

THREE HUNDRED PRAIRIE YEARS

Henry Kelsey's "Inland Country of Good Report"

Came up with them the tents of us. They killed
I shall now keep secret was from me.
Nor none of those same Indians did I see
Until that they their murder all had done
And the chief a deer was he I called a Sage
So far I have spoken concerning of the spoils
And now will give an acc^t of that same Country side
Which hither part is very thick of wood
There is small nutts & little cherries very good
This it continues till you leave of woods behind
And then you have beards of several kind
The one is a black a Buffalo great
Another is an outgrown Bear it is good meat
The skin to get. I have used all of ~~the~~ I can
He is man's food & he makes food of man
His hide they would not me as prisoner
But said it was a god & they should have
This place affords nothing but Bears & grass
And over it for three days time we past
Getting unto of woods on the other side
It being about forty six miles wide
This wood is poplar ridges with small pines of many
There is beaver in abundance but not little
with plains & ridges is the Country throughout
Their enemies many w^h from they can not get out
But now of late they hunt their enemies
And with our English guns do make y^e of
Aberrings point after the frost
Set up their a certain Crook
As token of my being there
cut out on 11th of date of year
And like wise for to verify the same
added to it my master Sir Edward Derrings name
I having not more to trouble you wth all I can
For your most obedient & faithful
Henry Kelsey

Edited by Henry Epp

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Canadian Plains Research Center
University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan
1993



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Tricentennial of Prairie History

Henry Epp

JUST over three hundred years ago the recorded history of the Canadian Prairies began. The first written record of the Prairies is by Henry Kelsey, a young Hudson's Bay Company employee, who journeyed into what is now Saskatchewan in 1690 and 1691, and prepared a brief written account of what he had observed.

The forests and prairies through which Kelsey travelled are much older than three hundred years, of course, and people had lived there for 10,000 years or more. These Indigenous, First Peoples knew the area intimately, and had developed elaborate cultures, trade networks, and travel routes. Kelsey travelled in their company, and they led him through these lands.

Kelsey did not "discover" the Prairies or what is now Saskatchewan, nor was he a "pathfinder." People were living there already, and he simply followed existing travel routes with them. What is important about Kelsey's visit is that he was a good observer and recorded at least some of what he saw and heard. What is even more important is that he was the vanguard, the initial condition, that led this land and its peoples through a series of changes, unprecedented in speed, intensity, and magnitude, culminating in the present condition. And the changes are still occurring.

The germ of the idea that resulted in the preparation and publication of this book occurred to me at lunch one day early in 1990. Malcolm Ross, originally from Brisbane, Australia and now working for the Saskatchewan Department of Environment and Resource Management in Regina, was sitting across the table from me. He asked me if I knew what year it was. I do not remember my exact words, but I mumbled something like "it's 1990." That was when he said this was the 300th anniversary of recorded history in Saskatchewan and the Prairies, the date of Henry Kelsey's first visit to this land and his written record thereof. My reaction was instantaneous, expressing incredulity that I had not thought of this, but realizing that often it takes someone who was not born and raised in a land to recognize some of its historically important occasions.

Following my discussion with Malcolm, I immediately telephoned Tim Jones in Saskatoon, executive director of the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society, to find out if anyone in Saskatchewan was planning to celebrate Kelsey's visit as a tricentennial event. Tim recognized the importance of this request instantly, and that day began checking with other interest groups, governments, universities, and other institutions. He drew a zero in Saskatchewan, but found that Paul





Thistle of The Pas, Manitoba was planning a conference to celebrate Henry Kelsey's famous journey in Manitoba.

Knowing this, Tim and I began preparing for Saskatchewan's own conference, with Paul Thistle as one of our invited speakers. That conference, after some delays, came to fruition on 22 and 23 November 1991 at the Delta Bessborough Hotel in Saskatoon. The majority of this book consists of edited versions of the papers presented by various speakers at the 1991 Kelsey conference in Saskatoon.

The Kelsey conference was organized in much the same way as is this book. Recognized authorities in their respective fields were invited to give presentations. In addition, when it was brought to my attention at the conference that a discussion on fish was missing, I asked Mervin Atton, a leading authority on Saskatchewan's fish and fisheries, to fill the gap by preparing a chapter on that topic for this book. The intent is to provide a state-of-the-art look at what is now Saskatchewan, especially the prairies; what made this land and its peoples the way they are; what they were like in the past; how and why they changed; where we are now; and, where we may be going. The focal point is Henry Kelsey's visit to this land in 1690 and 1691, the beginning of recorded history on the Canadian Prairies.

