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On the Edge of a Frozen Sea

Prince of Wales' Fort, York Factory and the Fur Trade of Western Hudson Bay

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by A.H. Hider. (HBCA)

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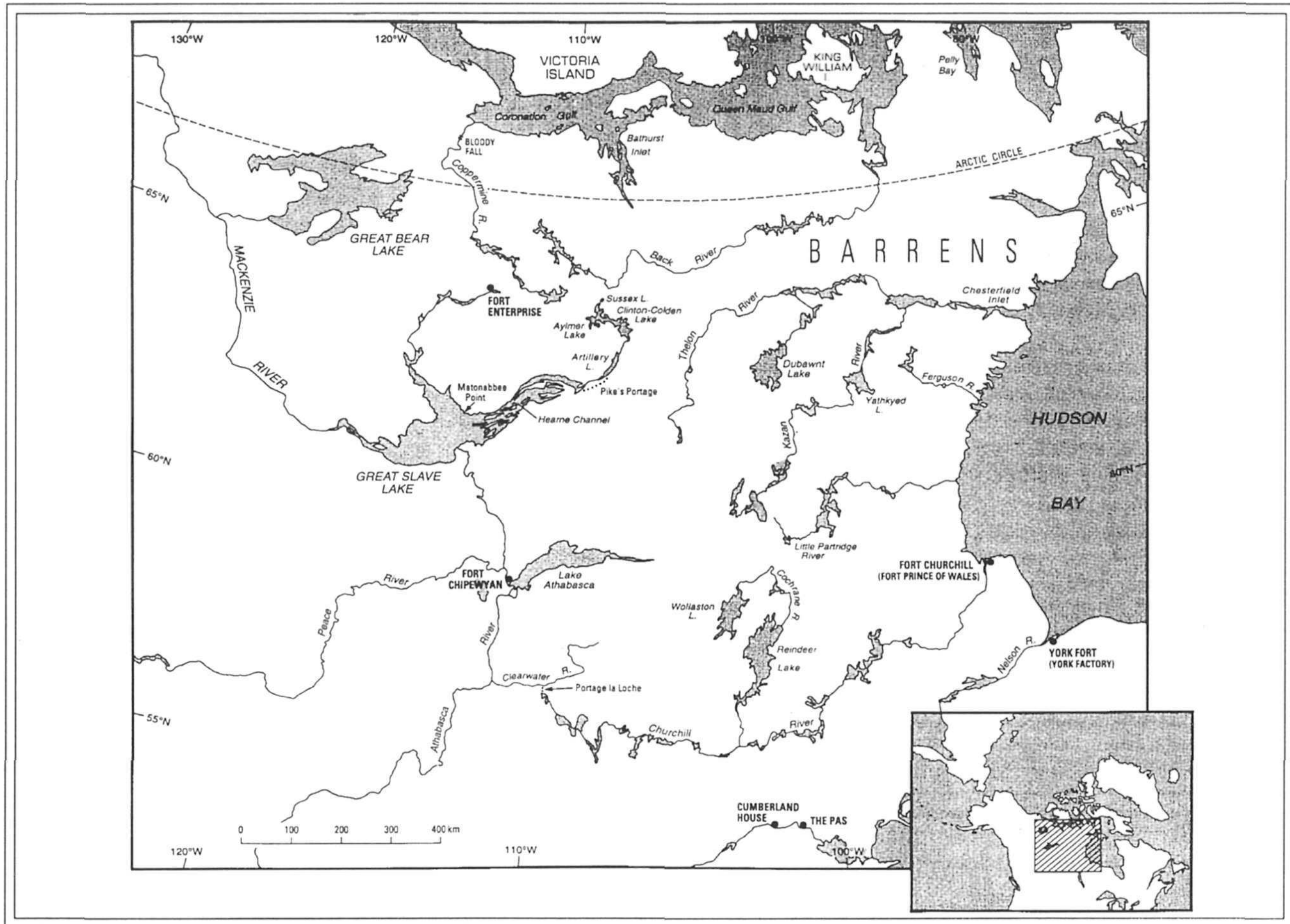


Western Hudson Bay and its hinterland. (From Richard C. Davis, ed., Lobsticks and Stone Cairns; Human Landmarks in the Arctic.)

Introduction

The modern visitor to western Hudson Bay is confronted by a seemingly inhospitable territory where wind, water, snow and ice have carved out a stark landscape that is millions of years old. Located on the southern fringe of arctic Canada, this land of rock and muskeg has been home to a fascinating array of plant and animal life — from arctic plants that bloom for a short season to the polar bears, caribou, seals and whales that inhabit the coastal lowlands and frigid waters of the bay. Human occupation of the territory surrounding western Hudson Bay, which dates back over many centuries, has also played an important role in shaping this "land of the north wind". From ancient hunters who inhabited the region before recorded memory, to the Aboriginal and European fur traders of later centuries, the story of western Hudson Bay has been one of conflict, accommodation, and survival "on the edge of a frozen sea".

The rocky shore of Hudson Bay near Churchill. Frozen for most of the year, the bay can remain jammed with ice until July.

The Ancient Peoples of Northern Manitoba

A Changing Land:

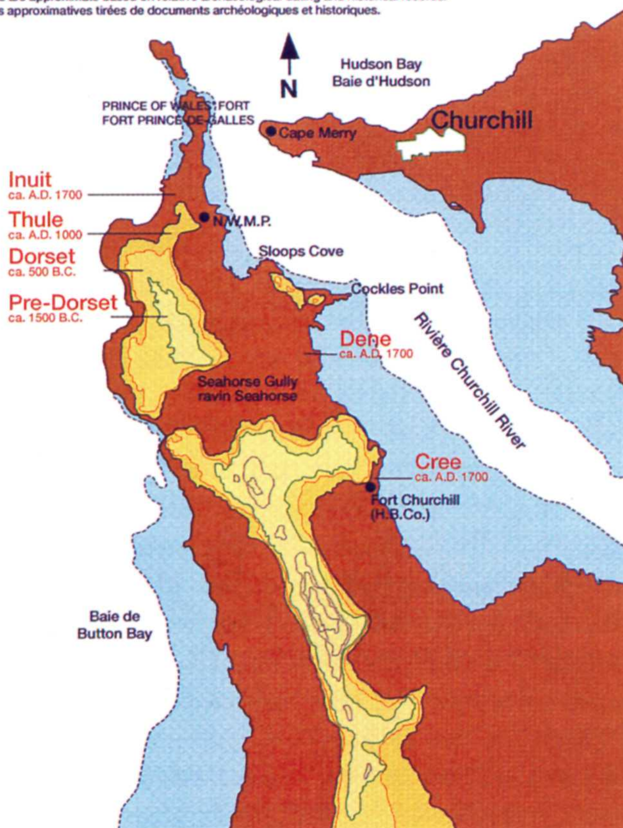
Approximately twelve thousand years ago during the last great period of glaciation a huge sheet of ice, in some places as much as four kilometres thick, covered most of the present-day province of Manitoba. As conditions slowly improved and the ice melted, it left behind the till plains, moraines, glacial lakes and river basins that are found today throughout the province. Glacial Lake Agassiz, one of the largest meltwater lakes in the world, covered 350,000 square kilometres at its peak. As this huge glacier melted it flooded the low-lying regions of northern Manitoba that had been created by the weight of the ice. The Tyrrell Sea, as it is called by geologists, was the ancient extension of present-day Hudson Bay and covered a region that reached many miles inland from the modern shores of the bay. Relieved of the pressure from the retreating glacier, the land continued to rise through a process known as "isostatic rebound" that created a series of Precambrian islands and gravel beach ridges. Initially, this rebound process was quite rapid but it has slowed over the centuries and is now calculated to be about 40cm a century. One of the best examples of isostatic rebound can be seen at Sloops Cove near Churchill where an 18th century mooring spot used by the Hudson's Bay Company to shelter its boats is now high and dry.

A Dorset family on the Hudson Bay coast gathers round the hearth to share a meal. (Historic Resources Branch)

Early Migrations to Manitoba:

As the ice retreated, Manitoba's First Peoples entered the province from the southwest approximately 11,500 years ago. Organized into small groups of related families, the "Clovis Culture", as they are called by archaeologists, gathered wild plants and hunted the big game animals that once roamed the grasslands southwest of the Manitoba escarpment. Ice

Age creatures such as mammoths, mastadons, big-horned bison and early species of camels and horses — all now extinct — were killed by groups of hunters armed with clubs and spears. Clovis peoples, like most band societies, moved throughout their territory in regular seasonal patterns according to the availability of plant foods and the migratory cycle of the animals they hunted. Band size, which might range from a single family to groups of fifty or more, varied from season to season depending upon the food resources that could be found at any given location. With the extinction of the Ice Age mammoths, Clovis peoples were replaced by



new Aboriginal arrivals who entered Manitoba from the American midwest approximately 8000 to 10,000 years ago. The abundance of game — particularly the huge herds of bison that roamed the northern grasslands — coupled with an improving climate in the region, drew these people northward. Archaeological finds indicate that these early

Travelling downwind so as not to alert the animals, Dene hunters approach a herd of caribou. The caribou hunt was the mainstay of the Dene economy, providing the people with food, hide for clothing and footwear, and bone and antler for tools. (Historic Resources Branch)

peoples also settled in the boreal forest zones of eastern Manitoba and Lake Winnipeg where they subsisted on large game animals such as the moose.

