

## The Role of Native Women in the Creation of Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1830

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*Sylvia Van Kirk provides a major example of how the understanding of history changes when women and minorities are treated seriously. In this article she highlights some of the findings from her pioneering study of the Canadian fur trade, *Many Tender Ties*. As she shows, the Canadian fur trade was neither violent nor male-dominated, because the incoming Europeans needed the cooperation of Indians of both sexes for the trade to succeed. Van Kirk's explanation of the activities of Indian women is a model of the feminist scholar's art of "piecing together" information about women from male-focused and ethnocentric sources. Her account does not present a picture of the Canadian fur trade from an Indian perspective, but it does take a giant first step toward a multicultural history.*

*The United States fur trade was much smaller and of shorter duration than the Canadian enterprise. American trappers seem to have depended more on their own resources and less on those of American Indians. However, many trappers married Indian women. Perhaps the American mountain man was not in fact the celebrated loner of legend and story. Because research on these questions is just beginning in the United States, it is still too early to tell.*

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

This long and unified experience gave rise in western Canada to a frontier society that seems to have been unique in the realm of interracial contact. Canada's western history has been characterized by relatively little violent conflict between Indian and white. I would like to suggest two major reasons why this was so. First, by its very nature, the Canadian fur trade was predicated on a mutual exchange and dependency between Indian and white. The Indian not only trapped the fur pelts but also provided the market for European goods. Until very recently, the fur trade has been viewed as an all-male affair, but new research has revealed that Indian women played an active role in promoting this trade. Although the men

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"At the Portage." The Indian family of a Hudson's Bay Company steersman watches while trade goods are being prepared for the portage at Grand Rapids, ca. 1882. From *Pictorial Canada*, vol. 1, edited by George Monro Grant, published by Belden Bros., Toronto, 1882.

were the hunters of beaver and large game animals, the women were responsible for trapping smaller fur-bearing animals, especially the marten whose pelt was highly prized.<sup>1</sup> The notable emergence of Indian women as diplomats and peacemakers also indicates that they were anxious to maintain the flow of European goods such as kettles, cloth, knives, needles, and axes which helped to alleviate their onerous work.<sup>2</sup>

The second factor in promoting harmonious relations was the remarkably wide extent of intermarriage between incoming traders and Indian women, especially among the Cree, the Ojibwa, and the Chipewyan. Indian wives proved indispensable helpmates to the officers and men of both the British-based Hudson's Bay Company and its Canadian rival, the North West Company. Such interracial unions were, in fact, the basis for a fur trade society and were sanctioned by an indigenous rite known as marriage *à la façon du pays*—according to the custom of the country.

The development of marriage *à la façon du pays* underscores the complex and changing interaction between the traders and the host Indian societies. In the initial phase of contact, many Indian bands actively encouraged the formation of marital alliances between their women and the traders. The Indians viewed marriage in an integrated social and economic context; marital alliances created reciprocal social ties, which served to consolidate their economic relationships with the incoming strangers. Thus, through marriage, many a trader was drawn into the Indian kinship circle. In return for giving the traders sexual and domestic rights to their women, the Indians expected reciprocal privileges such as free access to the posts and provisions.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of this Indian attitude, it was soon impressed upon the traders that marriage alliances were an important means of ensuring good will and cementing trade relations with new bands or tribes. The North West Company, a conglomerate of partnerships which began extensive trading in the West in the 1770s, had learned from its French predecessors of the benefits to be gained from intermarriage and officially sanctioned such unions for all ranks (from bourgeois down to *engagé*).<sup>4</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company, on the other hand, was much slower to appreciate the realities of life in Rupert's Land. Official policy formulated in faraway London forbade any intimacy with the Indians, but officers in the field early began to break the rules. They took the lead in forming unions with the women of prominent Indian leaders, although there was great variation in the extent to which the servants were allowed to form connections with native women.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the public social benefits, the traders' desire to form unions with Indian women was increased by the absence of white women. Although they did not come as settlers, many of the fur traders spent the better part of their lives in Rupert's Land, and it is a singular fact in the social development of the Canadian West that for well over a century there were no white women.<sup>6</sup> The stability of many of the interracial unions formed in the Indian country stemmed partly from the fact that an Indian

woman provided the only opportunity for a trader to replicate a domestic life with wife and children. Furthermore, although Indian mores differed from those of the whites, the traders learned that they trifled with Indian women at their peril. As one old voyageur explained, one could not just dally with any native woman who struck one's fancy. There was a great danger of getting one's head broken if a man attempted to take an Indian girl without her parents' consent.<sup>7</sup>

