

University of North Carolina at Asheville

North West Company Fur Traders' Impressions of Native Americans and Alcohol

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Department of History
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History

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Asheville, North Carolina
20 November 2007

The Indians brought me a horse which I purchased [in exchange] for liquor. About sunset they all arrived and camped with us. Old Buffalo, still half drunk, brought me his eldest daughter, about nine years of age, and insisted upon my taking her for a wife, in hopes I would give him a keg of liquor; but I declined the offer.¹

While one of the more striking examples, this quote from trader Alexander Henry shares its' subject matter with many other accounts left by North West Company fur traders. Men employed by the North West Company during the late 18th century and early 19th century ventured into the wilderness of Canada in the hopes of making a profit from the lucrative beaver pelt. These men took the direct approach of personally going to the Natives to acquire the beaver fur, which led to more encounters with the indigenous populace than was previously experienced by other European fur traders. North West Company men kept detailed journals of their experiences with the Native Americans and generally described them as an admirable people. While the majority of the records simply described the Natives' appearance, language, and social practices, one aspect the traders frequently noted regarding the Native Americans was the dramatically negative effects alcohol had upon them. Yet, because the Natives typically refused trade without the presence of alcohol, rum and liquor continued to be a staple of the trade. While the exact response varied from trader to trader, the North West Company men generally believed the Native Americans of Canada to be a commendable people, but left a largely negative commentary on the effects alcohol had upon them

¹ Henry, Alexander, David Thompson, and Elliott Coues. *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, fur trader of the Northwest Company, and of David Thompson, official geographer and explorer of the same company, 1799-1814; Exploration and Adventure among the Indians on the Red, Saskatchewan, Missouri, and Columbia Rivers.* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Ross & Haines, 1965), 65.

While the scholarly work on the North West Company is somewhat lacking, the secondary literature on the fur trade in North America is a well documented catalogue of work. Paul Chrisler Phillips' *The Fur Trade* is the most thorough and well-written work concerning the North American fur trade in its entirety. Clarence A. Vandiveer provides an excellent, if slightly shorter and more literary, account with his book, *The Fur Trade and Early Western Exploration*. Using personal accounts of individual fur traders to describe the history of the fur trade in North America, Carolyn Podruchny wrote *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade*. F. G. Ashbrook, Harold A. Innis, and Arthur J. Ray all wrote informative articles on various aspects of the fur trade, ranging from its' economic components, comparisons of Canadian and American trade development, and fur trade expansion. These works are in historical agreement concerning the North American fur trade and form an ideal starting point for someone studying this topic.

George Bryce's book, *The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, Including that of the French Traders of North-Western Canada and of the North-West, XY, and Astor Fur Companies*, narrows the historical lens to focus on the fur trade located explicitly within Canada and the northern United States. Similarly, Arthur Silver Morton's *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-1871; Being a History of Rupert's Land (The Hudson's Bay Company's Territory) and of the North-West Territory (including the Pacific Slope)* examines the early history of Canada's Hudson's Bay

² Paul C. Phillips, *The Fur Trade* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961); Clarence A. Vandiveer, *The Fur Trade and Early Western Exploration* (Cleveland, OH: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1929); Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); F. G. Ashbrook, "The Fur Trade and Fur Supply." *Journal of Mammalogy* 3, no. 1. (1922): 1-7; Harold A. Innis, "Interrelations Between the Fur Trade of Canada and the United States." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 20, no. 3 (1933): 321-332; Arthur J. Ray, "History and Archeology of the Northern Fur Trade." *American Antiquity*, 43, no. 1 (1978): 26-34.

Company and the various splinter companies, such as the North West Company, which emerged out of it.