The First Peoples of Northern Manitoba:

Beyond the southern plains and parkland zones, the forests of central and northern Manitoba were first visited by what archaeologists refer to as the "Shield Archaic" culture. Around 2000 years ago they were assimilated by Algonkian-speakers who had begun moving into the central boreal forest. By the late pre-contact period Cree-speaking people were the major inhabitants of central and northern Manitoba. Along the coast of Hudson Bay the Lowland Cree, the *Athinuwick* or *Muskego Inuiwick* — literally the "people of the Swamp" — inhabited the poorly drained, flat lowlands of western Hudson and James bays. At first glance an inhospitable region of tundra, marshland and thousands of creeks and rivers, many anthropologists speculated that the Hudson Bay lowlands remained almost completely uninhabited by Aboriginal groups prior to the arrival of the European fur trade. Cree oral history, along with more recent archaeological discoveries, however, support the notion that people have lived seasonally in the area for thousands of years, relying on the varied plant and animal resources of the coastal tundra and interior wetlands.

In the extreme northern part of Manitoba a different settlement history was occurring among Aboriginal societies prior to contact. A process of migration that started some 4000 years ago from Alaska culminated in the arrival of peoples that have been referred to as members of the "Arctic Small Tool Tradition", a circumpolar designation for groups who used a variety of small, delicately fashioned stone implements. At one time, Pre-Dorset culture and the later Dorset peoples, both members of the Arctic Small Tool Tradition (and referred to as the

An Inuit summer camp on the shore of Hudson Bay. Carrying harpoons, hunters prepare to leave in their hide-covered boats to hunt the seals that basked on the ice flows near the shore. (Historic Resources Branch)

"Tunit" by the later Inuit), inhabited almost all of arctic Canada, including the tundra zone north of the Churchill River basin in northern Manitoba. Some of the most significant Pre-Dorset and Dorset sites in Canada can be found near Churchill where remnants of ancient campsites and tent rings are scattered throughout an area known as Seahorse Gully on the west side of the Churchill River (see box). By 1000 A.D. the Tunit were replaced by a new wave of immigrants from the northwest known as the "Thule", the ancestors of the modern Inuit. For these northern coastal peoples marine animals such as whales, seals and walrus formed the mainstay of their diet and were hunted with harpoons. The Athapascan-speaking Dene arrived in northern Manitoba as part of a large migration of peoples from the west that began around 500 A.D. The easternmost Dene group, the Chipewyan, inhabited parts of the central sub-arctic inland from Hudson Bay and traditionally relied upon the barren-ground caribou for food.

Seahorse Gully: Settlement Throughout the Millennia

Just across the Churchill River from the modern town of Churchill, in an area known as the "west peninsula", are some of the most significant sites of ancient settlement in northern Canada. Called Seahorse Gully, this low area of coastal tundra, along with an adjacent gravel ridge known as Seahorse Ridge, contains thousands of artifacts relating to Pre-Dorset and Dorset peoples who visited and inhabited the area some 3500 years ago.

First discovered by a local Dene man, these sites were revealed after a fire exposed the gravel and sand below a surface layer of vegetation. During the Pre-Dorset era the west peninsula was probably an island, or series of islands, before isostatic rebound joined them into the continuous peninsula found today. Numerous tent rings — evidence of ancient dwellings — dot the area, as do graves, caches, and kayak rests. Remains of harpoons and the bones of sea mammals such as seals have been found in rubbish heaps dating from Pre-Dorset times and suggest the maritime nature of these early seasonal settlements. Lithic materials such as chert are found throughout the area and were used by ancient peoples to fashion scrapers, adze blades and chisels. Throughout the centuries Aboriginal peoples continued to visit the area where they harvested the beluga whales, seals, and fish that could be found in the cold waters of the Churchill River. First excavated by archaeologist Ronald Nash in the early 1960s, Seahorse Gully and Seahorse Ridge have been the focus of renewed archaeological work in recent years and many new sites have been discovered.

A Tradition of Trade:

Aboriginal peoples in northern Manitoba, as elsewhere, were engaged in trade long before the arrival of the European fur traders. The traditional exchange of goods among First Nations peoples was in part a response to the uncertainty of a regular food supply caused by climate fluctuations, overhunting, or the changing migratory patterns of game animals. For the first inhabitants of Manitoba, periodic food shortages that often resulted in famine were the reality of life in a precarious environment. Trade, and the establishment of strong economic bonds with one's neighbours, helped to offset the worst effects of these shortages. Travel to the territory of distant groups was a regular feature of the seasonal cycle for Manitoba's first peoples. Trading for foodstuffs helped to vary the local diet, while exotic and highly prized materials could be acquired from peoples living hundreds of miles distant.

A selection of bone and ivory tools and decorative pieces excavated by archaeologists at York Factory. These items were used by Aboriginal peoples and include an awl (top) used for sewing, a large flesher for scraping hides, a harpoon head (left) for hunting whales, and a netting needle (centre right). Decorative items include a spangle, pendant, and a tubular-shaped bone bead.

Trade among Native peoples was more than simply an exchange of goods similar to the modern way that we purchase items from a store. It was part of a larger strategy of inter-group relations that resembled the treaties that two countries might sign today. "Treaty trade," as it is sometimes called, helped to solidify relations between bands and nations and was usually accompanied by gift-giving ceremonies and social events. For many tribes, the annual journey to the villages of their allies was the focal point of the year. It was then that rare items could be acquired, diplomatic relations reaffirmed, old acquaintances renewed, and marriages arranged. A good deal of feasting, dancing and storytelling usually marked these occasions. Pacts of mutual assistance in times of scarcity, or when threatened by a common enemy, were negotiated and, like modern treaty signing ceremonies, the exchange of gifts was used to validate diplomatic ties. As a political and diplomatic event, as well as an economic one, trade formed an important part of life among the Cree, Dene and Inuit peoples of northern Manitoba. Later, with the arrival of the Europeans, these age-old trade routes and networks facilitated the rapid movement of European trade goods and technology throughout the continent. The "fur trade," as it came to be known, would not have been possible without them.

Where Two Worlds Met: Early Approaches and First Contacts

On the "Bay of the North Sea":

Decades before Aboriginal people in northern Manitoba had actually met Europeans they knew of the arrival of these strangers on the North American continent. The trading networks that linked various Native cultures on the continent brought European trade goods into the province from early settlements in New France and along the Atlantic seaboard. Cree and Assiniboine traders from southern Manitoba bartered with Ojibwa and Ottawa middlemen in the eastern Great Lakes region for French goods such as knives, hatchets, awls and guns that had been carried west in the 17th century by *coureurs de bois* from the small colonies of the St. Lawrence valley. In the north, the Cree and Chipewyan Dene had limited face-to-face contacts with a handful of European

Danish captain Jens Munk's map of the mouth of the Churchill River. The Munk expedition spent the winter of 1619-20 on the west peninsula where sixty-one men perished from scurvy and cold. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

explorers who reached landfall on the west coast of Hudson and James bays. Henry Hudson, who landed near the mouth of the Rupert River on James Bay in 1610, encountered a lone Cree hunter from whom he received two beaver skins and some deer hides in exchange for a knife, a mirror and some buttons. Other expeditions to Hudson Bay, such as that of Thomas Button in 1612 and the Danish explorer Jens Munk in 1619,

successfully sailed beyond the "furious overfall" (Hudson Strait) and wintered on the west coast of the bay. Encountering no Aboriginal people there, their crews usually spent a miserable winter of starvation and scurvy, unprepared for the harsh and unforgiving climate of the region. This unfamiliarity often had disastrous results — the Munk expedition which wintered at the mouth of the Churchill River lost a total of 61 men to disease and the cold, though somehow Munk and two other survivors managed to sail one of his two ships back to Europe.

On 2 May, 1670 Charles II granted a royal charter to the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson Bay". (HBCA)

But as European explorers in search of a passage to the riches of Asia were briefly abandoning Hudson Bay as a region of bitter cold, privation and death, French traders from the south were about to expand westward beyond the boundaries of New France. These traders were not after gold, silk or spices, but furs — the pelts of the beaver, fox, and marten that populated the forests of the eastern woodlands. The fur trade soon came to dominate much of the commerce of the interior and fed the demands of an expanding European fashion market. Two types of fur markets existed in Europe at this time. Fine furs such as fox and marten were worn by

The first public sale of furs in London by the newly formed Hudson's Bay Company, 1672. (HBCA)

royalty and the wealthy, while beaver pelts were "felted" for manufacture into hats. In an age when every European gentleman wore a hat, the felting industry soon became an important part of the clothing trade of England, France and other European countries. In the felting industry *castor gras* or 'coat beaver' (skins that had been worn by Native people so that the guard hairs had fallen out) were preferred over *castor sec*, the dry or "parchment beaver". To make this felt, the bottom barbed hairs of a beaver pelt were separated from the skin and mixed with a special paste that resulted in a flexible, yet durable, fabric that could be shaped into various styles of hats. Despite changing fashions, this rather specialized industry was the primary market for the fur trade in Canada over the next two centuries.

