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**"Sons of the Wilderness":
Work, Culture and Identity Among Voyageurs
in the Montreal Fur Trade, 1780-1821**

by

Carolyn Podruchny

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the History Department at the
University of Toronto.**

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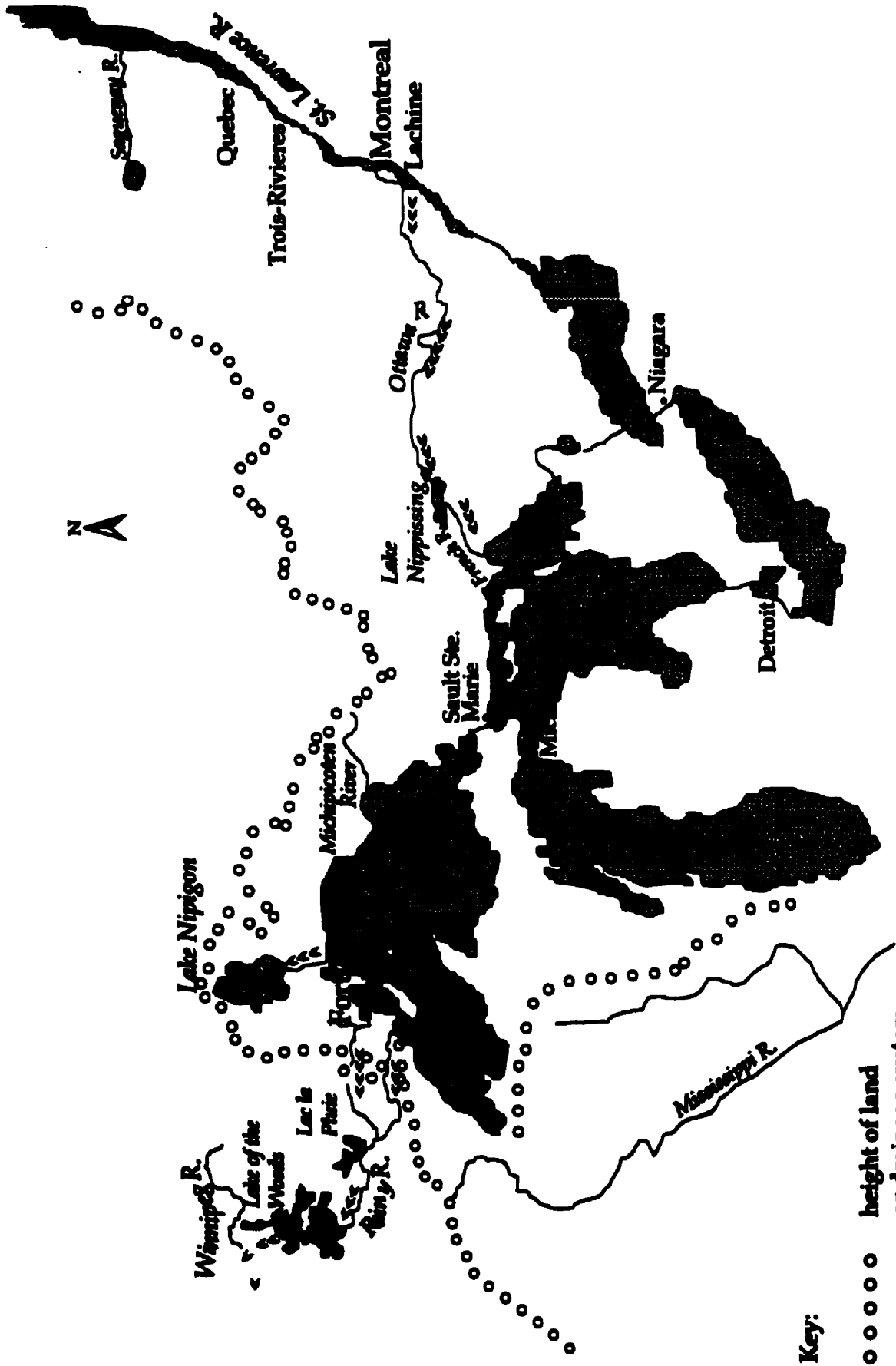
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Abbreviations

ANQM	Archives nationales de Québec, dépôt de Montréal
CPCM	Cours des plaidoyers communs du district de Montréal
FWC	Fort William Collection
GLNP	Grace Lee Nute Papers
HBC	Hudson's Bay Company
HBCA	Hudson's Bay Company Archives
HBCC	Hudson's Bay Company Collection
LAMC	Letterbook of Sir Alexander McKenzie and Company, kept by Daniel Sutherland
MC	Masson Collection
MHS	Minnesota Historical Society
MRB	McGill Rare Books
MRL, BR	Metropolitan Reference Library, Baldwin Room (Toronto)
NAC	National Archives of Canada
NWC	North West Company
NWCC	North West Company Collection
NWCL	North West Company Letterbook
OA	Ontario Archives
PAM	Provincial Archives of Manitoba
XYC	XY Company (or New North West Company)

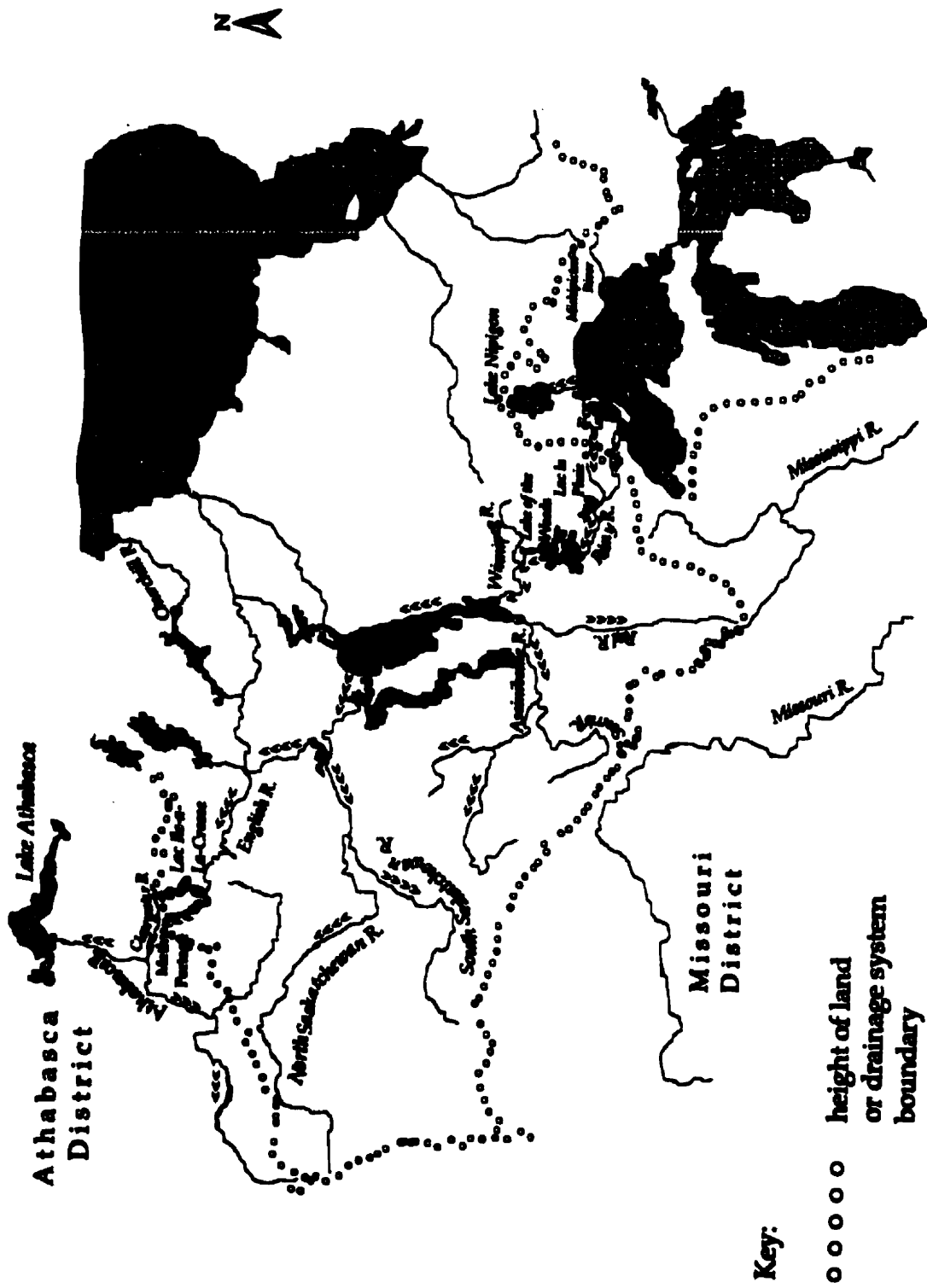


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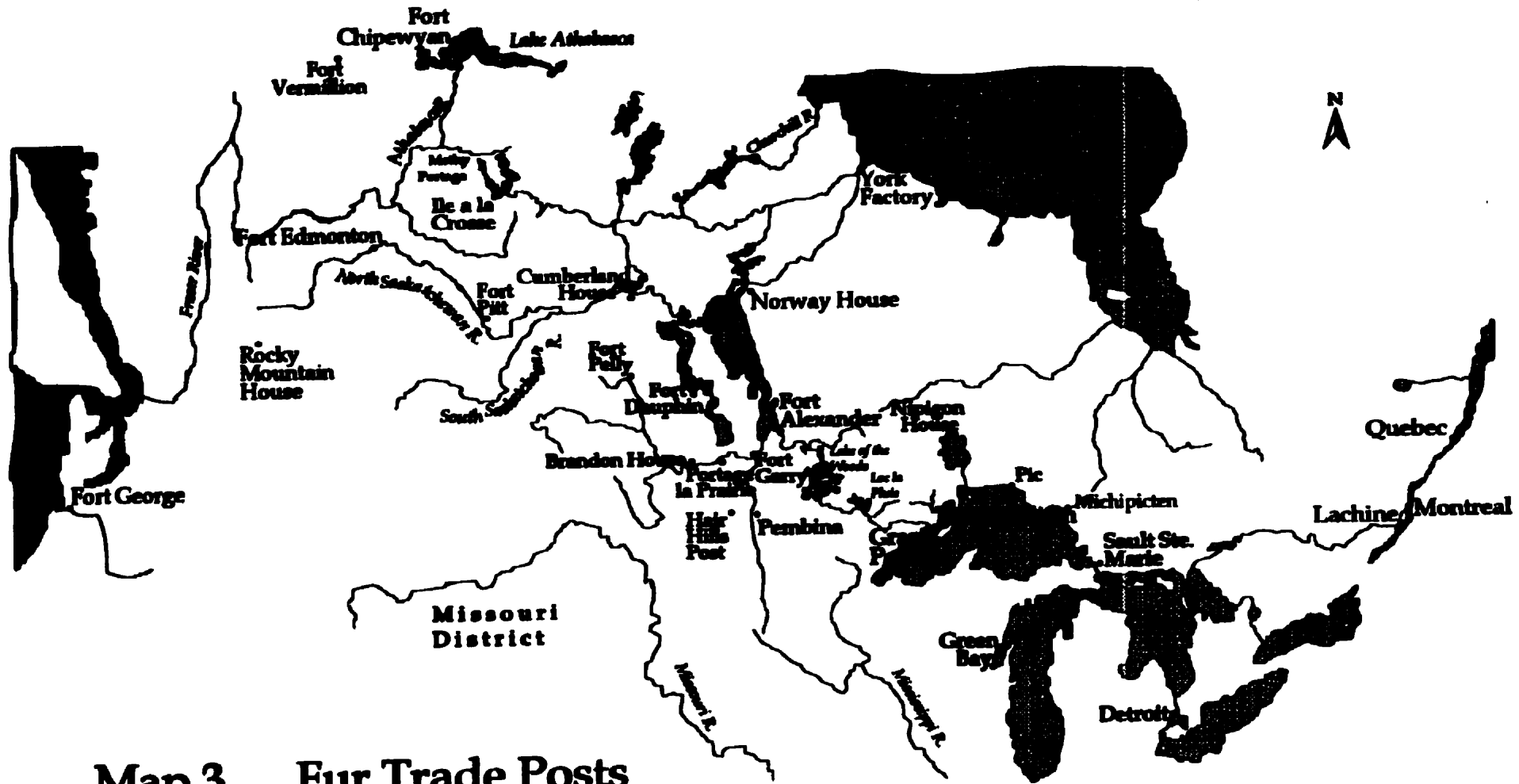
○ ○ ○ ○ height of land
or drainage system
boundary

◀◀◀◀ route of voyageurs

Map 1 Routes of the Porkeaters



Map 2 Routes of the Northmen



Map 3 Fur Trade Posts

Acknowledgements

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the International Order of Daughters of the Empire, the Ontario Ministry of Education, the History Department of the University of Toronto, and the School of Graduate Studies of the University of Toronto provided generous funding in support of my doctoral degree. Many archivists welcomed me to their collections and assisted me in finding sources. In particular I thank Judith Beattie and Anne Morton at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives; Gilbert Comeau at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba; Alfred Fortier and Gilles Lesage at the Centre du Patrimoine de Saint-Boniface; Mrs. Pam Miller at the McCord Museum of Canadian History; Luc Lepine, Estelle Brisson and Evelyn Kolish at the Archives nationales de Québec à Montréal; Karen Bergsteinsson and Leon Warmisky at the Ontario Archives; and the staffs of McGill Rare Books, the National Archives of Canada, the Minnesota Historical Society, Thomas Fisher Rare Books, and the Baldwin Room at the Toronto Metropolitan Reference Library.

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**“ ‘Sons of the Wilderness’: Work, Culture and Identity
Among Voyageurs in the Montreal Fur Trade, 1780-1821”
by Carolyn Podruchny**

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the History Department at the University of Toronto, 1999.

Abstract

French Canadian men, who worked as indentured servants in the Montreal fur trade in the 18th and 19th centuries, formed a distinct culture in the *pays d'en haut*. Their culture was influenced by their habitant and Catholic roots, Native peoples, and the circumstances of the fur trade. Voyageurs brought their language and religion into the *pays d'en haut*. To survive the rigours of this new environment, they borrowed materials from Native peoples such as canoes, snowshoes, moccasins and pemmican, as well as values and beliefs. Emulating Native peoples, voyageurs sought to be skilled canoers, successful hunters, stoic in the face of hardship, and live with few possessions. Voyageurs worked under the hegemonic rule of their primarily British masters, and yet outnumbered them in the isolated “wilds”. They engaged in a “theater of resistance” which included working slowly, stealing provisions, freetrading, and deserting the service, to pressure their masters for better working conditions.

Canoes, strength, mirth, women, and freedom were key elements in voyageur culture. Voyageurs took pride in caring for their tools, such as canoes, but also dogs, horses, toboggans, and paddles. These had to be tough and strong, just like the voyageurs themselves, because they became symbols of a masculine ideal of strength, skill and hardiness. Voyageurs' collecting and possessions were kept to a minimum because of the high mobility of their jobs. In the ethic of nonaccumulation, alternative forms of symbolic, social and cultural capital became ways to measure masculine success. Taking risks, such as running rapids, and competing in canoe races, gambling, and boxing matches, provided ways to earn “masculine capital” and bolster their reputations. Play was a forum in which new social behaviours could emerge. Celebrations and rituals helped voyageurs form a unified culture in the face of centrifugal forces caused by the mobility of the job and the transience of individuals. The men were in constant passage through different geographical and social spaces, as they moved between Montreal and the *pays d'en haut*. The liminality of the work place led to fluidity, inventiveness, and an openness to different cultural practices.

Statement on Sources

The bulk of the sources used in this dissertation are the writings of the literate of the fur trade. They left post journals, letters, memoirs, and published accounts of their experiences working in the trade. These sources can be found in archives spread across the continent. I visited the Archives nationales de Québec à Montréal, McGill Rare Books, the McCord Museum of Canadian History, the Bibliotheque municipales, and the Archives de la chancelleries de L'Archevêche de Montréal in Montreal; the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa; the Ontario Archives, the University of Toronto Thomas Fisher Rare Book Room, and the Baldwin Room at the Toronto Metropolitan Reference Library in Toronto; the Centre de Patrimoine (formerly Société historique de Saint-Boniface), the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, and the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg; the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul; and the Municipal Reference Library in Vancouver. Most published material can be found in the collection of the Canadian Institute of Historic Microreproductions.

In a very few sources I was able to come close to the voices of the voyageurs. These included court cases, where voyageurs were plaintiffs, defendants or witnesses; their engagements; and letters (I found only sixteen) written from voyageurs' friends and families to them while they were in the service. L'abbé Georges Dugas' biography of the voyageur Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, published only 70 years after Charbonneau retired from the service, provided much insight into voyageurs' mental world. But the writings of the fur trade literate proved to be the most useful; some recorded long passages quoting voyageurs on their attitudes, and describing their customs and rituals.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Voyageurs, Liminality, Masculinity and the Bourgeois Gaze

Voyageurs are an archetype in Canadian history and popular culture, mythologised as picturesque frontiersmen and "Magnificent River Rats."¹ Pictures of voyageurs canoeing adorn the labels on beer bottles, the sides of U-haul vans, and advertisements for summer camps and wilderness tourism. One bus company has even co-opted the voyageur for its corporate title. The image of the voyageur is meant to embody ruggedness, *joie de vivre*, and the ability to transport goods quickly and efficiently. Similarly, in Canadian literature and history, voyageurs are portrayed as tough, highly skilled men, capable of paddling and portaging great distances and surviving in harsh bush conditions, all the while singing, joking, and playing games.² This representation of voyageurs as "merry workhorses" has a long history, and its earliest sources can be found in the writings of the voyageurs' employers.³ In one of the best examples, North West Company (NWC) partner Daniel Harmon describes voyageurs as:

ficle & changeable as the wind, and of a gay and lively disposition... they

¹ Peter C. Newman, *Company of Adventurers, Caesars of the Wilderness*, (Markham, ON: Penguin, 1987), 2: 25.

² For a classic example of romantic stereotyping see Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur*, (New York: Appleton, 1931), VII, 17-20. Later examples include Marjorie Wilkie Campbell, *The North West Company*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1957; reprinted Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983), 22-4; and Daniel Francis, *Battle for the West: Fur Traders and the Birth of Western Canada*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1982), 51, 61-2.

³ For an excellent discussion of the history of textual representations of voyageurs see Konrad Gross, "The Voyageurs: Images of Canada's Archetypal Frontiersmen", in *A Talent(ed) Digger: Creations, Cameos, and Essays in Honour of Anna Rutherford*, edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek, Gordon Collier and Geoffrey V. Davis (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 411-22.

make Gods of their bellies, yet when necessity obliges them... they will endure all the fatigue and misery of hard labour & cold weather &c. for several Days following without much complaining. ... They are People of not much veracity.... Therefore there is little dependence to be placed on what they say and they are much given to pilfering and will even steal when favourable opportunities offer.... by flattering their vanities (of which they have not a little) they may be made to go through fire and water.⁴

Who were these brave and untrustworthy men? Why have they received so much attention as colourful caricatures, yet so little attention as ordinary men working in difficult conditions?

This dissertation looks past the stereotypes of voyageurs to their everyday working and living conditions, and describes the unique culture they developed working in the north west of North America.

The lack of scholarly attention to voyageurs is a surprising silence in historical writing. The fur trade has long been a subject of intensive inquiry, since Harold Adams Innis' 1930 monumental study *The Fur Trade In Canada*. Not only have scholars explored the imperial, economic and business histories of the fur trade, but much attention has been devoted to its social history.⁵ The social history of the fur trade has been preoccupied with

⁴ W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), 197-8.

⁵ Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956; first published 1930). For examples of imperial history see W. J. Eccles, "The Fur Trade and Eighteenth-Century Imperialism," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. XV (July 1983), 341-62; and John S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). For examples of economic history see E. E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation Among the Indians of North America," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1960); Arthur J. Ray and Donald Freeman, *'Give Us Good Measure': An Economic Analysis of Relations Between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company Before*

three themes. The first questions whether Native peoples were dependent on European traders and their goods, or to what extent they controlled the trade. Although this is an economic question, the studies focus on the question of Native power.⁶ The second addresses European intermarriage with Native women, and the subsequent emergence of a métis population.⁷ The third area of fur trade social history, the study of everyday life at fur trade posts, is the most recent and has arisen from public history studies written for the benefit of living history

1763, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); Bruce M. White, "Balancing the Books: Trader Profits in the British Lake Superior Fur Trade," in *New Faces in the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by William C. Wicken, Jo-Anne Fiske and Susan Sleeper-Smith, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 175-92 and "Montreal Canoes and their Cargoes," in *Le Castor Fait Tout: Selected Papers of the Fifth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1985*, edited by Bruce G. Trigger, Toby Morantz and Louise Dechêne (Montreal: Lake St. Louis Historical Society, 1987), 164-92; Tom Wein, "Exchange Patterns on the European Market for North American Furs and Skins, 1720-1760," in *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991*, edited by Jennifer S. H. Brown, W. J. Eccles, and Donald P. Heldman (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 19-37, and "Castor, peaux et pelleteries dans le commerce canadien des fourrures, 1720-1790," in *Le Castor Fait Tout: Selected Papers of the Fifth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1985*, edited by Bruce G. Trigger, Toby Morantz and Louise Dechêne (Montreal: Lake St. Louis Historical Society, 1987), 72-92. For examples of business history see E. E. Rich, *The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1870*, 2 vols., (London: H.B.R.S., XXI and XXII); Campbell, *The North West Company*; and Richard Somerset Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

⁶ Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976); Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Roles as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977); Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay, 1600-1870*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983); and Paul C. Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1986).

⁷ Sylvia Van Kirk, *'Many Tender Ties': Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980); Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Jacqueline Louise Peterson, "The People In Between: Indian-White Marriage and the Genesis of a Métis Society and Culture in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1830," Ph.D. Thesis, (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1980); and Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985).

sites.⁸

The history of working people in the fur trade has recently become a subject of concentrated interest.⁹ William Swaggerty and Dick Wilson have compared labourers in the American Fur Company and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC).¹⁰ Clairborne Skinner has briefly examined the work of labourers in the New France fur trade.¹¹ Most significantly, the publication of Edith Burley's 1997 *Servants of the Honourable Country*, which explores the master and servant relationship between Orkney workers and HBC officers stands as an important development in focussing attention squarely on the workers themselves, and demonstrates the extent of their power through insubordination and resistance.¹² Studies of

⁸ Michael Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday Life in the Hudson's Bay Company Service York Factory, 1788 to 1870*, (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1989), and *Prince of Wales Fort: A Social History, 1717-1782*, Parks Canada Manuscript Report, no. 379 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1979).

⁹ Some broader studies of labour and capital in early Canadian history briefly mention fur trade workers, such as H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860*, (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1981), 30-3; and Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 35-6. European labourers first received significant by Brown, *Strangers in Blood*. Native labourers been subject to some examination by Carol M. Judd, "Native Labour and Social Stratification in the Hudson's Bay Company's Northern Department, 1770-1870", *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 4 (November 1980), 305-14.

¹⁰ William R. Swaggerty and Dick A. Wilson, "Faithful Service under Different Flags: A Socioeconomic Profile of the Columbia District, Hudson's Bay Company and the Upper Missouri Outfit, American Fur Company, 1825-1835," in *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991*, edited by Jennifer S. H. Brown, W. J. Eccles, and Donald P. Heldman (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 243-67.

¹¹ Clairborne Skinner, "The Sinews of Empire: The Voyageurs and the Carrying Trade of the 'Pays d'en Haut', 1681-1754, Ph.D. thesis, (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago, 1991).

¹² Edith I. Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline, and Conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770-1879*, (Toronto, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Philip Goldring first began to compile information on labourers in *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1900*, Volume I, Manuscript Report Series, no. 362, Parks Canada, (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, 1979). Also see Ron C. Bourgeault, "The Indian, the Métis and the Fur Trade: Class, Sexism and Racism in the Transition from 'Communism' to Capitalism," *Studies in Political Economy: A Socialist Review*, no. 12 (Fall 1983), 45-80 and Glen Makahonuk, "Wage-Labour in the Northwest Fur Trade Economy, 1760-1849," *Saskatchewan History*, vol. xli, no. 1 (Winter 1988), 1-17.

the labourers working in the Montreal fur trade have been less frequent. After the publication in 1931 of Grace Lee Nute's romantic cultural study, *The Voyageur*, and before Skinner's 1991 doctoral dissertation, most attention paid to voyageurs was their impact on the sending society and quantitative studies of their places of origin. These studies have told us about the numbers of voyageurs, where they were from, and their economic contributions to New France and Lower Canada, but the voyageurs themselves have remained shrouded in mystery.¹³ Social historians of the fur trade have helped to enrich our understanding of the contours of a fur trade society, but much remains to be mapped. Some of the most exciting recent work on the history of the fur trade has begun to explore cultural interfaces and emerging hybridities in the meeting of Europeans and Native peoples, such as Richard White's *The Middle Ground*, and more recently Elizabeth Vibert's *Traders' Tales*. This study of voyageur culture contributes to these new areas in the social and cultural history of the fur trade by incorporating new approaches derived from literary theorists and cultural anthropologists.¹⁴

¹³ Nute, *The Voyageur*; Gratien Allaire, "Les engagements pour la traite des fourrures: évaluation de la documentation," *Revue d'histoire de l'amérique française*, vol. 34, (June 1980), 3-26, and "Fur Trade Engages, 1701-1745," in *Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Thomas C. Buckley, (St. Paul, Minn.:The Conference, 1984), 19-20; Hubert Charbonneau, Bertrand Desjardins et Pierre Beauchamp, "Le comportement démographique des voyageurs sous le régime français," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. xi, no. 21 (May 1978: 120-33), 125-6; Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992; first published as *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVIIe siècle*, Paris: Editions Plon, 1974). 117-24; and Allan Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour and Lower Canadian Agrarian Structures," in *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers 1981*, (197-214), 203-4.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); and Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Also see Peter Cook, "Symbolic and Material Exchange in Intercultural Diplomacy: The French and the Haudenosaunee in the Early Eighteenth Century," in *New Faces of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by William C. Wicken, Jo-Anne Fiske and Susan Sleeper-Smith, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 75-100.

The fur trade was a central enterprise in New France and continued as a vital economic activity in Montreal until the 1820s. Initially fur traders raised their own funds and paddled their own canoes into the *pays d'en haut* to trade with Native peoples. As the trade became more lucrative, merchants began to hire servants and managers to perform the work. A pool of skilled labourers who transported furs and goods emerged in the 1720s. After the 1760 conquest of New France, the fur trade operating out of Montreal was reorganized under the direction of Scottish, English, American and a few French Canadian managers, who called themselves *bourgeois*. These companies, which eventually merged into the NWC, hired French Canadian men mainly from parishes around Montreal and Trois-Rivières to transport goods and furs from Montreal to the North American interior during the summer months, and to work year round, manning the company posts and trading with Native peoples. During the most active period of the Montreal trade, the labour force grew from 500 men in the 1780s, to almost 3000 by the time NWC merged with the HBC in 1821. By the mid-18th century, these "voyageurs" had developed a distinct culture in the North American interior, which lasted past the mid-19th century.

The term "voyageur" can be confusing. The historian of New France Louise Dechêne uses the term to identify the small-scale independent fur traders, who worked alone or in small groups, with some financial backing from merchants, from the late 17th century to the mid-18th century.¹⁵ Later, the term came to be used more widely to refer to contracted labourers, or *engagés*. I use the term *voyageur* interchangeably with *engagé*, servant and worker. Another perplexing label is that of "*bourgeois*". In 18th and 19th-century Canada,

¹⁵ Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 94.

Montreal fur trade merchants and managers called themselves *bourgeois*. The term included company partners and all but the most junior clerks.

Although *bourgeois* and *voyageurs* can be understood as constituting two loose but distinct "classes" within the fur trade, ranges in authority and power existed within each group. Masters could be junior clerks, senior clerks or partners. *Engagés* also had varying status. At the bottom were seasonally employed summer men, referred to as *mangeurs du lard*, or Porkeaters, who paddled between Montreal and the Great Lakes. *Hommes du nord*, or Northmen, wintered at the interior posts. Within the canoe, paddlers were called middlemen or *milieu*, and foremen and steersmen, or *devant* and *gouvernail*, were called *bouts* and usually acted as canoe and brigade leaders. Interpreters and guides assumed authority over other *engagés*. Although the ethnic divisions did not entirely follow occupational lines, the Montreal *bourgeois* became more and more British after the 1760 Conquest, and the *voyageurs* were made up primarily of French Canadians. British discrimination against French Canadians and fellow-feeling among *voyageurs* contributed to the social distance between masters and servants. *Voyageurs* lived within a different cultural ethos than that of the *bourgeois*. Despite the range of roles within each group, the division between *bourgeois* and *voyageur*, or master and servant, served as a basic social organization of the fur trade.

I have chosen to follow a path well-trodden by many fur trade scholars in looking at broad patterns in the fur trade.¹⁶ Some scholars have asserted that "the term 'fur trade' is a bit

¹⁶ Broad studies include Innis, *The Fur Trade*; E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967); Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*; and Brown, *Strangers in Blood*; and Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, to name a few.

of a misnomer,” and their local studies reveal the great extent to which the trade varied over time and between regions.¹⁷ However, a broad approach proved the most fruitful line of inquiry in researching voyageurs. First, the sources are so fractured that it is rare to find much commentary about voyageurs in any one time and place. Because voyageurs were a mobile workforce, covering a vast area in the northwest, and because northern fur trade posts were usually temporary and frequently moved, no local voyageur culture emerged in any one area. In order to capture the fluid and far-flung character of voyageur culture, I have drawn widely from the many temporary post journals, correspondence and travel narratives of the constantly moving bourgeois, as well the chronicles of other travelers. Second, voyageurs traveled constantly over great distances and carried their culture with them. Their mental universe was broad, shifting and temporary. Studying the experiences of the men at one post would thus only reveal one segment of their lives. I explore the overall life pattern of fur trade workers, and map out their experiences in all facets of their jobs.

Sources and Methods

Like much of early modern social history, ethnohistory and cultural history, sources pose a great challenge. Voyageurs were primarily nonliterate and left very little record of their lives. Many of their experiences can be uncovered from the writings of literate “outsiders” to their specific culture. The writings of the fur trade partners and clerks, who were part of the larger fur trade society, and of explorers in the northwest, passing through

¹⁷ Francis and Morantz, *Partners in Furs*, 167; Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory* and *Prince of Wales Fort*; and Vibert, *Traders' Tales*.

the fur trade social world, provide a wealth of surprisingly detailed and nuanced reflections on voyageurs. A large quantity of writings by NWC partners and clerks have been preserved in the Masson Collection, which is shared between the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa and the McGill Rare Book Room in Montreal. Records from other companies and individual traders can also be found scattered in archives across Canada and the American mid west. Finally, many of the journals and letters of the literate of the trade, and of explorers and travelers in the north west are accessible in the publications of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions.

The major methodological problem in using these sources is that we must view voyageurs through the eyes of outside parties. This is a common problem for historians, and I have drawn from new techniques of textual deconstruction and post-colonial theory, developed by scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Mary Louise Pratt, and more recently Natalie Zemon Davis.¹⁸ The goal is not to look behind the sources to find an “objective reality” but rather to uncover layers of multiple readings and multiple voices. Yet the sources must be read carefully to find these alternate perspectives. One strategy is to delineate very clearly the perspective of those who generated the sources. I use the term the “Bourgeois Gaze” to refer to literate outsiders’ reflections of voyageur life. “Bourgeois” is what Montreal fur trade managers and clerks called themselves in 18th and 19th-century

¹⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); and Natalie Zemon Davis, “Polarities, Hybridities: What Strategies for De-Centring?” In *De-Centring the Renaissance: Canada and Europe in Multidisciplinary Perspective, 1500-1700*, edited by Germaine Warkentin and Carolyn Podruchny, (Submitted to University of Toronto Press). Also see Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, translated by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

Canada. The term "gaze" underscores the process of "othering" by these bourgeois, who believed they were superior to voyageurs, Native peoples, and women. Jennifer Brown and Elizabeth Vibert encourage scholars to "read beyond the words" of the bourgeois.¹⁹ Without these records, historians would have few and narrow views of voyageurs. The cultural baggage or "webs of signification" which shape and distort the portrayals of voyageurs by the bourgeois does not mean that their writings are of no value²⁰. By understanding the dimensions of the Bourgeois Gaze, and the way it refracts and distorts, we can catch glimpses of voyageur history.

The bourgeois were not a cohesive, homogenous group by any means, and I use the term loosely to refer to all men who were not labourers in the trade. This ranged from clerks to partners, who had different ethnic backgrounds, wages and status. But these men lived in the same social and physical environment, and came to form similar assumptions about social hierarchy, gender, age, race, and so forth. They all had a vested interest in making the trade profitable, and in viewing voyageurs as subordinates. In the analytical framework of Pierre Bourdieu, and repeated by Elizabeth Vibert, traders thought and acted for themselves, "but those thoughts and actions were grounded in something we may call trader habitus-- ways of being and knowing the world that derived from their historical backgrounds and life experiences and, most immediately, from their position in the social environment."²¹ In their exclusive Beaver Club dinners, the bourgeois developed a particular kind of masculine ethos

¹⁹ Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, "Introduction," in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, edited by same. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996).

²⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

²¹ Vibert, *Traders' Tales*, 16 and Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1, 72-3, 95, 159-97.

that differed from their fur trade servants. The bourgeois tried to reconcile their desires to be strong and rugged in the north west, and yet tried to be refined and civilized when they returned to Montreal.²²

Bourgeois cast voyageurs as "other" in their efforts to construct themselves as serious, industrious and successful men. The representations of voyageurs varied in different contexts. When describing their adventures in the wild and harsh north west, bourgeois portrayed voyageurs as part of the exotic landscape, as a source of additional tribulation and a test of their power and patience. Voyageurs added to the colourful and dangerous background of bourgeois adventures. However, in commercial contexts, where the bourgeois reported on their success in the fur trade, they wrote about voyageurs' great strength, ability and innate suitability to fur trade work, emphasizing voyageurs' obedience and loyalty. NWC partner Roderic McKenzie remarked in his general history of the fur trade that voyageurs:

always show the greatest respect to their employers, who are comparatively but few in number, and beyond the aid of any legal power to enforce due obedience. In short, the good opinion... these men entertain of their employers... has been uniformly the case, since the trade has been formed and conducted on a regular system.²³

²² Carolyn Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude and Fraternalism: Fur Trade Masculinity and the Beaver Club, 1785-1827," in *New Faces in the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by William C. Wicken, Jo-Anne Fiske and Susan Sleeper-Smith, 31-52, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1998).

²³ Roderick McKenzie, Esq., "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West," in Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 52. For arguments that the author of "A General History" was Roderick McKenzie, the cousin of Alexander Mackenzie, see Dr. John J. Bigsby, *The Shoe and the Canoe or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas*, (London:

In this commercial and functional context, McKenzie portrayed the workers as loyal and hardworking in order to bolster the NWC's success in trade and the authority and might of the bourgeois. The two images of voyageurs, both as romantic and unruly characters, and as a valuable labour force, dominate the historic record. However, a close and extensive examination reveals a complex workplace of accommodation and resistance in the master and servant relationship.

A second strategy in overcoming the bias in the written record is to read very widely in the writings of the bourgeois to discern broad patterns. "Repeating evidence", or incidents and behaviours which emerge frequently in a broad array of bourgeois writings reflect either widespread practices, or practices that were thought to be remarkable. At the interior posts, the bourgeois remarked upon every caribou that was killed by their servants, which reveals concerns about securing food, but also that voyageurs spent much of their time hunting. Determining the variety of incidents and behaviours reflects the edges of "permissibility" in voyageur culture, and reveals the range of ways in which voyageurs lived, rather than reflecting a "norm". Thus, when the bourgeois wrote of voyageurs playing cruel tricks on each other or bullying each other, these were probably not common occurrences, but reflect fractures in relationships, and acceptable means of expressing tensions. Finally, voyageur behaviour can also be determined from a few particularly observant bourgeois and clerks who wrote much about them. General behaviour can be inferred from specific patterns described in great detail.

Chapman and Hall, 1815), 1: 115 and Roy Daniells's introduction to *Voyages from Montreal*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1971), vii. For a similar portrayal of French Canadian voyageurs from a Hudson's Bay Company officer see Ottawa; National Archives of Canada; Selkirk Papers; MG19 E1; Microfilm reel C-1; Vol. 2; Colin Robertson, "Suggestions for the Consideration of the Honourable Hudson Bay Company", 1812, 536.

A third strategy in overcoming the difficulty in fur trade sources is to “read against their grain,” or to read around the overt intentions of the bourgeois. The passage from Daniel Harmon at the beginning of this chapter portrays voyageurs as quaint and childlike “others”, who were guided by the base lusts of their bellies, loins, vanities, and pockets. Yet Harmon's narrow and negative view of the voyageurs sometimes inadvertently contains a glint or glimmer of an authentic voyageur perspective. He lamented that although he was always surrounded by his servants in the north west, he felt alienated and alone; he grumbled that even if he could speak French fluently “what conversation would an illiterate ignorant Canadian be able to keep up. All of their chat is about Horses, Dogs, Canoes and Women, and strong Men who can fight a good battle.”²⁴ Harmon’s unkind dismissal of voyageurs in fact illuminates their respect for dogs, canoes, women and racing. Incidental descriptions of voyageurs’ activities, rather than the bourgeois’ moral preaching about them can be very revealing. A bourgeois might have casually mentioned that his crew canoed for twenty-five songs or five pipes. His intention was to record the distance the crew traveled, but he also disclosed that distances were measured by voyageurs’ work rituals.

A fourth strategy to reading beyond the words of the bourgeois is to ascertain the meaning in voyageur rituals. Rituals were often described by bourgeois for amusement or derision, but the “text” of the ritual can be used as a document to read the mental world of the voyageurs. Rituals produced and maintained community solidarity, and thus were key to group solidarity.²⁵ Celebrations in Montreal and fur trades posts during the departures and

²⁴ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Saturday, 6 March 1802, 55.

²⁵ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3-4.

arrivals of trading brigades were not simply quaint and sentimental customs. In the “text” of this ritual, one can read the importance of the voyageurs to their families and fellow workers, an acknowledgment of the danger during voyages, and markers to specific social worlds.

Canoes, Horses, Dogs, Courage, Risk, Women and Freedom: Elements of Culture

What were the elements of the distinct voyageur culture? NWC partner Alexander Ross wrote about his encounter with a group of aged voyageurs who had worked most of their lives in the fur trade service. They claimed with much bravado that although they were old, they could do anything that Ross requested of them: steer, row, or sail, proclaiming that they had been “brought up to voyage.” These “sons of the wilderness” were very talkative, high-spirited, independent, and had long yarns to tell about their lives. The eldest voyageur who acted as the leader to his crew shared with Ross some reflections on his life, which Ross tried to recount in the voyageur’s own words. He bragged that he had been in Indian Country for 42 years. For twenty-four he was a “light canoe-man” and hardly slept, easily padding for 50 songs a day. He pronounced that no portage was too long for him, and his end of the canoe never touched the ground. He saved the lives of his bourgeois, and was always the favourite, because he never paused at rapids or even waterfalls, claiming “No water, no weather, ever stopped the paddle or the song.” This aged voyageur also bragged about other accomplishments: he had had twelve wives, 50 horses, and six running dogs. He claimed:

No bourgeois had better-dressed wives than I; no Indian chief finer horses; no white had better-harnessed or swifter dogs. I beat all Indians at the race, and no white man ever passed me in the chase. I wanted for nothing; and spent all my earnings in the

enjoyment of pleasure. Five hundred pounds, twice told, have passed through my hands; although now I have not a spare shirt to my back, nor a penny to buy one. Yet, were I young again, I should glory in commencing the same career. There is no life so happy; none so independent; no place where a man enjoys so much variety & freedom as in Indian country.²⁶

The passage is very revealing about the central elements of voyageur culture. Tools of the transporting occupation-- canoes, horses and dogs-- held a significant place as prized possessions. They were coveted, well cared-for and decorated. These tools reflected voyageurs' masculine virtues, therefore canoes, dogs and horses had to be tough, fast, and strong, just like their owners. Voyageurs measured their prowess against Native men, their bourgeois, and each other. They were usually obedient servants, but they wanted to show that they were stronger and more capable than their bourgeois. A true test of strength was to "beat all Indians at the race," to live in the wilderness as a "savage" better than the "savages" could themselves. Many voyageurs' values were adopted directly from Native peoples, yet voyageurs distinguished themselves from Native peoples by wanting to be better than them. Native women were thus often treated as prize trophies, for there was no better demonstration of success in being a "son of the wilderness" than to possess one of its daughters as a bride. Winning the hearts of women, Native women, signified a space for sexual and romantic pleasure. It also meant that voyageurs recognized different worlds which could be entered and enjoyed. But because women usually sought men who could meet their economic needs,

²⁶ Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 2: 234-7.

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French Canadian communities in their new place of work. They rarely maintained kin, neighbour, or parish ties in the interior. No particular parishes seem to be associated with interior posts, and most posts were made up of men from many different parishes.²⁸ Rather, voyageurs formed new friendships and relationships in the context of work. This is not surprising considering the structure of the service. Usually only one sibling in a family became a voyageur. Men signed individual labour contracts rather than group contracts. The location of their posting was determined by the bourgeois. They moved around frequently and were often reposted from year to year. Voyageurs entered "Indian Country" as French Canadian peasants, and underwent rituals to mark the beginning of their new occupational identity and which laid out new cultural values and meanings. The longer voyageurs stayed in the interior, the more they adapted to the distinct voyageur culture. Regardless, their identities were always French Canadian in some way, and many of them maintained connections to French Canada. The labour force, including men who devoted most of their lives to the service, and indeed most people involved in the trade, spoke French. They sang French songs, practiced Roman Catholic rites, and maintained the values and cosmology of their French Canadian home.

Yet voyageurs did not work at home; rather, they entered the social domain of Native peoples. This second major influence on voyageurs can be seen most obviously in material culture. Voyageurs had to adopt Native technologies in order to survive the harsh conditions

²⁸ For an example of men from many different parishes making up a post community see Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, 13-14 or 197-8. In one of the few examples where brothers were posted to the same area, they did not get along with one another. Montreal; McGill Rare Books; Masson Collection; C.13; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Tuesday, 26 November 1799, 5 (I added page numbers).

of living in the *pays d'en haut*. They ate Native food, dressed in Native clothing, used Native tools, and married Native women. Native people also came to influence their beliefs, reshaping their notions of property, wealth and independence. The middle grounds which formed between voyageurs and Native peoples provided conduits for an exchange in social and moral values. Working in the fur trade, and especially coming into close contact with Native people, offered voyageurs a new kind of freedom unknown to habitants in the St. Lawrence valley. Some voyageurs chose to leave French Canadian society altogether to live with Native people.²⁹ However, they left one social system to enter another, with as many rules and boundaries on behaviour. Probably the most "free" of the voyageurs were those that chose to become freemen, which meant they independently traded and lived off the land on the margins of both fur trade and Native societies.³⁰ These men lived simply within small family units, or joined together to form diverse and erratic communities, such as The Pas, Swan River, Turtle Mountain, Pembina and Lesser Slave Lake.³¹ Although many voyageurs became freemen, joined Native families or emerging métis communities,³² their occupational culture remained distinct from these groups.

²⁹ Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: Sunday, 20 July 1806, 333; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday, 18 August 1808, 113.

³⁰ John E. Foster, "Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis," *Prairie Forum*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 1-13.

³¹ Carolyn Podruchny, "Shifting Identities and Constructing Communities: Joseph Constant's Journey to The Pas, 1773 to 1853," presented at the *Twenty-Eighth Algonquian Conference*, (Toronto, October 1996); Laura Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780 to 1879*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994), 66, 69, 104-6.

³² See Peterson and Brown, eds., *The New Peoples*, and Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Métis in the Nineteenth Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

The final influence on voyageur culture was the workplace itself. Voyageurs worked under the hegemonic rule of their primarily British masters, and yet outnumbered them in the isolated wilds of the *pays d'en haut*. They were also an all-male group of sojourners, alienated from French Canadian women. Like sailors and lumbermen, this community of men made masculinity, rather than families, the central social principle in their lives. Although voyageurs often formed relationships with Native women, and replicated family ties, these were usually temporary and easily severed. The immense distances, frequent travel, and impermanence of many posts meant that fluidity and transience dominated the culture. Lastly, the culture was organized around and informed by work, work that was strenuous, mobile, risky and tough.

Unlike other cultures, voyageur culture did not sustain itself primarily through familial reproduction. Rather, the culture was replenished mainly by the admission of new men entering the vocation. Although many voyageurs married Native women in the interior, and some of their children were raised in voyageur society and initiated into the occupation at very young ages, the practice was not widespread enough to dominate voyageur culture, at least not before the 1820s. Men who married Native women frequently left the fur trade service to live with their wives' families, to live as independent freemen, or to settle around the Great Lakes or Red River in emerging Métis societies.³³ Other voyageurs abandoned their Native families when they decided to leave fur trade service, and these children usually left posts to join their mothers' relatives. Voyageur culture was thus maintained by "immigrants", or new employees. These men had to be initiated into the voyageur world, and taught new

³³ Peterson, "The People In Between."

ways of living, working and playing.

Voyageurs conceptualized themselves as a group distinct from the bourgeois, their families in French Canada, and the Native societies they encountered in the interior. Individuals traveled in and out of this collective ethos, as they joined and quit the fur trade, and moved in and out of French Canadian and Native families. The culture remained fairly stable in the north west, was spread over a vast area by the mobile workforce, and maintained its structure within many different physical and cultural environments. Fluid interfaces thus shaped cultural formation in a major way.

Liminality and Masculinity

Voyageur culture was shaped by liminality. By this I mean that as voyageurs traveled from their homes in French Canada to the Native interior, they underwent continuous transformations in identity and cultural association.³⁴ The term "liminal" is used by cultural anthropologists to mean interstitial, implying both margins and thresholds, and a transitional state. My use of the term liminality does not strictly refer to the act of passage, but rather characterizes an entire cultural space. The process of continual movement in the fur trade workplace made it a liminal space, one where voyageurs constantly traveled between the European colony in the St. Lawrence valley through wild landscapes and Native worlds to isolated bastions of European society at the fur trade posts. They journeyed between cultures,

³⁴ The concept was first suggested by Arnold van Gennep in his work *The rites of passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1909). The concept was further developed by Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94-5 and *Blazing the Trail: Way marks in the Exploration of Symbols*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 48-51. For a theoretical discussion and cross cultural comparisons of *communitas* or the development of community in liminal spaces see Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96-7, 125-30 and *Blazing the Trail*, 58-61.

on the margins of French Canadian society, on the thresholds of Native societies, and under the authority of their predominantly British masters. In this liminal space they created a cultural and social order, one which was neither static nor homogenous. It embodied a range of values and beliefs which made sense of the fur trading world for voyageurs.³⁵ The voyageurs carried their culture with them as the trade moved farther north and west into the *pays d'en haut* or "Indian Country".

Voyageur culture was also shaped by masculinity. The cluster of values that permeated voyageur culture and became markers of the ideal man included being tough, daring, hard-working, heterosexually virile, jovial and carefree.³⁶ Voyageurs made direct links between their work and their gendered identity as men. This was a means in which to ground themselves in their passage out of French Canadian society as adolescents, and into the adult world of the exotic and dangerous *pays d'en haut* or Indian country, where they had to become courageous and tough adventurers. The farther north and west a voyageur travelled, the more he became a Man. Along with wintering in the interior, crossing infamous portages, such as Methy, shooting through rapids, killing bears, eating pemmican, and "success with the ladies" all constituted markers of manhood.

One way to measure the self-worth or "cultural success" of voyageurs is to use the economic metaphor of "capital" proposed by French theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Capital can be

³⁵ For a theoretical discussion and cross cultural comparisons of *communitas* or the development of community in liminal spaces see Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96-7, 125-30 and *Blazing the Trail*, 58-61.

³⁶ My understanding of masculinity as a category for historical analysis is informed by Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no. 5 (December 1986), 1053-75 and R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 67-92.

seen as noneconomic, as well as economic, wealth. Bourdieu argues that "it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory."³⁷ Like economic wealth, social capital (such as family connections), cultural capital (such as a university education) and symbolic capital (such as prestige, duty and authority) can be earned, invested, converted, spent, saved, or lost. Tangible, or perhaps economic, expressions of wealth in women, canoes, dogs and horses did not necessarily represent the ideal of cultural success. Masculine values such as strength, courage, and risk-taking, as well as mirth, trickery, and camaraderie could not always be measured in material ways. These values were expressions of noneconomic wealth, which the voyageurs sought, valued, saved and spent. In their friendships, parties, competitions and tricks voyageurs could earn or lose capital, which served as a measure their prestige and thus social power. The impracticality of accumulating material possessions led voyageurs to "accumulate wealth" through their reputations.

This dissertation has three sections: the structural, material and social history of fur trade work; voyageurs' relations with Natives peoples; and finally, rituals of culture and

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, 241-58, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 242. Also see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 112-21; and Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119.

identity. The first chapter explores recruitment, the terms of voyageur employment contracts, and the system of paternalism and indentured servitude. Cultural hegemony dominated the labour relations between voyageurs and their masters. Paternalistic control was imposed by the bourgeois, and voyageurs resisted it by exercising some freedom and independence within the work place. Yet this dialogue did not challenge the fundamental configuration of power. The next two chapters closely outline the nature and extent of work performed by voyageurs both on canoe journeys at interior posts. During the canoe journeys voyageurs not only paddled, but a great part of their work lay in loading and unloading canoes, portaging, and running rapids, all of which required a great range of skill and dexterity in addition to physical strength. At the interior posts, voyageurs became “jacks of all trades,” constructing buildings, procuring and preparing food, trading with Native peoples, and maintaining links with other posts through constant journeying. The second section of the dissertation turns to middle grounds that emerged between voyageurs and Native peoples. The middle grounds of shared meaning that emerged with Native neighbours and trading partners acted as conduits for cultural exchange. Voyageurs developed especially strong ties to many Native women, with who they had sexual and emotional relationships. Many voyageurs married Native women and had long-lasting families, but the dominant pattern of fluid monogamy was shaped by the fact that voyageurs and Native women traveled constantly in the interior. Voyageurs were often reposted to different forts from one year to the next. Native women followed annual cycles of travel to harvest seasonal economic resources. Although their unions tended to be serious and monogamous, they were not usually long-term. The bonds formed between voyageurs and Native women were important to trading alliances, but they

were often impermanent. The ethnogenesis of the métis certainly provides evidence of the emergence of some stable families, but this pattern did not dominate voyageur culture. The final section of the dissertation explores specifics of voyageurs' cultural performances as individuals and as a group. The chapter on play focuses on how notions of pleasure and adventure created a space for social experimentation, which encouraged the emergence of new cultural forms. Celebration, singing, dancing and competitions became forums for voyageurs to develop and benefit from their reputations as true "men of the north". The last chapter explores various rituals that voyageurs practiced both on canoe journeys and at the interior posts. The rituals helped to distinguish a particular voyageur culture, which gave voyageurs pride, and a sense of belonging to a select group of highly skilled and strong men.

Chapter 2

Entering the Service: The Structure of Fur Trade Work, Recruitment, Terms of Employment and the Master and Servant Relationship

The quest for furs was one of the central reasons for European colonists to settle in the St. Lawrence valley in the 17th century. Europeans set up outposts on the Atlantic coast of northern North America first to acquire fish, and later furs for trade in Europe to increase the fortune of colonial empires, as well as individual merchants.¹ In 1608, Samuel de Champlain established the first permanent fur trade post in the St. Lawrence valley to trade goods for furs with Iroquoian and Algonquian peoples in the interior of the continent. The fur trade became the central economic enterprise in the colony of New France and remained such until the first quarter of the 19th century. Initially Native peoples came to the posts along the St. Lawrence to trade with the Europeans, but eventually Europeans began to travel to hunting camps and villages in order to avoid trading through Native middle men and to increase their trading quotas. Specialized small merchants, called *coureurs de bois* or *voyageurs*, borrowed capital, purchased outfits of trade goods, and travelled to the interior to trade with Native people. In 1681, the French minister of marine, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, inaugurated the license or *cong * system, in which the New France government granted a limited number of licenses and quotas every year to merchants trading in the interior. By then, merchants had specialized to the point of forming partnerships, and hiring servants to

¹ See the work of Harold A. Innis, particularly *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction of Canadian Economic History*, (Yale University Press, 1930; revised edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 383-402.

transport the goods and furs back and forth between Montreal and the interior.² These *engagés* came to be known as voyageurs. Partnerships dominated the structure of the Montreal fur trade before and after the 1760 British conquest of New France. Although partners gradually changed from French merchants to Scottish, English and some Americans, the system of licensing, obtaining capital from investors, trading in small partnerships and hiring voyageurs for labour continued. After 1780, the partnerships eventually joined together into larger conglomerates such as the XY Company (XYC) and North West Company (NWC). In 1821, the largest of these conglomerates, the NWC, merged with the British monopoly, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), whose administrative centre was located at York Factory on Hudson Bay. After this, the trade operating out of Montreal began to diminish.³

In the years between the conquest and the 1821 merger, the number of voyageurs working in the Montreal fur trade reached its peak of approximately 3000 men. Voyageurs in Montreal and the surrounding parishes were recruited by agents of the fur trade partnerships. Once they signed *engagements*, or contracts, they entered into a master and servant relationship which was typical of indentured servitude in New France, and in other colonial settings. However, the organization of the labour system and the particulars of the fur trade workplace made the master and servant relationship more flexible than other settings. This chapter will outline the organization of labour, and the contours of the master and servant

² Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth Century Montreal*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 90-6, 107-25.

³ For business histories of the fur trade operating out of Montreal see Gordon Charles Davidson, *The North West Company*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1918); and Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *The North West Company*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957).

relationship. Although the bourgeois attempted to organize and standardize the trade and the contracting of their workers, the sheer number of voyageurs and the changing demands of the market made instability and flexibility the dominant characteristics of the fur trade labour scene.

Organization of Labour

In 1784 the NWC employed 500 men in the service, whom they divided into two equal sets. The first set of 250 men transported goods from Montreal to the administrative centre at western tip of Lake Superior in canoes capable of carrying about four tonnes, requiring eight to ten men to operate. These seasonally employed summer men were known as *mangeurs de lard* or Porkeaters. The other set of 250 men transported goods from Lake Superior to the posts in the interior country, some as far as 3000 miles distant. These men who wintered in the interior were referred to Northmen or *hommes du nord*.⁴ The labour force of the trade grew substantially over the next fifteen years. In 1790 traveller George Heriot reported that 350 paddlers, eighteen guides, and five clerks were usually employed every year to run the cargo between Montreal and Grand Portage.⁵ In his brief 1801 history of the fur trade, Roderick McKenzie asserted that usually the North West Company employed 50 clerks, 71 interpreters and clerks, 1120 canoe-men, and 35 guides. Of these, five clerks,

⁴ Letter of Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher to General Haldimand, 4 October 1784, in W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), 73-4.

⁵ George Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas, Containing a Description of the Picturesque Scenery on Some of the Rivers and Lakes; with an Account of the Productions, Commerce, and Inhabitants of those Provinces*, (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1813), 246-8.

eighteen guides, and 350 canoe-men worked on the Great Lakes run.⁶ In 1802, Simon McTavish reported approximately 1500 French Canadian servants working for the NWC.⁷ Later estimates of voyageurs employed in the interior reach as high as 2000.⁸ These numbers were augmented by voyageurs hired by partnerships and firms which were not a part of the NWC, and could reach as high as 3000.

The large Montreal canoes carrying about a dozen men set off in May. The provisions carried on board were consumed by the time they reached Michilimackinac, a major post between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, or Sault Ste. Marie, a post between Lake Huron and Lake Superior. At this mid-way point brigades stopped for additional supplies for themselves, for servants at the Lake Superior administrative post, and for the canoes heading out into the interior. Sloops, or sailing ships, were employed to assist in transporting goods from Michilimackinac or Sault Ste. Marie to the western tip of Lake Superior. Speed was of the essence; goods had to reach the Lake Superior administrative post by early July, allowing

⁶ Roderic McKenzie, Esq., "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West", in Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 33. Although the book lists Alexander Mackenzie as the author, the introduction was written by Alexander's cousin Roderick McKenzie. See John J. Bigsby, *The Shoe and the Canoe; or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas: Illustrative of Their Scenery and Colonial Life; with Facts and Opinions on Emigration, State Policy and Other Points of Public Interest*, 2 vols., (London: Chapman & Hall, 1850), 1: 115; and Konrad Gross, "The Voyageurs: Images of Canada's Archetypal Frontiersman," in *A Talent(ed) Digger: Creations, Cameos, and Essays in Honour of Anna Rutherford*, edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek, Gordon Collier and Geoffrey V. Davis (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), 414.

⁷ London; Public Record Office; Board of Trade Papers; B.T. 1, vol. 20, no. 93; Lt. Governor Milnes to Hobart; 30 October 1802, List of Departments in the North West Company supplied by McTavish, Frobisher & Co. The list is reproduced in Davidson, *The North West Company*, Appendix I, 279-81.

⁸ Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade in North America; with Observations Relative to the North-West Company of Montreal*, 2nd edition, (London: James Ridgway, 1816), 39. Voyageurs' labour contracts survive only in scattered notarial collections, and thus do not provide a reliable source for the total number of men involved in the trade.

enough time for the interior canoes to load and return to their posts. The canoes used in the interior were smaller than Montreal canoes, required only four to five men to operate, and were generally loaded with two-thirds goods and one-third provisions. This did not provide them with enough sustenance for their journeys, so they had to procure provisions along the way, usually from Native peoples. Crews were generally at great risk of starvation, and more so on the spring voyage when resources were more scanty.⁹

The Lake Superior administrative centre of Grand Portage, and later Fort William, was the site of transition between these two main transportation systems. The centre was a place of bustling activity as very large numbers of people came together during the summer *rendezvous*. By the early 1800s, as many as 500 people could be found coming and going at Grand Portage. Small independent traders set up shop to sell goods to the engagés. These businesses were quite successful, as the voyageurs were often paid their wages at Grand Portage and Fort William.¹⁰

Although the crews of each of these two transportation systems were considered distinct, overlap occurred in personnel and the substance of their jobs. At the Lake Superior administrative centre, Porkeaters and Northmen came into contact with each other while they were transferring the goods from the Montreal canoes with the furs from the interior canoes. Men were re-equipped once the loadings were exchanged.¹¹ Also at the Lake Superior post,

⁹ Letter of Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher to General Haldimand, 4 October 1784, in Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 73-4.

¹⁰ St. Paul; Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MHS); P791, Folder 7; Grace Lee Nute Papers; North West Company Letters, 1798-1816; Dominique Rousseau and Joseph Bailley v. Duncan McGillivray (originals from the Judicial Archives of Montreal).

¹¹ McKenzie, "A General History," 51.

travel parties and exploration expeditions exchanged their canoes for smaller ones.¹² An administrative centre was set up at Rainy Lake (also called Lac La Pluie), west of Lake Superior because Athabasca brigades often could not make it all the way to Grand Portage or Fort William within the short ice-free season. At this centre, Athabasca ladings were exchanged with the Montreal ladings and fatigued crews could be exchanged for fresh ones.¹³ The voyage between Grand Portage and Rainy Lake usually took a month, and a group of Porkeaters at Lake Superior were selected from among the Montreal brigades to make this additional journey.¹⁴ The experience gained by the Porkeaters from this extra run helped many of them to make the transition to Northmen, and work in the interior. About one third of the Porkeaters went on to become Northmen.¹⁵

Recruitment

Most Montreal-based fur trade companies, including the largest NWC and XYC, were co-proprietorships so engagements were made in the names of the various firms and individuals which comprised the shareholders and partnerships.¹⁶ Each of these individuals

¹² For one example see Captain George Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition to the Mouth of the great Fish River and Along the Shores of the Arctic Ocean, in the years 1833, 1834, and 1835*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1970), 20 May 1833, 37.

¹³ On a journey from Montreal to Fort Wedderburn on Lake Athabasca, Robert Seaborne Miles exchanged his crew for a fresh one at Rivière La Pluie on 8 July 1818. Toronto: Ontario Archives (hereafter OA); MU 1391; Hudson's Bay Company Collection (hereafter HBCC); Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; 18.

¹⁴ McKenzie, "A General History," 51-2.

¹⁵ McKenzie, "A General History," 34.

¹⁶ Lawrence M. Lande, *The Development of the Voyageur Contract (1686-1821)*, (Montreal: McLennan Library, McGill University, 1989), 41.

and partnerships had their own recruitment agents working in Montreal. Some of these agents were previously foremen in the trade, and some went on to become merchants supplying either voyageurs or the companies with goods.¹⁷ Agents were stationed in Montreal and at the major interior administrative posts, such as Grand Portage, Fort William and Michilimackinac. At the end of the fall they recruited both novices and experienced men in the returning brigades. Engagements were also drawn up throughout the Christmas season and contracts made in the north west interior or rural parishes were sent to Montreal headquarters up to March and April. Only rarely were engagements made in the summer months.¹⁸

Recruiters, especially ex-voyageurs, frequently hired men from their own parish. Sometimes certain brigades would be composed of men from one parish. John MacDonnell's 1793 brigade was made up of men from the parish of Berthier, all recruited by Joseph Faigan.¹⁹ The bourgeois also directed recruiters to other parishes they deemed suitable places to find "stout lads". Recruiters were paid a commission for every man that they signed on for the service. For example, bourgeois Joseph Frobisher paid his agent St. Cir five shillings for every man he hired to "come and go" (summer labour working between Montreal and Lake Superior), one guinea for each winterer, and all St. Cir's travelling

¹⁷ Lande, *The Development*, 48-57; and Winnipeg: Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA); F.3/1. Also see Allan Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour and Lower Canadian Agrarian Structures," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers*, 1981, (197-214), 200.

¹⁸ Lande, *The Development*, 41-2.

¹⁹ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, (St. Paul: MHS, 1965), 67-8.

expenses. However, St. Cir assumed the risk for any wages he advanced to the men.²⁰

Engaging was a regular part of business at the major administrative posts. When Northmen arrived at Grand Portage or Fort William in the middle of the summer, those who had not yet entered into agreements during the winter signed contracts.²¹ Men were engaged at Michilimackinac, St. Louis, Detroit, St. Joseph's Island, Sault Ste. Marie, and Kingston.²² Voyageurs also frequently signed engagements at the interior posts.

It was not always easy for agents to fill the quotas of men needed for each year's complement. Men were difficult to engage when the price of wheat was high and farming profitable.²³ It was difficult to find men during the summer months because experienced voyageurs were already employed while other labourers worked on the St. Lawrence boats which travelled between Montreal and Quebec.²⁴ During other times of the year labour shortages, or a lack of skilled men could pose problems. For example, in 1791, Joseph Frobisher gave instructions to his agents in Montreal, St. Cir and Fainant, to begin hiring men

²⁰ HBCA F.3/1, ff. 37 and 37b, Joseph Frobisher to Simon McTavish, Montreal, 7 January 1792.

²¹ McKenzie, "A General History," 52; Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: 1 July 1804, 247; Documents relating to the Engagement of Jean Baptiste Cadot, Jr., with the NWC, 1795, in Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 92.

²² Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1969), 24 May 1810, 44; Ottawa, National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), MG19 A41, Microfilm reel A-676, James Keith Papers, Memorandum book of James Keith, 1811ca - 1821, A 2; Colonel George Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections of Colonel Landmann, Late of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, (London: Colburn and Co., 1852) 2: 3 June 1800, 167-8; and Ottawa, NAC, MG24 H1, William Bentinck Papers, copies, Journals kept during a trip from Montreal to Niagara and the return trip, 1800 and from Montreal to Washington and the return trip in 1801, 45.

²³ HBCA F.3/1, fo. 126, John Gregory to Simon McTavish, Montreal, 16 March 1793.

²⁴ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A5; McTavish, Frobisher & Co. Originals, 1784-1804; Volume 3, "Letter Book of Joseph Frobisher, of the North West Company containing letters written by him from April 15th 1787 until October 20th 1788. From the Frobisher Documents in the possession of McGill University Library Montreal"; Montreal, 26 July 1788, Joseph Frobisher to John Collins, Esq., 63.

in late November, providing them with an advance "to Run about the Country from his Parish to Quebec," guaranteeing that all travelling expences would be paid by Frobisher.²⁵ John Gregory of the same partnership reported a month and a half later that:

we Come On Very Slowly with the Engaging our Men, Though Every Pains are Taken for that purpose, at Foot you Have An account of What are Engaged Here. St Cir, Fariant, & Tranchemontaigne, I Expect Will Each Compleat their Brigades, Besides Some Good Wintering Men, I Think I Never Saw the Men So Backward as This Year, & Shoud they Stand of Much Longer, it Will Be Absolutely Necessary We Shoud Make a Small Augmentation to the Men to Go & Come, the Outfit is Making Up as Fast as Possible, the Holidays are Now at an End, and I intend Beginning to Bale up After to Morrow, & Expect the Latter End of the Month to Have the Greatest Part at La chine.²⁶

Joseph Frobisher thought that the difficulty they had in meeting their recruitment goals was due to the mild winter, which prevented the river from freezing, and thus made travel difficult. He was encouraged that "all our old Men that has made their appearance in Town we have hired." Yet as late as February the bourgeois were alarmed at the low recruitment levels, and were willing to pay larger advances to the "old hands" to ensure their engagements. The "old hands" were generally much more desired than the novices. The number of winterers was 70 at that point, but the bourgeois wished to engage surplus men as

²⁵ HBCA F.3/1, ff. 27, a & b. Joseph Frobisher to Simon McTavish, Montreal, 24 November 1791.

²⁶ HBCA F.3/1, f. 30b, John Gregory to Simon McTavish, Montreal, 24 November 24 1791.

insurance against sickness or desertion, and to avoid relying on greenhorns.²⁷ It was also difficult to hire replacement voyageurs along the canoe routes if one of their men became injured or deserted.²⁸ Smaller crews slowed progress as the men had to stop more frequently to rest.²⁹

The bourgeois also had problems with labour shortages at the interior posts.³⁰ This was especially common during the summer months when most of the men were busy transporting goods and furs between the interior posts and the administrative centres on Lake Superior. Few men were left at the interior posts to continue trading and work on construction projects.³¹

Descriptions of deciding to leave the family farm to become a voyageur have not survived in documentary evidence to the best of my knowledge.³² Some scholars have found that service in the fur trade was an occupation handed down through generations-- if the

²⁷ HBCA, F.3/1, ff. 37 a & b, 41 a & b, 42, and 43, Joseph Frobisher to Simon McTavish, Montreal, 7 January 1792, John Gregory to Simon McTavish, Montreal, 18 February 1792 and Joseph Frobisher to Simon McTavish, Montreal, 18 February 1792.

²⁸ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 1 June 1793, 72.

²⁹ John Henry Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North: A Soldier-Surveyor's Letters from the North-West, 1843-1844*, ed. by George F.G. Stanley, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1955), letter to Sophia (sister), Fort Frances on Rainy Lake, 15 June 1843, 37.

³⁰ Ottawa; NAC; Masson Collection (hereafter MC); MG19 C1, Vol. 8; Microfilm reel #C-15638; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805"; Saturday, 20 October 1804, 13; Toronto; OA; Duncan Clark Papers; MU 572; Vol 2; Donald McIntosh, Michipicotton to Duncan Clark, the Pic, 24 August 1825, 2-3; Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West; A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 1: 118-19.

³¹ Duncan Clark Papers; Vol 2; R. Mckenzie, Pic to Duncan Clark, Long Lake, 1 May 1825, 1, 3.

³² A close look at the parish registers might reveal some local and curé attitudes to voyageurs. Genealogist Ellen Paul has closely examined the parish registers of l'Assomption to trace the life of a voyageur who returned from fur trade service and settled in l'Assomption. Ellen Paul, "The Voyageur at Home: Parish Registers as a Tool in Understanding the Motivation and Formation of a Fur Trader," presented at the *Rupert's Land Colloquium*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1998.

father served in the trade, then so would one of his sons and some of his grandsons.³³ In other cases it seems that working as a voyageur was a common practice in the parish, and not limited to individual families.³⁴ Serving in the fur trade was probably treated as a family or parish tradition, with tales of the *pays d'en haut* passed down through generations or among the community members. It came to occupy a prominent position in the cultural history of the colony because at various times up to 12% of some parish male populations became involved in the trade.³⁵

Why were particular habitants drawn to a life of working in the trade? There were certainly a multitude of reasons, earning money being one of the primary motivations. Income from the fur trade had a significant economic impact on the financial fortunes of a parish and family, and voyageurs made enough money to attract them back to the service year after year.³⁶ Yet, many men did not make money in the trade. Clerk George Nelson mused that what drew all men, voyageurs and bourgeois alike, into the fur trade, was the "deluded" belief that they could make large fortunes. He contends that "the lack of reflection by friends, relations, and themselves, their own blind ambition almost never fails to lead them to their ruin." Although Nelson's warning was probably a reflection of his failure to further his fur

³³ Gratien Allaire, "Fur Trade Engages, 1701-1745," in *Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Thomas C. Buckley, (St. Paul, Minn.:The Conference, 1984), 19-20; Hubert Charbonneau, Bertrand Desjardins et Pierre Beauchamp, "Le comportement démographique des voyageurs sous le régime français," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. xi, no. 21 (May 1978: 120-33), 125-6; Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 120.

³⁴ Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour," 203-4.

³⁵ Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 118-19.

³⁶ Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour," 200, 204-9; Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 123-4.

trade career beyond that of a clerk, his admonition should be seriously considered.³⁷

Nelson contended that what also drew traders and voyageurs into the service was their desire to lead an adventurous and licentious life, free of restraint. Some chose to go to the *pays d'en haut* "where they think to be unknown to every body" and "prefer a great deal passing the remainder of their lives in this brute Country than ever to return."³⁸ Alexander Ross similarly commented that:

In the various arrangements from year to year there is generally contentment and satisfaction among all classes. This arises as much from that variety of scene, that love of freedom of which man is so universally fond, and which he here so fully enjoys, as from anything else. There are pleasures at times in wild and savage countries as alluring as those in gay cities and polished circles; and on the whole, few ever leave the scenes of the wilderness without deep regret.³⁹

Did this picture of the "free" north west reflect more than just romantic stereotyping by ostentatious rhetoricians? Ironically, when they entered the service of the fur trade, voyageurs relinquished a significant amount of freedom. Although habitants paid dues to their seigneur, and felt the feudal burden, they essentially worked for themselves. Heads of households

³⁷ Sylvia Van Kirk, "George Nelson's 'Wretched' Career, 1802-1823," in *Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Thomas C. Buckley, (St. Paul, Minn.:The Conference, 1984), 207-13.

³⁸ Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room (hereafter MRL, BR); S13; George Nelson, Tete au Brochet, to his parents, 8 December 1811, 7. For examples of voyageurs entering the trade to make money also see W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), Saturday, 24 May 1800, 17.

³⁹ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 117; for a similar excerpt see Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 310.

decided when and what to plant, and controlled their means of production.⁴⁰ Voyageurs were usually sons of proprietors, and thus subject to their fathers' will, but their "familial servitude" was not particularly onerous nor restricting. In the fur trade service, voyageurs were contracted to be loyal and obedient to their masters, and although they had a fair amount of autonomy on the job, the bourgeois defined what the job was. The hierarchy of power and authority was underscored by the fact that the bourgeois gave the orders, and worked separately from the voyageurs. Yet, many writers have commented on the "love of freedom" which drew men into the trade. Leaving the restrictive confines of close-knit families and parishes did provide men with social freedom, an opportunity to explore new behaviours and create new identities. The theme of freedom and independence appears widely in commentary on the voyageurs. Recall the testament of the old voyageur that Alexander Ross met on Lake Winnipeg, who attested that "there is no life so happy as a voyageur's life; none so independent; no place where a man enjoys so much variety and freedom as in Indian country."⁴¹

Engagements

The most obvious challenge to the image of voyageurs leading a life of independence is the engagements they signed when they entered the trade. Like most forms of 18th-century labour systems, the Montreal fur trade labour system was organized around indentured servitude. Both Porkeaters and Northmen signed three to five-year contracts which legally

⁴⁰ Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 88.

⁴¹ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 237.

bound them to their masters. They agreed to be obedient and loyal in exchange for food, shelter and wages.⁴²

Historians have drawn on notarial records, specifically voyageurs' engagements, to explore the impact of the fur trade on rural Lower Canadian society. Scholars have studied voyageurs' place of origin, destination, their age in entering the service, mortality rates, marriage patterns and the extent to which joining the trade was a family tradition.⁴³ Others have looked at how numbers of engagés changed over time, and varied from parish to parish, depending on local economic contexts and governmental regulations.⁴⁴ Louise Dechêne asserted that "les répertoires des notaires peuvent être considérés comme de véritables registres d'enregistrement des allées et venues dans l'Ouest." However Fernand Ouellet challenged her by arguing that the notarial records do not contain all of the engagements, and that licenses or congés record a significant portion of men entering the trade. Gratien Allaire tempers Ouellet's charge by maintaining that the engagements can reflect general patterns of men in the service. He goes on to provide comparisons of notarial records with congés.⁴⁵ However, in the post-Conquest period, the notarial records of engagements become even less useful in illustrating men's entrance and continuing involvement in the fur trade. Much of the

⁴² For a brief report of master and servant law in a colonial setting see Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, "Master and Servant in England and the Empire: A Comparative Study," *Labour/ Le Travail*, no. 31, (Spring 1993), 175-84.

⁴³ These studies are mainly of the ancien régime. Dechêne, *Habitants et Marchands*, 217-26 and Charbonneau, Desjardins, and Beauchamp, "Le comportement démographique des voyageurs," 120-33.

⁴⁴ Allaire, Gratien. "Les engagements pour la traite des fourrures: évaluation de la documentation," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 34, (June 1980), 3-26 and Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour," 197-214.

⁴⁵ Dechêne, *Habitants et Marchands*, 217; Fernand Ouellet, "Dualité économique et changement technologique au Québec (1760-1790)," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. IX, no. 18 (novembre 1976): 294-5; and Allaire, "Les engagements."

engaging took place on an informal basis by bourgeois and clerks at small interior posts.⁴⁶ It is difficult to ascertain if contracts were signed in these cases, and if so, whether the contracts survived a journey to Canada to be filed with other notarial records. Usually collections of notarial records were preserved by individual notaries.⁴⁷ Because no notaries were present during the arrangements of contracts made at interior posts, it is unlikely that the engagements survived. For all these reasons, quantitative analysis of the engagements found in notarial records is unreliable in determining concrete demographic patterns. However, the contracts reveal much about the structures and substance of fur trade labour.

The labour contracts of all partnerships, both within and outside of the NWC, were remarkably similar. Contracts recorded voyageurs' names, parishes of origin, destinations in the north west, job positions, lengths of term, and salaries. The contracts required voyageurs to obey the bourgeois, work responsibly and carefully, to be honest and well-behaved, to aid

⁴⁶ Journals and letters include frequent mention of the arrangement of engagements at the interior posts. For a few examples see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 1; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Wednesday, 9 August 1797, Saturday, 7 April 1798 and Monday, 14 May 1798, 3, 53, 60; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 4; Microfilm reel #C-15638; William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790 (handwritten transcript); Friday, 2 April 1790, 50; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 5; Microfilm reel #C-15638; William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790; Friday, 2 April 1790, 15; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC", Sunday, 19 March 1815, 20-1; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 15 May 1801, 1 May 1803 and 6 May 1804, 180-1, 211, 243 and 2: 2 March and 18 September 1810, 590-1, 628; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Wednesday, 26 December 1804 and Sunday, 24 February 1805, 223, 230h; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 16 July 1800, 23; "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Appendix B, *Public Archives Report for 1929*, pgs. 109-45, (transcript from a copy at University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Collection, Pacific Coast Mss., Series C, No. 16; copy also at NAC, MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, Vol. 4; originals at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Sunday, 13 April 1806, 109; and Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 254-5.

⁴⁷ See E. Z. Massicotte, "Répertoire des Engagements pour l'Ouest Conservés dans les Archives Judiciaires de Montréal," *Rapport de L'Archiviste de la Province de Québec Pour 1929-1930*, (Québec: Rédempti Paradis, 1930), 191-466.

the bourgeois in making a profit, and to remain in the service. For example, a contract form for the firm McTavish, McGillivrays & Co. and Pierre de Rocheblave clearly instructs the engagé:

avoir bien et dument soin, pendant les routes, et étant rendu aux dits lieux, des Marchandises, Vivres, Pelleteries, Ustensiles, et de toutes les choses nécessaires pour le voyage; servir, obéir et exécuter fidèlement tout ce que les dits Sieurs Bourgeois, ou tout autre représentant leurs personnes, auxquels ils pourraient transporter le présent engagement, lui commanderont de licite et honnête, faire leur profit, éviter leur dommage, les en avertir s'il vient à sa connaissance; et généralement tout ce qu'un bon et fidèle engagé doit et est obligé de faire, sans pouvoir faire aucune traite particulière; s'absenter ni quitter le dit service, sous les peines portée par les loix de cette Province, et de perdre ses gages.⁴⁸

In addition, contractual obligations for the NWC often included voyageurs devoting several days to clear land around Fort William.⁴⁹ The contracts of summer men and winterers specified their different duties and the length of time they were to serve.⁵⁰

In all contracts, bourgeois were bound to pay the voyageurs' wages and provide them with equipment. The substance of the equipment, and the provision of food and welfare for the engagé were rarely specified in contracts, and thus provided one of the few places for

⁴⁸ Winnipeg, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (hereafter PAM), Fort William Collection (hereafter FWC), MGI C1; fo. 33, contract form for McTavish, McGillivrays & Co.

⁴⁹ Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage*, 181-2.

⁵⁰ Lande, *The Development*, 41-2.

obvious negotiation between the masters and servants.⁵¹ Custom came to dictate that equipment consisted of one blanket, one shirt, and one pair of trousers.⁵² Sometimes yearly "equipment" included a supply of tobacco.⁵³ Rations usually consisted of the food that was available depending on the place and time of year. John Macdonnell recorded that a full allowance to a voyageur while at the post "is a quart of lyed Indian Corn or maize and one pound of grease a day."⁵⁴ Ross Cox wrote that voyageurs'

rations at first view may appear enormous. Each man is allowed eight pounds of solid meat per diem, such as buffalo, deer, horse, &c., and ten pounds if there be bone in it. In the autumnal months, in lieu of meat, each man receives two large geese, or four ducks. They are supplied with fish in the same proportion. It must, however, be recollected that these rations are unaccompanied by bread, biscuit, potatoes, or, in fact, by vegetables of any description. In some of our journeys up the Columbia they were allowed pork and rice; and on particular occasions, such as wet weather, or making a long portage, they received a glass of rum.⁵⁵

Extra provisions informally promised to voyageurs on special occasions, such as drams and

⁵¹ For examples see Joseph Defont's 1809 contract with the North West Company, PAM, FWC, MG1 C1, fo. 32-1 and the contract of Louis Santier of St. Eustache with Parker, Gerrard, Ogilvy, & Co. as a *milieu* to transport goods between Montreal and Michilimackinac, 21 Avril [sic] 1802, NAC, MG19 A51.

⁵² McKenzie, "A General History," 34; and Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 248.

⁵³ Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 305.

⁵⁴ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 95.

⁵⁵ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 306.

tobacco, were sometimes referred to a "*phiol d'engagement*".⁵⁶ Alexander Henry the Younger explained that alcohol was customarily provided to men when they re-engaged at Grand Portage.⁵⁷

Mentions of engagements made at interior posts sometimes repeated the terms of a specific contract, such as the length of time, salary and promise of food and clothing.⁵⁸ In one example at Fort Alexandria, bourgeois Archibald Norman McLeod, recorded in his journal in January 1801: "I engaged La Hane [Hanche?] for two years & Cadien [Cadieu?] for three, the ordinary wages of the Fort, but I promised each a Gun & House [housing], One of them /Cadien/ being free at the Grand Portage."⁵⁹ On rare occasion the terms were laid out like a contract. In a letter to McKenzie, Oldham & Co., T. Pothier described the terms of engagement:

There are the Terms up on which I Shall engage [Joseph Robillard] for One year to Winter at McKinar of Mississippi [&?] Montreal, oblige [illegible] as another Winterer, & obliges to work at his trade as Cooper when Required.-
Wage, 850 [livres] & an Equipt Const of 2 Blankets, 2 Shirts, 2 prs Trousers, 1 pr Shoes, 1 Collier. I shall [illegible] Security to you provided he fullfill his

⁵⁶ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 7; Microfilm reel #C-15638; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Friday, 12 October 1798 and Saturday, 2 March 1799, 9, 39.

⁵⁷ Coues, ed. *New Light*, 1: 23 July 1800, 10.

⁵⁸ Toronto; OA; Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Thursday, 27 June 1805, 22 (I added page numbers); Montreal; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB); MC; C.24; Microfilm reel #2; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Wednesday, 11 February 1801, 21; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 6; Microfilm reel #C-15638; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Thursday, 14 May 1800, 21; and John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Wednesday, 26 December 1798, Saturday, 5 January 1799 and Saturday, 2 March 1799, 23, 25, 39.

⁵⁹ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Wednesday, 21 January 1801, 18.

Engt With me for Two Hundred Livres- and if he Continues in my Employ Will Stop the Remainder of the Dept the Ensuing Year Say 254 [livres] 5 [sols]- Should he discontinue With me, You Know I have a right to Send him Back here, which I Shall do if he try not pay the Said Sum, You Will please observe that I [illegible] not become responsible more than What I may have in my power to do for you Should the man Run away, Leave my Employ or Die, my Responsibility becoming Annulle. Should this Suit you please so have him Engt passed and advance him in money One Hundred and Twenty Livres which I Shall Pay you When you Come to Town.⁶⁰

Even if the terms of the contract were not laid out on paper, masters expected voyageurs to be obedient and loyal in exchange for their wages, provisions, and equipment, which mirrored engagements drawn up by notaries in Montreal. In engagements unique to the interior, voyageurs could be hired for a single season to guide, or hunt and fish for a post, though these positions were usually filled by freemen, or uncontracted French Canadian labourers living independently in the north west.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 B6; McKenzie, Oldham & Company, Originals, 1805; T. Pothier to McKenzie, Oldham & Co containing terms of engagement of Joseph Robillard, 3 February 1803, Montreal.

⁶¹ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 15; Microfilm reel # C-15638; Fragment of a journal, attributed to W. Ferdinand Wentzel, kept during an expedition from 13 June to 20 August ?1800; Saturday, 27 June ?1800 8. Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 30 March 1814, 862. For examples of men hired to fish see "First Journal of Simon Fraser," Friday, 24 April 1806, 113; and Toronto; OA; NWCC; MU 2199 (photostat of original); Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in Rivière Ouinipique", June to July 1784 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company", by Roderick MacKenzie, director of the North West Company. Typescripts can be found also in the OA; North West Company Collection (hereafter NWCC); MU 2200, Box 5, Nos. 2 (a), (b), and (c). Photostats and typescripts can also be found in NAC; MC; Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640; MRB; MC; C.17; and the MHS; P1571); Monday to Wednesday, 28 to 30 June 1784 and Sunday, 11 July 1784, 10, 16.

Wages

It is difficult to determine the real value of wages for voyageurs. Some historians have shown that the money sent back by voyageurs to their habitant families in Lower Canadian parishes had a significant impact on the economy, which indicates that becoming a voyageur was a serious economic strategy which was often successful.⁶² Voyageurs usually (though by no means universally) sent their wages home.⁶³ The bourgeois often made these arrangements by paying men in drafts which were sent to relations or friends in Lower Canada.⁶⁴ Men also sent money home to their families through other voyageurs who were returning to Canada.⁶⁵ There seemed to be somewhat of a traffic in goods between French Canadian families and their men in the *pays d'en haut*. Voyageurs sent home shoes, presumably moccasins that they procured from Native people in the interior, as well as other Native artefacts, such as "plumes" or feathers.⁶⁶ Shoes were a seemingly popular currency, as they were also sent from French Canada to voyageurs in the interior, as well as other personal effects, such as "tabliez"

⁶² Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour," 206-8.

⁶³ For example, after the 1821 merger, balances in men's accounts were paid to them, or their families or their friends in Montreal. HBCA F.4/61, North West Company Miscellaneous Accounts, 1808-1827, microfilm reel 5M13, fo. 29. Also see HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maskinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18; Mongall, Thomas, from wife Marie St. Germain, Maskinonge, 20 avril 1830, fos. 24-5; and St. Pierre, Olivier, from wife Nelly, Trois Rivieres, 28 mars 1831, fos. 30-1.

⁶⁴ McKenzie, "A General History," 52.

⁶⁵ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; McKissee, [John], from friend Andre Blais, York, 12 avril 1833, fos. 19-20.

⁶⁶ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Lebrun, Felix, from brother David, Maskinonge, 17 avril 1831 and friend David Sigard, Maskinonge, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 11-14; Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maskinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18; and Mongall, Thomas, from wife Marie St. Germain, Maskinonge, 20 avril 1830, fos. 24-5. On "plumes" see Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maskinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18. For an example of a clerk sending buffalo robes, moccasins and money to Canada see Toronto; OA; NWCC; MU 2198, Item 1. 2-3; Donald McIntosh, Michipicotten, to sister Christy McDonald, Cornwall, 12 August 1816.

or cloth smocks.⁶⁷

One of the reasons it is difficult to determine the real value of voyageurs' wages is that different kinds of currency were used in the fur trade, and their value fluctuated tremendously. The main units of exchange in British North America were gold, silver and copper coins. Their value depended on their weight and purity. Merchants traded with each other by converting their coins to a common currency, such as "sterling pounds" or "Halifax currency", yet exchange rates varied to a bewildering degree. Ordinances issued by the British Crown in 1764, 1777, and 1796 attempted to standardize rates of exchange within the colonies, but they were not always followed by merchants.⁶⁸

Although barter dominated the economy of exchange in the north western interior, voyageurs were paid in currency, and sold goods priced in currency. "Moneys of account" or credit notes (rather than coinage) were issued in a variety of currencies, including Halifax, sterling and livres.⁶⁹ The bourgeois also came to issue their own kind of currency, called "Grand Portage currency" or "north west currency", which was probably confined to their employees because of the high inflation of prices in the interior. John Macdonell noted that:

the currency of the north west is double that of Canada which currency had its origine, I presume, from the men's wages being formerly paid in peltries and it was supposed that one Liver's worth of furs would be worth 2 livers to the

⁶⁷ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; McKissee, [John], from friend Andre Blais, York, 12 avril 1833, fos. 19-20 and Rogue, Amable, from mother Marianne, Maskinonge, 15 avril 1830, fos. 26-7.

⁶⁸ A. B. McCullough, *Money and Exchange in Canada to 1900*, (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984), 17-19, 67-81.

