The Presence of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Territories of Canadian Native Societies: Some Negative Impacts (Note 1)

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Abstract

The Hudson's Bay Company was founded in 1667. King Charles II of England granted his cousin, Prince Rupert of the Rhine—an impoverished nobleman in need of funds—a license to exploit animal furs in the Canadian territories that came to be known as Rupert's Land. The Hudson's Bay Company began operations in Canada in 1670 and successfully established itself in the fur trade thanks to two Frenchmen, Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médard des Groseilliers; they provided crucial information, having previously traveled through the Great Lakes region and explored much of the Hudson Bay area. The company's first trading posts were set up on Hudson Bay and at the mouths of the Hayes and Nelson rivers; these settlements were named York and Port Nelson. Interior territories—particularly those now part of the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan—supported connections with these two hubs, as Indigenous people traveled there to trade the furs they had harvested.

Although it falls outside the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that the Northwest Company appeared in 1779 to compete with the Hudson's Bay Company. The rivalry between the two institutions was resolved by the British Crown and Parliament through a merger in 1821.

Canadian furs were primarily traded for firearms, iron tools, and alcohol. This essay focuses on two distinct ethnic groups: the Assiniboine (associated with the Sioux) and the Western Cree (an Algonquian people)—though one must consider that intertribal marriages played a role in an individual's affiliation with one group or the other. These two subgroups have previously been studied from historical perspectives, specifically about the impact of the regional and international fur trade, as well as the influence exerted primarily by Catholic and Methodist missionaries. Social, political, economic, and neighborly relations were first documented by explorers from the Hudson's Bay Company.

The first to encounter these societies were the French who had settled in the colony of New France, followed by the British associated with the Hudson's Bay Company. Some of these individuals are cited here, though it is impossible to mention everyone who left behind accounts.

The negative impacts caused by the HBC were numerous. I would highlight, in particular, those affecting the flora; the overexploitation of specific wildlife species for their furs; the early stages of British urban development, which led to the elimination of Indigenous encampments; and the shift from traditional forms of labor to work compensated in cash or kind—among others.

From the late 19th century onwards, serious studies began to appear by historians, philologists, and university professors interested in examining the era of the indiscriminate trapping of valuable furs in Canada. Prominent among them are the Hudson's Bay Company employees who recorded what they saw and what the native peoples told them during their travels; the Catholic and Protestant missionaries who ventured into these same regions; and the researchers—particularly those cited in this essay. The history of this company has been expertly chronicled by E.E. Rich (1958–59).

Keywords: Hudson's Bay Company, social life, territories, Assiniboine, Western Cree, fur traders, French and British missionaries

1. Introduction

Canada's northern regions feature two primary landscape types, alongside numerous others that must be classified as secondary. One of these is the Subarctic, dominated by taiga vegetation; it offers a southern belt of rich soil supporting medium-to-large firs, alders, birches, aspens, and willows—species characteristic of the boreal forest.

As one moves from south to north across this zone, the vegetation becomes progressively smaller; the forest—particularly the coniferous forest—becomes increasingly open, with the species growing further apart until they disappear entirely. This transition leads to a geographic zone known to Canadian botanists and geographers as the

"tamarack" zone—a term referring to a small conifer scientifically named *Larix laricina*. This tree features reddish-brown bark and dense clusters of blue-green needles, and is prized for its exceptionally durable, flexible wood.

Further north still—yet linked to the landscapes already described—appears another zone characterized by low-growing foliage, dominated by black spruce (*Picea mariana*) and dwarf willow (*Salix herbacea*). Beyond this point, the soil is poor and permanently frozen—a condition known as permafrost.

Beyond this natural boundary lies the tundra, an area primarily covered in grasses and small shrubs; notable species include dwarf willows, berry-bearing thickets, arctic grasses, and mosses. Rocks and large boulders are scattered throughout, often covered in lichens that serve as a vital food source for caribou. Together, these elements create a kind of frozen natural showcase. We do not know for certain what the boreal forest was like prior to the arrival of Europeans, but there is no reason to rule out the possibility that changes occurred—both in the southern and northern regions of Canada, the second-largest country after the Russian Federation (Junquera Rubio, 2019). Across the plains and along the shores of lakes and rivers, as well as in certain inland areas, Europeans encountered settlements featuring conical tents occupied by native societies; however, they did not find cities of the kind described by other Europeans who had arrived in present-day Mexico or the Inca Empire in Peru. In the early 16th century, the territory that is now Canada lacked cities (Note 2), roads, hospitals, and airports—features that are widely present today.

During the summer months, canoes could be seen navigating the rivers and lakes; in Arctic zones, the Inuit traveled by kayak, skillfully maneuvering around ice floes that obstructed their path (Junquera Rubio, 2022, 2023: 88-110). Wooden drying racks and small palisades displayed strips of meat and fish, curing in the smoke from nearby campfires. The indigenous peoples—as diverse as the many tribes and traditional societies they formed—along with their dogs (inseparable companions in this part of the world), were other notable elements worth recording. Occasionally, the flames and smoke from forest fires would also draw attention.

During the long winter, tracks left by snowshoes—crafted from dwarf larch wood—or by dog-drawn sleds were visible to the human eye. Native dwellings formed small settlements that were difficult to spot once covered by snow; likewise, traditional igloos or block-built shelters used by the Inuit were often too remote to be detected by casual travelers (Junquera Rubio, 2021: 821-838).

In certain geographical areas featuring small watercourses (streams), humans changed the landscape by constructing artificial weirs to facilitate fishing during the summer months. Natural obstacles were also used for this same purpose. In these landscapes, native peoples devised funnel-shaped paths to aid in capturing caribou during their seasonal grazing migrations; these were ideal times to obtain fresh meat for immediate consumption and to smoke any surplus for preservation. The side walls of these paths were constructed using stones or by manipulating shrub branches.

Canadian wildlife is highly diverse, including bison, caribou, beavers, moose, and walruses along the coasts, as well as birds of prey and migratory birds that traveled to these cold regions from South America. Beavers inhabited the waters—rivers and lakes—of the forested zones. Humans also moved across the landscape: traveling by canoe along rivers in summer, and by sled or on foot in winter. Inter-tribal contact occurred—sometimes peacefully and at other times violently—for a variety of reasons. This essay aims to examine two indigenous groups and the living conditions that affected them upon the arrival of Europeans—who came as officials and salaried employees of the Hudson’s Bay Company and other French and British fur-trading firms—in their traditional territories. The Assiniboine and the Western Cree, in particular, inhabited adjacent areas; this proximity had enabled them to forge strong bonds of friendship with one another, stronger, in fact, than those they shared with other groups with whom they otherwise shared ethnicity, language, and culture. This pre-existing dynamic persisted even as economic exchanges—primarily involving the fur trade—began. The English, French, and Scots arrived in Canadian territories as explorers and fur traders.

2. The Territory Occupied by the Assiniboine and Cree

The territory occupied by the Assiniboine and Cree in the 17th century was biogeographically diverse, comprising three distinct ecosystem types: 1) the boreal forest (or taiga), dominated by birch trees; 2) wooded areas dominated by conifers; and 3) a zone of grasslands and scrubland transitioning into tundra. There is no evidence to suggest they lived—even temporarily—within the tundra interior, a territory more characteristic of Athabaskan and Inuit peoples. Each of these vast ecozones offered a wide variety of ecological niches inhabited by native flora and fauna, providing diverse resources for the indigenous populations.

These two groups, belonging to different ethnic backgrounds, were settled in areas that are now the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—primarily the Assiniboine—while the Western Cree inhabited the U.S. states of Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota. This dispersal does not rule out the presence of other groups and societies, as nomadism—or semi-nomadism—entails at least seasonal mobility.

French colonization had taken hold along the St. Lawrence River, in the Great Lakes region, and in areas south of Lake Winnipeg. Notable French settlements of the time—geographically widely separated—included Quebec, Montreal, Detroit, and Fort Maurepas. The movement of French goods and products made by native peoples relied primarily on the St. Lawrence River.

King Charles II granted his cousin, Prince Rupert, permission to colonize a part of what is now Canada. The Hudson's Bay Company set up its first settlements on the bay bearing its name: Fort Churchill at the mouth of the Churchill River, and Fort York at the mouth of the Hayes River. The territories under its control were named as Rupert's Land; this area was significantly expanded in the 19th century when the company merged with the Northwest Company.