As the demand for fur increased in Europe, the search for new areas of supply helped push French traders westward after 1640. Two enterprising Frenchmen, Pierre Esprit Radisson and his brother-in-law Médard Chouart, sieur des Groseilliers journeyed as far as Lake Superior in the late 1650s, returning with a fine cargo of furs and a plan that would ultimately change the course of the fur trade in Canada. From Native middlemen of the southern Great Lakes, they heard tales of a great "Bay of the North Sea" where fur-bearing animals produced the finest pelts of the shield country. Spurned by French authorities, Radisson and Groseilliers journeyed to London and the court of King Charles II where they enjoyed a more enthusiastic reception. In 1668 a group of English investors headed by the king's cousin, Prince Rupert, financed an expedition to Hudson Bay. Sailing through Hudson Strait the *Nonsuch*, with Groseilliers on board, reached landfall at the mouth of the Rupert River on James Bay. A successful season trading with the Cree of southern James Bay convinced the sponsors of the expedition that Hudson Bay was the gateway to new riches; not the silks and spices of the Orient, but a quantity and quality of furs that could command the highest prices on the London market. With the granting of an extraordinary royal charter on 2 May 1670, the "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson Bay" — later to become the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) — was made, at least in the King's eyes, the "true and absolute Lords and Proprietors" of the lands drained by Hudson Bay, a huge territory that covered almost one third of present-day Canada, including all of Manitoba. Royal charters meant nothing to the Indigenous Peoples of Hudson Bay, of course, for it remained their land and not the English king's, though they welcomed the strangers and their trade goods to their shores. Small trading posts — usually little more than a

collection of rude log buildings surrounded by a rough palisade — soon ringed James Bay. Each summer Cree traders journeyed down the rivers by canoe from the height of land to trade with the company's small garrisons at Moose Fort, Albany, Rupert House and Eastmain.

Bloodshed on the Bay:

In Manitoba, initial HBC interest settled on the mouth of the Hayes and Nelson rivers on the west coast of Hudson Bay. As important trade routes, these rivers provided access to the bay for Native groups from the western interior. In 1682 Zechariah Gillam of the HBC established a post at the mouth of the Nelson River. The Company's monopoly in the region, however, was short lived as traders from France and New England, realizing the enormous potential for profits in the district, began to construct rival posts nearby. Over the next three years no less than seven hastily built forts were constructed at the mouths of the twin rivers. One of these early posts was York Fort. Named after the company's governor, the Duke of York (later King James II), it was constructed in 1684 by John Abraham of the HBC on the north bank of the Hayes River. The crowded competition in the region soon led to hostilities as rival traders made periodic attacks on the forts of their adversaries. In 1686 the Chevalier de Troyes led an overland expedition to the bay from New France and succeeded in capturing all but one of the company's posts on western Hudson Bay. Seven years later, in 1693 James Knight of the HBC momentarily swept the French from the bay, only to have them recaptured the following year by a flamboyant young military leader named Pierre

Pierre Le Moyne Sieur d'Iberville whose naval victory near the mouth of the Nelson River turned the tide of colonial rivalry in France's favour.

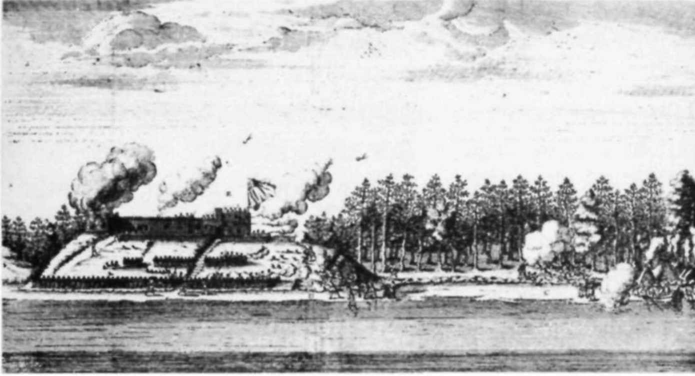
Le Moyne Sieur d'Iberville. Soldier, ship's captain, explorer, colonizer, trader and privateer, d'Iberville has been called by one biographer "the most renowned son of New France," and was undoubtedly one of the great military strategists in Canadian history. His name is perhaps the one most closely associated with this intense period of colonial rivalry in the fur trade, and his 1697 victory over three English ships just off the coast from York Factory remains one of the most stirring naval engagements in Canadian history. (See box)

Manitoba's Only Naval Battle

Few Canadians realize that one of the more significant naval battles in this country's history was fought on Hudson Bay, only a few miles off the coast from York Factory.

As the conflict between England and France for colonial domination heated up by the late 17th century, trading posts on the bay changed hands on an almost regular basis. Both overland and by water, rival troops carried out a series of raids that sometimes seemed more like comic opera than a skilled military campaign. York Fort, for example, changed hands a total of six times between 1684 and 1713. In one of the more dramatic episodes of the campaign a French naval force under the command of Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville was instructed in 1697 to retake York, which had been captured by James Knight of the HBC the previous year. Crossing the bay, d'Iberville's flagship the *Pélican* became separated from the four other vessels under his command. Anchoring off York Factory in early September he was confronted by three English warships; the *Hampshire, Dering* and *Hudson's Bay.* Completely outgunned, d'Iberville, in a series of brilliant moves managed to sink the *Hampshire* with 290 men on board, drive the *Hudson's Bay* ashore where it grounded on the shallow tidal flats, and chase the *Dering* from the mouth of the river. Tragedy struck the *Pélican* when, soon after its victory, the ship was driven on to a shoal where 23 of the crew were drowned. Despite the loss, d'Iberville managed to force the surrender of York; its complement of traders, labourers and tradesmen having little stomach for an all out fight against regular troops. York Fort remained in French hands until the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 when it reverted to the HBC. For his part, d'Iberville went on to further distinction, establishing fur trade posts in Louisiana and harassing English shipping in the West Indies.

Renamed Fort Bourbon, York was occupied for the next seventeen years by French traders representing the *Compagnie du Nord*, and though provisions from Europe were often in short supply — no ship arrived at the post between 1709 and 1713 — the inhabitants of Fort Bourbon managed to carry on a limited trade in furs with the Cree people of the region. No daily logs or journals have survived from this period,



The French bombardment of York Fort in 1697 from La Potherie's "Histoire de l'Amerique Septentrionale", 1753. (HBCA)

although the account of post governor Nicholas Jérémie, translated into English as *Twenty Years of York Factory, 1694-1714*, provides some of the earliest written descriptions of the geography, wildlife, and Native peoples of the region. The post garden at Fort Bourbon, which Jérémie claimed produced "good lettuce, green cabbages, and other vegetables of the same sort", describes perhaps the earliest attempt at agriculture on Hudson Bay.

Expanding the Bayside Empire:

Meanwhile, in Europe, prolonged peace negotiations between England and France ended with the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 and the return of all of the HBC's posts on Hudson and James bays. The following year James Knight arrived at York Fort to receive the surrender of the ill-equipped French and groused that the post was little more than a "confused heap of rotten buildings". Inundated by a spring flood in 1715, Knight had enough and decided to rebuild the thirty-year old post a short distance downstream and further back from the banks of the Hayes River. Constructed entirely of rough-hewn logs, this octagonal-shaped fort boasted four flankers and a high palisade around a central

courtyard. Like most wooden forts on Hudson Bay, though, it required constant upkeep and was almost completely rebuilt by the company in 1742. After a series of floods in the 1780s York Fort was moved again to its present location, about a kilometre upstream from the site of the 1715 post. Again, a traditional, but larger, flanker-style fort was constructed, this time under the supervision of Chief Factor Joseph Colen.

Soon after he occupied York Fort in 1714, James Knight began to formulate plans to entice the Athapaskan-speaking Chipewyan Dene to travel to the bay to trade. Furs were not the only prize, however, as the gold-obsessed governor hoped these "Northern Indians", as the company called the Chipewyan, could direct him to the copper mines and "Yellow mettle" that had long been rumoured among Native traders in the northwest. One problem existed, however. Hostilities between the Cree and the Dene peoples made the latter reluctant to undertake the dangerous journey to the bay, especially since their Cree enemies were equipped with muskets acquired from European traders. In 1715 Knight sent Thanadelthur, a Dene woman fluent in the Cree language (see box), to the barren lands to propose a peace treaty with the neighbouring Chipewyan. The "Slave Woman", as she is called in Knight's journal, was skilfully able to negotiate an accord between the warring nations, helped along by the company's promise to build a new post north of York at the mouth of the Churchill River.

James Knight had long believed that a post on the Churchill River would serve as an important adjunct to the forts at York and at the "bottom of the bay", the Company's name for James Bay. The HBC agreed that a post at this northern location would open up trade with the Dene and the Inuit and would have potential as a whale fishery, despite the fear that building in this harsh and sparsely treed location would be, in Knight's words, the "difficultest piece of Work as ere was done in this Country". Selected by Knight in 1717, the location for the new post on the Churchill River was well known, having been the site where Jens Munk and his crew wintered with disastrous results in 1619-20. It was also the site of an ill-fated attempt by the company to construct a fort in 1689; a ramshackle abode that burned to the ground within weeks of its construction. Somewhat bitterly, Knight contended in his journal that the men "sett it a fire to Run away by the light of it."

