

# The Trappers

BY DOUGLAS LEECHMAN

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*A Cree trapper and his family near York Factory in 1821. From the painting by Peter Rindisbacher in the Public Archives, Ottawa.*

THERE were pictures of Indians and their dogs in my geography book at school in Scotland and I knew I had to come to see them. I saw them all right, thousands of Indians and dogs too. But I've never been sorry!"

So spoke old Jim Jackson when we were far up the Porcupine River in the northern Yukon and he must have echoed the thoughts of hundreds of young men, fresh from the Old Country, whose first wish when they landed was to see the Indians.

One of these was James Isham, a lad of about sixteen when he reached York Factory in 1732, straight from Holborn in London. Unlike most of his contemporaries and successors, he was not content to let his impressions remain hidden in his head; instead, he wrote down, with

meticulous care, almost everything he could find out about the country and its inhabitants. Today, his notes and observations are a priceless mine of information about those early days and early people. Few better pictures of a fur trader's life and of his customers are to be found.

If Isham had a preconceived idea of the "noble red man" he must have been disappointed in what actually confronted him. Here were no noble savages, but a pitifully poor and half-starved people, barely able to keep body and soul together. Indeed, when conditions were even worse than usual, not always able to do that. Begging was instinctive with them, and gratitude unknown. Arrant thieves and liars, importunate beyond belief, and ever ready to turn on one who, not a day before, had befriended them.

To the French traders, most of them from Montreal or Quebec, the Indians were no novelty. They were recognized at once for what they were, Crees, who spoke a dialect of Algonkian, a language already familiar to the *coureurs de bois* and others in the fur trade. The tribe living about York Factory were Maskegons, men of the muskegs or swamps, often called Swampy Crees. Their northern boundary was the Churchill River, though Cree war parties and other more peaceful expeditions had pushed many miles farther north and west, as far as the mouth of the Mackenzie River and to the Rockies, in fact. These extensive forays took place after they got firearms, but long before that they had been extending their territory. One large group of Crees had moved out of the woods onto the prairies and are now known as the Plains Cree.

The Swampy Cree once lived farther south than the vicinity of Churchill and York Factory and it is thought that when they moved north they probably displaced a band of Slave Indians from that area. They are not a numerous people. Isham says that only 250 canoes, carrying about 550 people, came to trade each year and this included other tribes as well as the local people, who were generally referred to by the fur traders at York Factory as the Southern Indians, to distinguish them from the Northern Indians, known to us today as Chipewyans, who occupied the area north of the Churchill River as far as Great Slave Lake, thinning out to the north and east on the Barren Lands.

Other occasional visitors to the Factory were the Eskimo, who came down the sea coast from the north. Trade with

them was but seldom satisfactory, for they were wild and dangerous people with little of value to offer. Nor were they encouraged in their visits by the fact that the Indians would often waylay them when they left the post and take everything they had including, often enough, their very lives.

The Assiniboines came to York Factory too. These were a vastly different people, speaking a dialect of the Siouan language and living, in those days, to the west of Lakes Winnipegosis and Manitoba. Since then they have migrated slowly across the prairies to their present homes in the eastern foothills of the Rockies.

The Dogribs, like the Chipewyan an Athapascan group, whose country lay between Great Bear and Great Slave Lakes, often joined forces with them in organizing a trading expedition to the Factory, knowing that the larger the group they could muster, the more impressive and important they would appear to be.

Most early writers seem to agree that there were perceptible physical differences between the various tribes. The Swampy Cree were described as being of moderate stature, well-proportioned, and slender, a corpulent Indian being "a much greater curiosity than a sober one," alert and active. The women were often of great beauty, and Mackenzie's verdict that they were the comeliest Indian women in Canada, was anticipated by Isham, that "sober & Diligent young\* man," who says the girls are "Very Bewitchen when Young." Hunchbacks and other deformities were rare and the Indians commented more than once on the large proportion of cripples among the white people.

The Assiniboines attracted particular attention because of the extensive tattooing they practised, with large designs showing serpents and birds. Their method was to prick the skin with sharp bones and rub wet charcoal or gun-powder into the punctures.

The Chipewyans differed from the Crees, being usually taller, with "very low foreheads, small eyes, high cheek-bones, Roman noses, full cheeks and in general long broad chins" according to Hearne (ca. 1772) who knew them well. The women pleased him not at all for he says he found them "as destitute of real beauty as any nation I ever saw. The more ordinary ones," he goes on, "are perfect antidotes to love and gallantry." Jérémie, on the other hand, says that the Dogribs "have pleasant and kindly faces."

However marked the distinction between the Northern and Southern Indians in appearance, as far as culture is concerned they were all Indians and their ways were not our ways. The English, brought up in an atmosphere where Christian conduct was regarded as the norm in behaviour, were both surprised and pained to find entire tribes of people who not only neglected to practice those virtues



Chief and councillors wearing treaty medals at the swearing-in ceremony, York Factory, 1910. Photo by A. V. Thomas in the Public Archives of Manitoba.

that the white held desirable, but had never even had such rules of conduct suggested to them. Mercy for the defeated, generosity towards the needy, kindness, sympathy, justice, were not merely foreign concepts, they were non-existent.