It is significant that, just as in the trade ceremony, the rituals of marriage à la façon du pays conformed more to Indian custom than to European. There were two basic steps to forming such a union. The first step was to secure the consent of the woman's relatives; it also appears that the wishes of the woman herself were respected, as there is ample evidence that Indian women actively sought for trade husbands. Once consent was secured, a bride price had then to be decided; this varied considerably among the tribes but could amount to several hundred dollars worth of trade goods. After these transactions, the couple were usually conducted ceremoniously to the post where they were now recognized as man and wife.<sup>8</sup> In the Canadian West, marriage à la façon du pays became the norm for Indian-white unions, being reinforced by mutual interest, tradition, and peer group pressure.<sup>9</sup> Although ultimately "the custom of the country" was to be strongly denounced by the missionaries, it is significant that in 1867, when the legitimacy of the union between Chief Factor William Connolly and his Cree wife was tried before a Canadian court, it was found to have constituted a lawful marriage. The judge declared a valid marriage existed because the wife had been married according to the customs and usages of her own people and because the consent of both parties, the essential element of civilized marriage, had been proved by twenty-eight years of repute, public acknowledgement, and cohabitation as man and wife.<sup>10</sup>

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

Perhaps the most important domestic task performed by the women at the fur-trade posts was to provide the men with a steady supply of "Indian shoes" or moccasins. The men of both companies generally did not dress in Indian style (the buckskinned mountain man was not part of the Canadian scene), but they universally adopted the moccasin as the most practical footwear for the wilderness. One wonders, for example, how the famed 1789 expedition of Alexander Mackenzie would have fared without the work of the wives of his two French-Canadian voyageurs. The women scarcely ever left the canoes, being "continually employ'd making shoes of moose skin as a pair does not last us above one Day."<sup>11</sup> Closely related

snowshoes, without which winter travel was impossible. Although the men usually made the frames, the women prepared the sinews and netted the intricate webbing which provided support.<sup>12</sup>

Indian women also made a vital contribution in the preservation of food, especially in the manufacture of the all-important pemmican, the nutritious staple of the North West Company's canoe brigades. At the posts on the Plains, buffalo hunting and pemmican making formed an essential part of the yearly routine, each post being required to furnish an annual quota. In accordance with Indian custom, once the hunt was over the women's work began. The women skinned the animals and cut the meat into thin strips to be dried in the sun or over a slow fire. When the meat was dry, the women pounded it into a thick flaky mass, which was then mixed with melted buffalo fat. This pemmican would keep very well when packed into ninety-pound buffalo-hide sacks, which had been made by the women during the winter.<sup>13</sup>

But pemmican was too precious a commodity to form the basic food at the posts themselves. At the more northerly posts, the people subsisted mainly on fish, vast quantities of which were split and dried by the women to provide food for the winter. Maintaining adequate food supplies for a post for the winter was a precarious business, and numerous instances can be cited of Indian wives keeping the fur traders alive by their ability to snare small game such as rabbits and partridges. In 1815, for example, the young Nor'wester George Nelson would probably have starved to death when provisions ran out at his small outpost north of Lake Superior had it not been for the resourcefulness of his Ojibwa wife who, during the month of February, brought in fifty-eight rabbits and thirty-four partridges.<sup>14</sup> Indian women also added to the diet by collecting berries and wild rice and making maple sugar. The spring trip to the sugar bush provided a welcome release from the monotony of the winter routine, and the men, with their families and Indian relatives, all enjoyed this annual event.<sup>15</sup>

