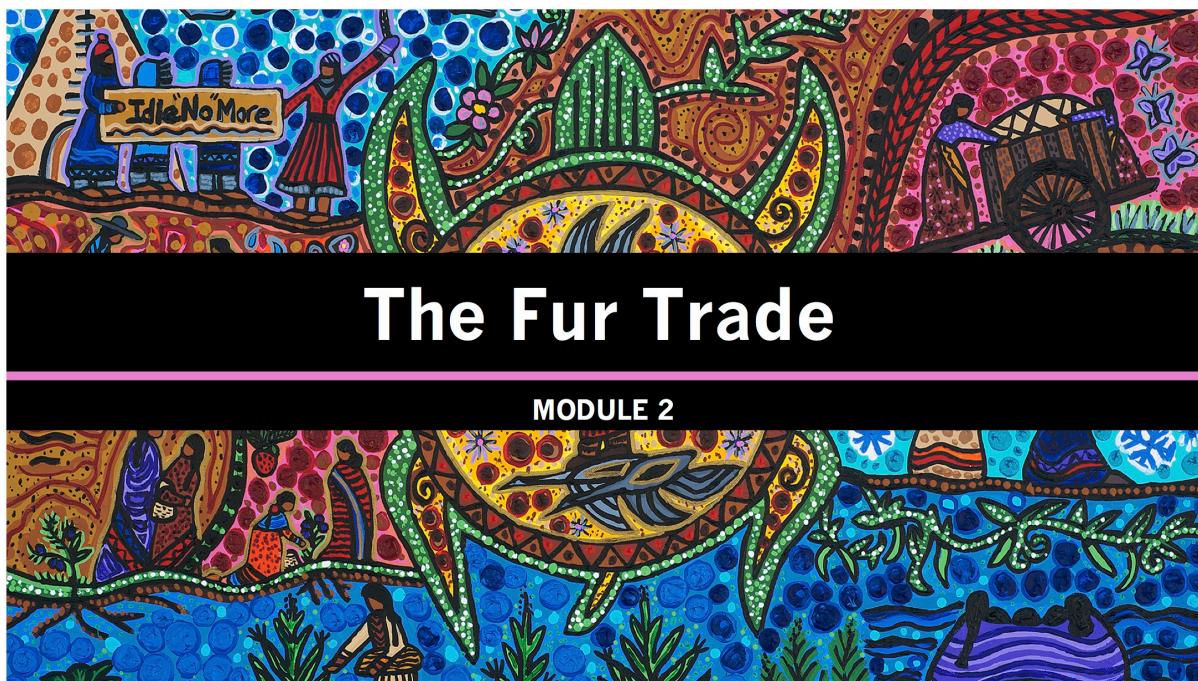


Indigenous Canada: Looking Forward/Looking Back



Cover Image: Artwork by Leah Dorion

The University of Alberta acknowledges that we are located on Treaty 6 territory and respects the history, languages, and cultures of the First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all First Peoples of Canada, whose presence continues to enrich our institution.

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Module 2 Introduction

North America was made up of a very complex and vibrant network of nations and communities whose stories and histories began long before Europeans made their way across the Atlantic Ocean. Module 1 explored the diversity of Indigenous ways of being and ways of knowing. Relationships across North America were facilitated through kinship ties and trading networks. Module 2 focuses on the time of the fur trade, an incredibly dynamic mix of cultural, economic, and social interactions that eventually founded the country now known as Canada. The fur trade irrevocably changed the relationships amongst the First Nations and also gave birth to the Métis Nation.



Figure 1. Classification of Indigenous peoples of North America; Credit: Nikater

Section One: Pre-Contact North American Networking

Population

The population size prior to 1492 has long been the subject of academic debate. Historical demographers now estimate that the number of people living in North America, not including Mexico and Central America, at the turn of the fifteenth century was somewhere in the range of 1.2 to 2.6 million people ('RCAP Report—Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' 1996, 20–22). However, there is research that suggests these population numbers are much higher than originally believed.

Researchers also claim that there were up to 200,000 people of various nations living on the northwest coast. In the east, the Wyandot, or Huron, who were agriculturalists and lived in villages in what is now present day southern Ontario, had some of the highest population densities in Canada. There are estimates ranging from 20,000 to 33,000 inhabitants (Ray 2016, 20–21). As a consequence of contact and colonization, the Indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere experienced a tragic and massive loss of population.

Pre-Contact Trade

Not surprisingly, trading networks existed prior to European contact. Pre-contact trade included some basic necessities, but most trading was done for luxury items (B. G. Trigger 1987). Some of the materials that were traded, in many instances across far distances, included: copper; a variety of shells (used for making beads); obsidian (a very hard, brittle volcanic rock used for making tools); flints; and oolichan oil (also known as eulachon oil, made from candlefish) (Dickason 2009; Dickason and



Figure 2. Eulachon (oolichan, candlefish) fishing; Credit: Bella Coola Valley Museum

Newbigging 2015; Ray 2016).

The routes used by coastal First Nations for thousands of years to trade oolichan oil are known as grease trails (Ray 2016, 16). Some pre-contact trade did include some basic necessities. For example, tribes such as the Mandan and the Arikara traded their surpluses of corn to the Assiniboine for furs and meat (Smith 2008, 44).