⁶⁹ McCullough, *Money and Exchange*, 228-9.

person who took it to Mtl to be paid.⁷⁰

The wages paid to voyageurs varied according to their position. Porkeaters were paid less than Northmen. Within the canoe, paddlers called middlemen or *milieu*, were subject to the authority of the foreman and steersmen, or *devant* and *gouvernail*, collectively called *bouts*, who usually acted as canoe and brigade leaders. *Bouts* could earn from one third to more than six times as much as *milieux*.⁷¹ Interpreters and guides were paid between two and four times as much as other engagés.⁷² Appendix I, a chart of the "Annual Wages of Voyageurs," shows the extent to which voyageurs' wages varied year by year. The ratios between wages for different positions varied tremendously. The huge jump in wages in 1803 probably marks the introduction of "north west currency," which might have been a way to contain wage wars. Despite the fluctuations, it is clear that Northmen were paid more than Porkeaters, bouts were paid more than millieux, and guides and interpreters were paid more than canoemen.⁷³

Some wages also seemed to vary between the interior posts. Minutes of the NWC from 1806 list wages separately from different posts. Men were paid the least in the Lac des Isles, Monontague, Lake Nipigon and Folle Avoine Country Departments, which were closest to major administrative centres. Wages increased for departments further west and north into

⁷⁰ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 93.

⁷¹ Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 254; and Roderick McKenzie, *Letters Inward, 1807-1824*, 3, 23.

⁷² "An Account of the Athabasca Indians by a Partner of the North West Company, 1795," 51; Mackenzie, "A General History," 34; and Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 305.

⁷³ The same pattern operated at higher ranks: junior clerks were paid a smaller annual salary than senior bourgeois, and did not hold shares in the partnerships which made up the Montreal fur trading companies. Partners were granted voting privileges in business meetings, in addition to their company shares and higher salaries. "An Account of the Athabasca Indians," 51.

the interior. Men were paid the most in the Athabasca, Athabasca River and Rocky Mountain Departments, at wages one and a half to twice as great as the lowest wages.⁷⁴ In other cases wages could be set out in a contract to increase incrementally every year, so that a voyageur could earn £80 in the first year, £90 in his second, and £100 in his final year.⁷⁵

When men first signed their contracts they sometimes received an advance on their wages, which could be as high as one third.⁷⁶ When they officially began their term of work, they received their equipment at the site of departure. The bulk of wages were paid on an annual basis, usually in a lump sum at a major administrative post, such as Grand Portage, Fort William, or Montreal.⁷⁷ Some men chose to have their earnings sent directly to Canada.⁷⁸ Wages were usually paid in cash or credit notes, but could also be paid in goods.

In addition to wages, food and equipment, voyageurs sometimes received a pension if they had been in the service for a long time. The minutes of an 1808 meeting of the partners of the North West Company, record:

The agents represented the unfortunate Case of many Old Voyageurs lately discharged from the Companys Service, who have no means of Support- and too Old and Infirm to work in Lower Canada; and recommended some provision to be made for these objects of charity- It was therefore agreed that the Agents of the NWCo should have placed at their disposal on the general

⁷⁴ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 213-15.

⁷⁵ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 272.

⁷⁶ Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 246.

⁷⁷ George Nelson, Tete au Brochet, to his parents, 8 December 1811, 8-9.

⁷⁸ McKenzie, "A General History," 52.

Account, a Sum not exceeding One hundred pounds Currency per Annum, for the above purpose, to be divided in such manner, as in their Judgment appeared best, but no Individual to receive more than Ten pounds currency in One Year.⁷⁹

Evidence for the fund is sketchy, but mention of it can be found as early as 1799, and as late as 1811.⁸⁰ Some contracts include a deduction of 1 or 2 % for the voyageur fund, or "le Fonds des Voyageurs."⁸¹

Voyageurs could earn additional money by doing odd jobs for bourgeois. Incentives were paid on top of regular wages for hunting, and to either guide or escort bourgeois to locations outside of their posting.⁸² While on canoe journeys, voyageurs were sometimes paid extra for carrying additional baggage on the canoes.⁸³ Voyageurs could also supplement their earnings by doing odd chores for other fur trade companies.⁸⁴ Sometimes they did this without the permission of their bourgeois.⁸⁵ They also on rare occasions hired each other to

⁷⁹ Minutes of the Meetings of the NWC at Grand Portage and Fort William, 1801-7, with Supplementary Agreements, Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 16 July 1808, 256.

⁸⁰ Agreement of McTavish, Frobisher and Company, 1799, with statement of Accounts, Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 104, 268.

⁸¹ For examples see the contracts of Pierre Forcier and Joseph Longueil in Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A51; Contrats d'engagements.

⁸² For hunting see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Saturday, 26 January 1798 and Sunday, 25 March 1798, 37, 50. For guiding and interpreting see Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Tuesday, 20 March 1798, 49; and Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage," Sunday, 11 July 1784, 16.

⁸³ McKenzie, "A General History," 51.

⁸⁴ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.11; Microfilm reel #52; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "Journal kept at Slave Lake", 1802; Sunday, 12 September 1802, 6.

⁸⁵ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Monday, 12 May 1821, 19-20.

do odd jobs. For example, one voyageur hired two others to cut and haul wood for him, a task that was a part of his duties.⁸⁶ Another voyageur hired someone to take his place on a journey because he did not want to leave his Native wife for an extended period of time.⁸⁷

A certain flexibility existed in voyageurs' contracts and terms of labour. They could sometimes trade jobs if they desired.⁸⁸ When men were injured or ill, tasks were often shuffled to accommodate them.⁸⁹ However, usually the bourgeois controlled these exchanges. Bourgeois and clerks often lent men to each other if they were in need.⁹⁰ They also traded particular voyageurs with whom they had difficulties or personal conflicts.⁹¹ In one case, William McGillivray sent a voyageur named La Tour from Lake Vermillion to winter at Grand Portage because the Natives "complained much of his conduct last Winter the Queu de Porcupicque came here on purpose to desire he should not Winter on his Lands."⁹² In another case, clerk George Nelson deemed the voyageur Charbonneau too old to travel between posts

⁸⁶ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Monday, 16 February 1801, 23.

⁸⁷ "First Journal of Simon Fraser", Monday, 19 May 1806, 121.

⁸⁸ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.7; Microfilm reel #4; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95 (typescript copy in NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640); Friday, 17 January 1794, 7.

⁸⁹ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.28; Microfilm reel #13; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday, 8 April, 30; and Toronto; OA; HBCC; MU 1391; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Sunday, 31 May 1818, 4.

⁹⁰ Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River: Being a Narrative of the Expedition Fitted Out by John Jacob Astor, to Establish the 'Pacific Fur Company' With an Account of Some Indian Tribes on the Coast of the Pacific*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966; originally published London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1849), 114; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 118-19; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Thursday, 25 August 1803, 7; and Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19, 6 and 9 June 1818 and 8 July 1818, 7-8, 18.

⁹¹ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Thursday and Friday, 20-21 December 1804, 223.

⁹² Ottawa; NAC; MG19 B1; North West Company Letterbook (hereafter NWCL), 1798-1800; vol. 1; William McGillivray to P. Grant, Grand Portage, 2 August 1800, 155.

in the winter and so replaced him with Longuelin.⁹³ Bourgeois extended their control over the voyageurs as far as they could. They tried to prevent their men from contracting with competing companies or becoming freemen.⁹⁴ Voyageurs who were particularly unmanageable or obnoxious were shipped off to remote corners of the north west interior, frequently relocated, and prevented from travelling to the annual summer meetings at Lake Superior.⁹⁵

The most effective controls bourgeois could exert over their men in the interior was to have the voyageurs incur a debt from the bourgeois. Voyageurs frequently used wages advanced to them to purchase goods in Montreal, and at the major depots in the interior, such as Fort William and Cumberland House.⁹⁶ Voyageurs also purchased alcohol and tobacco regularly from clerks and bourgeois in the interior.⁹⁷ Rum and tobacco was sometimes refused to the men until they had paid off some of their debt.⁹⁸ The French Duke de La Rouchefoucault Liancourt, travelling through North America in the late 18th century charged the North West Company with encouraging "vice" among their men by paying them in merchandise, especially luxuries, and rum, so that none of them ever earned a decent wage.⁹⁹

⁹³ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Friday, 19 January 1809, 16 (I added page numbers).

⁹⁴ George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, Tuesday, 13 September 1836, a reminiscence of 13 September 1802; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26 October 1805, 269.

⁹⁵ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 55.

⁹⁶ HBCA; NWCC; A.16/54, Microfilm Series I, reel 317-18, Servant's Accounts, Montreal 1810-26.

⁹⁷ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; 10, 44 and 62; and John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Saturday, 5 January 1799, 25.

⁹⁸ Toronto; OA; MU 842; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday, 3 March 1819, 35.

⁹⁹ *Voyages dans l'Amerique par la Rouchefoucauld Liancourt*, Vol. II, pg 225, Paris, An. 7.; cited by Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade*, 36-37.

Lord Selkirk, certainly no fan of the NWC, criticized them further for exploiting their men, pointing out that engagés often left their French Canadian families in distress, and were unable to provide for them because the cost of goods in the interior was double or triple the price in Canada, and men were usually paid in goods rather than cash. The NWC saved further costs on men's wages by encouraging addictions to alcohol, and then paying their wages in rum at highly inflated prices. The Company also placed no ceiling on their men's credit, so that many of them fell deeply into debt.¹⁰⁰

Despite Selkirk's obvious bias against the NWC, he was not alone in his misgivings about Montreal fur trade companies' labour practices. As a new clerk in the XYC, George Nelson was instructed to provide any trade goods his men may ask for, and to encourage them to take up their wages in any of the trade goods on board the canoe. Nelson was initially uneasy with this mode of dealing,

for thought I what is there more unnatural, than to try to the get the wages a poor man for a few quarts of rum, some flour & sugar, a few half fathoms of tobacco, & but verly little Goods who comes to pass a few of his best years in this rascally & unnatural Country to try to get a little money so as to settle himself happily among the rest of his friends & relations.

Eventually Nelson came to justify his participation in this system of exploitation because he felt that the men would ruin themselves anyway, and that most of them were disobedient "blackguards" for whom slavery was too good.¹⁰¹ Nelson was also surprised that these men

¹⁰⁰ Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade*, 32-47. Also see Montreal; MRB; MC; C.17; Liste des effets donnés pour des vivres et depenses du Fort du Lac de Flambeau, 3 aout 1804; 4, 11-29.

¹⁰¹ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Friday, 15 July 1803, 1-2, 34.

could live such a carefree existence while deeply in debt and with few material possessions.¹⁰²

Nelson's comments about the "carefree" existence of extravagant voyageurs are echoed widely in the writings of the fur trade literate.¹⁰³ An unnamed HBC clerk in 1810-11 wrote in the Fort Churchill post journal that:

the nature of Canadians is as opposite to that of Scotchmen or Orkneymen as black is to white. The former are little removed from Savages indeed the reader may easily conceive what offspring must shoot from the union of a volatile vain shiftless tho' not ruffle-less Frenchman with a toy-loving daughter of our Indian Scalper[.] A Scotch or Orkney servant identifies himself with his Money and conceives a favourable or unfavourable opinion of his Employers or Employment as he finds them subservient to his purpose of amassing wealth[.] a Canadian is ever in debt in advance to his Employers who greedily take advantage of all the propensities of their servants.¹⁰⁴

Bourgeois frequently report voyageurs "squandering" their money on rum and "baubles", especially when paid at Fort William, in the throes of rendezvous festivities.¹⁰⁵ These views of voyageurs were of course informed by the bourgeois' "discourse on the other," where they

¹⁰² George Nelson, Tete au Brochet, to his parents, 8 December 1811, 7-9.

¹⁰³ "An Account of the Athabasca Indians," 3; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 235-8; Coues, ed. *New Light*, 1: 3 October 1803, 225; Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 305-8; and Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 169-71.

¹⁰⁴ HBCA B.42/a/136a, Microfilm reel # 1M34, Fort Churchill Post Journal, 1810-1811, author not listed, fo. 19.

¹⁰⁵ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 16 August 1817, 287.

packaged voyageurs into an inferior stereotype which defined their own values and reflected their own insecurities. Their criticisms of voyageurs' seeming inability to save money is much more a sign of bourgeois values than the behaviour of the voyageurs.

Yet, voyageurs who remained in the interior did not become wealthy. Did they carelessly squander their money? In his study of 18th-century sailors, Marcus Rediker found that 17th and 18th-century observers "never tired of pointing out how seamen were 'careless' and 'irresponsible' with their money." Rather than save, seamen engaged in "unruly debauches and sprees of spending that squandered many months of wages in a matter of days" and rather than looking to the future that immersed themselves in the rich pleasures of the present. Rediker does not attribute this observed behaviour to simply another case of the higher orders lamenting about the lower; he asserts that an ethic of nonaccumulation ran deep among sailors. Seamen took seriously their mottos of "a rolling stone gathers no moss" and "a merry life and a short one." They "sought money but not capital; acquisition but not accumulation; the present, often at the expense of the future; gratification and consumption over deferral and savings."¹⁰⁶ This same ethic of nonaccumulation seemed to characterize the culture of voyageurs who wintered in the *pays d'en haut*. They had short term rather than long term goals. Wages were always important, but their value and meaning could shift.

It is clear that voyageurs entered the fur trade service to earn money to contribute to the family farm in Lower Canada, and that these earnings had a substantial economic impact.¹⁰⁷ However, what about voyageurs who stopped sending their money back to Canada,

¹⁰⁶ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 147-9.

¹⁰⁷ Greer, "Fur-Trade Labour."

and shifted their loyalties to their new lives in the interior? Those voyageurs who decided to stay in the fur trade service for as long as they could manage the strenuous work, who became freemen, and who lived with their Native families in the interior seemed to have different ideas about money. Amassing capital was not a goal for these men. They were probably influenced by Native attitudes to "wealth" as living a good life, being well-fed and enjoying "luxuries", such as finery, alcohol and tobacco. Voyageurs also demonstrated their wealth through their possessions, and not through their savings. These attitudes infused the culture of voyageurs. Becoming a voyageur may have been about money, but being a voyageur was not.

The Master and Servant Relationship: A Legal Contract

Despite the divergent values voyageurs and their masters held towards money, they shared a common understanding of their working relationship. The engagements established the legal framework for the paternal relationship. The principal tenet of the contract dictated that servants obey their masters in exchange for board and wages. In order to enforce the terms of the legal contracts, bourgeois tried to regulate their servants through legal and state sanctions. In January 1778, an official of the NWC sent a memorandum to Governor Sir Guy Carleton asking him "that it be published before the Traders and their Servants that the latter must strictly conform to their agreements, which should absolutely be in writing or printed, and before witnesses if possible, as many disputes arise from want of order in this particular." The memorandum goes on to ask that men be held to pay their debts with money or service and that traders hiring men already engaged to another company should purchase their

contracts.¹⁰⁸ Lower Canadian law eventually recognized the legality of notarial fur trade contracts, and a 1796 ordinance forbade engagés from transgressing the terms or for deserting the service.¹⁰⁹ In Lower Canada, the legislature empowered Justices of the Peace (JPs) to create and oversee the rules and regulations for master and servants relations.¹¹⁰

The bourgeois used the law to enforce the terms of contracts. Voyageurs were charged for breaking contracts, mainly for deserting, as well as for insolence or disobedience.¹¹¹ The files of the Court of Quarter Sessions in the District of Montreal reveal a range of cases: voyageurs accepted wages from one employer while already working for another, they obtained advance wages without appearing for the job, and they deserted the service.¹¹² Cases of voyageur desertion and theft can also be found in the records of the Montreal civil court.¹¹³ In 1803, the British government passed the Canada Jurisdiction Act by which criminal offenses committed in the "Indian territories" could be tried in Lower Canada, and the five

¹⁰⁸ NAC, Haldimand Papers, "Memorandum for Sir Guy Carleton", 20 January 1778, cited by Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 221.

¹⁰⁹ *Ordinances and Acts of Quebec and Lower Canada*, 36 George III, chpt. 10, 7 May 1796.

¹¹⁰ Grace Laing Hogg and Gwen Shulman, "Wage Disputes and the Courts in Montreal, 1816-1835", in Donald Fyson, Colin M. Coates and Kathryn Harvey, eds., *Class, Gender and the Law in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Quebec: Sources and Perspectives*, 127-43, (Montreal: Montreal History Group, 1993), 129.

¹¹¹ For one example see Montreal, McCord Museum of Canadian History, North West Company Papers, M17607, M17614, Deposition of Basil Dubois, 21 June 1798, and Complaint of Samuel Gerrard, of the firm of Parker, Gerrard and Ogilvie against Basil Dubois.

¹¹² Montreal, Archives nationales de Québec, dépôt de Montréal (hereafter ANQM), Court of Quarter Sessions of the District of Montreal, TL32 S1 SS1, Robert Aird vs. Joseph Boucher, 1 April 1785, JP Pierre Foretier; Atkinson Patterson vs. Jean-Baptiste Desloriers dit Laplante, 21 April 1798, JP Thomas Forsyth; and Angus Sharrest for McGillivray & Co. vs. Joseph Papin of St. Sulpice, 14 June 1810, JP J-M Mondelet. These cases were compiled by Don Fyson as part of a one in five sample of the whole series.

¹¹³ ANQM, Cours des plaidoyers communs du district de Montréal (hereafter CPCM), Cour du samedi (matières civiles supérieurs), TL16 S4 /00005, 37, 27 mars 1784, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse; and TL16 S4 /00002, no page numbers, 2 Avril 1778, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse.

JPs named were all prominent fur trade bourgeois, although the court's power remained limited.¹¹⁴ It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of court action to control workers, especially since prosecution rates have not survived in most of the records. Presumably the bourgeois would not continue to press charges if their efforts did not pay off. On the other hand, pressing charges against voyageurs did not seem to deter them from continuing to desert, cheat contract terms and steal from their employers.

Other efforts to control workers included cooperation between companies to limit contract-jumping and blacklisting deserters. In 1800 NWC officer William McGillivray wrote to Thomas Forsyth of Forsyth, Ogilvy and McKenzie:

I agree with you that protecting Deserters would be a dangerous Practice and very pernicious to the Trade and fully sensible of this when any Man belonging to People opposed to The North West Company have happened to come to our Forts, we have told the Master of such to come for them and that they should not be in any way wise prevented from taking them back.

McGillivray assured Forsyth that he was not protecting one of their deserters and had told his master to come and claim him. He goes on to discuss the case of the NWC engagé, Poudriés, who was allowed to return to Montreal because of ill health on the understanding that he was to pay his debt in Montreal or return to the north west to serve out his time. McGillivray explains that when the NWC discovered that Poudriés engaged himself to Forsyth, Ogilvy & McKenzie they attempted to arrest him. McGillivray accused Forsyth of protecting him, and

¹¹⁴ The JPs were William McGillivray, Duncan McGillivray, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, Roderick McKenzie, and John Ogilvy. Campbell, *The North West Company*, 136-7.

requested that he be returned to NWC service or that his debt be paid. He went on:

With regard to paying advances made to Men I wish to be explicit, we have alwise made it a practice and will continue so to do to pay every shilling that Men whom we hire may acknowledge to their former Master such Men being free on the Ground. We hire no Men who owe their Descent considering this a principle not to be deviated from in determining to adhere strictly to it we cannot allow others to treat us in a different manner- if a Man was Free at the Point au Chapeau we do not consider him at liberty to hire until he has gone to it.¹¹⁵

McGillivray decided to purchase voyageurs' engagements from their previous masters rather than paying their wages, and warned other fur trade companies against hiring any deserters.¹¹⁶

The other fur trade companies soon followed suit.¹¹⁷

Concurrently, voyageurs took their bourgeois to court, most often to sue for wages.¹¹⁸

Cases of this kind were widespread in all sorts of labour contracts in New France and Lower Canada, so it is not surprising that voyageurs followed suit. However, servants were not

¹¹⁵ NAC, NWCL, 1798-1800, MG19 B1, vol. 1, 131, William McGillivray to Thomas Forsyth, Esq., Grand Portage, 30 June 1800.

¹¹⁶ NAC, NWCL, MG19 B1, vol. 1, 152-3, William McGillivray to McTavish, Frobisher and Company, Grand Portage, 28 July 1800.

¹¹⁷ NAC, Letterbook of Sir Alexander McKenzie and Company, kept by Daniel Sutherland (hereafter LAMC), 40, D. Sutherland to Henry Harou, 15 May 1803.

¹¹⁸ ANQM, CPCM, Cour du vendredi (matières civiles inferieurs), TL16 S3 /00001, 41, 314-25, 3 juillet 1770 and 3 juillet 1778, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse; and TL16 S3 /00008, no page numbers, 13 janvier 1786, JPs Hertelle De Rouville and Edward Southouse, 6 octobre 1786 (followed by several other entries later in the month), JPs John Fraser, Edward Southouse and Hertelle De Rouville, and 27 octobre 1786, JPs Edward Southouse and Hertelle De Rouville; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 860-1, Sunday, 27 March 1814.

usually successful in claiming wages for jobs which they had deserted, or where they had disobeyed their masters.¹¹⁹ The colonial government and legal system supported fur trade labour contracts, but the contracts were difficult to enforce because of the limits of the policing and justice systems in the north west. Masters thus relied more on the "social contract" which they were constantly negotiating with their servants.

The Master and Servant Relationship: A Social Contract

Labour relations were highly influenced by local conditions. The personality of individual masters, the availability of food resources, the difficulty of work, and the cultural conventions of the labour force all affected the nature of the master-servant relationship. As many fur trade scholars contended, there was never just one fur trade: it varied tremendously in different contexts.¹²⁰ The same can be said of labour relations in the fur trade. Process and flexibility were dominant characteristics in the relationships between masters and servants. As the fur trade in North America varied tremendously during its long history and expansive presence, it is not surprising that its paternalistic structure also varied tremendously.¹²¹ Patterns varied over time, between regions, and among different companies. Fur trade historian Jennifer Brown contends that the managers of Montreal companies had greater difficulty in controlling their servants than did the HBC officers. The more fortunate HBC officers could rely on the London committee to lay down the standard rules of conduct, which

¹¹⁹ Hogg and Shulman, "Wage Disputes and the Courts in Montreal," 128, 132, 135-40, 141-3.

¹²⁰ Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay, 1600-1870*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 167.

¹²¹ See Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 41-51.

served as a basis for governing their men's behaviour. The Montreal companies not only lacked this central disciplining influence, but they also had further obstacles with which to contend. Discipline was not easy to administer while voyageurs traded *en dérrouine* (out on their own among Native peoples), or on long journeys where their support and assistance were urgently required. Brown goes on to assert that not only were Montreal masters outnumbered by French Canadian voyageurs:

they also generally lacked the vertical social integration that helped to hold the Hudson's Bay men together. Differences of status, without the mitigating prospect of promotion, and of ethnic background meant that relations between the two groups were often characterized more by opposition, bargaining, and counter-bargaining, than by solidarity. In addition, the French Canadians could draw on a long tradition of independent behaviour, social and sexual, in the Indian country.¹²²

The particular form of paternalism in the post-conquest Montreal fur trade was shaped by the high degree of control exercised by voyageurs in the labour system. Flexibility in contracts, frequent labour shortages, and continual re-postings gave the voyageurs bargaining power. Voyageurs' power was also augmented by the isolation and vast distances which increased their masters' dependence on them.

Edith Burley challenges Brown's characterization of the HBC workforce as more rigidly controlled and less independent than the French Canadian voyageurs. She contends

¹²² Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 87-8.

the Orcadians opposed and bargained with their masters like the voyageurs.¹²³ Although the culture of voyageurs was distinct from other fur trade labourers, all engaged in similar types of resistance and agency. These correlations are worth serious note, but the fractured nature of the sources prevents scholars from convincingly arguing that voyageurs were either more or less independent and 'rascally' than other fur trade labourers. The partners and clerks in the NWC did not keep detailed nor consistent reports of their activities at fur trade posts, and commented even more infrequently on the behaviour of their men. It is thus difficult to quantitatively compare the extent to which voyageurs and other fur trade labourers resisted the rule of their masters.

In the Montreal fur trade, voyageurs and masters interpreted their contract differently in different contexts. Their diverging and situational "readings" of the legal contract led to the emergence of a "social contract," which constituted the actual working relationship between the two groups. The "social contract" was expressed in the customs which came to characterize the fur trade workplace and the dialogue between servants and masters over acceptable working conditions. Masters tried to enforce obedience, loyalty and hard work among voyageurs, while the voyageurs tried to ensure that their working conditions were fair and comfortable, and that masters fully met their paternal obligations. Voyageurs exercised relative cultural autonomy on the job, and often controlled the work pace and scope of their duties. The bourgeois, however, maintained ultimate authority by exercising their right to hire and fire voyageurs and by successfully profiting in the trade.

¹²³ Edith I. Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline, and Conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770-1879*, (Toronto, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15-16.

In addition to indentured servitude and paternalism, the fur trade labour system was also shaped by cultural hegemony. Masters and servants accepted their positions as rulers and ruled. Voyageurs could challenge the substance and boundaries of their jobs and loyalty to their masters, without contesting the fundamental power dynamics. Voyageurs' acceptance of bourgeois domination was based on a deeply held belief in the legitimacy of paternalism. Voyageurs certainly became discontented, resisted bourgeois' and clerks' authority, and sometimes revolted, but it was outside of their conception of the world to challenge the hegemonic culture.¹²⁴ Thus, the structure of cultural hegemony was not inconsistent with the presence of labour strife. Although voyageurs participated in the formulation of the master and servant relationship, they challenged the terms of their employment and contracts without fundamentally challenging their position in the power relationship. Voyageurs and masters engaged in a dialogue of accommodation and confrontation as a means of constructing a workable relationship.¹²⁵ To assert the limited power and agency of the voyageurs does not deny the framework of subordination, rather it looks within it. Hegemony did not envelop the lives of the voyageurs and prevent them from defending their own modes of work and leisure, and forming their own rituals. Hegemony offered, in the words of E.P. Thompson, writing of the 18th-century English plebians, a "bare architecture of a structure of relations of domination and subordination, but within that architectural tracery many different scenes

¹²⁴ For a discussion on cultural hegemony and the consent of the masses to be ruled, see T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 3 (1985: 567-93), 568-70.

¹²⁵ Edith Burley also found that the relationship between masters and servants in the HBC was constantly subject to negotiation. Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 110-11.

could be set and different dramas enacted."¹²⁶

What "scenes of rule" were enacted in the northwest fur trade? The mutuality intrinsic to paternalism and hegemony governed social relations, and made up the substance of the "social contract" between the masters and voyageurs in the north west. Each party accepted their roles and responsibilities in the master and servant relationship, but they pressed the boundaries, and tried to shape the relationship to best suit their desires and needs. The difficulty masters encountered in enforcing authority, and the precariousness of survival meant they had to be particularly responsive to their servants. Part of hegemony involved appearances.¹²⁷ Masters often engaged in "public theatre," while voyageurs engaged in their own form of counter-theatre. Through this means of communication masters and servants came to accept common ideas of the way things ought to work. The formula laid out in the labour contracts served as the crux from which both parties tried to digress. In the "social contract," or "ritual theatre," masters attempted to evade their provision of welfare, and the voyageurs tried to ease the strain of their work and to control aspects of the workplace. A dialogue of resistance and accommodation kept the paternalistic relationship fluid and flexible, which was crucial to its resilience. Paternalistic hegemony was constantly being negotiated, and in the fur trade, management authority never came close to being absolute or ubiquitous.

How did bourgeois and clerks command and maintain some level of authority? In many historic circumstances, masters turned to physical might or the law as a principal

¹²⁶ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, (London: Merlin Press, 1991), 85-6.

¹²⁷ This is suggested by Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 45-6.

vehicle for hegemony. But at the height of fur trade competition, the arm of law was short and the high value of labour discouraged masters from physically intimidating their workers. Masters relied on paternalistic authority as an accepted ideology to justify and bolster their might. The ideology was expressed in the "theatre of daily rule."¹²⁸ Bourgeois imposed their authority through their belief that they were superior and were obliged to control their inferior servants. Masters also contributed to a dominant public discourse of their superiority, or enacted the "theatre of rule," in material ways. They ensured their access to more and better food, fancier clothing, and better sleeping conditions than voyageurs.¹²⁹ Further in the interior, away from the larger fur trade administrative centres, bourgeois had to rely on inexpensive symbols and actions to enforce their authority, such as carefully maintained social isolation, differential work roles, control over scarce resources, reputation and ability.¹³⁰

Differentiation in work role was very apparent in travel. Bourgeois were usually passengers aboard canoes, and only helped their men paddle and portage in cases of extreme jeopardy. At times the rituals of travel situated bourgeois at the head of a great procession. In his reminiscences of his fur trading career, Alexander Ross described how the light canoe, used for transporting men and mail quickly through the interior, clearly positioned the bourgeois as a social superior:

¹²⁸ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 43, 45-6.

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 110-12; R. Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 43.

¹³⁰ James Scott Hamilton, "Fur Trade Social Inequality and the Role of Non-Verbal Communication," (Vancouver: Ph.D. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1990), 138, 261-3.

The bourgeois is carried on board his canoe upon the back of some sturdy fellow generally appointed for this purpose. He seats himself on a convenient mattress, somewhat low in the centre of his canoe; his gun by his side, his little cherubs fondling around him, and his faithful spaniel lying at his feet. No sooner is he at his ease, than his pipe is presented by his attendant, and he then begins smoking, while his silken banner undulates over the stern of his painted vessel.¹³¹

HBC surveyor Philip Turnor, both envied and criticized that the NWC:

give Men which never saw an Indian One Hundred Pounds pr Annum, his Feather Bed carried in the Canoe, his Tent which is exceedingly good, pitched for him, his Bed made and he and his girl carried in and out of the Canoe and when in the Canoe never touches a Paddle unless for his own pleasure all of these indulgences¹³²

At posts, bourgeois did not participate in the vigorous round of activities which kept the post functioning smoothly, such as constructing and maintaining houses, building furniture, sleighs and canoes, gathering fire wood, hunting, and preparing food. Rather, they kept accounts, managed the wares and provisions, and initiated trade with Native peoples.

Bourgeois were encouraged to keep a distance from their labourers. Junior clerks in particular, whose authority in isolated wintering posts was threatened by experienced

¹³¹ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 301-2.

¹³² J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), Journal III, "A Journal of the most remarkable Transactions and Occurrences from York Fort to Cumberland House, and from said House to York Fort from 9th Sepr 1778 to 15th Sepr 1779 by Mr Philip Turnor", 15 July 1779, 252.

labourers, had to establish firm lines of control. When the NWC clerk George Gordon was still a novice, he received advice from a senior clerk, George Moffatt, to be independent, confident, very involved in the trade, and

Mixt. very seldom with the Men, rather retire within yourself. than make them your companions.- I do not wish to insinuate that you should be haughty- on the contrary- affability with them at times, may get You esteme, while the observance of a proper distance, will command respect, and procure from them ready obedience to you orders-¹³³

In 1807, John McDonald of Garth was sent out as a novice to take over the NWC's Red River Department, which was notorious for its corruption and difficult men. A French Canadian interpreter, who had long been in the district, and had great authority among voyageurs and Native peoples, had to be reminded by McDonald: "you are to act under me, you have no business to think, it is for me to do so and not for you, you are to obey."¹³⁴

Probably the greatest challenges the bourgeois and clerks faced in asserting authority and controlling their workers came from the circumstance of the fur trade itself-- the great distances along fur trade routes and between posts, and the difficulties of transportation and communication. The arduous job of traversing an unfamiliar and inhospitable terrain led to frequent accidents. The dispersed nature of the sources obscure any measurement of mortality

¹³³ OA, George Gordon Papers, MU 1146G, Moffatt, Fort William, to George Gordon, Monontagué, 25 July 1809. See also Hamilton, "Fur Trade Social Inequality", 135-6. Burley found a similar pattern in the HBC, Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 122-3.

¹³⁴ NAC, Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, written in 1859, photostat, MG19 A17, 119-21. The original can be found at MRB, MS 406, and a typescript can be found at the OA, MU 1763.

rates, but the writings of the fur trade literate are filled with literally hundreds of cases of trading parties losing their way along routes, injuring themselves or perishing in canoeing accidents, being attacked by bears and starving, to name a few of the mishaps.¹³⁵

Accommodation between voyageurs and bourgeois and clerks made up part of the master and servant relationship. They worked very closely for long periods of time, often shared living quarters, and faced many calamities and adventures together. The surest way in which bourgeois and clerks could ensure loyalty was to provide plenty of good food for their men, as many disputes were caused by shortages of provisions. Bourgeois and clerks fostered accommodation by meeting other paternal duties, such as attempting to protect their men from dangers in the workplace, providing medicines, and treating men with respect. Masters also encouraged accommodation in the workplace with their generosity and kindness, which was reminiscent of a kind of feudal largesse. Extra rations of alcohol and food, known as *regales*, were provided on significant occasions, such as settling accounts and signing new engagements.¹³⁶ Routine "rewards" were also incorporated into the more tedious aspects of

¹³⁵ For a few examples of becoming lost see MRB, MC, C.8, microfilm reel #14, Alexander McKenzie, *Journal of Great Bear Lake*, 18-26 June 1806, 20; MRB, MC, *Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle*, 1793-95, Thursday, 13 March 1794 and Monday, 8 December 1794, 11, 22; and Donald McKay, *Journal from January 1805 to June 1806*, Thursday, 12 September 1805, 32 (I added page numbers). For examples of canoeing accidents see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797," Wednesday, 16, 19 and 31 August 1797, 4, 6; William McGillivray, "Rat River Fort Near Riviere Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790 (written transcript precedes original on reel, both badly damaged), 73-4; and W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805", 9 October 1804, 9. On bear attacks see Toronto, MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's *Journal "No. 7"*, describing the Lake Winnipeg district in 1812, written as a reminiscence, 283-4; *Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth*, 54-5, 65-6; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser," Sunday 13 July 1806, 143-4. On starvation see Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*, Thursday, 19 February 1801, 22; NAC, MG19 A14, Microfilm reel #M-130, John Stuart, *Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6* (original at Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Saturday, 1 February 1806, 20; and George Nelson's *Journal "No. 5"*, June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, 209-10.

¹³⁶ For examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 10, 243, 23 July 1800 and 6 May 1804; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, 105, Sunday, 19 July 1807; and Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 304-5, 19 September

fur trade work, such as the customary provision of drams at portages.¹³⁷ Sometimes the giving of gratuities was self-interested, such as when McKay gave his men moose skin to make themselves shoes and mittens and blankets to last them through the winter, warning them that "we have a strong opposition to contend with this year" and they must be ready to go at a moment's notice.¹³⁸ His gift helped the voyageurs to perform their duties more effectively.

Despite these points of accommodation, harmony in the workplace was continually under stress as voyageur resistance to their masters' authority infused labour relations in the fur trade. Voyageurs' discontents focused sharply on unsuitable working and living conditions, such as poor rations, or unreasonable demands by bourgeois or clerks. They turned to a number of strategies to highlight their concerns and initiate change, such as complaining to their bourgeois and clerks and attempting to bargain for better working conditions. Like the Orcadians working for the HBC, individual action was more common form of worker resistance than was organized collective action.¹³⁹

Complaining by the voyageurs became a form of "countertheatre," contesting the bourgeois' demonstration of their hegemonic prerogatives. Just as the bourgeois often asserted their hegemony in a theatrical style, especially with canoe processions, the voyageurs

1817.

¹³⁷ For examples see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797," Friday, 11 August 1797, 3; NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 9, Microfilm reel # C-15638, 16, Unidentified North West Company Wintering Partner, "Journal for 1805 & 6, Cross Lake", Sunday, 10 November 1805; MRB, MC, C.1, microfilm reel #55, 66, Duncan Cameron, "The Nipigon Country", with extracts from his journal in the Nipigon, 1804-5, (also found in the OA, photostat, MU 2198 Box 3, Item 3; and in triplicate typescript, MU 2200, Box 5 (a-c)); and Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 325, Thursday, 13 June 1793.

¹³⁸ Approximately 20 June 1807, described in George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851. 186.

¹³⁹ Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 118-20.

also asserted their presence by "a theatre of threat and sedition."¹⁴⁰ In one illuminating example in the summer of 1804, while trying to travel through low water and marshes Duncan Cameron's men ceaselessly complained about the miserable conditions and difficulty of the work. They cursed themselves as "Blockheads" for coming to "this Infernal Part of the Country," as they called it, damning the mud, damning the lack of clean water to quench their thirst, and damning the first person that attempted that road. Cameron tried to be patient and cheerful with them, as he knew that complaining was their custom.¹⁴¹ Voyageurs sometimes chose to limit their resistance to a small, and perhaps more effective scale by complaining to their bourgeois or clerk in private, so that they would not appear weak in front of the other men. During a difficult trip from Kaministiquia to Pembina, Alexander Henry the Younger commented that little or nothing was said during the day when the men had "a certain shame or bashfulness about complaining openly," but at night everyone came to complain about bad canoes, ineffective co-workers, and shortages of gum, wattap and grease.¹⁴² Often voyageurs restricted their complaining in front of their master, in order to avoid losing favour. If they approached the master individually with strategic concerns, their demands were more likely to be met, than if they openly abused their masters for unspecified grievances.¹⁴³

When labour was scarce, men often bargained for better wages, both individually and

¹⁴⁰ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 67.

¹⁴¹ Cameron, "The Nipigon Country," 38-39.

¹⁴² Coues, ed. *New Light*, 1: 247-8, 28 July 1804.

¹⁴³ A blacksmith named Philip earned the wrath of his bourgeois, McKay, when he abused him both behind his back and to his face. Nelson, *Journal* "No. 5", 2 (labelled 186). George Nelson felt pressured by the continual complaints made by his men about their rations. He worried that his men were spreading discontent among each other and preferred them to approach him directly with their concerns. Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda", 8, Friday, 10 February 1815.

in groups. In a large and organized show of resistance in the summer 1803, men at Kaministiquia refused to work unless they received a higher salary.¹⁴⁴ However, these types of group efforts to increase wages were much more rare than the relatively common occurrence of men trying to individually bargain for better wages. Daniel Sutherland of the XYC instructed his recruiting agent in Montreal, St. Valur Mailloux, to refuse demands made by a couple of engagés for higher wages, and to appease the men with small presents. One engagé named Cartier caused turmoil by telling the XYC wintering partners that Mailloux was hiring men at significantly higher wages, asking for his pay to be increased to that amount. Sutherland became angry with Mailloux, warning him "Always [offer more to] oarsman and steersman, but never exceed the price that I told you for going and coming [paid to the paddlers]."¹⁴⁵ Voyageurs could refuse to do tasks outside the normal range of their duties without extra pay, as another means of increasing their wages.¹⁴⁶ Better working conditions often accompanied men's demands for more pay. Most often their concerns centred on safety, as they could refuse to take unreasonable risks.¹⁴⁷

French Canadian labourers had a reputation among all fur trade companies in North America as very skilled canoemen in the interior, and they were often targeted by Montreal

¹⁴⁴ Mentioned in Coues, ed. *New Light*, 1: 247, 1 July 1804.

¹⁴⁵ NAC, LAMC, 1802-9, vol. 1, MG19 A7, 18-19, 25-26, D. Sutherland to Monsr. St. Valur Mailloux, Montreal, 10 November 1802, 29 November 1802, and 20 December 1802, (originals in the Seminaire de Quebec). My translation.

¹⁴⁶ For one example of men demanding their pay be doubled for extra duties see Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797," 49, Tuesday, 20 March 1798.

¹⁴⁷ MRB, MC, C.27, Microfilm reel #13, 2, Athabasca Department, Great Slave Lake, W.F. Wentzel to Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward, 1807-1824, 5 April 1819.

companies and the HBC who wanted to steal them away from their competition.¹⁴⁸ In a letter to the Governor and Committee of the HBC, Andrew Graham, Master at York Fort, wrote:

The Canadians are chosen Men inured to hardships & fatigue, under which most of Your Present Servants would sink, A Man in the Canadian Service who cannot carry two Packs of eighty Lbs. each, one & an half League losses his trip that is his Wages. But time & Practice would make it easy, & even a few Canadians may be got who would be thankful for Your Honours Service.¹⁴⁹

Their reputation made it easy for voyageurs to switch to other fur trade companies for employment if they wanted to increase their wages, change their posting, or if they were angry with their bourgeois.¹⁵⁰ Alexander Henry the Younger was disgusted by some men's lack of loyalty:

the voyageurs southward, about Michilimackinac, the Mississippi, etc., are in the habit of changing employers yearly, according to wages offered, or as the

¹⁴⁸ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.29; Microfilm reel #23; Samuel Hull Wilcocke, "Mort de B Frobisher, Difficultés de Nord Ouest, 1819," 42-4; George Nelson's Journal, 30 November 1815 - 13 January, (parts of the journal in code), Sunday, 31 December 1815, Monday, 1 January 1816 and Sunday, 7 January 1816, 92-4, 97; Ottawa; NAC; MG19 B1; NWCL, 1798-1800; vol. 1; William McGillivray to Murdock Cameron, Montreal, 10 May 1799 and 23 May 1802 44-5, 183; and "Reminiscences' by the Honorable Roderic McKenzie Being Chiefly a Synopsis of Letters from Sir Alexander Mackenzie", Louis R.F. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, first published 1889-90, based on the correspondence between Alexander Mackenzie and Roderick McKenzie, 1786-1816, MC, vol. 32, 32A, NAC, MG19 C1), 1: Alexander McKenzie to Roderick McKenzie, Rivière Maligne, 1 September 1787, 20.

¹⁴⁹ Extracts from a Letter of Andrew Graham, Master at York Fort, to the Governor and Committee of the HBC, dated York Fort, 26 August 1772, Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 26 August 1772, 43.

¹⁵⁰ George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Monday and Wednesday, 18 and 20 June 1810, 13-14 (I added page numbers); George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, Tuesday, 13 September 1836; and Montreal; MRB; MC; C.13; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Thursday, 31 July 1800, 60-1 (I added page numbers).

whim takes them, which, with the spirit of competition in the South trade, and the looseness and levity they acquire in the Indian country, tends to make them insolent and intriguing fellows, who have no confidence in the measures or promises of their employers. Servants of this description cannot be trusted out of sight; they give merely eye service, and do nothing more than they conceive they are bound to do by their agreement, and even that with a bad grace.¹⁵¹

Voyageurs who had worked in the service for some time often became savvy bargainers which frustrated bourgeois and clerks who expected to be obeyed without hesitation. Clerk George Nelson expressed his frustration with servants:

The common men of all companies, places, who, or whatever they are, are always fretful, jealous, dis-contented & gluttonous, let the places or country be what it may, rich or poor, be the master ever so kind & indulgent, unless he be prudent & severe, not a little, the men will be always found the same, men; and only want an opportunity for shewing themselves so:- it is still worse where the country is hard.¹⁵²

The "fretful, jealous, discontented & gluttonous" voyageurs were most likely those who negotiated for the best terms in their contracts and knew their worth. Their loyalty to their masters did not extend past their contract, and some of the men who went over to work for the HBC did not hesitate to apprise HBC officers of the business plans of the NWC to please

¹⁵¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: Sunday, 17 April 1814, 890.

¹⁵² George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC", Tuesday, 7 February 1815, 3.

their new masters.¹⁵³ Men with valued skills and knowledge, such as interpreters and guides, were in the best position to bargain for better working conditions and more pay.¹⁵⁴ Because fur trade labour was often scarce, and the mortality rate was high, skilled men were valued. Masters often overlooked servant transgressions and met servant demands in an effort to maintain their services.

Voyageurs often attempted to deceive their bourgeois or clerk by pretending to be ill, or by lying about resources and Native peoples in the area in order to evade work. It is difficult to judge the extent to which voyageurs tried to trick their master, especially when they were successful. However, hints of this practice, and suspicions of masters frequently emerge in fur trade journals, suggesting that the practice was widespread. In December 1818, stationed near the Dauphin River, George Nelson became frustrated with one of his men, Welles, who frequently sneaked in "holiday" time by travelling slowly or claiming to be lost.¹⁵⁵ Less suspecting bourgeois and clerks probably did not catch half of the "dirty tricks" more careful voyageurs played on them regularly. Some masters, however, questioned their men's dubious actions and sent out to "spies" to ensure that voyageurs were working honestly.¹⁵⁶ Other deceptions were of a more serious nature. Alexander Mackenzie was suspicious that his interpreters were not telling the Native peoples what Mackenzie intended,

¹⁵³ HBCA B.89/a/2; Microfilm Reel # 1M63; Peter Fidler, *Ile a la Crosse Post Journal*, 1810-11; Friday, 15 June 1810 and Thursday, 21 June 1810, fo. 2, 3.

¹⁵⁴ NAC, MC, MG19 C1, vol. 3, microfilm reel # C-15638, François-Antoine Larocque, "Missouri Journal, Winter 1804-5," 8-15; and Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda", 30-2, Saturday, 8 April 1815.

¹⁵⁵ See entries Monday, 2 November 1818, and from Tuesday, 1 December 1818 to Wednesday, 30 December 1818, OA, MU 842, 10-11, *Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19*, 18-23.

¹⁵⁶ NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 15, Microfilm reel #C-15638, Fragment of a journal, attributed to W. Ferdinand Wentzel, kept during an expedition from 13 June to 20 August 1800, Friday, 26 June 1800, 7.

which could have serious repercussions for the trade.¹⁵⁷

When efforts to deceive their masters were frustrated, voyageurs could become sullen and indolent, working slowly and ineffectively, and even openly defying masters' orders. In one case in the fall 1800, while trying to set out from Fort Chipewyan, James Porter had to threaten to seize the wages of a man who refused to embark. When the voyageur reluctantly complied he swore that the devil should take him for submitting to the bourgeois.¹⁵⁸ More serious breaches of the master and servant contract included stealing provisions from cargo. Though Edward Umfreville kept up a constant watch over the merchandise in his canoes, a father and son managed to steal a nine gallon keg of mixed liquor.¹⁵⁹ George Nelson describes the pilfering of provisions as routine.¹⁶⁰ Men also sometimes stole provisions to give extra food to their girlfriends or wives.¹⁶¹ For the Orcadians working in the HBC service, Burley characterizes this type of countertheatre-- working ineffectively and deceiving

¹⁵⁷ MRB, MC, C.8, microfilm reel #14, Alexander Mackenzie, *Journal of Great Bear Lake*, March 1806, 125.

¹⁵⁸ On trip from Athabasca to the McKenzie River, James Porter, *Journal* kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801, 29 September 1800, 50. Porter quotes the man as saying "Si Je avoit Point des gages que le Diable ma aport si vous ma Soucier Embarker." See also John Thomson, who records that this man, named Bernier, gave further trouble to Porter on the trip. Thompson's interpretation of Bernier's swearing is "swearing the Devel myte take him if he had stirred a Step." See entries Monday, 29 September 1800 to Saturday, 4 September 1800, MRB, MC, C.26, Microfilm reel #15, John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1," 1-2

¹⁵⁹ Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage." For other examples of theft see Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal* kept at Alexandria, 1800, Friday, 28 November 1800; OA, Angus Mackintosh Papers; MU 1956, Box 4, 2-3, *Journal* from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813. 16 July 1813; and NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 2, microfilm reel # C-15638, 10, Michel Curot, "Journal, Folle Avoine, Riviere Jaune, Pour 1803 & 1804", Lundi, 11 octobre 1803.

¹⁶⁰ TMRL, BR, S13, George Nelson's *Journal* "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, (a typescript can also be found in the George Nelson Papers of the TMRL, BR), 9.

¹⁶¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 25, 6 August 1800.

masters-- as both a neglect of duty and as an attempt to control the work process.¹⁶² The same applies to the voyageurs.

One area of particular unease between voyageurs and masters was the issue of voyageurs freetrading with Native peoples. Unlike the HBC, the Montreal fur trading companies did not prohibit voyageurs from trading with Native peoples on the side to augment their income; some bourgeois and clerks even expected them to do so, as long as they did not abuse the privilege.¹⁶³ However, bourgeois and clerks were often very upset to find their men trading with Native peoples, as they wanted to concentrate the profit into their company's hands, and considered freetrading as "contrary to the established rules of the trade and the general practice among the natives."¹⁶⁴ In an 1803 trial over trading jurisdiction, John Charles Stuart, a NWC clerk, testified that when any men brought skins from the wintering grounds for the purpose of trading on their private account, "it was by a Special Favour" granted by their bourgeois, supported in the clause "Part de pactons" in their contracts. Although the practice was customary, the bourgeois retained the right to grant or refuse it.¹⁶⁵ After the 1804 merger of the XYC and NWC, the bourgeois decided to restrict private trade to increase profitability in the newly reformed company. Any man caught with more than two buffalo robes or two dressed skins, or one of each, would be fined 50 livres NW currency,

¹⁶² Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 139-44.

¹⁶³ McKenzie, "A General History," 34. On the HBC prohibition of private trading see Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 24-25. However, Burley suggests that the lack of reporting on this offense may indicate that the officer tacitly allowed their men to do so (144-52).

¹⁶⁴ Described by Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 159.

¹⁶⁵ MHS, GLNP, Folder 7, P791, NWC Letters, 1798-1816, Dominique Rousseau and Joseph Bailley v. Duncan McGillivray, (originals from the Judicial Archives of Montreal), 2.

and any employee caught trafficking with "petty traders or Montreal men" would forfeit his wages. The bourgeois were able to enforce this new restriction because the merger had created a surplus of men, so that employment became tenuous, and many voyageurs were concerned that their contracts would not be renewed.¹⁶⁶ In the minutes of the 1806 annual meeting, NWC partners agreed to ban men from bringing furs out of the interior in order to discourage petty trading.¹⁶⁷

Voyageurs sometimes moved out of the "countertheatre of daily resistance" to engage in "swift, direct action" against their masters' rule. Deserting the service was an outright breach of the master and servant contract.¹⁶⁸ Desertion should not be viewed as the single and straightforward phenomenon of voyageurs quitting their jobs. Rather, voyageurs deserted for a variety of purposes. Temporary desertions could provide a form of vacation, a ploy for renegotiating terms of employment, and a means of shopping for a better job. Men deserted when they were ill and needed time to recuperate.¹⁶⁹ Men also deserted when they feared their lives might be in danger, as was the case in March 1805, when servants of both the NWC and XYC ran off from the fishery at Lac La Pluie because they feared the Natives there wanted to kill them.¹⁷⁰ Voyageurs felt they could desert because they had a clear notion of their rights as

¹⁶⁶ Campbell, *The North West Company*, 155.

¹⁶⁷ Stewart, ed., *Documents*, Minutes of the Meetings of the NWC at Grand Portage and Fort William, 1801-7, with Supplementary Agreements (originals in Montreal, Sulpician Library, Baby Collection), 216, 15 July 1806.

¹⁶⁸ For an example see MRB, MC, C. 7, microfilm reel #4, Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, (typescript copy in NAC, MC, MG 19 C 1, vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640), 5 December 1793 to 6 December 1793, 4.

¹⁶⁹ McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 40, Saturday, 30 May 1801; and "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 72, 1 June 1793.

¹⁷⁰ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 233-34, Monday, 25 March 1805.

workers which was instilled by the reciprocal obligations of paternalism. This may be one of the more significant differences between Orcadians working for the HBC and the voyageurs. Orcadians did not desert very often because of the lack of "desirable places to go." Orcadians would most often desert to NWC posts, while voyageurs more often became freemen, joined Native families, or returned to the St. Lawrence valley.¹⁷¹

As part of the continual negotiation of the master and servant "social contract," masters responded to voyageurs' countertheatre with intense performances of authority. Bourgeois and clerks disciplined their men for transgressions of the master and servant contract, and as a means to encourage voyageur obedience. They could withhold servant privileges, such as depriving them of regales and access to liquor.¹⁷² They also frequently humiliated and intimidated their men. In one case during a journey to the Peace River in the summer 1793, Alexander Mackenzie was confronted with a man who refused to embark in the canoe. He wrote:

This being the first example of absolute disobedience which had yet appeared during the course of our expedition, I should not have passed it over without taking some very severe means to prevent a repetition of it; but as he had the general character of a simple fellow, among his companions, and had been frightened out of what little sense he possessed, by our late dangers, I rather preferred to consider him as an object of ridicule and contempt for his pusillanimous behaviour; though, in fact, he was a very useful, active, and

¹⁷¹ Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 153-4; Harris, *Resettlement*, 45-6.

¹⁷² For example, see McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria*, 15, Friday, 2 January 1801.

laborious man.¹⁷³

He also confronted the chief canoe maker during the same trip about his laziness and bad attitude. Mackenzie described the man as mortified for being singled out.¹⁷⁴ This kind of ritualized public shaming reinforced masculine ideals of effectiveness and skill. On an expedition to the Missouri in 1805, one of Larocque's men wished to remain with Charles McKenzie's party. Larocque became angry and told the man his courage failed him like an old woman, which threw the man into a violent fit of anger.¹⁷⁵ On occasion, a voyageur could be whipped for delinquency.¹⁷⁶ Bourgeois and clerks sometimes played upon the fear of starvation as a means of asserting authority over their men.¹⁷⁷

In cases of severe dereliction bourgeois had the power to fire their employees.¹⁷⁸ In some cases, voyageurs were happy to be let go as they desired to become freemen, as in the case with Joseph Constant, whom Nelson fired for his "fits of ill humour without cause."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷³ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 329, Saturday, 15 June 1793.

¹⁷⁴ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 373-4, Saturday, 29 June 1793.

¹⁷⁵ MRB, MC, C.12, Microfilm reel #6, Charles McKenzie, "Some Account of the Missouri Indians in the years 1804, 5, 6 & 7", addressed to Roderick McKenzie, 1809, 41. Photostat and typescript copies can be found in NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 59, Microfilm reel #C-15640 and OA, NWCC, MU2204, Vol. 3 and MU2200 Box 5 - 4 (a), and the account is published by W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, eds., *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818; The narratives of John Macdonell, David Thompson, François-Antoine Larocque, and Charles McKenzie*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

¹⁷⁶ For one example see McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, Saturday, 22 November 1800.

¹⁷⁷ Nelson, Journal No. 1, 43, Saturday, 17 November 1809.

¹⁷⁸ Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda", 8, Friday, 10 February 1815; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries", 235, Tuesday, 2 April 1805.

¹⁷⁹ George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake", (notes made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Thursday, 10 May 1821, 14-15. Constant had been threatening to desert the service for years, and he did make arrangements with another bourgeois, William Connolly, to leave the service. *ibid.*, Thursdays, 10 and 24 May 1821, 14-15, 20.

However, it was a very serious matter when voyageurs decided to quit. Bourgeois made efforts to recoup deserters, and could punish deserters with confinement.¹⁸⁰

Relations between masters and voyageurs were often tense, and on rare occasions violence erupted. The usual difficulties of the weather, accidents, and the constant challenge of the strenuous work could lead to high levels of stress and to anxieties among masters and voyageurs. Voyageurs' blunders, lost and broken equipment, and voyageur insolence often resulted in tense situations.¹⁸¹ Alexander Henry the Younger grew frustrated with one of his men named Desmarrais for not protecting the buffalo he shot from wolves. He grumbled:

My servant is such a careless, indolent fellow that I cannot trust the storehouse to his care. I made to-day a complete overhaul, and found everything in the greatest confusion; I had no idea matters were so bad as I found them.... Like most of his countrymen, he is much more interested for himself than for his employer.¹⁸²

Mutual resentments could lead to brawls between the masters and servants.¹⁸³

More typically tensions in the masters and servant relationship were expressed in nastiness and unfairness, rather than violence. Motivated by the desire to save money and gain the maximum benefit from their workers, bourgeois and clerks pushed their men to work very hard, which could result in ill-will. Most serious cases of ill will and injustice concerned bourgeois selling goods to voyageurs at inflated prices and encouraging voyageurs to go into

¹⁸⁰ "The Diary of Hugh Faries", 206, Sunday, 26 August 1804.

¹⁸¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 114, 9 October 1800.

¹⁸² Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 99-100, 18-19 September 1800.

¹⁸³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 166-7.

debt as soon as they entered fur trade service. It is difficult to find many instances of "bad faith" in bourgeois' own writings, as they would not likely dwell on their cruelty as masters, or reveal their unfair tricks. However, travellers, critics of fur trade companies, and disgruntled employees provide clues. Recall the charges of the French Duke de La Rouchefoucault Liancourt and Lord Selkirk that the NWC deliberately tried to ensure that their men went into debt by encouraging them to drink and throw their money away on "luxuries" and then charging their men highly inflated prices for these goods.¹⁸⁴

Voyageur responses to master cruelty could reach intense heights in the ongoing countertheatre of resistance. Ill will between servants and masters could impede work. Sometimes the tensions were so strong that voyageurs refused to share the food they hunted and fished with their masters.¹⁸⁵ The more outrageous instances of masters abusing servants could lead to collective resistance among the voyageurs, in the form of strikes or mass desertion. When a voyageur named Joseph Leveillé was condemned by the Montreal Quarter Sessions to the pillory for having accepted the wages of two rival fur-trading firms in 1794, a riot ensued. A group made up largely of voyageurs hurled the pillory into the St. Lawrence River and threatened to storm the prison. The prisoner was eventually released and no one was punished for the incident.¹⁸⁶ Voyageurs seemed to have developed a reputation for mob

¹⁸⁴ *Voyages dans l'Amerique par la Rouchefoucauld Liancourt*, Vol. II, 225, Paris, An. 7.; cited by Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade*, 36-7; Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade*, 32-47.

¹⁸⁵ Nelson, "A Daily Memoranda", 17-18, 40-1, Thursday, 9 March 1815, Tuesday, 23 May 1815 and Wednesday, 24 May 1815.

¹⁸⁶ NAC, 'Civil Secretary's Letter Books, 1788-1829', RG7, G15C, vol. 2, CO42, vol. 100, Sheriff Edward Gray to Attorney General James Monk, 9 June 1794; J. Reid to same, 12 June 1794; T.A. Coffin to James McGill, 21 July 1794; cited by F. Murray Greenwood, *Legacies of Fear: Law and Politics in Quebec in the Era of the French Revolution*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 80, 285.

belligerence in Lower Canada. Attorney general Jonathan Sewell warned in a 1795 letter to Lieutenant Colonel Beckworth that officers in Lower Canada should be given greater discretionary power to counter the "riotous inclinations" of the people, especially of the "lawless band" of voyageurs.¹⁸⁷ Instances of mass riots or collective resistance were not unknown in New France and Lower Canada. However, the small population, diffuse work settings, and not too unreasonable seigneurial dues usually restricted expressions of discontent to individual desertions or localized conflicts.¹⁸⁸ Yet, the instances of collective action could have created a precedent and memory for further mass protest.¹⁸⁹ On occasion voyageurs deserted en masse during cargo transports or exploration missions. In these cases their tasks were difficult and dangerous, and men worked closely together in large groups, performing essentially the same type of work. Communication, the development of a common attitude to work, and camaraderie fostered a collective consciousness and encouraged collective action. In the summer 1794 a Montreal brigade at Lac La Pluie attempted to strike for higher wages. Duncan McGillivray explained:

A few discontented persons in their Band, wishing to do as much mischief as possible assembled their companions together several times on the Voyage Outward & represented to them how much their Interest suffered by the

¹⁸⁷ NAC, Jonathan Sewell Papers, MG23 GII10, Volume 9, 4613-14, Jonathan Sewell to Lieutenant Colonel Beckworth, 28 July 1795. Donald Fyson brought this reference to my attention.

¹⁸⁸ Terence Crowley, "Thunder Gusts: Popular Disturbances in Early French Canada," (first published in *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers* 1979, 11-31), 105-6, 114-17; and Jean-Pierre Hardy et David-Thierry Ruddel, *Les Apprentis Artisans à Québec, 1660-1815*, (Québec: Les Presses de L'Université du Québec, 1977), 74-80.

¹⁸⁹ Jean-Pierre Wallot, *Un Québec qui Bougeait: trame socio-politique du Québec au tournant du XIXe siècle*, (Montréal: Boréal, 1973), 266-7.

passive obedience to the will of their masters, when their utility to the Company, might insure them not only of better treatment, but of any other conditions which they would prescribe with Spirit & Resolution.

When they arrived at Lac La Pluie the brigade demanded higher wages and threatened to return to Montreal without the cargo. The bourgeois initially prevailed upon a few of the men to abandon the strike. Soon after most of the men went back to work, and the ringleaders were sent to Montreal in disgrace.¹⁹⁰

Efforts at collective action in the north west did not always end in failure. In his third expedition to Missouri Country in the fall of 1805 and winter of 1806, Charles McKenzie's crew of four men deserted. They had been lodged with Black Cat, a chief in a Mandan Village, who summoned McKenzie to his tent to inform McKenzie of their desertion. The men had traded away all of their property to the Natives and intended to do the same to McKenzie's property, but Black Cat secured it. When McKenzie declared he would punish his men, Black Cat warned that the Natives would defend the voyageurs. When McKenzie tried to persuade the men to return to service, they would not yield.¹⁹¹ Men who spent their winters in the *pays d'en haut* became a skilled and highly valued labourforce who felt entitled to fair working conditions, and were not afraid to work together to pressure the bourgeois.¹⁹²

Despite the occasions of mass actions, voyageurs more often acted individually than

¹⁹⁰ Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1929), 6-7.

¹⁹¹ Charles McKenzie, "Some Account of the Missouri Indians," 72, 77-8.

¹⁹² MRB, MC, C.5, Microfilm reel #5, abridged version on Microfilm reel #6, 75, 79, Alexander Henry the Younger, travels in the Red River Department, 1806, Saturday, 26 July 1806 and Thursday, 7 August 1806.

collectively. Their most powerful bargaining chip in labour relations was the option of desertion. The decision to desert could be caused by any number of poor working conditions, such as bad food, an unfair master, and difficult journeys. Voyageurs used desertion often as a means of improving their working conditions rather than quitting their jobs. Although bourgeois took voyageurs to court for deserting their contracts, the measure had little effect as voyageurs continued to desert anyway. The option to desert acted as a safety valve, relieving pressure from the master and servant relationship. If voyageurs were very unhappy with their master, they could leave to work for another company, return to Lower Canada or become freemen. This safety valve worked against a collective voyageur consciousness. Collective action was also hindered because voyageurs seemed to idealize freedom and independence.¹⁹³

Some permanent deserters maintained a casual relationship with fur trading companies, serving the occasional limited contract, or selling furs and provisions. One man, Brunet, was forced to desert because his Native wife insisted on it. He rejoined the company under a freer contract. His wife began again to pressure him to desert the company and live with the Natives, presumably her relatives.¹⁹⁴ Another man named Vivier decided to quit his contract in November 1798 because he could not stand living with the Natives, as he was ordered to do by his bourgeois, John Thomson:

he says that he cannot live any longer with them & that all the devils in Hell cannot make him return, & that he prefers marching all Winter from one Fort to another rather than Live any Longer with them-

¹⁹³ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 236-7.

¹⁹⁴ Nelson, Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, 22-3, Monday, 31 January 1804, Monday, 14 February 1804, Tuesday, 15 February 1804, and Thursday 17 February 1804.

Thomson refused to give him provisions or equipment because in the fall he had provided him with enough to pass the winter. Thomson was frustrated with his behaviour all season, as he had refused to return to the fort when ordered. Vivier had become so disenchanted with the trade that he offered his wife and child to another voyageur, so he could return to Canada, but his wife protested. Thomson finally agreed to provide him with ammunition, tobacco and an axe on credit, and Vivier left the post. It is unclear whether he remained with his Native family. A month and a half later Vivier returned to the post, and appeared to take up work again.¹⁹⁵ Voyageurs may have returned to work for fur trade companies because they could not find enough to eat, or desired the protection that a post provided. Fear of starvation and the dangers of the north west may have discouraged voyageurs from deserting in the first place. In one case, Alexander Henry came across a pond where Andre Garreau, a NWC deserter, had been killed in 1801 with five Mandans by a Swiss party.¹⁹⁶

Concluding Remarks

Despite the efforts of the bourgeois to impose a system of organization on the Montreal fur trade, the terms of work for voyageurs were not fixed. The changing needs of the fur trade companies and the habitants led to fluctuations in recruitment, engagements and wages. The instability in the system was probably key to providing the flexibility necessary to the growth of the fur trade companies, especially in the context of the fierce competition for furs in the interior. Throughout the period leading up to the merger, the number of voyageurs

¹⁹⁵ John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798", Sunday, 18 November 1798, Monday, 19 November 1798, Tuesday, 20 November 1798, and Friday, 4 January 1799, 19-24.

¹⁹⁶ Henry, *Travels in the Red River Department*, 50, Wednesday, 23 July 1806.

employed in the service increased at a fairly steady rate to reach its peak of about 3000 by 1821.

Although it is difficult to quantify the occurrence of turbulence and accommodation in the relations between masters and servants, negotiations over acceptable labour conditions dominated the north west fur trade. Masters controlled the workforce by ensuring that all men immediately became indebted to their company, and by being the sole providers of European goods in the interior. Masters also capitalized on the risk-taking and tough masculine ethos to encourage a profitable work pace. However, their best way to maintain order was to impress their men with their personal authority, which was generated by a strong manner, bravery, and effectiveness. Formal symbols, such as dress, ritual celebrations, access to better provisions, and a lighter work load reminded voyageurs of the superior status and power of their bourgeois. This "theatre of daily rule" helped to lay out the substance of the hegemonic structure of paternal authority. Masters also turned to the courts to prosecute their men for breaches of contract, and attempted to cooperate with other companies to regulate the workforce, but these methods were far from successful in controlling their voyageurs. The "social contract" overshadowed the legal contract between masters and servants, and establishing an effective working relationship was key to ensuring a well-functioning trade and high profits.

In turn, voyageurs asserted their cultural autonomy and resisted master authority in their own "countertheatre" in an effort to shape the working environment. Voyageurs generally had very high performance standards for work, which were bolstered by masculine ideals of strength, endurance, and risk-taking. Nonetheless, voyageurs created a space to

continually challenge the expectations of their masters, in part through their complaining. They also set their own pace, demanded adequate and even generous diets, refused to work in bad weather, and frequently worked to rule. When masters made unreasonable demands or failed to provide adequate provisions, voyageurs responded by working more slowly, becoming insolent, and occasionally freetrading and stealing provisions. More extreme expressions of discontent included turning to the Lower Canadian courts for justice, but, like the bourgeois, voyageurs found that their demands were better met by challenging the social, rather than the legal, contract. Their strongest bargaining chip proved to be deserting the service, which they sometimes did en masse. Overall, voyageurs tended to act more individually than collectively, as the option to desert the service acted more as a safety valve against the development of a collective voyageur consciousness.

The master and servant relationship was a fragile balance, constantly being negotiated. Ruling-class domination was an on-going process, where the degree of legitimation was always uneven and the creation of counterhegemonies remained a live option. E.P. Thompson's emphasis on theatre and the symbolic expression of hegemony ring true for the voyageurs and masters, whose power struggles were as often about respect and authority as about decent wages and provisions.¹⁹⁷ The difficult working conditions, regular fear of starvation and absence of a police force positioned labour mediation in the forefront of the trade, and strengthened the symbolic power of the "theatre of daily rule". The "social contract" between the masters and servants overshadowed their legal contract, and determined the day-to-day relations between the two groups. Frequently, accommodation

¹⁹⁷ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 74-5.

allowed the fur trade to run smoothly, as voyageurs and bosses cooperated, especially in the face of external threats. Yet just as often, labour disputes and power struggles characterized the trade.

Chapter 3

"A voyageur's life is any thing but an easy one":

Work in the Canoe

Voyageurs' lives were primarily informed by work. They worked for their masters, labouring for the successful functioning of the trade, and they also worked to ensure their survival and maximize their personal comfort in a harsh environment. The major means of transportation in the fur trade was by canoe. The severe physical toil of canoeing, portaging, loading and unloading ladings dominated voyageur culture, and required a wide range of skills, much courage, endurance and resourcefulness. Voyageurs were stereotyped by the fur trade literate as "beasts of burden," who would simply obey their masters, and perform feats requiring brute strength and endurance. However, by closely examining their actual working routines, we see that voyageurs were competent, highly skilled labourers, who performed a range of tasks, which required organization, skill and dexterity. Many labour historians have explored the social construction of skill, especially in regards to presumably unskilled workers, such as loggers, shantymen or sailors. Often certain jobs became labelled as unskilled because there was a large pool of men who had learned certain manual skills in boyhood, especially on farms.¹ This was true of voyageurs. They developed the strength and skill to pack and carry goods while growing up on farms, and could quickly learn paddling

¹ See Stephen Wood, ed., *The Degradation of Work?: Skill, Deskilling and the Labour Process*, (London: Hutchinson, 1982); Ken C. Kusterer, *Know-How on the Job: The Important Working Knowledge of 'Unskilled' Workers*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1978); Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986); and Ian Radforth, "The Shantymen," In *Labouring Lives: Work and Workers in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, edited by Paul Craven, 204-76, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

techniques while on board the canoes. The post-Conquest British bourgeois may have viewed voyageurs as somehow “innately” suited to this difficult job because of the long tradition of fur trading in New France. Since the beginning of the French colony, settlers in the St. Lawrence valley had been *coureurs de bois* and voyageurs. The British bourgeois probably thought that long tradition was ingrained in all French Canadian men.

As farmers in the St. Lawrence valley, voyageurs were not unaccustomed to grinding toil, and dealing with the tribulations of weather and the land. Although setting out to work in the unknown northwest was more psychologically as well as physically challenging than farming, their experiences in the St. Lawrence valley provided some means of preparation. Like their lives on their farms along the St. Lawrence, the working lives of voyageurs followed seasonal patterns.² In the summer months, when waterways were free of ice, voyageurs worked at a frenetic pace, transporting goods and furs to and from Montreal, interior depots and far flung posts. In the winter months, at a slightly more relaxed pace, voyageurs built and maintained posts, established trading and social ties with Native peoples, and built up food stocks of pemmican, and dried meat and fish. This chapter will explore the working patterns of voyageurs during their intense summer canoe voyages.

There is no question that the job of voyageurs was difficult. They were hired to perform near miraculous feats of transporting goods and furs over immense distances and challenging canoe routes. Colonel George Landmann described the work of voyageurs in the late 18th century:

² Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 33.

No men in the world are more severely worked than are these Canadian voyageurs. I have known them to work in a canoe twenty hours out of twenty-four, and go on at that rate during a fortnight or three weeks without a day of rest of any diminution of labour; but it is not with impunity they so exert themselves; they lose much flesh in the performance of such journies, though the quantity of food they consume is incredible.³

Although this is probably an exaggeration, it reflects the extent to which voyageurs' jobs were considered difficult. They paddled for long days through all sorts of challenging rivers and lakes, and carried the loadings over numerous and difficult portages. Voyageurs took pride in difficult feats of strength, endurance and daring, which led to a ground of accommodation between the workers and employers. Yet they exerted some control over the pace of work. They organized time in a particular way, both in terms of hours and days. Weather, tasks, daily needs, and leisure, such as pipe smoking, determined the pace of the work.

Routes

The trade extended vast distances in North America, and bourgeois constantly explored new ground further west and north, especially during the period of increasing competition between the Montreal-based companies and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The immense transportation route was divided into two parts. The first comprised the routes between Montreal and the major provisioning centres on Lake Superior, Grand Portage until

³ George Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections of Colonel Landmann, Late of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, (London, Colburn and Co., 1852), 1: 309.

1804, when it moved 50 miles north to Fort Kaministiquia, renamed Fort William.⁴ This part of the transportation system had two major routes. The first was up the St. Lawrence River and through the Great Lakes, passing by centres such as York on the north shore of Lake Ontario, Niagara in between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, Detroit in between Lake Erie and Lake Huron, Michilimackinac in between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, and Sault Ste. Marie in between Lake Huron and Lake Superior (see Map 1). Most of the route was up-river, against the current. Lake schooners and sloops came to be used on the Great Lakes by the early 18th century to help transport goods and provisions.⁵ The second was up the Ottawa or Grand River, then west along the Mattawa River, across Lake Nipissing and along the French River, to Georgian Bay and Lake Huron and finally through to Lake Superior (see Map 1).⁶ Most of this route was upstream when travelling west (although the section between Lake Nipissing and Georgian Bay was downstream). It was thus much faster to travel east to Montreal than it was to travel west to the interior. For both routes, crews canoed along the north shore of Lake Superior, which involved a set of challenges and skills distinct from river travel. Rather than dealing with currents and portages, crews had to monitor wind, waves and

⁴ In its first four years Fort William was called Fort Kaministiquia because it was built on the Kaministiquia River, but it was renamed to honour of William McGillivray, who replaced Simon McTavish as the head of the North West Company in 1804. Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *The North West Company*, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), 128, 138, 160.

⁵ Victor P. Lytwyn, "Transportation in the Petit Nord," Plate 63, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume 1, From the Beginning to 1800*, edited by R. Cole Harris, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956; first published Yale University Press, 1930), 222; Clairborne Skinner, "The Sinews of Empire: The Voyageurs and the Carrying Trade of the 'Pays d'en Haut', 1681-1754," Ph.D. thesis, (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago, 1991), 200-5; and E. E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 188.

⁶ For a detailed description of this route see Eric W. Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada/ Then and Now*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 48-70.

tides.

The second major part of the Montreal fur trade transportation system operated out of Grand Portage and Fort William, and spread out thousands of miles west, north and south to the interior fur trade posts (see Map 2). The portage at the western point of Lake Superior was between eight and ten miles (at various locations) and took about fifteen days to cross. The height of land was passed just west of Lake Superior, after which travel westward was with the current. Travel to the interior thus was faster than the return to Lake Superior because it was mainly downstream. The internal continental and localized drainage systems into Hudson Bay, and the Arctic and Pacific Oceans complicated routes.⁷

Routes to different departments varied. The easiest posts to reach were those around the Great Lakes, Lake Nipigon and the region north of Lake Superior, but most brigades were sent out far to the north and west, especially as regions closer to the Great Lakes became over-trapped after 1805.⁸ These brigades travelled to Fort Alexander, or Fond du Lac, where the Winnipeg River flowed into Lake Winnipeg. Various routes led through the Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods river systems before entering the Winnipeg River.⁹ Fort Alexander

⁷ For drainage systems see "Canada: Écoulement Fluvial," *L'Atlas National du Canada*, 5th edition, (Ottawa: Environment Canada; Energy, Mines and Resources, 1993). For fur trade routes in the interior see Arthur J. Ray, D. Wayne Moodie, and Conrad E. Heidenreich "Rupert's Land," Plate 57, and D. Wayne Moodie, Victor P. Lytwyn, Barry Kaye, and Arthur J. Ray, "Competition and Consolidation, 1760-1825", Plate 61, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume 1, From the Beginning to 1800*, edited by R. Cole Harris, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); and D. Wayne Moodie, Barry Kaye, and Victor Lytwyn, "The Fur Trade Northwest to 1870," Plate 17, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume II, The Land Transformed, 1800-1891*, edited by R. Louis Gentilcore, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

⁸ Victor P. Lytwyn, *The Fur Trade of the Little North: Indians, Peddlars, and Englishmen East of Lake Winnipeg, 1760-1821*, (Winnipeg: Rupert's Land Research Centre, 1986), v; and "Transportation in the Petit Nord," Plate 63, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume 1, From the Beginning to 1800*, edited by R. Cole Harris, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

⁹ For a detailed description of canoe routes in the area between Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg see Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur's Highway: Minnesota's Border Lake Land*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical

acted as an interior depot, and as a hub for interior travel. The main routes which set out from Fort Alexander included southwards up the Red River to Pembina and the Missouri Country, and west along the Assiniboine River; to the northern tip of Lake Winnipeg, west along the Saskatchewan River, following both the south and north branches; and further north from Cumberland House along the Churchill or English River to the Athabasca district (see Map 2).

The job of working in canoes was divided into two separate parts which mirrored the division in the organization of the trade. Some men were hired to work in the first leg of the journey, between Montreal and Grand Portage or Fort William at the western tip of Lake Superior, and worked only during months when the waterways were free of ice. These men were referred to as *mangeurs de lard*, or Porkeaters, because their provisions consisted of pork, wheat and oatmeal. The term, however, was usually used in a derogatory way, underscoring that these "novices" were considered weaker and less adventurous than the men who worked in the interior. From these men a group went on to become *hommes du nord*, or Northmen, who worked as canoe-men in the interior year-round. The composition of these two workforces was different, but their jobs were similar. Both groups had only the brief summer months, when waterways were free of ice, to transport large loadings over vast distances in difficult terrain. *Mangeurs de lard* used bigger canoes because they travelled in more substantial waterways; and thus worked in larger crews. They had less invested in their relations with bosses and each other than did the *hommes du nord* because the work was temporary. Unlike *hommes du nord*, *mangeurs de lard* did not hunt or seldom traded along

Society (hereafter MHS), 1941), 11-18; and Skinner, "The Sinews of Empire," 282-96.

their journeys, as they carried most of their provisions with them, or stocked up at large posts along the way; their days thus consisted of longer periods of uninterrupted travel.

Despite the differences between these two workforces, an absolute boundary should not be drawn between the two. The Northmen started their voyageur careers as Porkeaters, and men often moved back and forth between the two groups. Some Northmen started their work in Montreal, with the Porkeaters, and some Porkeaters' journeys stretched partially into the interior beyond the inland administrative centre on Lake Superior. These two occupational categories were distinct, but they were in a dynamic relationship, one defining the other, and thus remained connected. Not only did Northmen become trained in the service while they were Porkeaters, but their tough reputations depended on comparing them to the less experienced Porkeaters.

Rates of Travel

Waterways in the north west were free of ice for about five months of the year. Canoe brigades had to complete their return trips to Lake Superior from either Montreal or the interior post in that time. Transporting lading the 3000 miles between Athabasca and Montreal was taxing.¹⁰ The longer the trip, the faster the men were obliged to travel to beat the ice.

Rates of travel varied tremendously. The small and light express canoes, which carried mail as their only lading, travelled the fastest. Canoe speed was also affected by the size of the lading: the more heavily packed the canoe, the slower its speed. For this reason,

¹⁰ Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes*, 20.

smaller north canoes, or *canots du nord*, generally tended to travel more quickly than the larger master canoes, or *canots du maître*, used on the Great Lakes run, but the master canoes could better withstand the waves and strong currents of large rivers and lakes. The *canots du maître* were usually 30 feet in length, but could be up to 36 feet, and from four to six feet wide in the middle. The *canots du nord* were smaller, usually 20 to 27 feet in length, and could carry a little more than half the cargo of a *canot du maître*. Sometimes voyageurs used a *canot bâtard*, or bastard canoe, which was larger than a north canoe but smaller than a master canoe, and was appropriate for either lakes or rivers.¹¹ One type of bastard canoe was between 29 and 33 feet long, with crews between six and eight. A second type of bastard canoe was between eighteen and 24 feet long with crews between two and four.¹² Canoe speed was determined by whether travel was with or against the current, and the number of rapids and portages along the route. Weather was the most unpredictable variable, as strong winds and rain could slow and often halt brigades during their journeys. Low water levels in dry years slowed travel, and increased the number of portages. If crew members were ill or injured, crews were slowed by the decrease in manpower, and were sometimes grounded until wounds healed and illnesses passed, or replacement paddlers could be found. Finally, canoes generally travelled faster at the beginning of the transport season, when crews were still fresh from of a winter of relative rest. It was thus fortunate for the men working the

¹¹ Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur*, (New York: Appleton, 1931), 24.

¹² Montreal; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB); Masson Collection (hereafter MC); C.20; Microfilm reel #22; "Some account of the Department of Fond du Lac or Mississippi by George Monk"; 7; George Monk, "A Description of Northern Minnesota by a Fur Trade in 1807," edited by Grace Lee Nute, *Minnesota History*, 5 (1923: 28-39), 33; and Michel Curot, "A Wisconsin Fur Trader's Journal, 1803-04," in *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, 20: 396-471, (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1911), 18 and 20 May 1804, 468.

Great Lakes routes, as their journey to Lake Superior was against the current, while their journey back to Montreal at the end of the season was with the current. The interior brigades were not so fortunate, as most of their journeys to Lake Superior were with the current, while their journey back to the interior was against the current.

Bourgeois Peter Grant estimated that *canots du nord* travelled an average of six miles an hour, but could increase their speed to eight or nine miles an hour when the men put up a sail in a good wind.¹³ At these rates voyageurs could travel between about 75 and 125 miles a day, but portaging would likely have reduced this to an average maximum of 50 miles a day, provided weather was optimal for travel. Fur trade historian Clairborne Skinner speculates that 17th-century fur trading canoes could, at best, travel twenty miles a day, and often as little as twelve miles a day.¹⁴ However, in 1793, John Macdonell records travelling as much as 24 leagues in a day in a *canot du maitre*, with fourteen paddlers and little cargo. Editor Charles Gates asserts that canoemen used the term league to refer to two miles; Macdonell's estimate would thus be close to 50 miles in a day.¹⁵ Skinner's dramatically lower estimates may be confined to the routes between Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg, which had more (and more onerous) portages than most other routes. At the generous estimate of 50 miles a day, canoes could travel about 1500 miles in a month, provided every day had ideal weather, which was unlikely. Eric Morse asserts that a freight or master canoe could only do 1000

¹³ Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Louis R.F. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, first published 1889-90), 2: 313-14.

¹⁴ Skinner, "The Sinews of Empire," 217.

¹⁵ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, (St. Paul: MHS, 1965), 5 July 1793, 90 and note 12, 72.

miles per month at best.¹⁶ Crews travelling to the farthest outposts in the Athabasca and Rocky Mountain districts had to travel more than 4000 miles in the months when the waterways were free.¹⁷ Every day had to count in the race to beat the winter freeze.

Men employed in the Great Lakes run were usually away from Montreal for five months, the length of time in which waterways were free.¹⁸ The trip from Montreal to Grand Portage and Fort William averaged a month and a half to two months. The return trip to Montreal was much faster, travelling with the current, and averaged three weeks to a month. In June 1800 George Landmann set out to break the record for the journey from St. Joseph's Island near Detroit to Montreal, which had been set by Simon McTavish at seven and three quarters days. After purchasing a new canoe, hiring the best men available, including a famous guide for the Ottawa River, and taking a full load himself at portages, Landmann was able to perform the journey in seven and one quarter days.¹⁹ Those men whose yearly trips were shorter spent the extra time during the summer sorting and packing the goods and furs at the Grand Portage and Fort William.

Interior canoes left Lake Superior in mid July, and the longest distance to travel was to the Athabasca district; these brigades usually shortened their journey by using the Rainy Lake post as the terminus, rather than Lake Superior, which saved about ten days. The trip from Rainy Lake to the next inland administrative centre at Fort Alexander, or Bas de la

¹⁶ Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada*, 20.

¹⁷ Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, 189.

¹⁸ George Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas, Containing a Description of the Picturesque Scenery on Some of the Rivers and Lakes; with an Account of the Productions, Commerce, and Inhabitants of those Provinces*, (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1813), 246-8.

¹⁹ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 167-69.

Rivière at the mouth of Lake Winnipeg averaged about a week.²⁰ Trips eastward were usually faster than trips west. The journey from Fort Vermillion on the North Saskatchewan River to Fort William could take a month.²¹ The journey from Cumberland, at the north end of Lake Winnipeg, to Rainy Lake averaged about ten days.²²

Canoes

Securing canoes for transport was a vital part of the trade. Very few voyageurs or bourgeois became expert canoe-makers, thus most of the canoes were purchased, either from canoe "shops" in Canada, or more regularly from Native peoples in the north west. Brigades setting out from Montreal purchased canoes from manufacturers in Montreal and Trois Rivières.²³ Bourgeois sometimes built up a store of canoes and *batteaux* at the point of departure in La Chine.²⁴ Other canoes were built at posts in the *pays d'en haut*, such as at the island of St. Joseph near Michilimackinac, Sault Ste. Marie, Grand Portage and Fort

²⁰ J. B. MacGregor, *John Rowand: Czar of the Prairies*, (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), 3.

²¹ Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 2: 509.

²² Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room (hereafter MRL, BR); S13; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822, (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 20 June 1822.

²³ Roderick McKenzie, Esq., "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West," in Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 35; Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 222; and Denys Delâge, "L'influence des Amérindiens sur les Canadiens et les Français au temps de la Nouvelle-France," *Lekton*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Automne 1992: 103-91, 280-91), 111.

²⁴ Ottawa; National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC); MG24 H1; William Bentinck Papers; Journals kept during a trip from Montreal to Niagara and the return trip, 1800 and from Montreal to Washington and the return trip in 1801; 3.

William.²⁵ In the interior, canoes were procured from Native people, who were often hired specifically to build them.²⁶ Foremen or steersmen were sometimes allowed to choose which canoe they wanted when a brigade came upon many canoes for sale en route. For example, Duncan McGillivray records that when they found nine canoes in Lake Siginigan, "after our foreman had chosen one for himself, the Men cast lots for the rest to avoid jealousy and confusion."²⁷

The skill of building canoes was highly valued and some men were held in high regard for this talent. Because canoes were damaged frequently, most men became proficient at repairing them. However, few men became specialized canoe-makers. The fur trade literate frequently wrote about being in need of more or stronger canoes.²⁸ In May 1806, after spending a day taking apart a canoe, re-gumming and re-setting it, only to find it still leaked, Simon Fraser complained:

This is the new canoe that La Malice made at Trout Lake. it is not only ill made but the bark is very bad. I have the canoe I came off with from Lac la Pluie last summer which is not much better than the other. It was a good canoe but got much spoiled last Fall in the ice at Trout Lake and afterwards going

²⁵ Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes, of the Character and Customs of the Chippeway Indians, and of Incidents Connected With The Treaty of Fond Du Lac*, (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1959, first published 1827), 8 July 1826, 201; and Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 22.

²⁶ On purchasing canoes see McKenzie, "A General History," 53; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26 July 1800, 14; and Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 2: 3 June 1800, 168.

²⁷ Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1929), 2 August 1794, 6.

²⁸ Toronto; Ontario Archives (hereafter OA); Duncan Clark Papers, Vol. 2; MU 572; R. Mckenzie, Pic to Duncan Clark, Long Lake, 1 May 1825, 3 (in the note at the bottom).

down the Portage and I could not get it renewed this spring for the want of a canoe maker.²⁹

Canoes were on occasion stashed along a route when they were no longer needed, or stored for the winter. For example, on Riviere des Sauleaux, in the fall of 1803, George Nelson had his men hide their canoes in a swamp until the following spring, when they would be used again.³⁰ Unfortunately canoes sometimes did not last through the winter, as they became damaged by animals or the elements.³¹

Canoes were generally made from birchbark, sewn together in large pieces with wattape, or spruce roots, and stretched over a wooden frame, which could be made from birch, spruce or cedar, or whatever was available. The seams were sealed with gum from spruce or pine.³² Although canoes were light and seemingly flimsy, they could carry a tremendous weight, *canots du maître* even up to five tonnes and *canots du nord* up to a tonne and a half.³³ Long poles called *grands-perches*, three to four inches in diameter, were laid along the bottom of the canoes, across the ribs, to help distribute the weight of the cargo and

²⁹ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Appendix B, *Public Archives Report for 1929*, 109-45, (transcript from a copy at University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Collection, Pacific Coast Mss., Series C, No. 16; copy also at NAC, MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, Vol. 4; originals at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Wednesday and Thursday, 21-22 May 1806, 122.

³⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Saturday, 3 September 1803, 8.

³¹ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Thursday, 12 September 1805, 2 (I added page numbers).

³² For a description of canoe construction see C.E.S. Franks, *The canoe and white water: from essential to sport*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 9.

³³ W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), Tuesday, 15 July 1800, 23, on a trip from Grand Portage to Fort des prairies (Fort Charlotte) in summer 1800, 2 canoes carried a ton and a half burden each, manned with 6 men.

crew evenly. Men sat on rolled-up blankets while they paddled.³⁴ Although the design and construction of canoes was copied from Native technology, fur traders' canoes were larger than Natives' canoes, and designed to carry far more lading.³⁵

Traders piled their canoes high with cargo.³⁶ Aside from the men and loadings of trade goods and furs, the canoes also carried provisions and maintenance equipment. The usual load for a *canot du maître* was about 60-65 packs, each weighing 90 pounds.³⁷ *Canots du nord* heading from Grand Portage into the interior carried about 35 packs, about 70% of which were trade goods, the other 30% being provisions, stores and baggage. Alexander Mackenzie described the contents of a late 18th-century brigade leaving Lachine, headed for the interior. Each canoe contained the men's baggage and 65 packages of goods. In addition, each had 600 weight of biscuit, 200 weight of pork, and three bushels of pease for the men's provisions.³⁸

The complement of goods was completed with two oil-cloths to cover the goods, a sail, an axe, a towing line, a kettle, and a sponge to bail water, with a quantity of gum, bark and wattape, to repair the vessel. Passenger Colonel George Landmann remarked upon how

³⁴ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: spring 1798, 303; William Bentinck Papers; Journals kept during a trip from Montreal to Niagara and the return trip, 1800 and from Montreal to Washington and the return trip in 1801; 1; McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*, 199-200; Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada*, 22-4; and Franks, *The canoe and white water*, 18-20.

³⁵ Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Louis R.F. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, first published 1889-90), 2: 313-14.

³⁶ McKenzie, "A General History," 35, 54.

³⁷ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, May 1793, 67-8 and footnote 45, 88; and Mackenzie, "A General History," 35.

³⁸ McKenzie, "A General History," 35, 54. Also see Isaac Weld, Jun., *Travels Through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, 4th Edition, (London: John Stockdale, 1807), 1: 319.

carefully equipment was stowed in the canoes during his 1798 voyage from Montreal to the interior. Packs were placed on the poles laid along the bottom of the boat, so that none touched the fragile bottom or sides of the canoe. In addition to the equipment mentioned by Mackenzie, Landmann noted that voyageurs brought their own ten-foot setting poles and paddles.³⁹

Brigades travelling on the Great Lakes route were made up of from three to six canoes.⁴⁰ In each brigade a captain was responsible for steering and guiding, tending the canoes and property on board, and commanding the men.⁴¹ Crews manning the larger *canots du maître*, used on the Great Lakes run, usually consisted of a guide, steersman, and eight middlemen or paddlers.⁴² Cargoes in a canoe depended on the number of men on board.

George Heriot asserted that:

The [North West] company trading to the north-west sends every year, to the posts on Lake Superior, about fifty canoes loaded with merchandise. Sixty-five pieces of merchandise of ninety pounds each; eight men, each weighing at least one hundred and sixty pounds; baggage allowed to these men, at forty pounds each, together with the weight of their provisions. The whole cargo of a canoe is, therefore, not less than eight thousand three hundred and ninety

³⁹ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 303-4. Also see Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 7.

⁴⁰ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders, May 1793*, 67-68; and Toronto; OA; Hudson's Bay Company Collection (hereafter HBCC); MU 1391; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Sunday, 17 May 1818, 1.

⁴¹ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Tuesday and Wednesday, 29-30 April 1800, 11-12.

⁴² Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 304-5.

pounds.⁴³

A *canot du maître* could be paddled with as few as five paddlers, one clerk and one interpreter when the cargo was particularly bulky, or when labour was in short supply, but could carry up to fourteen men.⁴⁴ *Canots du maître* were not built to a standard size, so instances of larger canoes carrying more men and goods occasionally appear in the sources. For example, on 24 May 1810, Gabriel Franchère, recorded nineteen men-- four bourgeois, one clerk and fourteen men-- travelling in one lightly equipped *canot du maître* from Montreal to Michilimackinac.⁴⁵ On a journey from Fort William to Montreal in the summer of 1814, Gabriel Franchère reported "fourteen stout voyageurs to man our large canoe."⁴⁶

At Grand Portage or Fort William, exchanges of lading were made between the *canots du maître* and smaller *canots du nord* travelling in the interior on smaller waterways. Large brigades of between five and thirteen *canots du nord* left Grand Portage together every fall, and gradually split up as each went their separate ways to different departments.⁴⁷ Crews usually comprised five to six men.⁴⁸ In the early fall of 1808 and 1809, crews travelling from

⁴³ Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 1790, 246-8.

⁴⁴ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Wednesday, 13 July 1803, 1; and Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: spring 1798, 304-5.

⁴⁵ Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1969), 24 May 1810, 44.

⁴⁶ Gabriel Franchère, *A Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, ed. by Milo Milton Quaife, (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1954), 20 June 1814, 272.

⁴⁷ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 3 June 1822; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Tuesday, 26 July 1808, 111; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Thursday, 29 August 1805, 1 (I added page numbers).

⁴⁸ For examples see George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Wednesday, 13 July 1803, and Tuesday, 23 May 1804, 1, 28. Michilimackinac to Riviere des Sauteaux, July 1803, in a "Michilimackinac canoe", 1 clerk, 1 interpreter, 3 men; return trip from Riviere des Sauteaux to Grand Portage, May 1804, in 2 canoes, 10 people, 4 men, 1 clerk, 2 women, 2 children, and one native.

Fort William to various inland posts ranged from four to seven men, including some with their families (see Appendix II: "Crews Travelling Inland from Fort William"). Native or mixed blood wives of voyageurs and bourgeois, and their children, could accompany canoes travelling between interior posts, and on trips to and from Grand Portage or Fort William.⁴⁹ They usually travelled in their own canoes along side the traders, and sometimes helped in gathering provisions for the brigades.

Canoes setting out from Lake Superior heading to the interior travelled in brigades and carried the annual complement of trade goods for their post of destination. Likewise, on return trips from the interior posts to the large administrative centres, canoes also travelled in brigades and carried large cargoes of furs.⁵⁰ Large brigades set out from Fort Astoria or Fort George on the Pacific coast, travelling inland on large trading missions. Part of the reason traders travelled in larger groups on the Pacific coast was that Native peoples tended to be a greater threat than in the continental interior. After the Pacific Fur Company first arrived on the Pacific coast in 1811 and set up Fort George, 102 people on twelve boats headed into the interior to trade.⁵¹ In 1812 a party travelling further inland from Fort Astoria to trade consisted of three proprietors, nine clerks, 55 Canadians, and 20 Sandwich Islanders

⁴⁹ For a couple of examples see the return trip from Riviere des Sauteaux to Grand Portage, May 1804, 2 canoes carried 10 people, 4 men, 1 clerk, 2 women, 2 children, and one native, George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Tuesday, 23 May 1804, 28. In canoes from Fort William 1 clerk and 4 men started out for Broken River; 1 bourgeois, 4 men, 1 guide, 1 interpreter, 4 women, 2 children to for Pigeon River; 1 bourgeois, 1 interpreter, 5 men, 2 women and 4 children for Grand River; and 1 clerk, 4 men and 1 woman for Riviere Dauphine, George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Friday, 2 September 1808, 2 (1 added page numbers).

⁵⁰ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822; (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 20 June 1822.

⁵¹ Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West; A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 1: 78.

(Hawaiians).⁵² A spring brigade in 1814, heading overland from Fort George to Montreal, was made up of ten canoes, each carrying seven men as crew and two passengers, in all 90 people.⁵³ In the spring of 1817, a North West Company (NWC) brigade was made up of 86 people, in two barges and nine canoes, each containing an average of twenty-two 90-pound packages.⁵⁴

Once in the interior, travelling between posts, crew and cargo complements varied considerably. In one brigade of four canoes, travelling from Red River to Pembina in late August 1800, under the charge of Alexander Henry the Younger, crews were made up of two or three paddlers, a bowman, a steersman, and up to three passengers per canoe, including Henry, a clerk, a guide, three wives and three children.⁵⁵ On a trip from Dauphin River to Cumberland in May 1821, one "large" canoe held five men, 25 packs, a trunk, and 25 small kegs. A second canoe following a week later carried seven men, three women and three children.⁵⁶ Despite this kind of variation, *canots du nord* were manned on average by four to five men.⁵⁷

⁵² Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 29 June 1812 and 5 August 1814, 72, 160.

⁵³ Franchère, *A Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, 4 April 1814, 199.

⁵⁴ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 236-7.

⁵⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 21 August 1800, 49-52.

⁵⁶ George Nelson's Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Wednesday, 30 May 1821, 24-6.

⁵⁷ In September 1800, six canoes set out from Fort Chipweyan, three bound for Mackenzie River, one for Marten Lake, and two for Slave Lake; each canoe had four to five men. Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 6; Microfilm reel #C-15638; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; 29 September 1800, 50; and Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 7; Microfilm reel #C-15638; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; 29 September 1800, 1. For other examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 8 July and 24 September 1810, 610, 629-30. Barry Gough translates "ducent" to conductor, bowman or headman. Barry M. Gough, ed., *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1988), I: 23, note 42.

Crews conveying explorers on their journeys tended to be smaller, and more difficult to procure, as the risks were very high, and the work more difficult. Men deserted more frequently than when they worked on regular brigades, especially if the party became short of provisions or threatened by Native people, as they often did. Sometimes men were engaged for easy missions, travelling through known areas, and aiding the bourgeois in finding a better route or new trading areas.⁵⁸ However, men could choose to desert even if the mission was not particularly threatening. In 1806, the NWC sponsored an expedition up the Missouri to establish trade with the Mandan and Hidatsa. Alexander Henry the Younger and Charles Chaboillez travelled with eight other men and 25 horses. On their return, the party lost their horses, and the men became annoyed when they had to carry the cargoes on their backs. Three deserted at Turtle Mountain.⁵⁹

The brigades of Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser exploring the far north and west faced particularly dangerous ordeals. Mackenzie made several attempts in the 1790s to find an overland route to the Pacific Ocean and during his efforts mapped the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean and the Peace River into the interior of the Rocky Mountains. He had endless difficulties trying to retain his men because his expeditions were so tough, and because his voyageurs gained a particular independence and pride from their difficult

⁵⁸ For example, in May 1813, Stuart, six Canadians and two natives embarked aboard two canoes, with a small assortment of goods (for pocket money) and provisions for a month and a half, to find a route by water to the Columbia and to build up the coastal trade. Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday, 13 May 1813, 259.

⁵⁹ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.5; Microfilm reel #5, abridged version on Microfilm reel #6; Alexander Henry the Younger, travels in the Red River Department, 1806; Saturday, 26 July 1806 and Thursday, 7 August 1806, 75, 79; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 7 and 14 July 1806, 185-8, 304; and François-Antoine Larocque's "Yellowstone Journal" in W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, eds., *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818; The narratives of John Macdonell, David Thompson, François-Antoine Larocque, and Charles McKenzie*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 184.

experiences with him.⁶⁰ Often explorers could only find suitable and experienced crews at the interior posts. Simon Fraser set out twelve years later in 1806 to find the route overland to the Pacific, and recruited his crew from Rocky Mountain House and Dunvegan. Families sometimes accompanied exploration brigades, and Native wives especially could provide valuable assistance to the explorers.⁶¹

When canoes travelled together in brigades, a conductor or pilot was appointed to manage the whole brigade. Every person in the brigade was obliged to obey him and he received a higher salary than the others.⁶² The bustle and confusion of many brigades travelling together, especially as they headed out from Grand Portage or Fort William together, called for firm control by the conductors.⁶³ Sometimes brigades held back to allow others to pass them to minimize the confusion and traffic jams.⁶⁴ Canoes in a brigade generally tried to stay as close together as possible. However, if a brigade was in a hurry, they sometimes chose to leave some canoes behind, especially if a canoe was damaged.⁶⁵

Traffic in the interior could be surprisingly heavy. On the main travel routes, such as the Great Lakes run, and from Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg, canoes usually travelled in large groups fairly close to one another. For example, at Fort Alexandra late June and early

⁶⁰ McKenzie, "A General History," 135-6, 265, 325-26.

⁶¹ "First Journal of Simon Fraser," Sunday, 13 April 1806, and Sunday, Wednesday, and Saturday, 11, 14, and 17 May 1806, 109, 118-20.

⁶² McKenzie, "A General History," 54.

⁶³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 11 August 1800, 30-1.

⁶⁴ For one example see Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 24 August 1794, 12.

⁶⁵ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Saturday and Sunday, 22 and 23 June 1822.

July of 1808, within nine days, at least seven brigades passed through or set off from the fort.⁶⁶ Even more minor posts could become quite busy during peak travel seasons. At Fort Dauphin in September 1808, eight canoes arrived in two separate brigades, and stayed to re-pack their goods and make acquaintances with Native people in the area.⁶⁷

Canoes frequently passed each other along the busy routes during the seasons of high travel in spring and fall. In one day on a journey from Grand Portage to Fort Alexandra, Daniel Harmon's brigade was overtaken by the brigade of Charles Chaboillez, and passed three canoes of Iroquois engaged to hunt beaver in the upper Red River area. Three days later his brigade passed by the Athabasca canoes.⁶⁸ On a trip from Fort Alexander to Fort Dauphin in late June 1809, George Nelson passed a freeman named Dubois, seven canoes from Slave Lake, and Simon Fraser with 30 canoes.⁶⁹

Furs traders encountered freemen, métis and Native communities in the interior. The interior was culturally and occupationally diverse, and brigades passed through not an empty wilderness, but through complex societies, all the way from Montreal to the Pacific and Arctic coasts. A lot of people met along the route were integrated in to the fur trade operations. For example, at the village of Hull at La Chaudière Falls, Natives working as

⁶⁶ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Tuesday and Thursday, 28 and 30 June 1808, and Friday to Thursday, 1 to 7 July 1808, 44-6.

⁶⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Thursday and Friday, 1 to 2 September 1808, 1 (I added page numbers).

⁶⁸ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, 22 and 25 July 1800, 25-6. For other examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26 July 1800, 14; Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 30 July 1817, 280; and George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a translation made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 17 June 1822.

⁶⁹ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Monday, 25 June 1809, Friday, 29 June 1809, and Wednesday, 4 July 1809, 26-7 (I added page numbers).

raftsmen contracted out their labour to assist the voyageurs in the portage.⁷⁰ Farther along the Ottawa River at the Longue Sault and Carrillon Rapids, men living along side contracted out their labour to conduct canoes down the rapids.⁷¹ Freeman also regularly sold provisions to voyageurs in the interior.⁷² Robert Seaborne Miles, working for the HBC, met a freeman at the entrance to Lake Nippissing in June 1819, while on his way to Fort Wedderburn in the Athabasca District. He traded biscuit for fish with the freeman, and the freeman informed him that the rest of his brigade had passed by in the morning with their sails set.⁷³ On a trip from the mouth of the Red River to Cumberland House in early September 1819, George Nelson and his crew encountered several freemen-- Lemire, Turner, Montrueil, and Martin-- along Rivière du Pas and Lac Bourbon. The men sold provisions to Nelson's brigade, and shared information on the comings and goings of other NWC brigades.⁷⁴

The main purpose of canoe trips was to transport trade goods to the interior and transport furs to the central administrative posts and eventually to Montreal. This could involve quite complicated plans and arrangements. For example, in a letter to Duncan Clark at the Pic in June 1825, Roderick McKenzie, at Fort William, instructed the bourgeois Clark

⁷⁰ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 15 September 1817, 299-300.

⁷¹ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 1 June 1793, 72.

⁷² MHS, Grace Lee Nute Papers, Folder 7, P791, 1-2, NWC Letters, 1798-1816, Dominique Rousseau and Joseph Bailley v. Duncan McGillivray, (originals from the Judicial Archives of Montreal); Montreal; MRB; MC; C.24; Microfilm reel #2; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Wed, 6 May 1801, 36; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 28 June 1803, 219.

⁷³ Toronto; OA; HBCC; MU 1391; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Saturday, 6 June 1818, 7.

⁷⁴ George Nelson's "Journal from Bas De La Riviere to Cumberland House, 1819-?", also entitled "Journal B", 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819 (notes taken from a transcript made by Sylvia Van Kirk; this journal is a continuation of George Nelson's Journal found in the OA, MU 842); Wednesday to Saturday, 1 to 4 September 1819, 4-5 (I added page numbers).

on the coming season's trade and transport plans. Two *batteaux* headed for Michipicotton would stop by Pic and drop off potatoes and articles, and would take the Pic packs on board. If the *batteaux* were too full to take all the Pic packs, the rest should be sent in the Long Lake canoe. Mackenzie instructed that Old Mallette, Belle Heneure, and Antoine Sanregret to embark in the Long Lake canoe and the "Widow" and the "old woman" to take Mallette's canoe as far as Michipicotton. Mr. Haldane would be passing the Pic some time about the 20th and would take any remaining furs in his canoe to Michipicotton. Mackenzie warned Clark not to neglect to send down the goods and men to go to Moose Factory. If the two *batteaux* could hold all the packs, Antoine Sanregret should remain at the Pic until Mr. Haldane passes. Finally, the men must not be allowed to remain at the Pic more than a day and a night and they should sleep in the boat during that period. The packs should be safely stored to protect them from rain.⁷⁵ The incredible detail of the instructions, and Mackenzie's minute attention to every particular of transport and travel plans conveys the complexity of the arrangements, especially in trying to account for uncontrollable variables such as weather and travel time.

Not only was it difficult to plan for transporting the goods, but maintaining sufficient labour could also become complicated. Men were hired along the Great Lakes route, both to replace deserters and supplement crews. In 1793 bourgeois John Macdonell tried to hire a man along the Ottawa River to replace another man who had become ill.⁷⁶ Gabriel Franchère, partner in the Pacific Fur Company, tried to engage the majority of his crew at

⁷⁵ Duncan Clark Papers; Vol. 2; R. McKenzie, Fort William, to Duncan Clark, Pic, 11 June 1825, 1-3.

⁷⁶ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 1 June 1793, 72.

Michilimackinac in spring 1810, to convey him to the source of the Missouri and, following the route of Lewis and Clarke, to the mouth of the Columbia.⁷⁷ Voyageurs were also hired at Detroit, both for travelling into the interior, and travelling to Montreal.⁷⁸ Men were also frequently hired at the interior posts (as discussed in the previous chapter). Bourgeois often shared their servants with each other, in order to best distribute the labour. In one case, on the way from Montreal to Grand Portage, John Macdonell reported that one paddler was taken out of each canoe in the brigade to create a crew for a new canoe.⁷⁹ In the summer of 1803, on Riviere des Sauleaux, George Nelson "lent" some of his men to another clerk, Chaurette, for eight to nine days to assist him in a long portage.⁸⁰

Work in the Canoe

Preparation for setting out on a voyage involved making packs and loading canoes. The voyageurs often took an active part in ensuring that the goods were equally divided between canoes within a brigade, and that packs were equally weighted, to prevent any unnecessary work or unfair distribution. Setting out from Fort William in 1833, George Back described the scene:

the Canadian *voyageur* is ... on no point... more sensitive... than in the just distribution of 'pieces' among the several canoes forming a party.... he has very

⁷⁷ Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast*, 24 May 1810, 44.

⁷⁸ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 2: 3 June 1800, 167-8.

⁷⁹ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 27 June 1783, 88.

⁸⁰ George Nelson's *Journal and Reminiscences*, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; 12 August 1803, 35.

substantial reasons for being particular in this matter, for he well knows that, supposing the canoes to be in other respects equally matched, a very small inequality of weight will make a considerable difference in their relative speed, and will occasion, moreover, a longer detention at the portages. The usual mode is for the guide to separate the pieces, and then to distribute or portion them out by lots, holding in his hand little sticks of different lengths, which the leading men draw. From the decision so made there is no appeal, and the parties go away laughing or grumbling at their different fortunes.⁸¹

Assembling packs took place on a very large scale at the major administrative posts. Fur presses packaged bundles of furs tightly together, which protected them and saved space.⁸² Smaller fur presses (with levers rather than screws) were used at most interior posts.⁸³ Before departures voyageurs repaired, gummed and loaded canoes.⁸⁴ When canoes arrived at a post, voyageurs immediately began repairing the boats, canoes and equipment, and examining the packages for damages or leaks.⁸⁵ Canoes were secured, and packs of furs and goods were

⁸¹ Captain George Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition to the Mouth of the great Fish River and Along the Shores of the Arctic Ocean, in the years 1833, 1834, and 1835*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1970), 38-9.

⁸² "The Narrative of Peter Pond" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 30.

⁸³ For one example see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 14; Microfilm reel # C-15638; "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown; Tuesday and Wednesday, 7 and 8 April 1800, 22.

⁸⁴ "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown; Thursday, 9 April 1800, 22; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Tuesday, 23 May 1804, 28; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Monday, 27 June 1808, 44; and James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Thursday, 6 August 1800, 48.

⁸⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 14 August 1800, 35-6; and James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Saturday, 16 May 1800, 21.

often untied and spread out to dry.⁸⁶

A usual day of canoeing started very early in the morning. Brigades usually set off between 3am and 6am.⁸⁷ They paddled for several hours first before stopping for breakfast.⁸⁸ The working days on a canoe journey were very long and demanding, and often tedious. A 'typical' voyage is that made by Robert Seaborne Miles from Lachine to Fort Wedderburn on Lake Athabasca in the fall of 1818. His travel journal is unusual in its daily detail, which allows us a close look at the daily rhythms. While on the Grand (Ottawa) River in early June, Miles recorded in his travel journal that the crew left their encampment 2:30am, and at 7:30am they went ashore to breakfast for an hour. At Portage du Canard, the men hauled the canoe and cargo up with the line and walked over. At 1:40pm they went ashore to eat and left again at 2:30pm. The next day they set out at 5am, portaged, breakfasted and left at 8am. At 1:15pm they reached Portage de Roche Capitaine, crossed it, ate, and left at 3pm. They encamped, ending the day, at 8:40pm. The next morning, at Little River, they left camp at 4:30am and poled up a number of strong rapids. One of the voyageurs became "very much

⁸⁶ James Porter, *Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801*; Thursday, 9 October 1800, 54; and George Nelson's *Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808*; Monday, 13 June 1808, 39-40.

⁸⁷ Toronto; OA; Angus Mackintosh Papers; MU 1956, Box 4; *Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813*; 22 July 1813, 9, records starting out at 4am. George Nelson's "*Journal from Bas De La Riviere to Cumberland House, 1819-?*", also entitled "*Journal B*", 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819 (notes taken from a transcript made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Saturday, 4 September 1819, 5 (I added page numbers), recorded starting off in the middle of the night; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Tuesday, 18 June 1822; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 3 September 1808, 486, starting out at 4am.

⁸⁸ John Henry Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North: A Soldier-Surveyor's Letters from the North-West, 1843-1844*, ed. by George F.G. Stanley, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1955), Lefroy to Julia, Lac des Chats, Ottawa River, 6 May 1843 and Lefroy to Younghusband, Sault Ste Marie, 20 May 1843, 10, 13.

indisposed." They put ashore to breakfast at 7:30am and left again at 9am. At 1:15pm they arrived at Portage aux Plain Chang, carried the cargo, ate and departed at 3:10pm. The next morning on Lake Nippissing, they broke camp at 4am. Later in morning they caught up with Ermatinger's brigade and exchanged a man with him. They breakfasted and re-embarked at 7am to cross Lake Nippissing, meeting Native people, a freeman, and an encampment of six North West canoes, before camping for the day at 9:30pm. They embarked the next morning at 2:30am along the French River. At 7:15am they entered the French River, and in fifteen minutes put ashore to breakfast for an hour. At 1:45pm they put ashore to eat, and one ill man detained the group until 3pm. They paddled until 7pm. The next morning they left camp at 4:30am and entered Lake Huron, meeting Native people along the way. They breakfasted at 7am and departed an hour later. The next morning they left camp at 3am and 7:30am met a brigade of four north west canoes.⁸⁹

In another "typical" week of canoeing, in an exploring party lead by Simon Fraser on his first journey along the Fraser River in the late spring and early summer of 1806, much of the same patterns emerge. Although Frasers' writings lack the detail of Miles, he includes notations on how frequently his crew stopped for rests, or "pipes". Fraser's journey was also hindered by damaged canoes and a difficult route. On Friday, 30 May 1806, he wrote "fine weather we set of [sic] at half past 4 A.M. but at the second Pipe a stump seen through my Canoe which obliged us to put ashore and we lost two hours to repair and gum it." The party lost two hours on shore gumming another damaged canoe. Fraser wrote that "we encountered

⁸⁹ Toronto; OA; HBCC; MU 1391; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Wednesday, 3 June 1818 to Tuesday, 9 June 1818, 5-8.

more misery to day than any day yet and were obliged to cut several logs and embarrass to open a Passage. my canoe through the awkwardness of the Bouttes was very much endangered and every soul on board near perishing." Although all hands worked very hard they travelled only eight and a half miles. The next morning at the second pipe Fraser's canoe broke upon a stump, and it required two hours to mend and gum it. In the afternoon another canoe did the same, which required three hours to repair. The next day in the forenoon one of the voyageurs named La Malice broke his canoe and they put ashore with the intention of mending it quickly. However once the crew was on shore, one of the men named St. Pierre fainted and remained speechless for more than an hour. La Malice decided to take the opportunity of the delay to band his canoe, but this took three hours. Fraser did not mind because his own canoe needed gumming at the time. The next day the group left one of the canoes and separated its load between the other two because all the men were nearly exhausted with fatigue, especially a voyageur named La Garde who had been steering Fraser's canoe for over a week and had such a sore wrist that he was unable to continue. La Malice took over steering, and Fraser hoped that the trip would be easier with all hands on board the two canoes. The next morning rain detained the brigade until 7:30am. Fraser was glad to have a pretext for allowing the exhausted crew to rest. Both canoes broke again that day, and had to be gummed. The canoes were so heavy and shattered that they had to be taken out of the water by four men. Two days later, still struggling along, Fraser complained that the difficult navigation was made worse by the faulty canoes, and awkwardness of the *bouts*, particularly the steersmen.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ "First Journal of Simon Fraser," Friday, 30 May 1806 to Thursday, 5 June 1806, 126-8.

These two examples of journeys reveal that crews worked between fifteen and eighteen hours a day, pausing for two to three hours for meals and breaks, and resting at night for six to eight hours to repair equipment, eat and sleep. The frequency and duration of rests and meals would depend on how much the brigade was pressed for time to reach their destination before waterways froze.⁹¹ On occasion voyageurs paddled throughout the night, especially if a bright moon and clear night allowed enough light to travel.⁹²

There were three positions in a canoe. The first was the *devant* or foresman, also called *ducent*, conductor or bowsman, who helped to guide the canoe through waterways, and acted as a lookout. The second was the *gouvernail* or steersman, positioned in the back of the canoe.⁹³ The *devants* and *gouvernails*, collectively called *bouts*, directed the paddling, calling out the command to begin or end, and setting the rhythm, and were responsible for carrying the canoe over portages.⁹⁴ One of these men usually acted as the captain of the canoe, directing the men and making decisions about the division and organization of the labour. Either of these two men were often left in charge of individual canoes or brigades when the clerk or bourgeois had other business to which they had to attend.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 2: 309.

⁹² Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 303. Landman records a case where voyageurs paddled for 25 hours straight, ostensibly because the shores were too infested with snakes for the crew to stop and camp. Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 2: 69-70.

⁹³ Both of these position were referred to as the *bout*, but the term has also been used to refer to all paddlers in general.

⁹⁴ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 186.

⁹⁵ George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Thursday, 29 August 1805, 1 (I added page numbers); Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Saturday, 29 June 1805 and Thursday 11 July 1805, 22, 24 (I added page numbers); George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Sunday, 19 June 1808, 42; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Thursday, 1 September 1808, 1 (I added page numbers).

The job that required the most skill and expertise was that of a guide. Either the *devant* or *gouvernail* could be guides, who helped choose routes and navigate through rivers, lakes and portages. Guides decided whether canoes should attempt to shoot rapids, be tracked from shore, or be portaged. Navigating the canoes through rivers and streams was a difficult job which required experience and knowledge of waterways and canoe-travel. In 1822 when arriving at Fort William, George Nelson wrote:

I could not sufficiently admire the adroisse [adroit] of our bowsmen in avoiding the numerous stones; how quick and exactly they made the most acute angles in spite of the mist, strength of the current and the velocity which we went, for sometimes all the crew paddled. One time in particular they had 3 very acute angles to make to avoid several Large and sharp stones and so near each other that it seemed impossible to avoid being dashed to atoms even on the first. But they ran perfectly light, only a few men in each canoe- We were looking on with the greatest anxiety and wonder- they shipped some water in the terrible swells, but did not even touch one stone.⁹⁶

Before starting out, the guide, *avant* or *gouvernail* would ensure that the canoes were in good repair and well packed, and would check the state of the water.⁹⁷ As fur brigades travelled further north and west into unknown lands they frequently hired freemen and Native people

⁹⁶ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Wednesday, 10 July 1822.

⁹⁷ Toronto; OA; Angus Mackintosh Papers; MU 1956, Box 4; Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813; 22 July 1813, 9.

to help choose routes and guide the canoes.⁹⁸

The third position was that of the *milieu* or middlemen, who were responsible for paddling and carrying the cargo over portages. Middlemen were paid less than foresmen or steersmen and their jobs were less skilled and less prestigious.⁹⁹ The job was also much more monotonous than other positions, as middlemen were expected to paddle all day.¹⁰⁰ Only on rare occasions would the clerk or bourgeois join the middlemen and help paddle, such as when labour was in short supply, the route was particularly gruelling or the brigade particularly rushed.¹⁰¹ *Milieux* were responsible for bailing, and were stationed at the *bar d'éponge*, the position in the canoe designated specifically for bailing, and used a sponge to keep the water level in the canoe as low as possible.¹⁰² Bad weather, such as rain and high waves, and a leaky canoe determined the frequency of bailing, which could be a full-time duty.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ For an example of engaging a freeman as a guide see Toronto; OA; North West Company Collection (hereafter NWCC); MU 2199 (photostat of original); Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in Rivière Ouinipique", June to July 1784 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company", by Roderick MacKenzie, director of the North West Company. Typescripts can be found also in the OA; NWCC; MU 2200, Box 5, Nos. 2 (a), (b), and (c). Photostats and typescripts can also be found in NAC; MC; Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640; MRB; MC; C.17; and the MHS; P1571); Monday, 28 June 1784, 10. For examples of engaging natives as guides see George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Tuesday, 30 August 1803 and Saturday, 3 September 1803, 8; Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 24 June 1789 and 8 July 1789, 150, 173; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 63-5; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser," Thursday, 15 May 1806, 120.

⁹⁹ See previous chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Grant, *The Sauteux Indians about 1804*, Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 313-14.

¹⁰¹ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Monday, 22 August 1803, 6; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser," Monday, 7 July 1806, 139-40.

¹⁰² George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 15.

¹⁰³ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Saturday, 4 September 1800, 2.

Portaging was the most onerous task in canoe travel. When they arrived at a portage, the bowsman usually jumped into the water, to prevent the canoe from touching the bottom, and guided it to shore. The middlemen unloaded the canoe and prepared the packs to carry over the portage. They tied their slings, referred to as "portage collars," "*colliers à porter*," "carrying straps" or "tump lines," to the packs, and slung them over their backs to carry them over the portage.¹⁰⁴ The slings were usually straps of leather about three to four inches wide, with smaller straps attached to the packs.¹⁰⁵ The first pack rested near the lower part of the back, while the collar was placed across the forehead. Men leaned forward so that the packs were supported by their backs, and stabilized by the strap around their head. One or two additional packs were placed on top of the first, and the load sometimes reach as high as their head.¹⁰⁶ *Ceintures flechées*, or wide sashes tied around voyageurs' waists, eased the strain to their backs, and helped to prevent hernias. Most men carried two packs at 90 pounds each, though sometimes men carried three packs at one time, as a show of strength. John Johnston commented that "he is not looked upon as a man Who cannot carry two [packages]. there are many Who even take three and out Run their fellows."¹⁰⁷ Carrying more than two packs was a show of strength and a mark of distinction among voyageurs.

When a canoe carried only passengers and no cargo, portages were quick and easy. Onerous portages existed on the route between Montreal and Lake Superior. Approximately

¹⁰⁴ Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, in Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 313-14.

¹⁰⁵ Archibald MacDonald, *Peace River. A Canoe Voyage from Hudson's Bay to Pacific in 1828*, (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1971), 44.

¹⁰⁶ Nute, *The Voyageur*, 47.

¹⁰⁷ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.6; John Johnston, Description of the Country around Lakes Superior & Huron, with a letter to R. Mackenzie, ca. 1799; 34-6.

six men were required to carry the *canot du maître*, which could weigh between 650 and 1500 pounds. A canoe could be especially difficult to carry when the ground was uneven, and thus the weight of the canoe distributed unequally. It took great skill for men to shoulder the canoe and carry it with no accident.¹⁰⁸ However, in the interior, the task of carrying the smaller *canot du nord* was considerably easier, and was reserved for the bowman and steersman.¹⁰⁹

Long and treacherous portages were difficult and time-consuming, and required great skill. British surveyor and scientist John Henry Lefroy records one portage on the Savannah River that was two and a half miles long with a steep hill. The crew started the portage and completed only half of it by nightfall, and they slept without their blankets because they were too tired to return across the portage to retrieve them.¹¹⁰ Canoe brigades could be detained by difficult portages for days, even up to 22 days.¹¹¹ In describing the portage at Grand Portage, bourgeois Peter Grant marvelled that "the whole is conducted with astonishing expedition, a necessary consequence of the enthusiasm which always attends their long and perilous voyages."¹¹² Grand Portage west of Lake Superior spanned nine miles; voyageurs usually had to carry eight packs each during the portage and were paid a Spanish dollar for every extra

¹⁰⁸ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 305. See also Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 251.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 313-14.

¹¹⁰ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to his mother, Savannah river, en route, 6 June 1843, 22.

¹¹¹ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 27 June 1822.

¹¹² Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 313-14.

pack they could manage. Alexander Mackenzie noted that "so inured are they to this kind of labour, that I have known some of them set off with two packages of ninety pounds each, and return with two others of the same weight, in the course of six hours, being a distance of eighteen miles over hills and mountains."¹¹³

Sometimes canoes waiting for the rest of a brigade to cross the portage made effective use of their time by gathering wood for paddles and bark for canoe repairs. Other men were often sent to help the other canoes cross the portage more quickly.¹¹⁴ Bourgeois frequently used the portages as occasions to write letters and journal entries.¹¹⁵ In other cases, the men simply waited with impatience for the rest of the brigade to finish, or "made merry" if they had wine or rum on hand.¹¹⁶

The not infrequent accidents slowed the progress of brigades. Wet ground and rocks made portages slippery, and men could easily fall while carrying the canoe or their packs, especially if they were inexperienced. On these occasions they usually carried only one pack as a measure of safety.¹¹⁷

Not all rapids required a full portage. When the rapids were not too onerous the *bouts*

¹¹³ McKenzie, "A General History," 51.

¹¹⁴ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.7; Microfilm reel #4; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95 (typescript copy in NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640); Saturday, 30 May 1795, 36.

¹¹⁵ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to his mother, Savannah river, en route, 6 June 1843, 19.

¹¹⁶ Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 21 July 1794, 3; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 23 July 1800, 10.

¹¹⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Friday 16 September 1803, 10; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Saturday, 22 June 1822 and Thursday, 4 July 1822; and Toronto; OA; Angus Mackintosh Papers; MU 1956, Box 4; Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813; 18 and 23 July 1813, 4-7, 12.

would shoot the rapids with an empty canoe, called a *décharge*, or with half of the cargo, called a *demicharge*.¹¹⁸ The middlemen would wait on the shore, leaving one or two men, usually the foreman and steersman, to guide the canoe through the rapids. These men would frequently have to jump out of the canoe if they had difficulty.¹¹⁹ Voyageurs were keen to avoid portages wherever possible, and thus chose to run through many dangerous rapids with a full canoe. Bourgeois Peter Grant explained:

when they arrive at a rapid, the guide or foreman's business is to explore the waters previous to their running down with their canoes, and, according to the height of the water, they either lighten the canoe by taking out part of the cargo and carry it over land, or run down the whole load. It would be astonishing to an European observer to witness the dexterity with which they manage their canoes in those dangerous rapids, carrying them down like lightening on the surface of the water. The bowman, supported by the steersman, dexterously avoids the stones and shoals which might touch the canoe and dash it to pieces, to the almost certain destruction of all on board. It often baffles their skill, when the water is very high, to avoid plunging in foaming swells on the very brink of the most tremendous precipices, yet, those bold adventurers rather run this risk, for the sake of expedition, than lose a few hours by transporting cargo over land.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada*, 7; and Skinner, "The Sinews of Empire," 221.

¹¹⁹ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Sophia, Norway House, 8 August 1843, 47-8.

¹²⁰ Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 313-14.

Many bourgeois and travellers echoed these praises of the voyageurs' skill and dexterity at running rapids.¹²¹

Running rapids was often fraught with dangers, and in extreme instances could end in fatalities. Canoes broke, cargos were lost, and men drowned.¹²² Men sometimes attempted to run rapids when it was impossible to portage around them. In an extreme case on 1 June 1808, while exploring the Fraser River, Simon Fraser and his partner Stuart chose to run some rapids because the river banks were too high and steep to climb. In the river their canoe faced ceaseless danger as it was tossed from one eddy to another. The men running the first canoe through the rapids were able to jump out of the canoe and drag it onto a rock platform on the bank. The rest of the crew had to save them by scaling down the sheer rocky walls of the bank and drag the men and canoes up to safety, which took a whole day. The crew then faced the treacherous hills of the portage with heavy loads on their backs.¹²³ Only three days after this incident Fraser recorded in his journal: "visited the lower part [of the rapid]; having found it strong and full of tremendous Whirlpools we were greatly at a loss how to act:- However, the nature of our situation left us no choice; for we were under the necessity either

¹²¹ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 308.

¹²² John Henry Lefroy records several near disasters in his travels through Rupert's Land with voyageurs in the 1840s. For one example see Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to his mother, Savannah river, en route, 6 June 1843, 24-25. Also see Angus Mackintosh Papers; Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813; 18 July 1813, 6; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 5 August 1800, 28.

¹²³ Toronto; MRL; BR; 917.11 F671; Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808" (photostat and typescript also available; photostat of the transcription of the journal at the University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Library, No. 18, Series C, in the Pacific Coast Mss.; and at NAC, MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, vol. 6. Published in L.R.F. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, vol. 1, New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, originally published 1889-90 and in W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-1808*, Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1960); Wednesday, 1 June 1808, 6-7.

to run down the Canoes or to abandon them" because the shore was too dangerous. This "desperate undertaking" exhausted the men. They decided to try to pass the rapid by land after several near fatalities. Even on this safer course one of the men nearly slipped and fell into the turbulent river.¹²⁴ Only five days later Fraser's crew faced an equally perilous situation:

it being absolutely impossible to carry the canoes by land, all hands without hesitation embarked, as it were a corp perdu, upon the mercy of this awful tide.- Once engaged the die was cast, and the great difficulty consisted in keeping the canoes within the medium, or fil d'eau, that is clear of the precipice on one side, and of the gulphs formed by the waves on the other.- then skimming along as fast as lightening the crews notwithstanding cool and determined, followed each other in awful silence. And when we arrived at the end we stood as it were, gazing congratulation at each other upon our narrow escape.-¹²⁵

Another means of navigating through rapids included pulling a canoe through water with a rope, which was called tracking or lining. This method of transport was used when shooting the rapids proved too dangerous or unfeasible, when a canoe could not be carried around a rapid or a fall because the shore line was too rocky or the vegetation too dense,

¹²⁴ Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808," Sunday, 4 June 1808, 10.

¹²⁵ Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808," Friday, 9 June 1808, 12.

when traversing a minor rapid upstream, or when in very shallow water.¹²⁶ Tracking lines were usually stored as part of a regular canoe's equipment.¹²⁷ Voyageurs tied this line to the canoe and dragged it either from within the water or from shore. Sometimes a couple of men stayed in the canoe to pole while they were tracking the canoe, which entailed pushing or anchoring the canoe from the bottom of the river bed with long poles.¹²⁸ Other times, one man stayed in the stern of the canoe to help keep the canoe in the proper channel while it was being pulled.¹²⁹

Tracking could be as arduous, tedious and dangerous as portaging or running rapids. Along the Saskatchewan River, Duncan McGillivray wrote in September 1794: "arrived at the end of the tracking ground to the great satisfaction of the men many of whom are estrepied [estropié or exhausted] by the hard duty they have performed for some days Past."¹³⁰ Again along the Saskatchewan River, this time in September 1808, after a long day of using towing lines, Alexander Henry the Younger reported that his men were pleased to have reached smoother water "because they were heartily tired of the tedious business" of tracking. The previous day one of his men had a narrow escape from drowning while untangling the towing line from vegetation along the shore. When the rope jerked free he was tossed headlong into the water, and was rescued after he had been swept down stream and

¹²⁶ Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808," Wednesday, 1 June 1808, 6-7.

¹²⁷ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Sophia, Norway House, 8 August 1843, 47.

¹²⁸ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Sophia, Norway House, 8 August 1843, 47.

¹²⁹ Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 313-14.

¹³⁰ Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 10 September 1794, 21.

swallowed a lot of water.¹³¹

Other techniques were used to help the canoes through difficult parts of a river passage. Poles constituted part of the regular equipment of a canoe. They were used to help ascend small rapids when the water was not too deep.¹³² Poles were also used to help push canoes through water too shallow to support a normal load. Men would sometimes leave the canoes to lighten them, and push them to deeper water, or walk alongside them until they reached a deeper part of the river.¹³³ Men were also forced to walk when the river was clogged with vegetation and they had to lighten the load to try to float the canoe over it, or to try to cut a passage through it.¹³⁴

Another facility which eased canoe travel on lakes were sails, sometimes improvised from blankets or oil cloths. The makeshift sail would be raised on a pole secured to the side of the canoe, with the ends of the cloth tied to the either end of the canoe, and voyageurs could then enjoy a brief respite from the endless toil of paddling.¹³⁵ With a good wind, canoes could travel at an average speed of eight or nine miles an hour.¹³⁶ However, when the wind

¹³¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 1 to 3 September 1808, 485-6.

¹³² For one example see "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Tuesday and Wednesday, 27 and 28 May 1806, 124-5.

¹³³ Isaac Weld, Jun., *Travels Through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, During the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, 4th Edition, (London: John Stockdale, 1807), 1: 319; and "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 16 September 1793, 112.

¹³⁴ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Friday, 30 May 1806 and Sunday, 6 July 1806, 126, 139.

¹³⁵ See the sketch of a sail in use on a York boat in Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes*, 45.

¹³⁶ Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 314. Also see George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 14-15.

became too strong, sailing was too great a risk, and canoes sought shelter along the shore.¹³⁷

As the NWC came to be organized, *canots du maître*, especially those on Lake Superior, were equipped with sailing sheets.¹³⁸

One way in which voyageurs helped to pace themselves, and pass the long hours was to sing while they worked. Voyageurs needed little encouragement to sing and took great pleasure in it.¹³⁹ Singing created a rhythm or pace for the crew which helped them to synchronize their paddling and maintain their momentum.¹⁴⁰ One traveller suggests that voyageurs' songs were classified according to the kind of canoe they used for the journey. Slow *chansons à la rame* were sung in canoes where large oars were used and the paddling was heavier and slower, which provided more power and control in rapids than did lighter paddles. Quicker *chansons à l'aviron* were sung in small *canots du nord*, where paddling was swift and light. Finally, *chansons de canot à lège* were sung in the express canoes, which carried no lading, only news and passengers, and travelled very fast, thus the songs were very lively and had a very fast tempo. Singing provided mental energy, necessary to the intense physical exertion of paddling, as well as rhythm.¹⁴¹

Voyageurs could, to some extent, control the voyage through their singing. If they

¹³⁷ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 13 June 1822. Also see Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 238-9.

¹³⁸ Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes*, 66.

¹³⁹ John Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1819, 20, 21 and 22*, (London: J.M Dent & Sons, 1819), 6 March 1820, 116.

¹⁴⁰ Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 247; Peter Grant, The Sauteux Indians about 1804, Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 313.

¹⁴¹ Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. by Lascelles Wraxall, (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1985, first published 1860), 255-6.

were particularly tired they could sing slow songs to ease the pace of the journey. Margaret Creighton found that 19th-century whalers also used singing to slow the pace of work, especially when they were engaged in particularly heavy work.¹⁴² If voyageurs were particularly anxious to arrive at their destination, fast songs helped them maintain a fast pace. Singing dispelled the monotony of paddling, and distracted voyageurs from their fatigue, boredom, hunger and the hardships of the journey. Ross Cox commented in the fall of 1817 along the Ottawa River that "The poor *voyageurs*, who were in a starving condition, kept up *les chansons à l'aviron* until daybreak, to divert their hunger."¹⁴³

The long days of days of tedious labour were broken up by various stops along the journey. The most frequent stops made were to smoke a pipe of tobacco, on average every two hours.¹⁴⁴ Stopping for a pipe became so entrenched in the work of voyageurs that distances came to be measured in "pipes".¹⁴⁵ Small rest stops during canoe journeys and portages often were referred to as *pauses* (often spelled phonetically as *poses*), which was a French Canadian term for "laying down" their packs.¹⁴⁶ On a portage, a *pause* was not only a resting place, it was also used as a temporary depot. All packs were brought to the first *pause* before any were carried to the second, to increase security during the portage. The

¹⁴² Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 131.

¹⁴³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 12 September 1817, 298; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 302-3; Franchère, *A Voyage*, 14 July 1814, 264; Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to his mother, Fort Chipewyan, Lake Athabasca, 30 September 1843 to 2 January 1844, 63.

¹⁴⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 30 August 1808, 482.

¹⁴⁵ For examples of pipes being referred to as small parts of a day's journey, see "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Thursday to Saturday, 29 to 31 May 1806, 126; and Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 309.

¹⁴⁶ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 59.

same places were generally used as *pauses* by all who passed, and it came to be common to measure the length of a portage by the number of *pauses* along the trail. The distance between two *pauses* varied from 600 to 800 yards, depending on the conditions of the trail.¹⁴⁷

Bad weather could force brigades to stop, and waiting out a storm could be an unexpected bonus, especially if a crew was particularly fatigued.¹⁴⁸ Breaks were also incorporated into stops for canoe maintenance. In especially harsh and cold waterways, men had to frequently gum and mend their canoes which were prone to cracking.¹⁴⁹ Gumming involved smearing melted spruce gum along the seams and in cracks and holes of the birch bark to prevent leaks and repair damage. Fibres of bruised bark were moistened with liquid gum and applied to large breaches in the canoe; rags then covered the hole and the edges were cemented with gum.¹⁵⁰ Gum was gathered from trees along route, but sometimes had to be purchased when it was in short supply.¹⁵¹ Voyageurs often gummed the canoes when other stops were made for portages, meals, or seeking information from people along the route.¹⁵² To save time, canoes were often gummed at night by torchlight, after the party had stopped

¹⁴⁷ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, footnote 61, pg. 97.

¹⁴⁸ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Monday, 25 June 1809, 26 (I added page numbers).

¹⁴⁹ For a few of the many examples of stopping to gum the canoes see Angus Mackintosh Papers, Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813; 18 July 1813, 7; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 3 September 1808, 486; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Sunday, 7 August 1803, 4; and George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Friday, 7 June 1822 and Friday, 14 June 1822.

¹⁵⁰ Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 1790, 247.

¹⁵¹ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Wednesday, 21 Sept 1803, 11.

¹⁵² George Nelson's "Journal from Bas De La Riviere to Cumberland House, 1819-?", also entitled "Journal B", 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819 (notes taken from a transcript made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Saturday, 4 September 1819, 5 (I added page numbers); "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 6 June 1793, 76.

for the night.¹⁵³ Canoes were also gummed and repaired whenever they arrived at a post.¹⁵⁴

As part of long-term maintenance, canoes were re-gummed when they were repaired, which was often. Most traders' journals are filled with references to damaging canoes on rocks and in rapids. For example, on a voyage in the summer of 1800, Alexander Henry the Younger reported that his brigades stopped to repair a damaged canoe at least seven times between Grand Portage and Fort Alexander over the course of a month, and at least three more times in a little over a week when they continued on their journey south to the Park River post at Pembina.¹⁵⁵ Canoes were constantly being repaired and refashioned while en route. On a journey from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in the Winnipeg River in the summer of 1784, Edward Umfreville's men improved their canoe for the interior waterways by removing, washing and shortening the canoe's ribs of timber to make it lighter.¹⁵⁶ Taking care of canoes could take up an extraordinary amount of time if the canoes were in a bad state. While Simon Fraser was attempting his first exploration of the Fraser River in the spring of 1806, he was plagued by poor canoes and his crew spent hours each day on shore gumming them.¹⁵⁷ Entire days during a journey could be devoted solely to repairing canoes.¹⁵⁸ Traders were sometimes able to hire Native people to fix their canoes or

¹⁵³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 24 July 1800, 12.

¹⁵⁴ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Thursday, 24 August 1797; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 14 August 1800, 35-6.

¹⁵⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 22, 24-26 July and 3, 8-9, 16, 22, 25 August 1800, 10-11, 13-14, 20, 28-29, 38, 57, 62.

¹⁵⁶ Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat," Tuesday, 22 June 1784, 7.

¹⁵⁷ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Thursday to Sunday, 22-25 May 1806, Thursday and Friday, 29 and 30 May 1806, and Sunday and Tuesday, 1 and 3 June 1806, 122-27.

¹⁵⁸ George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 10.

to purchase new ones from them en route, which could save a lot of time. However, as Henry complained in the summer of 1800, Native people did not always oblige as quickly as the traders desired. Henry became so frustrated with the Ojibwa he had hired to build him a new canoe at Lake des Perches near the height of land on his way from Grand Portage to Lake Winnipeg, that he set his own men to finish the job.¹⁵⁹ During the voyage men were sent out to gather cedar and bark for the canoe repairs and wood to fashion paddles and poles that were lost or damaged.¹⁶⁰ They often gathered the supplies in advance if they knew that the country further along their journey could not provide the needed materials.¹⁶¹

Provisioning

During the rushed summer travel between Montreal and Lake Superior, and Lake Superior and the interior posts, canoes were provided with as many provisions as possible, because the brigades did not have the time to hunt and fish along the way. Those leaving Montreal were outfitted with flour, corn, pork and fat. At Lake Superior, brigades stocked up with dried meat and fish, flour, corn and sometimes wild rice. As distances in the trade increased, traders came to rely more on the local economies of Native people they passed on their routes, purchasing pemmican, fish and meat from them. Bourgeois Benjamin and

¹⁵⁹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 27 July 1800 and Monday [sic] 29 July 1800, 14-15.

¹⁶⁰ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.7; Microfilm reel #4; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95 (typescript copy in NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640); Saturday, 30 May 1795, 36; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Friday, 7 June 1822; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Wednesday to Saturday, 23-26 [sic, skipped 25] April 1806, Wednesday and Sunday 7 and 11 May 1806, 113-14, 116, 118.

¹⁶¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 17 August 1800, 39-40.

Joseph Frobisher explain that a canoe's

general loading in two-thirds Goods and one-third Provisions, which not being sufficient for their subsistence until they reach winter Quarters, they must and always do, depend on the Natives they occasionally meet on the Road for an Additional Supply; and when this fails which is sometimes the case they are exposed to every misery that it is possible to survive, and equally so in returning from the Interior Country, as in the Spring provisions are generally more Scanty.¹⁶²

It was difficult to coordinate the purchase of fresh food, so dried foods which kept longer were preferred. The increasing competition between the fur trade companies, and thus the greater demand for food to feed the expanding labour force, led to the establishment of posts specifically devoted to provisioning the trade. The NWC established posts at Rainy Lake, Fort Alexander, and Cumberland House; the latter two drew especially on the buffalo resources of the plains for pemmican. Cree and Assiniboine who had lost their role as middlemen in the fur trade turned to provisioning as a new economic activity.¹⁶³ The Métis along the Assiniboine River turned the pemmican trade into large-scale and organized industry after about 1810, when it became the major provision for the traders.¹⁶⁴

When travelling in the interior between posts, men sometimes hunted and fished for

¹⁶² W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), letter of Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher to General Haldimand, 4 October 1784, 73-4.

¹⁶³ Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 128-34.

¹⁶⁴ Herman Sprenger, "The Métis Nation: Buffalo Hunting versus Agriculture in the Red River Settlement, 1810-1870," in *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis*, edited by Bruce Alden Cox, 120-35, (Carleton Library Series No. 142, Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987), 128, 131.

their own provisions when they were not too rushed.¹⁶⁵ Native wives were important sources of information and aid, as they often taught their husbands what could be gathered from different areas, and often did the gathering themselves.¹⁶⁶ Food gathered along the way included wild onions, plums, panbines (a kind of fruit), and grapes.¹⁶⁷ A last resort when food was scarce, was moss gathered from rocks. Rock moss, or *tripe de roche*, boiled in water to make a boullion, often prevented starvation.¹⁶⁸

Fishing along the route was not uncommon. Fishing with a hook and line in eddies was frequently relaxing, particularly after a difficult stretch of the journey.¹⁶⁹ Fish were also caught by setting out nets.¹⁷⁰ More skill was required to catch fish by spearing.¹⁷¹ In times of scarcity men were often sent ahead to scout for good fishing areas, or to catch and dry fish for the rest of the brigade when they passed.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 18 September 1794, 23-4.

¹⁶⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: Thursday, 1 September 1808, 485.

¹⁶⁷ Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808," Saturday, 22 May 1808, 1; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 22 August 1800, 58.

¹⁶⁸ "Diary of John Macdonell," in Gates, ed., *Fiver Fur Traders*, 77; Morton, ed., *Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, lii; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 17 June 1822.

¹⁶⁹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 30 August 1808, 482.

¹⁷⁰ Toronto; OA; MU 842; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday and Thursday, 23 and 24 September 1818, 2; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Thursday, 15 September 1808, 3 (I added page numbers); and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 16 October 1800, 35.

¹⁷¹ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Sunday, 9 June 1822 and Monday, 10 June 1822.

¹⁷² George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Sunday, 9 June 1822; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Friday, 24 April 1806, 113.

Meat comprised the major part of men's diets, especially in the interior, and men preferred meat to fish.¹⁷³ Large game, such as deer, bear and buffalo, seemed to be the favorites. But when in need men ate smaller game, such as beaver, otter, and hare, and sought wildfowl, including pigeons and ducks.¹⁷⁴ On some occasions when they were not in a great rush, men hunted during portages, or when their crew members were repairing and gumming the canoes.¹⁷⁵ Men were sometimes able to catch smaller game while in their canoe, and on rare occasions they shot larger game either on shore or in the water. Ross Cox described the unexpected treat when one of the bourgeois killed a large black bear which was swimming across the river ahead the brigades.¹⁷⁶ Sometimes brigades would stop to devote the day to hunting, as did the brigade of Duncan McGillivray, in mid-September 1794.¹⁷⁷ If the crew had the time, they would pause to dry the meat over a spit so that it would last a long time.¹⁷⁸

Because they were usually so pressed for time, unfamiliar with the environments in the north west, and lacked the skills to hunt and fish efficiently, fur traders procured most of their food from Native people or freemen.¹⁷⁹ Most often they purchased provisions with trade

¹⁷³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26 August 1800, 66. Also see Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 173-80.

¹⁷⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 5 September 1800, 85; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Monday, 15 October 1800, 35; and George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Wednesday, 26 June 1822.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Tuesday, 22 August 1797, 5.

¹⁷⁶ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 242.

¹⁷⁷ Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 12 September 1794, 22.

¹⁷⁸ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Thursday, 17 April 1806, 111.

¹⁷⁹ For examples of purchasing food from Natives see "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Thursday, 17 April 1806 and Wednesday, 23 April 1806, 111-12.

goods.¹⁸⁰ On occasion they traded for fish and meat with European provisions, such as biscuits.¹⁸¹ Natives were sometimes hired to travel with the brigades and hunt for them during the journey.¹⁸² Ironically, voyageur brigades frequently impeded their own hunting and Native hunting endeavours by the great noise and commotion created by their travel. On their way to establish Park River post near Pembina in September 1800, Alexander Henry the Younger's crew saw many deer and bear along the river, but their Native companions complained that the men made so much noise all day that it was impossible to kill them.¹⁸³ On a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, the Native people near Rivière la Savanne could not catch whitefish until the trading brigades had passed by because their noise frightened the fish away.¹⁸⁴

Traders adopted the Native practice of *caching*, which meant storing preserved food in hiding places along well travelled routes. Pemmican, and extra meat and fish that had been dried and pounded was most often cached.¹⁸⁵ Less frequently alcohol, non-food supplies and

¹⁸⁰ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26 August 1800, 62; and George Nelson's "Journal from Bas De La Riviere to Cumberland House, 1819-?", also entitled "Journal B", 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819 (notes taken from a transcript made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Saturday, 4 September 1819, 5 (I added page numbers).

¹⁸¹ Toronto; OA; HBCC; MU 1391; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Saturday, 6 June 1818, 7.

¹⁸² Coues, ed., *New Light*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: 5 and 6 September 1800, 85.

¹⁸³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 5 September 1800, 85.

¹⁸⁴ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a translation made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Sunday, 7 July 1822.

¹⁸⁵ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Thursday, 24 April 1806, 113; and Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A9; Simon Fraser Collection; Volume 5; "Second Journal of Simon Fraser", May - June 1808 (copied from the Bancroft Collection, Pacific Coast Mss. at the University of California at Berkeley; originals in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia); Thursday, 3 June 1808, 31.

equipment were cached.¹⁸⁶ The challenge was to secure the food from animals, and to mark the place so that it could be found with ease at a later date. Retrieving food from caches often constituted important resources to travellers.¹⁸⁷ Specific men, often guides, were designated to remember the location of the caches and to guide men back to the site at a later date, but often the men had difficulty in locating all the cached food.¹⁸⁸ Traders sometimes helped themselves to Native caches when they stumbled across them while on a journey.¹⁸⁹

In order to save time, crews frequently took their meals in the canoe.¹⁹⁰ Other times crews usually tried to combine meals with other shore activities. They sometimes paused for a meal when they put ashore to repair damaged equipment or gum the canoes, or to portage.¹⁹¹ Large meals were often prepared at the end of a day, when the crew set up camp for the night.¹⁹² Less frequently crews put ashore for the sole purpose of cooking a meal, which they called "*pour faire la chaudière*."¹⁹³ Depending on the pace of the journey, crews

¹⁸⁶ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Friday, 21 June 1822; and Ottawa; "Second Journal of Simon Fraser", Thursday, 2 June 1808, 20.

¹⁸⁷ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Monday, 21 April 1806, Saturday, 7 June 1806, and Monday, 23 June 1806, 112, 129, 132.

¹⁸⁸ George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806, Friday and Sunday, 6 and 8 September 1805, 2 (I added page numbers); and Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 2; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Michel Curot, "Journal, Folle Avoine, Riviere Jaune, Pour 1803 & 1804", 11 octobre 1803, 10.

¹⁸⁹ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Thursday, 24 September 1818, 2.

¹⁹⁰ George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 15; and Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 18 September 1794, 23-4.

¹⁹¹ Toronto; OA; Angus Mackintosh Papers; MU 1956, Box 4; Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813; 8 and 22 July 1813, 7, 10.

¹⁹² Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 302.

¹⁹³ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Friday, 28 June 1822;

would eat either two or three meals a day, although men sometimes snacked when they stopped to smoke. In the spring of 1806, Simon Fraser recorded in his journal that:

as the men force much in this River we allow them to make three meals a day and as they eat all together out of the same bag of Pemecan we put ashore for that purpose and afterward it is laid aside and not touched until next meal. this we find to be the best way and the men are better off and better pleased than if they ate a little at every Pipe.¹⁹⁴

Meals times could range from 20 minutes to two hours, depending on the number in the crew, and if the food had to be cooked.¹⁹⁵ Men drank water from rivers or melting snow.¹⁹⁶

Alexander Henry the Younger commented that his men were usually perspiring and hot from their tough physical exertions. They would often lean into a river to take long draughts of icy water.¹⁹⁷

Concluding Remarks

The literature of the fur trade portrayed voyageurs as unthinking “beasts of burden” performing mind-numbing toil with their brute strength. The large pool of men in the St.

Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 302-3; and Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 1791, 252.

¹⁹⁴ “First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806”, Thursday, 29 May 1806, 126.

¹⁹⁵ For meal times in 20 minutes see Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 302. For meal times in 1 and 1/2 hours see “First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806”, Wednesday, 25 June 1806, 103.

¹⁹⁶ David Thompson’s Journal, November 1797, in W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, eds., *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), Sunday, 10 December 1797, 103.

¹⁹⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 2 September 1808, 486.

Lawrence valley, with the skills learned on farms, who were looking for a means to supplement their farming with wage labour, probably led the fur trade masters to regard the position of engagé or servant as one that any man could fill. They thus undervalued the labour of voyageurs. Yet they also seemed to regard the job with a certain awe, marvelling at the incredible strength and skill it required. Voyageurs were in fact highly skilled workers who combined manual dexterity with conceptual abilities, and maintained a large degree of autonomy from their masters in carrying out their tasks. Their jobs were difficult, and required considerable skill, dexterity, courage and reason. Transporting goods and furs involved making decisions about the best travel and portage routes, inventing methods for running rapids and carrying heavy loads, and securing the necessary provisions for the strenuous work.

Chapter 4

"Jacks of all trades": Work at the Post

Like the previous chapter on working in canoes, this chapter rescues voyageurs from the stereotype in fur traders' writings as unskilled and simple-minded "beasts of burden" by looking closely at the work they performed at fur trade posts. Work at posts was less demanding and dangerous than working in canoes, but it required a much broader range of skills. Bourgeois Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher commented that "In winter Quarters... [voyageurs] are at ease, and commonly in plenty, which can only reconcile them to that manner of life, and make them forget their Sufferings in their Annual Voyage to and from the Grand Portage."¹ Like canoeing, post life had its own rhythms of hard work, rest, tedium and excitement. The dominant goals were contact and trade with Native peoples, rather than travelling.² While working at the interior posts, voyageurs were able to draw widely upon the skills they learned while growing up on farms in the St. Lawrence valley, especially construction, hunting and cultivating gardens.

Larger posts, and those located along main transportation routes, were much busier than smaller and isolated posts. The largest administrative post was the interior headquarters of Grand Portage, located at the western tip of Lake Superior. The post moved 50 miles north

¹ Wallace, W. Stewart, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), 74, Letter of Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher to General Haldimand, 4 October 1784. For a similar comment see John Henry Lefroy, Lake Athabasca to Anne, 1 January 1844, *In Search of the Magnetic North: A Soldier-Surveyor's Letters from the North-West, 1843-1844*, edited by George F.G. Stanley, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1955), 89.

² The tedium of post life is conveyed very well in Toronto; Ontario Archives (hereafter OA); Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue.

in 1804, and was called Fort Kaministiquia in its first few years, before being moved to Fort William in 1807, in honour of North West Company (NWC) head William McGillivray.³ Rainy River House on Lac La Pluie acted as a secondary administrative centre to Fort William, and was often the site of exchange of furs for trade goods between the Montreal and interior brigades. Fort Alexander, or Bas de la Rivière, at the mouth of the Winnipeg River, served as an interior summer rendezvous site. Other major interior posts included Cumberland House, Ile à la Crosse, and Rocky Mountain House (see Map 3).⁴ Furs, provisions and transport supplies were often stored at these interior administrative centres, and men were employed in sorting, packing and storing the goods. These larger centres also served as employment sites. Here, men were exchanged between brigades and freemen congregated at these posts if they were looking for work.

The vast majority of the interior posts were small and had a short life, some spanning only a few years.⁵ These posts, located off the main transport routes, did not receive nearly as much traffic as the major posts. Usually one or two north canoe crews became their core populations. At these posts voyageurs spent more time on construction and post maintenance than on packing and transporting ladings. Much energy was also devoted to developing

³ Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *The North West Company*. (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), 138, 160.

⁴ Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, revised edition, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970, first published in 1930), 232-5.

⁵ For an exhaustive list of fur trade posts, and their approximate life spans and size, see D. Wayne Moodie, Victor P. Lytwyn and Barry Kaye, "Trading Posts, 1774-1821," Plate 62, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume I, From the Beginning to 1800*, edited by R. Cole Harris, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); and D. Wayne Moodie, Barry Kaye, and Victor Lytwyn, "The Fur Trade Northwest to 1870," Plate 17, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume II, The Land Transformed, 1800-1891*, edited by R. Louis Gentilcore, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

relations with Native people in the area, either establishing trade or securing food from them. In these small settings, voyageurs often became very close to each other and their bourgeois. The master and servant relationship assumed a personal tone, and personality became an important factor in maintaining bourgeois authority.

A third category was satellite posts. They were usually very small, and rarely lasted more than a year. Men were often sent out in pairs or small groups to reach Native communities far from regular fur trade routes. In these settings voyageurs worked closely together and depended on each other for survival. These men often developed very close relationships with the Native people with whom they traded. They were the best-suited voyageurs to trade *en dérrouine*, an enormously successful tactic of promoting trade established by Montreal fur trade companies. Single or pairs of voyageurs were sent out with a small complement of goods to trade on a small scale in Native communities. Voyageurs trading *en dérrouine* could create new alliances, as well as reinforce existing ties.

At all types of posts work was divided into four main areas. The first was post construction and maintenance, and artisanal crafts, such as blacksmithing, coopering and carpentry. In Lower Canada habitants were accustomed to a wide range of duties and skills needed to run a farm and household, but they usually turned to skilled craftsmen for iron, metal, clay and some wood products.⁶ At the posts, men were expected to perform a far greater range of jobs, and only a few skilled craftsmen emerged in the profession. The second, and by far the dominant type of work for voyageurs, was the quest for food. Survival

⁶ For a description of the annual round of agriculture, and house construction and maintenance on habitant farms see Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 28-32, 195-8.

was often precarious, and men were highly motivated to maintain decent diets. Even in times of plenty, men devoted much energy to finding a wide variety of good food. Third, the type of work most important for the bourgeois, was the quest for furs. Lastly, some men travelled throughout the year between interior posts to carry furs, provisions, news and mail, acting as an information net which secured the fur trade community in the interior.

Arrival

At the annual summer rendezvous, the partners of the Montreal fur companies met to decide where to send traders for the coming year. Crews were assigned to specific posts, or assigned to establish new posts in areas deemed to have trading potential. In these cases the bourgeois or clerk in charge of the brigade would chose the precise location for the new post.⁷ Crews felt a tremendous relief when they arrived at a post location in the fall, after a long and hard journey racing against freezing. However, post duties immediately became pressing concerns. Contact with Native people in the area was the first order of business, even before unpacking from the long journey and setting up the post. Trade was the main reason for travelling into the interior, and trading rituals commenced at the earliest opportunity.⁸

Once contact had been established with Native trading partners, or if Natives were not in the area upon their arrival, traders turned their attention to establishing the post. When

⁷ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 170-290. On the tight management of the NWC see E.E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), 189-90.

⁸ Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room (hereafter MRL; BR); S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, 196 or 12 [my numbering] and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Thursday and Monday, 22 and 24 September 1808, 4-5, 38, (I added page numbers).

returning to an existing post, men were directed to unpack, clean up the site, repair old buildings, and possibly build new ones. Sites were often neglected over the summer or abandoned for several years.⁹ Construction for new posts began immediately. When John Thompson's party arrived at their designated site in the Athabasca District in mid-September 1800, he decided to set up his post near a Native settlement. The first day, "The Men Delivered their Baggages. made our Encampment &c.- which done gave them a Dram-" and early the next morning he "gave the Men 4 large Axes & a file in order to set about Building as quick as possible-"¹⁰ In their letters and journals the bourgeois frequently commented on the rate of post construction and their efforts to encourage their men to build quickly.¹¹ Posts could be built very quickly, especially if the crew feared an attack by Native people. When Alexander Henry the Younger arrived 9 September 1800 at Park River post, he chose a site, unloaded canoes, arranged camp in a way best suited for defence in record time, as his party had been fearful of Sioux attacks. The day after their arrival he gave each man a large axe and a supplied them with drams of high wine in order to encourage them to build the storehouse for the trade goods as soon as possible.¹² Bad weather and shortages of food also encouraged men to build shelter quickly. During the fall of 1798 at Grand Marais, John Thompson lamented that it had started to snow and the houses were not yet finished. He had to send the

⁹ Toronto; MRL; BR S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Sunday 2 October 1803 and Wednesday 12 October 1803, 12-13.

¹⁰ Montreal; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB); Masson Collection (hereafter MC); C.26; Microfilm reel #15; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1", Monday and Tuesday, 13 and 14 September 1800, 6.

¹¹ Ottawa; National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC); MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 14; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Author unknown, "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Saturday, 20 October 1799, 3.

¹² Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 9 and 10 September 1800, 1: 91-3.

hunter's wife to retrieve meat because there was too much work to be done to spare any of his men for the task.¹³

Community

The communities formed at the interior posts were made up of a range of people. Each post generally had at least one bourgeois or clerk to oversee the operations and trading in the area. Bourgeois were frequently assigned to a post or region for several years at a time.¹⁴ Many of the bourgeois married Native or métis women and had families which moved around with them from post to post.¹⁵ Voyageurs were usually assigned to different posts every year, depending on which brigade they accompanied into the interior. The men in a crew made up the labour force of the post for which they were destined. However, on occasion some members of the crew were "released" from their contracts for the winter and sent to live off the land if the company could not afford to provide for their welfare during the winter, or if there was an abundance of labour. Duncan McGillivray commented that at Fort George on the North Saskatchewan River in 1794, about fifteen of his men were "permitted" to spend the winter on the plains, and were provided with ammunition, and allowed to trade

¹³ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 7; Microfilm reel #C-15638; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798", Monday, 15 October 1798, 10. For another example see Toronto; OA; MU 842; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Friday, 9 October 1818, Saturday, 10 October 1818, Monday, 12 October 1818, Saturday, 17 October 1818, Monday, 19 October 1818, Monday, 26 October 1818, and Monday, 23 November 1818, 6-9, 15.

¹⁴ Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 170-290.

¹⁵ Sylvia Van Kirk, *'Many Tender Ties' Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980), 28-52; and Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 89-96, 107-10.

with Native people for their sustenance.¹⁶ In 1797, John McDonald of Garth wrote that he sent some of his men off to live in twos and threes along the river to survive the spring because the buffalo was scarce.¹⁷ In another example at Fort Alexandria along the Swan River in 1801, Daniel Harmon sent most of the post population, including voyageurs' wives and children, to spend the winter in groups of ten to fifteen on the plains to live off of the buffalo, as the company could not provide for their sustenance.¹⁸

Like the bourgeois, many voyageurs married Native and métis women in the interior and had families which lived with them at the interior posts (discussed in chapter 6). The number of people at a post varied greatly, depending on its location and relative importance to trade operations. In Appendix III, the chart "Composition of Posts in the North West Interior" shows the great diversity of populations at interior posts. The population at other fur trade posts matched these variations. Fort Dunvegan was a supply post for furs and provisions in the Athabasca District and characterized by fur trade historians as conventional. Its numbers of employees (including women and children) varied from 75 in 1805, lowering to about 50 in 1808, and dipping significantly after the merger to nineteen in 1822, and 24 in 1839.¹⁹ Cole Harris found that in the Cordillera region the number of officers and men at fur

¹⁶ Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1929), 7 October 1794, 32.

¹⁷ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A17; Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, written in 1859, photostat, (original at Montreal; MRB; MS 406 and typescript at Toronto; OA; MU 1763); 54.

¹⁸ W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), Sunday, 4 January 1801, 41.

¹⁹ Daniel Francis and Michael Payne, *A Narrative History of Fort Dunvegan*, (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1993), xv, 43.

trade posts varied from as few as six to as many as 40 or 50 in the larger establishments.²⁰

At posts, the bourgeois and clerks usually lived in their own houses, and crews lived all together with their families in a larger house. Although voyageurs usually lived together in large houses, sometimes they lived alone or with their families in separate dwellings that were smaller than those of the bourgeois. For example, in 1792 at the Peace River fort or "Old Establishment", two north canoes of about sixteen men built five houses seventeen by twelve feet for themselves.²¹ On occasion, one family or a couple of families shared a house, depending on the length of time they planned to spend at the post. However, in some posts, single men shared housing with married men and their families (see Appendix IV: "Housing Arrangements at Fort Vermillion, 1809"). Although the populations of forts varied throughout the years, it was not uncommon for children to constitute the largest demographic group.

Construction and Artisanal Crafts

Because very few artisans were specifically employed to work at the posts, voyageurs were expected to perform a wide range of duties necessary to run the post smoothly, and thus became "jacks of all trades." The first order of business was the construction of shelter. In New France and Lower Canada, contracted carpenters usually built most houses, even those

²⁰ Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 39.

²¹ Alexander Mackenzie, Esq., *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 23 December 1792, 251.

of simple frame and *pièce-sur-pièce* construction.²² Thus voyageurs working in the north west had to learn the vast range of skills that went into building a house. Undoubtedly some of the voyageurs must have had a rudimentary knowledge which they shared with their fellow labourers. The most common type of house was probably post-on-sill construction, with horizontal logs resting on sills cut into the vertical log frames. This style came to be known as the "Red River frame," and used widely in the Red River settlement, mostly because a single man with a few portable tools could construct the house alone.²³

Post construction and renovation was usually conducted in the fall, at the time of arrival at the trading site. Some construction projects were carried out during the summer months by men left behind.²⁴ Less often, construction projects spanned the winter months, if the weather permitted. For example, at the Rainy Lake post in early December 1804, engagés sawed logs, and split shingles, and then embarked in the construction of a new house, a project which stretched out until the end of January 1805.²⁵

Building a new post often required men to clear land of trees first.²⁶ In addition, land

²² Peter N. Moogk, *Building a House in New France*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 27, 32, 34, 36, 60.

²³ Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 26-7; Harris, *Resttlement*, 36, 39.

²⁴ Montreal; MRB; MC; C. 7; Microfilm reel #4; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95 (typescript copy in Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG 19 C 1, vol. 54, Microfilm reel #C-15640), Wednesday, 1 October 1794, 17; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, 17, 21, 26 May 1809, 22-3 (I added page numbers).

²⁵ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Charles Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1965), Monday, 10 December 1804; Wednesday, 19 December 1804; Friday, 18 January 1805; Wednesday, 30 January 1805; Thursday, 31 January 1805, 221-2, 226-7.

²⁶ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, vol. 1; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Thursday, 28 September 1797, 11. One bourgeois comments on Tuesday 9 October 1804 that his men employed clearing land for building along the Snake River: Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 12; Microfilm reel # C-15638; Attributed to John Sayer in the NAC Finding Aid #797, 2; "Journal of Daily

was cleared for gardens, and trees felled for construction. Donald McKay, of the Company of Temiscamingue, established a post near Langue de Terre in the summer of 1805.²⁷ By the end of July he had two men sawing and two clearing ground at the little river. Throughout all of August his men continued to saw and square wood for the store, warehouse and residences.²⁸ Cutting trees and squaring logs occupied much of the men's time. McKay's crew began sawing as early as 8 April 1805, and by the 22 May 1805 had cut at least 56 trees for the first part of the construction.²⁹ To save on energy men often turned to existing structures in various states of disrepair, salvaging old material, and building on previous foundations. At Tête au Brochet in the fall of the 1818, the voyageurs set about repairing an old house, which had been made for George Nelson seven years earlier. They cleared out the rubbish, re-laid the floors, and plastered.³⁰

Posts in the north western interior usually consisted of a warehouse, a store, and

Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3; 22 (a published version of this journal can be found in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 249-78, Gates attributes the journal to Thomas Connor). In October 1807, George Nelson noted that his men began to clear a place for building along the Rivière Dauphin. Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; 3.

²⁷ The collection of Donald McKay's journals for the Company of Temiscamingue can be found in the OA, but it seems that this trader and company are absent from the historiography.

²⁸ See entries Monday, 29 July 1805; Monday, 5 August 1805; Saturday, 17 August 1805; and Tuesday, 20 August 1820 in Donald McKay, *Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue*; 27-30 (I added page numbers).

²⁹ Donald McKay, *Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue*; Monday, 8 April 1805 and Wednesday, 22 May 1805, 9-11, 14 (I added page numbers).

³⁰ *Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet*; Friday, 9 October 1818; Saturday, 10 October 1818; Monday, 12 October 1818; Saturday, 17 October 1818; Monday, 19 October 1818; Monday, 26 October 1818; and Monday, 23 November 1818, 6-9, 15. See another example where an old house was turned into a shop for a new post. *George Nelson's Journal*, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Sundays, 1 October 1808 and 8 September 1808, 6 (I added page numbers).

houses.³¹ The most important structure at the post was the warehouse and men were instructed to build this first. Usually, the house for the bourgeois or clerk, or the store, was built next. Lastly, voyageurs could turn to the construction of their own houses.³² This order of building was not a hard and fast rule. The men frequently worked on the shop and houses simultaneously.³³ Occasionally, houses at the post were built before the shop.³⁴ Despite the fact that men's houses did not generally have a high priority in the direction of post construction by the bourgeois, the men seemed to spend a fair amount of time on them. The bourgeois make mention of it frequently, and the voyageurs probably put more time and effort into their homes than the bourgeois would be aware of, and sometimes blatantly disobeyed bourgeois orders to work on their homes.³⁵

After building the frame, men plastered both the insides and outsides of the house

³¹ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Wednesday, 8 November 1797; 18.

³² John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Thursday, Saturday to Monday, and Wednesday, 16, 18-20, 22 September 1800, 7. For another example of shop construction, at Fort George, see Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 10 October 1794, 32.

³³ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Thursdays, 19 September and 10 October 1805, 3-4 (I added page numbers). Also see Nelson description on post construction at Rivière Dauphin, Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Friday, 28 September 1810 and Wednesday, 3 October 1810, 28-29 (I added page numbers).

³⁴ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; early November [which was really October, mistake on Nelson's part] 1807, Saturday, 3 November; Tuesday 6 November; Friday, 9 November; Saturday, 10 November; Friday, 16 November; and Sunday, 18 November 1807, 3-5.

³⁵ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 25 March 1805, 234. For other mention of men working on their houses see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 16 October 1809 to 20 October 1809, 552-4; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Saturday 3 November [which was really October, Nelson's mistake] 1807, Tuesday, 6 November [October] 1807, 3-4; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Sunday, 8 September 1808 and Thursday, 12 October 1808, 6-7 (I added page numbers); "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sept. 1804", Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Tuesday, 17, 19, 27 and 30 October 1804, 23-24.

with clay.³⁶ Searching for clay and transporting it to the post could be time-consuming.³⁷ Some houses were covered with mud and bark, which were easier to procure.³⁸ Plastering could take as long as 25 days.³⁹ The number of houses, the availability of material and weather affected the pace, as well as the availability of food in the region. Men who were injured, or could not take part in other activities, were assigned to plastering, because it was a prolonged chore that did not require strenuous mobility.⁴⁰

Once plastering was complete, men moved on to other tasks, such as roofing. Like plastering, splitting of shingles was not as difficult a task as other aspects of house construction, so it was left to weaker men.⁴¹ Next, floors were laid, and houses were whitewashed inside and out.⁴² Chimneys were built from stone and secured with a plaster

³⁶ "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804", Thursday to Saturday, Tuesday, Wednesday 25-27, 30-31 Oct 1804, 23-24; Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A14, Microfilm reel #M-130; John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6; Saturday, 25 January 1806, 16 (original at Provincial Archives of British Columbia); George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Sunday, 1 October 1808 and Saturday, 9 December 1808, 6, 13 (I added page numbers).

³⁷ For example see Toronto; OA; Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Friday, 8 November 1799, 40 (I added page numbers).

³⁸ For example see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 17 July 1810, 614-15.

³⁹ See entries from 21 October 1805 to 3 November 1805, Montreal; MRB; MC; C.8; Microfilm reel #14; Alexander McKenzie, Journal of Great Bear Lake, 6-7.

⁴⁰ John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6; Wednesday, 15 January 1806, 12.

⁴¹ "Old Godin" seemed to be primarily responsible for shingles at the Rainy Lake post in the winter of 1804-5. "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Wednesday, 19 December 1804, Friday, 18 January 1805, and Thursday, 31 January 1805, 222, 226-7.

⁴² For examples of laying floors see George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Tuesday, 8 March 1804, 25; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Friday and Sunday, 16 and 18 November [actually October, Nelson's error] 1807, 5. For examples of whitewashing see Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Monday, 18 November 1799, 41; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Friday, 22 January 1819; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday, 16 November 1804, 219.

made of clay and hay.⁴³ Where stones were not available, men had to build chimneys solely from clay.⁴⁴ Hearths, and sometimes ovens, were built into the chimneys.⁴⁵ Men's carpentry skills were further developed in other aspects of house construction. Windows were cut and either left open or covered with skins, and shutters were added to keep out the weather.⁴⁶ Finally, men frequently dug cellars, both inside or outside the houses, to store food. Donald McKay reported that two men worked one day digging the cellar for the house at Langue de Terre in the fall of 1799. But laying the cellar floor, building stairs and installing a door for the cellar stretched out for almost a month.⁴⁷ Sometimes men built separate houses to store fish.⁴⁸ The finishing touch on almost every post was a flagstaff.⁴⁹ Cole Harris describes forts

⁴³ For examples of chimney building see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: July 1810, 614-15; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday, 12 October 1804, 214. For an example of chimney repair see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Tuesday, 13 March 1798, 48; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Wednesday, 10 October 1798, 6; and John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6; Friday, Saturday, Friday, Monday, 20-21, 27, 29 December 1805, 2-4.

⁴⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 28 September 1800, 104.

⁴⁵ For example see Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Saturday, 17 October 1818, 7 and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Wednesday, 1 May 1805, 239.

⁴⁶ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Saturday, 17 October 1818, 7; Montreal; MRB; MC; C.24; Microfilm reel #2; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Tuesday, 25 November 1800, 5.

⁴⁷ See entries between Monday, 21 October and Monday, 18 November 1799, Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; 38-41 (I added page numbers). For another example of cellar construction see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: July 1810, 614-15.

⁴⁸ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Thursday, 11 December 1807, 13.

⁴⁹ "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Septr. 1804," Wednesday, 21 November 1804, 28; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 6; Microfilm reel #C-15638; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Saturday, 11 October 1800, 54; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Thursday, 30 September 1800, 8, "The Men planted a Flagg Staff it being the usual custom color they pay you that compliment, to give them a little Liquor to Divest themselves- I gave them Three [illegible] Rum- Not merely on that Consideration, but none particularly on that of their having exerted themselves, & I [illegible] duty as well as can be expected from any Men-"; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 1, 13, 28 October 1801, 188, 191. For an example of flying the flag on Sundays see *ibid.*, 17 October 1800, 121.

as "power containers" of the fur trade, imposing symbols meant to demonstrate power over Native peoples, and over fur trade employees.⁵⁰ The flags represented an attempt to claim some kind of sovereignty in the *pays d'en haut*. They were supposed to signal to Native people a new presence on their land, but they also instilled traders with a sense of legitimacy and reminded them of their rights and duties in a foreign land.

Some posts, especially the major ones, were fortified with palisades to protect them from attacks by Native people and rival companies. Although these kinds of assaults were not typical, fear of the unknown could lead fur traders to construct the palisades before their residences. The Sioux, enemies of many Native groups who traded regularly with the Montreal companies, caused much trepidation. When Alexander Henry the Younger's party arrived at the site of Park River Post in September 1800, fear of the Sioux compelled them to post sentries and build palisades as soon as the storehouse was complete and the goods secure. He had each man cut 50 oak stockades twelve feet long and arrange them around the post. It required the full strength of two men to carry one log at a time on their shoulders. He remarked that "fear was an excellent overseer, and the work went on with expedition." With relief he reported on 10 September 1800 that the stockades were complete. Only then did the men begin to fell trees for house construction.⁵¹ Cole Harris has noted that in the Cordillera when traders "did not build palisaded, well-defended forts, they took risks." In 1814 two NWC posts in the far west were overrun. Harris asserts that a characteristic fort in the Cordillera contained a "rectangular palisade of cedar, fir or pine logs, usually squared on two

⁵⁰ Harris, *Resettlement*, 39, 57.

⁵¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 10-12, 20-21 September 1800, 93-5, 100-1. For other examples see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 11 June 1801 and Thursday, 2 June 1803, 49, 67.

surfaces (to fit tightly), planted four feet in the ground, standing fifteen to eighteen feet above it, and pegged to cross-pieces four feet from the top. A gallery six to seven feet wide on the inside of the palisades, four and a half feet below the top, and running from the length of the front and back walls (in some cases, all four walls), from which men could fire through loopholes." Forts also contained bastions, usually square two-storey structures, and a considerable armament of a variety of cannons, guns, muskets, bayonets.⁵²

In areas where men feared attacks from hostile Native people or were suspicious of the subterfuge of competing companies, sentries patrolled the post during the night. At Fort George in the early 19th century it was customary to keep a watch by night and a guard by day, and Alexander Ross asserted that it was run more like a military than a trading establishment.⁵³ At larger depots where great quantities of goods and furs were stored, security was increased. For example, at Grand Portage the gates were always shut at sunset and two sentries kept watch all night, chiefly for fear of fire.⁵⁴ Animals could pose threats to posts, especially to food stores and nets. Traps were frequently used to catch other intruding predators, such as wolves, wolverines, raccoons, foxes and fishers, whose furs were valuable to the trade.⁵⁵

Larger posts had more buildings, which created more construction work for the

⁵² Harris, *Resettlement*, 35-6.

⁵³ Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West; A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 1: 83.

⁵⁴ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 93.

⁵⁵ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday and Thursday, 18-19 November 1818, 14; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 19 October 1800, 122.

voyageurs. Some had blacksmith shops.⁵⁶ Others had horse stables.⁵⁷ Given the importance of travel by horse on the open prairie, smaller prairie outposts also had stables, such as Alexander Henry the Younger's Pembina River post. By 1807, after the post was six years old, Henry had his men build a large stable to house 50 horses.⁵⁸ Some forts, such as Fort Alexandria in 1801 and the Forks on the McKenzie River in 1807, had *glacières* or ices houses.⁵⁹ The size and scale of construction projects were often dependent on the vision and zeal of the bourgeois in charge. For example, in the same year, Alexander Henry the Younger, a bourgeois with considerable drive, had his men build a bridge over a creek to haul firewood more conveniently.⁶⁰ Bourgeois and clerks sometimes directed their men to build houses for the Native people in the area to improve trading alliances.⁶¹ On occasion voyageurs also had to build small houses near competitors' forts, to facilitate spying on the competition.⁶²

The absence of artisans in the northwest interior enabled some voyageurs with

⁵⁶ For one example at Fort Vermillion see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 31 August 1810, 622.