Knight's apprehensions regarding the difficulties associated with building in the Churchill area were well justified. Lack of suitable timber for building, the difficulty of travelling over muskeg and bogs, and the incessant clouds of mosquitoes, led the old governor to observe in his

Thanadelthur: Peacemaker on the Barrens

In Dene society in the 1700s women were not without influence. Perhaps the best known of these was a young Chipewyan Dene woman named Thanadelthur (or "Slave Woman" in the written record) who was to have a profound effect upon the early fortunes of the HBC on the west coast of Hudson Bay.

Captured by the Cree near the Nelson River in 1713 and kept by them as a slave, Thanadelthur escaped in the fall of 1714 and weeks later, exhausted and "Allmost Starv'd', came upon York Fort. James Knight, the Governor at York, was impressed with his new informant who had become conversant in the Cree language during her period of captivity. Interested in establishing trade with the Chipewyan, Knight hoped to build a new post closer to their territory at the mouth of the Churchill River. Fear of the better armed Cree had prevented the Chipewyan from venturing south to York Fort to trade. Knight seized upon the idea of sending Thanadelthur, along with William Stuart of the HBC and a large party of Cree, to the barrens to arrange a peace accord with the Dene. Thanadelthur quickly became the dominating spirit of the expedition. After weeks of searching, however, and stalked by sickness and starvation, most of the expedition turned back. Thanadelthur persuaded Stuart and the remaining Cree to wait ten days while she went off searching for her countrymen. Within a few days she came across a party of about one hundred Chipewyan and "with the perpetuall talking" convinced her people to return with her to make peace with the Cree. Thanadelthur was critical to negotiating the peace accord. As Stuart later described the scene, "She made them all stand in fear of her as she Scolded at Some and pushing of others. . . forced them to ye peace".

Thanadelthur remained at York Fort but was taken ill in January of 1717 and died a month later; Knight grieving in his journal that, "I am almost ready to break my heart". But it was through the efforts of the "Slave Woman" that Knight and the HBC were able to establish a post at the mouth of the Churchill River in the spring of 1717.

journal that Churchill was "a Misserable Poor place of it. York Fort is badd", he added, "but this is Tenn times worse...." Yet Knight's foresight became quickly evident as a thriving trade soon developed with the Dene and Inuit traders who visited the small post from their traditional

territories to the west and north. Knight, now almost eighty years of age, looked beyond the fur trade as his ultimate prize and in 1719, only two years after founding the Churchill River Post, he sailed off to look for precious metals and a northwest passage, a journey from which he never returned. Shipwrecked near Marble Island, a barren, wind-swept chunk of rock off the northwest coast of Hudson Bay, Knight and his crew of

Joseph Robson's 1745 plan of York Fort II located a short distance downstream from the original post. Gun batteries near the river protected the fort from attack. In 1788 the post was moved to higher ground, approximately one kilometre upstream. Today, the sites of York Fort I and II have been completely inundated by the Hayes River. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

forty lived for a time in a stone and sod house they constructed on the island's eastern shore, but eventually perished from starvation and cold. The fate of these "Unhappey Sufferars" was not discovered until decades later when company whalers noticed pieces of Knights ships floating near the island. In the annals of arctic discovery the loss of the Knight expedition ranks only behind that of the Franklin voyage as the greatest loss of men, and like that tragedy, has remained shrouded in mystery to this day.

Contact and Consolidation: The "Sleep by the Frozen Sea"

"Let Them Trade Good Goods"

As Europeans built their small wooden forts and made grandiose territorial claims on Hudson Bay, a new economy emerged in northern North America; the economy of the fur trade. But while the entrepreneurs from the "old" world represented new players in the trade for pelts, the traditional trade networks upon which it was based were centuries old. Obtaining trade goods from Europeans quickly became important to Manitoba's Aboriginal peoples — metal cooking pots simplified their lives and guns helped them to survive. Despite these attractions, however, the fur trade represented only a portion of their daily lives as they continued to pursue the seasonal round of subarctic life and the traditional priorities of an ancient culture. The search for food,

A Home Guard Cree family near York Factory, painted by the Swiss artist Peter Rindisbacher in 1821. (National Archives of Canada)

the provision of shelter, clothing and tools, the nature of family and kin group organization, and participation in hunting and trading expeditions, continued in much the same form after contact as it had for generations before.

Aboriginal traders characteristically travelled great distances during the short summer months to reach the company posts on the bay. For the hard won furs they had trapped throughout the winter months Aboriginal

A depiction of the trade ceremony at York Factory in the 1780s. These ceremonies traditionally involved speeches, the exchange of gifts, as well as a feast, and usually preceded the actual bartering of furs. (HBCA)

people demanded a range of goods that included guns, shot and powder, cloth, blankets, and metal tools such as knives, hatchets, kettles, awls, ice chisels, needles and files. "Luxury" items such as tobacco, beads and brandy were also sought, with traders usually making sure that practical items were acquired first. As money was not available, barter was the essence of the fur-trade economy with purchases valued according to a standard that came to be known as the 'Made Beaver' or MB for short. Under this system the worth of particular trade goods and all other types of skins were valued against one prime adult beaver pelt. The 'Made Beaver' remained the standard of trade in some locales until the late 19th century

Geographically, the Hudson Bay fur trade could be divided into areas of direct and indirect trade. Although Native groups from far inland made

Tobacco was a mainstay of the fur-trade economy. Shown here is a tobacco cutter, clay pipe, and the "carrots" of tobacco that were used in the trade.

the summer long journey to the posts on Hudson Bay, the Swampy Cree of the Hudson Bay lowlands acted as middlemen in the trade, exchanging company goods with distant groups for prime furs. These goods were "marked-up" in price by the Cree and, as Andrew Graham noted in his 18th century book *Observations on Hudson Bay,* the Cree "came amongst them [the inland Indians] and bought up their furs, giving them a gun for fifty wolves or beaver, six ditto for a hatchet, twenty ditto for a kettle, four for a knife and so on...." At York Factory, however, he wrote, "the trader gave a gun for fourteen beaver, a hatchet for one beaver, a large kettle for eight beaver etc." By the middle of the 1700s, according to Graham, only about ten per cent of the traders arriving at York trapped their own furs. Similarly, at Churchill Moses Norton described how the 'Northern' or Chipewyan Dene, having traded a hatchet for one Made Beaver at the post, exchanged it for nine or ten skins from the "Far Indians" — the Dene nations situated beyond Lake Athabasca. At York Factory, the busiest trading centre of all the bayside posts, Governor James Isham estimated in the 1740s that approximately 250 canoes, or about 550 Indians, arrived each summer to trade. Often whole families made the long journey to York with each canoe carrying furs equivalent to eighty or a hundred Made Beaver. Groups stayed on average about two weeks at the post, the days marked by speeches, an exchange of gifts, feasting and dancing, as well as hours of hard bargaining at the "trading window".

An Aboriginal trapper barters for goods and supplies at a company trading store. (Glenbow-Alberta Institute)

The trade ceremony and the trading captain were essential components of the exchange process. Trading captains were responsible for organizing the upland groups for travel to the post and, most importantly, represented their bands during negotiations with the Europeans. Often without much status away from the post, trading captains were respected by the company in the 18th century as "leading Indians" who enjoyed special considerations such as the gift of a captain's coat or an extra ration of rum. With some exceptions, trading captains usually occupied a transitory rather than a permanent status among Native groups, their position often

inherited from their fathers. The Chipewyan leader Matonabbee (see box) was one such exception as he seemed to enjoy a dominant position in Dene society beyond his role at Prince of Wales' Fort during the trading season.

Within the immediate region of each of the bayside posts were groups who were known to the European traders as the "Home Guard". Their main occupation was to provide the men of the forts with wild game and wage labour and, over time, they taught the company men how to make warm clothing from deer and caribou hides, as well as how to craft snowshoes and canoes for travelling in the northern wilderness. In return for their valuable services the Home Guard selected trade goods and foodstuffs that aided their ability to survive in a harsh climate. Because of their proximity to the posts at York and Churchill coastal peoples were in a better position to profit from the fur trade than were bands living in the interior.

Relations between the men of the Hudson's Bay Company and Cree and Dene women were important and enduring features of life on the bay throughout the history of the fur trade. The company's policy regarding these types of relations was one of non-fraternization. Only on occasions of business was social contact to occur and only the officer-in-charge would be involved with visiting traders on a personal level. The company's view on sexual fraternization was in part an attempt to prevent opportunities for the private trade in furs (an unpardonable sin in the eyes of the HBC and one that usually led to dismissal), as well as the fear that such

A Chipewyan-Dene woman and child near Churchill. The Home Guard Chipewyan tended to visit the trading post on a regular basis, while more distant bands seldom came in more than once a year. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

Matonabbee

The son of a Chipewyan Dene hunter and a former captive of the Cree, Matonabbee was born in 1737 at Prince of Wales' Fort at the mouth of the Churchill River. After the death of his father he came under the care of the governor at the fort, Richard Norton, from whom he learned Cree and a little English. Appointed a "leading Indian" by the Company, Matonabbee helped to mediate disputes between the neighbouring Cree and his own people the Chipewyan. Because of his knowledge of English and the ways of the traders at Churchill he was chosen as an important trading captain by the Chipewyan and was held in high status by the HBC.

