A Forest of Family Trees:

RUPERT'S LAND ROOTS IN WESTERN CANADA

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the roots of the family trees that sprouted as European fur traders and other sojourners settled in among their Aboriginal hosts in Rupert's Land. Jennifer Brown looks at how some of those stories, sometimes forgotten or suppressed in past generations, have been recovered and are being told and retold from new angles in the present time.

One century ago, Saskatchewan and Alberta attained provincial status in the Dominion of Canada. But that century is only the most recent of many in the long human history of the region. After the glaciers of the last Ice Age retreated, and the land became habitable and the plants and animals returned, people came as well, settling around the post-glacial lakes, swamps, and streams left behind by huge volumes of melting ice. The first settlers came to these northern climes about 6 or 7,000 years ago. To put the most recent century in historical perspective, those hundred years amount to about one sixtieth of that time span, momentous as they have been for the present populations of those two prairie provinces.

Aboriginal peoples were the first pioneers of this renovated landscape, harvesting its diverse plant and animal resources – bison and other game. When a relatively warm climate flourished around AD 1000-1200, they began cultivating the prairies' first domesticated crops, corn in particular, at their settlement on the Red River near present-day Lockport, Manitoba, and doubtless elsewhere. Many hundreds of generations elaborated rich cultural traditions and sophisticated technologies such as the hunters' short but strong sinew-backed bow that made the best possible use of the limited wood resources available on the northern plains. Skilled archers, bowyers, and fletchers (makers of bows and arrows) have flourished on the Plains for probably at least 1,800 years.[1]

The long history sketched above has tended to be submerged by the events of the last three hundred-plus years, with their momentous implications for northern peoples and their homelands. Historical works have also privileged the mass of documentation by literate sources in mainstream languages. Written records in English and French have commonly received the most attention; stories told in indigenous languages have remained inaccessible to all but the speakers of those languages. To understand more fully the present and the recent past, however, we need to attend to the sources from all sides and to seek a more balanced historiography grounded in listening to all the voices that have something to say.

On 2 May 1670, in London, England, 18 men – courtiers and other investors willing to "adventure" their funds in Hudson Bay, received from King Charles II a royal charter granting them trade monopoly rights and a claim to an enormous territory not yet mapped by anyone – the lands whose waterways flowed into Hudson Bay. The king's first cousin, Prince Rupert, best known in English history as a leader of the royalist forces in Cromwell's time, was the first governor of the Hudson's Bay Company; the new territory's name, Rupert's Land, honoured a man who in fact never visited "his" land or met the people whose homeland it was.

In fact, none of the early company directors ever saw this land or negotiated any transfer of its title with its residents; they simply instructed the men they sent out to make agreements for trade and land use with local Cree leaders in the vicinity of the first trading forts, symbolizing those agreements with "tallies of wood" and by other means that might be mutually understood (though we cannot know what mutual understandings were in fact achieved). The main English concern was to establish territorial claims in the face of French efforts to expand their domains from New France on the St. Lawrence River; indeed, in the 1680s and 1690s, European warfare spilled over into Hudson Bay as HBC forts were periodically seized or destroyed. Not until after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 did the French accept the English claim to Hudson Bay, allowing for many decades of relatively peaceful fur trading mainly with the First Nations who resided near the coast of what the Cree called the "dirty sea" – *winni-peek* (being salty, it was undrinkable[2]), or who were willing to travel down the rivers from inland to exchange beaver and other furs for kettles, axes, cloth, guns, and other useful goods.

JENNIFER BROWN

Jennifer Brown is a professor of history at the University of Winnipeg and the Canada Research Chair in Aboriginal Peoples in an Urban and Regional Context. Her interests lie in the aboriginal history of the Hudson Bay watershed known for 200 years as Rupert's Land, and of the First Nations and Métis of the Red River heartland where Winnipeg now stands.

From a Hudson Bay Cree perspective, the newcomers were strangers, potentially dangerous, as were the other intruders they had experienced – Inuit from the north and east, and Iroquois raiders from the south. But these outsiders were still more odd, with their large wooden vessels that generated the James Bay Cree word for "white men" – *wemistikosiwak,* men with wooden boats. The old Cree stories comment on the tree-like masts and cloud-like sails of these vessels, whose guns flashed fire and echoed across the Bay.[3] The only way, in Cree terms, to achieve a sense of security with these problematic newcomers (whose trade goods, however, were welcomed) was to establish some sort of bond with them. For the Cree as for other Aboriginal people, the most basic form of bonding was through building kinship ties – by means of marriage or adoption – to draw them into the community and build reciprocities that would lead to mutual confidence and mutual advantage.[4] Early HBC men, however, were firmly instructed to avoid such fraternizing, for security reasons and to avoid expense, loss, and trouble. They came without women and families; they were sojourners on company business.