Biogeographical variations created a significant difference in food resource abundance between the first and third zones—that is, between the boreal forest areas and the natural grasslands—as the former was home to only two large cervid species: the caribou and the moose. Historical data and limited statistics indicate that the population density of these two animal species—particularly the former—was much higher in the early 18th century than it is today, especially in the southern region of the territory associated with the Laurentian or Canadian Shield (which outcrops between Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay before transitioning into tundra zones). Moreover, these figures were modest compared to those reported for more southerly areas—specifically the grasslands of the early 20th century—because the caribou migrated toward the Arctic rather than toward the northern tributaries of what we now call the Mississippi-Missouri basin (Douglas and Wallace, 1926: 22).

At the same time, numerous contemporary studies allow us to compare historical data with current findings to decide whether the earlier information stays valid. Interestingly, current seasonal migration patterns closely resemble those seen three to four centuries ago (Oosenbrug and Theberge 1980: 59–72; Anderson and Johnson 2014: 1–17).

Small games were abundant and included species highly valued for their pelts: marten, lynx, otter, mink, muskrat, and beaver. These animals were prized not only for the fur trade and exchange but also as a food source for humans—particularly the last two, which were considered culinary delicacies by the indigenous peoples. This is the view expressed by Arthur J. Ray, based on historical documentation from the Hudson's Bay Company (Ray 1998: 27). It should be noted that an animal's presence in a specific habitat depends on physical characteristics, the use of those features, and the social behavior of each species (Wilks, 2004: 208-240; Bergerud, Stuart, and Camps 2007).

Before continuing, it is important to bear in mind that during the 17th and 18th centuries, the conventional border between Canada and the United States—which might have affected the territories traversed by the native groups in question—did not exist. Furthermore, when the Lewis and Clark expedition took place between 1804 and 1806, the explorers met Assiniboine people in regions that are now part of Montana and the Dakotas, showing that their seasonal migrations covered vast distances (Junquera Rubio 2017: 42-51).

Fish populations were another resource upon which any indigenous group depended. This wealth of aquatic life was found in river channels flowing over rocky beds along the edge of the Laurentian Shield, near Lakes Winnipeg and Rainy—that is, in the southern regions. Waterfowl were also abundant throughout the territory during migration seasons. To these actual and potential food sources, one must add wild rice, which grew and thrived in the wooded areas southeast of the aforementioned lakes and along the banks of the two rivers bearing the same name (Mayer-Oakes, 1967: 369–372). This aspect, too, has been studied for years in relation to climate change—whether actual or potential (Beamish, 1995; Berra, 2008).

In contrast to the resource offerings of the forest region, which were considerable, the resources found in the grasslands were far richer, both in terms of the number and variety of huntable species. Notable among the cervids were the pronghorn antelope (*Antilocapra americana*), mule deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), and wapiti or red deer (*Cervus canadensis*), among others. To this list, one must add the American bison (*Bison bison*). The bison's range extended from near Great Slave Lake in the north to near the Gulf of Mexico in the south; consequently, many indigenous societies relied on this species for a long period (Hart, 2001: 83–102; Nesheim, 2012: 547–577).

However, small animals were scarce here; they were rarely found in the wooded river valleys or in the highlands, such as the Turtle Mountains (Manitoba) and the Moose Mountains (Alberta). A notable species across all these areas is the beaver (*Castor canadensis*), which later became Canada's national animal following Senate approval in 1975.

It was the transitional green belt between the forests and the prairies—or grasslands—that provided indigenous peoples with many of their resources, drawing from the offerings of both environments. All the animals were present except for the caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), whose traditional habitat lies much further north, ranging from the boreal forest—or taiga—to the tundra. To this list of animals, we must add the muskox (*Ovibos

moschatus*); its current presence in U.S. territories is the result of an introduction driven by a conservation policy, following its disappearance from Alaska due to the harmful impact of hunting (Wilkinson, 1974: 13–22). Fish were abundant in the waterways and rivers—specifically the Assiniboine, Red, and Saskatchewan—and were harvested from prehistoric times through the historic era and up to the present day. Similarly, there was significant overlap in vegetation; wild rice (*Zizania palustris*) was always an important food source, even though it was perhaps never abundant enough to generate a large surplus for inter-tribal trade.

In addition to spatial variations in resources, there were temporal variations that manifested in two ways: 1) irregular and 2) regular or seasonal. The former stemmed from disease outbreaks and short-term climatic changes; both factors gave rise to unexpected situations.

Meanwhile, in forest and grassland areas, periodic changes in precipitation significantly affected small animal populations, particularly the muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*). This animal inhabited the shallow margins of lakes and rivers and was—and stays—sensitive to fluctuations in water levels. Under conditions of excess water, many young muskrats drowned, whereas during periods of scarcity, they could freeze to death in winter.

This phenomenon was noted as early as the 18th century, as the animal was highly valued for its fur. Faced with a shortage of specimens, Governor George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company sent a detailed report to the company's headquarters in London. He noted that the animals were highly susceptible to disease during dry spells, as water would stagnate and spoil due to a lack of renewal; if epidemics broke out, mortality rates were high and had a severe impact (Martin, Holmes, Wobeser, Anthony, and Greefkes, 1982: 279-282; Ray 1998: 31).

Stagnant water pools create favorable conditions for the concentration of the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*—the causative agent of tularemia—which infects muskrats when they drink the water, leading to death. The disease is named by high fevers that no wild animal species can withstand, let alone survive. While the situation typically resolves once a regular rainfall pattern returns, the population requires three years to rebuild, though it rarely recovers to its earlier numbers. These cyclical fluctuations, which negatively affected this rodent, occurred in eastern Saskatchewan and southern Manitoba. The numerous, extensive, and shallow bodies of water in these regions provided an ideal habitat for the muskrat—at times almost a paradise for the species—though one that was unreliable due to frequent droughts.

Seasonal changes had a more predictable effect on food availability. Significantly, cyclical changes in forest, woodland, and grassland habitats did not mirror one another but rather tended to complement each other. For instance, the summer season, particularly the period overlapping with late spring, was a time of relative food abundance in the forests, especially when fishing was highly productive and waterfowl were plentiful (Notzke, 1994).

At that time, food supplies were spatially concentrated around lakes and along rivers. During the cold months, the indigenous people had to seek shelter, and the situation was quite different; by mid-October, most birds had left the area, and fishing opportunities dwindled as ice cover made accessing the water increasingly difficult.

December, January, and February were bleak months for the native populations, and the threat of starvation was ever-present. Large animals could be hunted, but they were widely dispersed and undernourished, as many parts of the boreal forests could not sustain large herds of sizable cervids. These conditions improved with the arrival of spring. Consequently, once indigenous groups gained a measure of influence, they began to call for protective legislation against outsiders who might appear as competitors (Charlton, 2015: 68-102).

The food cycle in the fir and conifer woodlands shared some characteristics with that of the forest regions—a logical outcome given their shared borders—though there were some fundamental differences. During June, July, and August, fish and waterfowl were abundant, although fishing began in the spring when sturgeon moved through the rivers. However, autumn fishing was more limited compared to the same activity in the boreal region. Although wildlife is present in the area throughout the summer, the most important animal—the bison—migrates to the open prairies during this time and was therefore scarce in the immediate vicinity.

With the onset of winter, the situation changed; increasingly harsh weather conditions drove these animals to seek shelter near the forests, where they found grasslands offering, albeit limited forage. The herds typically dispersed to find small patches for grazing, taking refuge in wooded areas during severe weather. Consequently, food was abundant during the cold season—precisely when it was scarce in the adjacent forest. In fact, contrary to expectations, the winters were manageable in these challenging grasslands, as the bison remained on the open prairies while other species stayed in their natural shelters. These factors compelled humans who depended on this resource to adopt similar migratory patterns to survive (Charlton, 2015: 68-102).

In summary, the grassland zones were likely the most suitable areas for occupation during the long winters, serving as a base or potential "pantry" that provided both food and shelter. During the warmer months, there may have been significant regional variation in food resources; however, food could be obtained with relative ease across all three zones at that time. The economies of the Assiniboine and Western Cree revolved around hunting and

gathering. Archaeological data—though not particularly abundant—indicate seasonal and temporary occupation. At the same time, HBC employees were busy securing more furs; in other words, each group sought to protect what it considered its own business, while keeping a close eye on the actions of the other side.