Diplomacy, or practices that followed trading to ensure positive relationships and allies, were a key element of any trade event (Dickason 2009; Ray 2016). Gift exchange or gift diplomacy refers to the common requirement that gifts are exchanged when formalizing an agreement. Agreements had to be renewed periodically with exchanges that were highly formal and diplomatic. Exchanging gifts was an important part of ceremony, so gifts were also exchanged during many other important events, including trade. Highly respected individuals were held in high esteem due to their generosity and giving nature.

Section Two: Colonization and Trade

Complex Colonization

Before a discussion of the fur trade, a major activity that brought Europeans in great numbers to Indigenous lands, we must first talk about the first contacts between Europeans and Indigenous peoples in what is now Canada. We cannot begin a conversation about the history of Canada as a nation without talking about colonization.

Colonization is a term that describes the ongoing process where one group of people (colonizers) takes control of another group of people (colonized). The process of colonization involves one group of people (the colonizers) going in and taking over the land and resources of another group (the colonized), often damaging or even destroying their way of life. The colonizers exploit the land's resources and often utilize the land for settlement. Europe, for example, has had many colonizer groups, and Europeans

themselves have colonized groups from over the world, including Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.



Figure 3. Territories that were at one time or another part of the British Empire; Credit: The Red Hat of Pat Ferrick

Colonization is a process. There are many different aspects, and not all of the colonizing elements actually happen at the same time or in the same order. Nonetheless, the colonization process includes: (1) serious modification of Indigenous ways of life, including, political, economic, social, and spiritual systems; (2) setting up external political control; (3) forcing the Indigenous population to become economically dependent on the colonizer; and (4) providing abysmally poor quality social services, such as education and healthcare, for Indigenous peoples (Frideres 2012). The accumulated effect creates social divisions between colonizer and colonized that is determined by race, thereby promoting institutional racism, which we will talk about in greater detail later in the course.

Although first encounters with the French and English were often peaceful and had short term beneficial trading, the arrival of Europeans in North America resulted in the colonization of Indigenous peoples. This process happened in Canada over several hundred years, and Canada, as we know it today, would look very different without the colonial impact of France and Britain.

Goods

The fur trade as a commercial venture facilitated colonial dynamics. The small-scale trade in furs evolved into a complex and intricate industry. Most Canadian academics specializing in Native History go so far as to classify the fur trade as a partnership (Brown 2012; Dickason and Newbigging 2015; Ray 2016; Tough 1996).

Trade of furs between Europeans and Indigenous peoples of North America began in the late 1400s. European economies benefitted from taking raw materials, like fur, from faraway places and bringing the materials back home where they would be manufactured into other products and sold. To do this, European nations needed colonies that they could extract large quantities of raw material at a low cost. There was a lot of competition and violence between different European nations for control of these valuable raw materials (Kardulias 1990).

This way of thinking is called mercantilism. A simple way of thinking about mercantilism is as an economic theory of commercialism, the belief in the benefits from profitable trading. Mercantilism in the colonies drove European policy and actions from the 1500s into the 1700s. In this era of globalization, Europe laid down networks that came to directly and indirectly dominate distant lands and peoples (Innis 1999; Payne 2004).

Early Meetings

Although the colonial rush of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were more significant, archeological records show that the Norse landed and established a small settlement in c.1000 CE near L'Anse de Meadow in present day Newfoundland. It is unknown exactly how long this colony lasted, and it may have only been a



Figure 4. A site of early Norse colonization in L'anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland; Credit: Carlb

few years (Ray 2016, 47).

The Norse sagas – oral stories later put into writing – recount meeting people they called Skraelings. Skraelings were likely people belonging to the Dorset Culture, a group of people predating Inuit, but could have also been Beothuk, Indigenous peoples in Newfoundland. Unfortunately, by the saga accounts, these encounters turned violent, and the Norse were eventually driven away by the Skraelings (Ingstad and Ingstad 2000, 54).

It is common to refer to the arrival of Europeans, specifically the French and English, as the “discovery” of Canada. Of course, this was not a discovery at all for Indigenous people. French and English explorers and traders had merely found a place they did not know about. Indigenous peoples, having lived on North America for more than 40,000 years, were well aware of the land they lived on long before the arrival of the first Europeans (Dickason 2009). It is not unusual for discussions of the history of Canada to begin around the arrival of explorers Giovanni Caboto (also known as John Cabot) in 1497, Jacques Cartier in 1534, and Martin Frobisher in 1576.

Giant Bird

“Men of strange appearance have come across the water … Their skins are white like snow, and on their faces long hair grows. These people have come across the great water in wonderfully large canoes which have great white wings like those of a giant bird” (Ray 2016, 40).

The Ojibwe (Anishnaabe) prophet also added, “The men have long and sharp knives, and they have long black tubes which they point at birds and animals. The tubes make smoke that rises into the air just like the smoke from our pipes. From them came fire and such a terrific noise” (40).