⁵⁷ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Wednesday and Thursday, 26-27 September 1804, and Monday, 29 October 1804, 212, 216; Fort Alexandria, before departure to Tête au Brochet, Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Monday, 21 September 1818, 1.

⁵⁸ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 13 October 1801, 19 September 1807, 191, 424.

⁵⁹ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; 26 February and 25 March 1801, 23, 28; Montreal; MRB; MC; C.28; Microfilm reel #13; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday-Friday, Tuesday, Friday, 16-17, 21, 24 October 1807, 10-11.

⁶⁰ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 10 October 1807, 425.

⁶¹ Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Friday, 8 November 1799, 40 (I added page numbers).

⁶² See entries from Friday, 28 September to Wednesday, 10 October 1804, "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 212-14.

particular talent to specialize in crafts, such as blacksmithing, coopering and making canoes, effectively skipping apprenticeships.⁶³ However, most voyageurs were expected to be "jacks of all trades" and thus competent to some degree in these areas, especially because the fluidity and frequent shortage of labour at the interior posts meant post communities were often haphazard.⁶⁴ The range of duties voyageurs were expected to perform at a post at one time could be astonishing. For example, at the Rainy Lake post in the fall of 1804, in the space of eleven days voyageurs were building themselves beds, mending their clothing, chopping wood, constructing stables, laying floors, mending canoes, and catching and hauling thousands of fish.⁶⁵ At Fort Alexandria in the spring of 1801, over the course of three days voyageurs transported meat from the hunters' lodge, hauled ice and water for the ice house, built sledges, hauled houses to new locations, made pemmican, hung up meat and tongues to salt, made kegs to store grease, and made nails.⁶⁶ Some men were referred to specifically as carpenters, such as the unnamed engagés at Rainy Lake post in the fall of 1804 and Fort George in the winter of 1812-23.⁶⁷ However, most voyageurs practised carpentry in

⁶³ Lynn Louise Morland found that some voyageurs at Michilimackinac became part-time artisans, but always as a supplement to their fur trading. Lynn Louise Morland, "Craft industries at Fort Michilimackinac, an eighteenth-century fur trade outpost," Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Pennsylvania, 1993), 143.

⁶⁴ For examples of bourgeois expecting their voyageurs to be jacks of all trades see Toronto; OA; MU 572; Duncan Clark Papers; Vol. 2; To Duncan Clark, The Pic, from Donald McIntosh, Michipicotton, 8 July 1825, 1; and Toronto; OA; MU 572; Duncan Clark Papers; Vol. 2; To Duncan Clark, The Pic, from Donald McIntosh, Michipicotton, 8 July 1825, 1.

⁶⁵ See entries Saturday, 20 October 1804, Monday, 22 October 1804, Sunday, 28 October 1804, Monday, 29 October 1804, and Wednesday, 31 October 1804, "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 215-17.

⁶⁶ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Monday to Thursday, 2-5 March 1801, 24.

⁶⁷ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 26 November 1804, 220; Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1969), 1 January 1813, 108.

construction, building furniture, and fashioning tools, sledges and snowshoes. They first gathered suitable wood for their projects.⁶⁸ The most common items constructed were beds and bed frames, tables and chairs.⁶⁹ Men also made tools to help in other duties, such as wooden shovels, wheel-barrels, wedges to press packs, and fish baskets.⁷⁰ Barrels and containers for storage were very important at posts, and the skills of coopers highly valued. Coopers made barrels for use at their own posts, but probably because the trade was fairly rare, coopers were employed making barrels for use at smaller posts as well, and in preparation for the establishment of new posts.⁷¹

Artisans of a sort could emerge in the north western posts. Because voyageurs were required to learn and practice different trades while in the interior, it is not surprising that some became experts at particular crafts, both as a result of skill, and of necessity in these

⁶⁸ Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Tuesday, 25 November 1800, 5; and John Stuart, *Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6*; 20 December 1805, also see 22 January 1806, Mayace and La Gard were sent for wood to make a table, 1, 15.

⁶⁹ For examples of tables and chairs see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Thursday, 31 January 1805, 227; Donald McKay, *Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue*; Friday, 29 November 1799, 43 (I added page numbers); Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Tuesday, 25 November 1800, 5; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Tuesday, 23 October 1798, 14; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Wednesday, 21 January 1801, Thursday, 5 February 1801, Monday, 9 February 1801, 21-23. For examples of beds and bed frames see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday, 20 October 1804, 215; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Tuesday, 20 October 1818, 7; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, (I added page numbers), Wednesday, 24 January 1809, 16.

⁷⁰ On shovels see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 10 September 1800, 93. On wheel barrels see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday, 23 November 1804, Monday, 17 December 1804, Wednesday, 19 December 1804, 220-2. On fish baskets see Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Thursday, 15 October 1818, 6-7. On wedges see John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Thursday, 12 February 1801, 23.

⁷¹ Mention of cooper is found at Rainy Lake Post, "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday and Monday, 16, 26 November 1804, 219-20; and Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage*, 1 January 1812, 108.

isolated work settings. Others improved skills they brought from French Canada. In the spring of 1803 Alexander Henry the Younger wrote "One of my men undertook to make [a] real pair of wheels on the same construction as those we have in Canada. He finished them to day and [they] appeared to be very well done. I now made him Chief Wheelwright and we shall soon have a few capital Carts."⁷² Often one man acted as a blacksmith while others were engaged in helping him, by cutting wood, making charcoal and taking coals out of the kiln.⁷³ In helping, voyageurs probably learned some of the rudimentary skills of the craft. Blacksmiths made tools for post maintenance, traps for the trade, and helped repair guns.⁷⁴ The poor quality of firearms made gun repair a valued skill.⁷⁵

After men had arrived at their post site, and put the post in order, they began to prepare for the long winter months ahead. General preparations for the winter included building up stores of food and firewood, and ensuring that all buildings were sound. In the late summer and early fall, men harvested wild hay and stored it for their horses and other livestock, and for household use, during the winter.⁷⁶ Throughout the fall men were employed in chopping, hauling, and storing cord wood.⁷⁷ For example, at the Company of

⁷² Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 30 March 1803, 210.

⁷³ See mentions of a blacksmith shop at Fort Vermillion, Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 22 November 1809, 31 August 1810, 572, 622; and Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage*, January 1812, 108.

⁷⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: Friday, 28 January 1814, 825.

⁷⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 24 October 1800, 124.

⁷⁶ For a couple of examples see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday, 30 July 1801, 50; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 1 October 1801, 188.

⁷⁷ For a few examples see Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Tuesday and Saturday, 18 and 22 November 1794, 20-21; Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Saturday, 9 November 1799, 40 (I added page numbers); Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 22 and 23 October 1800, 122-3; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday, 20 October 1804, Monday, 29 October 1804, Wednesday, 31 October 1804, and Monday, 26 November 1804,

Temiscamingue post near Langue de Terre in October 1805, Donald McKay had his men chop and store fire wood, collect and store hay, haul corn, repair the floor of the winter house, whitewash the ceiling of the winter house, and collect flat stones for the hearth and pavement. In November his men squared logs and sawed boards to have on hand for construction and carpentry projects. They were ready to enter the wintering house on 17 December.⁷⁸ Maintenance continued through the winter and spring.⁷⁹ Snow removal could start as early in the season as mid-October, as it did at the forks on the Mackenzie River in 1807, and continue as late as March, as it did at the Rainy Lake post in 1805.⁸⁰

Cleaning the forts was a year-round chore.⁸¹ Garbage disposal and human waste management was a challenge to maintaining sanitary conditions. Problems could arise early on. Alexander Henry the Younger's crew arrived at the site of the Park River post 3 September 1800, and by 24 September Henry complained: "The stench around our Camp was now so great arising from the quantities of flesh and fat we had thrown away since our arrival

215-20; and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Saturday, 31 October 1818, 10.

⁷⁸ See entries between Monday, 28 October 1805 and Tuesday, 17 December 1805 in Donald McKay, *Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue*; 39-46, (I added page numbers). Also see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Wednesday, 30 January 1805, 227.

⁷⁹ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 232, Sunday and Monday, 10-11 March 1805.

⁸⁰ W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; 12, Thursday, 6 November 1807; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 220, 233, Saturday, 1 December 1804 and Thursday, 21 March 1805.

⁸¹ For examples see W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; 9, 41, Tuesday, 14 October 1807 and mid-June 1808; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 221-2, Friday, Saturday and Monday, 7, 15, and 17 December 1804.

here."⁸² Voyageurs washed and mended their own and their bourgeois' and clerks' clothes.⁸³ Men also participated in food preservation and preparation. They helped put cellars in order, baked bread, cleaned and cooked potatoes, boiled buffalo fat, made pemmican, and salted meat.⁸⁴ Some voyageurs were designated as cooks, but all were expected to know how to prepare food. In addition they made candles and soap out of bear fat and tallow.⁸⁵

Quest for Food

The quest for food dominated the fur trade and constituted a major concern for the men involved. When men arrived at a post, the hurried construction was accompanied by a scramble to build up the store of provisions for the winter. Food gathering, preparation and preservation had its own cycle, which was affected by place and weather, and when fur traders were particularly competent, their cycles mirrored those of Native people in the area.

⁸² Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 77, 102; 3 and 24 September 1800.

⁸³ W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Monday, 29 March 1808, 29; and John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6; 1, 11-12; 20 December 1805, 15-16 January 1806, (original at Provincial Archives of British Columbia). In another example, a voyageur named Coutu mended his clothes, "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday, 20 October 1804, 215. Most clothing was brought from Canada, but some clothing was obtained from Natives, and made by Native women, especially moccasins. Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 54.

⁸⁴ For a couple of examples, voyageur Lisé baked five loaves of bread, and voyageur Cloutier baked four loaves of bread and helped McKay organize the cellar, while voyageurs Faries and Le blanc cleaned potatoes. Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Friday, 21 June 1799, Tuesday, 19 November 1799, 31, 41 (I added page numbers). Voyageurs melted and boiled buffalo fat to put into pemmican, and Plante hung up the meat and tongues, which he had salted ten days ago. Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Tuesday and Wednesday, 3-4 March 1801, 24.

⁸⁵ For a few examples see John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Friday, 26 October 1798, 14; Coues, ed., *New Light*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: 17 September 1800, 25 February 1801, 99, 171; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Wednesday, 18 August 1808, 56.

Traders often relied on Native people for food, or to teach them to procure it for themselves.⁸⁶

The quest for food dominated post life, and determined the ease or stress of voyageurs' work. Voyageurs were highly motivated to maintain a strong and varied supply of food, and food issues led to stresses in bourgeois-voyageur relations. Voyageurs often refused to cooperate with their bourgeois and clerks when they were not satisfied with the provisions. In times of hunger, finding food was all-consuming and meant survival or death. In times of plenty, a varied selection and high quality food determined the standard of living at a post. Not surprisingly, men often showed a lot of initiative in hunting and gathering food.

When fur traders first arrived in an unfamiliar place, they were dependent on the Native people for food, and were as anxious to trade for provisions as for furs. In times of dire need, men went in search of Native peoples for provisions. For example, in the summer of 1802, Daniel Harmon was concerned about the shortage of food at Bird Mountain so he sent out seven men in several different directions in search of Native people to help them find provisions.⁸⁷ Travelling to Native camps for provisions was not restricted to times of crisis, but was often a regular activity at the post in the annual quest for sustenance.⁸⁸ Sometimes voyageurs were not thrilled at the idea of venturing out to Native lodges. In mid-January 1819 at Tête au Brochet, Nelson noted "At about 4. a m. (2 1/2 hours before day) The two

⁸⁶ On Native food cycles see Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 27-48.

⁸⁷ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Sunday, 25 July 1802 and Wednesday, 22 February 1804, 60, 72. In another example George Nelson also describes a desperate search for provisions one winter, where he dragged his men around against their will looking for Native people until they finally found some with provisions. George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 70.

⁸⁸ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 101; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Tuesday, Friday, Monday and Saturday, 3, 13, 16, and 21 April 1810, 2-5 (I added page numbers).

indians return. I send Vandalle with them, but sorely against his grain tho' he does not complain, because he is a peevish cowardly thing with the indians.- " The next day he sent Welles and Plante to join Vandalle, and they returned two days later heavily loaded with dry and pounded meat, and grease.⁸⁹ In many other cases, voyageurs welcomed the opportunity to visit Native lodges, especially if they had become friendly with them.⁹⁰

Men were also sent out to entice Native peoples to the post with provisions to trade.⁹¹ Native people often came to the fur trade posts without being sought by the traders, especially once the word was out that the traders wanted provisions. At the Pembina River post in the winter of 1798, Ojibwa periodically visited and offered meat to sell. Charles Chaboillez, the bourgeois in charge of the post, recorded one day in February that "Arrived an Old Woman, she brought four Pieces Dryed Meat, 3 Buffo Sdes, 2 Packs Cords & 2 Bladders grease, for which I paid her Ten Phiols Mixed Rum- gave her a Piece Tobo & she sets off."⁹² Travelling up the Red River on his way to establish the Park River Post, Alexander Henry the Younger

⁸⁹ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, 13, 14 and 16 January 1819, 25-6.

⁹⁰ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Thursday and Friday, 4-5 February 1819, 30-1; Toronto; MRL; BR; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 39; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Sunday and Monday, 1-2 March 1800, 39; and Winnipeg; HBCA A.11/4; London Inward Correspondence from the HBC posts, 1775-1783, Albany Fort. No. 105, microfilm reel #138 Thomas Hutchins to the London Committee, Albany Fort, Hudson's Bay, 5 July 1775, fo. 29.

⁹¹ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Wednesday, 10 December 1800, 14. In other examples, voyageur La France accompanied two young Native boys bringing skins, oats and bear meat to the Rainy Lake Post, "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Tuesday, 12 February 1805, 229; and voyageur Jolibois accompanied some Natives with meat to the post at Great Bear Lake. Alexander McKenzie, *Journal of Great Bear Lake*; 18 May 1806, 16.

⁹² Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Monday and Wednesday, 21 January and 21 February 1798, 36, 44. For a couple of other examples see John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 18C 5-6, Friday, 31 January 1806, 19; and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Sunday, 18 October 1818, 7.

purchased freshly killed buffalo from a group of Ojibwa. They planned to winter in the area and requested that Henry's party remain also, to continue trading, but Henry wished to travel farther up the river nearer to the Sioux. Henry continued to purchase food from Native people throughout September, and he engaged Native people to transport meat as well.⁹³ This kind of pattern of continued association could lead the traders to hire Native people more permanently to hunt for their post. Some Native people came so frequently that the traders hired eventually them on as permanent hunters. Native people sometimes formed "homeguard" communities close to the posts, but not to the same degree as did the Cree at the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) posts along the shores of Hudson Bay.⁹⁴

Traders often sought out Native people to hire as hunters as soon as they arrived at a post.⁹⁵ Some Native people were hired because they had reputations as being excellent and reliable hunters.⁹⁶ At Trout Lake on 21 June 1806, Simon Fraser was excited to report that he finally convinced Little Head's brother-in-law to join their party, and "as he is the most capable Indian to accompany us." He also employed Moise de dents de Biche, who seemed to be the best hunter in the area.⁹⁷ Traders felt more comfortable hiring Native people as hunters

⁹³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26 August, 11 and 16 September 1800, 62, 65-6, 95, 98.

⁹⁴ Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay, 1600-1870*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 41; Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 85; and Arthur J. Ray and Donald Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure: An Economic Analysis of Relations Between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company Before 1763*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 41.

⁹⁵ John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6; Tuesday, 26 December 1805, 3. Also see entries Sunday, 22 December 1805, Monday, 23 December 1805, Thursday, 26 December 1805, Thursday, 2 January 1806, Wednesday, 22 January 1806, Wednesday, 12 February 1806, and Saturday, 22 February 1806, 2, 4, 6, 15, 25-26, 31.

⁹⁶ "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, Tuesday, 2 October 1804, 20.

⁹⁷ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A9; Simon Fraser Collection; Volume 3; Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807 (copied in 1858 from Bancroft

if they were widely known to other traders, and also if they could serve multiple functions, such as guiding. When Alexander Mackenzie set off from Fort Chipewyan in early June 1789, he hired a Native man named English Chief as a guide and hunter. He acquired the name English Chief because he was one of the Native people that conducted Samuel Hearne to the Coppermine River in the early 1770s, and had been in the habit of carrying his furs to Churchill Factory on Hudson Bay ever since.⁹⁸

Hiring Native people as hunters provided a post with security and certainty in being supplied with provisions. However, the bourgeois felt that Native people could be unreliable, or could make excessive demands. On 16 November 1800, Archibald Norman McLeod, stationed at Fort Alexandria, complained that

Fusé came from our hunters with 3/4 of an Elk, the only meat we had from them for these twelve days past, &. they are not at all ashamed to send me word if I do not send them rum they'll not hunt for the Fort, &. such is my present situation that I will be necessitated to comply with their very unreasonable, the common request.⁹⁹

Along the same lines, Alexander Henry the Younger, stationed at Rivière Terre Blanche, near Fort Dauphin, in the winter of 1799, complained that the animals were so scarce he had to hire his hunters on extravagant terms. After supplying his two hunters with whatever dry goods they wanted, he gave them, their wives and children each a full set of the best clothing

Library, No. 18, Series C, at the University of California at Berkeley; can also be found in Appendix C *Public Archives Report for 1929*, 147-59); Saturday, 21 June 1806, 132.

⁹⁸ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 135-6.

⁹⁹ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, 16 November 1800, 3.

in the store, and providing "Saulteur [diluted] liquor," guns, knives, ammunition, and tobacco, Henry grumbled that "Even upon these terms I was obliged to consider it a great favor they did me."¹⁰⁰ Duncan McGillivray at Fort George in December of 1794 had even more serious problems when two of his four Native hunters deserted the traders, and threatened their survival through to the following spring.¹⁰¹

It is not surprising that bourgeois wished to be independent of Native people and thus urged their voyageurs to learn to hunt effectively. Generally most men working at a post were expected to hunt, but sometimes specific men were made responsible for hunting if they were particularly skilled, if there was a shortage of labour, or if the bourgeois was trying to save on ammunition.¹⁰² In the winter of 1809, Alexander Henry the Younger expected all of his men to make a *quart de loge*, which involved killing 20 animals, putting them on a stage, eventually hauling them to fort, and collecting enough buffalo hide for 20 pemmican bags. The men's wives usually accompanied them on hunting trips to help them make their *quart de loge*, and collect tallow and other offals, "which are of great service in their ménage."¹⁰³ Throughout the winter of 1784-85 at the Assiniboine- Rivière Qu'Appelle post, close to 100

¹⁰⁰ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 2-3. For another example of natives using difficulty with hunting as leverage for better trading terms, see Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Wednesday, 19 November 1800, 4.

¹⁰¹ Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 10 and 20 October 1794, and 27 January 1795, 32-3, 36, 52.

¹⁰² Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 11.

¹⁰³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 20 November 1809, 572. Sylvia Van Kirk asserts that Native women were especially important to traders because they could process and prepare meat. Van Kirk, '*Many Tender Ties*', 56-7.

buffalo were killed by voyageurs stationed at that post.¹⁰⁴

Men's hunting varied according to the environment and time of year. For example, members of Alexander Mackenzie's crew near Slave Lake in June 1789 killed beavers and geese for food.¹⁰⁵ In the winter of 1800 at Terre de Langue, Lisé, a voyageur in the employ of the Company of Temiscamingue, killed eight ducks, fourteen partridges, five muskrats and a mink in one November trip, and during an eight-day December trip he returned with 80 hares and 32 partridges.¹⁰⁶ Some hunting trips could last a long time, depending on the availability of food. Etienne Charbonneau was away from the fort at Pigeon River for 29 days on a hunting trip in November and December of 1807.¹⁰⁷ Lengthy hunting trips, especially in times of scarcity or in dangerous territory could cause men to feel anxious for both the safety of the hunters, and the success of their trip. Alexander Henry the Younger reported that when he returned from a hunting trip in the fall of 1800 at the Park River post, close to hostile Sioux, "my people had been uneasy about us, and were overjoyed when they heard us hallo."¹⁰⁸

Hunting techniques varied from the use of guns and rifles to the use of snares, depending on

¹⁰⁴ See entries between Sunday, 10 November 1794 and Wednesday, 11 February 1795, Journal of John MacDonell, *Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle*, 1793-95, 20-6. For other examples of hunting see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Sunday, 24 September 1797, Friday, 6 October 1797, Saturday, 12 January 1798, and Sunday, 25 March 1798, 10, 12-13, 33, 50; and Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Saturday, 20 December 1800, Saturday, 27 December 1800, Sunday, 4 January 1801, Sunday, 18 January 1801, and Wednesday, 18 February 1801, 12, 14-15, 18, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Tuesday, 9 June 1789 and Thursday, 11 June 1789, 140, 143.

¹⁰⁶ Toronto; OA; Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, Journal from August 1800 to April 1801, Company of Temiscamingue; Monday, 10 November 1800 and Thursday, 25 December 1800, 10, 17 (I added page numbers).

¹⁰⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Wednesday, 23 December 1807, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 23 September 1800, 102; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 26-7; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Sunday, 2 September 1810, 126.

the intended prey. Snares were most often used to catch hares.¹⁰⁹ Native women were especially adept at hunting with snares, and often their yields could mean the difference between comfort and starvation.¹¹⁰

Storing and hauling meat from a kill site to caches and posts took much time and energy, and was a constant job that dominated daily tasks at the posts.¹¹¹ After engagés were successful in a hunt, they usually cached the meat, to preserve it and protect it from wild animals, until it could be transported to the post.¹¹² In the winter they used sleds to haul meat from the cache site to the post, and in the summer they used canoes or horses and carts.¹¹³ Voyageurs also hauled the meat from Native hunters hired to work for a post, and meat which had been purchased freelance from Native lodges and Native caches.¹¹⁴ Sometimes the task of hauling meat fell to women and children if a post was short on labour and the bourgeois

¹⁰⁹ For examples see Donald McKay, *Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue*; Tuesday, 24 December 1799 and Monday, 17 February 1806, 46, 58; and John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Monday and Wednesday, 20 and 22 September 1800, 7.

¹¹⁰ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 58-9.

¹¹¹ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Fort Chipewyan, Athabasca, 1 Jan 1844, Lefroy to Sophia, 93. For an example of the high frequency of hauling meat see Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Monday, 24 November 1800, Tuesday, 25 November 1800, Saturday, 20 December 1800, Saturday, 3 January 1801, Sunday, 4 January 1801, Saturday, 7 February 1801, Thursday, 12 February 1801, and Saturday, 28 February 1801, 5, 12, 15, 21, 23.

¹¹² John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Friday, 19 October 1798, 12.

¹¹³ Journal of John MacDonell, *Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95*; Tuesday, 18 November 1794, 20; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Saturday, 27 October 1798, 16; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 15 October 1801, 191.

¹¹⁴ For examples of men retrieving meat from Native hunters see Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 20 October 1794 and 27 January 1795, 36, 52; John Stuart, *Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6*; 21 and 27 December 1805, and 2 January 1806, 1, 4, 6. For examples of men retrieving meat from Native caches see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Monday, Saturday, Sunday and Sunday, 2, 7, 8 and 22 October 1797, 11, 13, 15; and George Nelson's *Journal*, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Sunday and Thursday, 16 and 20 December 1810, 38-9 (I added page numbers).

required the voyageurs to stay at the post doing other things, like construction (with which Native women had little experience).¹¹⁵ On occasion, the bourgeois hired Native people to haul the meat. For example, Alexander Henry the Younger found that it was "too troublesome to send my people daily for meat, so paid Indians more to transport the meat."¹¹⁶ Caching was a risk, as sometimes wild animals or improper storage would damage the meat. In a comedy of errors at the Rocky Mountain House in January of 1806, a voyageur named Forcier froze one his toes going to a cache for meat. The next day, the bourgeois John Stuart sent men out to retrieve more meat from a cache but the men could not find it because they took the wrong road. When the men finally did return with meat a week later, they brought very little because the Native people left less meat there than they promised, and the meat that the men did bring was dried out. In an effort to prevent further mishap, Stuart had Native people guide his men to other caches and directed one of his men to stay with the Native people to secure the produce of their hunt in caches and to inform the men at the post of kills.¹¹⁷ Sometimes the bourgeois or clerks would become frustrated with their men's incompetence and set out themselves to retrieve meat. For example, George Nelson sent out one of his men to retrieve meat from Native lodges a few days after Christmas 1806 and he

¹¹⁵ For one example see John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Monday and Tuesday, 15 and 16 October 1798, 10.

¹¹⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 16 September 1800, 98; and John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Thursday, 18 October 1798, 11.

¹¹⁷ John Stuart, *Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6*; Sunday and Monday, 5 and 6 January 1806, Monday, 13 January 1806, and Sunday, 2 February 1806, 8, 10, 11, 21. In another case, at Dauphin River, a voyageur named Paradix was unable to locate a Native cache to which he had been sent to retrieve meat. George Nelson's *Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810*, Monday, 12 February 1809, 19 (I added page numbers). In another case at Tête au Brochet, on Tuesday, 24 November 1818, the men had a good deal of trouble getting to the lodges, and nearly lost Welles and two sleighs by sinking. *Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19*; 15.

returned New Year's eve with only one and half pounds and "a bunch of excuses about his woes." Nelson set off a few days later with his interpreter and three sleighs, and had no trouble getting meat.¹¹⁸

Depending on the region, fishing could be a productive way to attain food. Fish were speared and hung up to dry.¹¹⁹ Men also fished with lines.¹²⁰ More common was setting nets in streams and rivers, which constituted a regular part of many post routines.¹²¹ A successful operation could produce vast amounts of fish, and act as the main provisioning agent for a region. In the fall of 1804, at Rainy Lake post, an important provisioning centre, voyageurs fished the "Chaudière" (Kettle Falls), and it was reported on 22 October that they caught 1300 white fish, on 28 October they caught 1050, on 8 November they caught 60, and on 9 November they caught 1100. On 10 December four men went out to the *Pêche d'hiver* (winter fishing grounds) to set nets, and began to catch pike to add to their repertoire.¹²² On a smaller scale at James McKenzie's post in the Athabasca district in December 1799, Joseph

¹¹⁸ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 78.

¹¹⁹ For examples see George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Saturday, 14 October 1808, Tuesday, 12 December 1808, and Saturday, 17 November 1809, 7-9, 13, 43 (I added page numbers); Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Tuesday and Monday, 20 October and 2 November 1818, 7, 10; and George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, 24 or 208.

¹²⁰ James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Tuesday, 18 February 1800, 1.

¹²¹ For examples see Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Thursday, 11 June 1789, 143; Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Wednesday, 29 May 1799, 27 (I added page numbers) and Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Tuesday, 18 February 1806, 58 (I added page numbers); and "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sept. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, Tuesday, 9 October 1804, 22.

¹²² "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 11, 22, 28 and 31 October 1804, 8-9 November 1804, 10, 15, 18 and 19 December 1804, 214-22.

Bouché "brought at different times upwards of 260 whitefish for himself & Cadien Le Blanc."¹²³ Many voyageurs combined fishing and hunting to maximize their food resources. For example, in the summer of 1809, a voyageur named Richard stationed at Dauphin River went hunting with his two youngest brothers, leaving the next oldest to fish and take care of the family.¹²⁴ It seems that most men stationed at posts participated in fishing, and usually men fished in groups (unlike hunting which was frequently a solitary activity). At L'Ense du Bonet in the Lake Winnipeg area, George Nelson set up a semi-permanent "fishery" and stationed men there on a continual basis.¹²⁵ Men also frequently went fishing with their Native wives and families.¹²⁶ Bourgeois and clerks sometimes participated in fishing with their men, and on occasion even took over for their men when they were injured or ill.¹²⁷ But other times men fished for themselves and even refused to share with their bourgeois or clerks. In a time of scarcity at Manitonamingon Lake in the spring of 1815, George Nelson reported that he was running out of food, and his men would only bring him fish when they had "too much to keep with decency."¹²⁸ Fishing could be impeded by weather and mishap.

¹²³ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.13; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Saturday, 7 December 1799, 6 (I added page numbers).

¹²⁴ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Sunday, 12 August 1809, 32 (I added page numbers).

¹²⁵ George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; mid October 1805, Wednesday, 23 October 1805, 4-5 (I added page numbers).

¹²⁶ For examples see James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Monday, 30 October 1800, 60; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Monday, 22 October 1810 and Sunday, 18 November 1810. Also see Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 56.

¹²⁷ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake", (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Saturday, 28 April 1821, 10.

¹²⁸ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC"; Wednesday, 24 May 1815, 41.

Thick ice prevented men from setting and retrieving the nets, and nets were often lost in ice.¹²⁹

Other threats to fishing (and hunting) came from hostile Native people and competing fur trade companies. Fear of impending attacks, rumours and paranoia could lead men to desert their tasks, and interfere with the provisioning of a post. In March 1805 both the NWC and XYC men deserted the fishery near Rainy Lake post because they claimed that Native people in the area wanted to kill them. A voyageur named Richard went to investigate and found that the threat was a false alarm. The men resumed fishing and had a successful season.¹³⁰ Threats to men and fishing equipment were not always false alarms. In the Michigan Territory on River des Saulteux, George Nelson had his men sleep out at the fishery to guard the nets from wolves and wolverines.¹³¹ Other aspects to the fishery, besides the actual fishing, included the care for equipment and processing the catches. Men made and mended nets, made floats for nets, built fish houses, and dried and stored the fish.¹³² Native women were usually involved in drying fish, lending their expertise to food preservation.¹³³

¹²⁹ James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Tuesday, 12 November 1799, 3 (I added page numbers).

¹³⁰ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday and Saturday, 25 and 30 March 1805, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, 2-4, 7 April 1805, 233-6.

¹³¹ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Saturday, 6 April 1804, and Thursday, 18 May 1804, 28, 39.

¹³² For examples of making nets, floats and fish houses see George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Wednesday, 21 October [Nelson mistakenly recorded November] 1807, and Thursday, 11 December 1807, 6, 13; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Wednesday, 3 October 1810, 29 (I added page numbers). For an example of mending nets see George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Thursday, 10 March 1804, 25. For examples of caching and drying see George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Friday, 13 April 1810, 3 (I added page numbers); and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Tuesday, 20 October 1818 and Monday, 2 November 1818, 7-8, 10.

¹³³ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 56.

In areas where the soil was fertile and the growing season reasonably long, traders planted gardens to supplement their diets.¹³⁴ Many posts fell into this category, and evidence of gardening can be found at posts as wide-ranging as Langue de Terre in the Temiscamingue area, Lac La Pluie, Fort Alexandria at the mouth of the Winnipeg River, Dauphin River, Moose Lake, the fort at Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle and Cumberland post, and as far north as Fort Vermillion and Dunvegan on the Peace River, and the forks of the McKenzie and Liard Rivers.¹³⁵ The most common produce seemed to be potatoes and turnips, but men also sowed onions, cabbage, cucumbers, carrots, parsnip and beets.¹³⁶ Men began the gardens by clearing land in early spring, planting in the late spring, weeding throughout the summer, and harvesting in the fall.¹³⁷ Voyageurs also built fences around their gardens to protect them

¹³⁴ For an example of planting a garden see June 1810, Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 604-5. Also see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday, 23 November 1804, 220. Much of the historiography of the fur trade portrays agriculture as a signal of the decline of trade. D.W. Moodie, however, points out that agriculture was an important part of provisioning strategies for fur trade companies. D.W. Moodie, "Agriculture in the Fur Trade," In *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Carol M. Judd and Arthur J. Ray, 272-90, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

¹³⁵ For a discussion of limited agriculture and gardening at fur trade posts see L.H. Thomas, "A History of Agriculture on the Prairies to 1914", *Prairie Forum*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1976): 31-45 and Moodie, "Agriculture in the Fur Trade." Agriculture played an even greater role in provisioning after the 1821 merger. The new HBC encouraged farmers in the Red River settlement to produce surplus to trade to the Company, and also established "experimental" farms to discover the most productive crops and provision the workforce directly. See HBCA A.6/24, fo.22, 22d, 9 March 1836. The HBC also established a provisioning farm at Puget Sound. See James R. Gibson, *Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786-1846*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985).

¹³⁶ For examples see Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Monday, 6 October 1794, 17; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; mid May 1808, 34; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; mid April 1809, 21 (I added page numbers); Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 6, 9 and 14 October 1809, and mid June 1810, 549, 552, 604-5; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Sunday, 29 April 1804, May 1807, and Monday, 10 October 1808, 80, 103, 118; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 8 October 1804, 213.

¹³⁷ For an example of the annual cycle of garden maintenance see Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Monday, 6 May 1805, Monday, 17 June 1805, Tuesday, 20 June 1805, Monday, 21 October, Tuesday, 22 October 1805, Thursday, 3 April 1806, and Friday,

from animals.¹³⁸ Sometimes the soil needed maintenance, such as spreading manure and digging up stones.¹³⁹ In some locations, men also experimented more extensively with crops, such as the Lake Winnipeg area in 1805 where oats were cultivated, and at Tête au Brochet in 1818, where wheat was cultivated.¹⁴⁰ A more common activity was "making hay," or harvesting wild hay, to be used in post house cleaning (such as beds and brooms), and in the care of animals.¹⁴¹ Horses were the most common animals kept at fur trade posts, and their care constituted another aspect to voyageurs' varied duties.¹⁴²

The men supplemented their diets with other foods available in their regions. Berry picking was common in the summer and fall months, and sometimes traders lucked upon more substantial fruit such as plums, panbinas and grapes.¹⁴³ Other food sources attained

16 May 1806, 12, 18-19, 37, 68, 76 (I added page numbers). On weeding see for example George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Tuesday, 5 July 1808, 45.

¹³⁸ For one example see George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake", (notes taken from a translation made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 14 May 1821, 16.

¹³⁹ For examples see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday, 2 June 1803, 67; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Monday and Friday, 14 and 25 May 1821, 16, 22-25; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday, 29 September 1804, Wednesday, 10 October 1804, Thursday, 11 October 1804, Friday, 23 November 1804, and Thursday, 18 April 1805, 212, 214, 220, 237, 240; and Donald McKay, *Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue*; Wednesday, 29 May 1799 and Tuesday, 19 November 1799, 27, 41 (I added page numbers).

¹⁴⁰ George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Tuesday, 17 September 1805, 3 (I added page numbers); and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Monday, 21 September 1818, 1.

¹⁴¹ For examples of making hay see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 31 August 1807 and 10 October 1807, 424-25 and 2: 29 August 1810, 622.

¹⁴² For example see Journal of John MacDonell, *Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle*, 1793-95, La Grasse, Monday, 18 November 1793, 3.

¹⁴³ For examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 22 August 1800, 58; and W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Saturday, 11 October 1807, 9.

through gathering included swan, geese and duck eggs.¹⁴⁴ Men also learned to mine salt and procure sugar from maple trees and sugar beets.¹⁴⁵ Native women were crucial to the traders in learning to reap the benefits of the environment of the northwest, and frequently helped their husbands by gathering food from the land.¹⁴⁶

Trade

Like the quest for food, the pursuit of furs also dominated post life, but it was more a concern of the bourgeois and clerks than the voyageurs. Men were sometimes obliged by their bourgeois or clerk to hunt for furs, instead of trading for them. Native wives were also extensively involved in trapping and snaring.¹⁴⁷ Traps were set out throughout the year, and the animals caught ranged from beavers to martins, raccoons, foxes, fishers, and wolves.¹⁴⁸ Some traps were brought out from Lower Canada, but more frequently traps were made at the interior posts with blacksmith facilities which could make traps on site.¹⁴⁹ These locales were

¹⁴⁴ For example see Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Thursday, 11 June 1789, 143.

¹⁴⁵ For an example of salt see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 3 November 1800, 133.

¹⁴⁶ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Thursday, 18 April 1805, 237; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 17 September 1800, 99; and Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 58-9.

¹⁴⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC"; Saturday, 11 February 1815, 8; and Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 58-9.

¹⁴⁸ For examples see Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday, 11 November 1818, 13; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 19 October 1800, 122; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Sunday, 16 December 1804, Monday, 17 December 1804, Thursday, 20 December 1804, Sunday, 23 December 1804, and Sunday, 3 February 1805, 222-3, 227.

¹⁴⁹ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday and Friday, 16 and 22 February 1805, 229-30.

also important for the frequent repair required for traps.¹⁵⁰

The bulk of furs from the north west were traded from Native peoples. Voyageurs were frequently sent out in search of Native people to establish contact.¹⁵¹ Scouting and reporting on Native movements continued throughout the course of the year. For example, at Fort Alexander in mid November 1800, voyageurs Collier and La Rose reported to bourgeois Archibald Norman McLeod on the local Native people's trapping activities and intentions to come to the post to trade. In early January the following year, Collier set out to collect Native debts. In February, Etienne Ducharme came to tell McLeod that six tents of Native people were encamped near his lodge, and were loaded down with skins and provisions; Roy, Girardin, Dannis and Plante set out with provisions to trade with the wealthy Cree.¹⁵² Voyageurs not only gathered information about Native peoples, they also collected debts, traded and conveyed messages.¹⁵³ Bourgeois and clerks sometimes sent men to watch Native

¹⁵⁰ For one example see "The Beaver Trap is repaired & sent down-", Duncan Clark Papers; vol. 2; R. McKenzie, Fort William, to Duncan Clark, the Pic, 18 July 1825, 1.

¹⁵¹ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Tuesday and Wednesday, 14 and 15 September 1800, 6. Also see George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Sunday, 2 October 1803 and Wednesday, 12 October 1803, 12-13; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Friday, 9 September 1808, 2 (I added page numbers).

¹⁵² Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday and Monday, 16-17 November 1800, Sunday, 4 January 1801, and Sunday and Monday, 1-2 February 1801, 3, 15, 20. For another example see John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6, Tuesday, 14 January 1806, 11.

¹⁵³ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 5; Microfilm reel #C-15638; William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790; Friday, 26 February 1790, 11-12; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 4; Microfilm reel #C-15638; William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790 (handwritten transcript); Friday, 26 February 1790, 27-8; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Wednesday and Thursday, 10-11 December 1800 and Sunday, 11 January 1801, 14, 20-1. For another example of reporting bad news see W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807," August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday, 8 January 1808, 21.

peoples closely to prevent them from trading privately with freetraders.¹⁵⁴ In other cases men were sent to stay with Native people to prevent them from trading with rival companies.¹⁵⁵

Voyageurs were also sent out to scout on the competing companies directly. Before 1805, the XYC and NWC often had men to spy on each other and attempt to impede their trading efforts.¹⁵⁶ In November 1804 at the Rainy Lake post, Hugh Faries sent out Laverdure and La France to follow the XYC men while they were out trading. Even after the merger of the two companies, previous frictions could continue. Faries continued to employ voyageurs to spy on the actions of the previous XYC clerk Lacombe, whom Faries suspected was trying to cheat him.¹⁵⁷ Montreal fur traders were consistently suspicious of the dealings of the HBC before the 1821 merger, and routinely sent out men to spy on them and attempt to intercede their trading efforts. In 1807, a NWC voyageur named La Rocque, "a noted batailleur" was sent out to intercede Peter Fidler of the HBC.¹⁵⁸ Throughout most of his career as a clerk for the NWC, George Nelson sent men out to spy on the actions of the HBC traders. In the fall of 1818 at Tête au Brochet, Nelson even instructed Larocque to build a house near the HBC fort

¹⁵⁴ For one example see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Tuesday, 19 March 1805, 233.

¹⁵⁵ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday, 9 December 1818, 18.

¹⁵⁶ James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Thursday, 31 July 1800, 61 (I added page numbers).

¹⁵⁷ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 19 November 1804, Tuesday, 20 November 1804, Saturday, 1 December 1804, Wednesday, 5 December 1804, Thursday, 6 December 1804, and Friday, 8 March 1805, 219-21, 231-2.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade in North America; with Observations Relative to the North-West Company of Montreal*, 2nd edition, (London: James Ridgway, 1816), 50.

so that they could be more easily watched by his NWC men.¹⁵⁹

Voyageurs as well as the bourgeois and clerks participated in trading with Native peoples. They could be employed simply to bring furs promised to the bourgeois or clerk.¹⁶⁰ But they were regularly entrusted with more responsibility. Voyageurs were sent out individually with goods to trade without pre-arranged transactions or *courir en dérrouine*. They travelled to Native hunting camps to trade furs, instead of waiting at their established posts for the Native peoples to come in to trade.¹⁶¹ Throughout the year, they sought out furs, provisions, and materials to make necessary equipment.¹⁶² They sometimes initiated trade with Native people in a new area, especially if they were experienced in the northwest and in

¹⁵⁹ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Tuesday, 20 October 1818 and Wednesday, 9 December 1818, 7-8, 18. For other examples see George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Wednesday, 24 August 1808, 57; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Sunday, 26 August 1809 and Saturday, 1 September 1809, 35-6; George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC"; Sunday, 29 January 1815 and Thursday, 2 February 1815, 1; George Nelson's Journal, 30 November 1815 - 13 January, (parts of the journal in code); Tuesday, 2 January 1816, 95; and George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Friday, 27 April 1821, 10.

¹⁶⁰ For an example see William McGillivray sending Cadotte and Bellangé to fetch furs. William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790; Friday, 26 February 1790, 11-12.

¹⁶¹ For an explanation of *en dérrouine* see "The Diary of Archibald N. McLeod" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 144, footnote 31. For examples see Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, 21 December 1800, 12. For other examples see George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; mid November 1802, 30; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 19 November 1804, 219.

¹⁶² George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Friday, 20 November 1807, Friday, 26 December 1807, and Saturday, 2 January 1808, 9, 14-15; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 21 September 1800, 101. For other examples see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Sunday, 29 October 1797, Tuesday, 7 November 1797, and Thursday, 9 November 1797, 16-18; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, Monday and Friday, 1-2, 6 February 1801, 20; "Journal of an Excursion of Discovery to the Rocky Mountains by Mr. Larocque in the Year 1805 from the 2d of June to the 18th of October", W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, eds., *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), Tuesday, 11 June 1805, 164.

trading.¹⁶³ Voyageurs also traded with the English and with freemen, but most of their trading duties focussed on Native peoples.¹⁶⁴ Large groups of voyageurs could be sent out to conduct the trade on their own, as was the case at Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle in the winter of 1794. John MacDonell sent out Jean Baptiste Lafrance, Joseph Dubé, Joseph Tranquille, Hugh McCruchen, Louis Houle, Jean Baptiste Bertrand, and Antoine Bounuir Lanignes to Missouri "en traite".¹⁶⁵ Voyageurs could be singled out to head larger trading parties. For example, François-Antoine Larocque entrusted Azure with an equipment of goods at a Mandan village in the Missouri district.¹⁶⁶ When trading with Native peoples, voyageurs had to make difficult decisions concerning rates and prices, and were obliged to haggle over the terms of trade. Duncan Cameron gave his voyageur Bellefleure "every instruction in dealing with the Indians" before allowing his to conduct trade.¹⁶⁷ Voyageurs Delorme and Desjarlais reported to Charles Chaboillez in January 1798 that they were forced to lower their prices to the level of the southern traders to remain competitive. Occasionally mishaps could occur which jeopardized the trade. Later that spring, Delorme lost his way during a trading mission

¹⁶³ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Thursday, 11 December 1800, 14.

¹⁶⁴ For an example of men trading with the English see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Tuesday, 13 March 1798, 48. For examples of men trading with freemen see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 11 and 24 July 1808, 431, 434 and 2: 26 February 1810, 589.

¹⁶⁵ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Monday, 17 February 1794 (no page number).

¹⁶⁶ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 3; Microfilm reel #C-15638; François-Antoine Larocque, "Missouri Journal, Winter 1804-5"; Sunday, 25 November 1804, 8.

¹⁶⁷ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.1; Microfilm reel #55; Duncan Cameron, "The Nipigon Country", with extracts from his journal in the Nipigon, 1804-5 (also found in the OA, in photostat, MU 2198 Box 3, Item 3; and in triplicate typescript, MU 2200, Box 5, a-c); 60-1.

and consumed part of the liquor with which he was supposed to trade.¹⁶⁸ In March 1812, a voyageur named Frs. Paradix severely damaged his relationship with the Cree around Lake Winnipeg by stealing from them. When Paradix approached them to trade, the Cree refused and threatened Paradix's life. The Cree complained to George Nelson that:

'It is the fault of that curly headed lying dog. He too forsooth, must play his man, menaces us, beat us, steals our things and calls us liars. We were a little drunk, even if we were sober it would have been the same. He is a dog, a liar and a thief, Larocque know it. Let him go away we will not see the dog.'¹⁶⁹

Voyageurs' relationships with Native people were extremely important, as one of their key jobs was to bring Native peoples to the post to trade furs and provisions. This was expected of voyageurs throughout the year.¹⁷⁰ Numerous examples can be found throughout post journals, in places as wide ranging as Langue de Terre, Rainy Lake, Fort Alexandria, Grand River, the forks of the Mckenzie River, and Great Bear Lake.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Saturdays, 6 January and 7 April 1798, 31, 53.

¹⁶⁹ George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", describing the Lake Winnipeg district in 1812, written as a reminiscence; March 1812, 278-9.

¹⁷⁰ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Sunday, 9 October 1800 and Saturday, 7 February 1801, 9, 22; and James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Saturday, 11 April 1800, 13.

¹⁷¹ Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Saturday, 20 April 1805, 10 (I added page numbers); "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Tuesday, 12 February 1805, 229; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Wednesday and Thursday, 18 and 19 February 1801, 22; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 8; Microfilm reel #C-15638; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805"; Tuesday, 22 January 1805, 44; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Sunday, 9 November 1807, 14; Alexander McKenzie, Journal of Great Bear Lake; 13 December 1805, 9.

Voyageurs were also routinely sent out to stay with Native people.¹⁷² They traded with Native people at their lodges, and they encouraged Native people to trade at the posts, and to hunt for furs and meat to provision the posts.¹⁷³ At Fort Alexandria in December 1800, Archibald Norman McLeod instructed Baptiste Roy and Jacques to separate the Native hunters to increase their productivity (hunting returns), and he sent rum and tobacco to appease them.¹⁷⁴ Staying with Native people was generally a duty of all the men employed at a post, and men took turns staying at Native lodges alone or in pairs.¹⁷⁵ Occasionally the bourgeois would visit Native lodges to check up on his men, and to provide additional encouragement for the Native people to cooperate with the voyageurs.¹⁷⁶ The length of time of a "turn" with Native people varied, depending on the distance from the post, the numbers of men available, and their relationship with the Native people. Some turns spanned a

¹⁷² Sending men out to stay at Native lodges was regularly reported in fur trade journals. For some examples see Donald McKay, *Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue*; Wednesday, 29 May 1799, 26-7 (I added page numbers); "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown; Friday, 19 October 1799, 3; Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Saturday, 3 January 1801, 15; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 8 October 1804, 213; George Nelson's *Journal*, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Wednesday, 4 December 1805, 7 (I added page numbers); George Nelson's *Journal*, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; early February 1810, 50 (I added page numbers); and Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 9; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Unidentified North West Company Wintering Partner, "Journal for 1805 & 6, Cross Lake"; Tuesday, 7 January 1806, 22.

¹⁷³ For an example of bringing Natives back to the post see James Porter, *Journal kept at Slave Lake*, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Sunday, Monday and Sunday, 1, 2 and 8 March 1800, 3-4. For an example of voyageurs trading with Natives when they were sent out to stay with them see George Nelson's *Journal*, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Friday, 20 November 1807, 9. For examples of encouraging Native people to bring meat and furs to the posts see John Stuart, *Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6*, Sunday, Monday and Thursday, 22, 23 and 26 December 1805, 2, 4; and W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805"; Saturday, 20 October 1804, 13.

¹⁷⁴ Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Thursday, 11 December 1800, 9.

¹⁷⁵ For an example of a voyageur taking "his turn" see Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Tuesday, 18 November 1800, 3.

¹⁷⁶ For one example see Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Friday, 16 January 1801, 18.

fortnight, but others could be longer, especially if the men took their families with them.¹⁷⁷

If voyageurs did not get along with Native people, or if the Native people were indifferent or even hostile towards the traders, staying with Native people could be the most unpopular task at a post. In late April 1815, at Manitonamingon Lake, a voyageur named LeBlond set off to inform his bourgeois that he refused to stay with the Native people any longer.¹⁷⁸ Men made excuses to skip their turns with the Native people, as did Paradix at Dauphin River in the winter of 1808. When George Nelson sent him to go stay with Native people, he went spear fishing instead.¹⁷⁹ Recall that John Thompson had great difficulties convincing any of his men to stay with Native people at Grand Marais in the fall of 1798. He sent out Vivier and Le Compte to stay with a group of Native people. Le Compte returned in a week, claiming that he was too ill to remain with them. Thompson was suspicious, describing him as "a most indolent Lazy fellow", but he had trouble convincing anyone to take his place. Eventually he managed to persuade Desrosier and Broussault to join Vivier, but the voyageurs quickly became disgruntled and wished to return because the Native people were not co-operating with them. By mid November Vivier returned to the fort with his family, asserting that "he cannot live any longer with them & that all the devils in Hell cannot make him return, & that he prefers marching all Winter from one Fort to another rather than

¹⁷⁷ For examples see Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Wednesday, 3 December 1800, 6; Alexander McKenzie, *Journal of Great Bear Lake*; 27 October 1805, 6; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's *Journal*, 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819, entitled "Journal B" (this journal is a continuation of George Nelson's *Journal* found in the Archives of Ontario, MU 842); Sunday, 23 May 1819, 8 or b8.

¹⁷⁸ George Nelson's *Journal*, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC"; Sunday, 30 April 1815, 36.

¹⁷⁹ George Nelson's *Journal*, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Tuesday, 12 December 1808, 13.

Live any Longer with them-". Less than a month later Brousseau returned to the fort with his family as well, claiming that the Native people sent them back because there were no animals to kill for food.¹⁸⁰ Sometimes, Native people simply did not want voyageurs to stay with them, as was the case for Mashkiegon's band at Dauphin River in the fall of 1810.¹⁸¹ Part of the reason may have been the inconvenience and expense of having to take care of and feed the voyageurs, who were often not the most skilled hunters or workers, and could not do a fair share of work. At Rocky Mountain House in the fall of 1800, Little Chief sent voyageur La Beccasse from his lodge back to the fort because they did not want to feed him any longer, and had John Thompson pay them for food before permitting La Beccasse and St. Ours to spend the winter with them. Later that winter, a voyageur named La Violette had to be carried back to the post by Native people because he was ill and his legs had swelled. He blamed the Native people for not taking care of him while he stayed at their lodges, and the Native people vehemently denied his accusations. To add insult to injury, Thompson "gave one of the Indians a twitch on the nose" and bitterly complained that they could not be relied upon to bring provisions to the post.¹⁸² Clearly, Thompson's party gave the Native peoples of the area a lot of grief, and their reluctance to aid the traders did not seem unreasonable.

Other situations where voyageurs stayed with Native people were more positive. Even

¹⁸⁰ John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Friday, 12 October 1798, Thursday, 18 October 1798, Friday, 19 October 1798, Sunday, 21 October 1798, Sunday, 18 November 1798, and Thursday, 13 December 1798, 8-13, 19, 22.

¹⁸¹ George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Monday, 24 September 1810, 27 (I added page numbers).

¹⁸² John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Thursday, 6 October 1800, Tuesday, 18 October 1800, Friday, 21 October 1800, Monday, 15 December 1800, and Monday, 16 February 1801, 9-12, 16, 23-4.

one of John Thompson's men found a beneficial situation amidst the general pattern of bad relations in the winter of 1800-1 at Rocky Mountain House. St. Ours was very pleased with the Native men at his lodge and reported that they gave him plenty of hares to eat, unlike La Beccasse, who had to hunt for his own food, as "his Homme de Loge does not take the least Notice of him-". The men taking care of St. Ours agreed to host La Beccasse to save him from starvation.¹⁸³ Voyageurs often had better luck staying with Native people when they could utilize family contacts. At the Dauphin River in the fall of 1809, the two sons of Old Muffle d'Originalle came to the post to pick up Larocque to pass the winter with them because he was married to their sister.¹⁸⁴

Many voyageurs were entrusted with major tasks, such as setting up minor or temporary satellite posts. In the fall of 1800, when Alexander Henry the Younger set out to establish the Park River post, he left half his crew at Pembina to start a post under the charge of Michel Langlois, one of his voyageurs. He directed Langlois to equip the Native people and send them inland as soon as possible, and to make up a small assortment of goods for another small post at Hair Hill, and send voyageur Lagassé with two other men to build a small hut there. Henry sent another voyageur named Hamel to take the place of Lagassé, as "None would remain under the command of Lagassé, nor do I think him a fit person to have property in charge." Three years later, when the Hair Hills post became more permanent,

¹⁸³ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Wednesday and Friday, 18 and 20 February 1801, 24.

¹⁸⁴ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Tuesday, 16 October 1809, 39 (I added page numbers).

Henry sent Langlois to head that post.¹⁸⁵ The bourgeois in charge of Cross Lake in the fall of 1805 sent four of his men to man an outpost at Duck Lake at the request of the local Native people.¹⁸⁶ Sometimes the arrangement did not work out. At Rocky Mountain House in the winter of 1805-6, John Stuart encharged voyageur Lammalice with the Trout Lake outpost. He abandoned the post without informing Stuart, and later blamed the laziness and indolence of the other voyageurs sent to help him at the post.¹⁸⁷

Bourgeois and clerks occasionally delegated to voyageurs responsibilities equally as important as setting up satellite posts. Individual voyageurs demonstrating trustworthiness and responsibility could be left in charge of posts when the bourgeois went on trips, tracking the movements of other companies, or to the summer rendezvous.¹⁸⁸ James Porter was pleased in the fall of 1800, that Morin, left to take care of the post at Slave Lake during the summer, had been "very attentive and careful".¹⁸⁹ However, a voyageur left to take care of a

¹⁸⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 3 and 4 September 1800, 15 October 1800, and 3 October 1803, 77-8, 112, 225-7. For other examples see George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Sunday and Monday, 7 and 15 August 1803, 4-5; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Tuesday, 20 October 1818, Monday, 2 November 1818, and Monday, 9 November 1818, 7-8, 11-12.

¹⁸⁶ "Journal for 1805 & 6, Cross Lake"; Wednesday, 18 September 1805, Sunday, 29 September 1805, and Monday, 7 October 1805, 4-5, 9, 12. For another example see William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790; Friday, 2 April 1790, 15.

¹⁸⁷ John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6, Friday, Wednesday and Monday, 7, 19, and 24 February 1806, 24-5, 28, 31-3. La Malice and Lammalice might be the same person.

¹⁸⁸ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Friday, 1 June 1809, 24 (I added page numbers); George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Monday and Friday, 13 and 17 August 1810, 22 (I added page numbers); and George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC"; Saturday 25 February 1815, 12. For other examples see Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, 30-1; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 17 October 1800 and 4 January 1803, 121, 207; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Tuesday, 15 January 1798, 35.

¹⁸⁹ James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Monday, 20 October 1800, 57. For other examples see George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808;

post could meet with a horrible challenge, as did Louis Chatellain in 1805, who had to fight off a war party of 150 Rapid Natives with only the help of two other men.¹⁹⁰ Occasionally, when all the men were needed for a trip, one of the voyageurs' Native wives could be left to manage the post.¹⁹¹

Bourgeois and clerks sometimes left men in charge of posts all winter. In the winter of 1803, XYZ clerk Chaurette left voyageur La Lancette with three men to pass the winter alone at Lac du Flambeau. With Chaurette's encouragement, George Nelson decided to entrust voyageur Brunet with the post at Rivière des Sauteaux. By late December Nelson was pleased with Brunet's returns and his understanding of the language Ojibwe, and felt Brunet was industrious enough to be in charge of the post for the rest of the winter, while Nelson wintered with the Ojibwa.¹⁹² Cooperation and mutual trust was not uncommon between voyageurs and their masters, and bourgeois and clerks could entrust their men with great responsibility, such as having men help with inventories. In the summer of 1805 in the Temiscamingue area Donald McKay dispatched two voyageurs to Wanatawong for the inventory of that post which had been forgotten in the spring. In another case, a voyageur

Thursday, 30 June 1808, 44; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 4 June 1821, 25-6; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 12 and 19 May 1801, 180, 182; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; 15 May 1801, 37; and John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Saturday and Friday, 4 and 10 September 1800, 2, 3.

¹⁹⁰ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Saturday, 21 September 1805, 97.

¹⁹¹ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Thursday, 24 February 1804, 24.

¹⁹² George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Wednesday, 19 October 1803, Thursday, 20 October 1803, Monday, 25 December 1803, and Thursday, 6 January 1804, 14, 17, 20. Also see George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; 40, 47. For another example see St. Paul; MHS; P849, Box 4; Marjorie Gourdeau Gerin-Lajoie Collection; Letters (in French) by Joseph Guy to his father Pierre Guy II and his brother Louis (originals in Université de Montreal, Baby Collection, Correspondence G); Joseph Guy to his father Pierre Guy, Mackinac, 15 August 1805.

named Cloutier helped McKay put his cellar in order one winter.¹⁹³ Experienced voyageurs could also act as valuable assets in helping new clerks manage at posts. On way to Grand Portage in the spring 1792, bourgeois Angus Shaw left the young clerk John McDonald of Garth with the "faithful Guide Antoine" to help him manage the brigade.¹⁹⁴

Sometimes bourgeois and clerks regretted trusting voyageurs to manage their post.¹⁹⁵ Voyageurs could have their responsibilities relinquished if they did not perform to the satisfaction of their employers. Pierre L'Anniau was left in charge of Grand Portage in 1784, based on his extensive experience in the north west as a voyageur. However, when he was not getting along with the surrounding Native people, he was fired and replaced by Roderick McKenzie, at the time a young clerk.¹⁹⁶ In frustration, Alexander Henry the Younger wrote on 19 September 1800:

My servant [Desmarais] is such a careless, indolent fellow that I cannot trust the storehouse to his care. I made to-day a complete overhaul, and found everything in the greatest confusion; I had no idea matters were so bad as I found them. I shall for the future take charge myself and find other work for

¹⁹³ Donald McKay, *Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue*; Friday, 30 August 1805, 31 (I added page numbers); and *Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue*; Tuesday, 19 November 1799, 41 (I added page numbers).

¹⁹⁴ *Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815*, written in 1859, photostat, 26.

¹⁹⁵ *Simon Fraser Collection; Volume 3; Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807*, Simon Fraser to McDougall, Naugh-al-chum, 31 August 1806, and Simon Fraser to "my dear Stuart, Naukazeleh, 29 September 1806, 22, 29; and "Reminiscences' by the Honorable Roderic McKenzie Being Chiefly a Synopsis of Letters from Sir Alexander Mackenzie", (based on the correspondence between Alexander Mackenzie and Roderick McKenzie, 1786-1816, NAC, MC, MG19 C1, vol. 32, 32A), in Louis R.F. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, first published 1889-90), vol. 1: Alexander McKenzie to Roderick McKenzie, 1 October 1787, Ile a la Crosse, 20.

¹⁹⁶ "Reminiscences' by the Honorable Roderic McKenzie", in Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 1: 11-12.

him. Like most of his countrymen, he is much more interested for himself than for his employer, though he has a good salary for his abilities, which are not extraordinary, further than as interpreter.¹⁹⁷

Despite exceptions like Desmarais, most voyageurs proved to be indispensable to the trade. Not only did they facilitate trade by seeking out Native people and encouraging them to visit company posts, they travelled out to Native lodges to trade *en dérrouine*. In this capacity voyageurs developed close ties with Native peoples, which became indispensable connections for trading alliances.

Transportation and Communication

The final area of labour performed by voyageurs at interior posts was transporting goods, news and information between the posts throughout the year.¹⁹⁸ The most common form of travel was by canoe, but travel by horse, and in the winter, travel by dogteam, became popular.

Preparation for the annual departure to Lake Superior was an important activity at the interior posts. Goods were put together in packs of a manageable size and weight (between 80-100 pounds) for effective canoe travel.¹⁹⁹ Making packs dominated activities at interior posts, especially the large administrative centres, in the spring when men prepared to ship

¹⁹⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 19 September 1800, 100.

¹⁹⁸ In the Cordillera region, Cole Harris has also found that posts were linked local, regional and external circulation. Harris, *Resettlement*, 39-41.

¹⁹⁹ For one example see George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 14 May 1821, 16.

back the furs they had collected during the winter, and organized goods to be distributed for the coming year.²⁰⁰

During the fall, winter and spring, considerable traffic moved between the interior posts in the north west. Traders at different posts shared provisions, and men were continually sent to and from posts seeking and delivering food and supplies. Food was the most important item to be shared between posts, and men were sent to obtain and deliver a vast array of provisions, such as pork, grease, fresh meat, oats and sugar.²⁰¹ The transport of provisions could be especially critical with the threat of starvation.²⁰² Posts commonly ran short of their own provisions once they had helped out another post. For example, during the winter of 1808-9, Duncan Campbell left his post at Grand Rapids to travel to McDonnell's post at Pigeon River and George Nelson's post at Dauphin River because he was short of provisions. Campbell's imposition drained McDonnell's supplies, so that McDonnell had to send three of his men, Desrocher, Boulanger and Larocque, to obtain supplies from Nelson, and to fish at Tête au Brochet. Nelson himself had run out of provisions by late August of

²⁰⁰ For an example of making packs at the Swan River post see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Tuesday, 26 May 1801, 48. For an example of making packs at Grand Portage in 1789, see Roderick McKenzie, "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West," in Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 52.

²⁰¹ For a few examples see Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Monday, 4 March 1799, 9 (I added page numbers); George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Monday, 1 August 1803, 4; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Appendix B, *Public Archives Report for 1929*, 109-45, (transcript from a copy at University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Collection, Pacific Coast Mss., Series C, No. 16; copy also at NAC, MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, Vol. 4; originals at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Sunday, 13 April 1806.

²⁰² "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Thursday, 8 November 1804, Wednesday and Thursday, 19 and 20 December 1804, Sunday and Monday, 7 and 8 April 1805, Thursday, 11 April 1805, and Wednesday, 17 April 1805, 218, 222, 236-7.

1809, and had make a trip out to Fort Alexander to obtain more.²⁰³ Trade goods and other supplies such as horses and wood for construction were shared between posts.²⁰⁴

In warmer months travel by water was the most efficient mode. Much time and energy at the interior posts were devoted to canoe building and maintenance (see chapter 3). Men were sent out to gather wood for constructing the canoe frame, bark to cover the body of the canoe, and gum to secure the bark and seal the seams of the canoe.²⁰⁵ They often relied on Native people to help them find these supplies.²⁰⁶ The bourgeois usually hired Native people to construct canoes for the crew.²⁰⁷ Traders also reclaimed old canoes left by Native people.²⁰⁸ Traders helped each other obtain canoes. In May 1825 Roderick McKenzie, stationed at the Pic, wrote to Duncan Clark at Long Lake:

I wish you could get a small voyaging Canoe, made by Mondack; about the size of the one your men has here now, but a little higher in the ends- We are

²⁰³ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Saturday, 20 February 1808, 19; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Thursday, 23 November 1808, Sunday, 11 February 1809, and Sunday, 26 August 1809, 12, 19, 35 (I added page numbers).

²⁰⁴ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Tuesday, 18 November 1800 and Saturday, 7 February 1801, 3, 21; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Tuesday, 28 January 1794 and Friday, 7 February 1794, 8; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Friday, 14 November 1794 Wednesday, 17 December 1794, and Tuesday, 23 December 1794, 20, 22-3.

²⁰⁵ For examples see John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Thursday, 28 March 1799, 44; "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown; Friday, 3 April 1800, 21-2; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 27 August 1804, 206; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, late March and early April 1809, 120; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; late March and early April 1808, 28; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Sunday, 22 April 1809 and Wednesday, 1 August 1809, 21, 31 (I added page numbers).

²⁰⁶ William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790; Monday, 12 April 1790, 17.

²⁰⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Wednesday, 27 July 1803, 3.

²⁰⁸ George Nelson's Journal, 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819, entitled "Journal B", Saturday, 15 May 1819, 5-6 or b6 (I added page numbers).

very badly off here for Canoes- The men must run about with Fishing Canoes, which are by far too large for two men.²⁰⁹

Some engagés eventually learned to make canoes, especially with the help of their Native wives.²¹⁰ Men gained a lot of experience in constructing canoes due to the endless energies devoted to mending them. The harsh weather and water routes caused endless cracks, rips and leaks in even the sturdiest canoes, and the journals of the bourgeois are peppered with mention of men repairing their canoes.²¹¹ Some men became well-known for their canoe-making skills, and their expertise was requested by bourgeois at other posts.²¹² The occasional voyageur even became master canoe-makers, such as a voyageur named Amelle who was stationed at Rainy Lake post in 1804-5.²¹³ On occasion, men learned on the spot how to construct European-styled boats to use on lakes and in large rivers. Archibald Norman McLeod commented in the spring of 1801 that "I have no person here that ever wrought at a

²⁰⁹ Duncan Clark Papers; Vol. 2; R. Mckenzie, Pic to Duncan Clark, Long Lake, 1 May 1825, 3.

²¹⁰ For examples of men making canoes see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Monday, 2 April 1798, 52; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Thursday, 28 March 1799, 44; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 19 May 1804, 244. On Native women making canoes for traders see Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 61; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Wednesday and Monday, 1 and 13 August 1809, 31-3 (I added page numbers).

²¹¹ For examples see Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Saturday, 20 April 1799, 17 (I added page numbers); Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Monday, 14 May 1798, 60; "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown, Friday and Monday, 3 and 6 April 1800, 22; "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, Tuesday, 16 April 1805, 62; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 2; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Michel Curot, "Journal, Folle Avoine, Riviere Jaune, Pour 1803 & 1804", mercredi, 10 aout 1805, 5; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Tuesday, 3 September 1808 and Sunday, 22 April 1809, 6 and 21.

²¹² George Nelson's Journal, 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819, entitled "Journal B", Saturday, 22 May 1819, 8 or b8.

²¹³ For examples of Amelle's work on canoes see entries in "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Wednesday, 10 October 1804, Wednesday, 31 October 1804, Monday, 19 November 1804, Saturday, 22 December 1804, and Tuesday, 16 April 1805, 214, 217, 219, 221, 223, 237.

boat, but I fancy among us we may be able to make some sort of thing to float at least.²¹⁴ The simplest watercraft used for hauling goods short distances was a raft.²¹⁵

During both summer and winter voyageurs often used horses for travel, especially on the prairies, where horses could be traded from the Sioux, Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Snake, and plains Ojibwa.²¹⁶ Bourgeois and voyageurs usually bought horses for themselves, although on occasion a bourgeois could buy a group of horses for his outfit.²¹⁷ Sometimes horses accompanied canoes during voyages and lightened their loads when passing through low water or against a strong current.²¹⁸

One means of winter travel was by snowshoe, an item which became an important part of the trade.²¹⁹ Voyageurs and bourgeois learned to make snowshoes from their Native wives, or frequently relied on the women to make them.²²⁰ Because snowshoes were difficult to make, voyageurs were proud when they developed the skill.²²¹ Men collected wood to

²¹⁴ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Wednesday, Thursday, Monday and Wednesday, 18, 19, 23 and 25 March 1801, 27-28. For another example see Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 31 January 1795, 52-3.

²¹⁵ For examples see Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Monday, 3 June 1805, Friday, 13 September 1805, and Saturday, 14 September 1805, 16 and 32 (I added page numbers); and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 9 October 1809, 549.

²¹⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 19 August 1800, 7 July 1806, 47, 285.

²¹⁷ For a few examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 12 October 1800 and 27 January 1810, 117, 582 and 2: 1810, 602.

²¹⁸ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 16 September 1793, 112.

²¹⁹ George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Wednesday and Thursday, 4-5 December 1805, 7-8 (I added page numbers).

²²⁰ Alexander McKenzie, Journal of Great Bear Lake; 14 November 1805, 7; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday, 8 December 1804, 221. Also see Van Kirk, *'Many Tender Ties'*, 54-5.

²²¹ George Nelson records that he spent much time making snowshoes because he was determined to learn to make them properly. Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Saturday, 2 January 1819, 23.

make the frames,²²² but they usually turned to Native people for *babiche* (rawhide) and parchment skins to net their snowshoes, and moose skins for the soles of the snowshoes.²²³

Another means of winter travel was a sled pulled by the men or by a dogteam. Men built sleds, or "trains", of *épinette rouge* (tamarac) or spruce, which was also a technology learned from Native peoples.²²⁴ Sleds could be used to haul ice to the ice house, *piquets* to constructions sites, and especially meat from hunting and cache sites.²²⁵ Sleds were also used to transport baggage between posts in the winter.²²⁶ For long-distance travel, sleds were pulled by dogs rather than humans, such as at the Red River post in November 1800 and the Pembina River post in October 1801.²²⁷ Dogs became a regular part of post life, and at some

²²² Voyageur Roy procured wood for snowshoe frames Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Monday, 19 January 1801 and Saturday, 7 February 1801, 18, 21; and John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6, 20 and 29 December 1805, 6 and 21 January 1806, 1, 5, 8, 14.

²²³ For examples see Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Tuesday, 1 December 1818, 17; and George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Friday, 26 December 1807 and Saturday, 2 January 1808, 14-15. For descriptions of *babiche* see John F. McDermott, *Mississippi Valley French 1673-1850*, (St. Louis: Washington University Studies, 1941), 18.

²²⁴ John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Wednesday and Friday, 24 and 26 October 1798, 14. For other examples of men seeking wood for sleds see Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Tuesday, 25 November 1800 and Monday, 19 January 1801, 5, 18; Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Saturday, 11 January 1806, 51; John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6, 20 December 1805 and 21 January 1806, 1, 14; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday and Monday, 16 and 19 November 1804, 219; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Saturday and Monday, 7 and 9 November 1818, 11-12.

²²⁵ Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Tuesday, 18 February 1806, 58 (I added page numbers); and John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Saturday, 27 October 1798, 16.

²²⁶ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Friday, 24 November 1808, 12 (I added page numbers).

²²⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 24 November 1800 and 30 October 1801, 155, 191.

posts equalled the human population.²²⁸

Travel could be fraught with difficulties, such as the absence of snow shoes, travelling without a guide, and becoming lost. George Nelson and his men faced all of these difficulties in the winter of 1805 around Lake Winnipeg.²²⁹ Traders often tried to ease the difficulties of transportation by following well established Native travel routes and by marking common roads wherever they could. At Fort Dauphin in 1808, George Nelson had one of his men, Fortier, plant bushes at intervals along the road to the fort to aid travellers.²³⁰ Storms often prevented men from completing deliveries.²³¹ The fear of attack on a party by wild animals, such as bears, or by hostile Native people, could also discourage men from agreeing easily to inter-post travel.²³²

Accompanying trips to deliver food and supplies, was the movement of information. News was often obtained informally from people passing by. Voyageurs, freemen and Native people always brought reports of business, politics, health and deaths when they arrived at a post. For example, when two of McDonnell's men arrived at Alexandria, they tattled to Archibald Norman McLeod that J. Sutherland at the Elbow was engaged in improper trade.²³³

²²⁸ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 3 October 1803, 227; and Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy, Fort Chipweyan, Lake Athabasca, to Anne, 1 January 1844, 89.

²²⁹ George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806, see entries from late October to mid December 1805, 5-7 (I added page numbers).

²³⁰ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Sunday, 24 January 1808, 17. For another examples of becoming lost see Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday to Saturday, 10-13 March 1819, 36-8.

²³¹ George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Friday, 5 October 1810, 29 (I added page numbers).

²³² Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 22 and 28 November 1809, 573.

²³³ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, 28 December 1800, 14. For another example see George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Monday, 1 August 1808,

Men were often also sent out to seek news for their bourgeois.²³⁴ News was often sent to bourgeois through letters. While en route to Rivière Saulteaux, the young clerk George Nelson wrote a letter to his parents in Sorel and sent it via a trusted old voyageur named Paulet who lived near his father. Nelson complained that, except for Paulet, voyageurs were generally unreliable carriers of letters:

For people in this Country when they wish any thing to go or come safe to or from their friends it is always best by far to put it in Charge of the Gentlemen of the concern which not for mere Gratitude's sake I must say they always take Great care to have every thing safely delivered. When I wrote this letter I little thought of what was soon to happen to me. This old Paulet a very honest man being desirous of taking a letter from me to my parents I gave it him without hesitation as I knew that it would be safely deliver'd unless accidents.²³⁵

Rarely could a letter-writer be so choosy. Generally people sent letters with anyone travelling to a similar destination and everyone travelling through the interior was expected to carry mail, including Native peoples, freemen, voyageurs and bourgeois.

Jane Harrison has described the form of mail delivery in early Canada before the introduction of a unified postal system. Letters passed between traders in the north west followed the well established patterns that she found in the east. Letters contained an inventory on the flow of the mail, reported on who delivered a previous letter, and who they

51-2. Also see Harris, *Resettlement*, 39.

²³⁴ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Tuesday, 7 September 1794, 17. For another example see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday, 15 December 1804, 222.

²³⁵ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Wednesday, 10 August 1803, 4-5.

designated to carry the current letter.²³⁶ The first line of a letter to Duncan Clark at Long Lake from Donald McIntosh at Michipicotton, read -"This article will be handed to you by old Le May."²³⁷ Another letter to Clark, this one from Roderic McKenzie at The Pic, reported that:

Your favor of the 12th Inst. was handed to me by my son, who arrived here yesterday, along with two of the Pic Indians, they will leave this to morrow, with half a dozen of Pieces, belonging to Michipicotton, which you will endeavour to forward, to the latter place, as possible..... I received your letter by the Lake Nipissingue Indians.²³⁸

In May 1815, John Pruden in the Carleton District wrote to Robert McVicar at Cumberland House that "By the return of the 2 canadians to this place I had the pleasure of receiving your kind Letter...."²³⁹ People sometimes left letters for each other in various places. For example, in August 1805 Daniel Harmon found a letter at the mouth of the Red River addressed to him, left by Frederick Goedike, informing him that Goedike was in good health and on his way to Athabasca, so that they would probably not meet again for several years.²⁴⁰

Although it seemed like a haphazard system, the delivery of mail was such a common part of travel that it became an established enterprise. Letters were sent with voyageurs on

²³⁶ Jane Harrison, *Until Next Year: Letter Writing and the Mails in the Canadas, 1640-1830*, (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), introduction.

²³⁷ Duncan Clark Papers; Vol. 2; Donald McIntosh, Michipicotton to Duncan Clark, The Pic, 8 July 1825, 1.

²³⁸ Duncan Clark Papers; Vol. 2; R. McKenzie, Fort William, to Duncan Clark, The Pic, 18 July 1825, 1. For other examples see R. McKenzie, The Pic to Duncan Clark, Long Lake, 1 May 1825, 1; and Donald McIntosh, Michipicotton to Duncan Clark, The Pic, 24 August 1825, 1.

²³⁹ Montreal; McCord Museum; M 22074; Robert McVicar correspondence; 21 May 1815, 1.

²⁴⁰ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Sunday, 18 August 1805, 95.

most of their trips.²⁴¹ Bourgeois were often scrambling to quickly dash off letters before a voyageur departed.²⁴² The major trip from interior posts to district headquarters every year involved sending substantial packages of letters and reports.²⁴³ Letters usually accompanied post visitors and returning men.²⁴⁴ Mail was also delivered by freemen and Native peoples.²⁴⁵ Alexander Henry the Younger sent the 1810 "North West winter packet" to the South Branch on the Saskatchewan River with a western Ojibwa and an Ottawa, as he felt they were the only two men in the fort who would undertake this dangerous journey.²⁴⁶ Sometimes Native people acted as guides for men sent out to deliver the mail.²⁴⁷

Many trips were planned for the sole purpose of delivering letters.²⁴⁸ John MacDonell,

²⁴¹ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Sunday, 13 April 1806. Also see George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Monday, 1 August 1803, 4.

²⁴² For a couple of examples see George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Sunday, 24 December 1808 and Monday, 12 February 1809, 14, 19 (I added page numbers).

²⁴³ For one example see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Tuesday, 26 May 1801, 48.

²⁴⁴ James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Friday, 10 July 1800, 42; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 30 November 1815 - 13 January 1816 (parts of the journal in code); Saturday, 23 December 1815, 90. For other examples see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Wednesday, 4 April 1798, 52; and Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Sunday, 3 November 1793, 2.

²⁴⁵ George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Tuesday, 10 September 1805, 2 (I added page numbers); and Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. by Lascelles Wraxall, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985, first published 1860), 122-3.

²⁴⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 12 February 1810, 584.

²⁴⁷ W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Wednesday, 10 December 1807, 18.

²⁴⁸ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Saturday, 28 February 1801, 28. For other examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 25 and 28 November 1800, 155-66; and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Friday, 4 December 1818, 17; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Wednesday, 17 December 1800, Thursday, 25 December 1800, and Friday, 30 January 1801, 10-13, 20. For other examples see Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Thursday, 23 July 1805, 25 (I added page numbers); and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Thursday, 29 November 1809, 44 (I added page numbers).

stationed at Assiniboines-Rivière qu'Appelle, frequently sent his men out to deliver mail, especially to report on important news, such as informing other bourgeois of lost men.²⁴⁹

Voyageurs were sometimes sent with important orders, as well as the mail. In September 1808 Ferguson sent two men to Dauphin River with letters from their bourgeois, and orders to take back his wife and two children, who had passed a part of the summer there.²⁵⁰

The sending of mail and sharing of information was such an important part of the fur trade, that "expresses" constantly travelled about the northwest, referred to as the "general express" and "winter express."²⁵¹ Alexander Ross described the workings of the mail express: "From every distant department of the Company, a special light canoe is fitted out annually, to report on their transactions."²⁵² Daniel Harmon notes that the winter express left Athabasca every year in December and passed through the whole of the country, eventually reaching Sault Ste. Marie at the end of March.²⁵³ Men were sent out to meet the express, or to intersect with the express at major crossroads to save the express some time and distance.²⁵⁴

Voyageurs maintained sentimental ties with families and friends to some degree

²⁴⁹ For examples of the sending and receiving of letters see Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Rivière qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Thursday, 5 December 1793, Saturday, 8 February 1794, Wednesday, 8 October 1794, Saturday, 18 October 1794, and Saturday, 2 May, 1795, 4, 8, 17, 19, 33.

²⁵⁰ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Friday, 9 September 1808, 2.

²⁵¹ For examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 11 April 1806, 275; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Saturday, 7 April 1810, 2.

²⁵² Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 304.

²⁵³ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Sunday, 4 January 1801, 42.

²⁵⁴ For examples see Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, 4 January 1801, Saturday, 7 February 1801, and Thursday, 12 February 1801, 15, 21; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday, 8 April 1807, 30; and "Journal for 1805 & 6, Cross Lake"; Wednesday, 18 December 1805 and Sunday, 22 December 1805, 20.

through correspondence and messages sent word of mouth. No correspondence sent by voyageurs to French Canada has survived, and I have found only sixteen letters written by families and friends to voyageurs. These letters provide a remarkable, though dim, window into both habitant and voyageur worlds. Literacy rates in the French Canadian countryside were extremely low, and personal messages were transmitted by word of mouth via returning and departing voyageurs.²⁵⁵ Yet some habitants clearly felt they could use letters as a tool of communication even though if they lacked the ability to read and write for themselves. They may have relied on their *curé* or other literate of the community to read and write letters for them. Similarly in the *pays d'en haut*, voyageurs relied upon the literate of the trade to read and write their letters. Bourgeois Gabriel Franchère recalls an incident Lac la Biche, concerning a freeman who guided for fur trade companies:

He begged me to read for him two letters which he had had in his possession for two years, and of which he did not yet know the contents. They were from one of his sisters, and dated at Varennes, in Canada. I even thought I recognized the handwriting of Mr. L.G. Labadie, teacher of that parish.²⁵⁶

The frequency of letter-writing among the habitants and voyageurs was probably very low, especially compared to the high rates at which the literate of French Canada

²⁵⁵ Allan Greer, "The pattern of Literacy in Quebec, 1745-1899," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 9 (November 1978, 295-335), 330-1; and HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Grenier, Joseph, from parents Joseph & marie, Ruisseau des chenes, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 7-10; and Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maksinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18.

²⁵⁶ Gabriel Franchère, *A Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, edited by Milo Milton Quaife, (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1954), 5 June 1814, 241.

corresponded on a yearly basis.²⁵⁷ The scant evidence prevents any kind of systematic assessment, but it would make sense that those who did communicate through letters did so once a year. In one letter a father reports that he received a letter from his son, a voyageur, five years ago and had since sent him three letters, though he had not received a response to these.²⁵⁸ Another voyageur sent his wife two letters in one summer.²⁵⁹ At the opposite extreme, a mother had not heard from her son in eight or nine years.²⁶⁰ These letters may be skewed to the side of noncommunication because they were recovered from mail that had not been delivered by the HBC, usually because of the death of the recipient. Regular correspondence may not have been unusual, as it was sometimes requested by family members.²⁶¹

Habitants and voyageurs sent their letters with the brigades travelling between Montreal and Lake Superior. One mother wrote to her son:

Je teprie Chér enfant cý toute foi tu ne Peus Pas désendre cette année ges Père
au moins que tu aurat la bonté de nous Ecrire cette au tonne Par les voyageur
qui vons décendre.²⁶²

²⁵⁷ Jane Harrison, *Until Next Year*.

²⁵⁸ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Grenier, Joseph, from parents Joseph & marie, Ruisseau des chenes, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 7-10.

²⁵⁹ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; St. Pierre, Olivier, from wife Nelly, Trois Rivieres, 28 mars 1831, fos. 30-1.

²⁶⁰ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Benoit, Francois, from mother Marianne Dorgue, St Ours, 23 avril 1830, fos. 1-2.

²⁶¹ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Boimier, Isidore, from brother Charles, Mascouche, 28 avril 1823, fos. 3-4.

²⁶² HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Benoit, Francois, from mother Marianne Dorgue, St Ours, 23 avril 1830, fos. 1-2. Also

Correspondence was sent through people identified in the letters.²⁶³ Sometimes two letters were sent at once, either by two different people to the same voyageur, or with the intention of sending letters through different routes to increase the chances of the letter arriving at its destination.²⁶⁴ Letters could be sent "au azard" (by hazard), or without an address, with the hopes that the letter would find its way to the voyageur regardless.²⁶⁵

The content of letters from habitants to voyageurs in the interior underscores the emotional ties between voyageurs and friends and families in Canada. Voyageurs appear as important members of the parish communities. Friends and relatives reported on births, deaths and marriages in the family and parish, as well as new houses built, and roads improved.²⁶⁶ One letter reminded a voyageur of a potential wife waiting for him in the

see Rogue, Amable, from mother Marianne, Maskinonge, 15 avril 1830, fos. 26-7.

²⁶³ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Benoit, Francois, from mother Marianne Dorgue, St Ours, 23 avril 1830, fos. 1-2; Grenier, Joseph, from parents Joseph & marie, Ruisseau des chenes, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 7-10; Lebrun, Felix, from brother David, Maskinonge, 17 avril 1831 and friend David Sigard, Makinonge, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 11-14; Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maksinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18; and Rogue, Amable, from mother Marianne, Maskinonge, 15 avril 1830, fos. 26-7.

²⁶⁴ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; St. Pierre, Olivier, from wife Nelly, Trois Rivieres, 28 mars 1831, fos. 30-1; and Grenier, Joseph, from parents Joseph & marie, Ruisseau des chenes, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 7-10.

²⁶⁵ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Boimier, Isidore, from brother Charles, Mascouche, 28 avril 1823, fos. 3-4; and Rogue, Amable, from mother Marianne, Maskinonge, 15 avril 1830, fos. 26-7.

²⁶⁶ On the reporting births see HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Lebrun, Felix, from brother David, Maskinonge, 17 avril 1831; friend David Sigard, Makinonge, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 11-14. For news that family member died see Benoit, Francois, from mother Marianne Dorgue, St Ours, 23 avril 1830, fos. 1-2; and Boimier, Isidore, from brother Charles, Mascouche, 28 avril 1823, fos. 3-4. For news of marriages in the parish see Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maksinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18; and St. Pierre, Olivier, from wife Nelly, Trois Rivieres, 28 mars 1831, fos. 30-1. For reports on houses and roads in the parish see Lebrun, Hercule, from nephew, Olivier Fizette, Makinonge, 12 mars 1831; ("deceased"), fos. 15-18.

parish, while another apprised a voyageur on the state of his land in the parish.²⁶⁷ All the letters sent greetings from friends and family and wished the voyageur well and most inquired as to when the voyageur would be returning. One habitant chided his voyageur brother to save his money and behave well.²⁶⁸

Many of the letters express the pain of separation felt by those left behind. Joseph Grenier of "Ruisseau des chenes" begged his son in the Columbia district to return:

je ta sur Cher Enfant que tu nous cause beaucoup d'ennui et de chagrin Sur nos vieu jour de voir notre cher Enfan que nous avons tems eu de peine à Ellevé et croyant avoir du Soulagement et la consolation de lui et a present de le voir si Elloignée[.] Cher Enfan nous atie oublier et a tu perdu le Souvenir de notre tendress envertoi dans ta jeunesse[.] Croi moi Cher Joseph [his son] moi et ta peuvre mère te Disirons bein de te revoir en cor une foi a vant que de mourrir parce que Si tu ne dessent pas bien vite tu pouroit bien pas nous voir vivant parce que nous taSurons que nos peuvre cheveux on biens blachie de pui que tes partie d'avec nous[.] Prand donc courage revien don nous voir Encor une foi nous te recevrons les bras oûvert et ton arrivée pouroit petaitre bien nous faire vivre quelques année de plus par la joi que tu nous Causerai de te revoir et ta peuvre Grande mère Sicard qui est agé apresent de Quatrevingt

²⁶⁷ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Rogue, Amable, from mother Marianne, Maskinonge, 15 avril 1830, fos. 26-7; and McKissee, [John], from friend Andre Blais, York, 12 avril 1833, fos. 19-20.

²⁶⁸ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Lebrun, Felix, from brother David, Maskinonge, 17 avril 1831; friend David Sigard, Makinonge, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 11-14.

Neuf ans[.] Elle dit toujours quelle de mande à Dieu de te revoir devant que de mourir et Elle tams brasse biens et Ell prie Dieu pour toi que Dieu te fasse Connoître le Devoir que tu doit a ton Cher Père et Mère.²⁶⁹

This letter reveals deep emotional ties between parents and children. Spouses also begged husbands to return, as did Nellie St. Pierre in Trois Rivières writing to her husband Olivier "au font de la maire":

je navais Pas Craint Les reproche jamais je naurais Consentie a ton Depart. je nest aucune Consolation toujours dans la Peine et Lannui Plus je Vie et Plus je manui et Plus ma Peine est Grande Cante je Pense quil faut que je Passe encore deux ans sans avoir le Plessire de te voire je men despere que ce tems sera Long mais enfin il faut que je me Conforme a La volonte de Dieu et vive dans Lesperance que tu viendra ausitot ton tems fini.²⁷⁰

One future sister-in-law said she was waiting for the voyageur to return before she married his brother.²⁷¹

The letters, on the other hand, also recognize that voyageurs had established a life in the interior separate from that in French Canada. Asking to see the voyageur once more before death may have been a figurative expression, or may have been a pragmatic request.