Hardly a fur trader who put pen to paper had a good word for the Indian character, but there were some writers, such as Umfreville (1790), who put matters in a rather more flattering light and we are driven to the conclusion that there were two distinct "Indian characters." He puts the point neatly enough when he says that in trading "fraud, cunning, Indian finesse, and every concomitant vice was practised by them from the boy of twelve to the octogenarian, but when trade was not concerned they were scrupulously honest." The Indian, it would seem, believed that all was fair in trade and war and even today, to state the case mildly, they are not above practising minor deceptions.

Father Marest (1694) noted that the Assiniboines were sedate and seemed phlegmatic, one of the early references to the proverbial taciturnity and stoicism of these people, even before they had actually taken up their residence on the plains. The Cree, by way of contrast, he found to be more sprightly, always in motion, always dancing or singing. Both, he notes, are brave and love war. He sug-

\*He was only 25 when he took over Prince of Wales's Fort in 1741.

gests that the Assiniboines resemble the sober Flemings, while the Crees are like the Gascons.

There is no doubt that the character of the people changed as their contact with the trading posts increased. Father Marest pointed out that "the Indians nearest the fort are cowardly, timorous, idle, stupid, and absolutely vicious." Brandy was the downfall of many of them, those who visited the fort but once a year being the least under its influence.

Then, too, there was an inevitable modification of the characteristics of people who had never seen a white man, and those of their grandchildren, fifty years later. Knight (ca. 1716) says "Them Natives to the Norward are more Savage and brutelike than these and will drink blood and eat raw flesh and fish and loves it as well as some does Strong Drink." Such a description no longer would apply to the tribe with whom Hearne made his journey to the Arctic Ocean in 1771, though they were far from being angels even then.

Isham knew his Southern Indians, the Swampy Cree, well and had a good deal to say about them. He noted

their habit of biting off each other's fingers and noses when drunk or in a rage, "and no poison so Venemous as their teeth." He comments on their lack of chastity, calling them "a crafty sort of people, cheating, Stealing, and Lying they glory in, and Lud' [lewd] from their cradle." As for their personal habits "you must know they are none of the clenliest in their Victuals and cloathing," which is a brave understatement.

One change that followed the establishment of the trading posts was of far-reaching significance. Before the coming of the whites, the Indians relied completely on their own efforts to maintain themselves in the north woods. Their hunting and fishing techniques were well adapted to their environment, they had established trade routes and barter arrangements to enable them to secure necessities not native to their own districts, and so a reasonably able and industrious man could count on keeping his family, if not in affluence, at least in some semblance of comfort unless an unforeseen calamity overtook him. Game was known to be entirely lacking in certain areas, to be abundant in others at certain seasons. Fish would be



A hunter wearing a beaver "toggy" returns to his lodge with a scalp lifted from an enemy. The bark rogan at bottom right bears the artist's signature, "P. Rindisbacher." An H B copper kettle is on the fire. West Point Museum



Alex Chapman, modern  
York Factory Cree.  
A. B. McIvor

Robinson Throassie, a Cree who  
married a Chipewyan and now  
lives among them. R. Harrington

Chipewyan boy in native winter costume  
of caribou skin. R. Harrington



found here, berries could be gathered somewhere else, and a yearly round that took advantage of these known factors was firmly established.

When Jérémie (ca. 1694) arrived he found that the Dogribs lived on fish and caribou, killing the latter with arrows, and building long hunting fences in which they hid snares at intervals; but within less than one generation, in 1713, he reported that the Indians were dying of hunger as they had lost their skill with the bow. By now, the time that they formerly spent in hunting was devoted to trapping animals whose skins were of little use to them and whose flesh, in many cases, was inedible. With the furs they bought powder and shot which soon became essential to existence, and new wants—steel knives, brass kettles, beads, and cloth—dominated their economy.

Not only had hunting and fishing techniques been modified, but many other changes followed the coming of the white man to Hudson Bay. Isham describes both "the ancient wear and apparel of the Natives" and their more recent garments. In the old days the women, he says, wore a leather smock with a loose robe over it, and the men a longer leather coat also with a loose robe for additional warmth when needed, but now they were all using cloth to make a garment "which ties over the shoulder's, and serves them for smock, Gound [gown], and peticoate, (a Very Readyway)."

The Swampy Cree, living as they did at the northern extremity of Cree territory, were obliged by their environment to adopt some of the culture traits of the Eskimo. For example, they turned to soapstone for their cooking pots and, as large sheets of bark or matting were difficult to obtain, they covered their conical wigwams with hides of moose or caribou. More, the women had adopted a crescent-shaped knife, not unlike the Eskimo *ulu*. The Northern Indians (Chipewyans) also made use of soap-

stone vessels on occasion and built a conical wigwam covered with hides.