As in other pre-industrial societies, the Indian women's role extended well beyond domestic maintenance as they assisted in specific fur-trade operations. With the adoption of the birch-bark canoe, especially by the North West Company, Indian women continued in their traditional role of helping in its manufacture. It was the women's job to collect annual quotas of spruce roots, which were split fine to sew the seams of the canoes, and also to collect the spruce gum, which was used for caulking the seams.<sup>16</sup> The inexperienced and undermanned Hudson's Bay Company also found itself calling upon the labor power of Indian women, who were adept at paddling and steering canoes. Indeed, although the inland explorations of various Hudson's Bay Company men such as Anthony Henday and Samuel Heame have been glorified as individual exploits, they were, in fact, entirely dependent upon the Indians with whom they traveled, especially the women. "Women," marveled one inlander, "were as useful as men upon journeys."<sup>17</sup> Henday's journey to the Plains in 1754, for example, owed much of its success to his Cree female companion who provided him with

winter suit of furs.<sup>18</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company men emphasized to their London superiors the value of the Indian women's skill at working with fur pelts. In short, they argued that the economic services performed by Indian women at the fur-trade posts were of such importance that they should be considered as "Your Honours Servants".<sup>19</sup> Indian women were indeed an integral part of the fur-trade labor force, although, like most women, because their labor was largely unpaid, their contribution has been ignored.

The reliance on native women's skills remained an important aspect of fur-trade life, even though by the early nineteenth century there was a notable shift in the social dynamic of fur-trade society. By this time, partly because of the destructive competition between rival companies which had flooded the Indian country with alcohol, relations between many Indian bands and the traders deteriorated. In some well-established areas, traders sometimes resorted to coercive measures, and in some cases their abuse of Indian women became a source of conflict.<sup>20</sup> In this context, except in new areas such as the Pacific Slope, marriage alliances ceased to play the important function they once had. The decline of Indian-white marriages was also hastened by the fact that fur-trade society itself was producing a new pool of marriageable young women—the mixed-blood "daughters of the country." With her dual heritage, the mixed-blood woman possessed the ideal qualifications for a fur trader's wife; acclimatized to life in the West and familiar with Indian ways, she could also adapt successfully to white culture.

From their Indian mothers, mixed-blood girls learned the native skills so necessary to the functioning of the trade. As Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson's Bay Company emphasized in the 1820s: "It is the duty of the Women at the different Posts to do all that is necessary in regard to Needle Work,"<sup>21</sup> and the mixed-blood women's beautiful beadwork was highly prized. In addition to performing traditional Indian tasks, the women's range of domestic work increased in more European ways. They were responsible for the fur's washing and cleaning, "the Dames" at York Factory, for example, were kept "in Suds, Scrubbing and Scouring," according to one account.<sup>22</sup> As subsistence agriculture was developed around many of the posts, the native women took an active role in planting and harvesting. Chief Factor John Rowand of Fort Edmonton succinctly summarized the economic role of native women in the fur trade when he wrote in the mid-nineteenth century: "The women here work very hard, if it was not so, I do not know how we would get on with the Company work."<sup>23</sup> With her ties to the Indians and familiarity with native customs and language, the mixed-blood wife was also in a position to take over the role of intermediary or liaison previously played by the Indian wife. The daughters of the French-Canadian voyageurs were often excellent interpreters; some could speak several Indian languages. The timely intervention of more than one mixed-blood wife saved the life of a husband who had

aroused Indian hostility.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, in his account of fur-trade life during the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly after 1821, Isaac Cowie declared that many of the company's officers owed much of their success in overcoming difficulties and in maintaining the company's influence over the natives to "the wisdom and good counsel of their wives."<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the importance of native connections, many fur-trade fathers wanted to introduce their mixed-blood daughters to the rudiments of European culture. Since the place of work and home coincided, especially in the long winter months, the traders were able to take an active role in their children's upbringing and they were encouraged by company officials to do so.<sup>26</sup> When the beginnings of formal schooling were introduced at the posts on the Bay in the early 1800s, it was partly because it was felt to be essential that girls, who were very seldom sent overseas, should be given a basic education which would inculcate them with Christian virtue.<sup>27</sup> Increasingly, fathers promoted the marriage of their daughters to incoming traders, as the means to securing their place in fur-trade society. In a significant change of policy in 1806, the North West Company acknowledged some responsibility for the fate of its "daughters" when it sanctioned marriage *à la façon du pays* with daughters of white men, but now prohibited it with full-blooded Indian women.<sup>28</sup>

As mixed-blood wives became "the vogue" (to quote a contemporary), it is notable that "the custom of the country" began to evolve more toward European concepts of marriage. Most importantly, such unions were coming to be regarded as unions for life. When Hudson's Bay Company officer J. E. Harriott espoused Elizabeth Pruden, for example, he promised her father, a senior officer, that he would "live with her and treat her as my wife as long as we both lived."<sup>29</sup> It became customary for a couple to exchange brief vows before the officer in charge of the post, and the match was further celebrated by a dram of liquor to all hands and a wedding dance. The bride price was replaced by the opposite payment of a dowry, and many fur-trade officers were able to dower their daughters quite handsomely.<sup>30</sup> Marriage *à la façon du pays* was further regulated by the Hudson's Bay Company after 1821 with the introduction of marriage contracts, which emphasized the husband's financial obligations and the status of the woman as a legitimate wife.