3. Some Archaeological Data

Archaeological and historical data indicate that these two groups used a limited range of tools to exploit their environment and that activities centered on gathering seasonal foods dictated specific patterns of movement, given the logical link to food cycles. Metal tools arrived with Europeans—primarily fur traders from the Hudson's Bay Company, but also French traders in the same industry, as well as Jesuit missionaries and, later, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Numerous implements and tools have been identified (Ronaghan and Beaudoin, 1988; Christianson, 2015).

Materials have become known at sites occupied prior to European arrival within the present-day provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Early archaeological work focused on the Blackduck and Selkirk sites in Manitoba, though Canadian specialists believe other sites likely exist at similar latitudes. Indeed, numerous projects are currently underway that aim to uncover both the recent and distant past.

This search led to the identification of sites such as Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (Brink and Dawe, 1988: 9–18) and Charlie Lake; the latter yielded many "fluted" projectile points like those used by Paleo-Canadian populations. This site is located just ten kilometers from the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River, which flows through the city of Edmonton (Gryba, 1988: 47–53).

The findings show great similarity, with data correlating by more than 90%. Recovered artifacts consist primarily of flaked stone, sharpened stone tools, and ceramics. Implements that may have been made of wood, material abundant in all these areas, yield little information due to the difficulty of preserving them.

Projectile points have been found at all the sites, suggesting the use of the bow and arrow for hunting. Indeed, the Englishman Samuel Hearne—who accompanied Native people on a hunt for bison (which he called buffalo) in January 1772—notes that they were all equipped with this weaponry; he also describes their actions in successfully making several kills to satisfy their hunger. This Hudson's Bay Company employee described the animal as follows:

"*the buffalo in those parts, I think, are in general much larger than the English black cattle; particularly the bulls, which, though they may not in reality be taller than the largest size of the English oxen, yet to me always appeared to be much larger. In fact, they are so heavy, that when six or eight Indians are in company at the skinning of a large bull, they never attempt to turn it over while entire, but when the upper side is skinned, they cut off the leg and shoulder, rip up the belly, take out all the intestines, cut off the head, and make it as light as possible, before they turn it to skin the under side. The skin is in some places of an incredible thick-ness, particularly about the neck, where it often exceeds an inch. The horns are short, black, and almost straight, but very thick at the roots or base*" (Hearne, 1911[1792]: 255-256).

Bone awls were used to punch holes in hides, soft wood, and the like. Both societies produced ceramic vessels, and the impressions found on them show that the fabrics and nets were made from woven leather strips and cords. It is highly probable that these were used for fishing, as early people did not create objects unless they served a practical purpose.

The findings differ little from site to site, save for minor details, and provide no evidence of a specific, distinct tool used in one location but not the other. Scholars have noted that the only difference lay in the ceramics used: the Selkirk site is distinguished by "Winnipeg Fabric Impressed Ware" and, to a lesser extent, "Cemetery Point Corded Ware," whereas "Manitoba Corded Ware" is characteristic of the "Manitoba Focus" site. This is the view expressed by Arthur J. Ray, building on earlier work by W. J. Mayer-Oakes (1970; Ray 1998: 34).

This proves that the Assiniboine and Western Cree kept strong ties and shared a high degree of cultural similarity; despite belonging to distinct ethnic groups, they showed deep solidarity throughout their shared history. They serve as an example of good neighborliness—contrasting sharply with the prevailing situation upon the arrival of Europeans—as showed by Samuel Hearne's Arctic expedition in search of copper. Accompanied by a man of mixed heritage named Matonabee and five of Matonabee's wives, Hearne described an encounter upon reaching Inuit territory that filled him with sadness and revealed the intense hatred the Chipewyan people harbored toward the Inuit. He described the event as follows: "*the shrieks and groans of the poor expiring wretches were truly dreadful; and my horror was much increased at seeing a young girl, seemingly about eighteen years of age, killed so near me, that when the first spear was stuck into her side she fell down at my feet, and twisted round my legs, so that it was with difficulty that I could disengaged myself from her dying grasps. As two Indian men pursued this unfortunate victim, I solicited very hard for her life; but the murderers made no reply till they had stuck both their spears through her body and transfixed her to the ground. They then looked me sternly in the face, and began to ridicule me, by asking if I wanted an Esquimaux wife; and paid not the smallest regard to the shrieks and agony of the poor wretch, who was twining round their spears like an eel!"* (Hearne, 1911: 179).

Returning to the Assiniboine and Cree, necklaces made of beaver teeth, polished steatite pipes (likely used for smoking), and shell beads have been found at excavated sites in Manitoba, whereas scapula hoes—or shovels for digging storage pits—and large animal bones are more common in Selkirk sites. However, these tools stand for only a small fraction of the total assemblages awaiting discovery (Mayer-Oakes, 1967: 369–372).

When Jesuit missionaries arrived in the territories that are now part of Canada and the United States, they observed that Indigenous peoples used the *calumet* not only for smoking but also to seal pacts between different ethnic groups or individuals; they understood that the smoke was believed to possess supernatural powers, which is why the pipe was regarded as sacred (Leavelle, 2012).

Significantly, the sites associated with both societies are generally extensive in surface area yet lack deep accumulation layers. This suggests both the demographic importance of these settlements and their intermittent use, reflecting the migratory nature of their inhabitants and their adaptation to the movement patterns and fluctuating abundance or scarcity of hunted game. Furthermore, although each cultural cluster displays strong internal consistency, there are marked variations between individual areas about the relative abundance of specific tool types, as well as the floral and fauna remains available for study.

Most woodland sites within the so-called Selkirk complex are situated along lakes and rivers, with faunal remains consisting primarily of fish bones and clam shells—showing fishing grounds—whereas at Pelican Lake, an abundance of bones suggests that hunting was the primary activity. Similar variations have been documented among sites in Manitoba. Levels 5 and 6 at Lockport on the Red River, and Level 2 at the Tuokko site on the Winnipeg River (Note 3), show a predominance of fish bones alongside animal bones, although the latter were also significant.

Bird bones and small arrowheads appear in the upper strata of the excavated site, suggesting that these resources were consumed during the late prehistoric period in this part of North America. These camps are situated near rivers, implying that water was likely sourced from them. Furthermore, these waterways provided shelter and food for birds while also serving as sources of fish.

The site known as Stott Mound and Village, near Brandon, Manitoba, dates to a more recent period—around 1670—when Europeans were already present in the area. Interestingly, the faunal remains here consist predominantly of bison bones, accounting for 99% of the total.

Sediments having remains of dogs, wolves, bears, deer, beavers, coyotes, lynxes, skunks, squirrels, and other animals have also been found at these sites. Fragments of snowshoes have likewise been uncovered, though they are too scarce and poorly preserved to be studied effectively. Fish bones, turtle shells, bird bones, and clam shells were also found.

A curious detail is that archaeological evidence shows bison sometimes died after being driven toward a precipice—a process that began by triggering a stampede to prevent them from turning back. Other animals were brought down using bows and arrows or traps. The site's tool inventory reflects the economic orientation of its inhabitants, as well as the implements used for hunting, skinning, and hide preparation.

In summary, internal differences among the protohistoric cultures of southern Manitoba appear to stem from economic specialization that had developed among Indigenous groups. Research at most sites has revealed that the local environment was intensively exploited in nearly every instance. Significant dependency often arose when reliance was placed on a single resource, such as bison or the seasonally available salmon.

In some cases, such as the Stott site, repeated occupation occurred, as shown by the presence of hearths both above and below the accumulated bison bones. It is therefore likely that, during the Late Prehistoric period, the Assiniboine and Western Cree traveled in migratory bands, with band size decided by the season and available local resources. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that through these movements, many bands seasonally exploited two or three major environmental zones. Data obtained through archaeological research reveal a reliance on a single economic resource (bison), as is the case at Stott; meanwhile, at other sites, the remains indicate that a variety of resources were consumed or utilized.