In 1770 Matonabbee agreed to take HBC explorer Samuel Hearne to the mouth of the Coppermine River, an exhausting journey that lasted almost two years. In looking for an arctic port for its trading voyages, the company also wanted Hearne to ascertain the extent of the rich mineral deposits said by Native informants to be located in that high northern latitude. Hearne's two previous attempts to reach the Arctic Ocean had failed largely because, as Matonabbee contended, women who "can carry or haul as much as two men can do" had not been included in the expedition.

The expedition to the Coppermine remained under the leadership of Matonabbee as Hearne for the most part only travelled as a member of the group which included a number of hunters and Matonabbee's many wives. The Chipewyan leader's ability to adapt the expedition to the Native manner of transportation and to the realities of living off the land ensured its success. Hearne and Matonabbee reached the mouth of the Coppermine in July of 1771 but it took the party another year to return to Prince of Wales' Fort at the mouth of the Churchill River, having completed an incredible round trip of almost 3,500 miles. During the expedition Hearne and Matonabbee developed a close relationship, the British explorer later describing the Chipewyan leader as possessing a "scrupulous adherence to truth and honesty" and a "benevolence and universal humanity to all the human race."

As a trading captain and a middleman to the Copper or Yellowknife nation, as well as to the distant Dene groups such as the Dogrib, Matonabbee received gifts and gratuities from the company for his efforts in expanding its trading empire. Shortly after the destruction of the HBC post at Churchill, Matonabbee committed suicide, having lost his favoured position in the trade and, in the words of the 18th century writer Andrew Graham, "for grief that the French had destroyed Churchill Factory". In 1988 Matonabbee was commemorated as a figure of national historic significance by the Government of Canada.

connections might lead to bad relations and negatively affect the trade. Unofficially, of course, company officers and servants had relations with local Aboriginal women and for the most part these liaisons soon developed into long-term unions and family units that produced children. By the latter decades of the 18th century the Métis children of these unions had become important participants in the fur trade, serving as interpreters and company servants and helping to solidify relations between the HBC and the Aboriginal peoples of the area.

At York Factory a small band of coastal Cree provided the company with furs, provisions, and country technology, and took on duties as guides and couriers for the post. In the middle of the 18th century approximately 200 people wintered in the general vicinity of the fort, receiving for their efforts trade goods, food, liquor and occasional medical treatment from the post doctor. A sort of mutual dependence existed between the HBC at York and the neighbouring Home Guard. The latter's provisions — primarily caribou meat, geese and fish — were crucial to the operation of the fort, especially during the long cold winter months. As many of the company's personnel were unskilled in the techniques of hunting and fishing, and were needed for work at the post, the very survival of the men at York was dependent upon the Home Guard.

The involvement of the Home Guard at York Factory, however, changed the traditional cycle of seasonal subsistence for many of the Swampy Cree of the west coast lowlands. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans on the bay Aboriginal bands moved to areas where they knew the hunting to be more profitable. With the establishment of posts such as York Factory, the Cree tended to remain in less productive areas and came to rely, at least in part, upon the material assistance provided by the European traders there. North of York Factory, on the Churchill River, the Chipewyan Dene participated as Home Guard traders in the vicinity of the HBC fort that had been built there in the early 18th century. Determined to maintain their favoured status with the company, Cree bands from the Hayes-Nelson area moved north to the Churchill region and also provided the post with local provisions and labour. Although the Cree never traded at Churchill in large numbers, a small Home Guard population resided near the fort until the mid-1800s when the last Cree families moved south to York Factory

The decision by the Hudson's Bay Company to build a trading post near the mouth of the Churchill River was largely driven by their desire to attract the fur trade of the Chipewyan peoples, and to a lesser extent

that of the Caribou Inuit of northwestern Hudson Bay. The Chipewyan, the most easterly of the Athapaskan-speaking Dene, were a migratory people who generally lived in small family units in the tundra area north of the treeline. The huge caribou herds that roamed the tundra provided the Chipewyan with their primary means of food, clothing and shelter in much the same way that the Plains Cree to the south depended upon the bison. Although their traditional territories contained fewer fur-bearing animals than the lands inhabited by their neighbours the Swampy Cree,

The Smallpox Scourge

Contact with European traders and explorers brought more than trade goods to the tents and villages of Manitoba's Aboriginal peoples. In particular, European epidemic diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza and scarlet fever took a devastating toll among Native North Americans who did not possess the kind of immunity to certain types of infections enjoyed by visitors. As a result whole nations — from the southern plains to the tundra zones of northern Canada — were almost completely wiped out by a variety of contagions.

By far the most catastrophic of these diseases was the smallpox epidemic of the late eighteenth century which originated in the Missouri country and was carried north to York Factory and Churchill by Native trading expeditions in 1782. From Hudson's Bay Company records and from oral accounts of the period it is estimated that fully one-half to two-thirds of the Swampy and Woods Cree population of the York Factory hinterland perished, an incredible death rate that was comparable to the devastation of the more southern plains tribes such as the Cree, Assiniboine, Piegan and Blackfoot. Travelling to York, explorer David Thompson remarked in his journal that when they arrived at what appeared to be a deserted encampment and looked into the tents they found that the inhabitants "were all dead and the stench was horrid." Women, children, and men, both old and young, were infected and often those who managed to survive the actual epidemic were often too weak to hunt and starved to death. No wonder that in 1786 Humphrey Marten, the Chief Factor at York, remarked in his annual letter to London that the whole region was "dismally depopulated."

A similar outbreak of smallpox on the plains, this time in the 1830s, had little effect in the Hudson Bay region as the existence by that time of inland posts restricted travel to York and largely contained the disease to the regions south of the boreal forest. But other diseases, including influenza and scarlet fever, continued to ravage the York-Churchill region until well into the 20th century

Inuit women at Churchill, ca. 1910. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

the Chipewyan, in time, became effective fur trading middlemen to the Dene nations living in the western interior. Two Chipewyan groups traded at Churchill; the "faraway" people who travelled to the post only once a year; and the Home Guard who resided closer at hand and visited the post on a more frequent basis. In May of each year this latter group brought in their winter catch of furs and stayed to hunt geese for the company. They then travelled north to hunt caribou and returned to Churchill in the fall when they traded meat for winter supplies. Winter was spent in their traditional hunting grounds. Although the acquisition of guns and trade goods altered the seasonal round of the Chipewyan, they managed to maintain their independence, relying for the most part upon the caribou herds to provide their basic necessities. When a catastrophic smallpox epidemic broke out among Native peoples throughout much of western and northern Canada in the 1780s, an estimated 90% of the Chipewyan population in the Churchill region perished. By the late 19th century the "faraway" people had ceased coming to Churchill, while the local population spent more time at the post as hunters and wage labourers.

The HBC also traded with the Caribou Inuit, one of the five major groups who made up the Central Inuit population of the Canadian archipelago. Once residents of the Churchill west peninsula, at the time of contact the Caribou Inuit lived north of the Churchill River on the coastal tundra that stretched as far as Chesterfield Inlet. First visited by company trading sloops that sailed to Marble Island off the northwest coast of Hudson Bay, the Caribou Inuit began visiting Churchill after

1790 and by the 1830s they represented the largest group of Native traders at the post. These northern visitors brought in arctic fox furs and helped provision the post with whale and seal meat. By the late 1800s, however, their numbers at Churchill had declined as epidemics took their toll and American whalers and more northerly posts brought trade goods to the Inuit in their home territory.

***A Stone Fortress on the Bay*:**

Despite the company's failure to build and maintain a post on the Churchill River in 1689, some 30 years later James Knight, the octogenarian governor at York Factory, remained determined to establish a post in that region. From there he hoped to entice the reluctant Chipewyan into the fur trade, while envisioning the site as a harbour for the Company's northern whaling fleet and a jumping-off point in the quest for the legendary mines of the Copper Indians. Built by Knight in 1717 and named "Churchill River Post", the wooden palisaded fort (re-christened "Prince of Wales' Fort" in 1719) remained a subsidiary of the company's more important establishment on the Hayes River. But if fur returns from the new post never rivalled those of York, the London governor of the HBC, Sir Bibye Lake, had other plans for his most northern fort. In 1731, he commissioned the building of a massive stone fortress at the mouth of the river to be situated on a rocky treeless peninsula known as Eskimo Point. His motives for building such a formidable fortress — also named Prince of Wales' Fort — remain murky as no company documents survive which might point to the actual reasons for its construction. It can be surmised, however, that the HBC hoped that the fort, with its many cannons, might provide a refuge for company ships in time of war, their crews providing the manpower to defend the fortress from a seaborne attack. As warfare with France continued intermittently

