

Review Article

Studies in Fur

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It was appropriate that the lead article in the first number of *Archivaria* in 1975-76 was based on research in one of the most celebrated archival collections in the world.¹ In that article Arthur Ray pointed to the potential value of the business records of the Hudson's Bay Company, specifically to the Company's post account books and ledgers, as an illustration of the wealth of information contained in a largely neglected portion of a major archival source. Ray was pointing not only to the economic data that could be found in that source but also to the sociological and ecological information: the role of alcohol and tobacco in the trade; the type of furs brought in by the Indians; the number of deer and geese killed by the post's Indians; the identity and location of Indian groups; the Indian's buying habits. These aspects of the fur trade, he argued, would provide fruitful avenues of research.

One area of research with which Ray has become identified is that of the nature of the economic contact between the European and the native. Considering the character of that relationship the terms "buying habits" and "economic contact", Ray suggests, are misnomers. Stimulated by Karl Polanyi's studies in the "non-market" contact between peoples, i.e. a situation in which the modern idea of "price" and "price mechanism" did not operate, students of the fur trade such as E.E. Rich, Abraham Rotstein, and Ray have reached different conclusions regarding the "economics" of the trade contact. On the basis of his studies in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, E.E. Rich stated that in the early contact between the Company's personnel and the native people the Indian "did not react to the ordinary European notions of property nor to the normal European motives". They did not understand such European concepts as supply and demand, costs of production, determination of price, profit motive. Within the Indian society, Rich argues, there persisted, "the idea of gift exchange", a ceremonial and social contact.² This same characteristic of "cross-cultural" trade is noted also by Rotstein who categorizes the trade contact between white and Indian as a form of treaty, or political and military alliance. To the Indian, "economic" life was not a separate and independent sphere of social existence. The European trader regarded economic transactions as an impersonal activity. The Indian viewed them as highly personal — hence the ceremonial trade encounter, the pipe-smoking, the council, the gift-giving.³

1 Arthur J. Ray, "The Early Hudson's Bay Company Account Books as Sources for Historical Research: An Analysis and Assessment," *Archivaria* 1 (Winter 1975-76): 3-38.

2 E.E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation Among the Indians of North America," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 26, No. 1 (February 1960): 35-53.

3 Abraham Rotstein, "Karl Polanyi's Concept of Non-Market-Trade", *Journal of Economic History* 30, No. 1 (March 1970): 117-126.

This kind of association was a significant part of the relationship between the Huron Indians and the French in the early seventeenth century. Bruce Trigger, in his studies of the Huron people, notes that they had engaged with northern hunters in an exchange of corn for fish and meat long before the arrival of Europeans. Trade and trading contacts were reinforced by a complex set of accepted conventions. A particular trade route was recognized as the property of the tribe or family that had pioneered it. A trade "alliance" might involve an exchange of people, often children, as a gesture of friendship between the trade partners. At their first contact with the French, the Huron were hesitant about a trade relationship believing that there already existed a treaty-trade-alliance between the French and the Algonkin people, with whom the French were first in contact, and if violated would lead to Algonkin reprisals against them. The trade contact that was eventually made with the French embodied the kind of political and social obligations that had existed in the trade between Indian partners. Indian children were sent to the Jesuit Seminary at Quebec as a gesture of friendship and priests or *coureur de bois* living with the Huron were to be evidence of French goodwill. In the trade relationship the Huron guarded zealously their role as middlemen between the French and the interior peoples. They considered themselves a privileged people, and having a "treaty" with the French were entitled to protection from interlopers. The French soon realized that a trade relationship with the Huron required a "social" treaty. The Huron considered the trade relationship to involve a political and military alliance and the French were expected to join with the Huron as an ally in their war against the Iroquois. As to the Indian as an economic being, the French noted that the natives "scorned to haggle" over price and while they gave every sign of understanding market behaviour they did not openly express a profit motive. Economic activities were part of an elaborate social relationship between nations in which ceremony, gift-giving and exchange played an important role.⁴