The prevalence of settlements along waterways highlights their importance: they provided water, fish, and beaver; served as nesting and roosting grounds for birds (also a regular food source); acted as watering holes where animals could be hunted; offered abundant fishing opportunities during salmon migrations; and, crucially, served as transportation routes, enabling canoe travel and—in certain stretches—providing access to the forest interior. And one more detail: their banks were natural paths that allowed one to walk from inland areas to the mouths where they emptied into the sea. I have seen such scenes many times in various parts of Canada’s Northwest Territories, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and so on (Junquera Rubio, 2021).

Archaeological sites are abundant throughout southern Canada and show extensive evidence of occupation during the fur trade era (Klimko, 1994). Recently, rock paintings have became known that have no connection to the

Hudson's Bay Company but prove that humans were already settled in what is now Canadian territory at a very early date (Jones, 2024: 70-86).

4. Some Historical Data

The first historical observations regarding the ways of life of the Assiniboine and Western Cree were made and recorded by Jesuit missionaries who arrived in the Great Lakes region as agents of the French colony of New France. They gathered information from various tribal groups—found in northern Ontario and southern Manitoba—with whom the two peoples had prior contact.

One of the earliest accounts appears in the *Relation* of 1669–1670. Its author, Jacques Marquette, describes them as follows: "*The Assinipouars, who have almost the same language as the Nadouessi, are Westward from the Mission of St. Esprit, being fifteen or twenty days' journey distant on a Lake, where they gather wild oats, and fish are very plenty. I heard that there was in their Country a great River leading to the Western Sea; and a Savage told me that, being at its mouth, he had seen Frenchmen and four large Canoes with sails*" (Thwaites, 1959, 54: 191).

Accounts by Father Gabriel Marest indicate that the Cree also exploited these same resources on a seasonal basis. While noting details about the tribes that traded at Fort Bourbon (Note 4) (York Factory), Marest wrote of the Assiniboine and their allies: "*The Kilistinaux are nomadic people and we do not yet well know their rendezvous. They are toward the Northwest of the Mission of saint Esprit, are always in the woods, and have only the BOW to live by. They called at the Mission where I was last Autumn, to the number of two hundred Canoes, coming to buy Merchandise and corn. They went into the woods to pass the Winter; but I have seen them this Spring, on the Lakeshore*" (Thwaites 1959, 54: 193).

These descriptions note the practice of living along lakes and rivers to hunt and fish during the warmer months; this detail is significant because it suggests that, in this regard, the Cree living in regions outside the forest differed considerably from their kin residing near Hudson Bay.

Gabriel Marest believed these differences offered grounds to speculate that the Assiniboine and their Cree neighbors would be easier to Christianize, as they gathered in relatively large groups and remained in fixed locations for extended periods. This arrangement would allow missionaries to teach them the faith more conveniently and effectively. Other groups—such as those classified as Swampy Cree—were widely dispersed and constantly on the move, making the priest's work very difficult; however, shifting from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle is not easily achieved, especially within a short timeframe (Thwaites 1959, 68: 287-305).

French traders, led by La Vérendrye, penetrated the southeastern fringes of the Nelson River drainage basin in the 1730s. The explorer set up direct contact with the Assiniboine and the Cree; furthermore, these interactions yielded information regarding the two groups' activities and movements throughout the year, rather than just during the summer months as described in the Jesuit Relations. This provides insights into these groups' attitudes toward their natural environment—perspectives that differ from those offered by the missionaries (Kennedy, 1961; Holmes, 2008).

LaVérendrye set up his fur-trading post at Lake of the Woods in 1732, naming the site Fort Saint Charles. This feat was no easy task, as he first had to form a partnership, secure financial and political backing in Quebec and Montreal, and obtain the endorsement of the Jesuit missionaries. Upon receiving favorable news, he learned that the Cree—who lived along the southern shores of Lake Winnipeg—regarded the boreal forest as a barren region, particularly in the northernmost areas bordering the coast of Hudson Bay.

La Vérendrye became aware of the travel challenges posed by the landscapes of what is now central Canada. During a conversation with a Cree chief, the latter warned him of some of these difficulties, describing the situation as follows: "*the Sieur de la Vérendrye asked him if it was a long way to the first English fort on the Red river. He replied that it was ten long days' journey to go down and twenty to return, that the river is full of falls and rapids passing through a sterile country and traversing a chain of mountains. The Sieur de la Vérendrye made present to this Cree and assured him that in two moons the Frenchman would go and establish himself with him on the Red river. The chief went back well pleased*" (Burpee, 1927: 127). These accounts can also be found in the work of other scholars (Smith, 1980).

He was informed that the region lacked the resources necessary for survival, particularly during the winter. He was able to confirm this for himself when, upon the arrival of that season, he met serious difficulties, and his attempt to establish a foothold on the lower Winnipeg River ended in failure. In 1732, he had instructed his nephew, Christophe de la Jemeraye, to build a post along that waterway, but the task proved impossible; his men and native guides refused to winter there, fearing they would starve to death. He recounted the incident to the Marquis de Beauharnois as follows: "*I was no table to stablish the fort at Winnipeg last year owing to the difficulty the savages made about the road and also owing to the impossibility of getting men on account of their fear of dying of starvation in those parts. Moreover, canoes coming from Montreal would not have been able to get to us the same*

year" (Burpee, 1927: 95; Smith, 1980).

La Vérendrye's encounters and discussions with the Cree showed that, rather than spending the winter in those areas, these people migrated to the open prairies or camped along the southern edge of the boreal forest, near those grasslands. The reason was quite simple: in those regions, they could hunt animals such as bison and elk. It is possible that he did not believe the Indigenous accounts and, for this reason, set out in 1737 to verify them. He made the overland journey from Fort Saint Charles on Lake of the Woods to Fort Maurepas (Note 5), a post later established on the lower Red River, and the details of this trek have been studied by various researchers (Crouse, 1928: 206–222; Wilson, 1952: 39–50; Smith, 1980; Eakin and Culbertson, 2006: 72–73).

This journey took place in February. He traveled through nearby wooded areas to the lake, and from there reached the edge of the southern boreal forest and the first vistas of the great American prairies. Upon reaching his destination, he summarized his journey as follows: "*It took me eigtheen days to get to fort Maurepas. Nearly every day I came to lodges of savages, who wished me bon voyage and offered me provisions that I had no need for, as the men who were with me killed two or three moose every day*" (Burpee, 1927: 243; Eakin y Culbertson, 2006: 72-73).

Judging by the frequency with which he records meeting native hunters who were well-established in the area, it appears that the lands southwest of Lake Winnipeg were relatively populous during the winter. It was later decided that these people were there because game animals were abundant; fishing was futile in winter, as all the waters were frozen (Burpee, 1927: 243; Smith, 1980).

On his conversations with the indigenous people settled at Fort Maurepas, La Vérendrye noted: ""*The chiefs complimented me. The season was so advanced that the Cree were in a hurry to leave for their hunting: they had been waiting for me a long time. We settled upon the fourth of March as the date of the council, because time was required to notify two villages of the Assiniboin situated at the great fork of the Red river […].*

In this Interval Monsieur, I have employed the time in obtaining information about La Winnipeg, the rivers that fall into it, and the tribes dwelling on its shores; also respecting another great lake to the west so called the Brother of Winnipeg (Note 6), which communicates with it by a wide channel of still water from fifteen to twenty leagues in length, surrounded by wooded mountains extending from the north to the south-west, and abounding in martens and lynxes; it is the ground of the Cree and Assiniboin" (Burpee, 1927: 243-244).

La Vérendrye was struck by the eagerness Cree showed to go hunting; his curiosity was satisfied when he was informed that they—along with the Assiniboine camped nearby—regularly obtained abundant bison (Note 7) meat from the prairies for their people. He concluded that the presence of these indigenous groups was driven by the opportunity to hunt; he noted the large stockpiles of meat they had, which was the primary reason for their encampment there.

To this detail, he added another of equal importance: the tribe also intended to buy furs during the winter, as a nearby mountain (Note 8) range was known to be an excellent source of marten and lynx pelts.

In spring and early summer, these groups would migrate toward Lake Winnipeg and other lakes to fish. If the opportunity arose, they would also hunt, taking advantage of the bison herds that moved northward while grazing; furthermore, the animals were fatter than in winter, thanks to the abundant grass. Summer hunting on the prairies often eased travel to the headwaters of the Missouri River, where the groups traded with the Mandan (Note 9). We learn of these activities primarily through the Jesuit Relations and Le Vérendrye's own writings.