Literature dealing exclusively with the history of the North West Company can be attributed to three authors: Gordon Charles Davidson, Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, and W. D. Vincent. These three authors have each separately written a book on the subject, all aptly titled *The North West Company*. These authors tend to agree historically on the rise and decline of the North West Company and were successful in their documentation. However, those readers wishing to learn about the North West Company should start with Davidson or Vincent, as Campbell often allows the romantic nature of the topic to produce a flamboyant tone in her writing.⁴

Secondary literature which focuses on the individual North West Company traders, or Nor'westers, themselves deals mainly with the well known traders or individuals who left extensive accounts of their doings. Alexander Mackenzie's achievement of being the first European to successfully reach the Pacific Ocean from the east marked him as an excellent topic of research. Jeannette Mirsky's *The Westward Crossings; Balboa, Mackenzie, Lewis and Clark* is one such example of an analysis on Mackenzie's trek across the Rocky Mountains. The books, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, edited by Raymond W. Wood and D. Thiessen Thomas, and *Travels in the Interior of America* by John Bradbury and John Bywater, look upon lesser known Nor'westers who kept detailed journals of their travels. The writers provide a

³ George Bryce, *The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company, Including that of the French Traders of North-Western Canada and of the North-West, XY, and Astor Fur Companies* (New York: Kessinger Publishing), 2005; Arthur Silver Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-1871; Being a History of Rupert's Land (The Hudson's Bay Company's Territory) and of the North-West Territory (including the Pacific Slope)* (Toronto: University of Toronto), 1973.

Gordon Charles Davidson, *The North West Company* (New York: Russell & Russell), 1967; Marjorie Wilkins Campbell, *The North West Company* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1957; W. D. Vincent, *The Northwest Company* (Pullman, Washington: State College of Washington), 1927.

background introduction on the traders and proceed to examine the journals they left behind.⁵

Secondary literature which focused on the abuses of alcohol of Native Americans is far reaching. One such example is Sherry Saggars' *Dealing with Alcohol: Indigenous Usage in Australia, New Zealand and Canada*. Information in her book relevant to this paper gives a background history of alcohol use in Canada among Native Americans and some of the effects still felt to this day. Laurence Armand French's book, *Addictions and Native Americans*., attempts to understand the prevalence of addictions, including alcoholism, among Native Americans; concluding that it is caused by a combination of both physiological and social forces. Peter C. Mancall's *Deadly Medicine*, is another relevant addition to the study of addiction and Native Americans, focusing explicitly on alcohol and the fur trade.⁶

This article is an attempt to make the records and reflections of Nor'westers who witnessed alcohol abuse among Native Americans the focal point of a historical study. While the previously noted works do make mention of this subject, few works spend much time uncovering the fur traders' documented accounts and opinions. By exploring these reflections, the author hopes to provide further explanation on this previously underdeveloped subject.

To understand the relationship of North West Company traders and Native Americans it is important to grasp the makeup and history of the North West Company.

⁵ Jeannette Mirsky, *The Westward Crossings; Balboa, Mackenzie, Lewis and Clark*. (New York: A. A. Knopf), 1946; Raymond W. Wood and D. Thiessen Thomas, ed. *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains* (Oklahoma City, OK: University of Oklahoma Press), 1985; John Bradbury and John By water. *Travels in the Interior of America* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms), 1966.

Sherry Saggars, *Dealing With Alcohol Indigenous Usage in Australia, New Zealand and Canada* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1998; Laurence Armand French, *Addictions and Native Americans* (West Port, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers), 2000; Peter C. Mancall, *Deadly Medicine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1995.

Before the establishment of the North West Company in 1779, the areas of the fur trade in Canada were dominated by the powerful Hudson's Bay Company. Through a British Royal Charter, issued by King Charles II in 1670, the Hudson's Bay Company was legally given a monopoly over the fur trade located within the regions watered by the rivers that flowed into the Hudson Bay. As a result, the Hudson's Bay Company was able to maintain strong control over most of the area, and traders not employed by the Company had little chance of making a stake in the Canadian fur trade.⁷

Those traders not affiliated with the Hudson's Bay Company were understandably disgruntled at the Company's monopoly over the fur trade and wished a share in the profits. Decades before the Royal Charter ushered in the British monopoly in 1670, the French had already established fur trading posts and engendered trading ties with the Natives. The 18th century witnessed the decline of the French fur trade, partially due to the new powerful Hudson's Bay Company, but also due to the lack of cooperation between the French fur traders eager for the expansion of trade and French politicians who favored agricultural development instead. This was the situation in 1779, when Scottish and English fur traders not employed by the Hudson's Bay Company formed a rival company, simultaneously absorbing the remaining French traders left behind after the failure of the French fur Companies. This rival company was known as the North West Company.