Arthur Ray does not dispute the role of gift-giving or the social and ceremonial aspect in this exchange of goods. In *Give us Good Measure*, Ray and Donald Freeman, however, dispute Rotstein's "politically motivated" concept of the fur trade.⁵ On the basis of their analysis of fur trade records they claim that the thesis of "subservience of economic motivation to political objectives" cannot be maintained. The Indians with whom the Hudson's Bay Company men were in contact did not consider themselves a "nation" as the Huron did. They never thought of the exchange of goods in terms of a political association. They traded "freely and simultaneously" with both English and French; they engaged in "shopping around"; they were guided in their choice of trading partners by "economic and not political considerations"; their behaviour was "not unlike that of any modern western consumer". The concept of "treaty trade", they argue was undoubtedly a factor in the Huronia and St. Lawrence trade but can not be extended to include the European and the native at Hudson Bay.

By the nineteenth century, according to Rich, the Indian "revealed a completely European reaction to prices". In Rotstein's terms the fur trade for the Indian had become de-personalized. Further study might now be done in the fur trade records to clarify the process of economic Europeanization of the native beginning with the "primitive" concept of the economic motive noted by Ray and Freeman to determine what brought about the transformation. Was it the appearance of competition, the credit system, or the exchange of trade goods through Indian middlemen?

In 1966, Dale Morgan, an American historian, rebuked fur trade specialists for their failure to consider the Indian's role in the fur trade.⁶ Some of the above studies of the

4 Bruce Trigger, *The Huron, Farmers of the North* (New York, 1969).

5 Arthur J. Ray and Donald Freeman, "*Give Us Good Measure*": *An Economic Analysis of Relations between Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company before 1763* (Toronto, 1978)

6 Dale L. Morgan, "The Fur Trade and Its Historians", *American West* 3 (Spring 1966): 28-35.

Indian as an economic being help to make amends for that failure. Calvin Martin, an American anthropologist, in an imaginative and controversial study, *Keepers of the Game*, treats the Indian as a hunter and as an economic being in terms of a cultural-religious background.⁷ The fur trade, he argues, must be reconciled to the Indian's supernatural view of the world and his "belief-value" system. The major question he addresses is why the Indian whose existence depended on game, fish, and other sources of food in his environment could have engaged in exploitation of his world to the point of "overkill" through the fur trade. Why did he not recognize the damaging effects of his participation as a hunter in the trade? When presented with the opportunity of obtaining trade goods for furs he readily consummated the transaction. Part of Martin's answer is that exploitation of the environment did not take place before the arrival of the European because the Indian was handicapped by a rudimentary technology and had no incentive. He was by no means a conservationist but he was not a wasteful being in pre-historical times.

Basing his explanation on legend, oral history, and fur trader accounts, Martin suggests that by the time of European contact the Indian's traditional belief system had been undermined. There should have been a "spiritual" obstacle to overkill but it was disregarded. Prior to contact, the deterrent to excessive hunting had been the fear of reprisal by the animal world. The Indian lived on amicable terms with the animals and their spirits or "keepers"; this courteous relationship precluded overkill. The Indian and the animal communicated freely with one another. They were parts of a mutually co-operative spiritual environment. The beaver was considered as a separate "nation" and treated according to specific ceremonies, rituals and taboos. The "keeper" of the beaver, or spiritual "controller", had to be propitiated so that he would continue to furnish game for the hunter. Through this spiritual realm the Indian was linked sympathetically with his physical and natural surroundings. Man and nature adhered to a prescribed behaviour based on mutual obligation. The animal yielded itself to the hunter for his needs. The hunter, in return, was not to abuse the animal — or he risked revenge from "outraged game spirits". It was this threat of retaliation that placed an "upper limit" on the number of animals killed by the Indian hunter.

For reasons not fully explained in *Keepers of the Game* Martin states that by the time of European contact the spiritual system of mutual obligation and courtesy between man and animal had broken down and the spiritual deterrent to overkill was removed. In Martin's argument the key to this disruption of a long-standing compact between man and animal was disease. The Indian blamed the animals for disease; the animals were punishing him. Faced with this animal "conspiracy", the Indian entered into a war of extermination and revenge — a war that was transformed into the historic fur trade. The opportunity to obtain European trade goods provided the Indian with the technology and the incentive to overkill — his war of extermination. The world of the traditional Indian-animal relationship had been shattered.