Atlantic Fisheries

After the Norse settlement, Native and Inuit peoples didn't encounter any more Europeans on their lands until the late 1400s. The next group that Indigenous peoples met and began to trade with were Basque whalers and French whalers and fishermen who were operating off the east coast starting in the sixteenth century (Thomas 2013, 189). A sideline trade in furs emerged with these early encounters between Europeans, Mi'kmaq, and other Native peoples on the east coast. These contacts were casual at this point, as European nations were mostly interested in profiting from fisheries. Setting up colonies and settlement was not a priority for them. These first contacts set the stage for the fur trade.



Figure 5. Painting of Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot) by Giustino Menescardi (1762); Credit: Giustino Mesecardi

Under the flag of England, Giovanni Caboto led the first British expedition across the Atlantic Ocean reaching Canada. He landed somewhere in Newfoundland or Labrador on June 24, 1497 as he attempted to find a route to the rich markets of Asia. Evidence suggests that Caboto did not encounter, or at least did not trade with any Indigenous peoples on his first voyage. Despite claiming the land for King Henry VII, Caboto did not step off his ship. His second expedition of five ships was again funded by the King of England. Unfortunately for Caboto, this was to be his last voyage. For the next thirty years, approximately 1500 to 1528, other Europeans, including the Portuguese, scouted around this area seeking opportunities for trade and looting (Harris and Matthews 1987).

A Colony

The French, under Jacques Cartier, were the first European settlers to set up a sustained colony on what would be known as Canada. In 1534, French explorer Jacques Cartier travelled as far as the Gulf of St. Lawrence amidst large settlements of

Indigenous people. Cartier's detailed accounts of the Mi'kmaq relay the wariness of both Indigenous peoples and Cartier in the first encounters of trade (Ray 2016, 48). After successful trading encounters with the Mi'kmaq, Cartier travelled even further inland. Further up the St. Lawrence valley was the large Iroquoian village of Stadacona led by Chief Donnacona, which was near present-day Quebec City. Here Cartier made the first of his many grave errors. First, he erected a large cross, which bore the words "the King of France". Cartier wrote in his journal, "... the chief, dressed in an old black bearskin, arrived in a canoe with three of his sons and his brother ... he made us a long harangue, making the sign of the cross with two of his fingers, and then he pointed to the land all around about, as if he wished to say that all this region belonged to him, and that we ought not to have set up this cross without his permission" (Brown 2012, 61).

To placate Chief Donnacona, Cartier told him it was merely a directional tool to help navigate his ships. After this, diplomacy and interactions with Cartier worsened (Ray 2016, 51). Cartier lured and kidnapped Donnacona's sons, Dom Agaya and Taignoagny, and took them with him to serve as guides on his explorations. Cartier did not know that this would have been an acceptable action if he had offered two of his own men as replacements. When Cartier returned, he brought Dom Agaya and Taignoagny back with him. Soon after their return, the relationship with Cartier soured. It is not entirely clear why, but it likely had to do with the fact that Cartier ignored Donnacona's wishes and travelled up the river through the traditional lands of controlled by Donnacona to Hochelaga.

Unbelievably, on Cartier's second voyage he kidnapped Chief Donnacona himself along with several others to take back to France. It seems that there were some power struggles or disagreements happening in Stadacona at that time, and by bringing Donnacona to France, Cartier would effectively remove him as leader of the Stadaconans. Donnacona and the others would die in France in 1539.

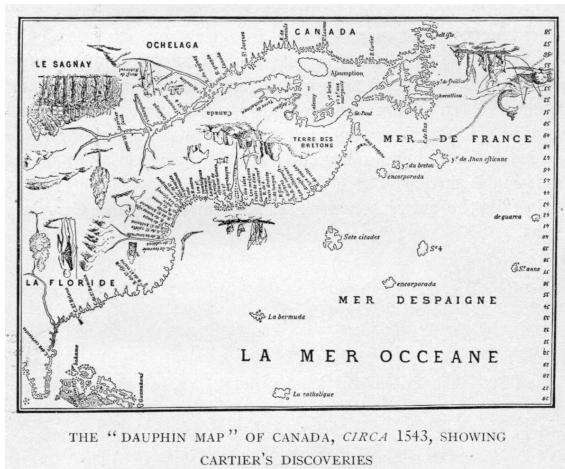


Figure 6. Dauphin Map of Canada (circa 1543) showing Jacques Cartier's discoveries; Credit: Project Gutenberg Archives

While the first two trips that Cartier took were focused on exploration, the added goal of Cartier's third and final voyage in 1541 was colonization. After setting up a French settlement without getting permission from the Indigenous peoples in the area, the colonists were continually hassled by the local peoples. Bad relationships combined with low supply levels caused the French to disband this settlement and return to France. This first effort to colonize Canada was brief and ended in 1543 (Ray 2016, 52; cf. B. Trigger 1986).

Champlain

In 1603, Samuel de Champlain arrived at Tadoussac and formalized an alliance with the Innu (or Montagnais) following Indigenous customs (Payne 2004, 13–19; Miller 1991; Miller 2004). A few years later in 1608, Champlain founded Quebec City and New France. At this time, the Stadaconans and Hochelagans, the groups of people that Cartier had met, were not living along the St. Lawrence River anymore. It could be that they were driven out by Mohawk groups, who wanted to take over control of this key trade area. It is likely that the St. Lawrence Iroquoians moved further west and merged with the Wendat. This area had been an important region of Indigenous trading long before the French arrived, and so such conflicts were not new.