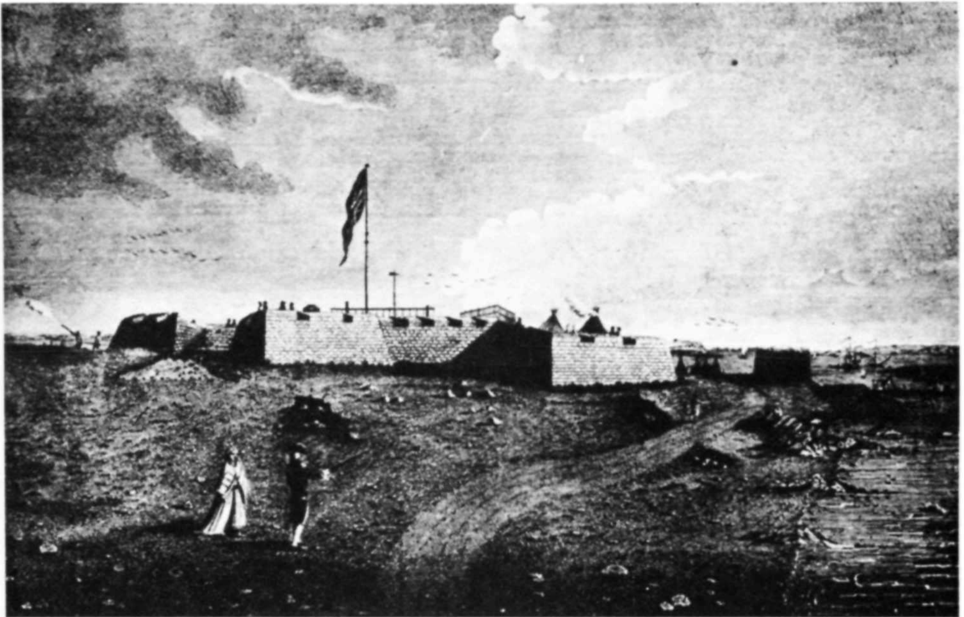
Samuel Hearne who accompanied the Dene leader Matonabbee on his journey to the mouth of the Coppermine River. Hearne later served as post governor at Prince of Wales' Fort which he surrendered to a French naval expedition in 1782. (HBCA)

throughout much of the 18th century, the new fort represented England's answer to the huge French fortress of Louisbourg located on Cape Breton. But as events later demonstrated, the plan was sadly misguided. When Prince of Wales' Fort was eventually surrendered to the French in the summer of 1782 it was defended by a tiny crew of only thirty-nine HBC labourers and tradesmen who knew little about warfare or even how to fire the fort's cannon.

In 1731, stonemasons and labourers were sent by the company to the Churchill River to begin construction of the new fort. When the first foundation stone was laid in the summer of 1732 Governor Richard Norton assured London that the structure would take only six or seven years to build. It was to be a serious miscalculation as the construction of the star shaped, flanker style fortress — which included a number of repairs and rebuilding efforts necessitated by the poor workmanship and materials of the original construction — would take 40 years to complete. When it was finally finished in the 1770s, however, Prince of Wales' Fort remained an impressive accomplishment and one of the most magnificent stone structures on the North American continent. Labouriously assembled from locally quarried stone, the fort was over 300 feet square in size with outer walls over 15 feet in height, an earthen rampart, four large flankers, and a parapet with evenly spaced embrasures, or openings, for heavy guns. A total of 40 cannon ringed the parapet and commanded every approach to the fort. Inside were the post governor's quarters, barracks for the officers and men, storehouses, tradesmens' shops, a cooking shed and stables. A powder magazine was situated within the northwest bastion, while a well for drinking water was located in the centre of the cobblestone-paved courtyard.

Prince of Wales' Fort was indeed an impressive achievement. Yet despite its formidable defenses (which were complemented by a gun battery across the mouth of the river at Cape Merry) it was to fall without a shot in 1782. That year, on a warm August day, the men of the fort looked up to see three French warships off Eskimo Point, fully equipped with cannon and manned by almost four hundred soldiers and sailors under the command of Jean-François Galaup, Comte de la Perouse. Samuel Hearne, the former explorer and now Chief Factor at the fort, realized that his small complement of untrained men were no match for la Perouse and quickly agreed to terms with the French commander. Hearne and his men were taken aboard the enemy ships and la Perouse ordered his soldiers to mine the fort walls and spike the cannons. Within hours Prince of Wales' Fort, which had taken almost four decades to

build, was reduced to little more than rubble. La Perouse then sailed off to York Factory which he easily captured and put to the torch. Unlike the battles of a century earlier, however, la Perouse had no interest in taking over the bayside establishments, his goal being simply to destroy, or at least disrupt, the HBC fur trade on the bay. Hearne was to eventually make his way back to the mouth of the Churchill River and the following year in 1783 he built a new post, called Fort Churchill, five miles upriver from the ruins of Prince of Wales' Fort. From this new location the company resumed its trade with the Dene, Cree and Inuit peoples of the region. York Factory was also re-established and within a few decades the Hayes River post would become the Hudson's Bay Company's largest and most important establishment in Western Canada.



A sketch of Prince of Wales' Fort in 1769, reportedly drawn by Samuel Hearne. Built of locally quarried stone, and taking four decades to build, this flanker-style fortress was fairly typical of stone fort construction of the period. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

York Factory in the 19th Century

Establishing the Inland Network:

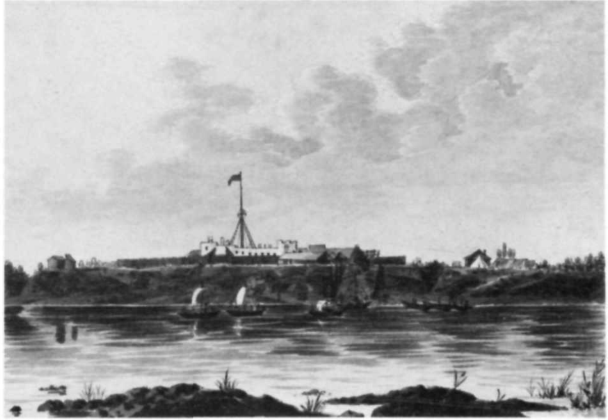
By the first decades of the 18th century the HBC posts on the bay no longer enjoyed exclusive trading rights within the area the company called Rupert's Land. As French traders from the east — under the direction of Pierre Gaultier Sieur de LaVérendrye — moved into the Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg region, they constructed a series of trading posts which effectively siphoned off the furs of the

"Canoes in a Fog" by Francis Ann Hopkins. Scottish and French traders of the North West Company pushed beyond the Great Lakes in the late 18th century, capturing much of the trade that had previously gone to the bay. (Glenbow-Alberta Institute)

Aboriginal nations that had traditionally made the season-long journey to the bay. With the fall of the French empire in Canada in 1760, independent Scottish and French traders from Montreal continued to build trading posts throughout much of western Canada, and in 1784 they came together to form the North West Company. The Nor'Westers, as they were called, quickly established their presence in the West and succeeded in driving the HBC to the verge of bankruptcy.

Throughout much of the 18th century the Hudson's Bay Company, its profits in steady decline due to this new inland competition, steadfastly refused to build inland posts and continued to rely upon the trade of those Native groups that travelled the long distances to its bayside forts. But, as first the French, then later the independent "Pedlars" from Montreal, and finally the North West Company, pushed further and further west, the HBC changed its policy and decided to meet the competition head-

on. In 1774 it constructed Cumberland House in northeastern Saskatchewan and other posts soon followed. Between 1780 and 1821, when the HBC merged with the Nor'Westers, hundreds of posts were constructed by the competing companies on the lakes and rivers of western Canada in an attempt to secure the lucrative trade of the Cree, Assiniboine, Ojibwa, Dakota, Blackfoot and Gros Ventre peoples who inhabited the plains and boreal forest regions of the west.



York Factory in 1821 as painted by Peter Rindisbacher. Built in 1788, the "Old Octagon", as it was called, was demolished in the 1830s. (National Archives of Canada)

"The Most Respectable Place in the Territory":

With the creation of its inland network the HBC developed a new and much expanded role for York Factory. No longer simply a trading post, York soon became a supply and transshipment depot where furs from all over Rupert's Land could be stored awaiting shipment to England. In addition, trade goods destined for the shelves of inland posts were stored at the factory to be transported in the spring by the york boat brigades that travelled the rivers and lakes of the vast interior. To accommodate this expanded role many new storage buildings were constructed at the post and additional living quarters were erected for the large complement of men that were now required by the company to run its massive supply operations in Rupert's Land. Artisans at the factory manufactured articles for use in the trade as well as the kegs, barrels, and cassettes needed to transport the "outfits" — or packaged trade goods — to the interior. When York Factory was selected as the company's administrative headquarters in 1810 additional clerks and officers were assigned to the post to manage the ledgers and account books of a vast fur-trading empire. The amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies in 1821, and the abandonment of the southern Great Lakes route to the West in favour of the northern route through Hudson Bay, only increased York's pre-eminence in the western fur trade.

By the late 1820s at York the "Old Octagon", as it was called by

York Factory, 1853. The large Depot building (centre), which still stands today, was the hub of a cluster of warehouses, trades shops, and residences that serviced the company's vast trading network in Rupert's Land.

company residents, was considered too small for the post's new storage and administrative responsibilities, so in 1831 work began on a massive 18,000 square foot depot, a building that still stands today. Other large warehouses were also erected during this period, as were tradesmen's shops, clerks' quarters, a men's house (known as "Batchelor's Hall"), a powder magazine, and in 1858 a church christened "St. John's of York Factory". Many of the larger buildings at the factory surrounded a central courtyard where the company attempted to grow a variety of vegetables with indifferent success. By the middle of the 19th century over 50 buildings occupied the site and housed a permanent workforce of some 51 officers, artisans, clerks and labourers as well as a co-resident population of Aboriginal servants and hunters. In 1850 Letitia Hargrave (see box), the wife of Chief Factor James Hargrave, proclaimed the factory a "great swell" and "the most respectable place in the territory".