²⁶⁹ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Grenier, Joseph, from parents Joseph & Marie, Ruisseau des chenes, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 7-10. Also see Mauraux, Francois, from Uncle Manuelle Preville, Maskinonge, 11 avril 1834, fos. 21-3; and Benoit, Francois, from mother Marianne Dorgue, St Ours, 23 avril 1830, fos. 1-2.

²⁷⁰ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; St. Pierre, Olivier, from wife Nelly, Trois Rivières, 28 mars 1831, fos. 30-1. Also see Mongall, Thomas, from wife Marie St. Germain, Maskinonge, 20 avril 1830, fos. 24-5.

²⁷¹ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; St. Pierre, Olivier, from wife Nelly, Trois Rivières, 28 mars 1831, fos. 30-1.

One letter, addressed to a voyageur "ausos du pay nord" passes along greetings to the voyageur's wife and family, which must be an acknowledgement of his Native family in the interior.²⁷²

The only insight we have into the content of letters written by voyageurs is through responses to them. They generally sent messages that they were in good health and had success in travel.²⁷³ One voyageur complained of the "La Cruel misere" in "ces miserables endroits."²⁷⁴ Others made arrangements through their families to buy and sell land in Canada, which was a clear indication that they continued to act as part of their parish community.²⁷⁵

Like any travel in the northwest interior, delivering mail could be treacherous. Threats from weather, wild animals and hostile people could prevent its delivery and injure the mail carriers. Charles Chaboillez noted in February 1798 that two men who arrived with mail from Lac La Pluie were starved and could hardly walk. Chaboillez gave them each a dram, some tobacco and a pint of rum to share.²⁷⁶ The difficulties and danger which accompanied letter delivery often made bourgeois sympathetic to the letter carriers. The men carrying the express

²⁷² HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Rose, David, from brother Jacques, Maskinonge, 14 avril 1834, fos. 28-9.

²⁷³ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Lebrun, Felix, from brother David, Maskinonge, 17 avril 1831; friend David Sigard, Makinonge, 20 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 11-14; Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maksinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18; and Mauraux, Francois, from Uncle Manuelle Preville, Maskinonge, 11 avril 1834, fos. 21-3.

²⁷⁴ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; St. Pierre, Olivier, from wife Nelly, Trois Rivieres, 28 mars 1831, fos. 30-1.

²⁷⁵ HBCA E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50; Lebrun, Hercule, from brother Charles M., Maksinonge, 18 avril 1831 ("deceased"), fos. 15-18; and Rose, David, from brother Jacques, Maskinonge, 14 avril 1834, fos. 28-9.

²⁷⁶ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Sunday, 3 February 1798, 39. Also see George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Tuesday, 14 November 1808, 11-12 (I added page numbers).

were generally treated well as they passed through posts, which was usually a benefit of the importance of their job. John Thompson habitually gave the express men tobacco, drams, provisions, ammunition, and one year even lent some express men an axe.²⁷⁷ The importance of mail to the bourgeois also motivated them to treat mail carriers well. Bourgeois often complained of loneliness in the north west interior, so that the arrival of letters became especially important ties with the outside world. Daniel Harmon wrote of his joy in receiving mail: "nothing could give me greater pleasure, while I am self-banished in this dreary country and at a great distance from all I hold dear in the world."²⁷⁸ Personal and business information passed on through letters also gave letters a heightened sense of importance. In September 1806 Harmon received instructions that he was to pass the ensuing winter at Cumberland House, and that his father had died.²⁷⁹ Both the business and personal importance attached to delivering news and mail made it an serious job for voyageurs to perform, and continual pressure was applied to men in delivering news and mail swiftly and promptly.

Concluding Remarks

As in the previous chapter on work in the canoe, this chapter on work at the interior posts shows that voyageurs were highly skilled labourers, who had to combine strength with dexterity and reason in order to survive the rigours of the north west. They developed much autonomy from their masters, and came to control many aspects of the trade. Work at interior

²⁷⁷ John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Saturday, 3 November 1798, Monday, 5 November 1798, Sunday, 10 February 1799, and Tuesday, 9 April 1799, 17, 30, 49.

²⁷⁸ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, 29 September 1801, 51.

²⁷⁹ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 3 September 1806, 101.

fur trade posts was less strenuous than working in canoe brigades. However, the isolation of the posts, and the precariousness of supplies made the job demanding nonetheless. Work at interior posts demanded a wider variety of skills than did working in the canoes. Voyageurs were expected to construct and maintain buildings, as well as produce tools and furniture. The quest for food and pursuit of furs dominated life at the posts, and brought voyageurs into close contact with Native peoples. The regular travel between the posts, and the regular delivery of mail and messages helped to cement a common culture among the separate communities at each post.

Chapter 5

Forming Middle Grounds: Voyageurs and Native Peoples

In his ground-breaking work on the alliances which developed from the late 17th century to the early 19th century between the French Crown and aboriginal peoples south of the Great Lakes (who were refugees from Five Nations Iroquois attacks), Richard White proposed that a middle ground emerged. French military officers and fur traders, and the “Children of Onontio,” as the refugee villagers came to be known, developed a distinct cultural space shared equally by both groups. This middle ground was not a place where the French assimilated the aboriginal refugees, nor where the primarily Algonquian villagers assimilated the French. Rather, new cultural forms emerged, which blended, albeit with difficulty, beliefs and aspirations of each group.¹ Although White’s study of the middle ground in the Great Lakes area describes one particular period of time and place, he asserts that the concept can be broadly applied to numerous contexts, even outside the history of Native peoples and newcomers in the Americas.² White also makes a distinction between two kinds of middle grounds: the first a formal and long term relationship between nations and councils, while the second emerges in everyday encounters between individuals.³

Another kind of middle ground appeared in the north west of North America in the

¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50-2.

² Explained by Richard White in his lecture “The Middle Ground and Transnational History: The Blurred Boundaries of Colonial North America” Creighton Lecture, University of Toronto, 10 November 1998.

³ White, *The Middle Ground*, 53.

18th century. Unlike the middle ground south of the Great Lakes, this did not involve imperial powers or military forces, nor forming alliances on formal, political levels. Instead, this middle ground, or rather these middle grounds, were spaces of shared meaning established by nonrefugee Native societies and European and Canadian fur traders. The middle grounds arose between individuals, those who formed long term stable trading relationships, lived beside one another as neighbours and friends, and married each other. These middle grounds consisted primarily of localized, everyday encounters and common understandings, with little formalized recognition; they were fluid, temporary, emerged and disappeared often. There were no treaties, and few common enemies. Rather the shared agenda was trade, and alliance. Like the middle ground south of the Great Lakes, trade, sex and violence were cultural foundations.

Tracing the origins and parameters of these middle grounds is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Rather I will explore how voyageurs in particular operated within this distinct cultural space. As this dissertation has shown in other chapters, voyageur culture was influenced by the Native peoples that they met in the north west interior. This chapter will focus on that process by exploring the "conduits" for cultural exchange. First, it examines French and Native relations in the valley of the St. Lawrence, looking at how the myth of the "savage" became the background on which French Canadians encountered Native peoples in the *pays d'en haut*. Second, this chapter will explore what happened when voyageurs met face to face with Native peoples in the north west and formed relationships with them which were outside the influence of their masters. These relationships emerge as fundamentally negative in the writings of the fur trade masters, who focused on conflict and violence. The challenge

is to make sense of these commentaries, and see the nature of voyageur-Native relations as a whole outside of the Bourgeois Gaze.

Myth of the Savage

French colonists had a long history of contact with Native people in the St. Lawrence valley. Like their European counterparts, they viewed all indigenous people in North America as "other", considering them as both different and inferior. Historian Olive Dickason coined the term "myth of the Savage" to describe how French colonists tried to make sense of their discovery of the "New World" peoples. The cultural image of the "Savage" emerged even before many Europeans arrived on the shores of northern North America. Reflections on peoples outside of Europe both critiqued European society and imprinted nonEuropeans, including North American Native peoples, as "other", different and less than the European self.⁴ The myth of the "Savage" always reflected European self-fashioning and self-doubt. Questioning humans' "true" nature as good or bad was reflected in the "noble Savage" and the "degenerate Indian." The "reasoning Savage" denounced European civilization, posed as the ideal of the ego and the spokesperson for a European *auto-critique*.⁵ The "Savage" could

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, translated by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 67-79. Also see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), esp. 7-8; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 29, 31; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed. *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1995); and Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the native Caribbean, 1492-1797*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1986).

⁵ Réal Ouellet with Mylene Tremblay, 'From the Noble Savage to the Degenerate Indian: The Amerindian in the Accounts of Travel to America,' in *De-centring the Renaissance: Canada and Europe in Multidisciplinary Perspective, 1500-1700*, edited by Germaine Warkentin and Carolyn Podruchny, (submitted to the University of Toronto Press). The best example of the "reasoning Sauvage" is found in the "dialogue with Adario" in Louis-Armand Lom d'Arce de Lahontan, *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Réal Ouellet and Alain

change to reflect the colonizers' changing alter-ego, but it was always the antithesis of self.

European colonizers, such as France, Spain, Portugal and England, set out to conquer not only the newly discovered lands, but also the newly discovered peoples. They saw North American aboriginals as heathens and barbarians, in need of civilizing and Christianizing. The French were not as successful colonizers as other European nations, as their small numbers in north eastern North America did not displace Native peoples to a great degree, and some cooperation and interdependence developed between the two groups.⁶ Yet throughout the history of New France, policy towards Native peoples was to "Frenchify" them, through religion, settlement and education.⁷

Studies of European othering and colonization generally neglect the influence of class or social orders. Understandably historians have relied on the writings of colonial officials, missionaries and merchants, men with power and privilege, to explore general attitudes towards Native peoples. But did the "voiceless" people of New France hold the same views? Did habitants in New France participate in creating the myth of the "Savage" in colonial discourse? Habitants' direct dealings with Native people through trade, war and marriage allowed them to develop their own views. Habitants had much contact with Native people who came to live on the Christian reserves in the St. Lawrence valley, such as Lorette, Oka

Beaulieu, 2 vols., (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, collection Bibliothèque du Nouveau Monde, [1702-3] 1990).

⁶ Cornelius J. Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 7, 190-4.

⁷ There was always a great deal of debate between colonial officials and Jesuits who opposed Frenchification. Olive. P. Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984), 273-8.

and Kahnawake.⁸ For a brief period in the 17th century colonial officials tried to create an inter-racial society and thus arranged some marriages and adoptions, but this policy met with little success and was discouraged by the Jesuits.⁹ Throughout the 18th century, French Canadians and residents of Kahnawake continued to have some contact as neighbours. Both Kahnawake men and women had been involved in the fur trade from the start, “smuggling” trade goods through Albany and trading with Native groups visiting Montreal. By 1790 Kahnawake men started to hire themselves out as engagés in the north west trade, working alongside the French Canadian voyageurs.¹⁰ Although these connections made the two communities of Kahnawake and Montreal familiar with each other, they did not bring the communities close together, and the barriers of language and custom kept the two cultures

⁸ On the Christian reserves which came to be called the Seven Nations see Jean-Pierre Sawaya, *La Fédération des Sept Feux de la Vallée du Saint-Laurent, xviiè-xixè siècle*, (Sillery, QC: Septentrion, 1998); Denys Delâge, "Les Iroquois chrétiens des 'réductions', 1667-1770. I. Migration et rapports avec les Français. II. Rapports avec la Ligue iroquoise, les Britanniques et les autres nations autochones," *Recherches amérindiennes au Québec*, Vol. xxi, (1991), nos. 1-2: 59-70, no. 3: 39-50; Bruce G. Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's 'Heroic Age' Reconsidered*, (Kingston and Montreal :McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 292-6; Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 119-28; and Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal*, trans. Liana Vardi, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 6-8.

⁹ Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 161-5; Sylvie Savoie, "Les mariages entre Amérindiens et Blancs. Historiographie du métissage et unions mixtes devant l'Eglise en Nouvelle-France," communication présentée au *Congrès de l'Institut Historique de l'Amérique Française*, octobre 1993; and Dechêne, *Habitants and Marchands*, 9, 14-15.

¹⁰ Delâge, "Les Iroquois chrétiens. I. migration," 65-6; Dechêne, *Habitants and Marchands*, 12-13; Gretchen Green, "A New People in an Age of War: The Kahnawake Iroquois, 1667-1760," Ph.D. Thesis, (Boston: The College of William and Mary, 1991), 233-7, 272, 283-6; Jean Lunn, "The Illegal Fur Trade Out of New France, 1713-60," *Canadian Historical Association Report, 1939*, 61-76; Trudy Nicks, "The Iroquois and Fur Trade in Western Canada," In *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by Carol M. Judd and Arthur J. Ray, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); and Theodore J. Karamanski, "The Iroquois and the Fur Trade of the Far West," *The Beaver*, (Spring 1982), 5-13.

apart, and impeded any kind of real cultural intermingling.¹¹ Louise Dechêne asserts that colonists probably perceived Natives as "pitiful savages" because Natives living on the St. Lawrence reserves were seen as particularly beleaguered, living in alienating and precarious conditions.¹² Yet the residents of Kahnawake believed they were an autonomous village, in the tradition of Iroquoian local independence. The alliance between the Christian Iroquois and the colonists of New France rested on a fundamental misunderstanding: the French thought the Iroquois were forced to become their allies because of need and thus treated them as subjects, while the Christian Iroquois believed they were an independent group in a relationship of mutual assistance with the French colonists.¹³ This basic misunderstanding represents the huge cultural gap between French colonists and their Native neighbours.

Trading fairs brought many different Native peoples to Montreal in the second half of the 17th century, such as the Ottawa, Ojibwa and Illinois.¹⁴ Habitants also came into closer contact with Natives outside of the St. Lawrence valley when they participated in warfare against the Five Nations Iroquois Confederacy.¹⁵ However, habitants who became voyageurs and coureurs de bois had the most contact with Native peoples from the *pays d'en haut*.¹⁶

¹¹ Allan Greer, *The People of New France*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), see chapter 6, "French and Others."

¹² Dechêne, *Habitants and Marchands*, 15.

¹³ Delâge, "Les Iroquois chrétiens. I. Migrations," 64-5.

¹⁴ Nicolas Perrot, *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Region of the Great Lakes*, edited and translated by Emma Helen Blair, (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1911), I: 174-5, 210-20; Dechêne, *Habitants and Marchands*, 10; and Greer, *The People of New France*, chapter on "French and Others."

¹⁵ W.J. Eccles, *France in America*, revised edition, (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990), 95-124.

¹⁶ See Dechêne, *Habitants et Marchands*, 117-24; Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 177-93; Hubert Charbonneau, Bertrand Desjardins, and Pierre Beauchamp, "Le comportement démographique des voyageurs sous le régime français," *Histoire sociale- Social History*, (May 1978); and Claireborne Skinner, "The Sinews

Many of these men zealously acculturated themselves to Native ways and married Native women. When they returned to New France, they sometimes brought not only their Native families, but a host of new cultural practices.¹⁷ Yet, the numbers of Native women brought back to the St. Lawrence valley as wives remained low, never amounting to more than 2% of the population.¹⁸

This tradition of contact in the 17th and early part of the 18th centuries set the stage for later generations' attitudes to Native peoples. In an excellent article on the influence of Native cultures on colonists in New France, Denys Delâge closely traces the blending of European and Amerindian customs. In the realm of material goods and technologies, French colonists very quickly adopted Native modes of transportation, such as canoes, snowshoes and sleds, and apparel, such as moccasins, and leather and fur clothing. Other very practical Native customs which aided colonists in surviving the new North American environment included adjustments in diet, herbal remedies, hunting and fishing. These Native materials and technologies were of crucial importance to voyageurs, who relied on them for survival in the bush. Habitants also adopted other Native customs which were not necessary to survival,

of Empire: The Voyageur and the Carrying Trade of the Pays d'en haut, 1681-1754," Ph.D. Thesis, (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago, 1991), 345-71.

¹⁷ Jacqueline Louise Peterson, "The People In Between: Indian-White Marriage and the Genesis of a Métis Society and Culture in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1830," (Ph.D. Thesis. Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1980); and Savoie, "Les mariages entre Amérindiens et Blancs."

¹⁸ Cornelius Jaenen, "Miscegenation in Eighteenth-Century New France," in *New Dimensions in Ethnohistory: Papers of the Second Laurier Conference on Ethnohistory and Ethnology*, edited by Barry Gough and Laird Christie, 81-115, (Ottawa: Canadian Ethnology Service Mercury Series Paper 120, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991); and Bertrand Desjardins, "Homogénéité ethnique de la population québécoise sous le Régime français," *Cahiers québécois de démographie*, 19/1 (printemps 1990), 63-76.

such as smoking pipes and playing lacrosse.¹⁹ Native influences reached deeper in linguistic and cultural realms, as habitants incorporated Native words and folk motifs, and adjusted themselves to Native styles of diplomacy and warfare.²⁰ Contrary to Cornelius Jaenen's assertion that the cultural borrowings did not substantially alter the conceptual basis of French society in New France,²¹ Delâge argues in both symbolic and imaginary ways, Natives shaped the core of habitant identity:

Dans la construction de l'identité canadienne la proximité des Amérindiens est déterminante. Les transferts culturels d'origine amérindienne servent à identifier les colons vis-à-vis les métropolitains. Ceux que l'aviron mène en haut, Ceux qui s'embusquent derrière les arbres pour la guérilla, Ceux qui pêchent et chassent l'hiver, Ceux qui fabriquent le sucre du pays, Ceux qui connaissent des Amérindiens, qui trafiquent, trinquent et fument avec eux, Ceux qui les craignent et les envient, Ceux qui en causent, ce sont les Canadiens ou les Acadiens par opposition aux Français.²²

However, Delâge admits that although Amerindian influences could inspire new attitudes and behaviours for French colonists, and offered refuge for colonial dissidents, it was ultimately limited.²³

In sum, most habitants would have had some knowledge of Native people, and some

¹⁹ Denys Delâge, "L'influence des Amérindiens sur les Canadiens et les Français au temps de la Nouvelle-France," *Lekton*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Automne 1992: 103-91, 280-91), 110-36, 143.

²⁰ Delâge, "L'influence des Amérindiens," 136-42, 146-8.

²¹ Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 195.

²² Delâge, "L'influence des Amérindiens," 158.

²³ Delâge, "L'influence des Amérindiens," 162.

even had extensive contact with them. Habitants borrowed material goods, technologies, skills, and cultural motifs from Natives, and the presence of Natives influenced their cosmology, their place in the world. Yet, the two cultures did not really intermingle, at least not in the St. Lawrence valley. In contrast, those habitants who traveled into the north west to trade for furs mingled closely with Native peoples and were heavily influenced by Native cultures.

Othering in the Interior

What was the nature of the relationships between Native peoples and traders in the north west interior? The configurations of power between traders and Native peoples has been a subject of ongoing debate among historians. The prevailing consensus is that Native peoples initially controlled trading relationships, that both Native peoples and European traders benefitted from them, and that eventually Native peoples lost power and became dominated and exploited by the Europeans, losing their resources and land, and eventually ending up on reserves.²⁴ Within this framework of power, the bourgeois, like other colonizers, viewed Natives as inferior, regardless of whether they were dependent on them.²⁵

Like most other aspects of voyageur culture, their relationship with Native peoples

²⁴ For a few of many examples see Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Roles as Hunters, Trappers, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977); Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay, 1600-1870*, (Kingston: McGill-Queens Press, 1983); Paul Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1986); and Laura L. Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780-1870*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994).

²⁵ See Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

must be viewed through the eyes of the literate of the trade. Although bourgeois and clerks expounded on the harmony, accommodation and closeness between voyageurs and Native people, their writings are primarily filled with examples of conflict, violence, and suspicion between the two groups. The bias in their observations must be carefully unraveled to find genuine traces of middle grounds between voyageurs and Native peoples.

The Bourgeois Gaze often merged voyageurs and Native peoples together as part of a broad "lower order." Native people were almost always generically referred to as "Indians." Voyageurs and Native peoples were often either lumped together as a single group, or compared to each other, when the bourgeois described their physical appearance, moral qualities, and social habits. David Thompson wrote that he found the characters of the Native peoples and French Canadians entertaining. When he tried to teach them about the fundamentals of astronomy, he sniggered that both groups thought he was looking into the future and requesting divine assistance. In writing about the northern Algonquians, James McKenzie lamented that they had adopted the vices of Canadians, such as "Indolence ungratitude malice baseness Stubbornness Cowardice and a propensity to drinking Stealing lying trechery."²⁶ However, writers in New France were concerned that habitants were overly influenced by Natives, becoming too free, independent, indolent and lazy.²⁷ Similarly, many

²⁶ Richard Glover, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1962), 89-91. On Canadians in general being compared to Natives see Montreal; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB); Masson Collection (hereafter MC); C.14; James Mackenzie, *Some account of the Kings Posts, the Labrador Coast and the Islands of Anticosti*, 1808: 30-31.

²⁷ Del ge, "L'influence des Am rindiens", 154-55, 157, 159-61.

writers in the interior described voyageurs becoming as insolent and depraved as Natives.²⁸ In the eyes of the bourgeois, both groups influenced each other in adverse ways.

At the same time the bourgeois and clerks had fluctuating views of voyageurs. Sometimes they wrote of voyageurs as being colleagues, allies, partners and even equals of the bourgeois themselves, and portrayed voyageurs as part of the collective "self" rather than "other". The bias and prejudice of the bourgeois towards Native peoples was then transferred to voyageurs, implying that voyageurs had the same kind of relationship with Native peoples as did the bourgeois. It may well have been the case that sometimes masters would view voyageurs as their closest allies against Native peoples, especially when they were confronted with an antagonistic group and felt endangered. In the absence of a threat of Native hostility, the bourgeois more freely associated voyageurs and Native peoples as necessary evils to the success of the trade. In some cases the bourgeois worried that the rowdiness of the voyageurs would cause Native people in the interior to lose respect for the traders, and thus injure the trade.²⁹ Yet, the bourgeois, especially the English ones, could cast Native peoples and voyageurs as great friends, and valued that ostensible connection for the success of the trade.³⁰

²⁸ Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 198-9; W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), 197-8.

²⁹ Roderick McKenzie, Esq., "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West", in Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 17-18; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, 1 January 1811, 136.

³⁰ McKenzie, "A General History", 17; Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 1: 279; Toronto; Ontario Archives (hereafter OA); North West Company Collection (hereafter NWCC); MU 2199, Box 4, No. 1 (photostat of original); "An Account of the Athabasca Indians by a Partner of the North West Company, 1795,"

Did voyageurs need to form a workable relationship with Native peoples they met in the *pays d'en haut*? There is no single answer, as Native peoples were incredibly culturally diverse. At the same time, voyageurs were not a unified group, and did not encounter Native peoples in the same way. As part of the commercial enterprise of the fur trade, they were involved in the broad process of trying to establish profitable trade. As individuals, however, they had varied motivations. Many voyageurs sought to get along with Native people simply to make their jobs, and thus their lives, easier. This desire could be urgent, as Native people often served as the keys to survival, in providing food, information on routes, and diplomatic ties to other groups of Natives. Many voyageurs became very intimate with Native people, working closely with them in the trade, living with them at lodges, and marrying Native women (see chapter 6). Some voyageurs decided to make a permanent life for themselves in the interior, either as freeman, or by assuming a Native identity by joining a family or community. Conversely, some voyageurs worked in the trade only for a limited time, invested little in their jobs and working environment, and either did not care or were resentful of Native people as foreign and powerful "others". It is more productive to sketch out the range of their relationships, rather than searching for an overarching generalization. By revealing the range of voyageur-Native relationships, which is interesting in and of itself, we can also start to uncover the opportunities and structures or environments in which cultural exchange took place. It seems that no one middle ground was established in the Montreal fur trade, rather specific sites of cultural cooperation emerged and shifted throughout the northwest to

revised 4 May 1840 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company", by Roderick Mackenzie, director of the North West Company, original at MRB, MC, C.18, Microfilm reel #22; photostat can also be found at National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640); 3-4.

suit the needs of Native people and traders. Examining the relationships in terms of Native ethnic groups is difficult because ethnic categories were messy at the best of times, and it is hard to know the extent to which voyageurs recognized these differences.³¹ Rather, Native peoples were viewed mainly as fellow workers, friends, enemies, and family members.

Contact

The first exposure of many voyageurs to Native people in the *pays d'en haut* occurred immediately on the journey out of Montreal, and along most of the routes into the interior. Yet, most of the sustained contact that voyageurs developed with Native people occurred at posts, where Natives came to trade and to work. Native people frequently resided at posts for prolonged periods of time when hired as guides, interpreters, hunters, and general labourers. Although this phenomenon was more common at HBC posts, the HBC term "homeguard" could be used to describe Native peoples living near the posts of other companies.³² On occasion a Native from the interior would be hired as a "regular" voyageur, and sign a contract similar to that of the French Canadian voyageurs.³³ However, most interior arrangements did not involve formal contracts. Rather, Native peoples worked upon verbal

³¹ For an example of the complexity in cultural identity and change see Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada*, especially her discussion of the concepts of "culture area" and ethnicity as applied to the western Ojibwa, x-xii.

³² The Swampy Cree who settled near HBC posts on the shores of Hudson Bay are most commonly referred to as the Homeguard. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 85; and Francis and Morantz, *Partners in Furs*, 41. Many later homeguard were Native peoples of mixed descent.

³³ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 6. In another example, a Native man signed a contract for six years at the rate of 300 livres per annum. "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Appendix B, *Public Archives Report for 1929*, pgs. 109-45, (transcript from a copy at University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Collection, Pacific Coast Mss., Series C, No. 16; copy also at NAC, MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, Vol. 4; originals at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Saturday, 17 May 1806, 120.

agreements, with provisions of credit. The bourgeois spoke of these agreements as they would of legal contracts.³⁴ Labour of this sort was very fluid and informal, with Natives moving in and out of jobs to suit their personal provisioning and economic strategies, and also changing their behaviour according to the environment (such as the abundance of animals in the area around the forts). Some Native people were engaged specifically to hunt hares, deer and bears for a post, on both an individual and group basis.³⁵ Traders often depended on Natives when their knowledge of the environment was poor, or when the voyageurs were weak from hunger.³⁶ As part of most arrangements bourgeois supplied Native hunters with ammunition.³⁷ Native boys were often hired to deliver ammunition and tobacco

³⁴ Similarly, Carol Judd has found that the HBC began to hire Native people in the 1770s on a casual basis without formal contracts to perform specific tasks, which could normally be performed in a single season. Carol M. Judd, "Native Labour and Social Stratification in the Hudson's Bay Company's Northern Department, 1770-1870", *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 17, no. 4 (November 1980: 305-14), 306.

³⁵ On hiring individual Natives see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 12; Microfilm reel # C-15638; attributed to John Sayer in the NAC Finding Aid #797, 2; "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sept. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, (a published version of this journal can be found in Charles Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1965), 249-78, Gates attributes the journal to Thomas Connor), Tuesday, 2 October 1804, 20; Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807; Simon Fraser to McDougall, Naugh-al-chum, 31 August 1806, 23; "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Saturday, 21 June 1806, 132; and Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: 16 September 1800, 98. On hiring groups of natives as hunters see Montreal; MRB; MC; C.26, Microfilm reel #15; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Monday and Wednesday, 1 and 10 December 1800, 13-14; Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room (hereafter MRL; BR); S13; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 12 August 1803, 35-6; Coues, ed., *New Light*, vol. 1, 5-6 September 1800, 85; and Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1929), 10 October 1794, Fort George, 52.

³⁶ "The Diary of Archibald N. McLeod" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 55; Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807; Simon Fraser to McDougall, Naugh-al-chum, 31 August 1806, 23-5.

³⁷ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A14; Microfilm reel #M-130; John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6 (original at Provincial Archives of British Columbia); Sunday to Tuesday, 22-24 December 1805, Thursday, 26 December 1805, Thursday, 2 January 1806, Wednesday, 22 January 1806, and Wednesday, 12 February 1806, 2-4, 6, 15, 25-6.

to the adult hunters.³⁸ Temporary casual employment of Natives included procuring bark, helping paddle canoes and transport goods, making canoes, retrieving goods lost during canoe accidents, and hauling meat to the posts.³⁹ Native men delivered mail between posts, especially in the winter when the journey was more dangerous than usual and voyageurs were reluctant to do this job.⁴⁰

Native people were most often sought out to act as guides, interpreters and negotiators. Native guides were frequently hired along trading routes in well-traveled areas, such as the routes between Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg. Although traders were familiar with these routes, local guides allowed them to travel more quickly and avoid temporary environmental impediments, such as fallen trees, or low water levels. In 1784 Edward Umfreville recorded hiring a Native guide from Lake Superior to Lake Nipigon even though some of his men had traveled the route several times before.⁴¹ The services of Native guides

³⁸ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Sunday and Monday, 11-12 May 1806, 118.

³⁹ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 5; Microfilm reel #C-15638; William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790; Monday, 12 April 1790, 17; Toronto; OA; Duncan Clark Papers; MU 572; Vol.2, R. Mckenzie, Pic, to Duncan Clark, Long Lake, 1 May 1825, 1, 3; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Wednesday, 27 July 1803, 3; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26-27 July, 9 August 1800 and 16 September 1800, 14-15, 30, 98.

⁴⁰ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 12 February 1810, 584; and Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. by Lascelles Wraxall, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985, first published 1860), 122-3.

⁴¹ Toronto; OA; NWCC; MU 2199 (photostat of original); Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in Rivière Ouinipique", June to July 1784 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company," by Roderick MacKenzie, director of the North West Company. Typescripts can be found also in the OA; NWCC; MU 2200, Box 5, Nos. 2 (a), (b), and (c). Photostats and typescripts can also be found in NAC; MC; Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640; MRB; MC; C.17; and the Minnesota Historical Society; P1571); Wednesday, 16 June 1784, Sunday to Wednesday, 20-23 June 1784, Wednesday, 23 June 1784, Sunday and Monday, 27-28 June 1784, Saturday and Tuesday, 10, 13 July 1784, and Saturday, 17 July 1784, 5-10, 16, 19, 21.

were more crucial in unfamiliar frontiers, such as through the Rocky Mountains, especially when bourgeois and clerks traveled to a new area for the first time. Alexander Mackenzie's journals about his explorations for a passage to the Pacific Ocean are filled with descriptions of his efforts to procure guides in unfamiliar lands.⁴² Sometimes Native people would be hired in a couple of different roles, such as interpreters as well as hunters. On occasion bourgeois even hired Native people to trade *en dérrouine* (traveling alone to Native lodges to trade on behalf of the company).⁴³

To a small degree, voyageurs came into contact with Native people as fellow employees. There was little competition between voyageurs and Native people for casual labour. The bourgeois preferred French Canadian employees, and hired Native people during times of labour shortage, or when their servants did not have the skills to perform the necessary tasks.⁴⁴ Bourgeois may have used the threat of hiring Natives to replace uncooperative voyageurs, but the threats were probably empty, as bourgeois considered Native people unreliable employees. Native people frequently threatened to quit, and more often than not followed through on the threat.⁴⁵ In frustration, the bourgeois often fired

⁴² Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 24 June 1789, 8-9 July 1789, 27 July 1789, and 11 August 1789, 150, 173, 175, 211, 223; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 63-65; Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807; Simon Fraser to Mr. McDougall, Sturgeon Lake, 6 August 1806, 14; "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Thursday, 15 May 1806, 120; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Tuesday, 30 August 1803 and Saturday, 3 September 1803, 8; and George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 12 August 1803, 35.

⁴³ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, early June 1789 and 9 May 1793, 135, 265; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 12 August 1803, 35-6; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Thursday, 21 July 1803, 3.

⁴⁴ Judd found the same pattern with the HBC. Judd, "Native Labour," 306.

⁴⁵ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.28; Microfilm reel #13; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807," August 1807 to June 1808; Sunday, 10 August 1807, 2.

them.⁴⁶ Sometimes Native guides bargained for better working conditions, such as demanding year-round contracts and that the trading party feed their families. On his 1784 trip north of Lake Superior, Umfreville decided to fire his Native guide because the guide expected the trader to feed his family of eight; another Native guide he hired for the remainder of the journey insisted that he be granted a contract to last throughout the winter.⁴⁷ In other cases Natives wanted the bourgeois or clerk to marry one of their family members as a means of establishing a closer economic and diplomatic tie with the traders.⁴⁸ Bourgeois often lamented that they had to put up with outrageous demands and rascally behaviour because they were so dependent on Native people. When animals were scarce and conditions poor, Natives often bargained for better terms in their contracts to hunt.⁴⁹ They threatened to stop hunting if not provided with enough rum, and bourgeois were compelled to comply with their request on the threat of starvation. In 1799, near Fort Dauphin, Alexander Henry the Younger complained the scarcity of animals obliged him to hire Native hunters on "extravagant terms." They demanded clothing for themselves and their families, liquor, guns, knives, ammunition and tobacco. Henry griped "even upon these terms I was obliged to consider it a great favor they did me."⁵⁰ Natives sometimes tried to pillage from the party they were

⁴⁶ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; 17, 25, 27 and 31 December 1800, 17-19; and Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807; Simon Fraser to Mr. McDougall, Sturgeon Lake, 6 August 1806 and Simon Fraser to McDougall, Naugh-al-chum, 31 August 1806, 15-16, 23-5.

⁴⁷ Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior," Monday, 28 June 1784 and Saturday, 10 July 1784, 10, 16.

⁴⁸ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Tuesday, 30 August 1803 and Saturday, 3 September 1803, 8.

⁴⁹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: winter 1799, Riviere Terre Blanche, near Fort Dauphin, 2-3.

⁵⁰ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.24; Microfilm reel #2; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, 16 November 1800, 3.

guiding, as suffered by Umfreville's unfortunate crew.⁵¹ Native guides also frightened or plundered other Native groups with whom the bourgeois wanted to trade.⁵² Native agency and bargaining for better working conditions may have served as an example to voyageurs, and introduced new ideas about their own potential freedom and power. Their knowledge about bourgeois views of Native workers as unreliable may also have increased voyageurs' bargaining power and given them confidence about the security of their jobs and increased their sense of self-worth as employees.

Voyageurs more often came into contact with Native people not as fellow workers, but as trading clients. Native people traveled to posts to trade and sell provisions.⁵³ Although the posts acted as islands of Euro-Canadian identity, localized middle grounds could emerge amidst them because voyageurs and Native people worked closely together there. Voyageurs also met Native people outside of the context of posts and trading parties when they were sent out individually or in small groups to trade.⁵⁴ In these settings, voyageurs faced Native people without the benefit of secure surroundings, and it was more likely that middle grounds of mutual understanding and cooperation could develop.

⁵¹ Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior," Wednesday and Sunday, 23 and 27 June 1784, 8-9.

⁵² Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Thursday, 13 August 1789, 225.

⁵³ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 1; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Monday, 21 January 1798, 36; John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6; Friday, 31 January 1806, 19; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 11 September 1800, 95.

⁵⁴ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; 20 November 1797, and 14 January 1798, 20, 34; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Friday, 20 November 1807, 9; and George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Friday, 26 December 1807 and Saturday, 2 January 1808, 14-15.

Creating Middle Grounds

At the interior trading posts, the bourgeois and clerks developed formal and diplomatic middle grounds with Native groups to promote trade. Within these settings voyageurs established localized everyday middle grounds with individual Native people. Many voyageurs, especially those working for many years in the *pays d'en haut*, became closer to Native people than did the bourgeois, because they worked in a less structured social environment than the bourgeois. Voyageurs did not have the bourgeois' ambition for profit, large personal investment in the trade, and the expectation of high returns. For these reasons they were more open to the influence of Native people.

Voyageurs became close to Native people primarily through trading contact. Friendships often emerged as Native people came to know individual voyageurs over the course of several years. These voyageurs were valued by the fur trade companies for their experience and trade networks. In 1825, bourgeois Roderick McKenzie did not want to send one of his men, Ant[oi]ne SanRegret, to Duncan Clark, because SanRegret was the best voyageur to trade with the Natives, and thus McKenzie did not want to lose him.⁵⁵ Voyageurs could use their personal friendships with Native peoples to trade outside of the company for individual gain, which in turn led to closer relationships between voyageurs and Natives, without master involvement. "Freetrading" goods primarily consisted of dogs, horses and meat. For example, at Rocky Mountain House in 1801, bourgeois John Thompson complained that Martin, a man whom he sent out to get meat from Native hunters, privately

⁵⁵ Duncan Clark Papers; R. McKenzie, Pic to Duncan Clark, Long Lake, 1 May 1825, vol. 2, 2. For another example see Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 21.

arranged to buy extra meat for his family, and when caught, claimed that it was a gift from a Native friend.⁵⁶

Voyageurs became the closest to Natives when they worked with them, helping Native hunters cache and haul their meat to the lodges and posts.⁵⁷ Voyageurs were frequently sent out *en déroutine*, trading directly with Native peoples in their own camps. Voyageurs were also sent out to live with Natives at their lodges during the winter. This was probably the greatest encouragement and mechanism for establishing middle grounds. It made voyageurs' relationships with Native people distinct from those of the bourgeois, who rarely lived alone with Native people in their lodges unless they were out exploring.

These relationships of "boarding" could be tumultuous. Native people usually agreed to feed the voyageurs who stayed with them in exchange for credit or goods. Great discrepancies often occurred in how well Native people treated their visiting voyageurs, who often complained of lack of provisions. For example, John Thompson reported that one of his voyageurs, St. Cyres, "is well pleased with his Homme de Loge [his Native hosts] because they gave him plenty of hares to eat. La Beccasse [another voyageur] is very ill off and has to hunt for his own food or else he would starve because his Homme de Loge does not take the least Notice of him."⁵⁸ Voyageurs could take an extreme dislike to Natives, and refuse to go

⁵⁶ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1," Sunday, 22 February 1801, 26. Thompson probably made an error in the name of the river, as Rocky Mountain House was near the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River. For other examples see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 14; Microfilm reel # C-15638; "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799," Author unknown, Sunday, 26 January 1800, 13; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 19 and 30 August 1800, 47, 73.

⁵⁷ John Stuart, Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6; Sunday to Tuesday and Thursday, 22-24, 26 December 1805, Thursday, 2 January 1806, Wednesday, 22 January 1806, and Wednesday, 12 February 1806, 1-4, 6, 15, 25-6.

⁵⁸ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Wednesday and Friday, 18 and 20 February 1801, 24.

out to live with them.⁵⁹ Frequently Natives refused to have voyageurs live with them, claiming they could not afford to feed them, or deal with their disrespectful behaviour. In a 1800 William McGillivray directed Peter Grant to have a voyageur named La Tour winter with him, and send another voyageur in his place to Vermillion Lake because the Native people there "complained much of his conduct last Winter[.] the Queu de Porcupicque came here on purpose to desire he should not Winter on his Lands."⁶⁰ In another case some Cree refused to have a particular voyageur live with them, calling him "a dog, a liar, and a thief."⁶¹

Unfortunately the bourgeois and clerks more often recorded trouble between voyageurs and the Native peoples, than good rapport and trust. Living with Native people often led to very close friendships with the voyageurs. Clues to these solid relationships can be found in some of the offhand comments by the fur trade literate. For example, voyageurs would frequently travel with the Native people back and forth from the lodges to the fur trade posts.⁶² Voyageurs often socialized with Native people, and welcomed them in their homes at the fur trade posts.⁶³ During the early days of the post-Conquest Montreal fur trade, a HBC officer commented that:

⁵⁹ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 7; Microfilm reel #C-15638; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Friday, 12 October 1798, Thursday to Friday, 18-19 October 1798, and Sunday, 18 November 1798, 8, 11-13, 19.

⁶⁰ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 B1; North West Company Letterbook (hereafter NWCL), 1798-1800; vol. 1; William McGillivray to P. Grant, Grand Portage, 2 Aug 1800, 155. For another example see Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Monday, 24 September 1810, 27 (I added page numbers).

⁶¹ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", March 1812, 278-9.

⁶² Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 6; Microfilm reel #C-15638; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Sunday, Monday and Saturday, 1-2 and 7 March 1800, 3.

⁶³ William McGillivray, written transcript of "Rat River Fort Near Rivière Malique...", 9 September 1789 to 13 June 1790; Friday, 1 January 1790, 5.

The Canadians have great Influence over the Natives by adopting all their Customs and making them Companions, the[y] drink, sing, conjure, scold &c with them like one of themselves, and the Indians are never kept out of their Houses whether drunk or sober, night or Day.⁶⁴

Fur trade officers' lamentations about voyageurs and Native peoples drinking together was coloured by their prejudice against the common lower orders, but they can be seen as indications of shared pastimes between voyageurs and Native peoples. Marriages between voyageurs and Native women (discussed in the next chapter) were strong signifiers of amity. As well, signifiers of friendship between voyageurs and Native peoples can be found in the incidence of voyageurs who chose to "go Native" or live most of their lives in a Native community. Alexander Henry the Younger describes meeting a Canadian named René Jussaume among the Mandan in the summer of 1806, who had worked as an interpreter and guide to Lewis and Clark. Henry commented that:

This man has resided among the Indians for upward of 15 years, speaks their language tolerably well, and has a wife and family who dress and live like the natives. He retains the outward appearance of a Christian, but his principles, as far as I could observe, are much worse than those of a Mandane; he is possessed of every superstition natural to those people, nor is he different in every mean, dirty trick they have acquired from intercourse with the set of

⁶⁴ Winnipeg; Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA); A.1 1/4; Microfilm reel #138; London Inward Correspondence from the HBC posts, 1775-1783, Albany Fort. No. 105, Thomas Hutchins to London Committee, Albany Fort, Hudson's Bay, 5 July 1775, fo. 29.

scoundrels who visit these parts.⁶⁵

This description is typical of the bourgeois' disparaging remarks on the influence of voyageurs and Native peoples on each other. Reading between the lines, it sounds as if Jussaume had adopted to Mandan culture very well. Other voyageurs lived in Native communities only on a temporary basis. Some chose to pass the summer with a Native hunting group, instead of partaking in the summer frenzy of transporting goods and furs.⁶⁶ Sometimes wives pressured their husbands to live with their Native in-laws. One voyageur named Brunet, under the charge of George Nelson in the Michigan Territory, was repeatedly pushed by his Native wife to abandon the service. He and his wife occasionally left the post to spend time with her family.⁶⁷

Living and working together led to goodwill, cooperation and knowledge exchange between Native people and voyageurs. Voyageurs very readily adopted Native customs to make their lives easier. A long history of borrowing from Native peoples in French Canada set an easy precedent. One of the most common areas of cultural borrowing was food. Of course voyageurs ate "country foods," or whatever was available in the *pays d'en haut*, but they frequently looked to Native people for new delicacies, such as dog meat, salmon berries, and particular oils and roots.⁶⁸ Voyageurs also frequently watched or participated in Native

⁶⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 20 July 1806, 333.

⁶⁶ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday, 18 August 1808, 113.

⁶⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Monday, 31 January and Monday, 14 February 1804, 22, 23.

⁶⁸ Toronto; MRL; BR; 917.11 F671; Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808," (photostat of the transcription of the journal made in the Bancroft Library, No. 18, Series C, in the Pacific Coast Mss., at the University of California at Berkeley; also can be found in Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A9; Simon Fraser Collection, volume 6; published in L.R.F. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, Volume 1, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, originally

dancing and singing.⁶⁹ They helped each other build houses, canoes and tools.⁷⁰ Native people also provided voyageurs with maps and information on routes, which were particularly valuable to the voyageurs.⁷¹ They helped each other during accidents or illnesses by rescuing each other, and sharing medicine and medical treatments.⁷² Ross Cox recorded a case where some Flatheads made a sweat lodge for an old Canadian voyageur who had severe rheumatism.⁷³ On another occasion a voyageur who was encamped with some Native people in their lodges became ill, and the Natives carried him back to his post, despite the voyageur's accusations that the Natives mistreated him and neglected their hunting and trapping

published 1889-90) and in W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-1808*, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1960)); Friday and Monday, 16 and 19 June 1808, 19-12.

⁶⁹ Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808," Tuesday, 20 June 1808, 22.

⁷⁰ Toronto; OA; Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Friday, 8 November 1799, 40 (I added page numbers); and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 27 July 1800, 14-15.

⁷¹ George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 12 August 1803, 50.

⁷² Attributed to John Sayer, "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804," Sunday, 25 November 1804, 29; John Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner During Thirty Years Residence Among the Indians in the Interior of North America*, (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1956, first published 1830), 80-1; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Monday, 16 February 1801, 23-4; Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 145; Montreal; MRB; MC; C.13; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Friday, 6 December 1799, and Tuesday to Wednesday, 14-15 January 1800, 6, 14 (I added page numbers); George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", 283-4; and Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 65-6. For examples of Natives providing medical aid to bourgeois and voyageurs see George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 37-8 (for a report of same incident see George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 29); George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 66; -George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, Tête au Chien, 12 September 1807, 6-7, 9-10 or 190-1, 193-4; and Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 139-40. For examples of Natives requesting medical aid see W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807," August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday, 28 August 1807, 4 and Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 126.

⁷³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 126.

obligations to the traders.⁷⁴ Sharing food was probably the most important means of demonstrating friendship.⁷⁵ Yet sometimes the "kindness" and "sharing" had a hard edge, such as when voyageurs compelled Native people to share provisions with them.⁷⁶ Both the instances of harmony and of discord reveal closeness and collaboration between the voyageurs and Native people, which signified middle grounds. Although the evidence from the writings of the bourgeois suggest more conflict than cooperation between Native peoples and voyageurs, the common practice trading *en dérrouine*, and voyageurs living at Native lodges, led to closeness between the two groups.

Sometimes bourgeois tried to take advantage of closeness between voyageurs and Native people by probing the voyageurs for information on Native motives and future plans.⁷⁷ However, bourgeois attempted to develop their own relationships with Native people and did not always rely on their men to establish these ties. It was in the best interests of the bourgeois to cultivate Native goodwill, as they relied on Native people for profit, guidance and survival.⁷⁸ Part of their relationship of official diplomacy could extend to Native people adopting bourgeois, and developing formal alliances. Support from traders could be

⁷⁴ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Monday, 16 February 1801, 23.

⁷⁵ George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, 25-26 or 209-10; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, fall 1803, 53-4; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Saturday, 3 September 1808, 114.

⁷⁶ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 30 November 1815 - 13 January, (parts of the journal in code), Thursday, 14 December 1815, 87.

⁷⁷ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbours' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC," Saturday, 11 February 1815, 8.

⁷⁸ "The Narrative of Peter Pond" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 55; and Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807; Simon Fraser to Mr. McDougall, Sturgeon Lake, 6 August 1806, 13-14.

extremely important to Native people, either symbolically or literally, and they vocally expressed their appreciation for Canadian "protection".⁷⁹ Native people frequently aided bourgeois, especially to cement trading ties and alliances.⁸⁰ Mention of Native people helping bourgeois rather than voyageurs is more frequent in the records probably because bourgeois recorded much more of their own experiences than those of their men. Their cooperation and trust could extend to asking for favors, such as bourgeois sending messages with Native people to voyageurs, and Native people warning traders against danger from other Natives.⁸¹

The middle grounds between Native people and voyageurs were built on personal encounters. Voyageurs' reputations with Native people often depended on their personality, courtesy and honesty. Natives could take a particular liking to a voyageur, based on his square dealing and fairness. For example, at Tête au Brochet in 1819, clerk George Nelson commented that "it is true La Roque [a voyageur] is a very Prudent man, respected & liked by the indians [Ojibwa] but Paradix is just the reverse."⁸² Conversely, some ignominious voyageurs were disliked, because they were considered liars, thieves or cheats. The Ojibwa trading at Tête au Brochet disliked voyageur Paradix so much that they refused to trade with

⁷⁹ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.7; Microfilm reel #4; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95 (typescript copy in NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640); Tuesday, 28 January 1794, 8; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 66; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807," August 1807 to June 1808; Tuesday, 30 April 1808 and Saturday, 15 May 1808, 33, 35.

⁸⁰ For a couple of examples see Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 88-100; and Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807; Simon Fraser to Mr. McDougall, Sturgeon Lake, 6 August 1806. 13-14.

⁸¹ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Tuesday, 13 February 1809, 19 (I added page numbers); and George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 29.

⁸² Toronto; OA; MU 842; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Thursday, 4 February 1819, 31. For another example see George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 39.

him and threatened to kill him. The Ojibwa became angry with all the traders and complained to Nelson that:

'it is the fault of that curly headed lying dog [Paradix]. He too forsooth, must play his man, menaces us, beat us, steals our things and calls us liars. We were a little drunk, even if we were sober it would have been the same. He is a dog, a liar and a thief, Larocque know it. Let him go away we will not see the dog.¹⁸³

This instance occurred during a time of heightened competition between fur trade companies. Traders' antics in attempting to secure Native trading partners may have made these Ojibwa dislike all traders and voyageurs. Nonetheless, these examples of voyageur reputations reveal instances of voyageurs becoming widely known by Native peoples, and gaining much experience in trading with them.

Conflict and Violence

The numerous incidents of conflict between voyageurs and Native peoples resulted from tension in meeting the racial "other" in a foreign land. Incidents of hostility also occurred frequently in contexts of heightened competition between fur trade companies. But conflict could also be seen as a sign of the process of forming a middle ground site. Attempts to forge shared meaning could lead to clashes, which were part of the process of forming middle grounds.

¹⁸³ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Thursday, 4 February 1819, 30-1; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake," (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Friday, 11 May 1821, 15; and George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", 278-9.

Fear of the "other" was a common source of hostility among recent arrivals to the interior. Understandably, voyageurs were very far away from home and in new physical and social landscapes. They had to abide by Native rules to survive. In some cases this initial fear did not dissipate with experience in the interior. Recall at Tête au Brochet in 1819, one of the voyageurs named Vandalle was described by Nelson as "a peevish cowardly thing with the indians."⁸⁴

Being loyal servants to their masters could cause voyageurs to treat Native peoples unfairly or suspiciously. Voyageurs were often sent out to follow Native people to dissuade them from trading with other companies, a tactic which impeded more than encouraged successful trade. In one case, at Cross Lake in 1805, two voyageurs helped their bourgeois change the directional markers left by Native people for the HBC, so that the HBC could find them to trade. Later in the season the voyageurs could not find the Native people, and complained that they did not leave markers.⁸⁵ Some Native people were afraid of French Canadians, and claimed that they were subject to "constant ill usage & beatings" if they traded with rival companies.⁸⁶ In other cases the reputation of Canadian traders as ruthless brutes discouraged Native people from trading with them.⁸⁷

Conflict or hostility between voyageurs and Native people could grow over time in

⁸⁴ Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Wednesday, 13 January 1819, 25.

⁸⁵ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 9; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Unidentified North West Company Wintering Partner, "Journal for 1805 & 6, Cross Lake"; Thursday, 24 September 1805 and Saturday, 4 January 1806, 6-7, 22.

⁸⁶ Winnipeg; HBCA; B.89/a/2; Microfilm reel #1M63; Peter Fidler, Ile à la Crosse Post Journal, 1810-11; 9, 15, and 23 June 1810, fos. 1-2, 4.

⁸⁷ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.27; Microfilm reel #13; Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward [all the letters are from W. Ferdinand Wentzel, Forks, McKenzie River], 1807-1824; 3 June 1822, n. p.

the context of increasing trade competition. Bourgeois Alexander Mackenzie described his voyageurs' relationship with the Beaver in the Athabasca District:

When the traders first appeared among these people, the Canadians were treated with the utmost hospitality and attention; but they have, by their subsequent conduct, taught the Natives to withdraw that respect from them, and sometimes to treat them with indignity.⁸⁸

What Mackenzie failed to mention was that the pressure placed on voyageurs to maximize fur profits led to the tension between voyageurs and Native peoples.

Voyageurs could see Native people through the eyes of the bourgeois, such as when they were granted extra responsibilities in trading, and the bourgeois closely counseled them on how to secure the most profit at the expense of Native people.⁸⁹ Bourgeois sometimes entrusted particular men with more control over profits by allowing them to determine the price of goods.⁹⁰ Voyageurs then treated Native people as impediments to success, especially when Native people refused to trade with them.⁹¹ In one incident, bourgeois Duncan Cameron described one voyageur whom he put in charge of a trading expedition:

his pride was very hurt by the Osnaburgh Chief, who would not Acknowledge him to be a great Man, and those Canadians whom we rise from an Inferior Station, to a higher One, are Just as Vain of being reckon'd great Men as the

⁸⁸ McKenzie, "A General History," 2 February 1793, 263.

⁸⁹ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.1; Microfilm reel #55; Duncan Cameron, "The Nipigon Country," with extracts from his journal in the Nipigon, 1804-5 (also found in OA, in photostat, MU 2198 Box 3, Item 3; and in triplicate typescript, MU 2200, Box 5, a-c); 60-1.

⁹⁰ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Saturday, 6 January 1798, 31.

⁹¹ Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Friday, 28 November 1800 and Monday, 1 December 1800, 5-6.

Indians themselves are, but very Seldom pursue the proper Manner to become Consequential, for Vanity, Selfishness, or Drunkenness, soon Spoils the most part of them, however.⁹²

This excerpt reflects how bourgeois often saw voyageurs through the same filter of bias that they viewed Native people, but beneath that surface the encounter between the voyageur and Native trading captain is visible. Either the respect or the subjugation of the Native trading captain was important to the voyageur. The former would indicate a closeness and mutuality, while the latter would indicate the absence of any kind of middle ground.

Most major disputes between Native people and traders were fomented by trading issues. Natives attempted to protect their position as major trading clients by preventing traders from moving inland to trade with other Native groups, especially those who were their enemies. For example, the Cree attempted to prevent the NWC from trading with the Slaveys in 1808.⁹³ Opposing companies could encourage Natives to attack the competition. Wentzel reported on the NWC's capture of HBC officer Colin Robertson near Great Slave Lake in spring 1819:

Several of our men informed that he had threatened to excite the Natives to Massacre the North West Companys Servants at Fort Chipewyan, and our men refused to do their duty unless he was apprehended & detained in Safe

⁹² Duncan Cameron, "The Nipigon Country," 60.

⁹³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: Sunday, 4 September 1808, 495. For other examples see Montreal; MRB; MC; C.20; Some Account of the Red River by John Macdonell, ca. 1797, 20-49; 26-27. Native peoples also vied with each other to become middlemen and control the trade. In the first quarter of the 18th century, Cree and Assiniboine assumed control of the trade out of York Factory until the companies began to move inland and make contact with interior peoples. See Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 53, 59, 61.

Custody.⁹⁴

Rumours of "Indian conspiracies" were recurrent. In 1808 George Nelson heard rumours of a plot by Native peoples to attack fur trade posts. This conspiracy might be linked to the spread into the north west of the nativistic teachings of the Shawnee Prophet, who counseled Native people to give up trade with Europeans and the use of their goods.⁹⁵ Yet rumours of Native conspiracies ranged from Crees and Sioux in 1810, Chipewyans and their neighbours in 1814, to Crees again in 1817.⁹⁶ It is hard to determine if the reported rumours were paranoia by the traders or had some basis. Native people might have been feeling the pressures of dwindling resources, and turned their anxiety into hostility against White traders.

On some occasions Natives directly threatened to attack trading posts.⁹⁷ The threats were followed through on some occasions, which to some extent validated the rumours and suspicions. In 1781 old Fort de Tremble, or Old Poplar Fort, on the Assiniboine River was attacked by a group of Cree. Alexander Henry the Younger recalls that "this unfortunate

⁹⁴ Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward [all the letters are from W. Ferdinand Wentzel, Forks, McKenzie River], 1807-1824; W. Ferdinand Wentzel to R. McKenzie, Athabasca Department, Great Slave Lake, 5 April 1819, 2.

⁹⁵ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Friday, 17 June 1808 and Monday, 1 August 1808, 41-2, 51-2; George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, June 1808, 16-18 or 200-2. Also see Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada*, 68, 85-8; and R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 39, 51.

⁹⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 1 April and 23 May 1810, 593, 599-600; Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 23 June 1817, 262; Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward [all the letters are from W. Ferdinand Wentzel, Forks, McKenzie River], 1807-1824; W.F. Wentzel to R. McKenzie, MacKenzie River Department, Great Bear Lake, 28 February 1814, 1.

⁹⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 23 September 1804, 251, and 2: 28 November 1809 and 22 January 1810, 573, 580; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 10 April 1805 and Saturday, 21 September 1805, 87-8, 97-8; Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, 59-61; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 28-9; and Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 17 and 20 October 1794, 36.

affair appeared to be the opening of a plan which the natives had in contemplation for the total destruction of Whites throughout the Interior of the New West Country." The attack took place early in the fall soon after the canoes had arrived when the men were still building. Eleven of the men hid themselves while the remaining ten defended themselves and drove off the Cree. Three of the Canadians and 30 of the Cree were killed in the battle. The post was immediately abandoned.⁹⁸ This example of hostility resulted from the height of competition between the NWC and XYC. Voyageurs had to bear the animosity caused by company rivalries.

Another impediment to smooth relations between the two groups was voyageurs' lack of experience of living in the interior. Native people were often annoyed with voyageur ignorance, especially if they scared away fish and game that Natives were trying to hunt, or if they broke taboos and offended animal spirits.⁹⁹ Refusing to share food with Native peoples during times of scarcity violated Native social ethics. On one occasion some voyageurs refused to share their large supply of provisions with some Native people in need, and even preferred to feed their dogs very well before sharing even a bite with the Native people.¹⁰⁰ This behaviour violated the social rules of "Indian Country," where everyone expected that

⁹⁸ Barry M. Gough, ed., *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1988), 1: 196-7; Montreal; MRB; MC; C.5; Microfilm reel #5, abridged version on Microfilm reel #6; Alexander Henry the Younger, travels in the Red River Department, 1806; Friday, 11 July 1806, 3; and John Macdonnell's "The Red River," in *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818; The narratives of John Macdonnell, David Thompson, François-Antoine Larocque, and Charles McKenzie*, edited by W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 82.

⁹⁹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 85; and George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", 283-4, describes a case where natives were displeased at voyageurs for killing and eating a bear.

¹⁰⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 17 April 1821, 1-2.

food would be shared among all allies.¹⁰¹ Traders' misunderstandings about the social ethic of sharing led to their widespread fear that Native people would steal their goods and furs.¹⁰²

Ironically, fear of pillaging often motivated bourgeois and voyageurs to trade fairly and generously with Native people, who in return often promised fair dealing.¹⁰³ In more cases, however, the fear of pillaging led to poor relations, mistrust and unfair trading, which resulted in actual pillaging by Native people. They stole both trade goods and equipment from the bourgeois and the individual property of the voyageurs.¹⁰⁴ Bruce White has found that pillaging was an important economic strategy for both Native people and traders. Pillaging or its threat by Native people encouraged traders to be fair and honest; at the same time traders frequently pillaged Native people of their furs to prevent them from ending up in the hands of the competition. In any case, incidence of pillaging represented the breakdown of the social cohesion which best encouraged profitable trade.¹⁰⁵

As formal allies, traders took on the networks of friends and enemies of Native

¹⁰¹ Bruce M. White, "A Skilled game of Exchange: Ojibwa Fur Trade Protocol," *Minnesota History*, vol. 50, no. 6 (summer 1987): 229-40.

¹⁰² Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95; Saturday, 2 May, 1795, 33; Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 74-87; and Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797," December 1797, 24.

¹⁰³ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797," Friday, 1 December 1797, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Sunday, 30 June 1822; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, August 1803, 39; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Monday, 1 September 1800, 75 and 2: 27 January 1810, 10-11 February 1810, 582, 584; and Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Friday, 20 February 1801, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Bruce M. White, "The Fear of Pillaging: Economic Folktales of the Great Lakes Fur Trade," in *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991*, edited by Jennifer S.H. Brown, W.J. Eccles, and Donald P. Heldman, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 199-216.

groups with whom they traded. For example, extensive trade with Algonquians on the interior plains led bourgeois and voyageurs to hate and fear the Sioux, who were enemies of the Algonquians.¹⁰⁶ In the summer of 1810 at the Pembina River, a large party of Sioux visited the traders' establishment. They did not molest the fort inhabitants, but were annoyed that the traders stayed behind the palisades. George Nelson recounts that "one night they observed the Sioux in large numbers around the fort and concluded they would certainly be attacked tho they had hitherto only suffered annoyance and fear, and they prepared for the worst; whoops were heard and death song." The Sioux probably wanted to simply intimidate the traders, as they could have attacked the post at any time, and their subsequent battle with the Ojibwa and Cree did not involve the traders.¹⁰⁷

More peaceable relations between Native peoples and traders were established when trading alliances were secured. Once harmony occurred on an official and diplomatic level, voyageurs and Native peoples began to develop personal ties. Violence was certainly a part of the middle grounds, but it did not always threaten its cohesion. Conflict served to create a system of "rough justice" between Native people and voyageurs in the northwest, which reflected shared ideas about socially acceptable behaviour in the northwest. One voyageur feared that the Native people would kill him because of his brutal behaviour, recognizing that

¹⁰⁶ George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 32-37; George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", describing the Lake Winnipeg district in 1812, written as a reminiscence, 286-8; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 6-7, 9-12, 23, 29 September and 2 October 1800, 85-6, 90-3, 95, 102, 107-9; and David Thompson's Journal, November 1797, travelling among Mandan-Hidatsa, in *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, edited by W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, Saturday, 16 December 1797, 105.

¹⁰⁷George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", 286-8.

he broke the "social law" of the middle ground.¹⁰⁸ In other instances, Native people feared that traders would avenge their allies' or friends' deaths, and thus trod cautiously around them.¹⁰⁹ However, the middle ground allowed room for negotiation. In one interesting case two voyageurs met a party of thirteen Crees and three Assiniboines in winter 1810. The Native people pillaged the voyageurs' furs, snowshoes and guns. They seemed determined to kill one of the voyageurs, probably as revenge on some previous injustice or feud. They had wanted the scalp of the bourgeois Alexander Henry the Younger, but settled for that of voyageur Clément. The other voyageur Cardinal, "who is a most loquacious person, was exercised to the utmost of his ability, and by his fluency of speech [and by giving the Natives his pistol] saved the life of Clément."¹¹⁰ These instances reveal that voyageurs and Native people could become closely involved in each other's affairs. On occasion, voyageurs could become involved in Native-Native disputes, or internal Native community justice. In one case clerk George Nelson and some of his voyageurs tried to intervene in a case where a Native man was physically assaulting his wife.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Voyageur Paradix was neither liked nor respected by the Natives, but Nelson provides no clues as to his brutal behaviour towards the Natives. *Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Thursday, 4 February 1819 and Tuesday, 23 February 1819, 31, 33.*

¹⁰⁹ James Mackenzie's *Journal, 1799-1800*, in *Les Bourgeois*, edited by L.R.F. Masson, 2: Monday, 17 February 1800, 387 (this page missing from the original journal in Montreal; MRB; MC; C.13; James Mackenzie's *Journal, 1799-1800*).

¹¹⁰ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 26 February 1810, 589-90.

¹¹¹ *George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 76-7; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake" (notes taken from a translation made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 10 April 1821, Saturday, 21 April 1821, and Wednesday, 25 April 1821, 2-9.*

Revenge killing constituted one aspect to the rough justice of the middle grounds.¹¹² Even though it perpetuated cycles of violence which helped to enforce permanent suspicion and mistrust between traders and Native people, it also represented personal connections and shared ideas of justice. In 1779-80 at Eagle Hill fort (Old Fort of Montagne D'aigle) a French Canadian trader poisoned a "troublesome" Native with laudanum. In the ensuing fray, both sides suffered several casualties. The traders were forced to abandon the post to avoid the wrath of the Cree who subsequently pillaged the post.¹¹³ In another example, Lord Selkirk describes one of these cycles, which started in 1802 on Pike River, near Lake Superior. Three Canadians running the post were murdered by some Native people, one of whom had helped them the preceding season. They then pillaged the post. In the following year, the NWC and a competing company set up posts on that location. A "bataillier" or bully from each of the posts murdered a Native suspect and her husband, even though the husband had saved one of the voyageurs' lives on a previous occasion.¹¹⁴ Most of the cycles of violence, however, did not lead to such significant rifts in trading relationships.

Concluding Remarks

Native peoples in the *pays d'en haut* had a significant impact on voyageur culture.

¹¹² George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Monday, 24 June 1822; and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Friday, 5 February 1819, 31.

¹¹³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 9 September 1808, 499. Further detail is provided by Barry Gough, *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1992), 2: 361, note 38.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, *A Sketch of the British Fur Trade in North America; with Observations Relative to the North-West Company of Montreal*, 2nd edition, (London: James Ridgway, 1816), 48-50.

Voyageurs encountered Native peoples most often as trading clients at interior posts, and were sent to trade in Native communities *en dérrouine*, and live at Native lodges. "Boarding" with Native peoples led to an intimacy between voyageurs and Native peoples which was greater than the ties between the bourgeois and Native peoples. In these settings, voyageurs often formed close friendships and kin ties with Native families, and thus created conduits for cultural exchange. Voyageurs adopted much of their material customs, such as technology and food. They were also influenced by Native values, such as the ethic of sharing. Yet despite individual relationships with Native peoples, as fellow workers, neighbours, friends, and wives, the "conduits" for cultural exchange were never straightforward. The "myth of the Savage" continued as a dominant influence, especially among newly arrived voyageurs. Conflict between voyageurs and Native peoples often came from tension in meeting the racial/ cultural "other". Competition among fur trade companies, and pressures on voyageurs to be loyal servants also led to hostility among voyageurs and Native peoples. But conflict also became a part of the process of forming middle grounds. Efforts to establish intimate relations could be fraught with rocky relations, and common ideas of justice emerged from these incidents. Shared meaning in the middle grounds were best developed in intimate relations, especially between voyageurs and Native women, which is explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Tender Ties, Fluid Monogamy and Trading Sex:

Voyageurs and Native Women

When traders met Native peoples in the interior, their own gender ideologies and the gender differences among Native peoples led them to develop distinct intimate relationships with Native women, separate from those with Native men. These relationships spanned a wide range of configurations. Voyageurs encountered Native women travelling along canoe routes, during trading ceremonies and while seeking provisions and directions. Porkeaters had time for only brief encounters with Native women because they spent little time in the interior. Seasoned Northmen who lived their whole lives in the interior could develop very stable, long term relationships with Native women. Between these two extremes lay the most common experience: Northmen who only spent a few years in the trade developed short term and fluid relationships with Native women. Once voyageurs were posted in the interior, they very often developed monogamous relationships with Native women who lived near their post. When voyageurs were sent out to live with Native families in hunting lodges or trade with them *en dérrouine*, they met Native women outside of the social confines of the post or the watchful eyes of the bourgeois. But these relationships were suspended or ended when the women's hunting groups moved away, or when voyageurs were re-posted to a different location, or retired from the service and returned to the St. Lawrence valley. This "fluid monogamy" was the most common union between voyageurs and the Native women they met in the *pays d'en haut*. Unlike "serial monogamy," where unions were well-defined and lasted

for distinct periods of time, the term “fluid monogamy” captures more configurations of unions, which could be intermittent and very short term, but nonetheless serious.

Earlier work on fur trade society has revealed stable marriages between Native women and officers of fur trade companies.¹ Similar patterns can be found among voyageurs. The existence of a substantial métis population, fur trade company policies regarding the country wives and children of voyageurs, judicial evidence, and the writings of the fur trade literate all point to the existence of relationships between Native women and voyageurs. Yet relationships between voyageurs and Native women were more fluid than unions between masters and Native women. Voyageurs’ greater mobility and less wealth and power than bourgeois and clerks made their relationships with Native women more temporary and intermittent.

Sexuality played a central role in encounters between Native women and traders. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to assess traders’ encounters with Native peoples of the north west interior as part of a process of Euro-Canadian sexual self-fashioning, and to untangle the projections of Euro-Canadian desire contained in the discourse of Native promiscuity. Instead, this chapter seeks to show how sexual desire made up a large part of the encounters between voyageurs and Native women, and became a site of cultural hybridity, as voyageurs and Native women forged sexual connections. Sex infused trading ceremonies. This was both a symbolic and practical way to establish kinship ties and alliances between trading partners, but sex in trading ceremonies became highly ritualized, and took on a

¹ See especially Sylvia Van Kirk, *‘Many Tender Ties’: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*, (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980) and Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980).

significance in and of itself. Sex also came to be seen as a trading commodity by Native peoples, and slowly the ritualized offering of sex in trading ceremonies made room for the development of a trade in sex. This was not a wholly new practice among some Native groups, but it became more common and entrenched with the coming of Whites.

Gender Roles in French Canada and the North West

The relationship between voyageurs and Native peoples was strongly influenced by gender. The categories of "male" and "female" were well-defined within French Canada. In Native cultures, work, diplomacy, social organization, and family arrangements were divided along gender lines. Yet, ideas about the status of women and the range of power within gender categories differed between French Canadians and Native peoples. In forming unions, voyageurs and Native women fashioned cross-cultural understandings and practices, such as the well-known *mariage à la façon du pays*, which was a hybridized marital union, mixing both settler and Native elements in wedding ceremonies.

Like other parts of early modern Europe, French Canada was informed by a system of patriarchy, where women were ruled by men, especially within the institution of the family.² This organization of power affected social systems, such as divisions of labour, as well as individual identities. In New France the institution of marriage was more pervasive than in France and the rest of western Europe. Historian John Bosher has shown that virtually everyone outside the clergy married, and widows and widowers remarried soon after their

² For a few broad overviews of gender in Europe see Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 38, 47-8; and Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 101-279.

spouse died.³ Did this lead to a society dominated to a greater extent by patriarchy? Jan Noel has argued to the contrary, asserting that women in New France enjoyed an unusually privileged position with access to superior education and roles in leadership and commerce. Most colonists migrated from France at a time when gender roles were not as rigid as they later became. In the early years of the colony, the low numbers of women made them highly valued and respected. The women often took advantage of their unique demographic situation by choosing husbands carefully and asserting rights to work and own property. By the 18th century, men's frequent absences due to involvement in warfare and the fur trade gave women more power and greater economic opportunities than they had in Europe.⁴ Allan Greer cautions, however, that the variety of women's experiences makes it hard to talk of a universal position of women. Noble women and religious women probably had the most power, habitant women had significant independence, while servant women were the most subjugated. Yet all were subject to men.⁵

Although most Native societies had clearly defined roles for men and women, they did not create the same kind of prescriptions for gendered behaviour that existed in European and settler colonies, and, most importantly, they did not live in a system of omnipresent patriarchy. A common reaction of fur traders to Native societies was shock at how hard Native women worked, and an assumption that Native women were treated as "beasts of

³ John Boshier, "The Family in New France," in *In Search of the Visible Past*, edited by Barry Gough, (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1991), 1-13.

⁴ Jan Noel, "New France: Les femmes favorisées," in *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History, Volume Two*, edited by Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 18-40.

⁵ Allan Greer, *The People of New France*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 60-4.

burden" by Native men, and forced to do hard labour.⁶ Historian David Smits suggests that Europeans cast Native women as "squaw drudges" to signify Native savagery, and thus help justify colonization.⁷ The "squaw drudge" stereotype probably reflected Euro-Canadians' discomfort with women whose working roles seemed to overlap with what they believed to be men's domain. The stereotype can be read as an indication of women's importance within Native societies and in the fur trade. Priscilla Buffalohead sagaciously warns scholars that although "some observers began to fashion an image of [Native] women as burden bearers, drudges, and virtual slaves to men, doing much of the work but being barred from participation in the seemingly more important and flamboyant world of male hunters, chiefs, and warriors," their portrait of Native women "was based upon the premise that women should be shown deference precisely because they were biological and intellectual inferiors of men." European observers thus "failed to comprehend the full range of women's economic roles, the extent to which Ojibway women managed and directed their own activities, and perhaps more importantly, the extent to which women held ownership and distribution rights to the things they produced and processed."⁸

⁶ Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1929), 10 October 1794, 33-4; and Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room (hereafter MRL; BR); S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, 9.

⁷ David Smits, "The 'Squaw Drudge': A Prime Index of Savagism," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1982), 281-306; Katherine M. Weist, "Beasts of Burden and Menial Slaves: Nineteenth Century Observations of Northern Plains Indian Women," in *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*, edited by Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, 29-107, (Washington: University Press of America, 1983); and Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 17-19.

⁸ Priscilla K. Buffalohead, "Farmers, Warriors, Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women," *Minnesota History*, vol. 48, no. 5 (Spring 1983, 236-44), 237-8. Also see Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 127-9.

Voyageurs probably did not see Native women as beasts of burden in the same way as the literate of the trade. They had come from farms where all family members worked side by side. They would have closely identified with the clear division of labour based on gender roles within Native cultures. Both men and women contributed to the formation of a household, and women inherited their husband's property. Men cleared land and worked in the fields, while women cared for domestic animals, and took care of the home and children. In some ways, this division of labour could be seen as egalitarian, even though French Canadian society was strongly patriarchal. Legally men were the heads of the household during their lifetime. But beyond the legal strictures, patriarchy was, as Allan Greer explains, "a pattern of thinking and acting that had, over the centuries, entered into the customs and into the very languages of Europe, structuring relationships and shaping personal identities."⁹ No doubt voyageurs attempted to rule their Native wives. Their efforts would have been doubly ineffective, not only because of Native women's unfamiliarity with European-styled patriarchal rule, but because voyageurs were often dependent on their Native wives for survival in the north west.

Voyageurs and Native women managed to find or create points of conjuncture or common ground in their ideas about marriage, sex, relationships, romance and gender roles. These points of conjuncture which emerged in their relationships included sexual rituals in trade, trade in sexual services, *mariage à la façon du pays*, and fluid monogamy.

⁹ Greer, *The People of New France*, 61, 64-70; and Jan Noel, *Women in New France*, (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, Historical Booklet No. 59, 1998), 17-19.

Perspectives of Passion in Middle Grounds

In order to catch glimpses of the personal sentiment between voyageurs and Native women, we must start with attitudes of the fur trade literate and sketch out the refractions of the Bourgeois Gaze. Not surprisingly, the bourgeois and clerks had contradictory and often uncomfortable attitudes about unions with Native women. George Nelson, though not by any stretch a typical voice of the bourgeois, provides some interesting clues. When he arrived to run the post at Rivière Dauphin in 1808, Natives in the area were pressuring him to marry one of the young Native women. He was adamantly adverse to "connexions of that sort," considering them to be adulterous and immoral, and worrying about what his peers, parents and God would think. He thought that those who married Native women did so to "serve craving lust," and when it suited them they cast off their families "to linger in want and wretchedness." Yet, he succumbed to pressure: "I was not, however, better than my neighbours; the Sex had charms for me as it had for others; But There always remained a sting, that time only wore away. I gave way, & went as the ox to the Slaughter."¹⁰ The choice of a neutered animal as a metaphor highlights Nelson's discomfort with having relations with Native women, yet it also reflects an attitude to marriage as a conquering of men. Perhaps he felt that Native women "ensnared" White men in their traps. Other traders wrote of marriage to Native women as if it was a matter of course. In describing the Spokanes Ross Cox wrote:

Their women are great slaves, and most submissive to marital authority. They did not exhibit the same indifference to the superior comforts of a white man's

¹⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, 22-3/206-7.

wife as that displayed by the Flat-head women, and some of them consequently become partners of the *voyageurs*.¹¹

Cox thus did not view marriage as the diminishment of men's freedom or masculinity. Connections between traders and Native women was a common phenomenon, and the fur trade literate described these connections according to their own preoccupations with desire and its repression. These preoccupations cast a hue on the unions between voyageurs and Native women which could range from disgust at sexual promiscuity, to sympathy for voyageurs "caught in a trap," to indifference. Fortunately some fur trade literate took more than a passing interest in connections between voyageurs and Native women, and provided detailed descriptions.

Affection and love seemed to exist in many unions of voyageurs and Native women. In the Columbia Alexander Ross wrote of all traders that "the tenderness existing between [Native wives] and their husbands presents one great reason for that attachment which the respective classes of Whites cherish for the Indian countries."¹² Alexander Henry the Younger wrote about one voyageur who volunteered to work for free, as long he was allowed to marry his beloved, and the company provide for their room and board. Henry commented that he had seen this "foolish" behaviour before among voyageurs, who "would not hesitate to sign an agreement of perpetual bondage on condition of being permitted to have a woman who struck their fancy."¹³ James McKenzie was equally derisive about one of his voyageurs who

¹¹ Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 231.

¹² Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West; A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 1: 296.

¹³ Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: 26 November 1802, 206.

was clearly devoted to his family:

Lambert went with his Bona Roba to gather Moss for their Son, the fruits of their Love and darling of their Lives.... Soon after He arrived with a Huge Load of Moss on his back while Madame walked slowly behind carrying nothing but her little Snarling brats-¹⁴

Many voyageurs cared deeply for their Native mates, and demonstrated their devotion through gifts. Voyageurs often went into considerable debt to buy "finery" for their Native wives and on one occasion a couple of men stole flour and sugar from company provisions in order to "feast their women."¹⁵

The writings of the fur trade literate also portray an image of the hyper-sexualized Jean-Baptiste, or a North American Don Juan, like the elderly voyageur who had twelve wives. Not only was the acquisition of wives important, but so was the way voyageurs treated them. The elderly voyageur bragged to Ross that all his wives had been as well dressed as the wives of a bourgeois. Providing expensive gifts to as many wives as possible was a sign of wealth, and signified skill, strength and endurance, qualities of the hyper-masculine voyageur. This seems to run counter to the ethic of nonaccumulation among the voyageurs, but spending money on clothing, jewelry, and good food for one's wife was a way to be lavish without the burden of amassing possessions that were difficult to transport. Bourgeois remarked upon how loyal and chivalrous voyageurs could be to their wives and lovers.

¹⁴ Montreal; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB); Masson Collection (hereafter MC); C.13; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Monday 18 November 1799, 4 (I added page numbers).

¹⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 6 August 1800, 25 and Winnipeg; Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA); B.42/a/136a, Microfilm reel # 1M34, Fort Churchill Post Journal, 1810-1811, author not listed, fo. 19.

Although they complained that voyageurs stole provisions and engaged in freetrading to provide extra rations for their wives,¹⁶ they also admired voyageur gallantry towards Native women. While serving in the War of 1812, many voyageur soldiers sneaked off at night to sleep with their wives.¹⁷ In one recorded instance, a couple of voyageurs chased some Native men in the middle of winter to retrieve their kidnapped wives, risking death from the cold and from armed and angry Native men.¹⁸

Concepts of love and devotion certainly existed in Native cultures. Yet, the bourgeois often expressed surprise at the degree to which Native women were attached to their Native husbands when they seemed to be treated no better than slaves.¹⁹ Bourgeois Duncan McGillivray speculated that Native women were treated so "barbarously" in the north west that they could not be expected to have deep sentiment towards their husbands, Native or French Canadian.²⁰ Native women's voices are faint in fur trade documents and we can catch only a few glimpses of their attitudes. George Nelson wrote of some women near Portage La

¹⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 6 August 1800, 25 and Montreal; MRB; MC, C.26, Microfilm reel #15, John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1", Sunday, 22 February 1801, 26. One voyageur tried to blackmail Ross into giving him a horse to pay for a bride, Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River: Being a Narrative of the Expedition Fitted Out by John Jacob Astor, to Establish the 'Pacific Fur Company' With an Account of Some Indian Tribes on the Coast of the Pacific*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966, originally published London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1849), 200-1.

¹⁷ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 308.

¹⁸ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13, George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 72.

¹⁹ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 128; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Appendix B, *Public Archives Report for 1929*, 109-45, (transcript from a copy at University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Collection, Pacific Coast Mss., Series C, No. 16; copy also at National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, Vol. 4; originals at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Wednesday and Friday, 16 and 18 April 1806, 110-11.

²⁰ Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 8 March 1795, 60-1.

Prairie who complained to the traders that they were poorly treated by their own people, and hinted that they would like to join up with the traders.²¹ This may have been an economic strategy on the part of the women, or the band, to improve their circumstances and form valuable ties.²² Native women used traders to gain power with their husbands or communities, and generally did not hesitate to pursue traders that they desired for whatever the reason.²³

Native men had varying attitudes to unions between their wives and daughters and fur traders. As was common among many interior Native groups, marriages between tribes were encouraged as a way to cement diplomatic and trading relationships. Economic relations were based on actual or potential kinship links, and the establishment of marital ties with White traders was a natural strategy.²⁴ Native fathers hoped both for trading advantages and a lasting commitment to their families. Thus, Natives frequently encouraged and even insisted that bourgeois, clerks and voyageurs marry one of their women. Sexual liaisons and marital unions were expected as part of the ceremonies assuring a stable trading relationship.

Some Native men were opposed to sexual unions between Native women and fur traders. George Nelson recorded the opinion of one Ojibwa man who disapproved of his daughter's dealings with traders. He called her dirty and lazy because she liked the company of men too much:

²¹ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Tuesday, 8 December 1807, 12.

²² Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 29 August 1800 and 1, 2 and 30 January 1801, 71-3, 163, 169.

²³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 186-8.

²⁴ Jennifer S. H. Brown, "Fur Trade as Centrifuge: Family Dispersal and Offspring Identity in Two Company Contexts," in *North American Indian Anthropology: Essays on Society and Culture*, edited by Raymond J. DeMallie and Alfonso Ortiz, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 206.

she is only good for white men, because with them she will have only snow shoes and moccasins to make, and can have as much of man as she desires; she is only good for the whites; they take women not as wives but only to use as sluts, to satisfy the animal lust, and when they are satisfied they cast them off, and another one takes her for the same purpose and casts her off again, and so she will go on until she becomes an old [woman] soiled by every one who chooses to use her[.] She is foolish, she has no understanding, no sense, no shame, she is only good to be a slut (bitch) for the white. I wish she would leave me.²⁵

Native men sometimes came to resent the relationships between Native women and the foreign traders. One voyageur named Joseph Constant was resented by many Cree and Ojibwa because of his "lavishness among the women."²⁶ Alexander Mackenzie found that the Beaver Natives in the Athabasca district abhorred "any carnal communication between their women and the white people."²⁷ Some Native men were particularly jealous of any connections between their wives and traders, and in one case a Snake murdered his wife

²⁵ George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, 41/225.

²⁶ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake," (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Friday, 11 May 1821, 15.

²⁷ Alexander Mackenzie, Esq., *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 2 February 1793, 263.

because she was having an affair with a trader.²⁸ George Nelson recorded that a Native woman could eventually be ruined by a series of alliances with Canadian traders, to the point where her own people rejected her.²⁹ These examples are specific cases, however, and do not represent the common pattern of relations between traders and Native peoples. Generally Native men encouraged unions between Native women and traders as a means of securing alliances.

Native Women in the Fur Trade

The faintness of Native women's voices in the writings of literate fur traders has been amplified through the work of feminist historians in the 1970s. Sylvia Van Kirk's *'Many Tender Ties'* outlines how Native women became integral to European traders as marriage partners because of country skills and trading connections. Jennifer S. H. Brown's *Strangers in Blood*, published in the same year, looks at women's roles in the formation of fur trade families. Also completed in 1980, Jacqueline Peterson's doctoral dissertation "The People In Between" explores fur trade families and the ethnogenesis of the Métis around the Great Lakes.³⁰ These historians were able to sift through the writings of the male fur trade officers to uncover actions of Native women. Anthropologists and, in more recent years, historians

²⁸ "Journal of an Excursion of Discovery to the Rocky Mountains by Mr. Larocque in the Year 1805 from the 2d of June to the 18th of October," W. Raymond Wood and Thomas T. Thiessen, eds., *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818; The narratives of John Macdonell, David Thompson, François-Antoine Larocque, and Charles McKenzie*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), Monday, 19 August 1805, 184. For another example see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 29 August 1800, 71.

²⁹ Cited in Brown, "Fur Trade as Centrifuge," 208-9.

³⁰ Van Kirk, *'Many Tender Ties'*; Brown, *Strangers in Blood*; and Jacqueline Louise Peterson, "The People In Between: Indian-White Marriage and the Genesis of a Métis Society and Culture in the Great lakes Region, 1680-1830," Ph.D. Thesis, (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1980).

have tried to explore the history of Native women independent of their relationship to fur trade officers and literate explorers, missionaries and colonizers. Native women's economic roles and political status within Native communities are subjects of great debate, as well as the question of whether Native societies were organized around patriarchy or whether equality existed between men and women.³¹ Many scholars agree that though not all Native societies were egalitarian before contact, "relative equality" existed between men and women, and that degrees of equality could vary. Contact with European traders, missionaries and settlers led to or intensified the subordination of women.³² Understanding Native women in their own cultural context is crucial to exploring how they interacted with Euro-Canadian traders. Unfortunately the paucity of sources has inhibited scholars to a large degree.

Although the writings of bourgeois either neglect Native women, or portray them in subordinate positions, they reveal that Native women participated in the fur trade in key ways, such as processing meat and furs to prepare them for trade, and hunting and trapping small animals which were included in the fur and provisions trade. Like Native men, Native

³¹ Ruth Landes, *The Ojibwa Woman*, (New York: AMS Press, 1969, first published 1938, Columbia University Press); Eleanor Leacock, "Montagnais Women and the Jesuit Program for Colonization," in *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, (New York: Praeger, 1980); Eleanor Leacock, "Women in Egalitarian Societies," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, edited by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 11-35; Karen Anderson, *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Women in Seventeenth-Century New France*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Martha Harroun Foster, "Of Baggage and Bondage: Gender and Status among Hidatsa and Crow Women," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1993), 121-52.

³² For overviews see Nancy Bonville, "Gender Relations in Native North America," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 13, no. 2, (1989), 1-28; Sylvia Van Kirk, "Towards a Feminist Perspective in Native History," *OISE Occasional Paper*; and Nancy Shoemaker, ed. *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), "Introduction," 2-7.

women came to fur trade posts to trade furs and provisions.³³ Some Native women were quite astute traders, such as the White captive John Tanner's adoptive Ojibwa mother, Net-no-kwa. Net-no-kwa received large annual presents from traders, such a ten-gallon keg of spirits and a chief's dress and ornaments, presents that were usually reserved for the most influential and productive hunters.³⁴ When traveling across Grand Portage one summer Net-no-kwa was determined to preserve her furs for the best prices. She did not use the traders' road to cross the portage, to prevent the traders from stealing her cargo. She resisted the traders' cajoling, gifts and even threats to convince her to trade with them. She would only consent to trade when offered the prices she wanted for her furs. Her actions demonstrate agency and adeptness in dealing with the traders.³⁵ It is hard to know if Net-no-kwa was an exception among Ojibwa women; traders may have given her more respect because of her acuity and reputation, and perhaps because she was an elder.³⁶ Jacqueline Peterson asserts that among Great Lakes peoples, social models existed of female hunters, warriors, celibates, prostitutes and medicine women. Although these women were numerically uncommon, they were regarded with deference and respect, as their powers were thought to come from "other-than-

³³ Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 1; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Tuesday, 24 October 1797, Sunday, 7 January 1798, and Wednesday, 21 February 1798, 15, 32, 44; Toronto; Ontario Archives (hereafter OA); MU 842; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; 18 October 1818, 7; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1965), Thursday 18 April 1805, 237.