Section Three: The Fur Trade

What was the Fur Trade?

Indigenous peoples had been trading amongst each other across far distances for thousands of years. Trade relationships were a large part of the connections between Indigenous nations across North America. Participation in the fur trade shaped the early relationships between European settlers and Indigenous peoples and set out the economic and geographical infrastructure of Canada as a nation. The fur trade motivated Europeans to travel further into the interior of the continent, and many European settlements began as trading posts (Innis 1999; Payne 2004). Many Indigenous peoples' traditional territories in northern Canada were sites of fur trade activity. The fur trade covered a period of about 250 years, and this module only scratches the surface of that history.

The fur trade does not only describe exchanges between First Nations and Europeans. Trading also took place between Indigenous groups, as European goods would travel in one direction and furs in the other. Many Indigenous peoples came into contact with European trade goods before they met Europeans themselves (Ray 2015).

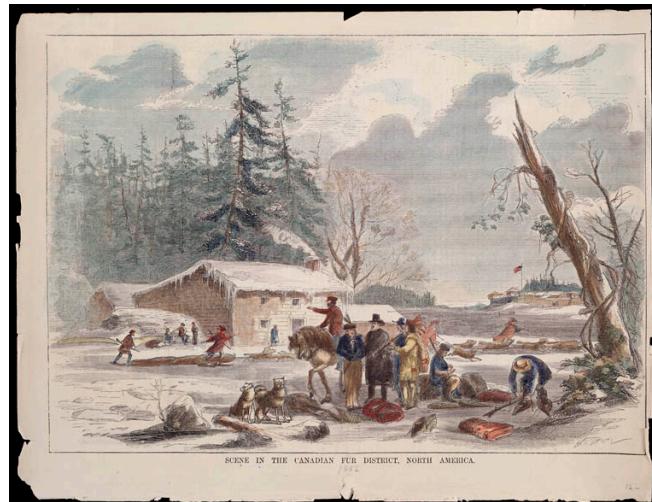


Figure 7. Scene in the Canadian Fur District (1856); Credit: Library and Archives Canada, Peter Winkworth Collection of Canadiana

Beaver Trade

“The Beaver does everything perfectly well, it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread, and in short, it makes everything.’ Innu trading captain, early seventeenth century” (Ray 2016, 46).

Traditional Indigenous economies in North America are, generally speaking, largely based in sharing (Voyageur, Newhouse, and Beavon 2011). In many Indigenous communities today, this sharing economy is still present but exists uneasily alongside the market economy. The idea of wealth determined by amassing material goods was unfamiliar to most Indigenous cultures. One reason that having a lot of material possessions was not important to many Indigenous peoples was because they moved to different areas following a seasonal cycle. It also didn't make sense to have some members of your community go hungry or homeless, because every person had value and worth. For most Indigenous peoples before trade with Europeans, fur was not necessarily seen as having value in itself. Over time, Indigenous peoples would come to see material wealth as something to aspire to. Fur trading included the hides of bear, moose, deer, marten, fox, and buffalo, but the most important and valuable commodity was the beaver pelt.

Indigenous peoples valued beaver not only for its fur, but for food as well. After contact with Europeans, the fur of the beaver became much more important. Beaver fur was the main way that many First Nations could obtain European goods. In Canada and northern United States prior to the trade, beaver populations were plentiful. But in Europe, over-hunting and loss of habitat pushed the beaver population to the brink of extinction (Ray 2016, 54–59).

Beaver fur has two layers – the guard hairs, which are stiff, and the downy undercoat. The undercoat was excellent for making felt, ideal for hat making. At this time in Europe, felt hats were extremely fashionable, and this made beaver felt in high demand by Europeans. In the early period of the fur trade, the furs Europeans wanted were actually the well-worn pelts that Indigenous peoples had already used for clothing. This was because the guard hairs would fall off after about a year of wearing the furs with the hair side inward.

Old winter coats became extremely valuable, as they would be soft and well suited for hat making. These beaver pelts were referred to as *castor gras*. The used furs that Indigenous peoples traded to the Europeans were essentially less valuable to Indigenous peoples than the European goods. In the early stages of the fur trade, Indigenous peoples gained a lot from this demand for beaver furs.



Figure 8. Beaver pelts; Credit: Alex "Skud" Bayley

The Montagnais (Innu) trading captain who mentioned that the beaver “does everything” also went on to say, “The English have no sense; they give us twenty knives like this for one beaver skin” (Ray 2016, 56). This quote from the Montagnais trading captain indicates the initial marvel that Indigenous people had at the value placed upon the beaver pelt by Europeans. Trade in beaver pelts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would have been impossible without the cooperation and enthusiasm of Indigenous peoples to consume European merchandise and products.