Letitia Hargrave: A Scottish Woman at York

Born in 1813 in Edinburgh, Letitia Mactavish was related to many prominent company officers in the fur trade. The wife of James Hargrave, the Chief Factor at York Factory, Letitia was a prolific letter writer and her correspondence provides a rare glimpse into daily life at the post in the early decades of the 19th century.

The daughter of the sheriff of Argyllshire in Scotland, and the granddaughter of the chief of the clan Tavish, Letitia received the education and social training that befitted her family's position. In 1839 she married James Hargrave, then a rising Chief Trader with the HBC, and travelled with him to York Factory in the late summer of 1840. At first ill-disposed to their new posting, Letitia soon came to appreciate life on the bay, in large part due to her prominent social standing at the factory. As the only European woman at York, and the wife of the company's most senior officer there, she enjoyed many comforts, including her own snugly furnished house and the services of a personal maid, cook and butler. Much of her time at the factory was taken up with letter writing and she had many correspondents among the wives of other company officers throughout Rupert's Land and with her relatives in Scotland. These letters provide an interesting commentary upon life at York and in the fur trade, as well as on the issues of the day as they affected fur trade society in the West. While occasionally critical of certain fur trade customs, Letitia did not shun the company of Métis women such as Harriet Vincent, the wife of Chief Trader George Gladman.

Letitia gave birth to five children while living at York Factory, three boys and two girls. In 1851 James Hargrave was transferred, along with his large family, to the HBC post at Sault Ste Marie. Three years later Letitia died, the victim of the cholera epidemic that was sweeping the country. Her valuable letters have survived, however, and have been published by the Champlain Society as the *Letters of Letitia Hargrave.*

Life on the Bay

A caricature of an HBC officer and his wife, probably from the 18th century, painted on wooden planks that were being used as shelving in the depot building at York Factory.

Gentlemen and Servants; The Nature of Work and Leisure:

For the people of York Factory and Prince of Wales' Fort life in the fur trade revolved around a highly regimented schedule based on the seasons of the year and one's rank at the post. HBC officers, called "gentlemen" by the Company, included a Chief Factor, one or more Chief Traders, and a number of clerks. They ruled over a contingent of tradesmen and labourers who carried out much of the actual physical work of the post. Recruited from Scotland, the Orkney Islands and the Isle of Lewis, or the indigenous Métis sons of former company employees and their Native wives, these labourers or "servants" were usually hired on three or five

A man and his wife travelling in winter, from an early 19th century watercolour by William Richards. (HBCA)

year contracts and many chose to stay with the company for longer periods than return home at the end of their first contract. Local Aboriginal people also worked for the company, though most were seasonal employees or were hired for specific tasks.

Although life in the fur trade could be difficult — the often back-breaking labour coupled with the intense cold of winter and the plagues of mosquitoes in summer sometimes made life intolerable — it was usually punctuated by periods of inactivity, recreational pursuits, and enough holidays and celebrations of one sort or another to ease the people through the long winter months. Various sports and games were played by company servants, usually during the Christmas and New Years holidays. Football, or soccer as it is known today in North America, was a favourite Christmas pastime for the European traders at York and Churchill and was mentioned as early as 1734 in the company journal at Prince of Wales' Fort. These games were usually violent affairs with few rules, leading one observer to remark in 1829 that "if Englishmen called this playing, it would be impossible to say what they would call fighting". Company officers tended to enjoy less strenuous recreations. Hunting, fishing, snowshoeing, cards and reading were the usual pursuits of "gentlemen" during their considerable number of leisure hours at the post. The library at York Factory was one of the largest in the fur trade, and while novels and other types of light reading material could be found on its shelves, so too could such serious tracts as Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* and Percy's *Ancient Relics of English Poetry.*

The consumption of alcohol was one recreational activity enjoyed by all classes at York and Churchill, however. Where tradesmen and labourers favoured beer, rum, and home made concoctions like "shrub", officers, on the other hand, usually indulged in brandy, port, and other "high wines". Drinking remained the favourite sedentary pastime at all times of the year, but it was usually during the Christmas and New Year's celebrations when regular dances and celebrations were held at the post that most spirits were consumed. In a land characterized by short summers and long, cold winters with few hours of daylight, recreational activities alleviated boredom and social tension and helped develop a sense of community among company servants and their families.

Although recreation was an important part of the routine at York and Churchill, it was work that most characterized life on the bay at that time. Labour at bayside posts was largely seasonal in nature. The daily tasks of company servants and their families were usually dictated by the

A Christmas dance at York Factory in the 1840s, from R.M. Ballantyne's Hudson Bay. *(HBCA)*

weather, the arrival of the supply ship, the departure of the inland boat brigades, and the availability of game. When the supply ship from England arrived at York and Churchill work reached a fever pitch as all available personnel were called upon to unload supplies and then load the ship with the furs that had been stored at the post over the previous winter. At other times of the year work settled into a routine of inventory control, packing outfits for the inland posts, cutting and transporting firewood, boatbuilding, maintaining the factory buildings, and at York the manufacture of articles for inland trade. Tradesmen were an important

Aboriginal peoples, both Indian and Métis, worked on the york boat brigades which transported goods and furs between York Factory and the company's inland posts. Work on the boats was physically demanding and often dangerous. (HBCA)

component of the labour force at bayside posts, especially at York Factory where boatbuilders, coopers, blacksmiths and tinsmiths were integral to the company's operations there and formed a separate class of servants at the post. Many of the workers at both York and Churchill, including full time and seasonal employees, were engaged in keeping the posts supplied with "country" supplies. The caribou and goose hunts were critical features of post life as was fishing, haying, ptarmigan hunting and gardening. Many of these activities were carried out by Aboriginal employees or by members of the local Home Guard. For company officers, work tended to be more sedentary in nature. Maintaining accounts, keeping a daily journal of activities at the post, and organizing work details were their major preoccupations. The nature of work at a bayside factory in the 18th and 19th centuries defined class structure at the post and underlined the separation of officers and servants. Pay scales, separate living quarters, leisure time, and the quality of food reflected this separation and remained enduring features of post life throughout the fur-trade era.

A Swampy Cree woman at York Factory, ca. 1930. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

The "Many Tender Ties" of Fur-Trade Life: Women and Family on Hudson Bay:

The expansion of the HBC fur trade along western Hudson Bay was accompanied by social as well as economic change. The evolution of new community relationships, and in particular the changing roles of family and gender, were important components of life on the bay after 1700. Local Cree and Dene women were critical to the work of the fur trade at York Factory and Prince of Wales' Fort. Since the earliest days of the trade on Hudson Bay Aboriginal women had served the company as interpreters, guides and negotiators. The story of Thanadelthur, who

helped engineer a peace accord between the Dene and Cree north of York Factory, was by no means unique as the HBC frequently employed the services of local women to further their trading activities among coastal and inland groups. Native women helped to supply the posts with much needed provisions and manufactured articles such as snowshoes and clothing. In addition to raising children and managing domestic affairs Cree and Dene women also dressed furs for trade and often hunted for game to support both their own bands and the men of the coastal factories.

The intermarriage of many company servants with local Aboriginal women — what one company officer referred to as the "many tender ties" of fur trade life — and the creation of new family units at the post, soon became an important feature of work and daily life on Hudson Bay. For company officers at York Factory and Prince of Wales' Fort an Aboriginal wife helped to ensure that her band might be relied upon to supply the post with furs and provisions. Humphrey Marten, a Chief Factor at York in the 18th century, was married to the daughter of the "Captain of the Goose Hunters", thus helping to solidify the link between the local Cree Home Guard and the factory. The Métis children that resulted from these unions quickly became an integral part of post life. Young Métis boys took on a variety of responsibilities with the HBC including clerical work, tradesmen duties, and unskilled labour, or served on the york boat brigades that transported cargo to inland depots. As well, the male children of company officers and their Aboriginal wives were occasionally sent to eastern Canada or overseas for schooling and many returned to take up lower level officer positions with the company. More influential were the daughters of these "country" marriages as young Métis women often became the partners of incoming Scottish and English officers. With their dual heritage these women were acclimatized to life on

A Cree woman stretches a beaver pelt. (HBCA)

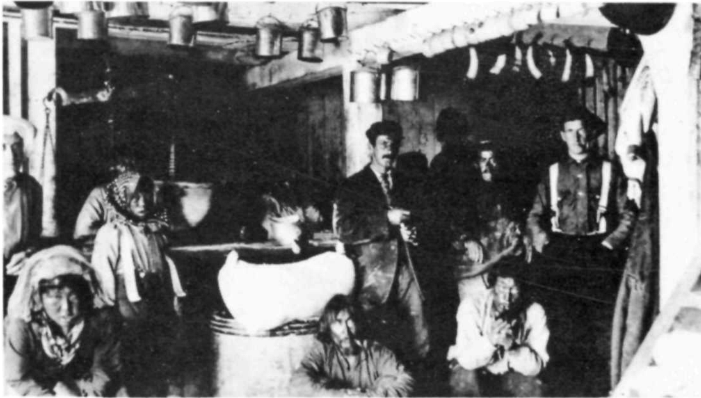
the bay — being familiar with Aboriginal culture — but could also make the successful adaptation to European ways.