But these Bay servants were also isolated, far from home, enduring long winters that they could not survive without help, food, and equipment from the Cree; and the reciprocities that developed on a local level went considerably beyond fur trading. The London directors were far away, in touch with their Bay employees by means of only one ship sent each summer to bring trade goods and supplies and to carry home furs. They could not readily enforce rules that aroused the suspicions of Aboriginal trading partners (it was odd enough to Native people that these men on ships traveled without women), and they could not control the dynamics of evolving post communities in the Bay. It is clear that by the mid-1700s, relationships between Aboriginal women and HBC traders were almost commonplace. By the late 1700s, numbers of the resulting families were amply visible in company records and in traders' own wills, in a number of instances.[5]

Gradually the company came to acknowledge women's roles in the trade, and discovered that their offspring with the traders even formed a potential "colony of very useful hands." A parallel process with rather different dynamics was at work in the Montreal-based fur trade that reached from Canada (still a relatively small region) across the Great Lakes into Rupert's Land, as French and later Scottish traders formed increasingly large families. The net result was a population of many thousands with multiple roots and branches both Aboriginal and European – bearing First Nations, Metis, and other identities, both Canadian and American. Mixed parentage or "blood" in itself was not a predictor of identity; everything depended on where these offspring went, who brought them up, which parental kinship networks drew them in, what marital mates and livelihoods were available, and what larger events (the annexation of Rupert's Land to Canada, the Louis Riel risings of 1869-70 and 1885, the treaty signings of the 1870s, the fading of the bison herds, the US frontier wars) scattered their families and communities or fostered the founding of new ones in new (or old) places, as for example, in mission settings.[6]

The net result was a population of many thousands with multiple roots and branches both Aboriginal and European – bearing First Nations, Metis, and other identities, both Canadian and American.

For a long time after the troubles of 1885, these histories were lost through displacements or purposely set aside. Looking back from 2005, however, we are finally seeing the women and families who generated this population take their place on the historical stage, gaining due recognition and wide interest. This process has dramatically accelerated in the last three decades. When, as a graduate student, I became interested in fur trade and Aboriginal history in the early 1970s, few people were working on or even talking about these families. Sylvia Van Kirk and I had independently come to realize as we did our Ph.D. dissertation researches, she in London, England, and I at the University of Chicago, that women and families in the fur trade had been a non-topic among scholars.[7] Discovering a new field, our perspectives were limited at the time; we were feeling our way, even with regard to terminology – how might we best describe these fur trade relationships, and what terms might best be used to describe offspring of mixed descent who had not even yet been categorized as a group? On these matters, for example, the ambiguous phrase "marriage according to the custom of the country" (marriage and custom both being variously defined), research and analysis need to continue.[8]

Back in the 1970s, we and others who were just beginning to work in this area were also very much limited to archival research. Even while we found the Hudson's Bay Company and other archives to be a rich treasure trove of materials that had never before been mined for these stories, we were trying to reconstruct them from the biased and selective records left by the literati of the fur trade, and later, of church missions and government – typically adult males of relatively high social standing writing for purposes and audiences rather different from ours. At the time, few descendants of these families were working on their histories, and few were talking openly and with pride about them. My only opportunity for oral history during my graduate studies came one afternoon in Selkirk, Manitoba, in a conversation with Ruby and Barbara Johnstone, descendants of Isaac Cowie, Chief Factor William Sinclair and his Cree wife Nahoway, and so many other old fur trade and Red River families that they styled themselves "Rupert's Landers" in honour of their deep roots in the region.[9] It was a foretaste of things to come.

In 1983, I began teaching Aboriginal and fur trade history at the University of Winnipeg. In that and the following decade, both university courses and scholarship in these areas underwent immense growth, a trajectory that continues. In 1983-84, there were perhaps 40 Aboriginal students at the university; now there are more than 800. Each year that I teach in these fields, and notably in my

course on Métis history, some students begin to explore their roots, tracing their family trees back into the fur trade and finding Cree, Ojibwe, and other Aboriginal relatives as well as Scots, Frenchmen and Englishmen, who link them into networks past and present and who all have stories waiting to be told. The cousins they find may range from among their own classmates to the breadth of North America and sometimes beyond, with the help of the vast reach of the Internet.