Trade Goods

The fur trade offered Indigenous peoples unprecedented access to various useful material technologies of Europeans, particularly metal. Trading old clothing (used furs) gave them access to metal objects such as knives, pots and axes, as well as needles, kettles, ice chisels, hatchets, and projectile points. Other goods were traded were guns, bullets, beads, linens for fishing nets, and mirrors. The only metal accessible before contact was copper, but it was too soft for utilitarian purposes (Innis 1999).

It is important to recognize that the fur trade was much more than an exchange of material goods. It was a time of social and cultural exchange that deeply affected both Indigenous peoples and Europeans (Frideres 2012; B. Trigger 1986). It can be helpful to think about technology in terms of knowledge, instead of just the material or physical

objects. Indigenous peoples contributed not only their skills in hunting, but also their extensive knowledge of the land and ecosystems to the development of the hybrid economy known as fur trade (Ray 2015).

Phases of the Fur Trade

The fur trade changed the social and economic patterns of Indigenous life. Traditional lifestyles required some adjustment for First Nations to take advantage of opportunities provided by the fur trade and to serve their own interests, including acquiring European goods. Indigenous societies incorporated and adapted to and used European goods in various ways within their own cultural contexts.

Historians identify three or more different phases throughout the fur trade (Innis 1999; Ray 2015; Ray 2016; B. Trigger 1986). Over the course of the fur trade, the relationship between Indigenous and European participants changed dramatically. The first phase is marked by Indigenous peoples having a great deal of agency. The second phase is marked by increasing Indigenous dependency on European items gained through the fur trade. The third phase is when the Europeans gain control of the trade, and negative impacts begin to overtake the benefits for Indigenous peoples.

French Traders

France set up colonies and forts primarily to engage in the fur trade. The French were able to work with existing Indigenous trade networks. Trade was already very important in the region, and goods were traded extensively between Indigenous groups. The fur trade required close cooperation with First Nations, and the French realized it was important to have good relations with

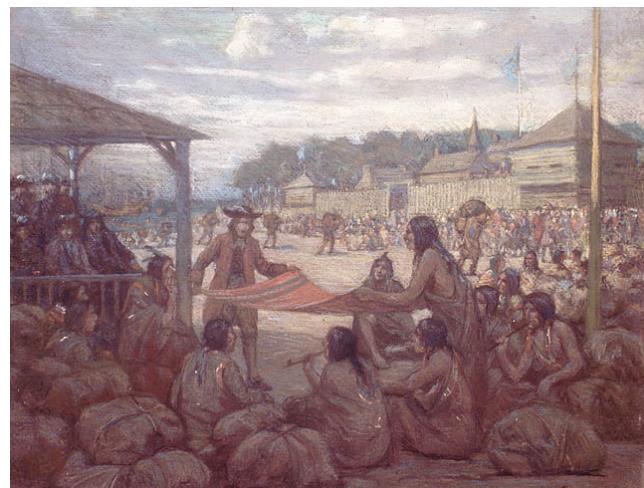


Figure 9. The Fur Traders at Montreal; Credit: Library and Archives Canada/Artist: Reid, G.A. (George Agnew), 1860-1947

Indigenous nations.

Trade Alliances

In the 250 years of the fur trade, there were several alliances and many shifts in power and advantage. The early part of the fur trade was advantageous to Indigenous peoples (Ray 2016; Ray 2015). For example, in the 1600s the French trading connection to the interior of the continent was controlled by two Indigenous powerhouses, the Algonkins and the Wendats, who had longstanding trade relationships together. The Wendat would source furs from First Nations groups in regions north and west of their territory. In turn, the Wendat would trade with the Algonkin traders, who would then trade directly with the French. Acting as middlemen, the Wendat traded north for furs with the Anishinaabe and Nehiyawak and deliberately controlled French access to these fur sources. This strategy put both the Algonkins and the Wendat in an incredibly powerful position. It was also beneficial to the French traders, as they were allowed to stay at Québec, Montréal, and Tadoussac, and the furs were brought to them. Access to weaponry of the French allowed the Algonkians and Wendat to successfully defeat enemies in the short term, such as the marauding Haudenosaunee, particularly the Oneida and the Onondaga.

When the Dutch arrived on the scene further south near New York, they became a rival of the French (Dolin 2011). The Haudenosaunee then aligned themselves with other nations nearby, what was to become the powerful League of Haudenosaunee, or Five Nations Confederacy comprising of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. The same geographical area where the Algonkian and Wendat suffered raids from the Oneida and Onondaga now had two European nations present, the Dutch and the French, both eager to make alliances for commercial, land, and military purposes. The European nations were in fierce competition, so they wanted to make alliances with Indigenous nations. Forming alliances with Europeans helped Indigenous nations fight with better weapons and bargain for goods and services, but it also had negative impacts in the long term (Ray 2016).

Control

The control of the fur trade became threatened as the French began to bypass the Algonkins to deal directly with the Wendat, and they were successful. This is a great example of how shifts in trade partnerships and alliances formed and re-formed as regional resources became depleted and Europeans moved west and north (Innis 1999; Ray 2015).

After a series of crushing defeats by the League of Haudenosaunee and their English allies, and the loss of people by diseases such as smallpox, the Wendat Confederacy fell apart. Suddenly, there was a gap left in the trade network that had the French traders move westward from their settlements on the St. Lawrence. This led to the development of a chain of inland forts by French. The established trading alliances were destroyed, and there was a struggle to realign the routes into the interior.