Shortly after its conception the North West Company experienced growth in manpower and profits. Due to the Company's rigorous entry process of allowing membership only after the completion of an extended service, most of the weaker fur

⁷ Bryce, 35-46.

⁸ Vandiveer, 119-125.

traders were weeded out. Vandiveer commented that "this system brought forth the most efficient and most loyal men, and proved a powerful factor in the prosecution of the business."⁹ By 1789, the Company was composed of approximately twenty three shareholders who managed the Company and slightly over two thousand clerks, guides, and interpreters. Based out of Montreal, the Company quickly began trading with the western Native American tribes for furs which had previously belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company.¹⁰

The trading methods of the Nor'westers were different than the Hudson's Bay Company and led to a thorough knowledge of the country and more contact with the Indians of Canada. The fur trading operations used by the Hudson's Bay Company consisted of establishing trading posts in the wilderness, to which Native Americans would bring their furs for trade. The North West Company men operated their fur trade by traveling directly to the Indians for trade. Extensive exploring enterprises were established to seek out Native tribes willing to trade, and one result was the uncovering of a greater geographical knowledge of Canada than had previously been charted. This information was closely guarded and remained within the company for many years. Another aspect of this trading method was direct contact with the Indians. Nor'westers frequently had personal dealings with Native Americans, often within Indian settlements where the traders witnessed the Natives in their natural society.¹¹

The majority of the Nor'westers' records concerning the Indians describe the Natives' appearance, language, and social practices. These records often contained the

Vandiveer, 121.

¹⁰ Vandiveer, 119-125; W. Stewart Wallace, ed., *Documents Relating to the North West Company* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934), 272. "Wilkins, 26-51.

traders' marvel at the differences which existed between the Indian's society and their own. Duncan Cameron, a fur trader who, in 1776, had not been willing to renounce his pledge to the crown and left New York for Canada, commented on the beauty of the women: "they all have excellent teeth and pretty black eyes."¹² Cameron further explained that there would have been some "real beauties" if only their skin had been lighter.¹³ A Nor'wester named Peter Grant also commented on the appearance of the Natives, and gave strong attention to the custom of the Indians to stretch their ears with heavy metals.¹⁴ George Keith, a trader from Scotland, spent much time trading with the Beaver Indians of Great Bear Lake in northern Canada. Keith was interested in their language, folktales and songs, and transcribed many pages in letters to a fellow fur trader in the winter of 1808. He picked his favorites to transcribe, and the tales were similar to moral fables and often involved monsters and talking animals.¹⁵ Keith, though fascinated by tales, contributed little importance to them and described them as "generally nonsensical or full of obscenity."¹⁶ A North West Company trader named John Johnston was interested in the superstitious nature of the Native Americans who lived near Lake Superior; in particular their practice of making sacrifices at various landmarks.¹⁷ Such records made up a large portion of the Nor'westers' observations concerning the Native

¹² Duncan Cameron, *A Sketch of the Customs, Manners, Way of Living of the Natives in the Barren Country about Nipigon*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 2 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 248.

¹³ Cameron, 247-248.

¹⁴ Peter Grant, *The Sauteux Indian: About 1804*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 2 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 316.

¹⁵ George Keith, *Letters to Mr. Roderic McKenzie, 1807-1817*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages-, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 2 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 71-87.

¹⁶ Keith, 78.

¹⁷ John Johnston, *An Account of Lake Superior*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 2 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 153.

Americans. These records had a tendency to focus on the Indians' more visible characteristics and suggest that the fur traders struggled to understand a new culture by comparing it to their own.