Some family researchers have had to practice diplomacy with grandparents, aunts, and others who lived through the racial prejudice that Native people experienced in past generations; older relatives sometimes do not want to hear about the Native sides of their families, and the women from whom their Native connections sprang have often vanished as racial sensitivities and patrilineal surname bias have combined to silence their voices. But their descendants (most often women, it seems) are retrieving their stories and bringing them forward with great skill and energy. To cite just two examples, Heather Devine's recent book, *The People Who Own Themselves,* traces in detail the histories of her Desjarlais ancestors from Quebec across the west to Canadian and American fur trade and Aboriginal communities as far afield as St. Louis, Missouri, and the Athabasca country, exploring the dynamics that led to their identifying themselves in multiple and changing ways. And Sherry Farrell Racette recently completed a ground-breaking study of Métis women's arts and clothing, building powerfully on her own familial experiences and observations and her expertise as an Aboriginal artist and designer.[10]

History is being changed, and so are our images of the past. The great men of the fur trade appear in a new light when viewed in the context of their social and familial relationships with Aboriginal people (which they handled in a variety of ways); and so do all the other men and women and their kin who became interconnected over the two hundred years that Rupert's Land existed. In the western provinces, and elsewhere too, the roots and branches of their family trees form a forest that grows with each generation. The tangle becomes more complex, and hence more interesting; history is being reconstructed, but also made anew, as people in the present follow old trails through these dense woods, and make fresh ones too, into the lengthening past.

Endnotes

[1] A Ph.D. dissertation (University of Manitoba, 2005) by Roland Bohr (Department of History, University of Winnipeg) outlines in more detail than any previous work the cultural and social history of archery in hunting and warfare on the northern plains (Bohr, "Aboriginal Archery and European Firearms on the Northern Great Plains and in the Central Subarctic: Survival and Adaptation 1670-1870").

[2] Similarly, Lake Winnipeg was also named as dirty in Cree for its muddy, clouded appearance as a prairie lake; although not salty, it differs greatly in appearance from the relatively clear waters flowing across the Canadian Shield.

[3] A leading figure in recording the stories of his people that relates to all facets of their history, ancient and recent, is Louis Bird, Omushkego (Cree) historian and storyteller from Peawanuck on the Winisk River near Hudson Bay. His new book, *Telling our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2005, with collaborators), and his website at www.ourvoices.ca present the richness of Omushkego (Swampy Cree) oral traditions relating to life before Europeans came and to the interactions with traders, missionaries, and others that came later. In particular, chapter 5 in *Telling our Stories* juxtaposes Hudson Bay Cree stories of early contacts with some of the perspectives brought by early voyagers to Hudson and James Bay.

[4] Compare Georges Sioui's commentary on the episode in which the Stadacona Iroquoians in 1535 presented Jacques Cartier with a young girl in a ceremony that Sioui reads as an effort to assimilate him through marriage, though Cartier did not understand the gesture ("Canada: Its Cradle, its Name, its Spirit: The Stadaconan Contribution to Canadian Culture and Identity," *Canadian Issues* [October 2003], 24-29. Frederic W. Gleach has read the "rescue" by Pocahontas of captain John Smith from supposed execution by the Powhatans as more likely a dramatic adoption ceremony to socialize Smith as an ally and friend; Smith also did not understand what was going on ("Controlled Specuation: Interpreting the Saga of Pocahontas and captain John Smith", in Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading beyond Words: Contexts for Native History,* 21-42 (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1996; rev. ed. 2003).

[5] Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980).

[6] The range of directions in which these offspring and their families traveled is well illustrated in the diverse articles collected in Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985). For a recent comprehensive bibliography on the Métis, see Lawrence J. Barkwell, Leah Dorion, and Darren R. Prefontaine, eds., *Resources for Métis Researchers* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1999); at over 2000 entries, it demonstrates how this field of study has expanded.

[7] These dissertations both appeared in 1980 in book form; see Brown, cited above, and Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980).

[8] In 2001, I returned to this question in "Partial Truths: A Closer Look at Fur Trade Marriage," in Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens, and R.C. Macleod, eds., *From Rupert's Land to Canada,* 59-80 (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press).

[9] Brown 1980, 71; interview with Ruby and Barbara Johnstone, 8 July 1972.

[10] Devine, *The People Who Own Themselves: Canadien Freemen and the Emergence of the Métis in Western Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004). Farrell Racette's dissertation, "Sewing Ourselves Together: Clothing, Decorative Arts and the Expression of Métis and Half Breed Identity," was completed in 2004 in the Interdisciplinary Program at the University of Manitoba.