The impact of the dispersal of the Wendat included a change in geographic concentration of the fur trade and a greater influence of the British. A shift in geography was to more northerly and westerly areas, and this paved the way for the rise of Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). HBC and fur trade posts on the Bay would now be in competition with the French.

Hudson's Bay Company

Hudson's Bay Company was established by a group of wealthy English merchants. Then in 1670 the King of England, Charles II, unilaterally granted HBC title to Rupert's Land, a huge tract of land that included all the lands drained by rivers flowing into Hudson's Bay. This Royal Charter also granted the company the unassailable right to trade into the Hudson's Bay. This area, approximately one third of Native Canada, was renamed Rupert's Land by the British (Foster, Macleod, and Binnema 2001).

The 1670 charter provided a small group of well-connected individuals with monopoly rights and protection by charter from the state. In this sense, HBC was one among many European companies that built an extensive network that engaged trade, exploitation, plunder, and slavery. A justification for monopoly rights was based on the risks to investment because of the uncertainties of long-distance trade.

Almost as an afterthought, the Crown realized that the region's residents may take issue with this land transfer and possibly resist and so gave instructions to the local governor, John Nixon, to discuss the new ownership of land with the local Native leadership. The instructions given by the Crown in 1680 instructions were "... in the severall [sic] places where you are or shall settle, you contrive to make compact wth. [sic] the [Native] captns. [sic] or chiefs of the respective Rivers & places, whereby it might be understood by them that you had purchased both the lands and rivers of them, and that they had transferred the absolute propriety to you, or at least the only freedome [sic] of trade" (Ray 2016, 70).



Figure 10. Prince Rupert reading the charter granted May 2, 1670, to the directors of the Company of adventurers trading into Hudson's Bay; Credit: Library and Archives Canada

Monopoly

On paper, HBC had a monopoly over vast territory; however, in lived reality, HBC only controlled a small area adjacent to the shores of James and Hudson bays. HBC established factories at mouths of major rivers flowing into Hudson Bay, which provided a convenient route for native traders to deliver furs. While the company sent explorers inland to encourage more groups to trade, HBC did not try to establish inland posts until the 1770s. HBC succeeded as well as it did, because the traditional trade routes to the south had been disrupted with the fall of the Wendat. The Nehiyawak that lived along Hudson Bay were looking for trade opportunities, whereas before they preferred to avoid the Europeans. (Ray 2015)

The French also saw the opportunities in the fur trade in the west, so they made efforts to establish good relationships with the Nehiyawak and other groups in the west. French traders focused more on the interior, because they wanted to cut off HBC posts from outlying supplying regions by moving inland from Montreal and circling around the areas of Hudson Bay. As a result, the various Indigenous nations became very good at taking advantage of European interest in alliance and friendship. The northwest French fur trade network disappeared after France handed New France over to the British through the Treaty of 1763.

North West Company (NWC), originally founded in 1779 by a loosely organized group of traders from Montreal, wanted to crack open the monopoly of HBC (Gordon 2013). NWC merged with smaller rivals and extended their trade to the Athabasca and Mackenzie districts. This bold and risky move capitalized on the rich furs from the north, and NWC became a fierce rival for HBC. By 1784 NWC had formed a powerful partnership of nine different fur trading groups and built a robust economic entity that openly defied the Royal Charter. The men, many of whom were experienced Canadien, worked for NWC became known as the Nor'Westers.

Emerging Métis

As the trading networks grew, HBC men and the French men of NWC adopted the trading practices of the Indigenous population. Securing the economic bonds and loyalty that came with kinship ties, Indigenous women and their kin would secure trading privileges through marriages and long term relationships with the newcomers. These bonds were often called “marriage à la façon du pays”, and, while mutually beneficial, were not always permanent (Devine 2004).

The offspring of these relationships became known to HBC as “half-breeds” or “mixed-bloods”, while the French called their children “bois-brûlés” or Métis. Little could have anyone predicted that through a series of unforeseen circumstances, time, and human nature, these relationships would create a new Nation, the Métis people (Gaudry 2016; O’Toole 2013; St-Onge et al. 2012).



Figure 11. The Trapper's Bride; Credit: The Walters Art Museum/ Commissioned by William T. Walters (1858-1860)/Painted by Alfred Jacob Miller (1810-1874)

Plains Peoples and Bison

Unlike the eastern First Nations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some Indigenous groups further west had not yet had direct contact with any Europeans. But due to extensive trading networks, European goods like metal and firearms were reaching the Plains First Nations, including the Blackfoot confederacy (the Siksika, Kainai, Peigan, and Tsuu T’ina). The changing geography of the fur trade was reflected

in tribal movements and economic reorientations to new environments (Kelly 2013; Ray 2016).

The fur trade gradually moved west with the expansion of Assiniboine and Nehiyawak into western territories. Assiniboine and Nehiyawak groups arrived on the plains at end of seventeenth century and continued expanding west. For Nehiyawak on the plains and parklands, buffalo (bison) hunting meant there was less direct dependence on the fur trade than for Nehiyawak groups eastward and northward.