Many Nor'westers made positive comments of the Indians they encountered. Often these comments were made after witnessing particularly humbling acts of Native Americans. A trader named Simon Fraser recalled a group of starving Indians he met in the wilderness in 1808. The canoe he was traveling in had overturned, causing him, his passengers, and all their cargo to spill into the river. After he pulled himself out of the water, Fraser discovered that their cache of supplies had washed ashore in front of a group of famished Natives. He continued his account and wrote, "After supplying ourselves plentifully, I made over the remainder to the Indian who had it in charge, he immediately divided the same among his friends who were greatly in want. Having been in a state of starvation for some time previous to our arrival, they deserve much credit for having abstained from the cache."

Some Nor'westers found various tribes of Native Americans to possess many admirable qualities. George Keith described the Beaver Indians as "In general.... pretty industrious and good economists in many respects and of an inoffensive disposition."¹⁹ A Norwegian apprentice clerk named Willard Ferdinand Wentzel described the Cree Indians as being "mild of temper, hospitable and compassionate to strangers, industrious, obedient and sociable."²⁰ Peter Grant, described the Sauteux

¹⁸ Simon Frazer, *Journal of a Voyage from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Coast*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 1 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 219.

¹⁹ Keith, 69.

²⁰ W. F. Wentzel, *Letters to the Hon. Roderic McKenzie, 1807-1824*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 1 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 92.

Indians of Lake Winnipeg as "naturally generous and liberal in their dispositions, they

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regard avaricious characters, liars, thieves and slanderers with the greatest contempt."

Duncan Cameron found the twelve Native tribes of the Nipigon Country, in modern day Ontario, to be very agreeable. Cameron declared, "They are courageous and possess in the most eminent degree that force of mind and love of independence which are chief virtues of man in his savage state." He defended them as not being as ignorant as some would believe, but, instead "a very intelligent people, quick of comprehension, sudden in

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execution, subtle in business, very inventive and industrious." His final description exemplified his admiration for these people as he called them "certainly the most patient

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and persevering people on earth." Other such sweeping statements of esteem existed among North West Company traders. Such an example is John McDonnell's statement which regarded the Mandan Indians: "They are the mildest and most honest Indians upon the whole continent." ⁴

Native American customs sometimes disturbed North West Company traders, which led to negative opinions of the Natives. Willard Ferdinand Wentzel, wrote a long letter in 1807 describing a Native tradition involving child rearing that he found alarming. In this letter he wrote, "These Indians have a strange custom, which, if it is not the most barbarous, is at least the most unnatural and disgusting of any I ever heard of."²⁵ The act the trader described was the tradition of mothers painfully pulling their newborn son's legs at various times of the day in the hopes that this would make their sons grow into

²¹ Grant, 326.

²² Cameron, 248.

²³ Cameron, 248.

²⁴ John McDonnell, *Some Account of the Red River*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson,

vol. 1 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 273.
²⁵ Wentzel, 87.

excellent runners.²⁶ Many Nor'westers were horrified after witnessing the Native practice of infanticide, which typically targeted newborn girls. George Keith called the mothers "barbarous" and could not understand the rationale behind their actions, calling

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it "a most abominable and inhuman custom." Peter Grant was disgusted after witnessing an Indian practice of eating the dung of reindeer, which he learned was

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"esteemed as a delicate dish by some of them."

The revulsion sometimes felt by the fur traders often led to negative generalizations about the Native Americans as a people. Duncan Cameron made sweeping statements such as "Indians are by nature very ungrateful. They are the greatest and most shameless beggars on earth; give them ever so much, they will still continue to ask for more until they receive a decided refusal."²⁹ After a bag of tobacco was stolen from a member of his party, Simon Frazer declared that "the Natives were addicted to stealing."³⁰ John McDonnell, described all the Assiniboils of the Red River as "a lazy, indolent and perfidious set, and, I believe, the worst hunters of any Indians in the North West."³¹ He continued to generalize and wrote "They are likewise great thieves and will steal from a rusty iron nail to a horse."³²

Despite the fact that they sometimes made negative generalizations concerning the Native Americans of Canada, most traders thought they were a commendable group of people. A North West trader named Roderic McKenzie believed that differences in custom and ritual were the only barrier that kept Native Americans from being

²⁶ Wentzel, 87-88.