Both Calvin Martin and Arthur Ray are represented in *Old Trails and New Directions*, a collection of papers presented at the third North American fur trade conference held in Winnipeg in 1978.⁸ The title is an appropriate one for the volume adequately reflects the new avenues of research being followed by historians, geographers and anthropologists in fur trade studies. As their disciplines have changed, old records have been re-examined and put to new uses. Arthur Ray considers the role of the Indian as a consumer; Carol Judd looks at the ethnicity of the Hudson's Bay Company employees in the nineteenth century; John Nicks examines the social and economic background of

7 Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game. Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley, 1978).

8 Carol M. Judd and Arthur J. Ray, eds., *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference* (Toronto, 1980)

the Orkney Islands from which, at the end of the eighteenth century, eighty per cent of the Hudson's Bay Company employees were recruited; Richard Ruggles traces the story of mapping of the Indian territories by Company personnel. Two others, Sylvia Van Kirk, who reports on recent trends in fur trade social history, and Jennifer Brown, who uses the terminology or linguistics of the fur trade as a basis for observations on fur trade society, have since published major studies on the fur trade community.

In *Many Tender Ties* Van Kirk reconstructs the role of the Indian, half-breed, and white women in the fur trade in western Canada for the period 1670-1870.⁹ Her purpose is to show that the fur trade "constituted a social and cultural complex as well as an economic activity". She notes that there is a paucity of sources particularly those written by native women through which the economic and social role of women, from the woman's viewpoint, can be told. And she admits the limitations in having to rely on male sources and accounts. Nevertheless she has successfully made use of fur traders' journals, correspondence, and wills in putting together this pioneer work which, she states, "supports the claims of theorists in women's history that sex roles should constitute a category of historical investigation". At times, there is a feminist note to some of Van Kirk's statements but it must be admitted that it is not a strident one.

Contact between European men and native women in other parts of the world was usually "illicit", and "peripheral" to the man's trading or colonizing venture. In western Canada, for purposes of economic contact, fur trade companies often encouraged "marriage" with a native woman through whom a lasting alliance might be made with her people. In western Canada, the relationship was not "casual" or "promiscuous". This may be too complimentary a picture of both native women and European men. Yet Van Kirk notes that the fur trade society was unique; it was "exceptional". Unlike other cross-cultural contacts it developed its own marriage rite, i.e. *à la façon du pays* which combined both Indian and European marriage customs. "If a man formed a liaison with a woman she was considered to be his wife, entitled to the recognition and support that a marital relationship implied." In Indian society the woman had an economic role to play. There was no division between the spheres of home and work. This role was carried over into her place in the fur trade where the work of Indian women "constituted an important contribution to the functioning of the trade".

Van Kirk does not confine herself to the relationship between the trader and the Indian woman. She traces what trader James Douglas referred to as a "revolution" in "the manners of the country, i.e. the eventual turning from the Indian wife to the half-breed and then to the white woman as "civilized" society approached the fur trade regions. Symbolic of the advance of civilization in western Canada was the Red River Settlement. With the arrival of missionaries, teachers, and white women the place of the native wife was challenged. Younger men in the fur trade, subject to new social pressures, became "imbued with the Victorian middle-class desire for respectability and success" and native women became victims of racial prejudice and social rivalry.

In *Strangers in Blood* Jennifer Brown, using basically the same sources and employing the same macrobiographical approach as Van Kirk, examines the fur traders group looking at their social background, their domestic lives, their family relationships, and the fate of their children.¹⁰ One of the most significant aspects of this meticulously researched study is the comparison between Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company men as husbands and fathers. The difference is attributed partly to the relationship of hinterland to metropolis. The men at the Hudson's Bay Company posts had