³⁴ John Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner During Thirty Years Residence Among the Indians in the Interior of North America*, (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1956, first published 1830), 86; Laura Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780 to 1879*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994), 36.

³⁵ Unfortunately in this instance Net-no-kwa decided to follow her son in joining another group of Natives and thus needed to be free of her cargo. She sold her furs quickly at a loss. Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity*, 51-2.

³⁶ Peers suggests age was one of the sources of Net-no-kwa's authority. Peers, *The Ojibwa*, 57.

humans” and spirits.³⁷ Priscilla Buffalohead describes gender differences in work roles among the Great Lakes Ojibwa, arguing that although normative gender ideology prescribed that men hunted and traded while women processed meat and furs from the hunt, on occasion women directly participated in the trade. She asserts that Ojibwa women probably had "ownership" rights to goods, and could thus trade as did men, and that flexibility and the complementary nature of Ojibwa gender roles allowed women to participate in activities usually assigned to men.³⁸ Carol Cooper has found among the Nishga and Tlingit (who were matriarchal societies) on the Pacific coast, that some women participated in the fur trade, and became intermediaries between the European trading companies and their tribes. One Nishga woman named Neshaki in the Nass River valley became an important trader, employed by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) to attract Native traders to their posts, and became the wife of HBC officer Captain William McNeill.³⁹

Despite the incidence of Native women acting as independent traders, fur trade bourgeois and clerks tended to treat women differently from Native men, trivializing them as trading partners. George Nelson reports providing one of his voyageurs with high wines and tobacco to give to Native men and "several things of no value" to trade with the Native women.⁴⁰ Voyageurs probably also treated female traders differently because of the intense

³⁷ Peterson, "The People in Between," 60-4.

³⁸ Buffalohead, "Farmers, Warriors, Traders," 238, 240-1.

³⁹ Carol Cooper, "Native Women of the Northern Pacific Coast: An Historical Perspective, 1830-1900," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 27, 4 (Winter 1992-3), 44-75.

⁴⁰ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Friday, 20 November 1807, 9. When approaching a new group to establish trade, Pierre Esprit Radisson and Medard Chouart des Groseillers sometimes gave the Natives gender-specific gifts, which reflected European notions of gender rather than Native. Pierre Esprit Radisson, *The Voyages of Peter Esprit Radisson*, (Boston: The Prince Society, 1885), 199-200.

patriarchy and rigid gender divisions in French Canada. In her study of the Ojibwa around the Great Lakes, Carol Devens asserts that the fur trade disrupted Ojibwa gender roles because "French traders wanted the furs obtained by men rather than the small game, tools, utensils, or clothing procured by women," causing women to become "auxiliaries to the trading process" rather than "producers in their own right."⁴¹ Women trading furs was probably also under-reported by the bourgeois because of prejudices against involving women in the trade. However, despite the prejudice of the European and Canadian writers, Native women in many instances became important traders.⁴² Like Native men, Native women were also hired by the traders for short labour contracts. They worked as interpreters and guides.⁴³ The most famous example is probably Thanadelthur, who acted as an interpreter and important peace-maker for the HBC in the early 1700s.⁴⁴ Native women were also hired to dress skins and lace

⁴¹ Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 15-18. This argument was initially put forth by Eleanor Leacock.

⁴² Jo-Anne Fiske and Caroline Mufford, "Hard Times and Everything Like That: Carrier Women's Tales of Life on the Trapline," In *New Faces of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1995*, edited by Jo-Anne Fiske, Susan Sleeper-Smith and William Wicken, 13-29, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998); and Cooper, "Native Women of the Northern Pacific Coast."

⁴³ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.12; Microfilm reel #6; Charles MacKenzie, "Some Account of the Missouri Indians in the years 1804, 5, 6 & 7", addressed to Roderick McKenzie, 1809 (Photostat copies can be found in NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 59, Microfilm reel #C-15640 and OA, North West Company Collection (hereafter NWCC), MU2204, Vol. 3. A typescript can be found in OA, NWCC, MU2200 Box 5 - 4 (a)); 19; Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 65. Native husbands and wives often worked together as guides. See Toronto; OA; NWCC; MU 2199 (photostat of original); Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in Rivière Ouinipique", June to July 1784 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company", by Roderick MacKenzie, director of the North West Company; typescripts can be found also in OA; NWCC; MU 2200, Box 5, Nos. 2 (a), (b), and (c); photostats and typescripts can also be found in NAC; MC; Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640; MRB; MC; C.17; and the Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MHS); P1571); Tuesday 22 June 1784, and Saturday, 17 July 1784, 7, 21. Native women sometimes moved far beyond these roles to become diplomatic emissaries between traders and Natives, as did the Chipewyan woman Thanadelthur, Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 66-71.

⁴⁴ Sylvia Van Kirk, Thanadelthur," *The Beaver*, (Spring 1974): 40-5.

snowshoes, areas where they had famed expertise.⁴⁵

The value of Native women's skills placed them in a unique position in the fur trade: they often became the central figures in alliances between fur traders and their Native trading partners. Van Kirk and Brown have written extensively on the formation of long lasting and serious marriages and families in the fur trade that arose between Natives and fur trade partners and clerks. As Van Kirk has aptly demonstrated, Native women's economic skills became a powerful incentive for traders to pursue them as wives (as well as the complete absence of White women). Fur trade officers desired Native women as wives to help them survive the rigors of the north west, and profit in the fur trade. Native women played key economic and social roles in the emerging fur trade society, by teaching their husbands to live off the land, and by serving as diplomatic emissaries between the European and Native traders.⁴⁶

Sex in Trade and Trade in Sex

The fur trade was never simply a trade of furs for goods. At the very least it involved highly ritualized ceremonies and protocols with far-reaching political and social implications. Initial studies of fur trade history focussed on the economic substance of trade between Europeans and Native peoples, debating on the extent to which Native people were

⁴⁵ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.7; Microfilm reel #4; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95 (typescript copy in the NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640); Thursday, 27 February 1794, 10.

⁴⁶ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 5. Also see Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 81.

dependent on European goods.⁴⁷ Later scholars began to examine the ways in which Natives controlled the trade, and began to uncover the larger socio-cultural meanings of exchange, which could extend to arrangements such as marriage, ritual adoption, assistance in war, and participation in community ceremonies.⁴⁸ One area which has been neglected is the role played by sexual liaisons. Sexuality was central to intercultural relations in the fur trade and voyageurs were on the sexual front lines. Sexual liaisons between Native women and White men often ratified ceremonies of trade and subsequent diplomatic and kin alliances. This led to sex comprising part of the ritual of trading material goods. It also created opportunities for a trade in sex.

Sex in trade and trade in sex probably existed between different Native groups before the arrival of Euro-Canadian traders. Many scholars have found that wife-sharing was common between allies and trading partners. Ruth Landes attested that freedom of sexual expression among the Ojibwa was common, although her descriptions reflect the early 20th-century view of an association between licentiousness and "less civilized" peoples.⁴⁹ Yet more recent research supports the earlier contentions. Jennifer Brown comments that:

The Cree and Chipewyans urged both North Westers and Hudson's Bay men to accept women in the interests of friendship and alliance; but farther to the

⁴⁷ See for example E.E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation among the Indians of North America," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1960); and Arthur J. Ray and Donald Freeman, *'Give Us Good Measure': An Economic Analysis of Relations Between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company Before 1763*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

⁴⁸ For some examples see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Bruce M. White, "A Skilled game of Exchange: Ojibwa Fur Trade Protocol," *Minnesota History*, vol. 50, no. 6 (summer 1987): 229-40.; and Peers, *The Ojibwa*.

⁴⁹ Landes, *The Ojibwa Woman*, 119-20.

west among various Plains Indian groups, the North Westers frequently encountered societies that had for some time actively engaged in trafficking in women for profit. The pattern of selling female slaves to the Canadians, noted by Umfreville in 1790, went back at least to the 1730s and 1740s, in which period up to sixty Indian slaves a year had been sent to Montreal.⁵⁰

It seems that sexual relations with both captive and free women was considered a part of cementing trading alliances. Unfortunately most work on aboriginal sexual practice focuses either on gender roles and male/ female equality, or on berdaches, a category for sexual “deviances,” such as homosexuality, transexuality, and third sex roles.⁵¹ This neglects the seeming heterosexual hegemony, and the presumption of hetero-erotic desire which underlay reproduction and family structures. In most north western aboriginal cultures, social organization was dominated by heterosexual couples in stable marriages, but instances of polygamy existed. Marriages were fluid, divorce and remarriages were routine, and spouses took turns living with each others' families.⁵² Most Native societies did not seem to have the same kind of moral regulation of sexuality as did the Europeans. Adolescent sexual experimenting was encouraged in some cultures. Spousal sharing was common, but a strong

⁵⁰ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 88.

⁵¹ On berdaches see Harriet Whitehead, “The bow and the burden strap: A new look at institutionalized homosexuality in Native North America,” in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, 80-115, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Will Roscoe, “How to Become a Berdache: Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender Diversity,” in *Third Sex Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, edited by Gilbert Herdt, 329-72, (New York: Zone Books, 1994); Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Paula Gunn Allen, “Lesbians in American Indian Cultures,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin Baum Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr., 106-17, (New York: New American Library, 1989); and Charles Callender and Lee M. Kochems, “The North American Berdache,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1983).

⁵² Landes, *The Ojibwa Woman*, 119-20; Peers, *The Ojibwa*, 45.

distinction was made between open sharing and illicit affairs, which were not tolerated. Berdaches perhaps represented an openness to erotic desire and diverse conceptions of the body. However, the sexual category of berdaches might also have reinforced heterosexual hegemony by defining and containing "deviance".

A similar paucity of research exists for the study of sexual desire and practice in early French Canada. The Catholic Church was the main regulator of sexual practice, and nonmarital sex was officially prohibited (and thus clandestine). Men and women usually married at a young age, depending on the availability of land and resources to start new family economic units.⁵³ Multiplicities of sexual expression, such as auto-eroticism, sexual coercion and abuse, and sex with children and animals were deemed deviant and usually punished and contained by the Church. In addition, non-marital affairs and prostitution were not tolerated.⁵⁴ Thus the configurations of Native sexual practice must have appeared titillating to voyageurs entering the *pays d'en haut*. Sex was not confined to marriage, and greater varieties of sexual practice existed.

When traders first made contact with new groups of Natives, Native men frequently offered their wives or daughters to the traders who made first contact (usually masters, but sometimes voyageurs) for sexual relations as a means of cementing trading relationships.⁵⁵

⁵³ Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 50-1.

⁵⁴ Serge Gagnon, *Plaisir d'Amour et Crainte de Dieu: Sexualité et confession au Bas-Canada*, (Sainte-Foy, QC: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1990).

⁵⁵ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.5; Microfilm reel #5, abridged version on Microfilm reel #6; Alexander Henry the Younger, travels in the Red River Department, 1806; Wednesday and Saturday, 23 and 26 July 1806, 47, 70; Meriwether Lewis, *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clarke, to the Sources of the Missouri, Across the Rocky Mountains, Down the Columbia River to the Pacific in 1804-6*, 3 vols., (Reprint of the edition of 1814; Toronto: George N. Morang & Co.) 16 January 1805, 1: 215; and Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 93.

Natives were often surprised and insulted at the prudish refusals of fur trade masters. In March 1795 at Qu'Appelle, John MacDonell reports that the Native Grand Diable and his wife "were surprised and chagrined" at his refusal of Grand Diable's wife's "favour", "but the Lady much more so, and I thought it prudent to make her some trifling presents to pacify her."⁵⁶ McDonnell's concern over offending the Grand Diable's wife would imply that she was not simply her husband's token, but rather was an agent in the trading relationship and had to be treated with dignity. Native peoples often considered sexual relations to be part of building trade alliances. In the following month MacDonell commented that when he refused to trade for meat brought by two Assiniboines, one of them offered "the favours of his young wife & made use of strong arguments to convince me of the goodness of the lady in question- but to no purpose."⁵⁷ The bourgeois usually only recorded when sexual liaisons were offered to them, but no doubt the same held true for those voyageurs who initiated trading relationships. One wonders whether the voyageurs would have made the similar prudish refusals of participating in sexual relations during trading ceremonies. Euro-Canadian and Christian social prescriptions would have discouraged them from actively participating in the sexual rituals, but they did not have the same kind of preoccupations with sexual repression as did men of higher orders. Voyageurs may have happily complied with sexual obligations in establishing trading alliances.

Although the fur trade literate portray Native women as passive objects which were

⁵⁶ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95; Thursday, 26 March 1795, 29 and "Extracts From Mr John McDonnell's Journal (1793-1795)," in *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, edited by L.R.F. Masson, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, originally edited 1889-90), 2: 293.

⁵⁷ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Sunday, 5 April 1795, 30.

bartered by the Native men, we cannot assume that such was the case. Women likely negotiated the conditions of sexual liaisons, and had a unique role in building alliances through these sexual connections. Continued diplomatic and trading relationships were often accompanied by a prolonged sexual relationship which led to kinship ties. In this way women could become key arbiters of goodwill in the trade.

Contact between Native peoples and White traders often led to both informal and highly organized exchange of women's sexual services for trade goods. Van Kirk argues that the traders had a great deal of difficulty comprehending the custom of wife-sharing and corrupted Native generosity into "outright prostitution," and that Native men also exploited their women to "satisfy what appeared to be the Europeans' voracious sexual appetites."⁵⁸ This image hides the pervasiveness and normalcy of sexuality in the meeting of traders and Native peoples. White traders were probably incorporated into existing Native diplomatic and social patterns. Trading sex did not usually become Native women's full-time livelihood. Nor did those who offered sexual liaisons become a separate social category, with trading sex as a primary social identifier (such as the category of "prostitute" in European societies). Carol Cooper asserts that among the Native societies on the north west coast, Native women often used sex as a form of payment for trade goods (and not establishing kinship ties). This lowered the status of the Native women in the eyes of the White traders, but not within their own societies. Among north west coast societies there was no particular stigma attached to payment for sex, and adult women were free to determine their own sexual and reproductive lives. Cooper contends that "it is unlikely that many of the women who engaged in voluntary

⁵⁸ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 25-6.

sexual activities for payment considered themselves prostitutes by vocation, nor did their families regard them in this light.” Conversely, slave women were treated as commodities, and thus bought and sold, usually by men.⁵⁹

In the north west fur trade the trade in sex was fluid and usually determined by Native women. It represented one aspect in establishing middle grounds. These was not an easy feat, because sexuality was not understood in the same way between Whites and Native peoples, and attitudes to sexuality differed dramatically. Yet, sex was a social practice common to the two cultures, and became a social bridge, albeit often shaky.

It is hard to determine how sexual pleasure was conceptualized among Native groups. Women trading sex for goods could suggest that women were seen as either "owners" or "instruments" of male hetero-erotic pleasure. In the former case, women could use men's desire of them as a source of power. In the latter case, women would be objectified, and might come to think about themselves as commodities rather than agents. Some scholars have asserted that trading women instead of men as sexual partners may be explained by unbalanced sex ratios. There were often more women than men among Native societies, especially militaristic groups whose men were often killed in battle.⁶⁰ Women were offered to traders not only for alliances, but because they were plentiful and profitable. Wives came to be treated as commodities in some societies where polygamy was associated with wealth.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Cooper, "Native Women on the Northern Pacific Coast."

⁶⁰ See Alexander Henry the Younger's "Report of North West Population 1805" in *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814*, edited by Barry Gough, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1988), I: 188. He find a 2.25:1 ratio of Native women to Native men.

⁶¹ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 88. Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead assert that in "prestige societies" often the erotic pleasure, passion, and images of male and female bodies dissolves in the face of economics, rank, and male honour. Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, "Introduction: Accounting for

These explanations, however, deny Native women agency in participating in the sex trade of their own accord. Further ethnographic research is needed to reveal the specificities and divergences of attitudes to sex among different Native cultures. Moreover, although the literate of the fur trade did not mention any kind of sexual relations between voyageurs and Native men, we can not assume that everyone fit the heterosexual model.

The paucity of sources prevents us from measuring how common the trade in sex became around fur trade posts. The sources show that it was present along most of the fur trade routes, from the Ottawa River, all around the Great Lakes and into the interior.⁶² The bourgeois often remarked when a group of Natives did not trade the sexual services of women, as though it was unusual, which may indicate that the practice was widespread.⁶³

The trade in sex developed differently in local contexts. It could be informal or casual, with Native women individually offering sexual liaisons for goods. In many cases, lines of trade were blurred when Native men offered their wives and daughters as an integral part of a trading alliance and establishing kinship ties. In other contexts the sex trade was more explicit and structured. Some Native men controlled and marketed women, selling them either individually, as prostitutes for an entire fort, or as permanent partners. At Rocky Mountain House in 1810, Alexander Henry the Younger noted one day that Piegans set off, "having several customers for their ladies during the night."⁶⁴ The sex trade could also be

Sexual Meanings," in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, 13-25 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁶² Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 15 September 1817, 300.

⁶³ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.27; Microfilm reel #13; Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward [all the letters are from W. Ferdinand Wentzel, Forks, McKenzie River], 1807-1824; 27 March 1807, 13; and Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, summer 1812, 83.

⁶⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 1 November 1810, 660.

controlled by women, who traveled together in groups to posts offering their services. For example, when Meriwether Lewis reached the mouth of the Columbia River in November 1805 during his overland expedition, "an old woman who was the wife of a Chinook chief, came with six young women, her daughters and nieces, and having deliberately encamped near us, proceeded to cultivate an intimacy between our men and her fair wards."⁶⁵ The bourgeois sometimes tried to keep the practice under control by banning the women from the post. Four years later at Fort George, Alexander Henry the Younger became irritated with women selling sex, and refused to allow any of these women into the fort.⁶⁶ Prices for women are hard to determine. At the Pembina River post in 1804 Henry recorded that one of his voyageurs "gave an expensive mare for one single touch of a Slave girl."⁶⁷

The trade in sex often became a site of cultural misunderstanding between many different groups. Native men were often insulted at refusals of the bourgeois to accept the sexual services of their wives and daughters.⁶⁸ HBC officers criticized North Westers for exploiting Native women. In 1792 Samuel Hearne wrote that the Chipewyans complained that Canadian traders abducted Native women by force and sometimes attacked elderly and infirm parents to steal their daughters. Hearne was appalled that "such ... goings on in this Quarter ... [are] encouraged by their masters, who often stand as Pimps to procure women for

⁶⁵ Lewis, *History of the Expedition*, 2: 271.

⁶⁶ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 19 April 1814, 890-1.

⁶⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 12 January 1804, 235.

⁶⁸ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Thursday, 26 March 1795, 29 and Masson, ed., "Extracts From Mr John McDonnell's Journal (1793-1795), in *Les Bourgeois*, 293.

their men, all to get the mens wages from them."⁶⁹ Jennifer Brown suggests that women as items of trade could sometimes lead to:

turbulent bargaining between North Westers and Indians and between the bourgeois or wintering partners and their own engagés. These employees, generally of French-Canadian backgrounds, were accustomed to female companionship and often placed an explicit economic value on that privilege, particularly if they were in debt.⁷⁰

In times of high levels of competition between trading companies, bourgeois encouraged the sex trade because it established closer ties with Native communities. The bourgeois also tolerated their labourers trading for sex because they had difficulty enforcing behavioural regulations. As the fur trade flourished and posts became more widespread, populous and stable, the trade in sex perhaps grew to suit the new markets.

Much of the language of the fur trade literate portrayed Native women as economic commodities which were bought, sold and pillaged. In one case at Fort George in the 1790s, a Beaver River Native complained to the trader Duncan McGillivray that his wife had been "pillaged," insinuating that the traders were the culprits.⁷¹ Traders feared the same from Natives and freemen. While posted at Tête au Brochet and Moose Lake, clerk George Nelson commented that women were sometimes pillaged, yet his story implies the collusion of the

⁶⁹ J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), 446n, 449.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 83-4.

⁷¹ Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 23 October 1794, 37. For another example see Masson, *Les Bourgeois*, 2: Monday, 17 February 1800, 388 (page missing from the original James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800, MRB, MC, C.13).

women. He wrote that the sons of Old Lacorne were "all great bucks, I suppose they came sneaking about the house in hopes of finding some of our young women out and stealing them off- they can very easily do it, it is not but once that such things have happened. I cannot think that they had any other intention, for they could have very easily killed every soul of us. I communicated this to the men, who keep watch all night, and shut up the gates of our fort."⁷² In other cases, the Native women seemed genuinely in danger. While traveling through the Okanagan, Alexander Ross feared greatly that nearby Natives would kidnap the wives in his party, and counseled them to escape secretly in the night, without pausing for food, a guide or protection, and to make their way home.⁷³

How much of this portrayal is coloured by the bourgeois view of "savage" women as less than humans without free will? It is hard to believe that the Native women consented to be "bought and sold," but the instances in fur trade records are too numerous to dismiss. "Traffick in the fair sex" became a part of voyageur culture. Voyageurs bought and sold their female sexual partners to each other and to company officers for personal pleasure, to increase their "social capital," and to pay off debts. In one New Year's joke, one voyageur named Desrocher pretended to sell his wife to another voyageur named Welles. But the joke lay in the fact that Welles did not have enough income or possessions to properly support a

⁷² Toronto; MRL; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819, entitled "Journal B", (continuation of George Nelson's Journal found in the Archives of Ontario, MU 842); 13 May 1819, 5 (I added page numbers); and George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake", (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk) Friday, 20 April 1821, 5.

⁷³ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 23-4.

wife; the arrangements to purchase the wife were seen as serious and not humorous.⁷⁴ One voyageur named Morin asked bourgeois James McKenzie to sell his wife to the highest bidder, and to credit Morin's account. Morin's wife did not idly consent to these dealings, and refused any of the men that McKenzie tried to sell her to.⁷⁵ The "traffick in the fair sex" was not only condoned but encouraged by the bourgeois who often sold Native women to their servants.⁷⁶

The "traffick in sex" was probably blurred with casual encounters between individual voyageurs and Native women, and created the space for traders and Native women to become familiar with each other. No doubt voyageurs and Native women had sex with each other outside of a formal union and where no money or goods exchanged hands. "Dating" rituals remain hidden from our view, probably because voyageurs tried to escape the gaze of the bourgeois. In any case, the range of sexual relations encompassed sex in trading rituals, a trade in sex, and noncommodified sexual encounters.

Fur Trade Marriages

Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown have recognized and explored the importance of sexuality in trading relationships. In reacting to earlier, lurid literature, steeped in racist,

⁷⁴ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Thursday, 10 January 1810, 48 (I added page numbers).

⁷⁵ Masson, *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 9 and 10 February 1800, 385 (page missing from the original James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800, MRB, MC, C.13).

⁷⁶ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Saturday and Monday, 17 and 19 May 1806 120-1; and Montreal; MRB; MC; C.24; Microfilm reel #2; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Friday, 8 May 1801, 36. For another example see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday, 10 May 1805, 240.

sexist images of sexual disorder and exploitation, they emphasized marriage, stability, and domesticity among fur trade officers and Native women.⁷⁷ I found similar configurations among voyageurs. Families were very important among many voyageurs who worked for long periods in the trade, and especially for those who decided not to leave the north west, settling down with their families in the interior, and forming the foundations of métis communities.⁷⁸ North West Company (NWC) policy, judicial testimony, and incidents in the writings of the fur trade literate all show that many voyageurs formed unions with Native women, and these “marriages” were respected as serious unions even though they existed outside the Catholic Church. Although most of the evidence that relationships could resemble European conceptions of marriage involve the bourgeois, these also occurred among voyageurs. Legal testimony indicates that ex-voyageurs understood *mariage à la façon du pays* to be “real” marriage. But regardless of what those involved thought or said, these relations never corresponded exactly to Lower Canadian or bourgeois marriage where matters such as property and religion were concerned.

Early on, the bourgeois of Montreal companies actively encouraged their servants to form unions with Native women because Native wives’ knowledge and kinship ties were important to the survival and prosperity of a post.⁷⁹ In the more than 30 years before 1806 the

⁷⁷ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 51, 116; and Brown *Strangers*.

⁷⁸ Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1969), 182; and Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. by Lascelles Wraaxall, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985, first published 1860), 3. Also see Marcel Giraud, *Le métis canadien*, 2 vols., (Paris: Institut d’Ethnologie, 1945); Peterson, “The People in Between”; and Jennifer S.H. Brown and Jacqueline Peterson, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985).

⁷⁹ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu’Appelle, 1793-95, Wednesday, 29 April 1795, 32.

Montreal companies provided sustenance for voyageurs' wives and children at interior fur trade posts. Although the NWC accepted and encouraged European-styled marriages more than the HBC, the NWC gradually became concerned with the number of dependents around their posts. This state of flexibility and tolerance of relationships diminished as the trade became more established in the north west. Constraints were eventually placed upon voyageurs who wished to marry Native women by the NWC. The minutes of the 1806 annual meeting record that:

It was suggested that the number of women and Children in the Country was a heavy burthen to the Concern & that some remedy ought to be applied to check so great an evil, at least if nothing effectual could be done to suppress it entirely.- It was therefore resolved that every practicable means should be used throughout the Country to reduce by degrees the number of women maintained by the Company, that for this purpose, no Man whatever, either Partner, Clerk, or Engagé, belonging to the Concern shall henceforth take or suffer to be taken, under any pretence whatsoever, any woman or maid from any of the tribes of Indians now known or who may hereafter become known in this Country to live with him after the fashion of the North West, that is to say, to live with him within the Company's Houses or Forts & be maintained at the expence of the Concern.

It is most likely that the NWC became more concerned with supporting voyageurs' families when they became more numerous and thus more costly. Marriages *à la façon du pays* were probably becoming more common for voyageurs over time. The NWC committee resolved

that every officer should ensure that no men in his department become involved with Native women, and those who transgressed the rules be subject to a fine of 100 pounds Halifax Currency (which constituted at minimum one year's wages of a voyageur). However, this rule did not extend to the mixed blood daughters of White men and Native women.⁸⁰ Van Kirk argues that this resolution was in part motivated "by the fact that in well-established areas marriage alliances were no longer a significant factor in trade relations."⁸¹ Enforcement of the rule was selective. An officer named Logan at St. Marys (Sault Ste. Marie) and a voyageur in the lower Red River were charged in 1809, but the important marriage alliances in the Columbia District were not affected.⁸²

Despite these eventual restrictions, marriage to Native women was an important part of life at fur trade posts. It was customary for wives and families to be left behind at posts when voyageurs made their annual trips to Lake Superior.⁸³ These absences threatened the unity and strength of marital bonds. But longevity was encouraged when voyageurs were able to take their families with them when they moved from post to post and on their travels into

⁸⁰ Minutes of the Meetings of the NWC at Grand Portage and Fort William, 1801-7, with Supplementary Agreements in W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), 210-11, 272.

⁸¹ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 92.

⁸² Minutes of the Meetings of the NWC at Grand Portage and Fort William, 1801-7, with Supplementary Agreements in Wallace, ed., *Documents*, 262; Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 92; Brown, "Fur Trade as Centrifuge," 202, 205; and Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 97.

⁸³ Winnipeg; HBCA; B.89/a/2; Microfilm Reel # 1M63; Peter Fidler, *Ile a la Crosse Post Journal*, 1810-11; Wednesday, 13 June 1810, fo. 2; and W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), Thursday, 19 May 1803 and Sunday 29 April 1804, 66-7, 80.

the interior.⁸⁴ Voyageurs sometimes insisted on bringing their families with them on trading missions, threatening to desert if the bourgeois did not consent.⁸⁵ When French Canadian voyageurs were occasionally hired by the HBC, they insisted on the right to have a Native wife.⁸⁶ Sometimes when voyageurs were forced to give up their wives either by their company or the refusal of their wives to travel with them, they insisted that their wives take no other husband, and sought assurances from the company that they would not permit or approve any other voyageur marrying their ex-wife.⁸⁷

A court case in Montreal provides an extraordinary insight into attitudes to marriage *à la façon du pays* in the north west. The 1867 case Connolly versus Woolrich, and the 1869 appeal Johnstone et. al. versus Connolly, dealt with the legality of north west marriages in Canada. Several voyageurs were called forth as witnesses to discuss their experiences in the *pays d'en haut*. Their testimonies are remarkably consistent. A 72-year-old witness, Amable Dupras, who had been a voyageur for fourteen years, testified that:

La façon de ces pays est que lorsqu'on avait envie d'avoir une femme, on allait demander au père s'il voulait nous la donner, et si le père voulait donner sa fille, on allait leur acheter quelque chose par reconnaissance. Ordinairement, c'était la façon

⁸⁴ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 17, 23-4 and 2: 7; Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, early June 1789, 135; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Friday, 9 September 1808, 2; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 21 August 1800, 50-2 and 2: 3 October 1803, 26-7.

⁸⁵ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806," Saturday and Monday, 17 and 19 May 1806 120-1.

⁸⁶ Winnipeg; HBCA B.22/a/6; Microfilm reel #1M17; Brandon House Post Journal, 1798-1799, Robert Goodwin; 13 November 1798, fo. 9.

⁸⁷ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A9; Simon Fraser Collection, volume 2; Simon Fraser's Letters to James McDougall, 1806-7, and to John Stuart, 1807; (originals in Provincial Archives of British Columbia), Simon Fraser to James McDougall, [Natieh ?] 31st Jany 1807; Simon Fraser to my dear friend (John Stuart), [Natieh ?] 1st February 1807.

du pays de donner un présent au père de la fille donnée en mariage. Ce n'était pas loisible d'avoir plus d'une femme.... J'ai souvent vu faire des mariages dans ce pays, et je parle de cette coutume avec connaissance.

His testimony reveals that there were specific social regulations and rituals to forming relationships between voyageurs and Native women. Another voyageur who was a witness in the case, Pierre Marois, corroborated the evidence of Dupras:

*Un homme par là [dans le pays d'en haut] ne pouvait pas prendre plus d'une femme, nous regardions cette union comme l'union de mari et femme par ici [Canada], [illegible] et une aussi sacrée. J'ai été marié là moi-même à la façon du pays. J'ai vécu vingt-trois ans avec elle, et elle est morte il y a huit ans passés. *Quand on voulait se marier dans le Nord Ouest, il fallait demander au père et à la mère [illegible] qu'on voulait avoir, et s'ils consentaient, on demandait après au bourgeois permission de se marier, et c'était la toute là cérémonie; et après cela, nous [illegible] considérons comme mari et femme légitimes comme ici, comme si nous étés mariés à l'église.*⁸⁸*

Clearly these voyageurs considered *mariage à la façon du pays* as legitimate and serious as Church marriages in the St. Lawrence valley.

In French Canada and in the north west interior marriages were conducted as both

⁸⁸ Translation of Amable Dupras: "The fashion in the country is that when one wishes to marry a woman, one asks her father, and if the father agrees to give his daughter, one purchases her. Ordinarily, it was the fashion of the country to give a present to the girl's father. One was not free to have more than one wife.... I often saw marriages in the country, and I speak of this custom with knowledge." Translation of Pierre Marois: "A man [in the north west] can't have more than one wife, we regarded this union like the union of a husband and wife [in Canada], and a sacred one. I have married [in the north west] myself in the fashion of the country. I lived twenty-three years with her, and she died eight years ago. *When one wants to marry in the north west, one must ask the [girl's] father and the mother... and if they consent, one asks the permission of the bourgeois to marry, and all attended the ceremony; and after that, we were considered as a legitimate husband and wife as [in Canada], as if we were married in a church.*" From "Connolly vs. Woolrich, Superior Court, Montreal, 9 July 1867," *Lower Canada Jurist*, XI: (197-265), 227-8.

formal rituals and celebrations. In rural French Canada in the 18th and 19th centuries, weddings were joyful occasions which underscored the importance of the family unit in that society. Wedding day festivities were semi-public affairs with large parties witnessing the ceremony at the church, processions of carriages or sleighs carrying the families and guests through the countryside, and followed by long parties attended by neighbours and relations.⁸⁹ Traveler John Palmer saw several weddings in the French Canadian countryside in the fall of 1817, and noted:

they have a train of cabriolets, a clumsy sort of gig, according to the respectability or wealth of the happy pair; on returning the bride rides first, and far from appearing reserved on the occasion, she calls out to her acquaintance in the street, or waves her handkerchief in passing them; the market people, whom they take care to pass, greet them with shouts, which the party seem to court and enjoy.⁹⁰

This same spirit of celebration carried over to voyageurs' weddings in the north west interior. Ceremonies and balls were held to formally unite men and women in marriage and to celebrate their unions.⁹¹ However, the wedding custom was a blend of Native and French Canadian practices. Judicial testimony from the Connolly case shows that a trader must gain the permission of the girl's parents and pay the bride price. The marriage was then solemnized through several rituals, which could include the smoking of a calumet and, the public

⁸⁹ Greer, *Peasant, Lord and Merchant*, 48-9.

⁹⁰ John Palmer, *Journal of Travels in the United States of America and in Lower Canada, Performed in the Year 1817*, (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1818), Sunday, 21 September 1817, 217.

⁹¹ George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, 22-3/ 206-7; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 10 November 1809, 571.

lecturing by Native elders on the duty of a wife and mother. The new Native bride was then "cleaned" by other women at the post, and then clothed in "Canadian fashion," which consisted of a shirt, short gown, petticoat and leggings.⁹²

An illustrative example is found in the case of a Métis voyageur and highly respected interpreter named Pierre Michel. After aiding the Flat-heads in one of their battles, he was awarded the wife of his choice for his bravery. His choice of bride was already promised to someone else, a warrior who loved her "ardently". But he agreed to allow Michel to have her. The happy Pierre presented a couple of guns, a dagger, cloth and ornaments to his bride's relatives. In the evening the couple, her relatives and friends assembled at the chief's lodge, where they smoked and Native elders and the bride's mother lectured her on her duties as a wife and mother: "they strongly exhorted her to be chaste, obedient, industrious, and silent; and when absent with her husband among other tribes, always to stay at home, and have no intercourse with strange Indians." The new bride and her mother then retired to an adjoining hut, where she exchanged her leather chemise with one of gingham, a calico and green cloth petticoat, and a gown of blue cloth. The exchanging of clothes probably symbolized the changing of social identities, representing a new allegiance with the foreign traders. A procession was then formed by two chiefs and several warriors carrying blazing *flambeaux* of cedar, to convey the bride and her husband to the fort. They sang war songs in praise of Michel's bravery, and of their triumphs over the Blackfeet. The bride was:

surrounded by a group of young and old women, some of whom were rejoicing, and others crying. The men moved on first, in a slow solemn pace,

⁹² Van Kirk found the same patterns; see '*Many Tender Ties*', 36-7.

still chanting their warlike epithalamium. The women followed at a short distance; and when the whole party arrived in front of the fort, they formed a circle, and commenced dancing and singing, which they kept up about twenty minutes. After this the calumet of peace went round once more, and when the smoke of the last whiff had disappeared, Michel shook hands with his late rival, embraced the chiefs, and conducted his bride to his room. While I remained in this country they lived happily together.⁹³

This marriage may have been more formal than usual, as Spokane women rarely married fur traders, and because Pierre Michel's bravery and importance among the Spokane was exceptional. It does, however, illustrate that marriage was represented by formal ceremonies, which combined Native and European practices.

Voyageurs treated marriage proceedings with great seriousness. Polygamy was generally not tolerated in fur trade society. In addition, Native men did not tolerate voyageurs mistreating their female kin. In the 1869 appeal, Joseph Mazurette testified that:

La façon du pays quand un bourgeois ou un engagé voulait une femme, il allait trouver les parents de la fille qu'il aimait, leur demandait s'ils voulaient lui donner leur fille pour sa femme, et s'ils consentaient, il s'habillait, la prenait pour sa femme et ils vivaient ensemble comme tels. Ce n'était pas permis de prendre *plus d'une femme dans le pays*. Cette sorte de mariage était respectée solennellement.... Presque toutes les nations sont pareilles, quant aux coutumes. On ne se joue pas d'une femme sauvage comme on veut. On sait en user à l'égard des femmes comme par ici.... Il y

⁹³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 128-9.

aurait du danger d'avoir la tête cassée, si l'on prend dans ce pays, sans le consentement des parents. C'est le père et la mère qui donnent les femmes, et s'ils sont morts, ce sont les plus proches parents. [Question.- Quand vous parlez d'avoir, de prendre ou payer pour une femme, en quel sens parlez-vous? Est-ce comme mari et femme pour toujours ou que pour le moment?] Réponse.- Pour toujours, Monsieur.⁹⁴

Their testimony reveals that marital unions with Native women were taken very seriously, were monogamous, and developed into a widely practiced custom.

The numbers of voyageurs married or partnered with Native women is very difficult to discern, as the bourgeois kept no consistent record. Marriage rates seemed to vary tremendously between posts; in many cases marriage was a visible and sometimes dominant part of post life. The emergence and growth of a substantial métis population in the north west interior, and the wide spread mention of voyageurs' wives in the writings of clerks and bourgeois, suggest that the practice was common.

I have found Native women included with the annual listing of the post inhabitants in thirteen instances (see Appendix V, "Women at Fur Trade Posts" and Appendix VI, "Voyageurs' Wives at Fur Trade Posts"). In five of these cases, the recorders did not specify whether the wives were married to officers or voyageurs. Percentages of Native women at

⁹⁴ Translation of Joseph Mazurette: "The fashion of the country when a bourgeois or an engagé wants a wife, he finds the parents of the woman that he loves, and asks them if they want to give him their daughter as a wife, and if they consent, he dresses her, takes his wife and they live together as such. It is not permitted to take *more than one wife in the country*. That sort of marriage is solemnly respected.... Almost all the nations are alike, as to these customs. One does not fool with an Indian woman just as one pleases.... One knows [not] to treat women badly.... There was the danger of having your head cracked, if you took [a wife] in the country, without the consent of the parents. It is the father and the mother who give the wives, and if they are dead, it is the closest to the parents... [One marries] for always." From Johnstone et al. vs. Connolly, Appeal Court, 7 September 1869, "La Revue Légale, I: (253-400), 280-1.

these posts ranged from zero (where it was obvious that women would be mentioned if present) to 67%. Marriage rates varied tremendously between posts, but the sample group in Appendices V and VI is too small to search for patterns or even a broad average. A census taken by Alexander Henry the Younger in 1805-6 for fourteen departments lists numbers of "Whites" as 1610 men, 405 women and 600 children (see Appendix VII, "Alexander Henry the Younger's 1805 Census of the North West"). Henry determines the racial categorization of people by the "head of the household," so "White" wives and children "belonged" to the traders.⁹⁵ Assuming that all the "White" women were romantically involved with traders, an average of 25% of the combined officers and voyageurs had Native wives. This census also shows that partnership with Native women was widespread throughout the northwest. Jennifer Brown has argued that marriage rates between voyageurs and Native women were higher than those between labourers working for the HBC because the Montreal fur trade officers had less control over their men, and could not prevent them from forming relationships with Native women.⁹⁶ Voyageurs had much more contact with Native women than did other fur trade labourers, and thus had a fundamentally different attitude towards them.

Native wives came to play a central economic role at fur trade posts and on trading missions. Sylvia Van Kirk has convincingly portrayed the importance of Native wives to traders:

The economic role played by Indian women in fur-trade society reflected the

⁹⁵ Editor Barry Gough asserts that "women 'of' white men" were called as "White." Gough, *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger*, 1: 188.

⁹⁶ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 87-8.

extent to which the European traders were compelled to adapt to the native way of life. The all-encompassing work role of Indian women was transferred, in modified form, to the trading post, where their skills not only facilitated the traders' survival in the wilderness but actual fur-trade operations. At the North West Company posts and at Hudson's Bay Company posts especially, native women came to be relied upon as an integral if unofficial part of the labour force. Their economic assistance was a powerful incentive for the traders to take Indian wives; even within their own tribes, the women exercised a role in the functioning of the trade which has been little appreciated by historians of this period.

Van Kirk describes Native wives supplying the traders with moccasins and snowshoes, dressing skins, helping in canoe construction and paddling, preparing food such as pemmican, curing and drying meat and fish, collecting rice and berries, and trapping small game.⁹⁷ Native wives' utility was so important to the survival and prosperity of a post that bourgeois encouraged their voyageurs to marry Native women.⁹⁸ In light of Van Kirk's work, it is thus not surprising that the wives of voyageurs worked alongside their husbands, helping them with chores ranging from food procurement to trapping and dressing furs to cultivating trading contacts. Native wives helped their husbands make sugar from maple trees, gather

⁹⁷ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 53, 54-9, 61-5.

⁹⁸ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Wednesday, 29 April 1795,

wildfowl eggs, transport meat to the post from kill sites, fish and attend to traps.⁹⁹

Like their husbands, voyageurs' wives were not always loyal and obedient to bourgeois and clerks; they sometimes helped their husbands in freetrading schemes. In the Athabasca District in the winter of 1800, two voyageurs named Martin and St. André sent meat from a kill site to the post with some Native men. However, Martin instructed the transporters not to give the meat to John Thomson, the bourgeois in charge, but rather to Martin's wife, who would give them an awl and vermilion in exchange. Unfortunately for Martin, Thomson found out about the scheme and became enraged, casting all of his voyageurs as "a Dirty despicable set of felons."¹⁰⁰ Van Kirk describes one particularly powerful Chipewyan woman, Madame Lamallice, who was married to a French Canadian HBC brigade guide at Fort Wedderburn on Lake Athabasca. During the difficult winter of 1820-1, Lamallice was the post's only interpreter, had considerable influence with the surrounding Chipewyan, and was accorded a favoured position by the HBC. A young George Simpson complied with her demands for extra rations and preferential treatment in order to ensure that she stayed at the post. When the provisions ran low in the spring, the voyageurs were ordered to leave the post and support themselves at the fishery. Madame Lamallice refused, and agreed to support her family with her own personal store of about 200 fish. Simpson was not amused to learn that this "thrifty amazon" was carrying on a private trade in

⁹⁹ Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Tuesday, 17 March 1801, 27; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 6; Microfilm reel #C-15638; James Porter, *Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801*; Monday, 9 March 1800, Tuesday, 2 June 1800 and Tuesday, 14 October 1800, 4, 27, 56; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 10; Microfilm reel #C-15638; J. Dufant, "Journal-Commencé le 7e octobre, continué par J. Dufant," at Fort des Epinettes, near Fort Dauphin, 7 October 1803 to 17 May 1804; 20 January 1804, 30.

¹⁰⁰ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Sunday, 22 February 1801, 25-6.

pounded meat, beaver tails, and moose skins, with a hoarded stock of trade goods. When the HBC officers attempted to limit Madame Lamallice's private trade, she threatened to turn all the Natives against them.¹⁰¹

Like Madame Lamallice, voyageurs' wives could acquire significant power in the running of trade operations. They often accompanied their husbands on expeditions to trade with a Native group. Voyageurs left their wives with the Native group to act as liaisons between them and the traders, sometimes for as long as an entire summer.¹⁰² On occasion voyageurs' wives went out on expeditions to trade for their husbands.¹⁰³ As Van Kirk has noted, Native wives' knowledge and familiarity with the landscape and various Native tribes made them especially valuable as guides and interpreters. Native women taught Native languages to Euro-Canadian traders and travellers in the interior. Native women also acted as conveyors of information between Native groups and traders, and often reported on the intentions and actions of various Native groups to help Euro-Canadians with their trading plans.¹⁰⁴

Because of their economic and diplomatic importance, Native women could exert

¹⁰¹ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 84-5.

¹⁰² Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Thursday and Saturday, 2 and 11 April 1795, 30; Peter Fidler, Ile à la Crosse Post Journal, 1810-11; Wednesday, 13 June 1810, fo. 2.

¹⁰³ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Saturday, 1 September 1809, 36 (1 added page numbers); and George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Monday, 24 September 1810, 27 (1 added page numbers).

¹⁰⁴ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 65-73; also see James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Tuesday, 2 June 1800, 27; John Henry Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North: A Soldier-Surveyor's Letters from the North-West, 1843-1844*, ed. by George F.G. Stanley, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1955), Lefroy, Lake Superior to Fanny, Montreal, 22 October 1844, 132, and Lefroy, Fort Chipewyan to Isabella, McKenzie's River, Fort Simpson, 29 April 1844, 112-13, 119; and Peter Fidler, Ile à la Crosse Post Journal, 1810-11; Tuesday, 11 December 1810 and Friday, 1 March 1811, fo. 18, 26.

control over their voyageur husbands' careers in the fur trade. Native wives often encouraged their husbands to desert the service and become freemen or live with their Native families. In one case a voyageur named Chaurrette who was an expert canoe-maker deserted the service because his wife wished him to do so.¹⁰⁵ Native women could exert control over the distribution of food resources within a post, which sometimes caused jealousy and resentment among traders.¹⁰⁶ George Nelson resented the wife of Brunet, one of his voyageurs, referring to her as "a vixen & hussy" who kept Brunet "in proper subjection by caresses, promises & menaces" and "sullen fits or moods." She persuaded him to disobey Nelson's orders and go to visit her relatives, and to quit the service.¹⁰⁷ Many voyageurs probably had to modify their presumption of patriarchal rule in marriage in order to maintain successful and stable unions with their Native wives.

Fluid Monogamy

How did the patterns of gender relations and marital unions differ between voyageurs and their masters? Van Kirk argues that the norm for sexual relationships in all ranks of the fur trade (officer, clerk and servant) did not consist of casual, promiscuous encounters, but rather of marital unions and distinct family units. She observes that voyageurs had much less

¹⁰⁵ Toronto; OA; HBCC; MU 1391; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Friday, 26 June 1818, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Winnipeg; HBCA; B.39/a/16; Microfilm reel # 1M22; Fort Chipewyan, Post Journal, 1820-1821, title says "Journal of Transactions & occurrences at Fort Wedderburn Athabasca Lake, Kept by William Brown Commencing June 6th 1820, and Ending February 10th 1821. Volume 1st"; Saturday, 8 July 1820, fo. 7; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Friday, 16 September 1803, 10; and George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, fall 1803, 49.

¹⁰⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Friday, 14 January 1804, Monday, 31 January 1804, and Monday, 14 February 1804, 20, 22-3.

money than clerks and bourgeois, and thus did not have the resources to lavish gifts on their Native wives. As well, voyageurs spent more time away from their Native wives than did the bourgeois. But she asserts that their relationships were fundamentally similar, in that they were primarily marital.¹⁰⁸ Like Van Kirk, Brown's study of the fur trade community in Rupert's Land is biased towards men in the higher ranks of the fur trade. Brown also attests that similar patterns of intermarriage with Native women occurred between officers, clerks and labourers in the trade.¹⁰⁹ But she differs from Van Kirk in her view that informality and flexibility were the dominant pattern in relations between traders and Native women. Brown suggests that British masters followed the pattern set by their voyageurs, and thus had intimate and yet often transient affairs with Native women.¹¹⁰

Without rejecting their findings, especially where bourgeois are concerned, I wish to emphasize the wide range of sexual relations that could be found in the fur trade. Voyageurs entered the service with contracts for only three to five years, and initially they did not see the job as more than a temporary way to earn more money to supplement farming in the St. Lawrence valley. Porkeaters working on the Montreal- Lake Superior run encountered Native women along the canoe routes and contact was probably limited to brief sexual encounters. Northmen working at interior posts encountered Native women for longer periods of time, and often developed relationships with them. Because voyageurs' contracts only spanned three to five years, they probably did not see their relationships lasting longer. The intention

¹⁰⁸ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 46-7.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, xxi, 51.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, 82, 89, 96.

of these relationships were monogamous and devoted partnerships, but by necessity they were usually brief, lasting the duration of voyageurs' postings, or Native groups' trading alliances with particular posts. The voyageur would live with his partner's family in their lodges, or she would move temporarily to the post. If children resulted from these brief unions, they would either be absorbed into the Native woman's family, or the voyageur would leave the service and become a freeman so that he could form a long-lasting union with his Native family. But, the most common pattern was for the couple to split, and move on separately with their lives. If they met again they could re-initiate their relationship. Some couples managed to have long term part-time unions, if they could co-ordinate their yearly travels.

Although voyageurs came from a society where marriage was the norm, they did not automatically translate this attitude to the north west interior. When relationships with Native women were formed, they were probably only meant as short term. If a voyageur fell in love with a Native woman, he would consider spending his life in the interior to stay with her. Some voyageurs may have brought their Native wives back with them to French Canada, but this would involve considerable expense, and would require a dramatic lifestyle change for the Native wife. The couple may also have faced discrimination in French Canada. Miscegenation was not by any means an accepted practice, nor was there social mixing between habitants and their Native neighbours.

In the 1869 appeal of the Connolly case, the testimony of voyageur Joseph Mazurette differed from the testimony of the two other voyageurs, Pierre Marois and Amable Dupras. When asked whether traders and voyageurs married women "pour toujours ou que pour le

moment," Mazurette replied "Pour toujours."¹¹¹ No doubt Mazurette was trying to attest that marriages in the *pays d'en haut* were virtually equivalent to Catholic marriages in French Canada, and when prompted, he asserted that the marriages were permanent. Yet his testimony does not ring true. Marriage for life might have been his experience in the *pays d'en haut*, and was the experience of some voyageurs who decided to spend their entire lives in the north west. Most voyageurs, however, ended their relationships with Native women when they returned to French Canada, or when they were moved to a different fur trade post. Recall the reminiscences of the old voyageur recorded by Alexander Ross: he bragged that he had had twelve wives over the course of his career in the trade.¹¹² He probably had twelve successive wives, rather than many wives at once. All three voyageurs testifying in the Connolly case strongly asserted that polygamy was not tolerated in fur trade society, and the writings of the fur trade literate show that only very rarely did a voyageur have more than one wife, and that these instances were examples of voyageurs adopting Native customs when they could afford to do so.¹¹³ If a voyageur was particularly prosperous, probably making money freetrading, and garnering more symbolic capital, he could afford to have two wives. But, the moral code of fur trade society, as well as his meager wages, would have discouraged polygamy.

Unions between voyageurs and Native women were "seasonal" in nature because of the high mobility of voyageurs' jobs and of Native communities. Voyageurs usually did not

¹¹¹ Johnstone et al. vs. Connolly, Appeal Court, 7 September 1869," *La Revue Légale*, 1: (253-400), 280-1.

¹¹² Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 2: 234-7.

¹¹³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 12 May 1803, 211.

bring their families when they made the annual summer trips to Lake Superior. During these summers, Native families often waited for their voyageur husbands to return, and some congregated at central interior posts such as Fort Alexander at the mouth of the Winnipeg River. However, some unions probably ended during these periods, especially those that were less serious and had no children. Voyageurs were frequently re-located from post to post, especially when they renewed their three to five-year contracts. Companies did not always pay for the maintenance of voyageur families, and voyageurs could often not afford to support them with their limited wages. Many of the men who developed serious relationships with Native women and deep commitments to their new families decided to "go Native" and live with their in-laws, or become freemen and travel with their families as independent traders. The short term or temporary relationships among working voyageurs corresponded well with many Native cultures which were also highly mobile in their pursuit of economic resources, and which sanctioned divorce and remarriage. The predominant pattern of relationships between voyageurs and Native women was fluid. Native women sometimes had brief affairs with traders, lasting simply a season. During these affairs they did not necessarily marry, or live with one another. Some affairs began when voyageurs arrived at a post for the winter, and ended when they left the post for Lake Superior. Other relationships lasted several seasons, or perhaps as long as the voyageur remained in the service, and were often suspended during summer travel. The fluidity of unions is amply demonstrated by recurrent break-ups, the "buying and selling" of women by White traders, and serial monogamy.

White traders often passed their wives and lovers on to other traders with the woman's consent so that the woman was not left alone. This practice, which was called "turning off,"

was couched in tender language, and revealed caring and respect for the women. When Daniel Harmon married a Métis girl he wrote:

when I return to my native land shall endeavour to place her into the hands of some good honest Man, with whom she can pass the remainder of her Days in this Country much more agreeably, than it would be possible for her to do, were she to be taken down into the civilized world, where she would be a stranger to the People, their manners, customs & Language.¹¹⁴

Bourgeois and clerks often passed their wives on to voyageurs when they grew tired or annoyed with them.¹¹⁵ Ross Cox commented that "When a trader wishes to separate from his Indian wife, he generally allows her an annuity, or gets her comfortably married to one of the *voyageurs*, who, for a handsome sum, is happy to become the husband of *la dame d'un Bourgeois*."¹¹⁶ Voyageurs may have felt forced into some of these unions, and unable to refuse their masters in accepting new Native wives.

Serial monogamy was also a common pattern among voyageurs. When they moved to different posts they would sometimes end marriages and start new ones immediately at their new post, especially if their wives wanted to stay near their Native families and not move with the voyageurs. Van Kirk asserts that Native peoples "did not view marriage as a lifetime contract, nor did they consider it to be in their interest to have their women leave the district."

¹¹⁴ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday, 10 October 1805, 98. However, in the end, Harmon did not take his Native wife with him when he returned to the east.

¹¹⁵ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, 29 June 1804, 33-4.

¹¹⁶ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 312; and Van Kirk, '*Many Tender Ties*', 50.

Native women easily rejoined their Native families when "turned off" by White husbands.¹¹⁷ Similarly, voyageurs frequently had a number of wives during their careers in the north west interior, and their wives frequently had had several Euro-Canadian husbands.¹¹⁸ Unlike their masters, voyageurs had less control over their geographic mobility in their fur trade careers. Voyageurs thus ended relationships with greater frequency than their masters. Voyageurs may also have been compelled to end relationships that they highly valued, and perhaps looked for opportunities to reunite with Native women with whom they loved but had been forced to leave. In any case, movement in and out of relationships was fluid.

The range of relationships between voyageurs and Native women included casual encounters that could be pleasant or could be brutal. Mutually consensual sexual relationships outside of marital unions emerged between voyageurs and Native women. However, coercive sex and sexual violence was an occasional problem. Like other cultural conflicts, they stemmed from misunderstandings and disrespect for moral codes.¹¹⁹ In one example in the winter of 1805 at Grand River, bourgeois W. Ferdinand Wentzel recorded that a Native man named Poucé Coupé refused to hunt for the post any longer because he was offended that his wife had sex with a voyageur, though it is unclear if the encounter was consensual or coercive. Wentzel disapproved of relationships between traders and Native

¹¹⁷ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 46.

¹¹⁸ See the example of Desrocher in George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Monday 24 September 1810 and January 1811, 27, 42 (I added page numbers). See the example of Brunet's wife in George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Sunday, 16 October 1803, 35. Also see Simon Fraser Collection, volume 2; Simon Fraser's Letters to James McDougall, 1806-7, and to John Stuart, 1807; Simon Fraser to James McDougall, [Natleh ?] 31st Jany 1807 and Simon Fraser to my dear friend (John Stuart), [Natleh ?] 1st February 1807.

¹¹⁹ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 40.

women because they often led to violence which disrupted the trade. He cited an incident in Athabasca in the summer of 1804, where four traders were killed by Native men whose wives had been "pillaged". The rape of Native women by voyageurs often led to cycles of retributive violence.¹²⁰ Conflict was often augmented by adultery and rivalries over women between Whites and Natives, and within trading communities.

The fur trade literature recorded some cases of voyageurs sexually assaulting Native women. However, direct references to rape, or sexual violence, are surprisingly rare, and mentions of "debauchery" are ambiguous regarding consent. It appears that a kind of moral code existed among voyageurs and bourgeois. Obviously the bourgeois discouraged sexual violence because it led to retribution from Native families. But voyageurs also scorned men who committed acts of sexual assault. Bourgeois John MacDonell records a case where an Ojibwa woman was able to rescue her daughter who was being raped by a voyageur by attacking him with a canoe awl. The voyageur received minor injuries and had difficulty walking, "a fate" observed MacDonell "he highly deserved for his brutality."¹²¹ Vengeance by Native women on traders was occasional, such as the spring of 1792, when both Chipewyan men and women attacked Canadian traders who had kidnapped the women.¹²² But the bourgeois devoted much more attention to Native on Native sexual violence. The silence surrounding White sexual violence may have been a deliberate, or even unconscious

¹²⁰ For examples of Native men sexually assaulting the wives and daughters of voyageurs see Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A17; Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, written in 1859, photostat, (original at Montreal; MRB; MS 406 and typescript at Toronto; OA; MU 1763); 123-5; and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Friday, 5 February 1819, 31.

¹²¹ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95, Saturday, 30 May 1795, 36.

¹²² Tyrrell, ed., *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor*, 449.

oversight. Or, sexual violence may have been limited in this context, where White traders were highly dependent on Native peoples. Their extensive descriptions of sexual assault among Native people was a colonization of representation, a process of constructing a "dangerous other." Ross Cox painted portraits of cruel and barbaric Native people; he asserted that among the Spokane "female violation is by no means uncommon." He went on to explain:

The frequent journeys which they women, in the execution of their laborious duties, are obliged to make alone in the woods in search of fuel, roots, &c. afford great facility to the commission of this offence; and the ravisher depends on impunity from the well-known fear of the woman to tell her husband, who might either abandon her, or, by taking the offender's life, embroil their respective families in a sanguinary contest.¹²³

This deplorable scenario might more resemble the countryside of England, France or French Canada, or perhaps Cox's own subconscious desires.

Voyageurs and Native women ended relationships for a variety of reasons. Some women were left alone, and rejoined their Native families. Bourgeois Alexander Ross commented that:

As ... their husbands go home to Canada ... these women must of necessity rejoin their respective tribes; where they generally remain in a state of widowhood during a year or two, in expectation of their return. If the husband

¹²³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 231-2; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 7", describing the Lake Winnipeg district in 1812, written as a reminiscence, 278.

does not return, the woman then bestows her hand on one of his comrades who has the good fortune to please her fancy the best.¹²⁴

Most likely just as often Native women ended relationships, by simply deserting the post to rejoin their families.¹²⁵ Physical abuse no doubt contributed to Native women leaving relationships. Alexander Henry the Younger described one incident where after a voyageur beat his wife, she went into the woods with a rope to hang herself. Instances of suicide seem to have sometimes occurred among Algonquian women who were overwhelmed with grief.¹²⁶ However, other Native wives simply left their husbands when they were abused, such as the wife of freeman François Richard who complained of "ill treatment & jealousy."¹²⁷ Carol Cooper asserts that on the north west coast, maltreatment, such as beatings, was a major factor in most cases of divorce between Native women and White husbands:

In 1842, a French-Canadian servant of the Company named Maurice gave his wife 'a drubbing because of her misconduct.' She quickly returned to her own people, taking her child with her. Families did not allow such abuse to go unchecked. One chief severely beat a Company servant named Turcotte when the man struck his daughter.

In this context, at a HBC post near mid-century, abuse of Native wives may have been high

¹²⁴ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 296-7.

¹²⁵ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.28, Microfilm reel #13; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807," August 1807 to June 1808; 19 and 28 June 1808, 43; and Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Friday, 16 April 1819, 45.

¹²⁶ Peers, *The Ojibwa*, 56-9. For instances of Algonquian women committing suicide see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 22 and 27 October 1804, 252 and 2: 3 September 1808, 486-7; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Sunday, 19 February 1803 and Sunday, 27 January 1811, 66, 136-7.

¹²⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Monday, 9 July 1810, 17 (I added page numbers); for an example of a voyageur giving his wife a black eye, see Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Saturday, 1 September 1804, 207.

because traders were far less dependent on Native women by this time. However, Cooper finds that on the whole fur trade servants valued their Native wives, and mistreatment was rare.¹²⁸

Native women could run away with other voyageurs or Native men, and were sometimes followed by their voyageur partners who tried to beg or force them to stay. In a "heroic rescue" a voyageur named Cournager under the charge of Dominique Ducharme chased after "his bird [who] had flown" the nest and triumphantly "saved" her from some Native men. While posted at Great Bear Lake in 1806, eight Native women deserted the post. Three of the voyageurs caught up to them and brought them back.¹²⁹ When women deserted the posts and their husbands, they often took provisions and supplies with them, further demonstrating their agency and initiative in economic well-being. The eight women who tried to escape the charge of their White husbands at Great Bear Lake, took with them "a Large [b]ox of the Conflats- Sinis and fish hooks and 30 fish." When the women were brought back to the post, the "pauvre" voyageurs "gave the woman a plenty full supper, in Sted of dehartening them." In other cases, break-ups were mutual, especially in openly hostile relationships. The wife of one voyageur was noted for having "fits" which Nelson suspected were feigned "to subdue the stubborn ill humour of her old husband whom she says is always quarrelling and disputing her on account of the illcare she has of his things and other

¹²⁸ Cooper, "Native Women of the Northern Pacific Coast."

¹²⁹ George Nelson's *Journal and Reminiscences*, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; 72; Montreal; MRB; MC, C.8; Microfilm reel #14; Alexander McKenzie, *Journal of Great Bear Lake, 1805-6*; 28 February 1806, 12; and see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 3 March 1806, 274.

qualities."¹³⁰ Disputes over the custody of the children, and cases of adultery often led to ugly partings.¹³¹ Bourgeois Daniel Harmon commented that when voyageurs and Native women married, they stayed together "as long as they can agree among themselves, but when either is displeased with their choice, he or she will seek another partner, and thus the Hymeneal Bond, without any more ado is broken assunder- which is law here and I think reasonable also."¹³²

Closing Remarks

Existing literature relies heavily on bourgeois experience and self-reporting, and tends to focus unduly on the dimension of sexuality that was contained in the constructed category of "fur-trade marriage." Yet, the formation of cultural middle grounds and sites of overlapping meaning between Native peoples and voyageurs led to a wide range of sexual and emotional "hybridities," which mingled voyageurs' ideas of desire, pleasure, and sexual control, as well as romantic and familial partnerships with those of Native women. The sexual middle ground was a fluid place where rules and patterns were subject to constant negotiation. Ideas about sexual identity, the body, biological differences between men and women, and ensuing gender categories all influenced conceptions of erotic desire and of unions between men and women.

¹³⁰ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Monday, 29 October 1809 and Monday, 5 November 1809, 41 (I added page numbers).

¹³¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 7 May 1802, 197; and Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 310-11.

¹³² Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Monday, 28 December 1801, 53.

Sexual contacts were common in formal rituals which ratified trade relationships, and sometimes led to the emergence of a sex trade. Those voyageurs who desired stable and permanent families in the interior, such as the men who devoted their lives to the service and freemen, were able to establish long-term marriages. However, the middle grounds were sites of constant negotiation and change, and "fluid monogamy" became the most common pattern of relationships between Northmen and Native women. Voyageurs could establish relationships with Native women which lasted only the duration of the winter. Other relationships assumed a "seasonal" character, and thus were suspended and resumed to match the yearly movements of both voyageurs and Native women. Voyageurs also established relationships with Native women which lasted the length of their posting at a particular fort. This pattern reflected Native influences of fluidity in marriage and divorce, but it developed a particular shape which reflected the conditions of the trade.

Chapter 7

Playing in the Margins: Parties, Tricks and Friendships

Previous chapters have outlined the material circumstances of voyageurs' working lives: their range of duties, the pace and rhythm of their work, and how they survived the rigours of an unfamiliar and often harsh environment. However, their lives were not all about work and survival. A sense of play and pleasure infused the workplace, which voyageurs valued highly. The old voyageur working on Lake Winnipeg, quoted by Alexander Ross, reflected "I wanted for nothing; and spent all my earnings in the enjoyment of pleasure.... were I young again, I should glory in commencing the same career again. I would [s]pend another half-century in the same fields of enjoyment."¹ Voyageurs certainly enjoyed many aspects of their jobs, and found amusement in hunting and fishing, and sometimes engaged in these activities for fun in their off time.² They especially valued their play and leisure after intervals of hard work.³ Play came to comprise a significant part of voyageurs' culture because their liminal position, on the boundaries of French Canada and "Indian Country", encouraged playfulness and trickery. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner asserts that "liminality is particularly conducive to play. Play is not to be restricted to games and jokes; it

¹ A voyageur quoted in Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 2: 236-7.

² Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room (Hereafter MRL; BR); S13; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; 32; and Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 2: 30 August 1808, 482.

³ Ottawa; National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC); Masson Collection (hereafter MC); MG19 C1, Vol. 10; Microfilm reel #C-15638; J. Dufant, "Journal- Commencé le 7e octobre, continué par J. Dufant," at Fort des Epinettes, near Fort Dauphin, 7 October 1803 to 17 May 1804; 19 January 1804, 30.

extends to the introduction of new forms of symbolic action... parts of liminality may be given over to experimental behaviour."⁴ Voyageurs were on the thresholds of new worlds entering the *pays d'en haut*, and the thrill and adventure of travelling into the unknown was expressed in their parties, tricks and fun.

Following Turner's lead, this chapter takes a broad view of play. Play should not be seen as a dichotomous opposite to work. Rather, play is better understood as a catch-all for festivities, pastimes, relief from work, and trickery. Parties, singing, dancing, gaming and joking made up the play of voyageurs. They engaged in play when they were working as well as resting. Play offered them amusement and diversion, but it also became a means through which they could shape their culture. Because voyageurs lived between worlds, they felt a new freedom to transcend social restrictions learned at their homes in French Canada, and try out, or "play at" new ways of living, and reinvent themselves. The play of voyageurs was influenced by cultural practices brought from French Canada, new practices learned from Native societies in the *pays d'en haut*, and by cultural forms which emerged from the fur trade workplace. It is under this influence especially that "experimental" behaviour could lead to new cultural forms. The voyageurs' ethos of trickery and play became a tool for carving out the contours of their work space and culture while on the margins of other societies.

Although play became an area for the expression of new social practices which made voyageur culture distinct from the culture of habitants and other early modern peasants, it did not threaten the paternalistic order of the fur trade, where servants obeyed their masters. Most

⁴ Victor Turner, "Variations of a Theme of Liminality," in *Blazing the Trail: Way Makers in the Exploration of Symbols*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 57.

of the play of voyageurs was highly structured and occurred within designated and contained contexts. It provided a safe space for voyageurs to express their anxiety and fear of entering the exotic "Indian Country," their anger at unfair masters and unreliable colleagues, and their excitement of setting off on new adventures. Forms of play generally sanctioned by the bourgeois allowed voyageurs to frolic without threatening the pace or effectiveness of their work, and encouraged values which were consistent with effective working skills, such as strength, bravery, risk, and perseverance. Play also became a social space where voyageurs could assert their particular ideal of manhood.

Play on Canoe Journeys

During the rushed canoe voyages transporting goods and furs between the interior posts, the administrative centres at Lake Superior, and Montreal, voyageurs integrated play with work. Parties and singing emphasized and complemented the most important aspects of their jobs. Festivities and merriment were highly valued by voyageurs. Through shared fun, they fostered friendships and respect for each other, which were especially important in the difficult and often dangerous work of transporting goods and furs.

The start and end of journeys were infused with festivity. All departures were generally characterized by the chaos of last-minute hirings, packing and planning, and this flurry of activity was intensified at the large annual Montreal departures at the beginning of a season.⁵ People gathered around the crews at Montreal and Lachine to bid farewell to the

⁵ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 8.

departing brigades. Clerk George Nelson reminisced that as young men set off, they bade farewell to their relatives and friends "with tears in their eyes & singing as if going to a banquet!"⁶ The same kind of celebrations accompanied the comings and goings of transatlantic ships at the seaports of Quebec, Halifax and St. John.⁷

Adding to the commotion was a general feeling of merriment. Large parties were held at Lachine the night before brigades intended to set out, and most people became intoxicated. In his biography of the voyageur Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, George Dugas describes the parties that were held before crews set out:

Pendant quinze jours, c'était, pour ces vieux loups du Nord, une suite de fêtes et de divertissements; ils invitaient tous leurs amis, et faisaient bombance; on aurait dit qu'ils tenaient à dépenser jusqu'à leur dernier sou, et à partir le gousset complètement vide. La boisson coulait à flots; le soir il y avait bal.... Le jour du départ, une foule de personnes se rendaient à Lachine pour être témoins du spectacle.⁸

Setting out from Montreal on 25 April 1833, explorer George Back comments on the festivities accompanying the departure to the interior:

...on arriving at La Chine ... I found [the voyageurs] far too assiduous in their libations to Bacchus, to be subject to any less potent influences.

⁶ George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 7-8; also see Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A17; Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, written in 1859, photostat, (original at Montreal; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB); MS 406 and typescript at Toronto; Ontario Archives (hereafter OA); MU 1763); 15 June 1791; 15.

⁷ Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 82-3.

⁸ Georges Dugas, *Un Voyageur des pays d'En-Haut*, (Saint-Boniface, MB: Editions des Plaines, 1981, first published in 1890), 25, 30.

Notwithstanding the alarm and confusion of the preceding night, a number of the officers of the garrison, and many of the respectable inhabitants, collected spontaneously together, to offer us a last tribute of kindness. We embarked amidst the most enthusiastic cheers, and firing of musketry. The two canoes shot rapidly through the smooth waters of the canal, and were followed by the dense crowd on the banks. A few minutes brought us to the St. Lawrence, and, as we turned the stems of our little vessels up that noble stream, one long loud huzza bade us farewell!⁹

The event described by Back were long traditions in Montreal. Carousing was sometimes delayed until the first night of the voyage, when the men drank their allowances of rum paid to them upon departure.¹⁰ The hangovers of both voyageurs and bourgeois could delay departures. While travelling with the North West Company (NWC) brigades in late April 1798, Colonel George Landmann described a wild party held at Lachine the night before the intended departure. He hid in the fireplace to protect himself as he watched the bourgeois Alexander Mackenzie and William McGillivray continue in their drunken frolics after everyone else had collapsed. After the delay caused by hangovers, Landmann described the parting: "away we started, with hearty expressions of goodwill from those who remained. Our people reiterated Indian war-whoops as long as the windings of the waters we were on,

⁹ Captain George Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition to the Mouth of the great Fish River and Along the Shores of the Arctic Ocean, in the years 1833, 1834, and 1835*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1970), 31-2.

¹⁰ Ottawa; NAC; MG24 H1; William Bentinck Papers; Journals kept during a trip from Montreal to Niagara and the return trip, 1800 and from Montreal to Washington and the return trip in 1801; 2.

allowed of our remaining in sight."¹¹

The pageantry was heightened with "Indian war whoops" and firing muskets at departures and arrivals.¹² The whoops and the muskets were a form of salute to the brigades, a gesture of honour and a wish of goodwill. "Indian war whoops" symbolized entry into a "savage world." The war whoops were meant to convey the danger and exoticism of the strange and barbaric Natives in the *pays d'en haut*. Appropriating the war whoops at Montreal departures marked the beginning of the transition from French Canadian habitant to voyageur, one who lived with the "savages." The appropriation reflected both a fear of Natives, as well as admiration for them. Recall Dugas describing the desires of new voyageurs to imitate Native peoples: "La vie sauvage leur souriait; il leur semblait que là-bas, débarrassés de tout frein, vêtus comme l'Indien, couchant avec lui sous la tente, et chassant comme lui pour vivre."¹³ Canoeing itself was a practice borrowed from Native peoples. The war whoops symbolized the extensive cultural borrowing of Canadians from Native peoples, but it also symbolized French colonists' view of Native peoples as an undifferentiated and exotic "other".¹⁴

The pattern of celebrations at departures carried over into the interior. Alexander Henry the Younger describes his men's party in summer 1800 after the first day out along the

¹¹ George Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections of Colonel Landmann, Late of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, (London, Colburn and Co., 1852), 1: 25 April 1798, 295-6, 302.

¹² For one example of muskets being fired at departure see Captain John Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1819, 20, 21 and 22*, (London: J.M Dent & Sons, 1819), 8 February 1820, 109. Muskets were fired both upon arrival and departure on 16 February 1820, 112-13.

¹³ Dugas, *Un Voyageur*, 27.

¹⁴ For the influence of Native cultures on French Canada see Denys Delâge, "L'influence des Amérindiens sur les Canadiens et les Français au temps de la Nouvelle-France," *Lekton*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Automne 1992), 103-91.

route from Grand Portage to Lake Winnipeg: "All were merry over their favourite regale, which is always given on their departure, and generally enjoyed at this spot, where we have a delightful meadow to pitch out tents, and plenty of elbow-room for the men's antics."¹⁵ This treat was especially appreciated after the arduous portage at that site. *Regales* were gifts of food, alcohol or tobacco provided by the bourgeois for special occasions.¹⁶

Arrivals were marked with the same festivity and pageantry as departures. A sense of relief, more than excitement dominated the occasions, as the men celebrated the completion of a safe and successful journey. Arriving back in Montreal was an especially momentous occasion, as it marked the departure from the fur trade world altogether. When Ross Cox's crew arrived at the Lake of Two Mountains, near Montreal, in September 1817, he presented his voyageurs with a keg of rum as a "valedictory allowance", and shook hands with each man.¹⁷ At Fort William and Grand Portage men were treated with *regales* of bread, pork, butter, liquor and tobacco, and usually had great parties.¹⁸ At smaller posts, men were treated

¹⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 20 July 1800, 6-8.

¹⁶ Similarly, at York Factory, the main administration post of the HBC, the departure of ships for England was always marked by a celebration. Michael Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday Life in Hudson's Bay Company Service, York Factory, 1788 to 1870*, (Ottawa: Ministry of the Environment, Canadian Parks Service, 1989), 87.

¹⁷ Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 19 September 1817, 304-5.

¹⁸ Roderick McKenzie, Esq., "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West", in Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 52; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 15-16.

with drams (shots of alcohol) when they arrived.¹⁹ The arrivals are reminiscent of sailors reaching ports after long bouts at sea, or lumberers completing a river drive. Drunken merriment and unruly rioting were expressions of joy in finishing a round of gruelling labour. Sailors arriving on transatlantic vessels combed the streets of port towns "in search of wine, women, and song."²⁰ In writing about 19th-century whalers, Margaret Creighton, however, warns that although some sailors engaged in irrepressible carousing, gaming, drinking and sexual sport while on shore, others took pleasure in more quiet and "pious" ways. The whalers she studied were a diverse lot who did not fit stereotypes derived from legal records or the writings of moral reformers.²¹ Likewise for voyageurs, arrivals at posts probably included a range of activities, from drunken brawls, to quiet prayers.

Incoming crews were usually met by the inhabitants of a post, including families that the men had left behind for the summer. Especially large crowds would gather at Grand Portage and Fort William.²² Alexander Ross described the pageantry and pomp that could

¹⁹ Toronto; OA; North West Company Collection (hereafter NWCC); MU 2199 (photostat of original); Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in Rivière Ouinipique", June to July 1784 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company", by Roderick MacKenzie, director of the North West Company. Typescripts can be found also in OA; NWCC; MU 2200, Box 5, Nos. 2 (a), (b), and (c). Photostats and typescripts can also be found in NAC; MC; Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640; MRB; MC; C.17; and the Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MHS); P1571); Saturday, 24 July 1784, 26; and Montreal; MRB; MC; C.28; Microfilm reel #13; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday and Friday, 2 and 3 October 1807, 8.

²⁰ Fingard, *Jack in Port*, 8, 74-5; Ian Radforth, "The Shantymen," in *Labouring Lives: Work and Workers in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, edited by Paul Craven, 204-76, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 221.

²¹ Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 140.

²² Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822, (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Wednesday, 19 June 1822; "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, (St. Paul: MHS, 1965), 92.

accompany the arrival of a crew:

On this joyful occasion, every person advances to the waterside, and great guns are fired to announce the bourgeois' arrival. A general shaking of hands takes place, as it often happens that people have not met for years: even the bourgeois goes through this mode of salutation with the meanest.²³

At smaller posts, flags were raised and crews were saluted with musket shots.²⁴ Men were often sent out to meet expected canoes, to help guide the crews into the posts.²⁵ Boisterous arrivals seemed to be a long-standing custom.²⁶

At the major administrative centers along the Great Lakes, such as Michilimackinac, Grand Portage and Fort William, departures and arrivals were similar to those in Montreal. The annual meeting of interior brigades and Great Lakes brigades at the western tip of Lake Superior in mid-summer, called the *rendezvous*, marked an important meeting of all parts of the trade. The abundance and wide range of goods contributed to the festivity, as the men enjoyed the food, drink, and camaraderie of large groups that were harder to come by in the

²³ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 303-4.

²⁴ Toronto; OA; MU 842; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Sunday, 27 September 1818, 3.

²⁵ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Monday, 22 August 1803, 6; Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A9; Simon Fraser Collection; Volume 3; Simon Fraser's Letters from the Rocky Mountains to proprietors of the NWC, 1 August 1806 - 10 February 1807 (copied in 1858 from Bancroft Library, No. 18, Series C, at the University of California at Berkeley; can also be found in Appendix C *Public Archives Report for 1929*, 147-59); Fraser to Mr. McDougall, Sturgen Lake, 6 August 1806, 15.

²⁶ John Henry Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North: A Soldier-Surveyor's Letters from the North-West, 1843-1844*, edited by George F.G. Stanley, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1955), Lefroy to his mother, Toronto, 20 November 1844, 136; and Robert M. Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay or Every-Day Life in the Wilds of North America During Six Years' Residence in the Territories of the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1972, first published 1848), 212.

interior.²⁷ Ross Cox described Fort William as "the great emporium" and "metropolitan post" of the interior, remarking that:

its fashionable season generally continues from the latter end of May to the latter end of August. During this period, good living and festivity predominate; and the luxuries of the dinner-table compensate in some degree for the long fasts and short commons experienced by those who are stationed in the remote posts. The *voyageurs* too enjoy their carnival, and between rum and baubles the hard-earned wages of years are often dissipated in a few weeks.²⁸

The reckless spending of a year's wages was probably an exaggeration, but Cox's passage reflects the jubilation of *rendezvous*.

Traders also mustered smaller, though equally wild parties at interior posts, especially those with administrative duties, such as Fort Alexander at the mouth of the Winnipeg River and Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca.²⁹ At these posts, instead of saying goodbye to Euro-Canadian families, men said goodbye to Native friends and families before departing.³⁰ Later at mid-century, travellers continued to describe interior *rendezvous* points, such as Grand

²⁷ "The Narrative of Peter Pond" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 47; Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, 37.

²⁸ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 287.

²⁹ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, i September 1808 - 31 March 1810, (I added page numbers), Friday, 14 September 1809, 37; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Wednesday, 13 July 1803, 1; W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), 115.

³⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819, entitled "Journal B", (this journal is a continuation of George Nelson's Journal found in OA, MU 842); Sunday, 6 June 1819, 11 (I added page numbers).

Portage along the Saskatchewan River, a general Native meeting place, where voyageurs, métis, and freemen generally stopped on their way to Columbia, which gave the place "the animation and variety of a fair."³¹ Celebrations happened on occasion en route when crews passed each other, especially if they were in a particularly remote area, and if they were not in a great hurry.³² Margaret Creighton found that "whaling ships sought each other out for company, and visits at sea, called *gams*, created a deep-sea society."³³ In similar ways to whalers, voyageurs took these occasions to visit, share stories of risk, daring and dangers on the rivers, and to comiserate with each other about the *misère* of the work.

Parties at the start and end of journeys were not unique to voyageurs nor French Canada in the 18th century, but they became distinctive social markers of the journey, underscoring its importance to the trade, its danger, as well as its defining status in voyageur culture. The leaving of "civilization" to enter the exotic and dangerous "Indian Country" gave the voyageurs' revelry a special resonance. The pageantry and festivities helped to separate the voyageur social order from French Canada, marked the transition between the distinct social spaces, and marked the emergence of a new culture. The designated (though limited) space for revelry allowed voyageurs an opportunity to express their fear, anxiety, sadness and excitement at travelling between these different worlds. By "letting go" or "going wild" at the parties, men were then better able to focus on the task of efficient travelling, necessary to the

³¹ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Fanny, Cross Lake Saskatchewan, 17 August 1843, 54.

³² Toronto; OA; Hudson's Bay Company Collection (hereafter HBCC); MU 1391; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Saturday, 6 June 1818, 7; Dr. John J. Bigsby, *The Shoe and the Canoe or Pictures of Travel in the Canadas*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1815), 1: 141.

³³ Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, 82.

effective functioning of the trade. *Rendezvous* were unique to the fur trade. They assumed great significance in the meeting of all parts of the disparate trading operations, and underscored the extreme division of times of plenty from times of want in the trade. They may have been modelled on Native trading fairs. Many Native groups met with each other in large groups on an annual basis. The most significant of these on the plains were the annual summer trading fairs at the Mandan-Hidatsa villages, but smaller fairs also occurred between the Cree, Ojibwa, Assiniboine, Shoshone and Blackfoot.³⁴ Traders may also have been influenced by the Native trading fairs which occurred in the second half of the 17th century in Montreal.³⁵ In any case, the large scale *rendezvous* became a fur trade institution in which voyageurs marked the mid-point of the fur trade season.

The practice of singing while paddling is illustrative of the blurred boundaries between work and play. Singing while working was a long standing custom among sailors.

Marcus Rediker explains:

Probably the most important cultural form for creating bonds among men of the sea was song. Indeed, maritime culture has long and justly been famous for its song; seamen have been celebrated for their music, their voices, their

³⁴ John S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy and War, 1790 to 1870*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 11, 17, 51-2, 54; Laura Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780 to 1870*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994), 30.

³⁵ Nicolas Perrot, *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Region of the Great Lakes*, edited and translated by Emma Helen Blair, (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1911), I: 174-5, 210-20; Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992; first published as *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVIIe siècle*, Paris: Editions Plon, 1974. 10); and Allan Greer, *The People of New France*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), chapter on "French and Others."

music, and their ballads.³⁶

Likewise, voyageurs' songs came to be one of the most characteristic features of their culture, and most bourgeois and travellers commented on the practice. Singing was both a pleasure to the voyageurs, as well as an aid to paddling. Chapter 3 has outlined how singing was used to aid the voyageurs in controlling work rhythms and passing the long hours of toil. In addition, crews often started and ended journeys with vociferous singing and yelling, which expressed the significance of these occasions, and helped frame the journey.³⁷ Singing helped to encourage mirth, perseverance and camaraderie among the voyageurs, which made their work easier and helped build ties of trust.

Voyageurs' singing could be very beautiful and was romanticized by many travellers. In November 1818, John M. Duncan was travelling along the upper St. Lawrence and commented:

I could have endured the rain for an hour or two, to listen to the boat songs of the Canadian voyageurs, which in the stillness of the night had a peculiarly pleasing effect. They kept time to these songs as they rowed; and the [s]plashing of the oars in the water, combined with the wildness of their

³⁶ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 189.

³⁷ George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822, (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Thursday, 20 June 1822; "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 5 July 1793, 92; "'Reminiscences' by the Honorable Roderic McKenzie Being Chiefly a Synopsis of Letters from Sir Alexander Mackenzie", (based on the correspondence between Alexander Mackenzie and Roderick McKenzie, 1786-1816, NAC, MC, MG19 C1, vol. 32, 32A), Louis R.F. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, vol. 1, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, first published 1889-90), 1787, Lac des Serpents, 17-18; and George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 7-8.

cadences, gave a romantic character to our darksome voyage. In most of the songs two of the boatmen began the air, the other two sang a response, and then all united in the chorus. Their music might not have been esteemed fine, but those whose skill in concords and chromatics, forbids them to be gratified but on scientific principles; my convenient ignorance of these rules allowed me to reap undisturbed enjoyment from the voyageurs' melodies, which like many of our Scottish airs were singularly plaintive and pleasing.³⁸

The songs clearly permeated the atmosphere of the interior travel routes. Better singers were usually selected to lead the crew in song, which signified that the voyageurs made efforts to improve the quality of their singing, and took pride in their performance.³⁹ Although songs were often sung in a rowdy fashion, many of them were delicate and pretty old French ballads, brought with early French settlers, passed down through their families.⁴⁰ Some of the more famous include "En roulant ma boule" and "À la claire fontaine," which are repetitious and pretty love songs.⁴¹

Singing old French ballads was common in Lower Canada, but took on a particular twist in the fur trade. One German traveller, Georg Kohl, who spent time around the Great Lakes in the 1850s, became particularly interested in voyageurs' songs. After questioning

³⁸ John M. Duncan, *Travels Through Part of the United States and Canada in 1818 and 1819*, (Glasgow: Wardlaw and Cunninghame, 1823), 2: 121-2; also see George Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas, Containing a Description of the Picturesque Scenery on Some of the Rivers and Lakes; with an Account of the Productions, Commerce, and Inhabitants of those Provinces*, (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1813), 247.

³⁹ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 302-3.

⁴⁰ For mention of songs as pretty see Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to sister Fanny, Fort William, Lake Superior, 30 May 1843, 17.

⁴¹ To read the words of the songs see Marius Barbeau, *Jongleur Songs of Old Quebec*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962), 91-4, 97-9.

many of the old voyageurs who had retired in the area, he speculated that in addition to old French ballads, voyageurs sang many songs which were informally composed and constantly changing, but never written down:

I here allude especially to the songs composed on the spot which are characteristic of the land and its inhabitants, as the people paint them in their daily adventures themselves, and the surrounding nature.... The Voyageurs accompany and embroider with song nearly everything they do- their fishery, their heavy tugging at the oar, their social meetings at the camp fire; and many a jest, many a comic incident, many a moving strain, which, if regarded closely, will not endure criticism, *there* serves to dispel ennui. If even at times no more than a 'tra-la-la-la!' it rejoices the human heart that is longing for song and melody.... Generally they designate their own most peculiar songs as 'chansons de Voyageur,' and exclude from them songs they have derived from France and elsewhere.⁴²

Kohl goes on to emphasize that the voyageurs' own songs (rather than the ballads) were very long and repetitive, which were particularly suitable to long canoe journeys: "They pause upon every idea, repeat it with a certain degree of admiration, and break off into musical refrains and repetitions."⁴³ Voyageurs were often more interested in the sound of a word, and its capacity for rhyme and repetition, rather than its meaning. However, in her cataloguing of voyageurs' songs, scholar Madeleine Béland has demonstrated how many aspects of

⁴² Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, translated by Lascelles Wraxall, (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1985, first published 1860), 254-5.

⁴³ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 257.

voyageurs' lives were expressed in their songs, such as their engagements, departures, food and loneliness.⁴⁴ Expressing significant experiences and recording them in work songs made up part of a unique voyageur oral tradition.

Another type of voyageur song, called *complaintes*, were similar in form to the old French ballads, but were composed by the voyageurs. They were often eulogies to the deceased or lamentations for their lives of hardship and toil. Some of the *complaintes* also indicated that the French Canadian voyageurs identified more with Natives than European or American immigrants, and their *complaintes* mourned the invasion of "Indian Country" by the White immigrants. *Complaintes* also commemorated tragic events, such as deadly accidents, and sometimes assumed the status of folktales, warning against dangers and teaching lessons of survival in the *pays d'en haut*.⁴⁵ The *complaintes* were much like the "sailors' lament," an "early form of the blues" which wistfully commemorated home.⁴⁶ Similarly, Ian Radforth has found that lumberers working in 19th-century Ontario created songs about the dangers of the job and the bravery of the men. He suggests that "their vibrant, sometimes haunting songs were an important way in which the woodsmen dealt with the extraordinary dangers of the work" by boosting their courage and commemorating the deceased.⁴⁷ The cache of voyageur songs inscribed their values in an oral tradition, which they shared among themselves and taught to new voyageurs.

⁴⁴ Madeleine Béland, *Chansons de voyageurs, coureurs de bois et forestiers*, (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1982).