²⁷ Keith, 120.

²⁸ Grant, 331.

²⁹ Cameron, 249.

³⁰ Frazer, 198.

³¹ McDonnell, 281.

³² McDonnell, 281.

considered respectable by Europeans: "Take away that unnatural custom... and they may be considered the best natured and most peaceable set of people perhaps in all America."³³ Fur trader Simon Frazer, continued in a similar vein and explained, "Thus, overlooking the bad qualities which are not cruel and barbarous in themselves, since they are committed thro' ignorance, they will deserve being called on the whole 'a good people.'"³⁴

The North West Company traders believed that the Native Americans were an excellent people, but their ignorance kept the Europeans from viewing the Natives as their equals. This inequality, as was pointed out by Early North American History scholar Richard White, stemmed from what the Europeans saw as strong cultural deficiencies within the Indians. The faults most Europeans associated with the Indians included dress and lack of modesty, a weak work ethic among the men, and perhaps most importantly, that they were not Christians. Many Europeans who traveled to North America thought it was their duty to civilize the "savages" they found there, and attempted to do so by changing their wardrobe and reading the bible to them.³⁵ While the North West Company men never went so far as to try to convert the Native Americans to Christianity, they did look down on the Indians and believed they had good intentions but simply were not civilized.

While many North West traders regarded Native Americans as a fine people, they were appalled by the disturbing change which overcame them under the effects of

³³ Roderic McKenzie, *Reminiscences*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 1 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 17.

³⁴ Frazer, 218.

³⁵ White, Richard. *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 27-52.

alcohol. Duncan Cameron wrote on this idea when he described the Indians of Red Lake: "They seem to think of nothing else but getting drunk; ...boys of about twelve years old are as anxious for it as their fathers, and the women more so, if possible, than either." As Cameron's quote demonstrated, substance abuse represented a growing problem in the Indian community. This dilemma was mainly caused by two factors: the physiological makeup of Native Americans, and the European introduction of different methods of substance use. While the indigenous population had come into contact with alcohol before the arrival of the Europeans, their physiology was not accustomed to the newly introduced concentration of ethanol. With a slower metabolism, Indians would experience a more pronounced intoxication while drinking small amounts of alcohol and were also at a greater risk of experiencing alcoholism. The reasons behind this are genetic. According to recent research, alcoholism can be contributed to certain genes within the human DNA. As the research has concluded, an important contributing factor is the mutation of a particular gene which plays a major role in metabolizing alcohol. The mutation frequency is extremely high among Chinese and Japanese populations, who have historically had low counts of alcoholism. Typically, Native Americans do not have this genetic mutation, thus making them more susceptible to alcohol abuse.³⁷

However, when considering this research it is important to recognize that it is relatively new and has been disputed by various Native American scholars, such as Joy Leland. Leland does not agree with the arguments that Native Americans have a genetic predisposition towards alcoholism, and describes this research as similar to perpetuating the stereotype of the drunken Irishman. Also, Leland points out that the research which

³⁶ Cameron, 299.

³⁷ French, 24-43.

concludes Indians are predetermined to become alcoholics establishes a victim mentality within the Native American community which is extremely harmful. Instead of physiological factors, Leland points to the change in the social factors associated with alcohol use. These new social factors were introduced by the Europeans.

Native Americans partook in alcohol consumption before the arrival of the European substances, however their alcohol use was relegated to customary rituals and was not subject to everyday use. A typical form of alcohol used by Native Americans in the pre-Columbian era was a type of fermented corn beer which was taken during fall festivals. Other forms of substance use included tobacco and peyote. However, like alcohol, these substances were restricted for ritual use, thus greatly minimizing the chance of substance abuse.³⁹

The arrival of the Europeans exposed Native Americans to a different approach towards alcohol. Alcohol was a staple of the European diet, due to the lack of fresh drinking water, and was consumed by most on a regular basis. Europeans brought their custom of the every day consumption of alcoholic beverages with them to North America and the Natives were naturally curious.⁴⁰ Its' introduction to the Indians began in the form of a gift or a friendly toast before the commencement of trading. However, it soon became a staple of the trade itself when European traders realized that alcohol was in high demand of the Natives.⁴¹

³⁸ Joy Leland, *Fire Water Myth: North American Indian Drinking and Alcohol Addiction*. Center of Alcohol Studies Monolith, 11. (New Brunswick: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies), 1976.