The social role of the mixed-blood wife, unlike that of the Indian wife, served to cement ties within fur-trade society itself. Significantly, in the North West Company, many marriages cut across class lines, as numerous Scottish bourgeois chose their wives from among the daughters of the French-Canadian *engagés* who had married extensively among the native people. Among the Hudson's Bay Company men, it was appreciated that a useful way to enhance one's career prospects was to marry the daughter of a senior officer.<sup>31</sup> Whatever a man's initial motivation, the substantial private fur-trade correspondence which has survived from the nineteenth century reveals that many fur traders became devoted family men. Family could be a source of interest and consolation in a life that was often hard

and monotonous. As Chief Factor James Douglas pointedly summed it up: "There is indeed no living with comfort in this country until a person has forgot the great world and has his tastes and character formed on the current standard of the stage. . . habit makes it familiar to us, softened as it is by the *many tender ties* which find a way to the heart."<sup>22</sup>

However, the founding in 1811 of the Selkirk Colony, the first agrarian settlement in western Canada, was to introduce new elements of white civilization that would hasten the decline of the indigenous fur-trade society. The chief agents of these changes were the missionaries and white women.

The missionaries, especially the Anglicans who arrived under the auspices of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1820, roundly denounced marriage *à la façon du pays* as being immoral and debased.<sup>23</sup> But while they exerted considerable pressure on long cohabiting couples to accept a church marriage, they were in no way champions of miscegenation. In fact, this attack upon fur-trade custom had a detrimental effect upon the position of native women. Incoming traders, now feeling free to ignore the marital obligations implicit in the "the custom of the country," increasingly looked upon native women as objects for temporary sexual gratification. The women, on the other hand, found themselves being judged according to strict British standards of female propriety. It was they, not the white men, who were to be held responsible for the perpetuation of immorality because of their supposedly promiscuous Indian heritage. The double standard, tinged with racism, had arrived with a vengeance!

Racial prejudice and class distinctions were augmented by the arrival of British women in Rupert's Land. The old fabric of fur-trade society was severely rent in 1830 when Simpson and another prominent Hudson's Bay Company officer returned from furlough, having wed genteel British ladies.<sup>24</sup> The appearance of such "flowers of civilization" provoked unfattering comparisons with native women; as one officer observed, "this influx of white faces has cast a still deeper shade over the faces of our Brunettes in the eyes of many."<sup>25</sup> In Red River especially, a white wife became a status symbol; witness the speed with which several retired Hudson's Bay Company factors married the English schoolmistresses after the demise of their native wives. To their credit, many company officers remained loyal to their native families, but they became painfully anxious to turn their daughters into young Victorian ladies, hoping that with accomplishments and connections, the stigma of their mixed blood would not prevent them from remaining among the social elite. Thus in the 1830s, a boarding school was established in Red River for the children of company officers; the girls' education was supervised by the missionary's wife, and more than one graduate was praised for being "quite English in her Manner."<sup>26</sup> In numerous cases, these highly acculturated young women were able to secure advantageous matches with incoming white men, but to some extent this was only because white ladies did not in fact make a successful adaptation to fur-trade life. It had been predicted that "the

lovely, tender exotics" (as white women were dubbed) would languish in the harsh fur-trade environment,<sup>27</sup> and indeed they did, partly because they had no useful social or economic role to play. As a result, mixed marriages continued to be a feature of western Canadian society until well into the mid-nineteenth century, but it was not an enduring legacy. Indian and mixed-blood women, like their male counterparts, were quickly shunted aside with the development of the agrarian frontier after 1870. The vital role native women had played in the opening of the Canadian West was either demeaned or forgotten.