The trading networks of Nehiyawak and Assiniboine, or Hohe Nakota, had spread European goods across the plains (Milloy 1990; Palmer 2011). These people specialized as middlemen; they brought furs to the factory and returned with trade goods. Some Plains First Nations, especially the Blackfoot, had no reason or impetus to trade directly with HBC on Hudson Bay. In the mid 1770s, HBC expanded into the interior to confront NWC, and in so doing they bypassed these middle men. Naturally, it was not in the interest of these middlemen to lose their economic niche. The fur trade expanded already existing trading networks, and so through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Indigenous peoples on the plains also benefited greatly from the fur trade.

Energy Bars

First Nations of the plains were bison hunters. The Blackfoot became important suppliers of food for the traders, specifically pemmican, a food made of fat, dried meat, and berries like saskatoons, strawberries, or blueberries. It stored well and provided highly concentrated nutrition. There were approximately 2000-3000 calories in every pound of pemmican. This food supply literally fuelled the fur trade so that traders could move northwest into the Athabasca region.

Indigenous women were key to this success, as they were the ones that made the pemmican and later prepared hides when the demand for buffalo robes increased in the 1850s (Colpitts 2014; Draper 2012). After 1821, the Métis buffalo hunters came to dominate the supply of pemmican to HBC. Métis bison hunters and their families created a valuable economic niche in the fur trade economy (Hogue 2015; Macdougall and St-Onge 2013).



Figure 12. Pemmican drying; Credit: John Johnston

Suddenly in 1811, HBC sold over 74 million acres to a majority shareholder, Thomas Douglas, Lord Selkirk. This new invasion, the Selkirk settlement, lay in the middle of the already established area called the Red River Valley where there was a major concentration of Métis people, who had a thriving economy. This Métis presence also straddled the NWC route and various forts. The Selkirk settlement land had been designated by Lord Selkirk for dispossessed immigrant Scottish highlanders to begin new lives in subsistence-based farming (Bumsted 2008; Ray 2016; St-Onge et al. 2012).

Chief Peguis (William King) 'To the Aboriginal Protection Society,' Red River, 1857...We are not only willing, but very anxious after being paid for our lands, that the whites would come and settle among us, for we have already derived great benefits from their having done so, that is, not the traders, but the farmers. The traders have never done anything but rob us and keep us poor, but the farmers have taught us how to farm and raise cattle. (Thorner and Frohn-Nielsen 2009, 291–292).

The manufacturing and distribution of pemmican became a valuable and essential staple for many of the posts, as well as for the Selkirk settlement. Selkirk Governor, Miles MacDonnell, turned to the local Indigenous populations of Ojibwa and Métis to supply the new influx of helpless settlers with meat, grease, and pemmican.

The influx of strangers on the lands surrounding and intersecting an already established Métis Red River settlement created great tension and challenges as the surveyors and the new settlers did not recognize any Métis claims to the land. As a result, the Métis and Nor'Westers became an allied front in their economic and land struggles against HBC (Bumsted 2008; Foster, Macleod, and Binnema 2001; Hughes 2016).

The Pemmican Proclamation of 1814

On January 8, 1814, the Selkirk Governor, Miles McDonnell, in a bid to exercise his authority over the settlements, issued a decree that would galvanize the nationalistic aspirations of a new people. The Pemmican Proclamation of 1814 occurred when McDonnell issued a ban on the export of pemmican or any other provisions. This development did not go over well with the Métis or Nor'Westers, who were both economically dependent on the pemmican. Six months later, McDonnell banned the running and use of horses on any buffalo hunts. The Métis in particular were already frustrated and began to resist (Dickason and Newbigging 2015; Hughes 2016; Innis 1999).

Rising tensions between the colony and the Métis and acts of Métis resistance culminated in the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816, which resulted in the death of twenty-one male Selkirk colonists. The Métis success in this conflict contributed to the development of Métis nationalism, but it was not the last time that the Métis would take on HBC (Gaudry 2016). Escalating conflict, especially in the Athabasca district, was costly to both Hudson's Bay and North West companies. Subsequently, economic costs and political/legal pressures from the colonial office forced these companies to merge in 1821. For the next fifty years, a reasonable stability was maintained in the Hudson's Bay Company territory under this monopoly.

Example of Stability

During this competitive period of 1783 to 1821, the value of furs tended to go up while the value of goods declined. These prices were an incentive to over-trap. In order to

maintain profitability, NWC and HBC briskly traded alcohol. After 1821, the newly formed company had to address the resource shortages created by the fierce competition, and efforts to manage and conserve beaver populations were made. The trade in alcohol declined. This monopoly gave HBC greater control over their interactions with Indigenous producers. While this monopoly allowed for more sustainable trapping of fur-bearing animals, beginning in the 1850s bison populations declined largely because of overharvesting (Dolin 2011; Ray 2015; Payne 2004).

Kinship and Personal Relationships of the Fur Trade

French traders, by adapting to Indigenous cultures, conducted their trade somewhat differently than the British. The French went further inland and often pushed the canoe routes to the edge of the expanding commercial frontier. As a means to facilitate trade, First Nations hosted the French in their villages and camps during the winter (Dickason and Newbigging 2015; Gordon 2013).