This book is divided into seven parts. Part I is an introduction, providing background information for what follows, and outlining the purpose and scope. Part II describes the area which is now Saskatchewan as it was in Kelsey's time, with emphasis on the prairies and forests Kelsey encountered three hundred years ago. Part III then provides a state-of-the-art picture of the events and processes which shaped the land and its inhabitants, human and nonhuman, leading to the situation that Kelsey encountered. Part IV describes where Kelsey went, whom he met, and the circumstances responsible for this. Part V deals with events and conditions which followed Kelsey's visit, changes to the land, its life, and its peoples. Part VI gives a brief prognosis of the future. Part VII is a copy of the original Kelsey papers, included to provide readers direct access to Kelsey's writings.

Individuals specializing in the disciplines of geology, geography, history, anthropology, and archaeology have provided chapters for this book. A writer (and also a biologist, an ecologist), Don Gayton, was asked to provide a subjective perspective on the land and its changes, an impression of the events which shaped the land and its life. Several Indigenous scholars and experts were invited to present their interpretations of the events since Kelsey's visit that have shaped their lives and cultures: James Dempsey, Linda Pelly-Landrie, and Sid Fiddler. The result, I hope, is not only a multidisciplinary compendium of individual expert presentations, but is structured sequentially and interpretively so as to provide a true interdisciplinary experience to the readers.

Several terms are used in this book which deserve explanation. Some of the chapters deal with whom Kelsey met and their ancestors and descendants. In the past, most often they have been called "Indians," as Christopher Columbus thought he had landed in Asia after his famous 1492 voyage across the Atlantic Ocean from Europe. Some authors use that term in this book. The term "Native"

peoples is used also, as are the terms "Aboriginal," "Indigenous," "First Nations," and "First Peoples."

I have tried to interfere as little as possible with each author's writing style. I have not limited individual expression and opinions presented logically and understandably and with factual bases, and I have not insisted on consistency in the use of terms to the point of limiting expression. Nor have I eliminated disagreements among authors, as that leads only to a false impression about the present state of knowledge.

Dependence and Control: Indian-European Trade Relations in the Post-Kelsey Era



Paul C. Thistle

IN this chapter, I summarize and review some of the findings of an earlier work (Thistle 1986) dealing with the consequences of Henry Kelsey being brought into the homelands of the Cree and their neighbours in 1690-91. My original interest in this field was stimulated in part by the observation of Van Kirk (1980a: 164) that more intensive investigation of Indian-trader relations was required, as distinct from the strictly economic tradition of the past. Also influential was a certain dissatisfaction with many of the early sources on fur-trade history which have been criticized for ignoring the perspectives and initiatives of Indian or First Nations peoples (Walker 1971; Bibeau 1984). Many of these accounts seemed to have been written to explain, and indeed in some respects to justify, the dominance of European migrants over the Aboriginal inhabitants of the New World. The basic questions to be asked are: When and how did Europeans gain their present dominant position? The traditional answers to these questions have been that, relatively soon after contact, First Nations peoples slipped into a subordinate and dependent relationship *vis-à-vis* the representatives of a "superior" European civilization. Non-Native migrants were represented as having quickly destroyed Native societies, dominating and exploiting them more or less mercilessly according to the particular ideological perspective of the scholar in question (for example, Bailey 1938: 264, 276; Rich 1967: 38; Myers 1972: 5; Rothney 1975: 25, 114).