Father Pedro Aulneau provides an example of this when describing the plans he had made for the summer of 1736: "*that I purpose passing a part of the summer with the Assiniboels, who occupy all the land to the south of it*" (Thwaites 1959, 68: 291-293). Aulneau does not specify at what point during the summer the tribe would have camped at the lake, but it is reasonable to assume that this phenomenon occurred in late spring and early summer—when fishing was at its peak, in the month of June.

Le Vérendrye's account of his 1737 meeting with these natives at Fort Maurepas supports the preceding conclusion. In his report, he wrote: "*I enquired of the Assiniboin where they meant to spend the summer; and they said that on returning from the war they would go to the country of the Kouathéattes to buy Indian corn and beans, for which they give in exchange axes, knives, firesteels, and other iron tools which those people do no possess*" (Burpee, 1927: 253-254). On the other hand, La Vérendrye's question was not naive; he wanted them to provide the goods previously agreed upon during the meetings and conversations held at Fort Maurepas.

Given that the Assiniboine invaded Siouan territory in the spring, the warriors likely settled their families in temporary camps where they could fish and subsist during the men's absence. To make the return journey to the Mandan villages, the men would first have to go back for their wives and children in mid-July, as later references by La Vérendrye indicated that the various bands took two or three months to complete the return trip. By leaving in July, they could have reached Fort Maurepas and remained there until the leaves fell—as promised—that is,

until autumn.

Long-distance trading expeditions to the Mandan villages took place annually; Assiniboine groups living in southern Manitoba traveled to buy goods they needed that other ethnic groups held in surplus. La Vérendrye's journals suggest that these expeditions most often took place in the summer, as in the instance mentioned above, though some bands appear to have made the journey in late autumn or early winter (Junquera Rubio 2017: 61–80).

Father Aulneau, after detailing his plans for the summer of 1736, included this note: "*Some time about the feast of all saints, if it be the will of our good Lord, I intend, with as many of the french as are willing to encounter the same dangers, to join the Assiniboels, who start every Year, just as soon as the streams are frozen over, for the country of the kaotiouak or Autelsipounes to procure their supply of indian corn*" (Thwaites, 1959, 68: 293).

Although the French placed great emphasis on agricultural products as a primary objective of these migrations, it would be incorrect to view them merely as commercial exchanges. Unlike the situation at the bay (Note 10)—where only men went to conduct transactions—the organized expeditions to the south, to the Mandan settlements, were carried out differently. La Vérendrye describes it this way: "*I was notified of the result of the Council, and proclamation was made through the village that every one was to be in readiness to march the day after next, the 30th of the month a stay to be made with the Mandan, who knew well how to profit by it in selling their grains, tobacco, skins and coloured plumes with they know the Assiniboin prize highly. The latter brought them in exchange guns, axes, kettles, powder, bullets, knives, awls. The Mandan are much more crafty than the Assiniboin in their commerce and in everything, amd always dupe them*" (Burpee, 1927: 323-324).

Travel to the territories controlled by the Mandan was slow, as the groups included women, children, and the elderly—whether healthy or sick. This system also needed the establishment of temporary camps, where hunting and fishing were conducted. French and British explorers noted abundant meat supplies, which were consumed on days spent traveling when no time was set aside for hunting.

La Vérendrye also noted that a significant portion of this surplus was required for the planned exchanges between the two groups; in his view, the hosts—who would provide temporary hospitality—lacked hunting grounds, a fact he highlighted as follows: "*Wes hall go there by easy marches, hunting by the way, in order to have fat when we arrive there to eat with their grain, which they always eat plain, having for the most part neither meat mor fat*" (Burpee, 1927: 315). The Mandan were specialists in maize cultivation, and this was the product they offered for trade.

In short, the Assiniboine seasonally exploited the prairie environment while undertaking temporary migrations to buy necessary goods that they did not produce themselves. This helps explain their slow pace of travel. La Vérendrye notes that these groups began their journey in the area known as Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, and took a month and a half or longer to reach their destination, as they never hurried to reach the headwaters of the Missouri River.

Europeans reached the western part of the present-day province of Manitoba before they reached its southern regions. The man who did this feat was the Englishman Henry Kelsey, a salaried employee of the Hudson's Bay Company (Kelsey, 1928). He set out from York Factory and spent two years traversing and exploring the territory's interior; he was the one who discovered the Touchwood Hills in Saskatchewan.

During these twenty-four months, he undertook two separate journeys, though all indications suggest both began at the same starting point: Dering's Point, near what is known as The Pas in the Canadian province. Kelsey notes that at the time, these territories were inhabited by the group he termed the "Wood Assiniboine." Curiously, and unfortunately, he did not write a detailed account of his first journey, though he did provide a summary in rhyming verse (Ray, 1998: 39).

However, there is sufficient additional information to indicate that the group Kelsey identified as the Wood Assiniboine likely departed from Dering's Point in July, traveled southwest, and wintered in the borderlands between the boreal forest—which is notably dense in this area—and the bison-inhabited prairies; the bison would congregate there in the spring, which was their mating season (Doughty and Martin, 1929: 1-4).

The questions we must ask ourselves are these: did the Assiniboine return to Dering's Point every summer? Was this location in The Pas? If this society visited these areas every summer, then we must acknowledge that they knew them well, as they offered the best source of fish; indeed, all available colonial records indicate that the lower Saskatchewan region provided the best opportunities for summer fishing. Moreover, with such reliable supplies available, families could set up camp; while they stayed there, the men would take their furs to the trading posts along the Hudson Bay coast to exchange them with the English for firearms, metal tools, and liquor. The Cree followed this exact same practice.

Henry Kelsey kept a journal of his second expedition and provided a wealth of information about the daily activities of his Native companions, though it covers only a brief period—from July 15 to September 12, 1691.

During these two short months, the Assiniboine traveled along the edge of the forest until late August; at some point around July 22, they headed toward the nearby prairies and began hunting bison.

Kelsey described the method this society used to bring down these large animals: "*barren ground, it being very dry heathy land and no water, but here and there small ponds. This instant ye Indians going a hunting kill'd great store of Buffilo. Now, ye manner of their hunting these beast on ye barren ground is when they see a great parcel of them together, they surround them with men wch done they gather themselves into a smaller compass, keeping at some place or another, and so get away from ym*." (Kelsey, 1928: 24). In his writings, Henry Kelsey adds that the [Assiniboine] Indians also hunted a significant number of beavers, and he uses these accounts to describe the geographical landscape: "*Having crossed this plain, which is evidently the one situated north-west of the Touchwood Hills, and called by the half breeds with whom I crossed it the Great Salt Plains, they pitched again into woods of poplar and birch, the ground being high cham-plain land, with many ponds, where the Indians killed a great many beaver, a very accurate description of the Touchwood Hills, from the top of one of which Hind counted forty-seven lakes and ponds. Kelsey remarks that scarcely one of the small lakes and ponds that here abound was without at least one or two beaver houses*." (Kelsey, 1928: 33). Henry Kelsey's writings have subsequently been studied and discussed in detail (Doughty and Martin, 1929: 13).

While studying the Assiniboine economic system of the late 17th century may not have been among Kelsey's objectives, his accounts do provide clues that allow for conclusions regarding the seasonal resource-gathering habits of these indigenous people. During the early summer, the groups that traded with the Hudson's Bay Company camped at Dering's Point and other suitable fishing locations; while the men traveled to York Factory, their families remained in camps near rivers where they could fish until the men returned.

This was the first description of this hunting technique in the open prairie regions, and it aligns closely with another account provided by La Vérendrye regarding a journey he made to Mandan territory in 1739—a trip undertaken in the company of a group of Assiniboine (Burpee 1927: 317).

It should be noted that this journey had not been made under these conditions previously, as the fur company had been chartered by Charles II for his cousin Prince Rupert in 1667, with the first trading posts set up in 1670 (Newman, 1986). This also shows that both indigenous groups had to alter their traditional behavioral patterns—changes that proved profitable, as they obtained firearms and tools in exchange for their furs; these were products previously unknown to them yet highly effective. Furthermore, it is possible—though not certain—that these transactions turned them into inseparable allies while simultaneously causing a rift with the two ethnic groups to which they had previously belonged; however, this remains unclear (Morton, 1973; Bourgeault, 1983; Beardy and Coutts, 1996; Hawkins, 2014).