Rivers were the highways for many Indigenous people. Boats were often the most efficient way to travel. The birch bark canoe was original Indigenous technology and an easy way to move goods and materials to and from trading posts to communities. Along both HBC and NWC trade routes, Indigenous people sold materials like birch bark, cedar root, birch rind, and tar to build and repair these canoes. NWC used a boat called “canoe du nord”, which was an enlarged version of this vital piece of this Indigenous technology (Podruchny 2006; Ray 2016).

The merger and consequent restructuring of HBC and NWC in 1821 had several long-term effects on the Métis and First Nations populations. Without the fierce competition of NWC, HBC now was able to create and enforce stricter rules and regulations about hunting and trapping. In 1820, Sir George Simpson was appointed governor-in-chief by London HBC headquarters and acted as HBC head of operations for all North American trade. Under his leadership, Governor Simpson eliminated many of the expensive trading practices that had been a critical underpinning of Indigenous trade.

One key development involved the streamlining of the transport systems. The transporting of commodities and people was a crucial feature of the conduct of the trade. York Factory, which in the mercantile era factory meant a place of commerce, was HBC's command centre and most important port of entry. For more than two centuries this establishment imported trade goods and exported furs, and Simpson's reorganization increased the importance of York Factory. In the interest of efficiency, Simpson replaced the canoe with the York Boat on major river corridors. The sturdy, locally built York Boat became the preferred mode of transportation. Because these boats could carry more at a time, it reduced the numbers of people needed, but it was a brutal form of work (Ray 2016; Sprakman 2015, 85).



Figure 13. York Factory, 1853; Credit: Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. R9266-1615
Peter Winkworth Collection of Canadiana

Over time Europeans adapted to the environment, and the interdependence based on the skills and knowledge of the Indigenous population shifted to favour the Europeans. In a bid to accumulate wealth, HBC was about to make a decision that would reverberate throughout history.

Last Stages of the Fur Trade

Otipemisiwak (freemen, literally, people who are their own bosses) developed in the fur trade as Métis and others broke away from the consigns of HBC or NWC. They became free agents, trapping, hunting, trading and selling furs, and providing provisions to the posts as opportunities presented. Significantly, these freemen groups lived outside the authority of the bands (St-Onge et al. 2012; O'Toole 2013).

Indigenous groups experienced the effects of the fur trade in various ways at different times. The early, middle, and late stages of the fur trade occurred earlier for Indigenous peoples living in the eastern parts of what is now Canada than for those living in the western parts. The fur trade as the dominating relationship endured longer in the west and the north than in the east. The early stages of the fur trade were characterized by Indigenous peoples as crucial and forceful players in the game. During the middle stage of the fur trade, Indigenous peoples still had some influence and control, but as things progressed, the benefits of the trade shifted to the Europeans sphere of control (Dickason and Newbigging 2015).

Most damaging for Indigenous communities was an economic dependency on the consumption of European goods. Consumption of these goods required a willingness to trade or work for wages. This dependency weakened many aspects of traditional Indigenous economies, and eventually European interests won out. They gained the upper hand both economically and politically. By the 1800s beavers were almost hunted to extinction in many parts of Canada, and by the late 1800s, the fur trade in the subarctic regions crashed and stagnated. After 200 years, the problem of overhunting was compounded by declining fur prices on the London market (Ray 2016).

Coincident with low fur prices, overhunting reduced the availability of bison as a food staple. The year 1879 marked the end of the plains buffalo economy; a shortage of bison meant that pemmican ceased to be a readily available economy. This development contrasted sharply with the situation at the start of the nineteenth century

when the bison population was estimated to be around 30 million on the plains. By the early 1900s, only 1000 bison were left (Gelo 2016).

Permanent Settlements

The fur trade deeply affected the social organization of Indigenous communities. For example, many Indigenous peoples over time established themselves in permanent communities near trading posts. This created very different social arrangements than what they traditionally followed (Burnett and Read 2012).

Health

The increasing population of Europeans and the intense interactions resulted in Indigenous populations being affected by disease outbreaks, for which they had no built-up immunity. When the Europeans arrived, they carried germs and viruses, to which Indigenous peoples in Canada had never been exposed. Smallpox came with the French in the early 1600s, and the next several hundred years caused catastrophic devastation to Indigenous communities throughout the western hemisphere. One smallpox epidemic alone ravaged the west coast. It is estimated that as many as 20,000 Indigenous people, or approximately one-third of the total population, died (Daschuk 2013).

Conclusion

The takeover of HBC by the International Financial Society in 1863 signalled the certain demise of the fur trade and its eventual replacement with an agricultural economy. Settlers, large-scale immigration, railroads and telegraph lines (the Internet of the 19th century), and private property drastically altered the regional economy. On the ground, the diminished possibilities of the fur trade and the perception of pending changes were the perfect set-up for treaties.

The desperate economic circumstances that many Indigenous peoples in western and northern Canada found themselves in at the end of the fur trade were often those under

which the many treaty negotiations were conducted. The perception of the pending changes was a major motive for negotiating treaties with the Canadian government.

Credits

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