⁴⁵ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 257-61.

⁴⁶ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 189.

⁴⁷ Radforth, "The Shantymen," 225.

Parties and Play at Posts

Voyageurs had much more leisure time during the winter months spent at interior posts, than they did during the canoe journeys of the summers. Once in the interior after the rushed canoe voyages, they had more time to feel homesick and anxious in the midst of a foreign world. Much of their play was reminiscent of French Canada, such as their celebrations of annual holidays, drinking and balls, and helped voyageurs create a sense of home away from home. Voyageurs also had the time to create new connections, form new families, and solidify a distinctive society in the north west. Their celebrations thus became markers of their new culture, enabling them to create new memories and new traditions.

Annual holiday celebrations punctuated the yearly round of labour, and these were especially important to the men living at the isolated posts, away from their families and friends. Men often journeyed from outlying posts to congregate at the larger central forts to celebrate the holidays, and gladly risked the dangers and discomfort of winter travel, even a week of walking on snow shoes, to avoid spending a holiday alone.⁴⁸ Holidays helped to mark the passage of time, and provided structure for long, dreary, and often lonely months at the interior posts. Coming together to celebrate at specific times helped to generate in camaraderie and fellow feeling with each other, their bosses, and Natives.

Christmas and New Year's constituted the most popular holidays for the fur traders and were rarely forgotten or ignored. Other holidays that were sometimes celebrated included All Saint's Day on 1 November, St. Andrew's Day on 30 November, and Easter in early

⁴⁸ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Isabella, Lake Athabasca, Christmas Day, 1843, 84.

April.⁴⁹ Similar celebrations occurred at Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) posts.⁵⁰ The occasional mention of celebrations occurred on Palm Sunday, the King's birthday (4 June), and *Epiphanie* or "Little Christmas" (6 January).⁵¹ Men seemed willing to commemorate any day, regardless of its origins or significance to them, because it served as an excuse for a celebration and drams from the bourgeois. Commemorating St. Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland, and observing the birthday of George III, King of Great Britain, were probably holidays introduced by the Scottish and English bourgeois. It is not surprising that Christmas, New Year's, All Saint's Day and Easter were celebrated at the fur trading posts, as they were common practices in French Canada.⁵² George Landmann noted that in late 18th-century Montreal, New Year's Day was:

⁴⁹ For examples of All Saint's Day see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 12; Microfilm reel # C-15638; attributed to John Sayer in the NAC Finding Aid #797, 2; "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804" 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, (a published version of this journal can be found in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 249-78, Gates attributes the journal to Thomas Connor), Thursday, 1 November 1804, 25; and W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Saturday, 1 November 1807, 12. For examples of St. Andrew's Day see Toronto; OA; Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue; Saturday, 30 November 1799, 43 (I added page numbers); and Montreal; MRB; MC; C.24; Microfilm reel #2; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, 30 November 1800, 6. For examples of celebrating Easter see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, vol. 1; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Sunday, 8 April 1798, 53; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 14; Microfilm reel # C-15638; "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown, Sunday, 12 April 1800, 23; Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Sunday, 11 April 1819, 43.

⁵⁰ Anne Morton, "Chief Trader Joseph McGillivray," presented at the *Rupert's Land Colloquium 1998*, Winnipeg and Norway House, June 1998; and Payne, *The Most Respectable Place*, 65, 87-92.

⁵¹ For an example of celebrating Palm Sunday see Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Sunday, 4 April 1819, 42. For examples of celebrating the King's birthday see Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, Monday, 4 June 1810, 11 (I added page numbers); and Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 2: 167-8. For an example of celebrating *Epiphanie* see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 6 January 1801, 165.

⁵² For comments on New Year's celebrations as a French Canadian custom see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Friday, 2 January 1801, 41. Also see Hector Grenon, *Us et coutumes du Québec*, (Montréal: La Presse, 1974), 153-68; Sophie-Laurence Lamontagne, *L'hiver dans la culture québécoise (xvii^e-xix^e siècles)*, (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1983), 101-3; and Jean Provencher, *Les Quatre Saisons dans la vallée du Saint-Laurent*, (Montréal: Boréal, 1988), 449-57, 463-70.

a day of extraordinary festivity, which was extended to the two or three following days. Amongst the Canadians it was... the fashion for everybody to visit everybody during one of the three first days of the year, when a glass of noyau or other liquor was, with a piece of biscuit or cake, presented to the visitor, which, after a hard day's work in calling at some twenty or thirty houses, frequently terminated in sending a number of very respectable people home in a staggering condition toward the close of the day.⁵³

Levees, or paying respect to masters on New Year's Day, as well as feasting and drinking were characteristic of celebrations in fur trade society. Celebrating these holidays no doubt provided a sense of continuity and comfort for voyageurs who were far away from their homes.

The holiday celebrations seemed to follow a formula. Specific rituals and ceremonies gave the day a sense of formality and tradition, which produced order. The rituals were then followed by chaotic parties, where wild abandon and heavy drinking predominated.

Alexander Henry the Younger complained on New Year's day in 1803 that he was plagued with the ceremonies of the day, and men and women drinking and fighting "pell mell."⁵⁴

During most holiday celebrations at fur trade posts, men generally did not have to work.⁵⁵ During Christmas and New Year's day voyageurs and bourgeois frequently arranged

⁵³ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 239-40.

⁵⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 1 January 1803, 207.

⁵⁵ Toronto; OA; Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, Journal from January 1805 to June 1806, Company of Temiscamingue; Wednesday, 25 December 1805, 47 (I added page numbers); Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Thursday, 25 December 1807, 14; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Sunday, 1 November 1807, 7; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 1 November 1810, 660.

to visit other posts, or invited visitors to their post for the day or for the entire holiday season.⁵⁶ Many men tried to organize their work schedules so they would not miss any of the festivities. In December 1818 at Tête au Brochet, George Nelson was frustrated by one of his voyageurs named Welles. Nelson had sent Welles to Falle de Perdix on the 23 December, but Welles returned to the post on the 30 December, claiming that the snow and ice prevented him from reaching his destination. Nelson suspected that this was a lie, and that Welles really wanted to be back at the post for the New Year's celebrations.⁵⁷ Men of different companies sometimes put aside their different allegiances to celebrate together.⁵⁸ Frequently Native people came to the posts to participate in the festivities, which helped the traders solidify trading ties and foster goodwill with them.⁵⁹ Donald McKay noted that it was customary for Native people to arrive at the post on all feast days.⁶⁰ Voyageurs sometimes went out to the Native lodges to visit, as part of the day's celebrations.⁶¹ Those Native peoples who were closely involved with provisioning and fur trading, such as the "homeguard", celebrated with the traders.

⁵⁶ Donald McKay, *Journal from January to December 1799, Company of Temiscamingue*; Tuesday, 24 December 1799, 46 (I added page numbers); George Nelson's *Journal*, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Thursday, 25 December 1807, 14; George Nelson's *Journal*, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Sunday, 23 December 1810, 39 (I added page numbers).

⁵⁷ *Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19*; Wednesdays, 23, 30 December 1818, 22-3.

⁵⁸ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Friday, 1 January 1802, 192; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Tuesday to Friday, Tuesday, 25-28 December 1804, 1 January 1805, 223-4.

⁵⁹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 1 January 1801, 162-3; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Tuesday and Wednesday, 1 January 1811 and 1812, 136, 147-8.

⁶⁰ Toronto; OA; Microfilm #MS65; Donald McKay, *Journal from August 1800 to April 1801, Company of Temiscamingue*; Thursday, 25 December 1800, 17.

⁶¹ "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Septr. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, Tuesday, 1 January 1805, 35.

The day's festivities on Christmas and New Year usually began early in the morning. Voyageurs ceremoniously called on their bourgeois or clerk to formally wish him well and pay their respects.⁶² The bourgeois was sometimes woken up by the firing a musket or canon, which constituted the beginning of the New Year's day's formalities, although sometimes Christmas day ceremonies were begun in this fashion as well.⁶³ In 1793 Alexander Mackenzie wrote that:

On the first day of January, my people, in conformity to the usual custom, awoke me at the break of day with the discharge of fire-arms, with which they congratulated the appearance of the new year. In return, they were treated with plenty of spirits, and when there is any flour, cakes are always added to the regales, which was the case, on the present occasion.⁶⁴

Like the firing of muskets when a brigade arrived at a post, this salute was a symbolic welcome and show of honour to the holiday, providing a sense of formality.

After the firing of muskets, all the residents of the fort would then gather together in a general meeting, where the bourgeois or clerk would provide *regales* or gifts to the

⁶² "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown, Tuesday, 1 January 1800, 9; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Tuesday, 1 January 1805, 224; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 8; Microfilm reel #C-15638; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805"; Tuesday, 1 January 1805, 37.

⁶³ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.13; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Wednesday, 1 January 1800, 11 (I added page numbers); Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday and Friday, 1 January 1801 and 1802, 162, 192; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 30 November 1815 - 13 January, (parts of the journal in code), Monday, 25 December 1815, 91; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 84; and Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1969), 107-8.

⁶⁴ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 1 January 1793, 252. On other comments of the long-standing custom see W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807," August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday, 1 January 1808, 20; and Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey*, 1 January 1802, 53.

voyageurs. Depending on the wealth of the post, *regales* could be as little as a single dram or great quantities of alcohol, especially if there was a shortage of food.⁶⁵ At the start of 1802, Daniel Harmon gave his men a dram in the morning and then enough rum to drink throughout the course of the day, to help distract them from the scarcity of meat.⁶⁶ In an effort to secure more alcohol for the day's festivities, men would go to great lengths to salute their bourgeois, or any passing visitor or dignitary, in hopes of being treated.⁶⁷ *Regales* on New Year's seemed to be slightly more generous than those on Christmas, as men were frequently treated with tobacco in addition to drams.⁶⁸ At wealthier posts, men's *regales* included food in addition to alcohol and tobacco. Common food gifts were specialty items which were hard to procure, such as flour and sugar, though the *regale* could include meat and grease.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ For drams see Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Wednesday, 1 November 1797 and Monday, 25 December 1797, 17, 27; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Thursday, 25 December 1800, 13; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 6; Microfilm reel #C-15638; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Thursday, 25 December 1800, 72; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805"; Tuesday, 25 December 1804, 34; and W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807", August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday, 25 December 1807, 20. For large quantities of alcohol see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 7; Microfilm reel #C-15638; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Tuesday, 25 December 1798, 23; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Wednesday, 25 December 1799, 10 (I added page numbers); Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Friday, 25 December 1801, 52; and "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, Thursday, 1 November 1804 and Tuesday, 25 December 1804, 25, 34.

⁶⁶ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Friday, 1 January 1802, 53.

⁶⁷ George Nelson's Journal, 30 November 1815 - 13 January, (parts of the journal in code); Monday, 25 December 1815, 91.

⁶⁸ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.7; Microfilm reel #4; Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95 (typescript copy in the NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 54, microfilm reel #C-15640); Wednesday and Thursday, 1 January 1794 and 1795, 6, 23; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Monday, 1 January 1798, 29; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Tuesday, 1 January 1799, 24; and "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804", 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, Tuesday, 1 January 1805, 35.

⁶⁹ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 1 January 1793, 252; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Thursday, 25 December 1800, 161; Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 9; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Unidentified North West Company Wintering Partner, "Journal for 1805 & 6, Cross Lake"; Wednesday, 1 January 1806, 21; Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 305-6; and Montreal; MRB; MC; C.8; Microfilm reel #14; Alexander

Regardless of wealth, most posts mustered some kind of feast on Christmas and New Year's as part of the day's ceremonies. Voyageurs took great pleasure in their food and in feasting, especially since survival could be so precarious in the interior, and their victuals were often mundane and limited. In 1812 Gabriel Franchère commented that "The 25th of December, Christmas Day, was spent most pleasantly. We treated our men to the best that the post could offer, which delighted them as they had lived for nearly two months on fish dried by fire, which is very poor food."⁷⁰ Bourgeois were not always so generous. Alexander Henry the Younger wrote on 1 January 1814 that the bourgeois could scarcely collect liquor enough out of the kegs to give the men each one dram, so they provided them with rice, salt beef, and swans as well. The bourgeois, however, provided themselves with a great feast of rice soup, boiled swans, roast wild fowl, roast pork, potatoes, rice pudding, wild fruit pie, cranberry tarts, cheese and biscuits with porter, spirits and two bottles of Madeira.⁷¹ It seemed to be more common for the bourgeois and voyageurs to celebrate the day together.⁷² This temporary lowering of class barriers was probably due to the loneliness of bourgeois and clerks who were isolated from other masters. Sometimes all hands pitched in and worked together in preparation of the feast. While in the Athabasca district in 1799-1800, bourgeois James Mackenzie recorded the post's cooperation in preparation for celebrating the new year.

McKenzie, *Journal of Great Bear Lake*, 1 January 1806, 10.

⁷⁰ Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage*, 107. Also see Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A14; Microfilm reel #M-130; John Stuart, *Journal kept at North West Company Rocky Mountain House, 1805-6* (original at Provincial Archives of British Columbia); 1 January 1806, 6.

⁷¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 781.

⁷² Donald McKay, *Journal from August 1800 to April 1801, Company of Temiscamingue*; Thursday, 25 December 1800, 17; and George Nelson's *Journal*, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Monday, 1 January 1809, 14 (I added page numbers).

On 31 December, voyageur Dusablon made fish soup and voyageur Lambert made fish cakes and dried meat, while voyageur Masquarosis drew water and tended the fire. Mackenzie and bourgeois George Wentzel oversaw the preparations and pitched in where needed, "In short every body in the House had a finger in the pie & were busy all night as une queue de veau."⁷³ By providing voyageurs with a decent feast, the bourgeois could ensure goodwill from his men; men helping to create the feast and celebrate together fostered fellow feeling among them.

After the formal ceremonies of honouring the day, exchanging gifts and feasting, the real party began. Men celebrated by drinking liberally.⁷⁴ Serious drinking could last for several days after the holiday.⁷⁵ Both Edith Burley and Anne Morton found that at HBC posts, Christmas and New Year's could be celebrated with almost a week of "incessant carousing."⁷⁶ Drinking heavily usually led to fighting among the men.⁷⁷ Duncan McGillivray commented that "The Holidays were spent as usual in dissipation & enjoyment, intermixed with quarreling and fighting- the certain consequences of intoxication among the men."⁷⁸

⁷³ James Mackenzie's *Journal*, 1799-1800; Wednesday, 1 January 1800, 11 (I added page numbers). The phrase "une queue de veau" means as busy as the switching of a calf's tail.

⁷⁴ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Monday, 1 January 1798, 29; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Friday, 2 January 1801, 40; and Montreal; McCord Museum; M 22074; Robert McVicar correspondence; James Keith, Fort Chipewyan to McVicar, 31 January 1825, 2.

⁷⁵ "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Tuesday to Thursday, 25-27 December 1804, 223.

⁷⁶ Morton, "Chief Trader Joseph McGillivray"; and Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 133.

⁷⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 1 January 1802 and 1803, 192, 207; Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Tuesday, 1 January 1811, 136; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Tuesday, 1 January 1805, 224.

⁷⁸ Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1929), Fort George, 26 January 1795, 51.

Dancing, fiddle-playing and singing were also significant ingredients of the parties.⁷⁹ During this part of the day's festivities, disorder and subversion dominated. Yet, the chaotic mayhem was constrained and limited by its designated site and meaning. It was a socially sanctioned time where voyageurs, and bourgeois, were allowed to carouse to the extreme.

This style of celebrating holidays-- starting with formal ceremonies, and then moving on to wild abandon-- lasted well into the mid-19th century at the interior fur trade posts. Upper Canadian artist Paul Kane described the Christmas festivities at Fort Edmonton in 1847. A flag was raised at the post. An enormous feast of buffalo, white fish, beaver tails, geese, potatoes and turnips was served to all inhabitants of the post. In the evening a dance was held in the great hall, "filled by the gaily dressed guests. Indians, whose chief ornament consisted in the paint on their faces, voyageurs with bright sashes and neatly ornamented moccasins, half-breeds glittering in every ornament they could lay their hands on; whether civilized or savage, all were laughing, and jabbering in as many different languages as there were styles of dress."⁸⁰ British scientist John Lefroy described the 1844 New Year's celebrations at Fort Chipewyan:

la bonne année as the Canadians say- ...which according to their custom every person in the Fort came to wish me, and the rest of us, this morning. It is a day of great fête, in which the gentlemen hold a kind of levée in the morning, and

⁷⁹ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Friday, 2 January 1801, Wednesday, 25 December 1805, 40, 99; and George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811, December 1810 to January 1811, 39 (I added page numbers); and George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Monday, 1 January 1809, 14 (I added page numbers).

⁸⁰ Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America from Canada to Vancouver's Island and Oregon Through the Hudson's Bay Company's Territory and Back Again*, (Toronto: Radisson Society, 1925, first published 1858), 261-3.

give a dance in the evening- for the latter I hear the fiddle tuning while I write- and which is the one holiday of the year to young and old. A separate levée or drawing room is held for the ladies in which a laudable custom exists of giving them a kiss in wishing *la bonne année* (this old fashioned salute is general in the country on other ceremonial occasions)....After this they have a 'régale' of which I must not lower your idea by revealing what it consisted in, but one item is always a glass of wine, if there is any. Our ball went off with great éclat. Many of the Canadian dances are amusing enough, particularly one called the *Chasse aux Lièvres*.... The voyageurs have an amusing custom of pressing the gentlemen to dance in such a way as this 'Ah! Monsieur, wont you dance, and you shall have my partner!' the lady takes it as a compliment. 'Voulez vous pas dancier, et avec cette dame icit' handing to you the lady who has just stood up with himself. We mustered six or eight women to about three times that number of men, and they enjoyed themselves until about 1 in the morning to an old fiddle and an Indian drum.⁸¹

Lefroy's fascinating description reflects a genuine mingling of French Canadian and Native forms of merriment. "Kissing the ladies" in the drawing room and the teasing incorporated into the *chasse aux lièvres* might have reflected both an enjoyment and respect for Native and métis women. Ross Cox describes one dance at Lac La Pluie in 1817:

We had two excellent fiddlers; and as several of the gentlemen had wives, we

⁸¹ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Sophia, Fort Chipewyan, Athabasca, 1 January 1844, 91-3.

got up three or four balls, in which the exhilarating amusement of the 'light fantastic toe' was kept up to a late hour in the morning. We walked through no lazy minuets; we had no simpering quadrilles; no languishing half-dying waltzes; no, - ours was the exercise of health; the light lively reel, or the rattling good old-fashioned country dance, in which the graceful though untutored movements of the North-west females would have to put to blush many of the more refined votaries of Terpsichore.⁸²

Cox's chivalrous admiration for "North-west females" reflects the fur trade society moral code of respecting women, regardless of their race, which existed in the north west before the arrival of white women. This official attitude existed at the Beaver Club dinners, held for the fur trade bourgeois in Montreal. One of the formal toasts which began each dinner was to wives and children in the north west.⁸³ Historian Michael Payne provides an almost identical description of balls at the HBC post York Factory:

The balls were exciting events. Music was usually provided by fiddlers, and the dances were mostly Scottish reels at which the Indian women were not particularly accomplished, but which they enjoyed immensely. An interesting feature of the balls was the tradition that developed of company employees lining up to be kissed in turn by all the Indian women present.⁸⁴

⁸² Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 31 July 1817, 280.

⁸³ Carolyn Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude and Fraternalism: Fur Trade Masculinity and the Beaver Club, 1785-1827," in *New Faces in the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference*, edited by William C. Wicken, Jo-Anne Fiske and Susan Sleeper-Smith, 31-52, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 41.

⁸⁴ Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory*, 89.

Many groups of all-male sojourners seemed to enjoyed music and dances in their leisured moments. Nearly all shanty camps in northern Ontario had a fiddler, and singing and dancing were popular Saturday-night pastimes.⁸⁵ Creighton argues that some of the most popular activities on the forecastles of whaling ships were singing and dancing, which helped forge bonds between the different classes and ethnicities of men and accommodate social differences.⁸⁶ The same seemed to be true at the interior fur trade posts.

Holding a formal ball was an importation from French Canada, but the dancing and music were culturally distinctive. The "old fiddle and Indian drum" symbolized the mixing of European and Native forms.⁸⁷ Dancing was not restricted to holidays, but continued throughout the seasons at fur trade posts. Having dances or "balls" was a fairly common occurrence both at the Great Lakes posts and in the interior.⁸⁸ Either fiddlers or singers would provide the music, and spirited, fast dancing predominated over formal, slower reels. The descriptions of the "lively reels" of country dances reflected a rough and tumble *joie de vivre* that was characteristic of voyageur culture. Balls at Grand Portage during the *rendezvous* were more genteel affairs for the benefit of the bourgeois, with music from the bagpipe,

⁸⁵ Radforth, "The Shantymen," 231-2.

⁸⁶ Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, 136.

⁸⁷ Also see Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 126-9.

⁸⁸ For examples of balls at Great Lakes posts see "The Narrative of Peter Pond" in, Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Mackinaw, 47; and Toronto; OA; George Gordon Papers; MU 1146; Frederick Goedike, Batchiwenon, to George Gordon, Michipicoten, 11 February 1812; 1-3. For examples of balls at interior posts see George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Fort Alexandria, Saturday, 18 June 1808, 42; and Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River: Being a Narrative of the Expedition Fitted Out by John Jacob Astor, to Establish the 'Pacific Fur Company' With an Account of Some Indian Tribes on the Coast of the Pacific*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966, originally published London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1849), Spokane House, summer 1812, 212.

violin, flute and fife.⁸⁹ Even at these balls, "country music" combined musical forms from Canada, Scotland, England and Natives. Dances were often held to celebrate specific events, such as the coalition of the XY Company and NWC in 1804.⁹⁰ The most common occasions for balls were weddings and to honour visitors to the post.⁹¹ Men from different companies frequently attended each others' dances.⁹² Sometimes dances were held for no particular reasons, other than to have fun and enliven the monotony of post life, especially during the long winters.⁹³

Alcohol

In 18th-century European and colonial settings, alcohol was a big part of most peoples' lives.⁹⁴ Voyageurs' use of alcohol or attitude towards it probably did not differ from habitants, or other groups of labouring men in the 18th century. However, a key difference was that alcohol was restricted and controlled by the bourgeois, and voyageurs did not have

⁸⁹ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Grand Portage, Friday, 4 July 1800, 22.

⁹⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Coded Journal, 17 April - 20 October 1821, entitled "A continuation of My Journal at Moose Lake", (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 28 June 1821, 29.

⁹¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 6 September 1810, 626; and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Sunday, 16 December 1804, Sunday, 24 February 1805, Sunday, 31 March 1805, Sunday, 28 April 1805, Sunday, 12 May 1805, and Friday, 17 May 1805, 222, 230, 234-5, 238, 240-1.

⁹² For an example of NWC and HBC men dancing together at Fort George see Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 22 March 1795, 66. For an example of NWC and XYC men dancing together see "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday, 11 January 1805, 224-5. For an example of NWC, XYC and HBC men dancing together at Rivière Souris, Fort Assiniboine, see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Monday, 27 May 1805, 89-90.

⁹³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 27 January 1810, 584.

⁹⁴ Thomas Brennan, *Public Drinking and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). For a discussion of how drinking can be understood as part of the social order see Mary Douglas, ed., *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

habitual access to it as they would have in French Canada. Bourgeois controlled the rations of alcohol to save money and as a means of exerting control over their men (the symbolism of drams is discussed in chapter 8). Although the bourgeois probably drank as much as their men, they treated voyageurs as useless drunks. They frequently reprimanded their men for drunkenness.⁹⁵ Bourgeois sometimes refused to sell alcohol to their men in an effort to curb their drinking practices, especially when they wanted their men to pay their debts.⁹⁶ Seeing themselves as distinct from their men in regard to drinking helped bourgeois to socially distance themselves from their men, which helped them maintain authority over their men. These attitudes are ironic when compared to the behaviour of bourgeois at the Montreal Beaver Club and annual *rendezvous*. Their dinners were notorious for excessive drinking and revelry.⁹⁷ After the merger of the HBC and NWC in 1821, the new governor George Simpson imposed stringent temperance regulations on posts, but met with little success. Perhaps his measures were so unpopular because most traders knew that drinking was not a serious problem.⁹⁸

Drinking held a central place in seafaring culture. However, unlike the north west, where cargos had to be physically hauled over unending portages, deadly excesses of drinking were common. Drink offered respite from an often punishing life on ship. Rediker

⁹⁵ For one of many examples of bourgeois drunkenness and brawling see George Nelson's *Journal and Reminiscences*, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; 57.

⁹⁶ Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Friday, 2 January 1801, 15; and *Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19*; 3 March 1819, 34-5.

⁹⁷ See Carolyn Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude and Fraternalism".

⁹⁸ Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company*, 134-5; Jan Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades Before Confederation*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 189-93.

speculates that "too much plain dealing, with the elements and with the conditions of life at sea, led to a lot of plain old drinking."⁹⁹ Unfortunately for the voyageurs, they could not carry enough liquor to offer respite from their journeys. Yet, like sailors, drinking served critical social functions, allowing the men to bond with each other and form enduring friendships.¹⁰⁰

Voyageurs' working days were punctuated with "drams" or shots, they drank some nights while relaxing, and drank heavily during parties, dances and holidays.¹⁰¹ Bourgeois control over supplies and the frequent shortage of alcohol on canoe voyages and in the interior probably encouraged voyageurs to develop a "feast-famine" attitude to drinking. If they knew that the supply of alcohol was often precarious, they would drink with abandon while alcohol was available. Although these occasions were described in considerable detail in the journals of the bourgeois and clerks, limited supplies of alcohol made them exceptional rather than routine.

In some extreme cases, voyageurs were drunk when they worked.¹⁰² Periodically bourgeois mentioned when drunkenness of the voyageurs impeded their work. One bourgeois could not send off his goods as early as he wished because his men "were amusing themselves and not fit to travel."¹⁰³ Voyageurs sometimes began to drink their *regales* while

⁹⁹ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 191-2.

¹⁰⁰ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 192.

¹⁰¹ See chapter 8 for extensive examples of drams being provided on a daily basis.

¹⁰² For two examples see Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 29 June 1812 and 30 July 1817, 74, 280. However, Alexander Mackenzie characterized it as a regular occurrence. McKenzie, "A General History," 17-18.

¹⁰³ Ottawa; NAC; MG19 B1; North West Company Letterbook, 1798-1800; vol. 1; A. McKenzie to John Loyer [Sayer?], Grand Portage, 9 August 1799, 87. For another example of drunk voyageurs preventing a departure see "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Septr. 1804," 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, Thursday, 20 September 1804, 17.

paddling, and journeys had to be interrupted because the voyageurs were not fit to continue.¹⁰⁴ On some occasions a post could be characterized by general drunkenness,¹⁰⁵ but more commonly heavy and raucous drinking had a designated time and form, such as during holiday celebrations. On the canoe journeys and at interior posts men usually confined their heavy drinking to the occasional evening.¹⁰⁶ Bourgeois sometimes used alcohol as a means of maintaining good faith among their men on a particularly difficult journey. In the summer of 1793 while on an arduous mission to find an overland passage to the Pacific Ocean, Alexander Mackenzie described the end of one hard day of work: "At the close of the day we assembled round a blazing fire; and the whole party, being enlivened with the usual beverage which I supplied on these occasions, forgot their fatigues and apprehensions."¹⁰⁷

Heavy drinking was reserved for special occasions, such as when supplies arrived, and during parties and "balls".¹⁰⁸ A notable designated time and place for heavy drinking and drunkenness was the *rendezvous* where voyageurs received generous *regales*.¹⁰⁹ "Wild excess" could be found further in the interior. One small creek near the Red River earned the

¹⁰⁴ George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Friday, 5 August 1803, 4.

¹⁰⁵ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95; Sunday, 27 October 1793, 2.

¹⁰⁶ Journal of John MacDonell, Assiniboines-Riviere qu'Appelle, 1793-95; Sunday, 14 December 1794, 22; "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown, Saturday and Sunday, 11-12 November 1799, 3a; and John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Monday, 10 October 1800, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Saturday, 15 June 1793, 329.

¹⁰⁸ For an example of drinking when supplies arrived see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 7 March 1814, 851. For examples of drunkenness during parties see Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 22 March 1795, 66; "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Friday and Saturday, 11-12 January 1805, 224-5; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Monday, 27 May 1805, 89-90.

¹⁰⁹ George Nelson's Journal, "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 15-16; Mackenzie, "A General History," 1789, 52.

name "Drunken River" when a carousing group of voyageurs had a particularly memorable party.¹¹⁰ At least one voyageur was nicknamed "the Drunkard", and this mark of notoriety made it into official correspondence.¹¹¹

Often excessive drinking led to violence. A voyager named Voyer, between the ages of 40 and 50, described as "a great drunkard," went to Grand Portage to visit friends. When he became drunk, some of the clerks and bourgeois smeared his face with "caustic" and drew lewd figures on it. Voyer became enraged when sober and swore revenge on those who had disfigured him. The following summer, when the same bourgeois denied him alcohol and chided him for his drunkenness, he killed several of their horses and threatened them with a knife.¹¹² These kind of exceptional cases of "drunkards" can be found in most early modern societies; they represent the edges of social acceptability rather than the norm.

Despite the outbreaks of violence, drunkenness was contained rather than excessive. Drinking did not threaten the social order of the fur trade, rather it provided a safe and designated outlet for debauch and disorder. Michael Payne found the same pattern at York Factory-- although excessive drinking caused some social tensions, alcoholism was not widespread and fatalities due to drinking were limited.¹¹³ The "boundaries of containment" were set by the availability of alcohol and the commonly accepted social sites for heavy drinking. Voyageurs became apprehensive when violence became excessive, when the

¹¹⁰ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 2: 249-50.

¹¹¹ North West Company Letterbook, 1798-1800; vol. 1; Alexander Mackenzie to the proprietors of the NWC, Grand Portage, 16 June 1799, 71.

¹¹² George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; 57.

¹¹³ Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory*, 83.

functioning of fur trade was disrupted for a great length of time, and when food was in short supply. In one extreme case, a bourgeois named Duncan Campbell, charged with drunkenness by the NWC in 1809, had allowed his trading post to become a corrupt, filthy and starving "heart of darkness." He lost all of his trade goods, ran out of food, drank himself to oblivion, and neglected his paternal duties to his servants. He was court-marshalled, and his voyageurs testified that they were disgusted by his behaviour.¹¹⁴

Games and Contests

One way to understand play among voyageurs is to use Pierre Bourdieu's economic metaphor of "capital."¹¹⁵ The masculine values of strength, courage, and risk-taking, as well as mirth, trickery, and camaraderie were expressions of noneconomic wealth. Play, especially through games and contests, became a means of accumulating "masculine capital" by demonstrating their skill, strength and endurance. Because voyageurs had few possessions and could not carry many personal belongings with them into the interior, games could not involve elaborate equipment.¹¹⁶ Playing cards and gambling were common pastimes.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851; 20-1 or 204-5.

¹¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital", John G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, 241-58), 242. Also see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 112-21; and Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119.

¹¹⁶ In his discussion of the cargos carried in *canots du maitre*, Bruce M. White notes only the basic necessities of food, clothing and alcohol as equipment for voyageurs. Bruce M. White, "Montreal Canoes and their Cargoes," *Le Castor Fait Tout: Selected Papers of the Fifth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1985*, edited by Bruce Trigger et. al., 164-92, (Montreal: St. Louis Historical Society, 1987), 185-7.

¹¹⁷ For an example of playing cards see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Sunday, 16 November 1800, 37. For an example of playing a game called "La Mouche" with cards and chips see George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 63. On gambling as a wide-spread practice see Cox,

Michael Payne also found that small board games such cribbage and dominoes were also common pastimes at York Factory.¹¹⁸ Voyageurs played games from French Canada, such as those with a ball.¹¹⁹ Other games or amusements, such as "pagessan" or "le jeu au plat" and body tattooing, were learned from Native peoples.¹²⁰ Dr. John Richardson, who was a surgeon in the Royal Navy and a traveling companion of John Franklin, described games played by the Cree at Cumberland House. The game *puckesann* involved betting on the number of stones tossed out of a small wooden dish. In the "game of the mitten," one marked and three unmarked balls were placed under four mittens, and contenders had to guess under which mitten the marked ball lay. These games, along with lacrosse, required little equipment, which could be easily made from materials in the surrounding environment.¹²¹

Voyageurs gained social currency both by enhancing their reputations for toughness and skill, and by their own belief in their strength and ability. In reminiscing about his life, the elderly voyageur on Lake Winnipeg bragged to Alexander Ross that " 'I beat all Indians at the race, and no white man ever passed me in the chase.' "¹²² The value of beating Native peoples implies that Native men were faster and stronger, and thus more manly than Euro-Canadians. The desire to excel at skills necessary for survival in the north west, skills which

Adventures on the Columbia River, 306.

¹¹⁸ Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory*, 69.

¹¹⁹ Donald McKay, Journal from August 1800 to April 1801, Company of Temiscamingue; Sunday, 28 December 1800, 17.

¹²⁰ For an example of voyageurs playing Native games see Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 82. On voyageurs tattooing themselves see Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Thursday and Friday, 22-23 January 1801, 19. On Cree tattooing see Dr. Richardson's account in Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey*, 67.

¹²¹ Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey*, 63, 68.

¹²² Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 236-7.

were usually learned from Native peoples, was a clear example of cultural values shifting from French Canada to voyageur culture in fur trade society. Being more "Indian" than the "Indians" was a measure of manliness and success in adapting to new social and physical spaces.

Currency could also be earned in beating the bourgeois.¹²³ However, physical contests were most common among voyageurs. Canoe races were a popular form of competition. Crews would race against each others' canoes within a brigade, or race against other brigades.¹²⁴ These contests built a sense of fellowship, trust and cooperation among the crews. Bourgeois encouraged their men to race, and they often set out to break each others' records for the fastest time between major posts. Recall George Landmann's record for the journey from St. Joseph's Island near Detroit to Montreal, which his crew completed in seven and one quarter days.¹²⁵ After the 1821 merger, races between Montreal canoes and York boats were common at York Factory.¹²⁶

Brawling was a common social activity and had a variety of meanings among the voyageurs. It frequently accompanied parties and heavy drinking, and in these contexts, was hostile and malicious, and sometimes led to mayhem or riots.¹²⁷ However, brawling was often

¹²³ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 2: spring 1799, 81.

¹²⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 11 August 1800, 30-1; Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 18 August 1794, 11-12; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Tuesday, 9 July 1822; and George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Fort William to Cumberland House, 21 July - 22 August 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Monday, 19 August 1822.

¹²⁵ Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 167-9.

¹²⁶ Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory*, 68-9.

¹²⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 6 May 1804, 243; and Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria*, 1800; Friday, 10 April 1801, 31.

an organized event or competition at which men sought to demonstrate their prowess, boost their reputations, and amuse their mates.¹²⁸ They often "fought for a set", and a "drawn battle" could be decided with "fair boxing at head quating."¹²⁹ Brawling was significant to voyageurs because it demonstrated strength and toughness. It also underscored a dimension of physicality in voyageur culture, which was encouraged by the physical nature of the job. One famous Métis voyageur, Paulet Paul, achieved an almost "mythic fame" as a fighter after the 1821 merger.¹³⁰ Brawling can be understood as part of the importance of competition among voyageurs and became a means for them to increase their symbolic capital. Richard Reid and Ian Radforth assert that among the Ottawa lumberers, fighting expressed an individual's standing according to his strength, stamina, courage, cunning and ferocity. French Canadian shantymen especially worshiped good fighters as heroes.¹³¹

Fur trade journals are filled with stories about the difficulty of fur trade work and the almost mythic strength, endurance and joviality of the voyageurs. They were frequently referred to as "beasts of burden" which both reduced them to animals and elevated them to "hyper-masculine" superheroes. Clerk George Nelson wrote that these "sons of hercules":

seem to do more than ever was meant for human nature; ... [they] rise at dusk
in the morning and until near sunset, are either pulling on their paddles, or

¹²⁸ "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown; Saturday, 11 April 1800, 23. For another example of brawling referred to as a sport or competition see George Nelson's Journal, 1 April 1810 - 1 May 1811; Sunday, 13 May 1810, 7 (I added page numbers), where two voyageurs fought a "rough and tumble" and a "pitch battle."

¹²⁹ Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Athabasca River, Thursday, 3 May 1819, 69.

¹³⁰ Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory*, 69; and John E. Foster, "Paulet Paul: Métis or 'House Indian' Folk Hero?" *Manitoba History*, no. 9 (spring 1985).

¹³¹ Radforth, "The Shantymen," 235; Richard Reid, ed., *The Upper Ottawa Valley to 1855: A Collection of Documents*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1990), xxxiii-xxxiv.

running with 180, or 200 lbs wt. on their backs, as if it were for life or death; never stop to take their meals peacably, but with a piece of pemmican in their hands eat under their load.¹³²

He went on to marvel that voyageurs seemed tougher, stronger and swifter than dogs or horses. Voyageurs tried to out-perform each other to demonstrate their masculine capital.

Contests were not limited to physical prowess but extended to almost any area. Competing to see who could eat or drink the most was less significant than contests of physical prowess, but it was like gaming, or a way for voyageurs to gamble small amounts of their symbolic capital for entertainment's sake. In the spring of 1808 while journeying between interior posts, two of George Nelson's voyageurs, Leblanc and Larocque, decided to see who could eat the most during one of their meals. Both unfortunate men began to feel ill and shake, when lynx excrement was discovered at the bottom of the pot, which elicited "many coarse & filthy jokes."¹³³

Tricks

Were the faeces in the pot an accident or a joke? The predominance of jokes and trickery in voyageur culture leads one to think that the latter was the case. Humour is difficult

¹³²George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Friday, 21 June 1822. For other examples see *ibid.*, Thursday, 4 July 1822, Tuesday, 9 July 1822, and Tuesday, 6 August 1822; Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 251-2; Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 303 and 2: 179, 186; Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 246-7; and Extracts from a Letter of Andrew Graham, Master at York Fort, to the Governor and Committee of the HBC, dated York Fort, 26 August 1772, W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1934), 43.

¹³³ George Nelson's Journal, "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851, 28-9 or 212-13.

to translate across cultures, both for historians trying to understand voyageurs, and for voyageurs trying to have fun with each other, their bosses, and their Native friends and families. The writings of the fur trade literate reveal that voyageurs frequently joked with and teased each other and their bourgeois.¹³⁴ In one example at Rocky Mountain Fort in fall 1799, a voyageur named Gagnon threw his recently deceased dog on the side of a river bank. The men of the post then sent out a "simpleton" named Borriard to see if the dog had to come to life.¹³⁵

Cruelty to animals was a strain of humour that voyageurs shared with other early modern peoples. It is surprising that voyageurs focussed on dogs in the north west. Sled dogs were an important asset for winter travel. Voyageurs collected and cherished dogs, decorating them as they would their canoes and paddles. Yet, they occasionally abused dogs for fun. In complaining about traveling in the interior, John Franklin commented that:

The next evil is being constantly exposed to witness the wanton and unnecessary cruelty of the men to their dogs, especially those of the Canadians, who beat them unmercifully, and habitually vent on them the most

¹³⁴ For examples of the pervasiveness of joking see Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 243; Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19; Lake Nippissing, Saturday, 6 June 1818, 7; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 3 October 1803, 227. For example of teasing see *ibid.*, 10 Sept 1800, 93; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a translation made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Thursday, 20 June 1822; George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851; summer 1807, 4 or 188; and Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Fort Simpson, McKenzie's River, 5 June 1844, 121. For an example of a bourgeois teasing a voyageur see James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Friday, 31 January 1800, 17 (I added page numbers).

¹³⁵ "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown, Tuesday, 4 December 1799, 5-6.

dreadful and disgusting imprecations.¹³⁶

Perhaps because voyageurs were so highly dependent on dogs for winter travel, those dogs that could not be properly trained for pulling sleds were scorned. Alexander Henry the Younger recorded that his men sometimes amused themselves by "watching dogs copulate, and then rushing upon them with an axe or club."¹³⁷ Voyageurs clearly found it amusing, although the bourgeois did not. Common notions of trickery and jokes are significant signs of a cohesive culture among voyageurs. The humour in torturing dogs may be part of what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed "grotesque realism" in medieval and early modern European folk humour.¹³⁸ Bodily elements were deeply positive, not repulsive, and all that was "bodily" became "grandoise, exaggerated, immeasurable." Dogs took on a symbolic value as that which expressed "base" animal (and human) needs in an immediate way. Bakhtin goes on to explain that "the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract." Abusing dogs may have been a form of debasing that voyageurs heavily relied upon. Dogs were valued because they were eaten by voyageurs, a victual which was learned from Native peoples; eating dogs could be sacred. Dogs were important as both a means of travel and as food, and were thus visible targets for debasement. These forms of amusement are echoed in paintings by William Hogarth, such as "The First Stage of Cruelty."¹³⁹ This cruel abuse of dogs is reminiscent of what historian Robert Darnton

¹³⁶ Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey*, Fort Chipewyan, 26 March 1820, 127-8. For other examples see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 30 March 1803, 210 and 2: 13 February 1811, 699.

¹³⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 6 January 1801, 166.

¹³⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, first published 1968), 18-19.

¹³⁹ For a reproduction see Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1985, first published in 1984), 74.

coined as the "great cat massacre," where apprentices in an 18th-century printing shop captured and charged most of the cats in the neighborhood in a mock trial and strung them up with a makeshift gallows. The apprentices were not dependent on cats, as the voyageurs relied upon dogs. Yet, as with the cat massacre, modern readers' inability to see the humour in torturing dogs underscores the cultural distance that separates us from voyageurs.¹⁴⁰

Symbolic and social capital was exchanged in trickery by efforts to garner respect and mete out humiliation. Excessive joking and teasing could cause ill will between men.¹⁴¹ In one case, at the Park River post in the fall of 1800, all the men were edgy, as they feared an attack by the Sioux. One of the voyageurs, Charbonneau, earned the ire of the post for his tomfoolery. He fired his gun at the bourgeois, Alexander Henry the Younger, and then hid, leading everyone to believe that the Sioux had begun an assault.¹⁴² Sometimes jokes could end in tragedy. At Pembina River in the summer of 1803, voyageur Joseph Rainville accidentally killed voyageur Venant St. Germain when, in play, he shot him with a gun he thought was not loaded.¹⁴³

Playing tricks on their bourgeois may have been a way for voyageurs to express dissatisfaction, or to try to gain the upper hand in the relationship. George Nelson seems to have fallen victim to many of his men's tricks. Early on in his career, while he was still a novice, Nelson's voyageurs shook his house in the middle of the night, made Nelson believe that it had been caused by an animal, and then refused to stay in the house with him for

¹⁴⁰ Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 77-8.

¹⁴¹ Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Friday, 10 April 1801, 31.

¹⁴² Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 2 October 1800, 109-10.

¹⁴³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 19 August 1804, 249.

mutual protection. His men grabbed him when he went out to inspect the post at night, which amplified Nelson's fear of the dark, and they fabricated stories of ghosts to scare him.¹⁴⁴

These tricks probably extended to novice voyageurs as well. Radforth describes the "hazing" of new shantymen as their initiation into shanty life. The rites of initiation, such as pushing novices into tubs of icy water, covering their faces with soot, and scaring them by pretending to be bears, was a way to bring them into the fraternity of shantymen, teach them the rules of the group and their place in it.¹⁴⁵

Nelson's suspicions of his men playing "derty tricks" on him lasted into the later years of his career.¹⁴⁶ Nelson may not have been a typical clerk; his insecurity in wielding authority over his men may have made him appear weak, and thus be particularly susceptible to tricks by his men. Other bourgeois and clerks may have been more hesitant than Nelson in recording tricks played on them because of the humiliation they undoubtedly endured. Robert Darnton found that early modern artisans used symbols to make a fool of the bourgeois for the benefit of the other workers, but kept jokes ambiguous enough to avoid being fired. Along the same lines, voyageurs' abuse of dogs may have been funny to them because it mimicked how they felt about being under the rule of their masters. Their "symbolic horeseplay" might have been an attempt to chastise a harsh bourgeois for his ill-treatment.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Nelson never knew if his men were responsible or not for these strange occurrences, but it seems highly probable, especially considering Nelson's fear of night in the early part of his career. George Nelson's *Journal and Reminiscences*, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; fall 1803, 52; George Nelson's *Journal*, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804; Thursday, 18 May 1804, 39-41; and George Nelson's *Journal* "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851; 15 or 199.

¹⁴⁵ Radforth, "The Shantymen," 232-3.

¹⁴⁶ *Diary of George Nelson, in the service of the North West Company at Tête au Brochet, 1818-19; Monday, 2 November 1818, 10-11.*

¹⁴⁷ Suggested by Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 101.

The upper hand in jokes and trickery was sometimes held by the bourgeois. Alexander Henry the Younger mercilessly teased two of his men, Langlois and Desmarais, one day in early fall 1800. He pretended generosity with his men, giving them some bad West India rum, but telling them it was fine French brandy. After the men praised the liquor and boasted their expertise in assessing the quality of cognacs, Henry revealed his trick. The next day he gave the same men some coloured high wines, who praised it as the best West India rum they had ever drunk, and esteemed far better than "that nasty strong stuff, high wine." Henry had a second laugh, and secured the promise from the men that they would never again pretend to judge liquor.¹⁴⁸ Bourgeois tried to reinforce their social distance from voyageurs by demonstrating greater knowledge and sophistication. However sometimes they employed the rough and cruel antics which they usually attributed to their men. In a malicious and exceptional case, one bourgeois, Alexander McKay, notably "eccentric", set fire to a tree which a voyageur was turning into a maypole. The unfortunate man, caught at the top of the blazing tree and enveloped in smoke and heat, barely saved his life by jumping to another tree.¹⁴⁹ Most bourgeois, and voyageurs, would hesitate in taking jokes so far that they would permanently alienate their peers.

Joking and trickery took on interesting dimensions with regard to Native peoples.

Voyageurs were fascinated by Native "antics", and enjoyed their singing and dancing.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 2 and 3 September 1800, 76.

¹⁴⁹ Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 2 May 1811, 78-9.

¹⁵⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; 917.11 F671; Simon Fraser, "Journal of a voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, Performed in the year 1808" (photostat and typescript also available; photostat of the transcription of the journal at the University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Library, No. 18, Series C, in the Pacific Coast Mss.; and at NAC, MG19 A9, Simon Fraser Collection, vol. 6. Published in L.R.F. Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, vol. 1, New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, originally

Native peoples were also frequently amused by voyageurs, as at Spokane House in the summer of 1814, where the Native people were delighted when the voyageurs managed to domesticate and train a young bear.¹⁵¹ In another instance some starving voyageurs amused a group of Ojibwa with their efforts at imitating Native chanting, singing and dancing. The Ojibwa took pity on the voyageurs and gave them food.¹⁵² Teasing and joking were also common among Native women who married voyageurs. Native women often asserted their power over the traders by playing tricks on them. In the winter of 1810, an old voyageur named Desrocher pretended to sell his wife to another voyageur named Welles. As part of the elaborate plot, the wife played along. When Welles awaited his new bride in their marriage bed, rather than joining him, she threw a kettle of ice water all over him.¹⁵³ Among Native peoples, the Trickster, also known as Nanabohzo, was a major spirit, who had both the power to create and to destroy, using laughter, humour and irony.¹⁵⁴ It is hard to know if voyageurs learned about the Trickster, and understood Native spirituality, but the emphasis on humour probably provided a cultural meeting ground.

The social life and play of voyageurs at the interior posts reveals an interesting tension between old and new social practices. Voyageurs preserved social traditions from

published 1889-90 and in W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-1808*, Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1960); Tuesday, 20 June 1808, 22.

¹⁵¹ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 31 August 1814, 164. For an example of voyageurs joking with an elderly Native woman see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 1 January 1801, 163.

¹⁵² George Nelson's *Journal and Reminiscences*, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; fall 1803, 51.

¹⁵³ George Nelson's *Journal*, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810; Thursday, 10 January 1810, 48 (I added page numbers).

¹⁵⁴ See Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972, first published 1956); and Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historic Changes*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 84-100.

French Canada to create a sense of home in "Indian Country," which could be overwhelming in its strangeness. Celebrating annual holidays, drinking and dancing reminded voyageurs of their lives in rural French Canada, and allowed voyageurs to continue to be a part of that social world. Yet, the circumstances of the fur trade led to the emergence of new cultural forms. The heightened masculinity of the male dominated work place, which valued toughness and strength, and the liminality of the social space of canoe journeys and post life, brought contests and trickery to the fore. Men made every effort to demonstrate their strength, endurance and good humour, especially in the face of hardship and privation.

Camaraderie

How did the liminal position of voyageurs working in the fur trade affect their relationships with each other? How did the men work out the social conventions of their culture? How were their friendships with fellow voyageurs different from their friendships with men in French Canada? These questions are very difficult to answer. The dearth of work on male friendships among habitants makes comparisons especially difficult. A significant drawback in assessing the shape and nature of voyageur friendships is that their lives must be read through the writings of their bourgeois and clerks, who were probably not aware of many of the relationships among their men, and would have little reason to record them in their letters and journals unless the behaviour directly affected the fur trade work. The record contains extremes in behaviour, situations which were remarkable or abnormal, and conduct which hindered the workings of the trade. Despite these daunting drawbacks, this section attempts to explore patterns in voyageur camaraderie. In friendships between the men we can

see expressions of the voyageur social order, such as an emphasis on good humour, generosity, rowdiness and strength. In a culture where money and material possession had limited significance, the quest for a strong reputation became important to the social order.

Politeness was a social convention brought from French Canada. Traveling through the Canadas in the early 19th century, John Lambert noted that French Canadians were generally "good-humoured, peacable, and friendly" and remarkably civil to each other and to strangers. People bowed to each other as they passed on the streets, and men sometimes even kissed each other on the cheek.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, writers remarked upon the good humour and affection that voyageurs showed to each other and even to their bourgeois. Ross Cox marveled that the men referred to each other as *mon frère* or *mon cousin* without being related and that they made up pet names for their bourgeois.¹⁵⁶ Bestowing kinship names on each other may have been a practice borrowed from Native people, who frequently adopted people or assigned them kinship designations to incorporate them into their social order.

Yet, civility among voyageurs was often described as "rough", and as exchanges delivered in the "coarse & familiar language of brother voyageurs."¹⁵⁷ Swearing or blasphemy was not restricted to expressions of anger, but was common in many different contexts. Expressions usually had to do with religious imagery, such as *sacré* (sacred), *mon dieu* (my

¹⁵⁵ John Lambert, *Travels Through Canada, and the United States of North America, in the years 1806, 1807, & 1808*, (London: C. Cradock and W. Joy, 1814, 2nd ed. 1st ed. published in 1813), 1: 173.

¹⁵⁶ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 306. Also see Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 304.

¹⁵⁷ George Nelson's Journal "No. 5", June 1807 - October 1809, written as a reminiscence, dated 7 February 1851; 30 or 214.

god), and *baptême* (baptism), which probably eased and poked fun at serious situations.¹⁵⁸

The characterization of the familiarity and camaraderie as "rough" by the bourgeois may reflect the bourgeois' desire to be "civilized."¹⁵⁹ Historian Peter Moogk asserts that verbal and physical abuse among "the lower orders" in New France was commonplace, but did not mean that habitants were particularly vulgar or wanton people. Bakhtin proposes that *billingsgate*, or curses, oaths and popular blazons, was a form of folk humour in early modern Europe. Abusive language was a mark of familiarity and friendship.¹⁶⁰ The "rough" civility may have found a particularly exaggerated expression in the *pays d'en haut*. Because the men worked in harsh and dangerous conditions, they wanted to be especially jovial and rowdy to demonstrate their lack of fear, and their great strength in living amidst adversity. Rediker suggests that at sea "rough talk" was a way for sailors to express an opposition to "polite" bourgeois customs and their ideals of gentility, moderation, refinement and industry. He asserts that "rough speech" was a transgressive means to deal with shipboard isolation and incarceration.¹⁶¹ Likewise, rough talk among voyageurs was probably a verbal cue for a distinct masculine identity.

Fraternity among voyageurs was aided by the values of charity, generosity and good

¹⁵⁸ For a few examples see George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822 (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk); Tuesday, 18 June 1822; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803; 10; and Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 167.

¹⁵⁹ See Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude and Fraternalism" for a discussion of bourgeois efforts to reconcile what they perceived as "rough" and "gentle" forms of masculinity.

¹⁶⁰ Peter N. Moogk, "Thieving Buggers' and 'Stupid Sluts': Insults and Popular Culture in New France," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XXXVI (1979), 524-47; and Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5, 16-17.

¹⁶¹ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 166.

cheer, especially in the interior, where many unknown dangers could befall travelers and life was often precarious.¹⁶² Canoes invariably stopped to help others if they were in need or short on food.¹⁶³ These values became a kind of "insurance" for cases when voyageurs were in need of assistance. They protected each other from hostile Native people, dangerous animals and a treacherous environment. In a case around Fort Vermillion, at Plante's River in February 1810, a couple of voyageurs were robbed and threatened by a party of thirteen Cree and three Assiniboine. The Native people agreed to not hurt one of the voyageurs, Cardinal, whom they knew from previous trading, but they wanted the scalp of the other voyageur, Clément. Recall Alexander Henry the Younger's relation of this tale: "Cardinal, who is a most locquacious person, was exercised to the utmost of his ability, and by his fluency of speech saved the life of Clément from these scoundrels." In the end Cardinal had to appease the Natives by relinquishing all of their trade goods, including a valuable pistol.¹⁶⁴ Voyageurs on occasion were also able to save each other from bears, snakes, and other dangerous creatures.¹⁶⁵ The most common dangers of travel were canoe accidents, and many men were rescued from near drowning by their fellow crew members.¹⁶⁶ They took great pride in being cheerful and good-

¹⁶² Near Michilimackinac in 1799 Landmann's crew became ill and could not proceed. A passing canoe of French Canadians delayed their voyageur to help the brigade, a sacrifice which they cheerfully made. Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 2: 117-18.

¹⁶³ In July 1800 in the Rainy Lake district Daniel Harmon's brigade stopped to provide drams to the crew of the Athabasca brigades who were on their way to Grand Portage because they had been starving on much of their journey out. Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Saturday, 25 July 1800, 26.

¹⁶⁴ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 26 February 1810, 589-90. For another example of men working together and protecting each other from hostile Natives see Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 111-14.

¹⁶⁵ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 81-2, 213-14.

¹⁶⁶ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 5 May 1817, 240; Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage*, 25 May 1814, 164; and "'Reminiscences' by the Honorable Roderic McKenzie Being Chiefly a Synopsis of Letters from Sir Alexander Mackenzie" in Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 1: 7-9.

spirited in the face of hardship, toil and danger, as described by Nelson in his analogy of voyageurs as "sons of Hercules." This kind of stoic and blithe endurance of adversity may have been learned from Native peoples. Voyageurs were impressed when Native people always shared with others, and laughed and jested when they were starving.¹⁶⁷

No doubt many genuine friendships emerged between voyageurs. A sense of intimacy was often the result of working closely together, especially in difficult circumstances. Alexander Ross wrote "There is, perhaps, no country where ties of affection are more binding than here."¹⁶⁸ However, it is hard to discover the depth and longevity of friendships. Men often changed posts from year to year, a factor which could undermine friendships. The overall fluidity of the workplace and culture, with new men moving into the job, and men moving out, either to live with Native people, as freemen in the interior, returning to Canada, or dying, worked against the development of long-lasting relationships.

Strains between voyageurs were caused by personality differences, or workplace incidents.¹⁶⁹ Sometimes men disliked a particular voyageur because he did not work as hard as everyone else or was a particular bully.¹⁷⁰ At the Pembina River post under the direction of Alexander Henry the Younger in fall 1800, one of the men was abusing some of the weaker men at the post, physically intimidating them and treating them as his personal slaves. By

¹⁶⁷ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 72-6.

¹⁶⁸ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 1: 303-4.

¹⁶⁹ For an example of men quarrelling see "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799," Author unknown; Tuesday, 14 November 1799, 3a. For an example of men quarrelling over trapping territory see Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 31 October 1800, 132-3.

¹⁷⁰ "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799", Author unknown, Thursday, 25 October 1799, 3; James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Wednesday, 22 January 1800, 16 (I added page numbers); and "The Diary of Hugh Faries" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Wednesday, 1 August 1804, 197.

mid-November one of the other men, who was as strong as the bully and had been on friendly terms with him, was so appalled by the situation that he defended the weaker men and challenged the bully to fight. To the delight of everyone, the bully received a beating and was put in his place.¹⁷¹ Animosity between voyageurs was sometimes so strong that the bourgeois deliberately placed them at different posts.¹⁷² Men of different companies frequently quarreled and fought, probably as a result of direct competition for furs and favour among the Natives.¹⁷³

Instances of brutality and cruelty among voyageurs seemed to be confined to individuals, rather than characterizing the social order. Yet, voyageurs may have become hardened and mean as they tried to toughen themselves in the often cruel environment. Stealing and cruel beatings could occur without apparent provocation.¹⁷⁴ Men who became ill during a journey were especially vulnerable to cruelty, as voyageurs did not want to be put at risk themselves by being left behind to care for those who could no longer travel or were dying. In several recorded instances, ill and dying men were deserted by those who were chosen to care for them.¹⁷⁵ However, most instances of recorded cruelty occurred under especially difficult or crisis conditions, such as when men were starving.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 6 November 1800, 135.

¹⁷² Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 January - 23 June 1815, entitled "A Daily Memoranda of my, my men, & my Neighbors' transactions, as far as can be necessary, in Manitonamingon Lake, for NWC"; Saturday, 8 April 1815, 30-2.

¹⁷³ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 1 May 1803, 211.

¹⁷⁴ James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, Sunday, 8 March 1800, 4.

¹⁷⁵ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 139-40; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser", Tuesday, 1 July 1806, 136-7.

¹⁷⁶ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 60; Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 1817, crossing the Dalles, 245.

Despite the superficial face of "rough talk", social conventions among voyageurs stressed charity and generosity, especially in the face of hardship. Voyageurs could demonstrate that they were tough and strong enough to be kind in a cruel environment. Yet sometimes the difficulty of life in the fur trade caused men to be harsh and cruel to each other, but much of this ill will could be expressed in the frequent and usually organized "sport" of fighting. The tension between a desire for equality and the centrality of social ordering influenced relationships between men in both good and bad ways. Voyageurs worked very closely together, and relied upon each other for survival. However, their often deep friendships were threatened by the transiency of the job.

Sexuality

Some scholars have argued that masculinity or gendered identities cannot be separated from sexuality, and that heterosexuality is often a key part of working men's masculine identity.¹⁷⁷ This construction of masculinity becomes especially problematic in homosocial working environments when men did not have access to women for erotic pleasure. The situation of the voyageurs is historically unusual: they often worked in all male environments, yet they had access to women of a "savage race." Was heterosexuality constructed in the same way when the sexual "other" was also the racial "other"?

The bourgeois portrayed voyageurs as heterosexual, and were conspicuously silent on homosexual practices. The bourgeois may have consciously chosen to overlook the

¹⁷⁷ Steven Maynard, "Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History," *Labour/ Le travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 159-69 and Frank Blye, "Hegemonic Heterosexual Masculinity," *Studies in Political Economy*, 24 (1987).

occurrence of homosexuality, considering it an unmentionable deviance. The silence may also indicate an ignorance of homosexual practice among voyageurs and Natives. Or, homosexuality may not have existed as a social option for voyageurs who had easy access to Native women for sex. In any case, the silence demands close scrutiny.

Many all-male sojourners, most notably sailors, have a documented history of practicing sodomy, although it remains a clouded issue.¹⁷⁸ Without being essentialist about the nature of erotic desire, it is not unreasonable to assume that voyageurs sometimes had sexual feelings for each other or participated in sexual acts together. If sexuality is understood to be situational, then men working together in isolated groups probably developed sexual and emotional relationships with each other.¹⁷⁹ The voyageurs who transported goods and furs on the arduous route between Montreal and Lake Superior worked in isolated settings and had limited contact with Native people. These men, however, worked in the trade only during the summer months and returned to their French Canadian parishes where any kind of nonmarital sexual practice was prohibited.¹⁸⁰ It is possible that in the isolation and freedom of their summer jobs they experimented with different kinds of sexual pleasure. Or, it is possible that they were simply too tired to be interested in sex? Voyageurs

¹⁷⁸ Arthur N. Gilbert, "Buggery and the British Navy, 1700-1861," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Fall 1976), 72-98; Steven Maynard, "Making Waves: Gender and Sex in the History of Seafaring," *Acadiensis*, XXII, 2 (Spring 1993), 144-54; T. Dunbar Moodie, "Migrancy and Male Sexuality in the South African Gold Mines," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (January 1988): 228-56; and George Chauncey, Jr., "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr., 294-317 (New York: New American Library, 1988).

¹⁷⁹ Maynard, "Rough Work," 169.

¹⁸⁰ Serge Gagnon, *Plaisir d'Amour et Crainte de Dieu*, (Québec: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1990), 12-23.

who worked in the interior were often cooped up in trading posts, far away from the regulative forces of the Catholic Church and the scrutiny of social peers, and had the time and leisure to pursue erotic pleasure. Here one might expect to find significant emotional and possibly sexual bonding. The difficulty of fur trade work and the great risks in canoeing and portaging often created intense bonds of friendship and trust between men.¹⁸¹ One clue to homosocial practice in the interior may lie in the patterns and rates of marriages between voyageurs and Native women. Posts where few men married may have become informal sites for same-sex relationships.

Documentation on sodomy in early modern settings has been found mainly in legal records. French Canadian courts contain no prosecutions for voyageur buggery or sodomy (to the best of my knowledge). The Montreal traders did not impose rigid military discipline on their workers as did the HBC, and thus voyageurs were less socially regulated and freer than HBC labourers.¹⁸² Edith Burley has found a few prosecutions for sodomy among the Orkney men working at HBC posts, but she asserts that "Officers appear to have had little interest in the regulation of their men's sexuality and were probably content to overlook their improprieties as long as they did not interfere with the company's business."¹⁸³ Was the same true for the Montreal bourgeois? Many violations of contracts and other crimes were not formally punished because legal systems did not exist in the interior. Perhaps because bourgeois knew they could not prosecute buggery, or prevent it, they turned a blind eye to it.

¹⁸¹ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 303-4.

¹⁸² Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Families in Indian Country*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 87-8.

¹⁸³ Edith I. Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline, and Conflict in the Hudson's Bay Company, 1770-1879*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997) 129-30.

The silence regarding sodomy in bourgeois writings may reflect that the practice was considered deviant, amoral, and illegal. Sexual contact between voyageurs and bourgeois may also have been silenced by bourgeois who did not wish to be incriminated.

Bourgeois may have chosen to overlook sexual relations between voyageurs and Native men so that they would not threaten trading alliances or create enemies. A substantial group of scholars have explored homosexuality among Native societies in the cultural form of berdaches.¹⁸⁴ Berdaches occupied "third sex" roles in Native societies and were sometimes called "two-spirited people." They were most often people who played opposite or both male/female roles, held significant spiritual power, and often became culture heroes. Although berdaches represented many different configurations of gender roles and sexual practices in different Native cultures, their widespread presence may indicate that sexuality was not dichotomous in many Native societies, and that there was space for the expression of homosexual desire. Some suggest that berdaches represented forms of "institutionalized" homosexuality. It is possible that the presence of berdaches indicates that homosexuality was permissible in Native societies, and thus permissible among voyageurs and Native men.

¹⁸⁴ Harriet Whitehead, "The bow and the burden strap: A new look at institutionalized homosexuality in Native North America," in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 80-115. For a critique of Whitehead's imposition of a two-gender model on Native societies, see Will Roscoe, "How to Become a Berdache: Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender Diversity," in *Third Sex Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, edited by Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 329-72. Also see Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). On lesbianism see Paula Gunn Allen, "Lesbians in American Indian Cultures," *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin Baum, Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr., 106-17, (New York: New American Library, 1989).

Concluding Remarks

The play and sociability of voyageurs was central to their working lives in the fur trade. It helped to support the voyageur social and cultural order. At the same time, play was a forum in which new social behaviours could emerge, helping to shape the fluid and liminal culture. Three dominant themes emerged in the play and sociability of voyageurs. Contests provided men with "symbolic capital" in their efforts to bolster their reputations as strong men. The liminal space particularly encouraged jokes and trickery. Finally, voyageurs tried to form a unified and somewhat collective culture in the face of centrifugal forces caused by the mobility of the job and the transience of the men. These ideals and themes distinguished voyageur culture from that of habitants in French Canada, the fur trade bourgeois, and Native societies they encountered in the interior.

Chapter 8

Rites and Rights: The Voyageur Identity

Ritual, or ceremony, is an imprecise concept which has been subject to many different interpretations and usages. Classical scholars have contended that rituals conveyed "truths" in myth and art, while social scientists have considered ritual an important component of community, and the expression of communal beliefs.¹ Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner is perhaps the best known theorist on ritual, and defines it as "*performances, as enactments, and not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules are from the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its form.*"² Following his lead, I will use the term ritual to mean the dramatization of symbols which represent cultural values. Historian Edward Muir proposes a means for using ritual to understand history by explaining that a ritual is a:

social activity that is repetitive, standardized, a model or a mirror, and its meaning is inherently ambiguous. Some scholars place greater emphasis on it as a form of behaviour, either as an enactment that creates social solidarity or forms of social identities; others focus on ritual as a kind of communication that allows people to tell stories about themselves; and still others see ritual as a collectively created performance, a specific kind of practice that constructs, maintains, and modifies society itself.

¹ See Richard F. Hardin, "'Ritual' in Recent Criticism: The Elusive Sense of Community," *Publications in Modern Language Association*, 98 (1983): 846-62.

² Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories About Them," in *On Narrative*, edited by W.J.T. Mitchell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 1981), 155-6.

All of these views are valid and enrich our understanding of how ritual was used in the past.³ Rituals express, teach and remind participants of the meanings and values of their culture, community and their identity. Rituals achieve communal bonding, as well as expressions of individual selfhood. The instability and fluidity of voyageur culture made symbols, and their dramatization in rituals, of vital importance to the maintenance of the culture. Rites were also tools with which voyageurs could carve out "rights" for themselves in the hegemony of the master and servant relationship.

The canoe journey out of Montreal and into "Indian Country" was a ritual which identified the transition into voyageur culture, and defined a social space for the teaching of new values. The "cultural performance" of ritual baptisms signified the thresholds crossed by French Canadian labourers as they entered a new occupational and cultural identity, as well as new stages of manhood. Catholic rites practised by voyageurs, especially in dangerous or tragic circumstances, symbolized the influence of their roots on their new identities. Also through rituals voyageurs honoured and obeyed their masters and yet undermined their authority. Finally, voyageurs imprinted themselves on the social and physical landscape of "Indian Country" through their rites and rights of language.

Les Baptêmes: Making Men

Paddling in canoes all day was usually mundane and tedious. Men tried to punctuate the daily drudgery by demarcating periods of work with rituals and give meaning and order to the journeys. Because voyageurs were constantly initiating new men to their culture, and

³ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6.

because their culture was dominated by fluidity and transience, canoe journeys were imbued with ritual more than any other aspect of voyageur culture. The journey from Lower Canada to "Indian Country" was a psychological and cultural, as well as a physical journey. Rituals marked the entrance to a new cultural landscape in a salient way. Journeying itself symbolically represented the fluidity and liminality of voyageur culture. As discussed in the previous chapter, celebrations and pageantry honoured the arrivals and departures from Montreal and interior fur trading posts. The men sang while they worked in order to set the pace of paddling and to distract themselves from the tedium. They measured distances along canoe routes by the number of times they stopped to smoke their pipes. The most significant ritual of the canoe journeys, however, was the symbolic *baptême* at fixed points along the fur trade canoe routes. Experienced voyageurs would force all new crew members, voyageurs, clerks and bourgeois alike, who had not before crossed that point, to participate in this initiation ceremony. The ceremony symbolically represented the entrance or transition to a new place, a new occupation, a new culture and a new identity. These designated thresholds provide a window to many aspects of transformation involved in entering voyageur culture.

New employees entering the fur trade were initiated into voyageur culture by *baptêmes* at significant geographical points along fur trade transport routes. While travelling along the Ottawa River in 1761, fur trader and explorer Alexander Henry (the elder) commented that "On this southern side, is a remarkable point of sand, stretching far into the stream, and on which it is customary to baptize novices."⁴ Voyageurs who had never yet

⁴ Alexander Henry (the elder), *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776*, (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig, 1969), 25-6.

passed that point along the fur trade routes were dunked or drizzled with water in a mock ceremony. Like much of voyageur culture, rituals along canoe routes are obscured in the historical record. Brief mention of the ritual baptisms can be found in the writings of literate clerks and bourgeois. Any detailed descriptions of the rituals are usually of the bourgeois' own initiation rather than that of the voyageur. Despite these limitations, the ritual baptisms emerge from the fur trade record as an important and long-lived element of voyageur culture, spanning at least the 1680s to the 1840s.

The sites of the ritual *baptême* along the fur trade canoe routes were places with significant geomorphological features, which usually affected the canoe travel, and marked the entrance to a new region. The sites also assumed symbolic meaning through the voyageurs' signification. I have found evidence of three *pointes aux baptêmes* described in the chronicles of the fur trade bourgeois and travellers. One was along the Ottawa River, a second was at the height of land 50 miles west of Lake Superior, and a third was at Methy Portage, or Portage La Loche, just north of Ile à la Crosse. Each of these sites was located near the start of a discernable segment of the vast canoe route of the Montreal trade. It is not surprising that the oldest of the sites was the closest to Montreal, and the most recent of the sites was in the farthest reaches of "Indian Country." The sites followed the extension of the fur trade north and west, and came to represent the moving boundary of "Indian Country." The sites probably represented the entrance to a socially recognized "new land" or region within "Indian Country." The *pointes aux baptêmes* thus provide clues to a social geography, in which voyageurs made sense of and contained the strange new lands they entered.

The first of these sites, along the Grand or Ottawa River, was the first place on the

route out of Montreal where the bedrock or Precambrian Shield could be seen. It was located about 200 miles north west of Ottawa, where Deep River or the Rivière Creuse entered the Ottawa River, at the upper end of Lac des Allumettes.⁵ Here canoe brigades passed through a narrow, deep and swift part of the river, where towering cliffs of granite bedrock provided a significant visual marker to the entrance into a new land. Immediately after this difficult passage, brigades stopped at a sandy point, which came to be known as the *pointe au baptême*, where canoes could be easily grounded and the crew could pause for a rest. This site seems to be the oldest and most well established site of the ritual *baptême* along fur trade routes. It was mentioned with passing familiarity by Chevalier de Troyes as early as 1686, and the *Pointe aux Baptême* is today marked on maps.⁶

Another popular site of the *baptême* was the height of land about 50 miles west of Lake Superior, which separated the waters draining into the Great Lakes from those draining into Lake Winnipeg and Hudson Bay.⁷ Changes in continental and local drainage systems

⁵ Henry (the elder), *Travels and Adventures*, 25-6; W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), Wednesday, 30 April 1800, 11-12; George Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas, Containing a Description of the Picturesque Scenery on Some of the Rivers and Lakes; with an Account of the Productions, Commerce, and Inhabitants of those Provinces*, (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1813), 251-2; Toronto, Ontario Archives (hereafter OA), Angus Mackintosh Papers, MU 1956, Box 4, Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813, approx. 23 July 1813, 13-14; and Toronto, OA, Hudson's Bay Company Collection (hereafter HBCC), MU 1391, Robert Seaborne Miles' Journal, 1818-19, Wednesday, 3 June 1818, 6. Also see map in Eric W. Morse, *Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada/ Then and Now*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, [1969] 1989), 68.

⁶ L'Abbé Ivanhoe Caron, ed., *Journal de l'Expédition du Chevalier de Troyes à la Baie d'Hudson, en 1686*, (Beauceville: La Compagnie de 'L'Éclaireur', 1918), 15 mai 1686, 37; "Chalk River", Map 1132A, Surficial Geology, (Ottawa: Geological Survey of Canada, 1962).

⁷ Toronto, OA, North West Company Collection (hereafter NWCC), MU 2199 (photostat of original), Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in Rivière Ouinipique," June to July 1784 (forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company," by Roderick MacKenzie, director of the North West Company; typescripts can be found also in the OA, NWCC, MU 2200, Box 5, Nos. 2 (a), (b), and (c); photostats and typescripts can also be found in National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Masson Collection (hereafter MC), Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-

were generally referred to as "heights of land." Here currents in rivers changed direction, entailing a major portage to enter the new river system. This major geomorphological change was keenly felt by the traders, who depended on the water systems for transport. Changes in current meant that the journey became either easier or harder, depending on a crew's direction. The significance of this site also lay in the change in canoe method and travel. At the major administrative center of Grand Portage, and after 1804 Fort William, the large *canots du maitre*, which were used on the route from Montreal to Lake Superior, and suitable for lake travel, were exchanged for the smaller *canots du nord*, which were better suited to rivers and streams. The change of canoes also entailed a change in crew. Most of the men who worked on the Montreal to Lake Superior route did not continue on the journey into the interior, but rather headed back to Montreal with a cargo of furs.⁸ The new crews of men formed at Grand Portage and Fort William had their own set of ritual initiations during their journey into the interior.

Established at a later date, the third site of the ritual *baptême* was at Portage La Loche, also called Methy Portage, found north of Ile à la Crosse, at Clearwater River which flows into the Athabasca River. The portage was located on the height of land separating the

15640; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB), MC, C.17; and the Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter MHS), P1571), Thursday, 22 July 1784, 25; "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, (St. Paul: MHS, 1965), Sunday, 11 August 1793, pgs. 99-100; and Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: 24 July 1800, 11. Also see Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur's Highway*, (St. Paul: MHS, 1941), 48-9 and the map on pg. 4; and Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur*, (St. Paul: MHS, 1931), 66-7.

⁸ Roderick McKenzie, Esq., "A General History of the Fur Trade from Canada to the North-West," in Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 with a Preliminary Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Fur Trade of that Country*, (London: R. Noble, Old Bailey, 1801), 51-4.

waters flowing into the Churchill River and Hudson Bay, and waters draining into the Mackenzie River and Arctic Ocean.⁹ Although mention of the ceremony occurring here is rare, the site had long been recognized as one of the most difficult and beautiful portages. It was about twelve and half miles long. Although most of it stretched over level ground, the last mile of the portage comprised a succession of eight hills, and the edge was a steep precipice rising about 1000 feet above the plain. North West Company (NWC) bourgeois Alexander Mackenzie commented on the precipice's "most extensive, romantic, and ravishing prospect."¹⁰ The explorer John Franklin also waxed poetic about the beauty and sublimity of the view from the edge of the portage, which contrasted to the "wild scenery" of the deep ravines and narrow and dangerous pathways of the portage itself. After he completed the difficult portage, Franklin wrote "I could not but feel astonished at the labourious task which the voyageurs have twice in the year to encounter at this place in conveying their stores backwards and forwards."¹¹ This site of the *baptême* was geomorphologically significant by several counts. It was remarkably beautiful. It was probably the most arduous portage faced by voyageurs in the entire north west. Finally, it represented the entrance to a new state of "northernness", as the change in drainage system towards the Arctic Ocean took voyageurs more quickly and easily into new northern frontiers.

Each of these sites of the ritual *baptême* marked both a difficult passage along the

⁹ John Henry Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North: A Soldier-Surveyor's Letters from the North-West, 1843-1844*, edited by George F.G. Stanley, (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada, 1955), Lefroy to Isabella, McKenzie's River, Fort Simpson, 29 April 1844, 116-17; and "Canada: Écoulement Fluvial", *L'Atlas National du Canada*, 5th edition, (Ottawa: Environment Canada; Energy, Mines and Resources, 1993).

¹⁰ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, 89-90.

¹¹ Captain John Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1819, 20, 21 and 22*, (London: J.M Dent & Sons, 1819), 118-20.

canoe routes, and the entrance to a new land. "Indian Country" was a psychological as much as physical space, where social rules changed. The ritual *baptême* was a symbolic passage to this different world, which was considered exotic, mysterious and dangerous to Canadians. In a sense the sites also represented the "point of no return." The brigades were too far along in their journeys for men to desert their brigade and easily return to the safety of Montreal, Grand Portage or Isle à la Crosse.

The ritual *baptême* was a ceremony that helped to induct men into a new fraternity of fellow labourers. In this sense it is reminiscent of the very old tradition among sailors to baptize and haze men the first time they crossed the equator. Marcus Rediker sums up the practice neatly:

The 'sailor's baptism,' a classic rite of passage, was enacted when novices first 'crossed the line,' that is, the equator. Practised by all seafaring nationalities and therefore part of an international maritime culture, the seaman's baptism was essentially an initiation ceremony that marked the passage into the social and cultural world of the deep-sea sailor.¹²

The very early beginning of the custom of baptizing men along the Ottawa River during the French *régime* was probably first inspired by the knowledge of sailors' customs. Some bourgeois linked the ritual *baptême* directly to the sailors' custom. Daniel Harmon wrote: "Those voyagers I am told have many of the Sailors customs, and the following is one of

¹² Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 186. Also see Greg Dening, *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 71, 76-8 and Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 117-23.

them:- from all who have not passed certain places they expect a *treat* or something to drink, and should you not comply with their whims, you might be sure of getting a Ducking which they call *baptizing*.”¹³ However, the habitants had other reminders of the practice, as it became common among French Canadian soldiers in the mid-18th century to mark *pointes aux baptêmes* on the St. Lawrence River between Montreal and Quebec. The soldiers would "baptize" those came into sight of either settlement for the first time, or would accept a "*pourboire*" in place of the ceremony.¹⁴

The fraternal initiation at the *pointes aux baptêmes* had a different meaning at each site, as voyageurs passed through different stages of their occupation. The *baptême* along the Ottawa River initiated the newest and most inexperienced men into the occupation, and enforced the distinction between habitants and voyageurs. Crossing this point of *baptême* signified leaving the familiar confines of civilization to head out into the unknown, or wild land. This ceremony separated voyageurs from non-voyageurs, and encouraged a feeling of distinction in men who had just left their families for the first time in Montreal. This helped unite the voyageurs as a group, and refocus their attention and loyalty to their brigade. Margaret Creighton asserts that "crossing the line" symbolically separated new American whalers from their shore side kin and "experienced mariners exhorted recruits to embrace their shipmates as family and to bend themselves to the rules of the ship." The ceremony

¹³ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 30 April 1800, 11-12. For other more general comparisons of voyageurs to sailors see Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to sister Fanny, Fort William, Lake Superior, 30 May 1843, 16. For mention of voyageurs participating in the baptism at the equator while sailing on the *Tonquin* see Gabriel Franchère, *A Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, edited by Milo Milton Quaife, (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1954), 22 October 1810, 16.

¹⁴ *Voyage de Pehr Kalm au Canada en 1749*, traduction annotée par Jacques Rousseau et Guy Béthune, (Montréal: Pierre Tisseyre, 1977), 222-3, 428.

underscored the unity of the ship and proclaimed a collective autonomy of the forecandle.¹⁵ Similarly voyageurs' ritual *baptême* gave the young men a sense of new belonging, and helped create a sense of unity among the brigades, which were of crucial importance to the effectiveness and safety of the job. Socializing as a group during the ceremony reinforced the fraternity and fellow-feeling of the crews and brigades. It helped voyageurs to overcome social divisions incurred from different parishes of origin and differences in ages. The celebrations and drink which accompanied the ceremonies probably dulled the sadness of leaving their families in Montreal and the anxiety of entering a new world.

The theme of leaving civilization and entering "Indian Country" was equally pronounced at the major point of *baptême* at the height of land beyond Lake Superior. Men who crossed this line, and who spent at least one winter in "Indian Country" became *Hommes du nord*, or Men of the North, which symbolized a new occupational and social identity. Northmen distinguished themselves from men who had not wintered in "Indian Country" and who only worked during the summer months transporting cargo between Lake Superior and Montreal. They called these men *Mangeurs du lard*, or Porkeaters, to signify that they stayed close to boundaries of "civilization", and lived off domesticated meat, rather than wild meat. Northmen denigrated Porkeaters because they were lesser men and had not been initiated into the mysteries of life deeper in "Indian Country."

Although the duties performed by Porkeaters and Northmen were similar, voyageurs exaggerated their differences by language and action. All Northmen were Porkeaters at one point during their careers, but they did their best to divide the occupational categories.

¹⁵ Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, 117.

Northmen treated the Porkeaters with disdain, and sometimes sided with bourgeois to discriminate against them.¹⁶ The discrimination was often so bad that many Porkeaters refused to make the journey from Grand Portage to Lac La Pluie, which became the eastern dépôt for the Athabasca brigades in 1787.¹⁷ For Northmen the term Porkeater came to symbolize weakness, ineptitude and laziness. Northmen teased and insulted men who were less skilled and weaker than themselves by referring to them as Porkeaters.¹⁸ Sometimes men earned the permanent nickname of Porkeater during their careers in "Indian Country," perhaps because they were ineffective or weak, or because they were recent arrivals in the interior.¹⁹ Northmen distanced themselves from Porkeaters when they met at the Lake Superior *rendezvous* site. At Grand Portage in the late 18th century, and later at Fort William in the 19th century, each group set up their encampments on opposite sides of the fort.²⁰ Gabriel Franchère reported at Fort William during the summer *rendezvous* of 1814 that:

One perceives an astonishing difference between these two camps, which are composed sometimes of three or four hundred men each; that of the pork-eaters is always dirty and disorderly, while that of the winterers is clean and

¹⁶ Ottawa, NAC, MG19 B1, North West Company Letterbook (hereafter NWCL), 1798-1800, vol. 1, William McGillivray to Peter Grant, Grand Portage, 10 August 1800, 165.

¹⁷ NWCL, 1798-1800, volume 1, William McGillivray to Peter Grant, Grand Portage, 10 Aug 1800, 165.

¹⁸ Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 308.

¹⁹ Ottawa, NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 6, Microfilm reel #C-15638, James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801, Monday, 13 October 1800, 55; Ottawa, NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 8, Microfilm reel #C-15638, W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Journal kept at the Grand River, Winter 1804 & 1805," Thursday, 29 November 1804, 24-5; Ottawa, NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 15, Microfilm reel # C-15638, Fragment of a journal, attributed to W. Ferdinand Wentzel, kept during an expedition from 13 June to 20 August ?1800, Sunday, 20 July ?1800, 9-11.

²⁰ McKenzie, "A General History," 50; and "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 93.

neat.²¹

The cleanliness and order of the Northmen's camp may have reflected their greater experience in camping, and their more professional attitude to their jobs.

Northmen frequently stopped just before they reached a post to spend time cleaning themselves and changing into their best clothes.²² Even while in danger from threatening Native people, Northmen took the time to clean up before arriving at a post. Ross Cox describes his crew's approach to Ile à la Crosse in late June 1817:

Stopped here for half an hour *pour se faire la barbe*, and make other little arrangements connected with the toilet. These being completed, we embarked, but having the fear of Crees before our eyes, our progress was slow and cautious across the lake, until our avant-couriers announced to us that the flag of the North-West floated from the bastions, and that all was safe.²³

Se faire la barbe suggests that Northmen valued dignity, courtesy and comfort, rather than behaving like uncaring and slovenly brutes. But their motives for cleaning themselves before they entered a post may have been to create the impression that the journey required little exertion and was executed with ease, which underscored Northmen's strength and skill. They may have intended to impress the other voyageurs at the post with their manly strength, in

²¹ Franchère, *A Voyage*, 269.

²² Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's "Journal from Bas De La Rivière to Cumberland House, 1819-?", also entitled "Journal B", 1 May - 8 June 1819, 16 August - 15 September 1819; (notes taken from a transcript made by Sylvia Van Kirk; this journal is a continuation of Nelson's journal found in the OA, MU 842); Thursday, 9 September 1819, 6 (I added page numbers); Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 1: 303; "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 92; Angus Mackintosh Papers; Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, summer 1813; 23 July 1813, 16, 23; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808; Sunday, 13 June 1808, 39.

²³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 263.

order to increase their "social" or "symbolic capital," especially since idealized voyageur masculinity valued might, vigour and endurance. Voyageurs may have also hoped to impress Native women at the posts, in their efforts to search for sexual partners or mates. Crews made a great show of arriving by singing upon their approach, which would add to the image of completing a journey looking strong and fresh, rather than tired.²⁴ HBC officer Robert Ballantyne commented that when crews arrived at posts "it is then that they appear in wild perfection. They voyageurs upon such occasions are dressed in their best clothes; and gaudy feathers, ribbons, and tassels stream in abundance from their caps and gaiters."²⁵ The rituals of cleanliness and adornment were developed by Northmen working in the interior and had much more invested in their jobs than those who only worked in the summers between Montreal and Lake Superior.

Porkeaters were often younger than Northmen. Away from their homes and families perhaps for the first time, they probably enjoyed the new freedoms and pleasures of life away from family and parish regulation by being tough and brutish. However, Porkeaters faced new regulatory pressures from Northmen in the form of discrimination. Northmen set high standards of strength, skill and endurance on the job, and mocked the manhood of those that could not meet these standards. Northmen considered their jobs as a permanent way of life, rather than as a temporary summer job. Porkeaters did not have the same commitment to the job, or to the culture, as did the Northmen, who spent years, and sometimes most of their

²⁴ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 303; "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 92.

²⁵ Robert M. Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay or Every-Day Life in the Wilds of North America During Six Years' Residence in the Territories of the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company*, (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1972, first published 1848), 200.

lives working in the trade. Northmen thus thought of themselves as better men than Porkeaters, because they were more tough, strong, brave and experienced. Landmann speculated that voyageurs:

are ambitious of being styled, *homme-du-nord*, a Northman, one who voluntarily leaves his family, and the comforts of a tranquil life, to voyage in Indian country, and pass at least one winter in the North, usually understood to be beyond the western banks of Lake Superior. These men, *hommes-du-nord*, regard themselves, and are regarded by the friends, as very superior beings--men of a high courage, who have proved that they hold the effeminacies of civilised life in contempt, and that they can cheerfully submit to a kind of hardship; as they live upon Indian-corn and grease without any salted or other meat but that procured by the gun-- they apply the epithet of *mangeurs-de-lard*, or pork-eaters to all those who have never passed a winter in the north.²⁶

This passage suggests that leaving loved ones behind, disdaining sentimental attachments, and depriving oneself of comfort and good food was necessary to be a true *homme du nord*. Living without the “effeminacies of civilised life,” or in other words, like Native peoples, was the ideal of masculinity. Recall George Dugas’ biography of the voyageur Jean-Batiste Charbonneau, which suggests that all voyageurs wished to live like Native peoples, wearing Native clothes, sleeping in tents, and hunting to eat.²⁷ Although voyageurs valued the skills,

²⁶ George Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections of Colonel Landmann, Late of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, (London, Colburn and Co., 1852), 1: spring 1789, 310.