## Notes

1. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980; Winnipeg, Manitoba: Watson and Dwyer, 1980), pp. 72-73.
2. The most outstanding examples of Indian women who, although not married to whites, were active peacemakers and diplomats, are Thandadithur, a Chipewyan, and Lady Capto, a Chinook. See *ibid.*, pp. 66-71, 76-77.
3. The few cases of violent conflict, such as the Henley House Massacre of 1752, were caused by the traders' failure to respect this bargain. See *ibid.*, pp. 41-44.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29, 41-42.
6. After an ill-fated venture in 1686, British wives were officially prohibited from traveling to Hudson Bay. It was not until 1812 with the Selkirk settlers that women were again officially transported to Hudson Bay. A French-Canadian woman in 1806 was the first and one of the few white women to come west in the North West Company canoes. See Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 173-80.
7. *Johnstone et al. v. Connolly*, Appeal Court, 7 Sept. 1869, *La Revue Legale*, 1:280 (hereafter cited as *Connolly Appeal Case*, 1869).
8. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 36-37. For a discussion of the motivation of the Indian women, see chap. 4.
9. This does not mean that sexual exploitation of Indian women was unknown in the Canadian West. Prostitution certainly existed, and the marriage relationship could be abused as in white society.
10. *Connolly vs. Woodrich*, Superior Court, Montreal, 9 July 1867, *Lower Canada Jurist* 11:230, 248.
11. W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 220.
12. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 54-55.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
14. Toronto Public Library, George Nelson Papers, Journal, 29 Jan.-23 June 1815. See also Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 58-59.
15. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, p. 57.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
17. J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor, 1774-1792*, Champlain Society, vol. 21 (Toronto, 1934), pp. 252-53.
18. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, p. 64.
19. Hudson's Bay Company Archives, B-239b/79, fols. 40d-41 (hereafter HBCA).
20. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 90-91.
21. R. H. Fleming, ed., *Minutes of Council of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land, 1821-31*, Hudson's Bay Record Society, vol. 3 (London, 1940), p. 378.
22. Public Archives of Canada, James Hargrave Correspondence, vol. 21, Hargrave to Christie, 13 June 1832.

23. HBCA, D.5/18, fols. 535d-536.
24. One of the most famous cases was that of James Douglas, a clerk in northern British Columbia, whose high-handed treatment so outraged the Carrier Indians that he might have been killed but for intervention of his mixed-blood wife Amelia and the wife of the interpreter. See Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 111-13.
25. Isaac Cowie, *The Company of Adventurers* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1913), p. 204.
26. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 97, 99, 106, 131.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.
28. W. S. Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, Champlain Society, vol. 22 (Toronto, 1934), p. 211.
29. Connolly Appeal Case, 1869, p. 286.
30. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 108, 115.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
32. G. P. de T. Glazebrook, ed., *The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843*, Champlain Society, vol. 24 (Toronto, 1928), p. 381.
33. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, pp. 153-56.
34. They also violated "the custom of the country" by callously casting aside their former mixed-blood partners after the fact. For a full discussion of this episode see Sylvia Van Kirk, "The Impact of White Women on Fur Trade Society," in *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), pp. 27-48.
35. PAC, Hargrave Correspondence, vol. 21, Hargrave to Charles Ross, 1 Dec. 1830.
36. Glazebrook, ed., *Hargrave Correspondence*, p. 229.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 310-11.

## Honor Ideology, Marriage Negotiation, and Class-Gender Domination in New Mexico, 1690-1846

by  
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The ways in which societies organize marriage provide us an important window into how economic and political arrangements are construed. When people marry, they forge affinal alliances, change residence, establish rights to sexual service, and exchange property. Besides being about the reproduction of class and power, however, marriage is about gender. The marital exchange of women gives men rights over women that women never gain over men. This feature of marriage provides a key to the political economy of sex, by which cultures organize "maleness" and "femaleness," sexual desire, fantasy, and concepts of childhood and adulthood (Rubin, 1975: 166).

With these theoretical moorings in mind, I present here an essay on the history of marriage in a colonial setting, New Mexico between 1690 and 1846, an environment in which class domination was culturally articulated and justified through hierarchies of status based on race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. My major concern will be to examine the key role that control over marriage choice played in the maintenance of social inequality, focusing on changes in the mode of marriage formation during the period under study—a decline in the incidence of parentally arranged nuptials and an increase in those freely contracted by adolescents on the basis of love and personal attraction. Rather than discussing the roots of these changes abstractly, I will explore how parents and children negotiated their behavior, the disparities of power

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