This interpretation became difficult to accept given the social scientific theory of cross-cultural relations and in light of a lack of detailed analysis afforded to initial contact relations, depending instead on an uncritical projection of later patterns of relations back onto the early stages of contact (Axtell 1975: 131; Morantz 1984: 57). In addition, more recent work in the field (Van Kirk 1980b: 7, 9; Bishop 1974: 96-97; Ray 1974: 62) had discovered that the typical "early dependence" interpretation is at best an oversimplification and at worst a racist approach to this history. Following the new approach known as "ethnohistory," it seemed necessary to add the insights available from the existing ethnography of Native cultures as well as theoretical perspectives on cross-cultural relations and non-Western economic models in order to develop a more complete understanding of the history of early Indian-European relations (Lurie 1968: 90). For example, those who have argued that contact between First Nations peoples

and European traders automatically resulted in conflict — either cultural (Jenness 1937: 14-15; Stanley 1973: vii, 48-49) or economic (Hickerson 1966: 822; Rothney 1975: 5) — need to consider the work of sociologists who hold that the conflict model may not be the best one to explain the early stages of cross-cultural contact (Barth and Noel 1972: 333-36; Lieberman 1961: 905). Although some scholars such as Bishop (1990) and Tough (1988) have been critical of my approach, the general conclusions are widely accepted in the literature (cf. Ray 1974; Sloan 1979; Morantz 1980). It is clear that the facile conclusion that First Nations peoples soon were forced into dependence on the fur trade and subjected to the early control of Europeans must be re-examined.

The Cree and their neighbours living west of Hudson Bay were not recent migrants driven into this area as mere flotsam before a European economic tide occasioned by the fur trade, as has been argued by some. Rather they were long-term inhabitants of their homelands when encountered by Kelsey and his successors beginning in the late fifteenth century (Russell 1991). Prior to Henry Kelsey's epic guided tour of the western hinterland, having established themselves as middlemen, the Cree developed relationships with the English of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and their French mentors, Pierre Radisson and Jean Baptiste Chouart. In a pattern to be repeated consistently, Radisson and Chouart were guided inland from Port Nelson between 1682 and 1685 and were adopted into Cree society in a successful attempt to tightly integrate the Europeans into the Native sociopolitical systems. Throughout, we see that the trade which developed was predicated on Native concerns for the social foundations of trading relationships, ceremony, and decidedly non-European motivations (Thistle 1986: 11-15, 18).

Henry Kelsey was sent inland from York Factory in the company of a captain of the Assinae Poets (Assiniboine) in 1690. The uncertainties about the route taken by Kelsey's mentor are dealt with elsewhere in this volume (Ronaghan). It should be noted that this journey and those which followed demonstrated the crucial importance of Native geographical knowledge, survival skills, linguistic facilities, female companionship, and political skills to the advancement of European economic interest.

During Kelsey's time, and for many years thereafter, it is clear that Europeans could not find their way, live off the land, nor easily establish relations with potential new trading partners without Native assistance. First Nations peoples demonstrated their control over and independence from this solitary European in a variety of ways. They ignored Kelsey's requests for them to put aside the traditional pursuit of "warring" in favour of trapping (Doughty and Martin 1929: 15-16). Time after time they exerted their control over the transportation lifeline (Thistle 1986: 31, 54-56). Without a doubt, First Nations peoples also controlled the strategic situation. This was easily demonstrated to the typically isolated non-Native trading envoys while travelling inland. When Anthony Henday was threatened by de la Corne's men at Fort Paskoyac in July 1754, Henday's Cree mentor Atticashish "only laughed and said they dar'd not" (PAM, HBCA E.2/4, fol.38). Neither the French nor the English controlled the strategic power relations during the early phases of the fur trade (Thistle 1986: 24). Inland, the situation was such that the simple numerical superiority of the Native

populations precluded rapid adoption of European ways, much less the imposition of European strategic control.

The reports of those such as Kelsey and Thomas McCleish from York Factory make clear that, in contrast to Europeans who rather quickly became "Indianized," Native contact with European society was relatively circumscribed. Comparatively few Indians voyaged to trade directly at the permanent establishments on Hudson Bay and those that did came to trade only once every two or three years (Thistle 1986). Such limited contact was not intense enough to result in major shifts in the orientation of cultures among Native peoples. Indeed, it was the non-Native fur traders who adapted to the kinship and marriage systems, languages, transportation and clothing technologies, alliances, and trading practices of Native peoples. Europeans even began to accept the medical knowledge and belief systems of First Nations peoples (Thistle 1986: 39-40; Brown and Brightman 1988: 23, 62, 82).