³⁹ French, 10.

⁴⁰ French, 24-43.

⁴¹ James Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 257.

Not all Indians were enraptured by alcohol, but it became nearly inseparable from the trade, and many Natives refused trade transactions without its presence. It is important to note that fur traders did not supply the Natives with superior spirits, but rather a highly diluted form. In 1799, the Nor'wester James McKenzie described the customary distribution of low grade alcohol in the fur trade and explained, "It is unnecessary telling always in the journal that every Indian who arrives, whether good, bad, or indifferent, gets a bit of tobacco and a dram. If he wishes to know the real value given, I will tell him, the tobacco is always rotten and the rum mostly water."

By the late 18th century, alcohol abuse among Native Americans was recognized by the Canadian government as a growing problem, but was not addressed due to the general European approval of alcohol use and the possible negative effects on the fur trade that would result from an alcohol ban. Due to the fact that alcohol was a staple of their diet, Europeans were unlikely to view alcohol as the source of the problem, but rather placed blame on the Indians' lack of control. As French explained, "Given the wide acceptance of alcohol in English culture it is not surprising that [Europeans] made no serious efforts to control liquor consumption...,"⁴³ Also, Europeans believed a ban on the sell of alcohol to Native Americans would cut into the profits of the fur trade. From their point of view, to supply alcohol to Native Americans during trading sessions simply amounted to greater profits. Alcohol had become their customers most highly demanded product and, without it, many customers might be lost. The main goal of the fur trader was to make a profit, and legislation which banned certain aspects amounting to greater

James McKenzie, *Extracts from his Journal*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 2 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 382.⁴³ French, 17.

profits simply made no sense. Also, the fur trade was quickly becoming the most important source of revenue within Canada, and thus law makers were wary of hampering its growth.⁴⁴

North West Company fur traders had many dealings with Native Americans and there were many negative reports of intoxicated Native Americans. Fur trader Alexander Henry wrote many descriptions of witnessing Native Americans under the influence of alcohol. Most of his writings on the subject could be summarized by his statement on July 26, 1800: "The Indians were drinking and were rather troublesome."⁴⁵ Throughout his journeys through Canada, Henry came upon many intoxicated Native Americans, who all seemed to be angry and thirsty for alcohol. On one incident in July of 1800, Henry required repairs on his canoes but "the Indians were not in working humor, and were continually smoking and begging for liquor."⁴⁶ Henry refused to give them alcohol and, eventually, this unnamed tribe of Native Americans threatened to destroy his canoes if they did not receive it. Henry, however, still refused and "menaced them with a good beating if they misbehaved."⁴⁷ His threat scared the Indians and caused them to flee. The next month, on August 5, 1800, Henry and his companions met another group of Native Americans who had recently finished repairing canoes for European fur traders. The fur traders had long since departed, and had paid the Indians in liquor for the repairs before leaving. Henry noted that all the Natives were still intoxicated from the alcohol

⁴⁴ Vandiveer, 119-130.

⁴⁵ Henry, 22.

⁴⁶ Henry, 14.

⁴⁷ Henry, 14.

they had received the day before, and were extremely rude. After the Natives spoke of shooting at them the fur traders promptly left the area.⁴⁸