²⁷ Georges Dugas, *Un Voyageur des pays d’En-Haut*, (Saint-Boniface, MB: Editions des Plaines, 1981, first published in 1890), 27.

strength and courage it took to winter in the *pays d'en haut*, they missed their families and maintained sentimental ties with French Canada. Departures and arrivals in Montreal were always emotional and tearful.²⁸ When the voyageurs were about to depart on their first trip, Dugas describes them as regretting "leur folie" of signing an engagement, and in tears, begging their company to release them from their obligations.²⁹

It is interesting that voyageurs focussed on food as an element of masculinity. Rather than calling inexperienced summer men greenhorns or novices, they were signified by the food that they ate. Northmen similarly denigrated Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) servants, usually from the Orkney islands, by calling them Oatmeal-eaters. Voyageurs seemed to genuinely prefer wild meat to salted or domesticated meat, and also preferred any kind of meat to fish.³⁰ Perhaps they believed that food made the man, and that the softness or weakness of men came from the food itself. Fur trade scholar Elizabeth Vibert has found that traders generally disdained "weak" fish, and preferred "strong" red meat, believing they could incorporate "some measure of the special powers of the animal consumed-- the strength, aggression, sexuality, and other elements seen as the 'animal nature' of humans."³¹ It is thus

²⁸ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Foile Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 7-8; also see Ottawa; NAC; MG19 A17; Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, written in 1859, photostat, (original at Montreal; MRB; MS 406 and typescript at Toronto; OA; MU 1763); 15 June 1791; 15; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 30 April 1800, 12.

²⁹ Dugas, *Un Voyageur*, 27-8.

³⁰ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday, 18 August 1808, 113; Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Sabine, Fort Simpson, McKenzie's River, 27 March 1844, 99; Montreal, MRB, MC, C.13, James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800, Thursday, 31 July 1800, 60-1 (I added page numbers); and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 26 August 1800, 66. For a discussion of food preferences and customary complaining about provisions in the fur trade see Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 94-113.

³¹ Vibert, *Traders' Tales*, 179-80.

not surprising that the weak, domesticated meat of pigs was viewed as weakening the men who consumed it. Yet, Northmen usually ate whatever food they could find in the interior, including oats and wheat, and did not pass up pork during summer rendezvous at Grand Portage and Fort William.³² Access to food, rather than what men actually ate seemed to be of greater importance. Northmen probably emphasized that by placing themselves in situations where food supplies were precarious, they were being tough and brave. Perhaps the emphasis on food reflects its centrality in the lives of voyageurs. Voyageurs took great pleasure in their food and in feasting, especially since survival could be so precarious in the interior, and their victuals were often mundane and limited. Bourgeois often commented on the voracious appetites of the voyageurs, and their love of eating. NWC bourgeois David Thompson wrote that "a French canadian has the appetite of a Wolf, and glories in it; each man requires eight pounds of meat p^r day, or more; upon my reproaching some of them with their gluttony, the reply I got was, 'What pleasure have we in Life but eating.'"³³

The ritual *baptême* at the height of land west of Lake Superior symbolized the start of a new life, a rebirth as a professional voyageur. Northmen were more committed to constructing a stable and workable occupational culture than were men who paddled only during the summers. They signed contracts not simply for a summer job, but for usually a

³² Toronto, MRL, BR, S13, George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Cumberland House to Fort William, part in code, 3 June - 11 July 1822, (notes taken from a transcription made by Sylvia Van Kirk), Thursday, 20 June 1822 (no page numbers); McKenzie, "A General History", 52-3; and Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1969), 180-1.

³³ Richard Glover, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1962), 319. For similar comments see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 7 March 1804, 75.

three year period, and entered "Indian Country" to make a life for themselves.³⁴ The occupational distinction between Porkeaters and Northmen reflected social categories of toughness and manliness among voyageurs, and this was underscored and formalized in the ritual *baptême*.

The site of the *baptême* at Methy Portage marked yet another stage or distinction within the voyageur occupation. Men who had made the portage, and especially who had wintered north of it, were thought to be the *crème de la crème* of all voyageurs. The British scientist and surveyor John Henry Lefroy remarked in 1844 that "After passing the Portage de la Loche (the great Portage) a man is no longer a 'mangeur de Lard', he calls himself 'voyageur du Nord, Baptême!' and the very musquitoes do or ought to respect him."³⁵ By the 1840s, the terms used to distinguish different categories of voyageurs may have shifted, so that only those working in the Athabasca were called Northmen. Or Lefroy may have been confused on the terms voyageurs used to refer to each other. Yet, he understood that men who made the portage entered a more revered state of occupation and manhood. Athabasca men were thought to be the toughest of all voyageurs in the north west. While travelling on Lake Winnipeg, a brigade destined for the Athabasca district challenged another heading to the Fort des Prairies along the Saskatchewan River to race through Lake Winnipeg. The young clerk Duncan McGillivray wrote "The Athabasca Men piqued themselves on a Superiority they were supposed to have over the other bands of the North for expeditions marching

³⁴ For examples and discussion of the contracts, or *engagements*, see Lawrence M. Lande, *The Development of the Voyageur Contract (1686-1821)*, (Montreal: McLennan Library, McGill University, 1989).

³⁵ Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to Isabella, McKenzie's River, Fort Simpson, 29 April 1844, 116-17.

[canoeing], and ridiculed our men *a la facon du Nord* for pretending to dispute a point that universally decided in *their* favor." Despite the confidence of the Athabasca men, both brigades reached the northern end of the lake after 48 hours of continuous canoeing and declared a tie.³⁶ The brigades that set out to explore new fur trading areas under the direction of Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser were regarded as especially tough and brave. On their quests to for an overland route to the Pacific the bourgeois often relied on the men's concern for their reputations and ambitions of fame to carry them farther north and west than any voyageurs had ventured before. Mackenzie pushed his brigades very hard in his attempts to find a passage from Fort Chipewyan over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. After many mishaps with broken canoes and lost ammunition on a journey in 1793, his men began to threaten to desert. Mackenzie managed to dissuade them by reminding them of:

the honour of conquering disasters, and the disgrace that would attend them on their return home, without having attained the object of the expedition. Nor did I fail to mention the courage and resolution which was the peculiar boast of the North men; and that I depended on them, at that moment, for the maintenance of their character.³⁷

Being the first White men to cross the Rocky Mountains was considered to be an especially awesome feat.³⁸ The bourgeois understandably encouraged the 'rugged' ethos of the

³⁶ Arthur S. Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794-5*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1929), 18 August 1794, 11.

³⁷ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Thursday, 13 June 1793, 325-6.

³⁸ For a discussion of the NWC's first efforts to find an overland route to the Pacific Coast, see Richard Somerset Mackie, *Trading Beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793-1843*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 7-12.

voyageurs, who competed with each other to perform awesome feats of strength and endurance, which conveniently suited the bourgeois agenda for quick, efficient and profitable fur trade operations. Yet, it is clear that both the bourgeois and the voyageurs privileged men who had been farther north than any other traders, and attributed them with particular strength and courage. The Athabasca men thus embodied an idealized masculinity for all voyageurs in the north west fur trade. Not only were men's reputations significantly bolstered by working in the Athabasca, but men also stood to lose "masculine capital" if they did not complete expeditions there.

The sites of the *baptême* became more geomorphologically significant and dangerous as they moved farther into the interior. The point along the Ottawa River did not entail a change in water flow, nor a portage, rather it only marked the first glimpse of bedrock on the journey out of Montreal. The second site west of Lake Superior entailed a height of land, separating two major water systems, and several portages of over a 1000 feet.³⁹ The site furthest into the north west entailed a labourious portage of twelve and a half miles, including a stretch over slippery rock and narrow defiles. Crossing the Rocky Mountains was also considered to be a major feat of manhood. The movement of *pointes aux baptêmes* into the interior mirrored the development of an increasingly tough masculine ideal. The distance travelled north into the interior thus became a measure of manliness. Crossing the points of *baptême* were passages to new states of manhood for voyageurs. Each new state was more tough, courageous and risky than the last. Willingness to take risks, to endure long periods of

³⁹ Victor P. Lytwyn, "Transportation in the Petit Nord," Plate 63, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume 1*. Roderick McKenzie marks the portage over this height of land as 679 paces. McKenzie, "A General History", 57.

hardship and privation, and to carry a full load were important qualities to the voyageur masculine ideal.

The actual substance and meanings of voyageurs' rituals are elusive because their actions survive only in the second hand reports of their literate bosses, who were usually of a different ethnic and class background. Unfortunately details of the ritual *baptême* are sparse, and the literate traders recorded usually their own initiation, although they did recognize it as primarily a voyageur institution. Not surprisingly the bourgeois emphasized that the ceremonies were occasions for voyageurs to demand drams from them (see the discussion on drams later in this chapter). Daniel Harmon wrote of the *baptême* as occasion to make merry:

Those voyagers I am told have many of the Sailors customs, and the following is one of them:- from all who have not passed certain places they expect a *treat* or something to drink, and should you not comply with their whims, you might be sure of getting a Ducking which they call *baptizing*, but to avoid that ceremony I gave the People of my Canoe a few Bottles of Spirits and Porter, and in drinking which they got rather merry and forgot their Relations, whom they had but a few Days before left with heavy hearts and eyes drowned in tears.⁴⁰

In 1791 traveller George Heriot was also able to avoid a dunking in the Ottawa River by paying a fine.⁴¹ Voyageurs certainly enjoyed the *regales* accompanying rituals and ceremonies during canoe journeys, but the significance of this ceremony seems deeper. By

⁴⁰ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, 12.

⁴¹ Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 251-2.

forcefully including the bourgeois and travellers, voyageurs were symbolically and practically demonstrating their strength and power on the journeys, and this was a means by which to encourage the bourgeois to be fair masters. Edward Umfreville recorded "paying my Baptême," which may have been both a symbolic and real price masters paid to ensure servant obedience.⁴² Similarly, Marcus Rediker found that among 18th-century sailors, "crossing the line" relaxed the barriers between captain and crew, and sometimes temporarily reversed the ship's official hierarchy. However, Greg Denning warns that the ceremony had a more ambiguous meaning and that "crossing the line" on board sailing ships was a satire more than a challenge of the institutions and roles of power. The ceremonies bordered uncomfortably on "reverse world" rituals, where sailors proudly asserted their independence, and quaint customs, where sailors humbly acknowledged the grace with which they were governed.⁴³ The dearth of extensive descriptions of the *baptême* suggests that the ritual may have had more to do with an interior voyageur culture than with master and servant relations.

The most vivid description of the *baptême* was provided by John Macdonell in summer 1793. After his crew left Grand Portage, heading westward into the interior, he recorded:

I was instituted as a *North man* by *Baptême* performed by sprinkling water in my face with a small cedar Bow dipped in a ditch of water and accepting certain conditions such as not to let any new hand pass by that road without experiencing the same ceremony which stipulates particularly never to kiss a

⁴² Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage", Thursday, 22 July 1784, 25.

⁴³ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 187; Denning, *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language*, 77-8.

voyageur's wife against her own free will the whole being accompanied by a dozen of Gun shots fired one after another in Indian manner. The intention of this Bâptême being only to claim a glass. I complied with the custom and gave the men... a two gallon keg.⁴⁴

Like the practice of toasting voyageurs, wives and children at Beaver Club dinners, and formally kissing women at interior post levees, the passage "never to kiss a voyageur's wife against her own free will" was a sign to show appreciation for women, regardless of their race or status. Although the ceremony of the baptism was meant to be playful, it had a serious undertone which warned initiates to treat Native women with respect and dignity, especially since Native women were vitally important to fur trade operations. It also warned initiates that "Indian Country" was a place with different social and sexual rules. It might be permissible to kiss the wife of another voyageur if she consented, which would signify that her relationship was coming to end, that her husband was away, or that she simply wanted to "play" with someone else. Conversely, on board American whaling vessels, Creighton found that sailors had to swear to adulterous flirtation during their ritual baptism.⁴⁵ Fur trade symbols of how to treat women probably differed so dramatically from those of sailors because Native women were so integral to survival in the north west and success in the trade.

Because the ritual *baptême* highlighted the importance of entering "Indian Country," it is not surprising that aspects of Native behaviour were incorporated into the ceremony. The firing of guns "in Indian manner" was an instance of appropriating Native practices in an

⁴⁴ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Sunday, 11 August 1793, 99-100.

⁴⁵ Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, 120.

attempt to fit into "Indian Country."⁴⁶ Voyageurs tried to indigenize themselves and their ceremonies, to help them assume a new sense of belonging and to take possession of the foreign land. In her study of Davy Crockett myths in mid-19th-century America, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg asserts that "Individuals, experiencing themselves as powerless in the face of massive and unremitting social transformation, respond by attempting to capture and encapsulate such change within a new and ordered symbolic universe."⁴⁷ As the Crockett myth glorified the very change which the Jacksonian moral reformers feared, the Native rituals during the ceremonial *baptême* honoured and revered the threatening Native forces in the journey beyond. The ceremony also forewarned voyageurs of the new social rules which changed at the entrance to "Indian Country."

Finally, a sense of trickery and frolic probably accompanied the *baptême* ceremonies. As discussed in the previous chapter, the heightened sense of liminality at this threshold to the interior probably encouraged a sense of playfulness.⁴⁸ The new forms of symbolic action in highlighting the passage to a new world and new identity included subverting power structures by making bourgeois pay for their entrance to "Indian Country," and by appropriating "the wild" in imitating Natives. Bourgeois and travellers mentioned that men were dunked rather than sprinkled with water, implying that the ceremony was a spirited

⁴⁶ Although the phrase "shooting a gun in an Indian manner" is not uncommon in the writing of the literate of the fur trade, I have been unable to find out what it entails. The practice was more likely an invention of fur traders, rather than a reflection of how Native peoples actually used guns.

⁴⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 90, 100.

⁴⁸ Victor Turner, "Variations of a Theme of Liminality" in *Blazing the Trail: Way Makers in the Exploration of Symbols*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 57.

hazing rather than a gentle welcome to a “new” world.⁴⁹ Most voyageurs did not know how to swim, and death by drowning was a frequent occurrence in fur trade work, so dunking could assume ominous tones. Dunking was contained, that is, men were probably not released while in the water, but it clearly placed the power of life and death into the hands of the dunkers. But the *baptêmes* were also accompanied by more banal pleasures, such as stopping for a rest during the strenuous journey, and partaking of drams and regales. The ritual *baptême* was certainly not slavishly followed, and subverting or changing it was a means of having fun. NWC agent Angus Mackintosh describes a strange example where on a trip from Michilimackinac to Montreal, the crew paused at the “Point aux Baptême,” near the Deep River along the Ottawa River. His fellow bourgeois, Henry Parker, had never crossed that point before, so he was baptized by the crew, even though they were close to completing their journey out of “Indian Country.”⁵⁰ Although the ritual symbolized important social meanings, an atmosphere of play and fun probably predominated at the mock baptisms.

La Misère et la Mort: Catholic Rites and Religious Syncretism

The *baptême* was clearly a play on Christian baptisms, which underscored the importance of Roman Catholicism within voyageur culture. As the first of Catholic sacraments, it was recognized as the door to Church membership and to spiritual life. Ironically, the ritual baptism marked traders' exit from the settled Christian world, which

⁴⁹ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 30 April 1800, 11-12; Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 251-2.

⁵⁰ Angus Mackintosh Papers, Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River, approx. 23 July 1813, 13-14.

reversed its normal meaning. Churches, clergy and the observance of Sabbath were left behind, as the ritual baptism was to the door to "Indian Country."⁵¹ Yet, by virtue of using a Catholic rite, the ritual baptism also marks the continuing practice of Catholicism, albeit in modified form, in the interior.

The Roman Catholic Church was a central institution in eighteenth-century Canada. Priests acted as community leaders, and parishes were the social centers for habitants living in the St. Lawrence valley. Roman Catholicism influenced French Canadian cosmology and regulated the lives of the colonists by providing a creed of the origin of humans and their place in the world, and a clear moral code. Yet, as in much of early modern Europe, Canadian colonists sometimes understood the sacred or supernatural in ways that fell outside the institutional regulation of the Church. Often called "magic", "sorcery" or "superstition", these beliefs and practices thrived in Catholic cultures where the boundary between the sacred and the magical was ill-defined and fluid.⁵²

Voyageurs brought magico-religious beliefs and practices with them into the north west interior, or *pays d'en haut*, and modified them to suit their new culture. The circumstances of the workplace had a major impact on these transfigurations. Bourgeois were primarily Protestant, and denigrated the Roman Catholic "superstitions" of their servants.⁵³

⁵¹ Rediker asserts that sailors stripped baptism of its Christian meaning and used it to serve the ends of occupational solidarity. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 189.

⁵² Ollivier Hubert, "Le rite institutionnalisé: la gestion des rites religieux par l'Église Catholique du Québec, 1703-1851," Ph.D. Thèse, (Québec: Département d'histoire, Université Laval, 1997).

⁵³ For a Protestant dismissal of habitant Catholic rites see John Lambert, *Travels Through Canada, and the United States of North America, in the years 1806, 1807, & 1808*, (London: C. Cradock and W. Joy, 1814, 2nd ed. 1st ed. published in 1813), 1: 175. On the impiety of French Canadian voyageurs generally see Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, 198.

The practice of Roman Catholic rites became sites of voyageur resistance to bourgeois hegemony. Voyageur religious rites often focussed on danger and death, such as requesting protection for the living and sanctification for the deceased, which reflected the harshness and hazards of working in the *pays d'en haut*. These rites also emphasized rebirth, which represented the formation of voyageurs' new occupational identity. However, away from their parish communities and the guidance of priests, the Roman Catholic rites practiced by the voyageurs in the interior moved further into the fluid zone between religion and magic. Voyageurs were obliged to improvise supplications to God and the saints, and repudiations of Satan, and were freer to turn to other sources of magic outside of the institution of the Church for protection and benediction.

Catholic customs practiced by voyageurs in the *pays d'en haut* were fused with their work rhythms. Departures from French Canada were marked with the solemn ritual of stopping at St. Ann's Church at the western extremity of the island of Montreal. St. Ann, mother of the Virgin Mary, was the patron saint of Brittany and New France. For centuries St. Ann had also been prayed to by sailors and fishers before they set out on each journey.⁵⁴ It is thus not surprising that she came to be seen as the patron saint of voyageurs. As men portaged around the rapids by the church, they stopped to hear a final mass and to pay homage to St. Ann, asking for protection during their voyage.⁵⁵ The crews contributed voluntary donations

⁵⁴ Thérèse Beaudoin, *L'Été dans la culture Québécoise, XVII^e - XIX^e siècles*, (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, Documents de recherche no. 10, 1987), 168.

⁵⁵ McKenzie, "A General History," 35-6; also see Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, 15 June 1791, 15; and Henry (the elder), *Travels and Adventures*, 16.; Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 248.; "Reminiscences" by the Honorable Roderic McKenzie Being Chiefly a Synopsis of Letters from Sir Alexander Mackenzie," Louis R.F. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960, first published 1889-90; based on the correspondence between Alexander Mackenzie and Roderick McKenzie, 1786-1816, NAC, MC, MG19 C1, vol. 32, 32A), 1: 7.

in order to have prayers said for the prosperity of the voyage, and a safe return, as well as prayers for their friends and families.⁵⁶ Peter Pond describes the ritual's importance:

as you Pass the End of the Island of Montreall to Go in a Small Lake Cald the Lake of the Two Mountains[,] thare Stans a Small Roman Church Aganst a Small Read[.] this Church is Dedacateed to St Ann who Protescts all Voigeers[.] heare is a Small Box with a Hole in the top for ye Reseption of a Lettle Muney for the Hole father to Say a Small Mass for those who Put a small Sum in the Box[.] Scars a Voigeer but Stops Hear and Puts in his mite and By that Meanes thay Suppose thay are Protacted while absant[.] the Church is not Locked But the Munney Box is well Sacured from theaves[.] after the Saremoney of Crossing them Selves and Rapeting a Short Prayer we Crost the Lake and Entard the Grand [Ottawa] River so Calld which Lead us to the waters which Cams in to that River from the Southwest.⁵⁷

The priests at St. Ann's sometimes held an outdoor mass where voyageurs would lie on the ground while receiving the priest's benediction.⁵⁸ The ceremony helped instill a sense of the seriousness of leaving for the interior, and an acknowledgement of the risk of travel in "Indian Country." The priests at St. Ann's probably tried to instill a strong sense of devotion

⁵⁶ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 27 May 1793, 69; also see "The Narrative of Peter Pond" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 29-30; and George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 10.

⁵⁷ "The Narrative of Peter Pond" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 29-30.

⁵⁸ Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River: Being a Narrative of the Expedition Fitted Out by John Jacob Astor, to Establish the 'Pacific Fur Company' With an Account of Some Indian Tribes on the Coast of the Pacific*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966, originally published London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1849), 171-2.

into the voyageurs before they headed out into the “wild land of pagans and Satan.”

The priests would have been pleased that Catholic rites marked other points in the voyage into the interior. Daniel Harmon noted that “the Canadian Voyagers when they leave one stream to follow another have a custom of pulling off their Hats and making the sign of the Cross, and one in each Brigade if not in every Canoe repeats a short Prayer.”⁵⁹ Although the only church in the north west was at Mackinac, voyageurs maintained aspects of their faith while working in the interior.⁶⁰ They treated abandoned Jesuit missions in the interior with “pious reverence.”⁶¹ They also attributed awesome features in the land to the work of ungodly supernatural forces. Bourgeois Ross Cox reported that in May 1817, at junction of Rocky Mountain River and Peace River, his crew saw an enormous glacier, made even more spectacular by the reflection of the sun and the rumbling of an avalanche. After gazing in silent wonder at the glacier, one of the voyageurs exclaimed with much vehemence, “I’ll take my oath, my dear friends, that God Almighty never made such a place!”⁶² Even if the voyageur did not attribute this particular work to God, he recognized the sacred or magic at work in nature. His remark also reflected the idea that “Indian Country” was a Godless place, and that the Catholic world had geographical, as well as cultural boundaries.

Roman Catholic rites became a way for voyageurs to identify themselves as distinct from their Protestant masters, and to resist master authority. One contested site was the

⁵⁹ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Saturday, 24 May 1800, 17.

⁶⁰ “The Narrative of Peter Pond” in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 31.

⁶¹ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 149.

⁶² Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 248.

observance of Sabbath.⁶³ Although flags were customarily flown at forts on the Sabbath,⁶⁴ time and resource constraints meant that men usually worked on Sundays, especially during the canoe journeys when they were in a great rush to beat the ice, and when they first arrived at their wintering site and were busy constructing a post.⁶⁵ HBC officer Robert Ballantyne explained:

The Sabbath day in such a voyage as this cannot be a day of rest, as, from the lateness of the season, every hour is of the utmost importance. Delay may cause our being arrested by ice when we reach the heights of land; and even now we fear then, unless the season is a late one, we shall experience great difficulty in reaching Canada.⁶⁶

Sometimes voyageurs demanded the right to observe the Sabbath, thereby enforcing a day of rest.⁶⁷ Some bourgeois agreed to provide the men a later holiday when they were forced to work on the Sabbath.⁶⁸

Religious observance during Christmas became another site of contested terrain between masters and servants. Voyageurs and bourgeois agreed that refraining from work during the holiday was thought of as a means of sacrifice and deference to God to sanctify the

⁶³ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.24; Microfilm reel #2; Archibald Norman McLeod, Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800; Sunday, 12 April 1801, 32.

⁶⁴ Coues, ed., *New Lights*, 1: 17 October 1800, 121.

⁶⁵ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 307; Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Lefroy to his mother, Savannah river, en route, 6 June 1843, contd to 1st July, 22.

⁶⁶ Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay or Every-Day Life in the Wilds*, 219-20.

⁶⁷ Alexander Henry the Younger wrote that he allowed his men to observe the Sabbath, which probably meant that they demanded the rite. Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 21 September 1800, 101.

⁶⁸ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: Sunday, 16 September 1810, 627.

day.⁶⁹ But, evangelical Protestant Daniel Harmon complained at great length about the heathen ways of the Roman Catholic voyageurs, especially at Christmas: "This being Christmas Day our people pay no further attention to Worldly affairs *than to Drink all Day*" and fretted that their excessive drinking and fighting defiled the day's importance. He was delighted in 1806 when most of the voyageurs were absent from the post, and he felt free to honour Christmas with reading the bible and meditating on the birth of Jesus, rather than being distracted by unruly partying.⁷⁰ Harmon's criticisms of Canadians' impiety was influenced by anti-Catholicism and his own exaggerated piety. Protestant bourgeois were hostile or oblivious to religious rites of voyageurs, whose habitant Catholic backgrounds may have taught them practices of worship unrecognizable to the bourgeois. Voyageurs did not consider indulging in alcohol and revelry antithetical to religious observance.

The circumstances of the fur trade came to shape voyageurs' religious customs. Catholic rites were most often practiced by voyageurs in harrowing or tragic circumstances. One group caught in a storm on Lake Winnipeg became frightened when they lost their sail and began to count their rosary beads and cross themselves.⁷¹ In another instance when voyageurs were caught in a storm on Lake Winnipeg, while traveling from Fort Alexander to Jack River, everyone knelt, took out their rosaries, began to pray to various saints, and vowed that if they lived to see a priest they would have a mass offered up as a thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary for their "miraculous deliverance." Bourgeois Alexander Ross commented that

⁶⁹ George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Thursday, 25 December 1807, 14.

⁷⁰ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Saturday, 25 December 1802, Sunday, 25 December 1803, and Thursday, 25 December 1806, 65, 71, 102-3.

⁷¹ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 239.

"vows of this kind are always religiously observed by old voyageurs."⁷² The seriousness of their prayers underscored the danger of fur trade work.

Voyageurs who died in the *pays d'en haut* were generally buried in a Roman Catholic manner. The regular canoe routes were scattered with crosses marking the spots where voyageurs had drowned or met their death by some other accident.⁷³ Whenever a brigade passed by crosses on the shore voyageurs pulled off their hats, made the sign of the cross and paused to say a prayer. Daniel Harmon remarked that "at almost every Rapid that we have passed since we left Montreal, we have seen a number of Crosses erected, and at one I counted no less than thirty!"⁷⁴ The crosses often marked the name of the voyageur, and the date of his death. On occasion the site was named after him, such as Lapensie's Island close to Jasper House.⁷⁵ "Pointe aux Croix" or "Pointe des Noyés" on Lake Nippissing was named after an accident in the mid-1780s where eleven men were drowned, and crosses erected for each of them.⁷⁶ The crosses often served as warnings to travelers of the dangers of a particular set of rapids or a portage.⁷⁷

⁷² Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 244-7, 248.

⁷³ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 161-2.; Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 71, note 10; Daniel W. Harmon, *Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America*, Trails Makers of Canada Series, (Toronto: Courier, 1911), 6, 9; "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 5 July 1793, 90; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Thursday and Friday, 15 and 16 May 1800, 15.

⁷⁴ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Saturday, 24 May 1800, 17.

⁷⁵ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 204; and Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage*, 25 May 1814, 164.

⁷⁶ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 24 June 1793, 87; Landmann, *Adventures and Recollections*, 1: 307; "Reminiscences' by the Honorable Roderic McKenzie," in Masson, ed., *Les Bourgeois*, 1: 8-9.

⁷⁷ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 24 June 1783, 84.

Deceased voyageurs were also buried at impromptu graveyards near posts.⁷⁸

Voyageurs could be very particular about the location of these graveyards, wanting to ensure that the graves be protected. Bourgeois James McKenzie complained after one of his men died that:

three Men were this day employed but to no purpose to Dig a Grave among the Rocks behind the Fort- I told them before they began that the prettiest as well as the easiest place to Dig a Grave would be on Pointe au Sable but with that Spirit of Contradiction which is peculiar to all Frenchmen they every one of them denied it at the same time ridiculing me for proposing to inter a Français who by being so is sacred on a piece of land where the Indians always encamped & might profane his Tomb by scraping skins on it, &c., &c.⁷⁹

On some occasions remains were transported back to Canada to be buried in consecrated ground.⁸⁰

Sometimes freemen were also buried according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church. One aged freemen, Jean Baptiste Bouché, died at 69. Alexander Ross and his crew "buried him in our camp, and burned the grave over, so that no enemy might disturb his remains; and near to the spot stands a friendly tree, bearing the inscription of his name, age,

⁷⁸ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 145; and Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Monday, 11 May 1812, 152.

⁷⁹ James Mackenzie's Journal, 1799-1800; Tuesday, 17 December 1799, 8-9 (I added page numbers).

⁸⁰ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 27 May 1793, 69.

and the date of his death."⁸¹ Because the man was sick for a long time before his death, and was immobilized his last ten days, we might presume that the voyageurs followed his wishes for a Catholic burial. Sometimes voyageurs had their Native wives buried according to Roman Catholic tradition.⁸² In an exceptional case, a voyageur performed an emergency baptism of another voyageur's Native wife on the verge of her death.⁸³ Voyageurs often also had their children in the north west baptized and buried according to rites of the Roman Catholic Church.⁸⁴ Catholic rites were primarily observed in times of danger or death, and served as vivid signs of voyageurs' roots.

In the absence of the guidance of priests and Catholic liturgy, many of the Catholic practices became more easily infused with magical beliefs outside of the institution of the Church. The blurred boundaries between Catholicism and magic, and the liminal space of voyageur culture created an atmosphere particularly conducive to incorporating extra-institutional sources of spiritual power and protection. In one example, around the time of the Conquest, a canoe of voyageurs returning to Montreal from the *pays d'en haut* met a large group of Iroquois at Grand Calumet portage on the Ottawa River. The Iroquois began to chase the Canadians, who managed to shoot through dangerous rapids in order to escape them. After their miraculous feat, all the voyageurs prayed and vowed to hold masses for their deliverance. The Iroquois stopped chasing the crew when they saw a tall woman in

⁸¹ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 125.

⁸² George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, Thursday, 14 July 1808, 47.

⁸³ James Mckenzie, Extracts from his journal, 1799-1800, Athabasca District in Masson, *Les Bourgeois*, 2: 11 February 1800, 385-6.

⁸⁴ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, Monday, 3 September 1809, 36 (I added page numbers).

white robes standing in the bow of the canoe. The voyageurs believed this woman was the Virgin Mary conducting the canoe and frightening away the Iroquois.⁸⁵ In another incident, during one of the frequent storms on Lake Winnipeg, a voyageur recounted to bourgeois Alexander Ross that three strange lights appeared to guide the boat to shore through treacherous narrows. Some of the voyageurs thought the three lights represented the apostles Peter and Paul guarding the Virgin Mary, while others considered the appearance ominous, and predicted that three men would drown, or that only three out of the nine would be saved in a future storm.⁸⁶ This example shows how voyageurs easily shifted from Catholic to magical explanations of supernatural phenomena.

The supernatural appeared not only to help troubled canoes, but to portend danger. While on the Columbia River in 1814, a brigade of voyageurs was attacked by a group of Native people, probably Chinooks. They took refuge on an island, and attempted to establish a truce. However, the voyageurs feared they would die because during the night ravens flew overhead, which they believed signified approaching death.⁸⁷ Premonitions of death could also come in the form of visions or ghosts. John McDonald of Garth reports the story of one voyageur working at Isle à la Crosse in 1792 who saw a vision of white horses pulling a coach with two men in it. The following season he and another voyageur went duck hunting on the same river and were never seen again. When their canoe was found on that river, even

⁸⁵ George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 11-12; and Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. by Lascelles Wrasall, (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1985, first published 1860, 262-3.

⁸⁶ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 244-7, 248.

⁸⁷ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 173-5.

the bourgeois McDonald admitted that "There is surely some more in this than superstition."⁸⁸ Regardless of whether this incident occurred or not, the telling of these types of stories reinforced the belief in magical powers in the universe which operated outside the boundaries of the Church.

Many of voyageurs' religious rites were influenced by Natives peoples, especially Algonquians, that they met in the interior. Traveling in the exotic and adventurous "Indian Country" opened voyageurs to new cultural beliefs and practices. As discussed in a previous chapter, cultural exchange with Native peoples most often occurred among men who wintered in the interior and traded with Native peoples directly in their communities. The close contact between voyageurs who lived with Native peoples in their lodges, married Native women, and became a part of Native families, if even for only a short while, led to the formation of middle grounds and conduits for cultural exchange. Many extra-institutional magico-religious rites of the French Canadians were similar to Algonquian beliefs. It was at these cultural junctions that voyageurs and Algonquians most often borrowed from one another, and found common sites of understanding. One point of cultural intersection was the belief in possession by evil spirits. In one story about a group trading near Mackinac on the Great Lakes, a voyageur suddenly fled into the woods. When his fellows pursued him to see what was wrong, the voyageur would not allow them to come near, and fled further into the woods. After a long and fruitless search the crew decided to leave him and continue on their journey. They hoped that another canoe passing might pick him up, and tied a letter to a long pole giving an account of the affair, and pleading for the mercy of God and the saints. But the

⁸⁸ Autobiographical Notes of John McDonald of Garth, 1791-1815, 29-30.

next day, to the crew's astonishment, they saw him further along their route. He seemed wild and alarmed, and they again unsuccessfully chased him into the woods. Again in the afternoon the crew spotted him in another distant place on their journey. They thought that an evil spirit must have transported him because it was impossible for humans to travel such immense distances so rapidly without aid. The next day the crew discovered him again in a bend of the river. They cautiously surrounded him on the shore, and managed to bring him aboard the canoe. Clerk George Nelson commented that "He showed all the signs of horror & anxiety upon being seized; they secured & carried him on board. he looked quite wild & dejected, & his clothes were all in rags!" Nelson dismissed the incident, considering as evidence of the man's insanity or his trickery.⁸⁹ The incident is similar to European stories of possession and Algonquian stories of windigos, and may have served as a cultural conjunction.

Voyageurs certainly became aware of some aspects of Native spiritual beliefs and practices, though they did not always respect them. In 1803 some starving voyageurs tried to imitate Native chanting, singing, dancing, and smoking while asking for food from a group of Ojibwa, who were amused, took pity on the voyageurs and gave them food.⁹⁰ The voyageurs were driven to desperate measures to find food, but their imitations of Native peoples were also meant as a mockery of their culture. Teasing and joking were common among Native peoples. The Trickster, or Nanabozo, was a major Algonquian spirit, who had both the power

⁸⁹ George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 13.

⁹⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836; fall 1803, 51.

to create and to destroy, using laughter, humour and irony.⁹¹ The voyageurs may have learned about the Trickster, and thus engaged in an imitation of Native rites as a serious means of connecting with the Ojibwa to find food. But the joke might also have accidentally revealed a cultural conjunction, a place where the two cultures converged.

Many Native beliefs and practices may have been incorporated into voyageurs' work rituals. Clerk George Nelson records an incident of one of his voyageurs, Joseph Labrie, who prayed to the "mère des vents," or Mother of the Winds, while the crew was in the middle of a lake. He dropped a penny piece, a bit of tobacco, and flint steel into the lake as sacrifices for a good wind. Labrie was successful, as a good wind filled the sail.⁹² Some voyageurs even came to believe in the spirits called forth by Algonquians in shaking tent ceremonies.⁹³ An Algonquian medicine man would enter a designated tent to call forth spirits and communicate with them. The tent would shake and voices of the spirit could be heard by those outside the tent.

Native influences on religious rites were most common amongst voyageurs who formed intimate relations with Native peoples. One of the most obvious sites of cultural mixing were marriages *à la façon du pays* (see Chapter 6). Although the marriage ceremonies were not performed by Catholic priests, they were seen by traders as legitimate and sacred unions. Another religious rite which became modified by Native influences was the baptizing

⁹¹ See Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972, first published 1956); and Christopher Vecsey, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historic Changes*, (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 84-100.

⁹² George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", 27 April 1802 - April 1803.

⁹³ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.1; Microfilm reel #55; Duncan Cameron, "The Nipigon Country," with extracts from his journal in the Nipigon, 1804-5 (also found in OA, in photostat, MU 2198 Box 3, Item 3; and in triplicate typescript, MU 2200, Box 5, a-c); 28.

of children from unions between traders and Native women. In one case in June 1809 at Blood River, the son of a trader and Native woman was baptized by a Native leader, who was probably also a medicine man or shaman. The ceremony began with a speech, followed by a song and the ringing of round bits of copper fastened loosely to a stick to serve as bells. The child had a stripe of vermilion put on his face. All those attending the ceremony were given sugar, pounded meat, grease, and tobacco.⁹⁴

Voyageur beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural and cosmology reflect their distinct culture. Emphasis was placed on danger, death and rebirth; the rites became a site of resistance to master authority; and voyageurs became even more open to extra-institutional beliefs when away from the regulation of their priests and parishes. The liminal nature of voyageur culture also created an inventive atmosphere where voyageurs became open to Native influences to a great degree. In particular, cultural conjunctions, such as trickery and the belief in possession by evil spirits, became sites of shared meaning between the two peoples.

Rites of Power: Maypoles, Firewater and Fire

The master and servant relationship between voyageurs and bourgeois was contested terrain (see Chapter 2). Although voyageurs obeyed and honoured their bourgeois, they sought means to assume power in the relationship. The tension between accepting their place in the social hierarchy of indentured servitude, and yet asserting power was reflected in the rituals of maypole ceremonies, giving and taking drams, and smoking pipes.

⁹⁴ George Nelson's Journal, 1 September 1808 - 31 March 1810, 24 (I added page numbers).

Bourgeois or passengers in canoes were occasionally honoured by the ritual of constructing maypoles or "lob sticks" around the Lake Superior area and in the interior. Maypoles honouring important people were not unique to the fur trade, as the practice was common in Lower Canada and had long roots in Europe.⁹⁵ A tall pine standing out on a lake was selected, and all its branches "lobbed" off except for those at the very top. The name of the passenger or bourgeois was carved into the trunk's base, and the lob stick was honoured with cheering and musket fire. The person honoured by the lob stick was then expected to provide *regales*, or treats, to all the voyageurs in the brigade. The ceremony thus became associated with creating occasions for a party.⁹⁶ Alexander Ross noted that:

It is a habit among the grandees [bourgeois] of the Indian trade to have Maypoles with their names inscribed thereon on conspicuous places, not to dance round, but merely to denote that such a person passed there on such a day, or to commemorate some event. For this purpose, the tallest tree on the highest ground is generally selected, and all the branches are stripped off excepting a small tuft at the top. On Mr. McKay's return from his reconnoitring expedition up the river, he ordered one of his men to climb a lofty tree and dress it for a May-pole. The man very willingly undertook the job, expecting, as usual on these occasions, to get a dram.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 107-13.

⁹⁶ Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey*, 2 October 1819, 40; Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America from Canada to Vancouver's Island and Oregon Through the Hudson's Bay Company's Territory and Back Again*, (Toronto: Radisson Society, 1925, first published 1858), 236; Nute, *The Voyageur*, 67; and Nute *The Voyageur's Highway*, 49.

⁹⁷ Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers*, 2 May 1811, 78-9.

What was particular to the fur trade was that the lob stick came to serve as a landmark along journeys, helping to mark routes, and to remind voyageurs of those who had travelled that way in the past. As Ross's brigade passed a maypole at the mouth of Berens River in the 1820s, one of the men in his crew recalled creating it eighteen years earlier.⁹⁸ A lobstick was raised in honour of Frances Simpson in 1830, at Norway House, while on a journey from Red River to York Factory. She wrote in her diary that:

the Voyageurs agreed among themselves to cut a 'May Pole,' or 'Lopped Stock' for me; which is a tall Pine Tree, lopped of all its branches excepting those at the top, which are cut in a round bunch: it is then barked: and mine (being a memorable one) was honored with a red feather, and streamers of purple ribband tied to a poll, and fastened to the top of the Tree, so as to be seen above every other object: the surrounding trees were then cut down, in order to leave it open to the Lake. Bernard (the Guide) then presented me with a Gun, the contents of which I discharged against the Tree, and Mr. Miles engraved my name, and the date, on the trunk, so that my 'Lopped Stick' will be conspicuous as long as it stands, among the number of those to be seen along the banks of different Lakes and Rivers.⁹⁹

Another distinct characteristic of fur trade maypole rituals was that they represented the give and take in the master and servant relationship. Servants were willing to obey their masters, and even honour them, if the bourgeois treated them well. Post-merger HBC officer Robert

⁹⁸ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 2: 242. For another example see "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 16 August 1793, 102.

⁹⁹ Grace Lee Nute, "Journey for Frances," *The Beaver*, (Summer 1954: 12-18), 17. For the rest of the published excerpts of Frances Simpson's diary, see *The Beaver*, (December 1953), 50-9, and (March 1954), 12-17.

Ballantyne described one voyage where:

At sunset we put ashore for the night, on a point covered with a great number of *lopsticks*. These are tall pine-trees, denuded of their lower branches, a small tuft being left at the top. They are generally made to serve as landmarks, and sometimes the voyageurs make them in honour of gentlemen who happen to be travelling for the first time along the route, and those trees are chosen which, from their being on elevated ground, are conspicuous objects. The traveller for whom they are made is always expected to acknowledge his sense of the honour conferred upon him, by presented the boat's crew with a pint of grog, either on the spot or at the first establishment they meet with. He is then considered as having paid for his footing, and may ever afterwards pass scot-free.¹⁰⁰

Although the maypole honoured the bourgeois or important traveller, it also obliged him to the voyageurs.

Another common practice in the fur trade workspace was the provision of drams (shots of alcohol) or *regales* (treats of alcohol, food or tobacco) by the master to his servants. On first glance, this may appear to be a clear case where the master, who had control of the alcohol, was exerting his authority and paternalistic goodwill in providing drams. Yet a closer examination of the practice reveals that it was a ritual where voyageurs imposed their demands upon their master.

Working was often punctuated by "drams" as rewards or means of encouragement.

¹⁰⁰ Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay or Every-Day Life in the Wilds*, 191-2.

This did not mean that the voyageurs spent the day drinking or eating, rather the bourgeois parceled the drams or treats to small portions. The act of giving the treat was more important than the treat itself. Bourgeois gave drams to their voyageurs after they had completed duties that were particularly momentous, such as building houses or erecting a flagstaff, the last task in constructing a post.¹⁰¹ Drams also marked the significant occasions of arrivals and departures from posts.¹⁰² The constant travel of men between posts, hunting camps, Natives' lodges and traps could be exhausting, especially in the winter, so bourgeois were inclined to reward this task. In addition, travelling in the company of Native people was often perceived as hazardous or risky, and bourgeois frequently provided these travellers with drams as extra incentive, especially those who were going off to stay at a Native lodge.¹⁰³ Drams were

¹⁰¹ For an example of completing a house see Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 29 August 1805 - 8 March 1806; Thursday 10 October 1805, 4 (I added page numbers). For examples of erecting flagstaffs see Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 14; Microfilm reel # C-15638; "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799," Author unknown, Saturday, 11 November 1799, 3a; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Saturday, 11 October 1800, 54; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 28 October 1801, 191; and Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 12; Microfilm reel # C-15638; attributed to John Sayer in the NAC Finding Aid #797, 2; "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Septr. 1804," 15 September 1804 to 27 April 1805 with some account of 1791-3, (a published version of this journal can be found in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 249-78, Gates attributes the journal to Thomas Connor); Wednesday, 21 November 1804, 28.

¹⁰² Ottawa; NAC; MC; MG19 C1, Vol. 7; Microfilm reel #C-15638; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Sunday, 10 February 1799, 30; James Porter, Journal kept at Slave Lake, 18 February 1800 to 14 February 1801; Tuesday, Friday and Saturday, 18, 28 and 29 February 1800, Tuesday, 7 April 1800, Saturday, 16 May 1800, 1, 2, 12, 21; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 4 September 1800, 78; Montreal; MRB; MC; C.26, Microfilm reel #15; John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Sunday 11 January 1801, Saturday, 7 February 1801, and Sunday, 22 February 1801, 20, 22, 25; and Montreal; MRB; MC; C.28; Microfilm reel #13; W. Ferdinand Wentzel, "A Continuation of the Journal of the Forks, MacKenzie River, for Summer 1807," August 1807 to June 1808; Thursday and Friday, 2 and 3 October 1807, 8.

¹⁰³ John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Friday, Thursday and Saturday, 12, 18 and 27 October 1798, 8, 11-12, 15; and "Journal of the Rocky Mountain Fort, Fall 1799," Author unknown; Friday, 19 October 1799, 3.

commonly provided for other particularly difficult tasks, such as portages.¹⁰⁴ Voyageurs also chose to reward themselves after difficult portages, saving their *regales* for such occasions.¹⁰⁵ Smaller tasks, such as constructing furniture or snowshoes, could also be rewarded with a dram.¹⁰⁶

As part of general encouragement, bourgeois treated their men with drams at the end of a day of hard work.¹⁰⁷ Bourgeois could also provide drams at the start of a day or of a difficult task, as added incentive.¹⁰⁸ Promise of drams as a reward were often explicitly made to coax voyageurs to work harder and faster.¹⁰⁹ In one case during a particularly gruelling canoe journey, Alexander Mackenzie became fearful that his men would desert, so he cajoled them with a "hearty meal, and rum enough to raise their spirits," before resorting to threats and humiliation.¹¹⁰ While on the Columbia River in the early 19th century, Ross Cox's party encountered hostile Natives. The bourgeois in charge, Mr. Stuart, gave "each man a double allowance of rum, 'to make his courage cheerie.'"¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴ In 1797, Charles Chaboillez commented at a portage that "after they had finished according to custom gave the People each a Dram." Ottawa: NAC; MC; MG19 C1, vol. 1; Microfilm reel #C-15638; Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Friday, 11 August 1797, 3; and Morton, ed., *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray*, 25 July 1794, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 23 July 1800, 10.

¹⁰⁶ John Thomson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Thursday and Tuesday, 5 and 24 February 1801, 22, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Charles Chaboillez, "Journal for the Year 1797"; Tuesday, 29 August 1797, 6; Coues, ed., *New Light*, 2: 16 September 1800, 98; "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804," Tuesday, 9 October 1804, 22; and "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Tuesday, 8 July 1806, 140.

¹⁰⁸ John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Wednesday, 10 October 1798, 6; and Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: 9 and 10 September 1800, 91, 93.

¹⁰⁹ "Journal of Daily Occurrences- Commencing 15th Sepr. 1804," Friday, 12 October 1804, 22.

¹¹⁰ Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Thursday, 13 June 1793, 322-6.

¹¹¹ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 111-13, 173-6.

Voyageurs' wives and families were also given gifts by the bourgeois.¹¹² Including families in gift-giving was a tacit acknowledgment of their importance at interior posts. Maintaining the goodwill of Native wives was essential to traders dependent on their knowledge and skill. Providing men with drams and *regales* seemed to mirror the custom of gift-giving in trading with Native peoples.¹¹³

John Thompson's journal illustrates how some bourgeois used drams in the work-setting of a post. When his crew arrived at Rocky Mountain House in mid September 1800, he provided his men with a dram after they had set up the encampment. He gave them another dram five days later, after they had constructed a warehouse and secured the trade goods inside. In the following week he gave his men drams while they were building houses, and when they planted a flagstaff. His comments were reminiscent of maypole ceremonies: I gave the voyageurs "a little Liquor to Divest themselves" not because they had particularly exerted themselves, but rather as a matter of course.¹¹⁴ Some bourgeois tried to restrict the provision of alcohol to their men to save money and to improve their performance, but, as Archibald Norman McLeod explained, voyageurs needed "a little debauchery" now and then. He broke with custom by not providing his men drams when they finished constructing

¹¹² John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; Thursday, 1 January 1801, 19. I could not find any evidence of voyageurs giving each other gifts. Bourgeois may have found this practice unnoteworthy, or perhaps were not aware of their men's relationships with each other.

¹¹³ For some examples see Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Roles as Hunters, Trappers, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 137-42; Bruce M. White, "'Give us a little milk': the social and cultural meanings of gift giving in the Lake Superior fur trade," *Minnesota History*, 48, 2 (1982): 61-62; and Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 113-5.

¹¹⁴ John Thompson, "Journal, Mackenzies River alias Rocky Mountain, 1800-1"; 13, 18, 22, 29 and 30 September 1800, 6-8.

houses and erected the flagstaff at Fort Alexandria, but gave them a quart of high wines on St. Andrew's Day.¹¹⁵ Perhaps his men made it clear that they would not work effectively without this incentive.

The provisioning of drams and *regales* was thus a ritual that helped to break up the cycle of work and provide for moments of rest. Although the bourgeois controlled the giving of drams, it would not be surprising if men worked less effectively without the incentive. Voyageurs might also have slowed down the pace of work by taking their drams slowly.

Another common work ritual which could also slow the pace of labour was smoking pipes. Voyageurs always smoked while they paddled. They decided when to stop for a smoke, how much tobacco to put in their pipes, and how quickly or slowly they smoked them. Voyageurs could also slow the journey by pausing to eat whenever they filled their pipes (see Chapter 3).¹¹⁶ In this way, the rituals of voyageurs' pleasures dominated the rhythm of fur trade work.

Imprinting the Landscape: Language in the Trade

The European language of the post-Conquest Montreal fur trade was French, as the interpreters and labourers were primarily French Canadian or Métis. Specific French terminology arose in the trade, some carry-overs from the days of the trade before the Conquest, such as *voyageur*, *bourgeois*, *commis*, *pays d'en haut*, *portage*, and *courir en dérrouine*. Voyageurs often determined which general terms remained French. Alexander

¹¹⁵ Archibald Norman McLeod, *Journal kept at Alexandria, 1800*; Sunday, 30 November 1800, 6.

¹¹⁶ "First Journal of Simon Fraser from April 12th to July 18th, 1806", Thursday, 29 May 1806, 126.

Ross commented that "the Canadians, or voyageurs, dignify their master by the name of Bourgeois,- a term handed down from the days of the French in the province of Canada."¹¹⁷ Other terms in the trade came from the French Canadian voyageurs, both before and after the Conquest. The pamphleteer Samuel Hull Wilcocke, quoting from Benjamin Frobisher's damaged journal, noted that "to march is the Canadian term for traveling, and is as frequently, if not oftener, applied to express the progress of a canoe or boat, as of a pedestrian."¹¹⁸

Many canoeing terms specifically related to voyageurs were of French origin, such as *milieu* (paddlers in the middle of the canoe), *devant* (foresman), *gouvernail* (steersman), *bouts* (foresman and steersman), *demicharge* (unloading half a canoe to shoot rapids), and *décharge* (unloading the entire canoe to shoot rapids). Traveling around Lake Superior in the 1850s, Johann Georg Kohl remarked that "there is not a single part of the canoe to which the Canadians do not give a distinct name." They referred to the ribs of a canoe as *varangues*, canoes without cargoes as *canots à lège*, and fully loaded canoes as *canots de charge*. Traveling by canoe was called *aller à l'aviron*, or "to go by the paddle."¹¹⁹ The French term *dégrade* appears in the writings of English bourgeois, which meant a crew was forced ashore by bad weather.¹²⁰ Sunken trees in rivers and streams were called *chicots* by voyageurs.¹²¹ The widely-used French term *pause* (usually spelled phonetically as *pose*) referred to the stopping

¹¹⁷ Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, 1: 301.

¹¹⁸ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.29; Microfilm reel #23; Samuel Hull Wilcocke, "Mort de B Frobisher, Difficultés de Nord Ouest, 1819," 26.

¹¹⁹ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 29-34.

¹²⁰ "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 21 Aug 1793, 103.

¹²¹ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 29 June 1812, 74.

places found at intervals on every long portage (see Chapter 3).¹²²

Other terms which seemed to be picked up by all who worked in the trade regardless of language included *faire la chaudière*, which meant cooking.¹²³ Voyageurs called snowshoes *racquette pattes d'ours* (bear's claw), which may have been an adaption of a Native term, and *mal de raquette* referred to the acute pain in feet and legs suffered by those unaccustomed to snowshoeing.¹²⁴ These terms reflected areas of voyageurs' particular interest and expertise: traveling and provisioning. However, English bourgeois adopted other French Canadian expressions. One expression that came to be used by the NWC bourgeois and voyageurs was "*potties*" to refer to the XYZ. The term *petite potée* meant a collection of things or people of small value. NWC bourgeois applied it to the XYZ to underscore the small size and limited success of their enterprise.¹²⁵

French terms were employed widely in the trade, even by bourgeois and clerks who could not speak French. Most of the literate kept journals and wrote letters in English, which was the official language of the companies. However, it seems that most of the experienced bourgeois and clerks were able to work with the voyageurs, who most likely spoke little English. In his first couple years of service, the American Daniel Harmon complained about not being able to speak French, and commented on other new clerks, recently arrived from Scotland, who could speak as little French as he. Harmon was relieved when other

¹²² "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 97, note 61; and Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 59.

¹²³ Heriot, *Travels Through the Canadas*, 252.

¹²⁴ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 336; Lefroy, *In Search of the Magnetic North*, Fort Simpson, 28 March 1844, to his Mother, 103.

¹²⁵ "The Diary of Archibald N. McLeod" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 141, note 23; and Gordon Charles Davidson, *The North West Company*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1918), 77.

anglophone bourgeois and clerks were around so he could talk to someone, though he found consolation and company in his books (especially the Bible). He comments that he was usually not left alone in charge of voyageurs before he could speak proficient French, and he started to study the language as soon as he arrived in the interior. After two years in the interior, when he had mastered elementary French, he complained that even if he could speak fluently in French "what conversation would an illiterate ignorant Canadian be able to keep up. All of their chat is about Horses, Dogs, Canoes and Women, and strong Men who can fight a good battle."¹²⁶ Yet his experience shows the necessity of learning French.

The use of French terms in the trade were symbols of voyageurs' power and control in the workspace. The voyageurs also imprinted themselves on the landscape by naming geomorphological features, such as rivers and portages. Ross Cox commented that "The Canadians, who are very fertile in baptizing remarkable places, called an island near our encampment of the 6th *Gibraltar*, from the rocky steepness of its shore." While traveling along the Winnipeg River, he complained that "it would be tiresome and useless to give the various names by which the Canadians distinguish those places" because there were so many of them.¹²⁷ On a trip from Pais Plat in Lake Superior to Portage de L'Isle in the Winnipeg River during the summer of July 1784, the crew of Edward Umfreville named many portages, including *Portage de detour*, *Portage de deux Rapids*, *Portage des Grosse Roches*, *Portage des Trembles*, and *Portage de Petite Rivière*, which described the physical features of the

¹²⁶ Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years*, Wednesday, 9 July 1800, Tuesday, 28 October 1800, Saturday, 4 April 1801, Saturday, 2 May 1801, and Saturday, 6 March 1802, 22, 37, 45-6, 47, 55.

¹²⁷ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 278.

portages.¹²⁸ Other place names which reflected the physical surroundings included *Portage du Thé*, named after a species of mint which grew there; *les Terres Jaunes*, which referred to the yellow banks in the Rocky Mountains; *La prairie de la Vache*, which meant cow country or buffalo country; *Le Rocher de Miette*, which meant small rocks.¹²⁹ As well, some place names were the French translation or rendition of a Native name, such as Lac Ouinipique (Lake Winnipeg).

The naming of points along fur trade routes reflects the history and experiences of fur trade labourers, and these names usually persisted for years. Clerk George Nelson provides a very detailed description of a trip between Fort William and Cumberland House in the summer of 1822, mentioning the prevailing names of many of the portages and the stories that went with them. Portage *Ecarté* (remote or isolated) was so named because a man had been lost in it for nearly two days, and because the path through the portage was obscured by large stones. Another named *Racoursi* (shortcut) was so difficult that according to Nelson only maniacs tried to run it, such as the Iroquois and a few French Canadians. He described *Petit-Portage des Chiens* as slippery and smooth, commenting that the men frequently slid on their back sides, or fell on their faces, while racing with their heavy packs. *Portage à Jourdain* was named after a guide who had broken his canoe there. Another portage where a couple of men had died was called *Portage des Morts*. Voyageurs called Portage du Lac la Pluie '*le bout des Terres*' which was an old name that Nelson thought might have originated prior to the Conquest when the French traders only traveled to that point in the interior, and

¹²⁸ Edward Umfreville, "Journal of a Passage in a Canoe," Monday and Tuesday, 12-13 July 1784, and Thursday, 22 July 1784, 17-19, 25.

¹²⁹ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 237, 239, 252-3.

thought that the Great Lakes were simply branches of the western sea. *Portage Des. Rocher à Chaurette* was named for a guide who broke his canoe and lost his cargo there. At *Chute à Jacqueau* Canadians customarily raced with their loads, and frequently fell with their loads. Some "fools" also raced across *Portage Barrière*, but were often killed. One portage on an island was named *Beau-bien*, after a bourgeois ordered his guide to run the rapid against his will. The canoe was swamped, sucked into an eddy, and several people drowned and much property was lost. Nelson commented that *L'Eau qui remuent* (moving water) was well-named "for [voyageurs] do so with a vengeance, but the Canadians are made for this country." He asserted that voyageurs "perverted" many Native place names.¹³⁰ However, most of the names he listed seemed to have arisen from voyageurs' experiences, such as naming portages after particular voyageurs who had died or were injured there.¹³¹ The names of the portages might have served as markers for difficult portages, as well as reminders of those men lost in the service. For example, *Portage des Noyés* (drownings) marked the location where five men had drowned.¹³² The crosses and the names of portages made danger and death a very visible part of the landscape of canoe routes. Angus Mackintosh noted that a very large opening in a rock on the north side of the French River was referred to as "the entrance to Hell" by his voyageurs.¹³³ Naming was a way of managing and minimizing the

¹³⁰ Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's diary of events on a journey from Fort William to Cumberland House, 21 July - 22 August 1822, Tuesday, 23 July, Wednesday, 24 July, Saturday, 27 July, Tuesday, 6 August, Sunday, 11 August, Sunday, 18 August, Monday, 19 August, and Tuesday, 20 August 1822.

¹³¹ Such as Derreaud's Rapid, named after a voyageur of that name who broke his canoe in it. "The Diary of John Macdonell" in Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, Monday, 24 June 1783, 84.

¹³² Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal*, Friday, 5 June 1789, 138-9.

¹³³ Angus Mackintosh, "Journal from Michilimackinac to Montreal via the French River," July 1813, 7.

fear of these sites. Voyageurs could preserve their strength and prepare for a difficult portage if they were reminded of its location on a fur trade route. These names reflect work experiences that were deemed important to the voyageurs.

In a similar manner, voyageurs diminished the authority and power of the bourgeois by nicknaming them. In subtle ways, they could minimize their power. Unfortunately most clerks and bourgeois probably did not record nicknames of themselves, especially if they were unflattering. Only Ross Cox recalled:

It is laughable to hear the nominal distinctions [voyageurs] are obliged to adopt in reference to many of the partners and clerks, who have the same surname. They are Mr. Mackenzie, *le rouge*; Mr. Mackenzie, *le blanc*; Mr. Mackenzie, *le borgne*; Mr. Mackenzie, *le picoté*; Mr. McDonald, *le grand*; Mr. McDonald, *le prêtre*; Mr. McDonald, *le bras croche*; and so on, according to the colour of the hair, the size, or other personal peculiarity of each individual.

He reports that voyageurs called one of the agents, Mr. Shaw, *Monsieur Le Chat*, and his children were called *les petits Chatons*.¹³⁴ In the 1850s Johann Georg Kohl noted that old French Canadians living around Lake Superior referred to bears as shaggy bourgeois.¹³⁵ These clues probably only reflect the tip of the iceberg of voyageurs' nicknames for the bourgeois. Through nicknaming voyageurs could symbolically exert power over their masters and undermine their authority, while asserting their own values of levity and mirth.

¹³⁴ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 307.

¹³⁵ Kohl, *Kitch-Gami*, 184.

Concluding Remarks

Canoe journeys were dominated by rituals which highlighted the exaggerated liminality of voyageurs' lives during this part of their job, and which helped symbolize the passage into a new social world. The pageantry and celebrations of arrivals and departures, mass at St. Ann's Church, and *baptême* ceremonies imbued voyageurs' work with meaning. The rituals helped to distinguish a particular voyageur culture, which gave voyageurs pride, and a sense of belonging to a select group of highly skilled and strong men. The *baptême* in particular expressed a social geography which revered the landscape, waterways, the new social world of "Indian Country". The ceremony also marked a deep respect for the north, and an association between "northness" and masculinity. Voyageurs' sense of manhood was also linked to their roots in French Canada, which were expressed in Catholic rites, which were prevalent in the face of danger and death. Voyageurs were able to face dangers and death with the help of the ancient and familiar Catholic ceremonies, especially since they were in an unfamiliar world. Finally voyageurs' sense of manhood was influenced by their struggles to be both good servants and maintain an ideal of independence. They honoured their masters in rituals, yet they also asserted their right to be treated well. Finally, voyageurs imprinted themselves on the social and physical landscape of "Indian Country" through the pervasiveness of French terms in the trade, working in French, and naming landscapes and significant sites of their labour, such as portages. By participating in rituals of identity, voyageurs made their cultural values distinct and clear, and defined and asserted their power and entitlement.

Chapter 9

Conclusion: Leaving the Service

This dissertation has examined how French Canadian men entered fur trade service, the substance of their work in the trade, their encounters with Native peoples in the north west interior, and the distinct culture they developed over the years of service as Porkeaters and Northmen. A remaining question is how voyageurs left the service and where they went.

The majority of voyageurs returned home to the St. Lawrence valley when they decided to leave the service. Porkeaters worked in the trade in the summer, and were away from the St. Lawrence valley for only part of the year. Many Northmen returned to Canada after one term (three to five years) in the service, while others returned when they were no longer physically able to handle the demanding work. Voyageurs were also sent back to Canada by bourgeois when they were ill and could not work.¹ A fascinating area which remains to be explored is the influence of ex-voyageurs on the society and culture of Lower Canada. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address that question, but the constant return of voyageurs from the north west interior and their sheer numbers suggest that they had an enormous impact.

Most voyageurs maintained an allegiance with the St. Lawrence valley while in the *pays d'en haut*. Homesickness certainly played a part in the desire to go back to Canada.²

¹ Toronto; Metropolitan Reference Library; Baldwin Room (hereafter MRL; BR); S13; George Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Tuesday, 2 August 1803, 4.

² Voyageurs loneliness is often expressed in their songs Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway*, trans. by Lascelles Wraxall, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985, first published 1860), 258-60. Clerks and bourgeois often recorded their feelings of being homesick. George

Sometimes voyageurs openly hated the interior and could not wait to return home.³ In one case bourgeois Roderick McKenzie recalled voyageurs referring to the interior as "S_cci_e Pays M__d __te ____" (Saccire Pays Maudite, or this cursed awful country).⁴

Voyageurs who had been in the service for many years frequently spoke about going back to the St. Lawrence valley.⁵ The desire to return to Canada remained with some men who had established successful careers as freeman and had families in the north west. One such man was Charles Racette, one of the more notorious and successful freemen, who lived in the north west for more than 30 years, acting as a guide, interpreter and clerk for fur trade companies.⁶ He was probably born in the parish of St-Augustin-de-Demaures in 1758 or

Nelson's Journal, 13 July 1803 - 25 June 1804, Tuesday, 23 May 1804, 29; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal "No. 1", written as a reminiscence, describing a journey from Montreal to Grand Portage, and at Folle Avoine, 27 April 1802 - April 1803, 10; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal and Reminiscences, 1 December 1825 - 13 September 1836, 22-3. Also see Ross Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 130-1, 198-9, 218; W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon, 1800-1816*, (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1957), 4 April 1801, 29 September 1801, and 21 June 1803, 45-6, 51, 67-8; and Gabriel Franchère, *A Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America*, edited by Milo Milton Quaife, (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1954), 26 July and 6 September 1810, 3, 10-11.

³ For example Vivier in Ottawa; National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC); Masson Collection (hereafter MC); MG19 C1, Vol. 7; Microfilm reel #C-15638; John Thomson, "A Journal kept at Grand Marais ou Rivière Rouge, 1798"; Sunday, 18 November 1798 to Tuesday, 20 November 1798, 19-20.

⁴ Montreal; McGill Rare Books (hereafter MRB); MC; C.27; Microfilm reel #13; Roderick McKenzie, Letters Inward [all the letters are from W. Ferdinand Wentzel, Forks, McKenzie River], 1807-1824; 3.

⁵ Toronto; Ontario Archives (hereafter OA); North West Company Collection; MU 2199, Box 4, No. 1 (photostat of original); "An Account of the Athabasca Indians by a Partner of the North West Company, 1795," revised 4 May 1840 (Forms part of the manuscript entitled "Some Account of the North West Company", by Roderick MacKenzie, director of the North West Company. Original at MRB, MC, C.18, Microfilm reel #22. Photostat can also be found at NAC, MC, MG19 C1, Vol. 55, Microfilm reel #C-15640); 3-4.

⁶ A.G. Morice, *Dictionnaire historiques des Canadiens et des Métis Française de l'Ouest*, 2nd edition, (Montreal: Granger Freres, 1912), 243; Winnipeg; Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA), B.177/a/1, James Sutherland's Red Lake (NW Ontario) journal of 1790-91, June 1791; HBCA, B.105/a/4, John Mackay's Lac la Pluie journal of 1796-7; 1 June 1797; HBCA, B.22/a/5, John Mackay's Brandon House journal of 1797-8, 27 August 1797; and Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; Toronto; MRL; BR; S13; George Nelson's Journal, 3 November 1807 - 31 August 1808, 2, 6.

1765, married an Ojibwa woman and had several children with her in the interior.⁷ In 1819, he was on his way to Canada with his Native family when he was waylaid at Grand Rapid by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and forced to participate in the kidnaping of North West Company (NWC) bourgeois Benjamin Frobisher and John Duncan Campbell.⁸ It is unclear if Racette's journey to Canada was a visit or a permanent move, or if he ever resumed the interrupted trip. Racette's life does not represent those of voyageurs because he was a freeman, and thus able to travel as he pleased. But his desire to return to Canada represented a common trend. In another example, a long-time voyageur named Louis La Liberté, who had a large family in the interior with a Native wife and became father-in-law to three bourgeois, chose to return to Canada in his later years, although it is unknown whether he took his Native family with him.⁹

Yearnings to go back to the St. Lawrence valley were tempered by voyageurs' desire to be in the interior, and their fascination and admiration for Native peoples and the landscape of the *pays d'en haut*. In one of his many romantic flourishes, Alexander Ross might have conveyed some of the sentiment of voyageurs in the north west in his description of bourgeois' attitudes to their lives there. He wrote that being posted in the interior:

among the savages in the far distant wilds of North America, may appear to some as banishment rather than an appointment of choice in search of competency, when in a variety of ways fortune places more or less within our

⁷ Harry Duckworth, personal communication.

⁸ Montreal; MRB; MC; C.29; Microfilm reel #23; Samuel Hull Wilcocke, "Mort de B Frobisher, Difficultés de Nord Ouest, 1819," 6.

⁹ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 306-7.

reach; yet of the persons who have spent any portion of their years in those countries, few or none are known who do not look back with a mixture of fond remembrance and regret on the scenes through which they have passed; preferring the difficulties and dangers of their former precarious but independent habits to all the boasted luxuries and restraints of polished society. In the wilderness they spend a long, active, and healthful life.¹⁰

Many voyageurs became very attached to the interior.¹¹ A significant number of men decided to spend most of their lives working in the trade, and even settle down in the interior. Men who were in heavy debt to their company, and who had large Native families often settled around Lake Superior to farm, rather than returning home and possibly facing the shame of failure or discrimination.¹² The Red River valley was a popular place to settle, especially for those voyageurs who were fired after the 1821 merger of the NWC and HBC.¹³ After working as a voyageur for fifteen years, Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau decided to settle in Saint Boniface in the Red River valley to farm and work as a stone mason on the first Roman Catholic cathedral in the north west. After finding these occupations unsatisfying, Charbonneau decided to become a buffalo hunter and moved to the Minnesota Territory. His biographer,

¹⁰ Alexander Ross, *Fur Hunters of the Far West: A Narrative of Adventures in Oregon and the Rocky Mountains*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1855), 1: 284-5.

¹¹ Eliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry*, (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1897), 1: 28 November 1800 to Monday, 1 December 1800, 157-8.

¹² Gabriel Franchère, *Journal of a Voyage on the North West Coast of North America during the Years 1811, 1812, 1813 and 1814*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1969), 182; Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 3, 168-70, 212-13; and Ottawa; NAC, MG18 C5, Claude-Godefroy Coquart, Jesuit, *Memoire de Coquart adresse à François Bigot sur les postes du Domaine du Roi: La Malbaie, Tadoussac, Ile-Jeremie et Chicoutimi*, 5 avril 1750.

¹³ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 2: 243.

l'abbé Georges Dugas, explained:

Nous l'avons dit en commençant, nos voyageurs du Nord n'ont jamais pu se faire dans la suite à la vie calme des champs. La vie nomade qu'ils avaient menée pendant leur jeunesse les avait tout à fait dégoûtés des travaux de l'agriculture.... À cette époque la chasse avait beaucoup plus de charmes que les travaux des champs.¹⁴

Another option for voyageurs was to become freemen, independently trading and hunting. Ross Cox describes three freemen who had formerly been engagés in the NWC "who, after the expiration of their engagement, preferred the wild and wandering life of a trapper, to remaining in the Company's service, or returning to Canada."¹⁵ One successful freeman was Joseph Constant, who established his own small trading post near Cumberland House, and whose descendants became founders of the town of The Pas.¹⁶ Some of these men who quit the fur trade service and stayed in the north west became absorbed into Native societies. One such man was René Jussaume, who lived with the Mandan in one of their great trading villages on the upper plains. Alexander Henry the Younger noted that this "man has resided among the Indians for upward of 15 years, speaks their language tolerably well, and has a wife and family who dress and live like the natives."¹⁷

Voyageurs who left the fur trade service could return to the St. Lawrence valley; settle in the interior at Fort William or the Red River settlement to farm; join the Métis buffalo

¹⁴ Georges Dugas, *Un Voyageur des pays d'En-Haut*, (Saint-Boniface, MB: Editions des Plaines, 1981, first published in 1890), 105-8.

¹⁵ Cox, *Adventures on the Columbia River*, 23 June 1817, 262.

¹⁶ Carolyn Podruchny, "Shifting Identities and Constructing Communities: Joseph Constant's Journey to The Pas, 1773 to 1853," Presented at the *Twenty-Eighth Algonquian Conference*, (Toronto, October 1996).

¹⁷ Coues, ed., *New Light*, 1: Sunday, 20 July 1806, 333.

hunters; join Native families; or become freemen, living and trading independently in the north west interior. A final option for voyageurs was to not leave the service. Some men spent the greater part of their lives working as voyageurs, and died on the job. Of course, men died in the service while still young. But others lasted until well past their 60s. The elderly voyageur quoted by Alexander Ross on Lake Winnipeg, who so eloquently expressed the central values of voyageur culture, had worked as a voyageur for 42 years, and maintained that “were I young again, I should glory in commencing the same career again. I would [s]pend another half-century in the same fields of enjoyment. There is no life so happy as a voyageur's life; none so independent; no place where a man enjoys so much variety and freedom as in Indian country.”¹⁸

This ethnography of the voyageurs is informed by and contributes to colonial North American labour and gender history. Like slaves in the American south, voyageurs created dialogues of power with their masters without challenging the structure of paternalism. Like sailors, voyageurs expressed their identity through rituals, and developed a particular masculine ethos which excluded women. Yet the patterns in labour relations, work and masculinity are unique to voyageurs. Unlike sailors, voyageurs worked among women of a different race and formed intimate relationships with them. Unlike slaves, voyageurs' servitude was limited to the length of the contract, and they did not suffer brutal and

¹⁸ Ross, *Fur Hunters*, 2: 234-7.

dehumanizing subjugation. Voyageurs differed from indentured servants in the settled parts of New France, the Thirteen Colonies and British North America because they worked as an all-male sojourning labour force in constant voyage. No other group of all-male sojourners is labeled as “travelers”.

French Canadian voyageurs working in the *pays d'en haut* had a distinct culture which valued canoes, dogs, horses, strength, mirth, women, and freedom. Voyageurs took pride in caring for and owning their tools of the trade, especially canoes, but also dogs, horses, toboggans, paddles and the like. These were treated with care and respect. These tools had to be tough and strong, just like the voyageurs themselves, in part because they became symbols of a masculine ideal of strength, skill and hardiness. Canoes were the primary means of travel during the summer months, and voyageurs were employed in repairing and maintaining them throughout the season. Most voyageurs could not afford their own canoe, but the canoe came to symbolize work in the fur trade. Voyageurs usually owned their own paddles, and these they decorated. In the winter months, dogsled was the most common means of travel. Dogs became a central part of post communities, and some voyageurs possessed their own teams. Horses were used for travel on the open plains. Because they were expensive, few voyageurs owned them. These means of travel held a place of great importance, and came to represent the masculine prowess of those who used them.

Voyageurs' collecting and possessions were kept to a minimum because of the high mobility of their jobs. In the ethic of nonaccumulation, alternative forms of symbolic, social and cultural capital became ways to measure masculine success. Taking risks, such as running rapids, and competing with one another in canoe races, gambling, and boxing

matches, provided ways for voyageurs to earn “masculine capital” and bolster their reputations. Contests and gaming were common at the interior posts. Play was a forum in which new social behaviours could emerge. Annual celebrations and parties at arrivals and departures helped voyageurs form a unified culture in the face of centrifugal forces caused by the mobility of the job and the transience of individuals. Dancing and music became sites where voyageurs combined French Canadian customs with Native customs. The liminal space particularly encouraged jokes and trickery. These provided a means for voyageurs to express tensions, and they sometimes served as cultural conjunctions with Native communities.

Voyageurs measured their masculinity against male “others”. Resisting bourgeois hegemony was a way to stand up to the master. The central tenet of master and servant relationships was the legal contract which bound voyageurs to loyalty and obedience in exchange for food, clothing and wages. A social contract developed around the legal obligations in which masters and voyageurs tried to negotiate the edges of their rights and duties. Voyageurs engaged in a “theater of resistance” which included working slowly, stealing provisions, freetrading, and deserting the service. In this way they sought to control the workplace to some degree, and pressure their masters for better working conditions. By demonstrating their physical superiority to their masters in canoeing, portaging and hunting, voyageurs earned “symbolic capital” which they could spend in negotiations with their masters.

Being more “savage” than the “savages” was another means by which voyageurs sought to earn masculine capital. Voyageur culture was highly influenced by Native peoples.

The most obvious cultural borrowings were materials such as canoes, snowshoes, moccasins and pemmican. Yet, the adaptations included not only material culture, but also values and beliefs. Emulating Native peoples, voyageurs sought to be skilled canoers, successful hunters, stoic in the face of hardship, and live with few possessions in the “wilderness”. Yet they distinguished themselves from Native peoples by wanting to be better than them. They thus took possession of these borrowed traits, and claimed a social space for themselves in “Indian Country.” Cultural exchange with Native peoples most often occurred among men who wintered in the interior and traded with Native people directly in their communities. When trading *en dérrouine* men were sent out individually or in pairs with a small complement of goods to trade on a small scale in Native communities. Men were also sent to live with Native people in their lodges throughout the winter, to maintain alliances. In these settings voyageurs developed particularly close relationships with the Native people, and it was most often here that middle grounds, or sites of shared meaning, emerged, which acted as conduits for cultural exchange.

The dominant pattern in unions between voyageurs and Native women was “fluid monogamy.” By this I mean that the relationships were taken seriously, but they were mainly short-term or intermittent. Voyageurs formed relationships with Native women when living in the north west interior. A voyageur sometimes lived with a woman’s family at their lodge, and sometimes she came to stay at the post. But the relationship was either put on hold, or ended when the woman’s family moved on in their seasonally-based economic activities, or when the voyageur was re-posted to a different district. Some voyageurs had children with Native wives and formed permanent families, and provided the means for their families to

travel with them. Other voyageurs limited their encounters with Native women to casual affairs.

Traveling in the exotic and adventurous "Indian Country" opened voyageurs to new cultural beliefs and practices, and their culture became particularly shaped by liminality. The men were in constant passage through different geographical and social spaces, as they moved between Montreal and the *pays d'en haut*. The circumstances of the work place constituted a major influence on voyageur culture. There is no question that the job of voyageurs was difficult. They were hired to perform near miraculous feats of transporting goods and furs over immense distances and challenging canoe routes. Work at the interior posts was easier than that on the summer canoe brigades, but voyageurs were required to perform a wide range of duties, which included construction, artisan crafts, hunting, fishing and trading with Native peoples. Threats to their well-being came mostly from the harsh environment, the ever-present possibility of starvation, and over-work, but hostile Native people and cruel bourgeois could contribute to their misery. Yet, despite these difficulties, voyageurs formed a vibrant culture while working together in crews and at interior posts. The liminality of the work place led to fluidity, inventiveness, and an openness to different cultural practices. Rituals became a way for voyageurs to express and maintain their cultural beliefs. The canoe journey out of Montreal and into "Indian Country" became the point of transition into voyageur culture, and was a social space for the teaching of new values. The "cultural performance" of ritual baptisms signified the thresholds crossed by French Canadian labourers as they entered a new occupational and cultural identity, as well as new stages of manhood. The religico-magical rites practised by voyageurs were modified in the interior to

emphasize the dangerous and frequent tragedies in their jobs. Voyageurs imprinted themselves on the social and physical landscape of "Indian Country" through naming lakes, rivers, rapids and portages. These names contained voyageurs' history as people working in a harsh environment.

Another major influence on voyageur culture was their origins. Voyageurs were habitants from the St. Lawrence valley who entered fur trade service, at least initially, to earn money for their farms and families. The *lingua franca* of the fur trade was French, voyageurs sang old French ballads while they worked, and they practiced Roman Catholic rites in the interior, even without the guidance of a *curé*. Most voyageurs maintained some kind of connection to French Canada. While in the trade, many sent money and moccasins home to their families and friends. Surviving correspondence reveals intense emotional attachments between voyageurs and their French Canadian families which survived years and vast distances.

Voyageurs created a unique culture in the north west which was influenced by their French Canadian origins, the Native peoples they met in the interior, and the circumstances of the workplace. They were indentured servants far away from settler society. They crisscrossed the continent, and provided European settlers with knowledge about the "unknown and savage" interior. They became an archetype in Canadian culture as pillars of strength, courage and perseverance because of the dangerous and difficult circumstances of their jobs. This archetype has lasted to the present day. Their image is memorialized on coins, and is celebrated in a festival in St. Boniface every winter. A new project for an Imax film wants to place voyageurs front and center to dramatically portray of the "opening up" of the

“wild” north west. But behind this image, voyageurs were ordinary men who were highly skilled workers, paddling, playing and creating a culture in their fluid and mobile workplace.

Appendix I

Annual Wages of Voyageurs

P = Porkeater N = Northmen U = Unspecified £ = pounds

Note: all wages have been roughly converted into the Halifax currency, except for those years listed in Grand Portage currency.¹ The ratios are listed, where data is available, as milieux: bouts: guides: interpreters.

Year	middlemen/ <i>milieux</i>	foremen & steersmen / <i>bouts</i>	guides	interpreters	ratios of wages between positions	Un- specified general wage
1790 ²	P: £15 N: £22	P: £25 N: £50	P: £45 N: £103		P: 1: 2 :3 N: 1:2.5:4	
1795 ³	U: £25 - £50	U: £25 - £50	U: £42 - £125	U: £42 - £125	U: 1:1:1.5:1.5	
1798 ⁴	P: £10 - £15 N: £33	P: £17 - £25 N: £50	U: £33 - £42	U: £42 - £167	P: 1:1.75:3.25: 4+ N: 1:1.5:1: 1.25+	
approx 1800 ⁵	U: £25	U: £42			U: 1:1.75	
1800 ⁶						£100
1802 wage war ⁷	U: £83 - 125£					
1803 ⁸	N and cooper: £850 [G.P.Cy.?)					
1804 ⁹	P: £500 G.P.Cy.	P: £700 G.P.Cy.			P: 1:1.5	
1806 ¹⁰	N: £300 - £500 [G.P.Cy.?)	N: £350 - £700 [G.P.Cy.?)			N: 1:1.25	
1807 ¹¹						£25 - £60
1812 ¹²						£80 - £100
1824 ¹³	U: £20	U: £125			1:6	

Appendix II

Crews Travelling Inland from Fort William¹⁴

year	inland post	# bourgeois	# clerks	# guides	# interpreters	# voyageurs	# women	# children	total #
1808	Broken River		1			4			5
1808	Pigeon River	1		1	1	4	4	2	13
1808	Grand River	1			1	5	2	4	13
1808	Rivière Dauphine		1			4	1		6
1809	Rivière aux Morts		1			5			6
1809	Broken River		1			5			6
1809	Rivière Dauphine		1			6			7
average		0	1	0	0	5	1	1	8

Appendix III

Composition of Posts in the North West Interior

US = mentioned in sources but number unspecified

Date	Post & Head	# bourgeois	# clerks	# interpreters	# guides	# engagés	# women	# children	Total
1798 ¹⁵	Fort George John McDonald of Garth	1				16			17
1798 ¹⁶	Fort Augustus Hughes	1				16			17
1800 ¹⁷	Reed River & Red River Michel Langlois					7	3	3	13
1800 ¹⁸	Park River Alexander Henry and Younger	1				8			9
1801 ¹⁹ summer	Fort Alexander Daniel Harmon	2	1	2		5	6	13	29
1801 ²⁰	Bird Mountain on Swan River Daniel Harmon	1		3		6	2		12
1802 ²¹	Fort Alexander Frederick Goedike	1		2		3	US	US	6
1802 ²²	Bird Mountain Daniel Harmon	1		1		6			8
1803 ²³ summer	Fort Alexander Daniel Harmon	1		1		US			approx 30
1803 ²⁴	Unnamed satellite post of Fort Alexander Frederick Goedike	1				2			3
1803 ²⁵	Hair Hills Michel Langlois				1	20	5	5	31
1804 ²⁶	Lac La Peche on Qu'Appelle River Daniel Harmon	1				12			13
1804 ²⁷ summer	Fort Alexander Daniel Harmon	3		1		US			US

1805 ²⁸	Lac La Pluie		6	3	2	28			39
1806 ²⁹ summer	South Branch House Daniel Harmon and Smith	2		3		4	US	US	9
1806 ³⁰	Moose Lake Pierre Pérás [or Perra]	1				4			5
1807 ³¹	Dauphin River George Nelson		1	1		5	2		9
1808 ³²	Broken River Crebassa		1			4	1		6
1808 ³³	Pigeon River McDonell	1		1	1	4	4	2	13
1808 ³⁴	Grand River Campbell	1		1		5	2	4	13
1808 ³⁵	Dauphin River George Nelson		1			4	1		6
1808 ³⁶	Dunvegan Frederick Goedike	5				32	9	US	44
1809 ³⁷	Fort Vermillion Alexander Henry the Younger	3				33	27	67	130
1810 ³⁸	New White Earth House Alexander Henry the Younger	5				20	36	68	129 & 85 HBC people
1810 ³⁹	Stuart's Lake in New Caledonia Daniel Harmon	2				13			15
1812 ⁴⁰	Fort Astoria	5	9			90			104
1813 ⁴¹	Athabasca	5	13	8		162			188
1813 ⁴²	English River (upper)	1	3	3	2	37			46
1813 ⁴³	English River (lower) or Rat River & Cumberland House	1	3	1		36			41
1813 ⁴⁴	Saskatchewan River (Forts des Prairies)	2	4	7	2	58			73
1813 ⁴⁵	Athabasca River & Lesser Slave Lake	1	1	1	1	27			31
1813 ⁴⁶	Fort Dauphin	1	4	2	1	30			38

Appendix IV

Housing Arrangements at Fort Vermillion, 1809⁷⁰

House	# bourgeois	# voyageurs	# wives	# children	Total
House 1		4	4	9	17
House 2		4	3	8	15
House 3		5	3	6	14
House 4		4	5	9	18
House 5		5	4	8	17
House 6		4	3	8	15
House 7		4	1	5	10
House 8	1				1
House 9	1				1
House 10	1		1	3	5
Tent		2	2	5	9
Total	3	32	26	61	122⁷¹

Appendix V

Women at Fur Trade Posts

Posts where numbers of women are given, but indeterminate if they are wives of voyageurs or officers.

Post and year	total # of people	# of officers	# of voyageurs	# of women	# of children	% of men with wives
3 September 1800, Park River Post ⁷²	9	1	8	0	0	0
2 October 1801, Bird Mountain ⁷³	12	1	9	2	0	20
9 September 1808, Broken River ⁷⁴	6	1	4	1	0	20
10 October 1808, Dunvegan ⁷⁵	46+	5	32	9	"several"	24
27 October 1807, Dauphin River ⁷⁶	9	1	6	2	0	29
1 June 1801, Fort Alexandria ⁷⁷	28	2	7	6	13	67

Appendix VI

Voyageurs' Wives at Fur Trade Posts

Posts where numbers of women are given, and wives of voyageurs are specified.

Post and year	total # of people	# of officers	# of voyageurs	# of women	# of voyageurs' wives	# of children	% of voyageurs with wives
9 September 1808, Dauphin River ⁷⁸	6	1	4	1	0	0	0
9 September 1808, Grand River ⁷⁹	13	1	6	2	1	4	17
3 September 1800, Reed and Red Rivers ⁸⁰	13	0	7	3	3	3	43
3 October 1803, Hair Hills ⁸¹	20	0	10	5	5	5	50
9 September 1808, Pigeon River ⁸²	13	1	6	4	3	2	50
16 October 1809, Fort Vermillion ⁸³	130	3	33	27	26	67	79
1810, New White Earth House ⁸⁴	129	5	20	36	20	68	100

Appendix VII

Alexander Henry the Younger's 1805 Census of the North West

Fur trade officers not distinguished from voyageurs.

Departments	"White" Men	"White" women	"White" children	% men with wives
Athabasca	208	48	84	23
Athabasca River	37	12	15	32
English River	75	40	63	53
Rat River	25	7	10	28
Fort des Prairie	136	59	103	43
Fort Dauphin	45	22	18	49
Upper Red River	56	52	82	93
Lower Red River	75	40	60	53
Lake Winnipic	88	11	15	13
Lac la Pluie	46	10	10	22
Fond du Lac	128	29	50	23
Nipigon	90	20	20	22
Kaministiquia and Mille Lac and Lac des Chiens	62	16	36	26
Pic	16	2	3	13
NWC Totals	1090	368	569	34
A K Co Men & c [old XYC]	520	37	31	7
Overall totals	1610	405	600	25

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A.11/4; Microfilm reel #138; London Inward Correspondence from the HBC posts, 1775-1783, Albany Fort.

A.16/54; North West Company Collection; Microfilm Series I, reel #317-18, Servant's Accounts, Montreal 1810-1826 and Canadian Servants' Ledger, 1815-1822.

B.22/a/6; Microfilm reel #1M17; Brandon House Post Journal, 1798-1799.

B.39/a/16; Microfilm reel #1M22; Fort Chipewyan Post Journal, 1820-1821, "Journal of Transactions & occurrences at Fort Wedderburn Athabasca Lake, Kept by William Brown Commencing June 6th 1820, and Ending February 10th 1821. Volume 1st."

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B.177/a/1; James Sutherland's Red Lake (NW Ontario) journal of 1790-91.

B.105/a/4; John Mackay's Lac la Pluie journal of 1796-7.

E.31/2/2 Unallocated Correspondence and employees' private letters, undelivered, 1823-92; Voyageurs, 1823-50.

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