It should be noted that this journey was undertaken by canoe and on foot, as horses were introduced to this society much later—long after other groups had already been using them. These animals were acquired through a variety of means, including trade, theft, and purchase. It is known that they were introduced by the Crow, who acted as intermediaries for the southern regions of the present-day provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Junquera Rubio, 2017: 45).

For the rest of the year, from late summer to early spring, the people settled in the borderlands between the boreal forests and the prairies. In the latter region, the bison was the primary food source; Kelsey's observations make it clear that the Assiniboine had devised an effective method for conducting mass hunts without the use of horses, cliffs, or firearms—elements that typically dominate discussions regarding the hunting practices associated with these native North American animals (Hazen, 2012).

Some seventy years after Henry Kelsey's journeys, Joseph Smith and Joseph Waggoner left York Factory on three separate occasions, heading into the territory of southwestern Manitoba and adjacent Saskatchewan—lands situated immediately east and southeast of those visited by Kelsey; in other words, they expanded upon the area he had explored. Unlike Kelsey's accounts, those provided by Smith and Waggoner contain a wealth of data and details about the seasonal activities of the Native groups accompanying them (Rich, 1967).

Their first journey began on August 23, 1756; Smith noted that he was accompanied by a group of Sturgeon Natives—a Cree subgroup—who had invited the Hudson's Bay Company to send representatives to explore the territories where they spent the winter (Ray, 1998: 41).

The group traveled southwest by canoe, navigating until October 8, when the waters began to freeze, forcing them to abandon their vessels. By this point, they had passed the northern end of Lake Winnipeg and were on the Saskatchewan River, somewhere east of Cedar Lake, which they reached a month later. There, the travelers paused to rest for eight days, camping at an abandoned French post (Ray, 1998: 40).

When the group decided to continue their journey, they had to proceed southwest; Joseph Smith described this decision-making process, which was later recounted by Arthur J. Ray: "*We came to a Lake very Large on three days Journey from the french house [the one locate don Cedar Lake], SW Course see'd plenty of Islands, and a*

Great many Moouse on them, in the Evening Came to the hills very Lofty [undoubtedly the Manitoba escarpment] with plenty of moouse" (York Factory Journals, 1757: 9-10; Ray, 1998: 41).

The mountainous area was reached on November 11. Most of the autumn season had been spent in the region between Cedar Lake and the Manitoba Escarpment (Note 11). During that time, the Sturgeon Cree moved slowly, frequently pausing for extended periods and subsisting largely on pike fishing and moose hunting (Ray, 1998: 41).

After crossing this area of gentle terrain, Joseph Smith's group continued southwest, traversing a wooded region that they reported was largely burned over. From December 1 to 5, they paused to hunt "buffalo"—the first mention they made of this animal—while from the 6th to the 18th they were on the move again, traveling primarily through wooded lands. On December 18, Joseph Smith wrote: ""*this day [18th] Came to a herd of Beasts there we Lay by for 3 weeks. 19th to y 9th of Janry., 1757 Lay by killing buffeloo, no Beaver got at Yet no houses to be Seen, as for wolves they will not take the trap*" (York Factory Journals, 1757: 12; Ray, 1998: 41; Hazen, 2012: 39-41).

This group resumed its journey on February 7, meaning the seasonal camp had been occupied for approximately 52 days. On this occasion, the route was altered; they changed course toward the northeast, heading for a territory they described as being covered in "burnt forests." Acting on information provided by Joseph Smith, they reached a hill covered in green forest by February 19, where they managed to kill five elk. From that point on, the elk were the only species they were able to hunt (Note 12).

One might assume that an animal of such considerable size could adequately feed the entire expedition party; however, estimates suggest that the indigenous peoples of Canada were heavy consumers of meat. Alexander Henry the Younger provided the following data while employed by the Northwest Company. It is worth noting the quantities and dates associated with a specific location—in this case, the Cumberland Lake settlement. For the company at that time, this site served neither as a hunting ground nor a fur-storage depot, but rather as a rest house for employees (Coues, 1965: 475).

The following table presents data extracted from the journal of Alexander Henry the Younger by Elliot Coues—data I have used in various publications (Henry the Younger, 1988, 1992). These figures are widely scattered throughout his work. What is striking about this table is the diet's immense reliance on meat—primarily from hunting, and secondarily from farms set up by settlers.

Quantities	Weight	Season
112 Cow	45 000	From September 1 to February 1
35 Bulls or oxen	18 000	
3 Waskesek	905	
5 Large black bears	460	Winter
5 Beavers		
3 Swans		
1 White crane		
12 Geese		
36 Ducks		
1150 Fish of various sizes		November 15 to April 1. Caught with nets under the ice
775 Sturgeons		
Rendered animal fat	410	April 20 to May 20
Meat from other types of bears	140	
323 Bushels of potatoes along with vegetables		

Prepared by the author based on data provided by Elliot Coues, drawn from Alexander Henry the Younger (Junquera Rubio, 2019: 355).

Returning to our expedition members, they managed to reach the Swan River on March 3rd, where they intended to build their canoes. They camped there for two months—until May 5th—long after the snow had melted and the river had opened for navigation once more. The freezing of the waters made it impossible to travel along them, and this difficulty forced them to take longer breaks than desired; for this reason, they stayed there "*during the*

first week in May they would have arrived at York Factory shortly after the ice had melted on the lower Hayes and Nelson rivers" (Ray, 1998: 41). We know something about the routes followed by the canoes each year, thanks to E. W. Morse (1968).

Joseph Smith noted on the first day of the journey—while returning in a canoe that had broken down just minutes after setting out: "*sett out and padler down the River NE course. The shores were flat on borth Sides and burnt woods; there were Waskesws (Note 13) going in droves, we killed a great many very good living for we had nothing but Raigan [dried meat] and fatt*" (York Factory Journal, 1774-5: 9; Ray, 1998: 41).

About a year later, the two Englishmen, Joseph Smith and Joseph Waggoner, returned to the territory of the Sturgeon Cree, but this time they traveled a route that allowed them to navigate the two interconnected lakes—Winnipegosis and Manitoba (Rich, 1967: 127–129). The activities they recorded were very similar to those they had previously encountered. The exception on this occasion was the observation that the Cree groups had already moved ahead with their seasonal tasks.

On November 1, they arrived at an Assiniboine camp in southwestern Manitoba. Joseph Smith described the encounter as follows: "*November the 1 tuesedly we lea by and wandey the 2 we moved and want wbn and camt to twenty teantes of the Sineapoits [Assiniboine] and there was a pownd as the[y] maed to kill the boffles in and that day wandey ther was 67 came in at onse*" (York Factory Journals, 1758: 3; Ray, 1998: 42).

In this regard, Arthur J. Ray adds: "*this was one of the earliest references to the use of the fenced enclosure or 'pound' and the hunting of bison in southern Manitoba*" (Ray, 1998: 42). Once the animal enters a fenced area, it cannot escape, as its size prevents it from jumping over the fence. This scenario does not apply to deer, for instance, which can jump over and clear many obstacles.

The two British citizens (Smith and Waggoner) and their companions stayed for a month at the site where the temporary camp of the Assiniboine and Cree was found, as both groups were represented there. During their stay in this temporary settlement, they managed to hunt another eighty-six bison themselves (Ray, 1998: 42). They also saw that "*on 24 December the Cree departed from the pound trap... and for the next month they drifted rather aimlessly in the parklands. Toward the end of February, on the 27th, Smith noted in his journal that there were few Indians because they had all gone to make their canoes*" (York Factory Journals, 1758: 4; Ray, 1998: 42-43).

Joseph Smith undertook the last of his three journeys between 1763 and 1764. Reconstructing the route, he followed proves exceedingly difficult. Scholars suspect that the geographical descriptions he provided match those given after his first expedition; this reinforces the likelihood that he returned to the same landscapes because he was already familiar with them. Furthermore, there is considerable overlap in his descriptions of native societies, which bear strong resemblances to those he had previously described. There are also many similarities in his accounts of hunting activities in the wooded areas and nearby prairies during late summer and early autumn: "*September 8, 1763: Whe Laf our canoues and moved and want sw the pick by the rever. Tiedt o kill baver /in Land bornt wods as four as I could see by the rever Lied asp … [September 15, 1763] Whe moved and want SbW wind nne burnt woods, at the rever lied Asp with pine, plaenty of bavers of sorts*" (York Factory Journal, 1764: 6-7; Ray, 1998: 43).