The North West fur trader named Roderic McKenzie related his own experiences of Native Americans and alcohol while trading in the Portage territory near Lake Superior. In the spring of 1789, McKenzie recalled that he had stopped a fight between one of his fellow fur traders and a Native. The Native involved was discovered to be the cause of the scuffle and was promptly turned out of the camp. Before being removed, the guilty Indian told McKenzie with an angry look, "When the leaves grow large in the Portage, I will remember you."⁴⁹ McKenzie recalled that later "that evening the Indians had a drinking match. They were yelling, quarrelling, fighting and making such a dreadful racket, that one might believe that all the Furies of Hell were let loose in the camp, but our gates were of course secured."⁵⁰ The morning after, it was discovered that five Indians were dead, one of whom was the guilty Indian from the day before. In a search to find out what had happened McKenzie learned that a young Native he had befriended had killed the guilty Indian, as he was McKenzie's enemy and had meant to kill him at the first opportunity.⁵¹

John McDonald of Garth, a trader who joined the North West Company at only seventeen years of age, recorded an account in which he was forced to hide his alcohol from the Natives. McDonald and his companions had spent the winter of 1805 living near an unnamed tribe of Indians, and by the spring they were anxious to get away from them. However, McDonald was worried "that they should see us taking away our

⁴⁸ Henry, 22-23.

⁴⁹ McKenzie, 12.

⁵⁰ McKenzie, 12.

⁵¹ McKenzie, 12.

remaining property, particularly tobacco, ammunition, liquor, &c., &c." McDonald feared that the Natives would beg for the liquor if they saw it, which would invariably lead to conflict. McDonald's interpreter had a plan and secretly made a kite and let it fly on a clear night. The Indians saw the kite and were amazed, as they had never seen anything like it before. The next morning the interpreter declared that he had received a letter regarding the kite in the sky, and that it was a message "from the Master of Life ordering them off in three days to a stated point, and bidding them not to return for several days."⁵³ The Natives obeyed the fabricated command, and the fur traders departed with their supplies, and alcohol, undisturbed.⁵⁴

Alexander Henry recalled an Indian drinking bout on September 29, 1800 in which a young Indian woman was brutally stabbed by her husband. His account began in the afternoon with the quote, "the Indians continued drinking,"⁵⁵ and explained that later that night he was informed that an Indian named Old Crooked Legs had killed his young wife. However, upon inspection, Henry discovered that the woman was still alive but had received three stab wounds and was in a coma. Henry learned that the motive of the crime was jealousy fueled by alcohol, as Old Crooked Legs was an elderly man and had accused his young wife of infidelity. When the fur trader found the guilty man he was "blind drunk....and singing and saying he was not afraid to die."⁵⁶ Henry convinced the tribe not to kill Old Crooked Legs, and they agreed not to kill him as long as the young woman was still alive. The next afternoon, Henry learned that the woman had awoken

⁵² John McDonald of Garth, *Autobiographical Notes*, in *Les Bourgeois De La Compagnie Du Nord-Ouest: Recits De Voyages, Lettres Et Rapports Inedits Relatifs Au Nord-Ouest Canadien*, ed. L. R. Masson, vol. 2 (New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1960), 32.

⁵³ **McDonald, 33.**

⁵⁴ **McDonald, 32-33.**

⁵⁵ **Henry, 105.**

⁵⁶ **Henry, 105.**

from her coma and was told by her companions to begin drinking again, as it would do her good. Henry wrote, "She accordingly did so and was drunk all night."⁵⁷

Duncan Cameron left a vivid account of alcohol abuse among the Indians of the Nipigon region. He related a meeting with a tribe in 1804 who wished to trade provisions for liquor: "They were provided with a plentiful stock of dried buffalo meat, and anxious for a dram. I accordingly gave liquor in return for their provisions; they fell to and kept drinking all night." Cameron then complained that he and his men were unable to sleep that night due to the howling of the intoxicated Indians and their dogs. The fur trader continued to reflect on the topic and wrote "I have often seen them, when they could get no more liquor, boil tobacco and drink the juice of it to keep themselves in that state of intoxication."⁵⁹ Cameron did not trust Natives who drank, as they would often attribute the crimes they committed while intoxicated completely to alcohol. Cameron thought that the Indians sometimes used their inebriated state to their advantage, as "when [they are] mischievously inclined, they feign to be drunk, expecting that no one will lay their crimes to their account when in that state."⁶⁰ However, despite the fact that he recognized the negative effects of alcohol on Native Americans, Duncan Cameron, like most North West Company trades, felt no qualms when he supplied the Natives with alcohol. In fact, as his quote from October 5, 1804 showed, he used it to his own advantage: "They are all very civil to me, and so they may, for I am giving them plenty to drink, without getting anything from them as yet."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Henry, 107.