Even the supposedly superior material culture offered by Europeans was not adopted wholesale. For example, Kelsey (Doughty and Martin 1929: 188) reported that many bone tools continued to be preferred over the iron counterparts available in trade. In fact, most of the technological innovations accepted by Natives were modified to suit their existing social systems and world views and often were used for purposes other than those for which they were produced in Europe. For example, utilitarian trade items frequently were employed by Native peoples as decorations, trade blankets were often boiled to extract dyes, or unravelled and the yarn used to weave small bags (Thistle 1986: 35-36; Karklins 1992: 42).

What some scholars have seen as the rapid development of "cultural amnesia" among First Nations peoples who were confronted with a wealth of replacements for traditional goods through trade, can be explained by looking more closely at how this interpretation was developed. Traders such as Jérémie and Knight (Ray 1974: 19-21) reported Indian claims that they had lost the ability to use their bows and arrows. It must be noted, however, that most, if not all of these claims were made during bargaining sessions where Indians were clearly attempting to invoke the traders' "pity" in order to persuade them to be more generous. In short, this was merely a part of typical trade rhetoric, not a statement of the actual situation (Thistle 1986: 37). It is also clear from the work of Ray (1974: 13-14, 73-79) and Morantz (1980: 40-41, 71) that the numbers of guns in circulation, the limited demand for this item, as well as the logistics of employing guns great distances away from sources of powder and repair precluded any real dependency on this European product despite the trade rhetoric that Indians would starve if not given ammunition (Thistle 1986: 37-38).

This "dependence" on the fur trade is one of the most pervasive interpretations in the fur-trade literature (Morantz 1980: 39; cf. Rich 1967: 38 and Rothney 1975: 62, 77). Data associated with the Assiniboine and their neighbours do, however, refute this interpretation. For example, while Henday visited the Assiniboine in September 1755 he commented: "I smoaked with them and have done all in my power to get them to visit our forts, but I am afraid to little purpose, the living in this plentiful country, and can well do without any European support, but their chief objection is the long distance" (PAM, HBCA

E.2/4, fol.44). In reality, of course, it was the Europeans who were dependent on First Nations peoples not only as the primary producers, guides, and middlemen for collecting fur, but for transportation labour, and the supply of food and protection. On a number of accounts, therefore, we must challenge the conclusions of many early fur-trade historians concerning the initial stages of trade relations in the area west of Hudson Bay. As was the case east of Hudson Bay (Morantz 1980: 40), First Nations peoples were by no means dependent upon non-Native traders for survival in the period known as the early fur trade era. They remained in firm control of the relationships in economic, political, social, and strategic terms. "Dependence" should be used instead to describe the position of Europeans who remained under the patronage of their Indian mentors during this period.

The First Nations peoples inland from Hudson Bay eventually persuaded both the French and the English to establish trading posts in their homelands, ushering in what historians refer to as the "competitive fur trade era." The Cree encouraged the La Vérendryes to establish posts at the north end of Lake Winnipeg in 1741, at Cedar Lake in 1743, and at The Pas some time between 1743 and 1749 (Champagne 1971: 41-46). During the 1760 conquest crisis in Quebec, the Cree in The Pas area prevented the retreating French traders from burning their buildings in the expectation that they could more easily persuade successors to occupy these sites if the buildings remained, which, in fact occurred (Thistle 1986: 25). The Cree made use of the resulting competitive situation to persuade the HBC to establish an inland post in their area and they advised the Company on the location of Cumberland House which was built in 1774. From this time until the establishment of a monopoly brought about by the merging of the North West Company and the HBC in 1821, the Cree and their neighbours continued to maintain a significant degree of control and independence.

It is clear from the experience of Alexander Henry the Elder in 1775 that the Cree were in full strategic control of their homeland. His party of 130 experienced voyageurs was waylaid and forced to pay heavy tribute in order to be allowed to proceed west of The Pas by Chatique, the headman of the Basquiau Cree (Henry 1809: 260). For many years, the HBC records evidenced serious concerns about their own strategic position. For example, in 1802 William Tomison reported from Cumberland House that his men dared not stir outside of the post because of the fear of Indian power (PAM, HBCA B.49/a/31, fol.28).