Joseph Smith continued to recount his adventures in an analogous manner until the end of October. They were all engaged in hunting beavers along the riverbeds that wound through the forests, while also catching moose to secure an adequate meat supply. Records show that the group had not yet killed any bison by October 27, as the entry for that day notes: "*the Iden plaenty vitels but no bofeler as yet*" (York Factory Journal, 1764: 9; Ray, 1998: 43).

Based on these accounts, we know that on October 26 the group headed southwest toward the open prairies; by November 2, they had successfully taken their first bison, followed shortly thereafter by five more. From early November onwards, they began setting traps for foxes and wolves—a task they continued while traveling southwest—but due to a lack of meat, they were forced to camp temporarily to keep trapping and to hunt bison, as no other options were available during that winter season.

Accounts provided by Hudson's Bay Company employees reveal a marked difference in how time and the workday were perceived by Indigenous peoples compared to Europeans. This context helps explain why the Assiniboine first met Smith's group on January 18 and continued traveling with them until March 20, the day they reached a birch forest where they intended to build their canoes. For the Europeans, a halt of nearly two months was nothing short of a disaster, as the vessels were not launched until May 14, after the last ice floes had drifted away.

After ten days of paddling, Joseph Smith noticed a detail that had previously escaped his attention: "*Whe Lea by for ther whe Laft the fameleys and ther cam 8 canoues mour of the Sinepoits then ther was all mst 200 canus*" (York Factory Journal, 1764: 20; Ray, 1998, 43). By mid-May, spring was waning and summer was fast approaching; while the men traveled to York with the furs, their families would wait and subsist by fishing—a practice they had been carrying out for "*seventy-five years earlier*" (Ray, 1998: 43).

The Hudson's Bay Company would send a new explorer whenever the earlier one retired. Three years after Joseph Smith, a new employee—William Pink—traveled to the same region; his first journey took him from York up the North Saskatchewan River to the area where the city of Prince Albert, in the modern-day province of Saskatchewan, now stands (Tyrrell, 1934: 6). William Pink left from York accompanied by a large group of Indigenous people, a practice he shared with all his predecessors. Moreover, these natives would come to trade, and upon returning, they had no objection to being accompanied by British citizens associated with the Hudson's Bay Company. At the start of the journey, the number of natives was considerable, but as they moved westward, each group would split off to head toward its winter hunting grounds and reunite with family. They all traveled southward, ascending the smaller tributaries of the Saskatchewan River (Tyrrell, 1934: 6).

William Pink's journey has been described as follows: "*The band with which Pink remained travelled by canoe in a west-northwest direction until 7 October when they abandoned their canoes and for the next month walked overland, reaching the prairies on 8 December. There the group immediately began hunting bison and trapping fox and wolf. Two days later the Indians divided into two groups of equal size; Pink followed the one that headed to the southwest to an aspen grove where they stopped for four days to make snowshoe frames and sleds*" (Ray, 1998: 44).

Generally—though exceptions occurred—by December, the indigenous groups consisted of around twenty families, and Hudson's Bay Company employees lived alongside these groups during their travels. When natives and British shared a camp, they would hunt together or busy themselves making snowshoes to help walking on the snow. Generally, the indigenous people remained in the parklands during December and January; however, by late January, the previously dispersed natives would begin to gather, as they needed to start the work of procuring the furs to be delivered to York, Nelson, or other trading posts.

In this regard, the full extent of the impact Europeans had on Indigenous cultural systems—altering seasonal tasks, the timing of rituals, and so forth—has not yet been fully assessed. We are aware of some of these effects, but not all; even less understood is the nature of the agreements many Indigenous societies were compelled to sign—agreements promoted under the political guise that they were in the societies' best interest, though subsequent events have proven precisely the opposite (Radenbaugh and Sutter, 2005: 41-53; Junquera Rubio, 2017, 2021).

Much like Hudson's Bay Company employees before him, William Pink observed that in late January, all the Indigenous people trading at York began moving toward the sites where they planned to build their canoes; even their companions, who shared this intention, began moving in early February and traveled on foot until the end of that month.

This type of movement required resting at semi-abandoned campsites or preparing a clearing in the forest to conduct the task. While they were obliged to remain in a specific location, some hunters had to venture out to secure game for meat—unless they had caches of supplies hidden from an earlier journey. Once this matter was resolved, they dedicated time to finding forests rich in birch trees so they could construct canoes from the bark. Fortunately for them, the present-day province of Saskatchewan held forests where birch trees abounded (Junquera Rubio, 2021: 449-475).

During March and April, Indigenous groups camped near waterways to see the spring thaw; while building their canoes, they fished whenever possible, hunted waterfowl, and trapped animals to obtain pelts for the fur trade. The canoes were usually ready by mid-May, at which point the journey toward Hudson Bay would begin (York Factory Journals, 1766–67: 2–21; Ray, 1998: 44). In short, the notes made by William Pink largely align with those of his predecessors; while his insights were valuable, they largely mirrored what was already known from earlier ethnographic descriptions of the natives' daily lives. For Hudson's Bay Company employees, the priority was to document previously unknown geographical data and show viable fur resources ready for exploitation.

During the eighteenth century, the company's London headquarters issued specific orders to Hudson Bay; those in charge of trading posts at the mouths of major rivers (such as the Churchill, Hayes, and Nelson) were required to act in accordance with these directives. This explains why Britons sent into the interior during that century always traveled accompanied by Indigenous people—such as those who came to trade at Fort York—with whom they were already familiar and whom they trusted; otherwise, a Briton would never have undertaken such journeys.

Undoubtedly, these Hudson's Bay Company employees traveled alongside the natives, yet they were not blind; inevitably, they encountered people who did not bring furs to Fort York but who engaged in similar activities and traded with the French, for instance. It is worth recalling that the French colony of New France officially ceased to exist in 1763, having been transferred to Great Britain under the Treaty of Paris; consequently, French citizens were no longer permitted to conduct commercial activities in Canada, yet they continued to do so.

It is in this context that we must understand the observations made by Matthew Cocking—an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company—in his 1774 journal. While camped at Fort à la Corne in the company of a large group of Indigenous people, he saw French traders openly conducting business and buying high-quality furs. This showed

to him that the French traders were disregarding the agreements signed by their government; indeed, as the record states: "*Cocking refers to French traders on the Saskatchewan, and met several of them. These were men who had been engaged in the fur trade before the cession of Canada to England, and were now working for English traders from Montreal*" (Cocking, 1774: 105; Burpee, 1946: 106).

During his explorations, Cocking gathered a wealth of information about the physical geography and resources of the Saskatchewan River valley. Although he harbored some doubts about the accuracy of the data, he believed his findings would prove valuable to Samuel Hearne, whom the company had dispatched inland that same year to establish the post known as Cumberland House on the lake of the same name (Burpee, 1946: 107; Ray, 1998: 44-45).

Mathew Cocking had a sense of the company of which he was a part and this is how we should understand the letter he wrote on August 16, 1774, to Samuel Hearne, which has been reproduced by Arthur J. Ray: "*The Indians I am with say that Elk and other Beasts are but scarce at the lake Your Leader attempted to take you to, particularly in the Winter, and the Natives will leave you there and proceed to the Barren Land [the prairies]. Basquis [the Pas] in their opinion would be [a] Better Place Being a great place of rendezvous of the Natives in the Summer, and where they are more likely to stay some of them [during the winter] and provide for you than where you are. But that even at Basquis Provision is likely to be scarce at times; and that the best places for the Provision are here or else a great distance above you near the Barren Ground, where Buffelo Flesh may by easily brought you. men to the Barren Land along with the natives [?] that you will certainly be distressed for want of Provisions in the Winter, the Barren Land being too far distant to have any quantity from then to you*" (Ray, 1998: 45).