⁵⁸ Henry, 45.

⁵⁹ Cameron, 248.

⁶⁰ Cameron, 248.

⁶¹ Cameron, 294.

While the majority of the Nor'westers' records concerning Native alcohol abuse were accounts of the actions of intoxicated Indians, some traders included reflections on substance abuse and the fur trade. Willard Ferdinand Wentzel thought it was the competition between the fur traders which brought on alcohol abuse among Native Americans. Wentzel reasoned that, at its conception, the competition had been to the advantage of the Natives, as it gave them opportunity for larger profits. However, Wentzel reflected that the competition was also "often prejudicial to morals and equally
 fly
 injurious to the character of many." This was why, Wentzel believed, European fur traders would feel no remorse when they used alcohol for trade. Wentzel continued to reflect that most Europeans would assume that competition would make the Indians more industrious, while in reality he explained it was "far to the contrary; drunkenness, idleness and vice are preferred."⁶³ Wentzel recognized that competition was linked to supplying Native Americans with alcohol, and proclaimed "it destroys trade, creates vice, and renders people crafty, ruins good morals, and almost totally abolishes every humane sentiment in both Christian and Indian breast."⁶⁴

The North West Company fur trader Duncan Cameron believed that Native alcohol abuse would be the destruction of competition and of the fur trade itself. Cameron thought that the Natives continually increased their demand for more alcohol, while their quantity of beaver furs for trade stayed the same. He worried for the future of the fur trade if these conditions remained the same as "the consequence will be that the Indians will get all they want for half the value and laugh at [the fur traders], in the

⁶² Wentzel, 96.

⁶³ Wentzel, 96.

⁶⁴ Wentzel, 96.

end."⁶⁵ However, Cameron was not willing to trade without the presence of alcohol, even though he recognized the danger, both to the fur trade and the Native Americans.

Cameron believed that the Native Americans loved alcohol because "they reckon [it to be] the most efficacious medicine of all to cure every disease."⁶⁶ Even though, in reality, Cameron knew that it "in fact sends a great many to their grave."⁶⁷ He continued to explain that the negative examples of alcohol abuse had no importance with the Native

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Americans, and that "their desires must be gratified at any cost." Therefore, Cameron reasoned that if the Natives desired alcohol for furs they would receive it, and if not from him, then from someone else. Cameron was there to make a profit on the beaver fur not to protect the Indians. However, his conscience seemed rise up at the end of his written reflection when a Native asked him for a drink.⁶⁹ He wrote, "I granted his request, but telling him at the same time that drinking was contrary to his present state of health."⁷⁰

Through the examination of many North West Company fur trader's journals, the author discovered a first hand account of the ravages of alcohol abuse among Native Americans and the varied reactions of the fur traders on that tragedy. The majority of the records concerning Native Americans focused on their most visible qualities such as appearance, language, and social practices. While sometimes unfamiliar and disturbed by certain aspects of the Native's way of life, the fur traders that were examined generally viewed the Native Americans as a good natured people with admirable qualities. Such qualities included hospitality, compassion, and patience. However, they were horrified

⁶⁵ Cameron, 295.

⁶⁶ Cameron, 274.

⁶⁷ Cameron, 274.

⁶⁸ Cameron, 274.

⁶⁹ Cameron, 274.

⁷⁰ Cameron, 274.

by the way Native Americans were transformed through alcohol abuse. Accounts of violent actions committed by intoxicated Indians were common throughout the Nor'westers' records. Most traders simply recorded what they witnessed, and did not try to find the underlying implications of what they saw. A few traders reflected on the alcohol abuse and considered its connections with trade. However, despite the overwhelming negative depictions of alcohol abuse among Native Americans, Nor'westers continued to trade furs with alcohol. Thus, alcohol remained a staple of the fur trade in Canada.

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