First Nations traders also continued to exploit the competitive situation to their own advantage by playing one European interest against the other. Traders were forced to take supplies of goods out to the Indian camps and to haul post visitors' furs to their destination using their own manpower (Thistle 1986: 61-62, 68-69, 78). Indian ecological and geographical knowledge, skill, and manpower to produce and operate the required technology necessary for the operation of the crucial transportation system remained indispensable during the period 1774 through 1821. European traders were continually lamenting their inability to override the interests and priorities of the Natives, which clearly remained outside non-Indian control (Thistle 1986: 54-57, 78).

The inland establishments also remained dependent on the production of food provisions by their First Nations partners well into the 1800s. Indeed, rather than

engaging in trapping for a living, many Native groups simply intensified their big game hunting adaptation and traded meat in order to obtain the desired trade goods, demand for which remained relatively inelastic. It is clear that First Nations peoples did not on the whole become "inextricably enmeshed" in the European trading system as some would have it (Rothney 1975: 62, 77, 117). Trapping for a living did not become a necessity during this period, since Native groups continually showed their ability to withdraw from the trade relationship at will and to survive quite well without need of European goods (Thistle 1986: 78-80; cf. Sloan 1979).

Even under monopoly conditions which obtained after 1821, there is evidence to suggest that First Nations peoples west of Hudson Bay were able to retain a certain amount of control and to demonstrate their independence from the European trading system. Trading posts such as Cumberland House continued to depend on Indian hunters for the supply of country produce to ensure adequate food supplies to support operations (Thistle 1986: 81-82). Some Cree in the Cumberland House region obviously were maintaining their traditional pursuits of hunting and gathering as a primary adaptation (Thistle 1986: 85-86). In addition, participants were still able to withdraw at will and to subsist quite well without a supply of European trade goods. References to the Cree "doing nothing in the fur way" were common during the monopoly period, even when fur bearers were plentiful — a situation which a dependent Native people could not have afforded to exploit (Thistle 1986: 87-88, 90, 93).

The Cree also resisted HBC efforts to direct their trapping efforts and the conservation of beaver resources. These attempts at control evidently were failures because the Cree continued to resist such direction, and their religious beliefs concerning their special spiritual relations with animals had not been weakened by their contact with Europeans (Thistle 1986: 88, 90, 92-94). In addition, as late as the 1840s, the HBC was still forced to send men out to Indian camps with supplies of trade goods and to fetch furs for Indians who continued to be independent enough to demand this service (Thistle 1986: 89-90). During the monopoly period up to 1840, HBC journals also demonstrated that the collection of furs continued to depend entirely on the cooperation and knowledge of Cree guides without whom company efforts proved fruitless (Thistle 1986: 90-91). Cree canoe men also exerted their power in the realm of transportation. Collecting bark, building canoes, delivering regular packets of mail, outfits of trade goods, and passengers remained dependent on First Nations labourers who continued to place higher priorities on their own interest when it suited them. This is hardly the behaviour of fur-trade dependents (Thistle 1986: 89, 90-91).

In summary, the assumptions about the rapid fall of First Nations peoples inhabiting the interior west of Hudson Bay under the control of Europeans and into inextricable dependence on the European fur-trade system can be challenged with the available evidence. Natives in the region were numerically superior and knowledgeable enough to maintain a significant degree of control over their participation in the production of fur and in the transportation and provisioning systems, as well as the strategic balance of power. The social and political systems of First Nations peoples clearly served as the basis for the structuring of

the early fur-trade periods and it is apparent that changes in Native material culture were predicated on their own needs and world views. On the other hand, it was Europeans who adapted themselves (some contemporaries believed much too far) to the "customs of the country." During the period from 1690 to 1840, Europeans clearly were unable to impose their own conditions on the relationship with Native peoples and, therefore, found it necessary to adapt themselves to the existing social, political, technological, and economic systems of the First Nations peoples of the regions.

As to the questions of when and how Europeans eventually achieved their current position of dominance over First Nations peoples, the answers must lie in later times which are outside the scope of this paper. Later fur-trade periods saw deteriorating ecological conditions. In addition, the advent of missionary activities introduced nontraditional forms of leadership, religious factionalism, and tendencies toward unecological concentrations of populations around permanent settlements. The pressures inherent during the treaty period and the industrialization of the economy also can be looked to for explanation. In any event, these factors all took place after the period covered by this study. Thus, in response to those who argue that European fur traders dominated First Nations peoples soon after contact, we need simply refer to Atticashish "who only laughed and said they dar'd not."

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