Slowly, the HBC began to recognize the changing nature of the bayside population as small schools were established in order to provide the company with, in the words of the London Committee, "a Colony of very useful Hands". Later, these bayside schools were formalized and enlarged and were staffed by missionaries sent to the West by a variety of religious societies in England. With the creation of the Red River Colony in the early 19th century, many retiring company officers and servants travelled with their Aboriginal families to the new settlement where they took up farms along the Red and Assiniboine rivers. In the north, however, the legacy of these fur trade marriages has remained an important part of life on the bay to this day.

Cree women with handiwork at the Mission House at York Factory, ca. 1910. Aboriginal women hunted game and supplied the post with provisions and locally manufactured goods such as snowshoes and beadworked articles of clothing. (HBCA)

Faded Glory: The Hudson Bay Fur Trade in Decline

As York Factory expanded in the middle decades of the 19th century, the Hudson's Bay Company post at Churchill, established one year after the destruction of Prince of Wales' Fort in 1782, went into decline. By 1860 only a few hundred Dene continued to trade



The interior of the HBC store at Fort Churchill, 1910. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

at Fort Churchill as a growing number of interior posts siphoned off the trade that had previously gone to the coast. Only a small population of permanent servants remained at the fort, although a much larger population of part-time labourers and their Métis families continued to live nearby. A small post, Fort Churchill comprised few buildings and these were usually in a state of disrepair. If York was "the most respectable place in the Territory", Fort Churchill presented a much different picture; in the words of George Simpson McTavish "a more dilapidated hamlet could scarcely be found anywhere". By the end of the century fur trade returns at the fort were in steady decline, although an active white whale fishery continued to operate there and its products — largely

Chief and councillors of the Fort Churchill Band at the signing of Treaty Five, 1 August, 1910. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

oil rendered from fat — comprised most of the post's exports. Local Dene and Métis families continued their seasonal work for the company and in 1910 they signed a treaty with the Government of Canada.

Changing Transportation Routes:

By the latter decades of the century York, too, was in decline, its

Cree servants at York Factory, 1910. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

short-lived period as the company's major entrepôt in the West ended by changing transportation routes and the growth of larger population centres in the south. Beginning in 1858, the HBC began shipping a portion of its western "outfits" to the Northwest via railways in the United States, steamboats, and Red River carts along a southern supply route headquartered at Upper Fort Garry in what is now the city of Winnipeg. By 1872, York supplied only those posts in Manitoba located north of Norway House at the top of Lake Winnipeg. Eventually the factory's centralized accounting and transport responsibilities were also shifted to Winnipeg, as was a large part of its

Goose hunters at York Factory, ca. 1940. (Courtesy of Flora Beardy)

workforce. It continued to supply the local Cree population, however, and remaining families, aware of the changing nature of life in the north after the turn of the century, either left for inland establishments or took treaty in 1910. Seasonal work and a local trade continued at the mouth of the Hayes River after this date, but the arrival at Churchill of the Hudson Bay Railway in 1929 (see box) shifted the economy of northern Manitoba away from York Factory and led to the eventual closing of the post in 1957. Cree families from the area then moved to other northern communities, including York Landing, a reserve community created by the Department of Indian Affairs over 200 kilometres from the old post. At one time the bustling centre of the Rupert's Land fur trade, York Factory was quickly abandoned, the victim of changing transportation routes and the new agricultural economy of Western Canada.

An aerial view of Prince of Wales' Fort.

A Railway to Hudson Bay

In the 1870s agitation began for a railway line linking the growing city of Winnipeg with a seaport on Hudson Bay. Considered by business and agricultural interests in the West as an alternative to "Eastern domination" and a necessary outlet for western grain destined for Europe, construction of the line did not begin until 1908 due to political and financial difficulties.

Before the financial constraints of World War I intervened and suspended construction, a line had been built as far as the Kettle Rapids on the Nelson River. One of the major issues confronting the Canadian government was the location of the railway's terminus on Hudson Bay. In 1912 Port Nelson was chosen, not for its natural habourage, but for its shorter and easier access. After the war, construction began on port facilities at the mouth of the Nelson River, but in the 1920s, upon the recommendation of Frederick Palmer, an English civil engineer, Churchill was chosen to replace Port Nelson as the terminus, largely because of its natural advantages as a deep water port.

Construction of the railway was a Herculean task. Hundreds of miles of muskeg capable of swallowing large sections of roadbed and track, as well as areas of shifting permafrost, had to be crossed. Aside from Canadian and American workers, immigrants from Russia, Scandinavia, and Eastern and Western Europe were employed in the construction of the line. Some 3,000 labourers, living in crowded camps and enduring bitter cold and insects, used picks, shovels and wheelbarrows to build roadbeds and bridges and lay the track. On the 3rd of April 1929 the last spike was driven at Churchill, and with the completion of port facilities there in 1931 the Hudson Bay Railway was officially declared open. Today, while the future of the line remains in doubt, the work of these railway builders is remembered and continues to serve as an enduring memorial to Manitoba's northern potential.

York and Churchill in the Modern Era

As the fur trade declined on western Hudson Bay and throughout the West the HBC retrenched its operations, selling off much of its former territory to the Dominion government and the railways. In 1933, the company abandoned Fort Churchill and opened a store in the new community that soon arose around the railway terminus and port facilities on the east side of the Churchill River. Little remains of the post on the west peninsula; only cellar depressions and what was once the post cemetery can still be seen.

The Depot building at York Factory as it appears today.

At York Factory, as well, there is little evidence of the post's once proud past. The majestic depot building still stands, but only the traces of other structures, such as an 18th century stone powder magazine, are visible among the clearings and scrub willows that threaten to overrun the site. The old cemetery contains the marked and unmarked graves of hundreds of post officers, servants and hunters. On a number of the deteriorated crosses and headstones, many surrounded by small, painted, picket enclosures which the elements have weathered a silvery gray, can be read the names once associated with the old post: McPherson, Saunders, Beardy, Gray and Gibeault.

In 1920, the newly created Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada declared Prince of Wales' Fort — then little more than a ruin — to be of national historic significance. A plaque was erected at the site in 1931. Three years later, 1934, the Government of Canada sponsored the partial reconstruction of the fort's massive stone walls and interior ramparts as part of a depression-era public works program. Interrupted by World War II, work on the fort and the walls of a number of its interior buildings continued in the 1950s, as did reconstruction work on the stone battery at Cape Merry. York Factory was declared a national historic site in 1936 and was turned over to the federal government in 1968.

Since then, Parks Canada has carried out an intensive programme of research and conservation at both sites. At York Factory extensive archaeological investigations have uncovered the remnants of many early post buildings, including the remains of the 18th century octagon located beneath the floor of the depot. Over 200,000 artifacts were collected and inventoried during the course of these investigations. As well, structural histories, a land-use history, a social history of the post covering the period between 1788 and 1870, and a recently published oral history entitled *Voices from Hudson Bay: Cree Stories from York Factory*, provide a great deal of information on the history of the factory and its people over three centuries. Conservation work has also been carried out at the site, including recent work to stabilize the depot building. Similar research has been carried out on the history of Prince of Wales' Fort, as have recent archaeological investigations within the fort walls and conservation work on the 18th century cannon that once guarded the fortress. Management plans guide all future preservation and interpretation activities at Manitoba North National Historic Sites.

Prince of Wales' Fort. Portions of the fort walls and interior buildings were rebuilt in the 20th century.

Today, visitors to Churchill can tour the fort and visit the gun batteries at Cape Merry National Historic Site, or can make arrangements to visit Sloops Cove National Historic Site located on the west side of the river approximately two kilometres from the fort. York

Beadwork pattern for a moccasin vamp, dating from the late 18th or early 19th centuries, found by archaeologists beneath the floor of the depot building at York Factory. (B. Ebell)

Factory National Historic Site is less accessible, however, and can only be reached by boat or by charter aircraft. Information on York and the Churchill area sites, as well as nearby Wapusk National Park, which was established in 1996, can be found at the Parks Canada Visitor Centre located in Churchill.

Visitors at Prince of Wales' Fort.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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Frank Tough: *"As Their Natural Resources Fail": Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870-1930.* Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1996.

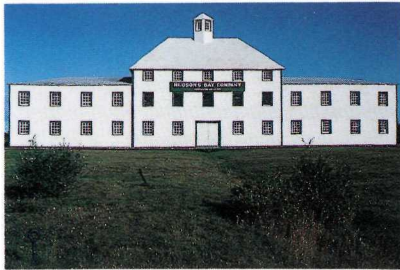
Sylvia Van Kirk: *"Many Tender Ties": Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870.* Winnipeg, Watson and Dwyer Publishing, 1980.

Gyndwr Williams: "The Hudson's Bay Company and The Fur Trade: 1670-1870, *The Beaver*, Autumn, 1983.

On the Edge of a Frozen Sea

Prince of Wales' Fort, York Factory and the Fur Trade of Western Hudson Bay

Today, visitors to the western shore of Hudson Bay can encounter a past where Aboriginal peoples and European traders attempted to survive in a harsh environment. Beginning with accounts of human occupation in the region that date back almost four thousand years, ***On the Edge of a Frozen Sea*** *tells the story of the dramatic days of the fur trade and the interaction between two cultures in the "land of the north wind".*



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