9 Sylvia Van Kirk, *"Many Tender Ties": Women in the Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg, 1980).

10 Jennifer S. Brown, *Strangers in Blood. Fur Trade Company Families in the Indian Country* (Vancouver, 1980).

little social contact or relationship with a minor elite group in Britain — the governing body of the Company. The men of the North West Company, many of them partners in the organization (not employees as Hudson's Bay Company men were) had a direct relationship with *the* social and economic elite of Montreal. While the North West Company men tended to consider their stay in the west as temporary and were more likely to look upon a "marriage" there as casual, the Hudson's Bay Company men entered into more lasting unions and evidenced more concern for the education and advancement of their children. The differing family patterns are thus related to the different social background of the fur trade personnel and to the different employee-management arrangements. Brown also relates the social patterns and behaviour of the two groups to their ethnic and religious background. The Hudson's Bay Company were Protestant, English, Scots from the Lowlands, and Orkney Islanders; the North West Company men were Highland Scots and Canadians with Roman Catholic and French Canadian affiliations, and with more kinship links among themselves.

Both Van Kirk and Brown make reference in their studies to Archibald McDonald, a Hudson's Bay Company officer, and to his family. McDonald's marriage to a mixed blood woman serves as a model of the conventional domestic life that was possible in such unions. His biography, *Exile in the Wilderness*, by Jean Murray Cole reflects the stability of his marriage *à la façon du pays* to Jane Klyne who not only accepted her husband's son by a previous "marriage" to an Indian woman but also bore him twelve children. Though McDonald's continuing commitment to his wife and his concern for the upbringing and education of his children are central to her biography, Cole goes much beyond the story of cross-cultural family life. She provides, through McDonald's own correspondence and diaries, an account of life and trade at Hudson's Bay Company posts in the first half of the 19th century. McDonald came to the fur trade country first as an agent of Lord Selkirk. It was he who conducted a party of Selkirk settlers on a harrowing trip overland from Churchill to York Factory in 1814. McDonald's account of this trip, the most detailed in print, is one of the most valuable parts of the biography. Later as a Hudson's Bay Company officer stationed at a number of posts in the interior and in the Columbia District, McDonald maintained, despite his "wilderness" life many of the accoutrements of civilized society. An educated and gregarious man he continued his reading habits and broadened his interest in poetry, botany, zoology, medicine, conservation, and resource development. Although it was McDonald who referred to his life as an "exile in wilderness" it is often difficult to accept this characteristic of his days as a fur trader. Throughout the biography are references to the mild, lush land of the Columbia District, the comfortable quarters at Fort Langley, the "little Eden" of Fort Colville, his contentment, his enthusiasm. By the 1840s, however, after nearly twenty years on the west side of the mountains, the "novelty of the exotic life in the Indian country" had worn off; McDonald saw little hope of further advance in the Company and he began to dream of life in the "civilized society" of Canada. In 1844, with his family he began the trip eastward to settle on a farm in the Ottawa valley. There was no thought (as with many fur traders) of leaving his mixed blood wife behind; there was no consideration of casting off the native wife, as his colleagues George Simpson and John George McTavish had done, and turning to a white woman. His wife, while at times a curiosity to her Canadian neighbours along the Ottawa River, had little difficulty in adjusting to "civilized" life. McDonald, while in the fur trade country, had never departed from the Victorian concepts of morality, industry, and Christian education all of which he had instilled in his wife and children.¹¹

In the work of Arthur Ray, Donald Freeman, Calvin Martin and others the Indian has at last been brought into the fur trade on his own terms, within his comprehension

11 Jean Murray Cole, *Exile in the Wilderness. The Life of Archibald McDonald, 1790-1853* (Don Mills, Ont., 1979).

as an economic being, and against the background of his cultural environment. With Van Kirk and Brown the unique and complex role of women and the fur trade family unit have been opened to investigation. The fur trade specialist had the impression, when encountering fur trade personalities, that there must have been something incestuous about the fur trade family. He continually kept running into Grants, Ross', Hargraves, Mactavishes, and Macdonalds — a family jungle of sons, brothers, cousins and assorted relatives and a bewildering array of inter-family relationships. The studies that we have had in Canada centred on the family unit have usually been about an elite family. The framework of these studies was derivative — based on American models. Through the study of fur trade families a distinctive Canadian approach to family history has been developed.



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