The information provided by the native people was exact, demonstrating knowledge inherited from their ancestors; furthermore, they warned that The Pas—one of the best fishing spots on the lower Saskatchewan River—presented difficult conditions in winter. During this season, most tribal groups would leave the area until late spring, camping wherever they could find resources. The accuracy of their accounts about the Cumberland Lake district was later confirmed by the experiences of Samuel Hearne and Matthew Cocking (Burpee, 1946: 106–107).

The former [Samuel Hearne] and his companions nearly starved during their first winter at the lake in 1774–1775, while Matthew Cocking, who succeeded him the following year, was forced to send two men—accompanied by native guides—to the parklands in January to secure a meat supply and wait out the winter until spring arrived (Burpee, 1946: 106).

Separately, during the winter of 1775–1776, Alexander Henry the Elder traveled overland from Beaver Lake (north of Cumberland Lake) to Fort des Prairies on the Saskatchewan River, located just downstream from the confluence of the North and South branches. He began his journey through the boreal forest on January 1st and met no native groups, as the local inhabitants had moved to more favorable areas.

He and his two traveling companions also nearly starved along the way. Their hardships stand in stark contrast to the experiences La Vérendrye had during his winter journey across the forest fringes of southern Manitoba in 1737. Accounts recorded by Europeans—primarily the French and British—clearly show that native societies moved during the winter, traveling from the forests of Saskatchewan toward the parklands (spruce forests) or the vast southern prairies. Starting in the spring, they would return to set up their fishing camps.

French and British reports from the period between 1690 and 1765 suggest the existence of two established cycles of resource exploitation, characteristic of the tribal societies living at that time in the central and southern regions of present-day Manitoba and Saskatchewan. One of these cycles relied on the exploitation of forest and parkland resources and was more common among the Cree and certain Assiniboine groups, particularly those keeping direct contact with Hudson's Bay Company trading posts. This cycle shows that the societies in question spent the warmer months of the year in the boreal forests (Spry, 1963; Cameron, 1985; Junquera Rubio, 2017, 2019, 2021).

During that time of year, Cree men undertook trading expeditions to Hudson Bay, while their families fished and hunted along the shores of lakes and rivers within wooded areas. In late August, September, and October, they hunted—specifically targeting moose and beavering the wooded areas next to the prairies. From November to March, they moved to the parklands or prairies, where they often lived alongside the Assiniboine, hunting bison and other animals and processing the pelts for trade at the York Factory trading post. In March, April, and May, they settled along the lakes, splitting up to build canoes, continuing trapping for furs, fish, and hunting waterfowl (Ray, 1998: 46).

Another cycle has also been named, with activities centered on the grasslands bordering the boreal forests, the area preferred by the Assiniboine for settlement. However, these subgroups had only indirect contact with the Hudson's Bay Company, as they obtained the company's goods through Cree intermediaries or members of their own ethnic group; furthermore, for a long time, they traded with the French rather than the English. This explains the presence of French-made implements at excavated sites that once served as temporary camps (Ray, 1998: 46).

These societies commonly turned into open prairies during the winter to seek shelter, hunt bison, and trap wolves

(Hazen, 2012). In the spring, they set up fishing camps along major waterways, primarily to catch sturgeons.

These activities expanded in early summer, a time when they would go to war against the Siouan (Note 14) and Gros Ventre (Note 15) peoples. During the mid-to-late summer, tribal populations moved to grazing grounds to subsist primarily on bison meat. From late August through autumn—and in some cases, even into early winter—trading expeditions were undertaken to Mandan villages to buy corn harvested by those indigenous people.

Upon the conclusion of these expeditions, both groups returned to the wooded areas (forests), except for those who wintered in the frozen, open expanses scattered within the more forested regions, such as the Turtle Mountains. It was through these overlapping economic systems that the Indian societies of the prairies, forests, and woodlands came into contact; when profitable, these interactions fostered interregional trade (Pritzker, 2000: 303-320).

Through these exchanges, the various bands learned to navigate the diverse habitats characterizing the regional landscape. The Cree, for instance, refined their bison-hunting techniques, using the meat as a trade commodity to buy corn. The ability to exploit all these zones granted these groups great ecological flexibility, allowing them to adapt quickly to the shifting economic conditions of the late 18th century when Europeans were firmly established in the region, even though the mass influx of settlers had not yet occurred. This situation eased rapid interregional migration.

Seasonal mobility posed a challenge for French Catholic missionaries—particularly the Jesuits, who produced extensive documentation, most notably the *Jesuit Relations*. Later, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate also arrived, settling in what was then Manitoba—a territory considerably smaller than the present-day province. The first center set up in the region known as Rupert's Land was in the community of Saint Boniface, now a neighborhood of the city of Winnipeg.

From this base, the missionaries ventured deeper into Canadian regions, eventually reaching the Arctic. There is no need to repeat what has already been written and published elsewhere (Junquera Rubio, 2003, 2006, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2022, 2023, 2023; Junquera Rubio & Navarro Madrid, 2010: 837–856; Junquera Rubio & Valladares Fernández, 2019). Suffice it to say that missionaries would visit temporary encampments to share their message; initially, when the Indigenous people moved to a new location, the preachers would follow on foot. The approach taken by Methodists and other evangelical missionaries followed a remarkably similar pattern. The fact that Canada's Indigenous peoples were not sedentary posed a significant challenge for the evangelizers.

5. Conclusions

This essay aims to highlight the impact the Hudson’s Bay Company had on the northern and southern zones of the Canadian boreal forest. The English arrived with clear goals, such as drawing Indigenous peoples—who were willing to acquire British goods in exchange for valuable furs—into the trade network. Transactions were never conducted on equal terms, as the balance of power favored the Europeans.

This commercial development brought about social, political, and economic changes for the native populations. Furthermore, the groups involved in these exchanges underwent substantial transformation; they preferred to interact with people outside their traditional ethnic groups—both Europeans and other Indigenous peoples—from whom they obtained useful items that enabled them to improve their circumstances and act as intermediaries with other native societies.

Archaeological evidence reveals significant changes; the remains that have been uncovered show that traditional practices were notably disrupted upon the arrival of the English and French. Moreover, written records confirm that Indigenous groups broke away from their historical traditions.

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Notes

Note 1. This essay is part of a broader study conducted within the framework of a project titled *Culture and Social Change among Dene, Inuit and Métis of the Northwest Territories (Canada)*, carried out between 1999 and 2016. Funding was provided by the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The principal investigator is the author of this essay.

Note 2. On October 2, 1535, Jacques Cartier met a sizable village situated on a hill, which he named Hochelaga. The site was protected by a wooden log palisade. Iroquois people inhabited the settlement at the time, and the French navigator named the hill *Monte Real*. The city of Montreal was later set up at this location (Junquera Rubio, 2019: 48–67).

Note 3. The focus horizons studied in Manitoba offer many components in the present day.

Note 4. Fort Bourbon and York Factory are names referring to the same location; the name changed depending on whether the site was under French or British control. It is one of the most important trading posts established by the Hudson's Bay Company, situated at the mouth of the Hayes River and opposite Port Nelson.

Note 5. Fort Maurepas retained its name, but its location changed several times.

Note 6. On page 244, Lawrence J. Burpee adds note 2, warning of the following: "Lake Manitoba and Lake Winnipegosis, Lac des Prairies on La Vérendrye's map.

Note 7. The word he uses is "buffalo".

Note 8. It refers to Riding Mountain (also Porcupine Mountain).

Note 9. The Mandan are Sioux.

Note 10. The bay in question is Hudson Bay, as the natives would visit Hudson's Bay Company posts to trade with the employees. The goods brought to the trading posts and those obtained there were the exclusive property of the men—rarely of the women.

Note 11. An escarpment is understood to be a rocky zone with a steep slope.

Note 12. E. E. Rich, according to Joseph Smith and Joseph Waggoner's party, had travelled from Cedar Lake to the Assiniboine River. They would have been in the latter area in January, and early February. In the middle of the latter month, they headed northward to the Swan River area where they subsequently built their canoes (Rich, 1967: 127-129).

Note 13. The term *waskesew* should be translated as red deer (*Cervus elaphus manatobensis*).

Note 14. The Siouan peoples were related to the Sioux settled in the present-day states of the two Dakotas and Minnesota.

Note 15. The Gros Ventre, or Atsina, inhabited the region extending from Montana to the Great Lakes and parts of Saskatchewan.

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