Both French and English authors comment on the Indians' practice of polygamy, which contrasted so markedly with European custom. Both the Swampy Crees and the Northern Indians shared this practice which, in fact, was widespread throughout the Northwest Territories and is by no means extinct today in the more remote areas. Among the Northern Indians it was much easier to get a wife than to keep one, for a man had to be prepared to wrestle with any challenger for the possession of any



*Swampy Cree woman and grandchild.*

Bullaty-Lomeo



woman. Many of the more powerful men had seven or eight wives, but a weaker man would have trouble in keeping one, especially if she were at all desirable. Desirability, in their eyes, consisted in strength and activity in packing, meat curing, and skin dressing, not in regularity of features or beauty of complexion. The more far-sighted men tried to marry sisters for, they explained, sisters got along better than strangers.

The position of women in that barren country was not an enviable one. Work was their daily lot and hunger was their fate whenever there was a shortage of food, for custom demanded the men be fed first and the women and children get what was left, if anything. Hearne points out that the women carried the food supplies and doubtless saw to it that they starved as little as possible, but adds that they were in for trouble if they were detected in their pilfering.

There were occasional feasts with gambling, games, and dancing to relieve the monotony of life. Isham writes of the women's double-ball game, a ball game for men, and "other small Divertions" which he thinks fitter for children than for adults.

Difficult as life was for most people, for the aged it was intolerable. Old men and women who could no longer keep up with their group, sick people unable to walk, were perforce left by the trailside. Sometimes a little food was given them and on occasion after resting, they would struggle on and rejoin their families. Often, they would never leave the spot where they last lay down. Others, anticipating eventual desertion, would give a great feast if they were able to, recite the tale of their lives, and then ask their oldest child to strangle them, a request which was usually granted. Cremation was a frequent method of disposing of the dead, but at times the body was merely exposed without any attempt at burial. The Cree buried their dead with most of their effects, according to Isham, who shows by drawings just what the graves were like.

Those of the whites who got to know the Indians intimately, and by no means all of them did so, soon found that witchcraft, magic, and the medicine man were factors of the first importance in the lives of the natives. Hunting and fishing methods depended as much on the proper use of charms as they did on skilled woodcraft. Bait was effective in fishing, they believed, because of magical ingredients, not because it was attractive to the fish as food. A net that had the wrong charms tied in the four corners could not be expected to catch fish, and every hunter

carried a medicine bag with as wide an assortment of "medicines" as any fly-fisherman ever dreamed of.

To them the woods and barrens were populated by spirits, most of them indifferent to man, but some of them dangerous, and these had to be propitiated with offerings. The first goose of the season had to be treated with unusual respect and ceremony and his head decorated with beads. The skull of a slain bear must be cleaned carefully, the jaws tied together, and then placed high on a special pole, out of the reach of dogs that might desecrate it.

Always there was the fear of another man's malicious use of magical powers, acquired during the spirit quest of early adolescence, when young boys and some girls too retired to lonely spots to fast and pray for a spirit helper and a vision. Accidents, sickness, misfortune were laid to evil spells, not to natural causes, and magic must be fought by stronger magic. The medicine men were called in with their drums and rattles and the sickness was expelled, or the stolen article recovered, and the thief identified.

Relations between the whites and the Indians were, on the whole, remarkably good. The journals, naturally, have more to say of the unusual incidents, the little points of friction, and of the more serious difficulties, than they do of the quiet day-to-day trading, the friendly intercourse, the enjoyable hunting trips taken with an Indian

companion. The "home guard" Indians who lived in or near a post became the constant friends and familiars of the trader and his staff, and the Indian women helped with the daily chores.

Capt. James Knight, the Governor, kept a sick Indian boy in his own bedroom for weeks. "I have had a Terrible time of it not haveing 2 hours Rest in 24 Hours for these 10 weeks past," he wrote in 1717, and later recorded the boy's death in his journal with the words "the Loss of this Boy has gon nearer to me than any Missfortunes I have ever mett in my Days."

Intercourse between the various Indian tribes was not always so friendly. It was when the Cree got flintlocks

that they raided the Dogribs and took slaves from them, and the Northern Indians had no scruples at all about falling on any band of people weaker than themselves. The possession of firearms was the turning point in most of these encounters, up to the time when all the tribes were armed. It is with an ill-concealed glee that Kelsey (ca. 1690) relates of the Cree that "of late they hunt their Enemies, and with our English guns do make ym flie."

Isham points out that the Indians' perpetual begging by which at one time they enriched themselves considerably, had now almost ceased and life had settled down to a quiet routine, but it was Hearne who saw most clearly that the changes introduced by white civilization had not all

been to the advantage of the natives. He points out that those Indians who do not bother with trapping or trading have the better time of it, content merely to follow the deer in summer and build a pound in winter, there to live with an assured food supply and months of feasting and idleness before them.

All things adjust themselves in time and it was once more Isham, no longer a green London apprentice, who learned to live at peace with the people who visited his post. His was a simple formula: "I find good usage and civility agrees well with these Natives,—if they grow obstobilius, a Little correction then sweatening\* makes them pliant."

\*Sweetening.

*Below: Maskegon family group.  
Right: Praise to the Kichemunito.  
Bullaty-Lomeo*

