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Westward and Northward

Chapter Outline

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the expansion of the fur trade into what would become western Canada and to further demonstrate the impact that European contact would have on the indigenous nations of the West. The chapter begins by highlighting the impact that the horse, firearms, and disease had on the nations of the Plains. In short, each of these resulted in a shifting of territories as various groups gained or lost power due to access to horses and firearms and as they struggled under the devastation of European diseases. The impact of the early smooth-bore guns is not fully known; the bow and arrow was still the preferred buffalo hunting method for groups who were plains hunters before the arrival of the Cree, Nakoda and Plains Ojibwa. At first, the introduction of guns was a primarily psychological advantage.

One of the most obvious results of the shifting of territories is demonstrated by the movement of the Cree and Nakoda on to the Plains and their adoption of a buffalo culture, especially in the southern portions of the territory. The Cree also continued to be major players in the fur trade, providing European goods to the western Indigenous nations such as those of the Niitsitapiikwan Confederacy and taking on the “middlemen” role. As time progressed, however, the Cree and Niitsitapiikwan became enemies, resulting in the Niitsitapiikwan dealing directly with traders. The Niitsitapiikwan at first believed they were not being treated as fairly as the Cree, especially with regards to firearms. However, with the expansion of the fur trade into the Athabasca region and a growing market for buffalo robes and pemmican, relations between traders and the Niitsitapiikwan improved. The late 1700s saw the Cree and Niitsitapiikwan competing for dominance on the Canadian Plains.

The late 1700s also saw the development of the fur trade in the Far Northwest of present-day British Columbia. The trade developed on two fronts, one from the interior towards the coast and another along the coast after Captain Cook’s visit to Nootka Sound in 1778. The Northwest Coast saw three companies vying for control of the trade—the Northwest Company, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), and the Russian American Company—with the HBC eventually coming to control the trade. Because of the financial backing of the British Crown and the vast trading network it had established, the HBC was able to control trade. As was the experience on the Plains and on eastern portions of the continent, contact with traders had social consequences. Like other groups, west coast societies were impacted by diseases, increased aggression between Indigenous nations, and a change in lifestyle.

Learning Objectives

- To understand how the geographic location of Indigenous Peoples changed on the prairies over time and the impact this had on particular nations and resources
- To recognize the influence of the fur trade on what became western Canada
- To understand how Indigenous Peoples adapted and applied strategies in their attempts to maintain control of the fur trade
- To recognize the effects of new technologies such as firearms on traditional hunting practices and conflictual social relationships

Key Terms, Figures or Sites

Far Northwest Term used by Euro-Canadians to describe present-day Northwest Territories, Yukon, and northern British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan (p. 147).

Legaic (Legex, Legaix) Tsimshian title for a chief meaning “chief of the mountain” (p. 152).

Muquinna Chiefly title of the Mochat band Nuu’chah’nulth, meaning “possessor of pebbles”. One particular Muquinna (*fl.* 1786–1817) quarrelled in 1803 with the captain of a fur-trading ship over a defective gun, which led to the destruction of the ship *Boston* by a group of Nuu’chah’nulth. Two survivors were left. Muquinna was renowned for the magnificence of a potlatch he gave that same year (p. 150).

Niitsitapiikwan (Niitsitapi Confederacy) Plains coalition composed of the Siksika, Piikani, Káinawa, Tsuu T’ina, and A’ani. At its peak, it extended from the North Saskatchewan River, south to the Missouri, and from the present Alberta–Saskatchewan border to the Rocky Mountains; also known as the Blackfoot Confederacy (p. 142).

North West Company (NWC) Consortium of fur-trading firms and individuals formed in the late eighteenth century to compete with Hudson’s Bay Company in the western fur trade. The HBC absorbed the NWC in 1821 (p. 144).

pemmican Concentrated food used by Plains Métis and Indigenous Peoples consisting of dried meat, pounded fine and mixed with melted fat and sometimes berries. It became a staple food of the fur trade. One kilogram of pemmican had the food value of four to eight kilograms of fresh meat or fish (p. 145).

potlatch Ceremonial feast of Northwest Coast Indigenous Peoples involving the host’s lavish distribution of gifts. A means of redistributing wealth within communities, it was banned by the Canadian government in 1884 as being contrary to European values (p. 150).

Thompson, David (1770–1857) HBC, and later NWC, fur trader and explorer who surveyed a route to the Churchill River and the area west of Lake of the Woods along the 49th parallel, and was the first European to travel the Athabasca Pass through the Rockies to the west coast (p. 139).

traders Individuals working for large companies who accepted furs and other goods from Indigenous Peoples in exchange for agreed-upon items such as knives, pots, beads, and guns (p. 145).

Study Questions

1. What influence(s) did the horse have on Indigenous Peoples of the Plains?
2. What influence(s) did guns have on Indigenous Peoples of the Plains?
3. What role did European disease play in the shifting power balance of Indigenous Peoples on the Plains?
4. What three factors initially kept the Niitsitapiikwan from active involvement in the western fur trade?
5. What is pemmican and why did demand for it increase during the fur trade?
6. How did the Athabaskan trade affect the roles of women?
7. How and why did the Hudson's Bay Company come to control the fur trade?
8. What was the basis for the 'China clipper traffic' between China and the Northwest Coast?
9. Who was Muquinna and what is significant about the lavish potlatch he held in 1803?
10. Who was Koyah and what factors led to death of his family?
11. How did Indigenous settlement around coastal trade posts differ from that of the homeguards?
12. What was the connection between greater levels of Indigenous control over the coastal trade and material wealth (in comparison to the interior trade).

Essay Questions

1. Briefly discuss the impact of guns on power relations and hunting practices.

Indigenous power was deeply impacted by the appearance and availability of guns. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Cree were armed and established on the Saskatchewan River. The fact that they were armed meant a bigger advantage than having a horse. This advantage was felt in both warfare and hunting practices. The Shoshoni, who had been in power on the Plains until then, could not access firearms quickly enough because of various events including the Seven Years War and the disappearance of France as a power. These factors combined with epidemics meant that, by the end of the eighteenth century, the Shoshoni were pushed off the northern Plains ceding their position to the Niitsitapiikwan Confederacy, (in particular, the Siksikawa and the Piikani, who were the primary confederate bands involved) (pp. 142-143).

2. Discuss the impact of the horse on Plains culture and relationships.

The Shoshoni appear to have been the first group of Indigenous Peoples to acquire horses on the northwestern Plains. On the southern Plains, mounted warfare and the adoption of buffalo hunting on horseback were techniques developed the Apache over time. Buffalo hunting on horse subsequently induced some groups from the parklands to give up sedentary agriculture (p. 139). As running buffalo on horseback became a favored technique, jumps also fell into disuse (p. 140).

Horse raiding became a favorite activity and horses became a symbol of warrior status. Horse raids were carried out against enemies, thus becoming acts of war and not just theft. With this, came changes to social conventions and contrary to long-held beliefs about animal ownership, practices of excess grew; among the Piikani, some individuals were known to have up to 300 horses (p. 141). Finally, the acquisition of horses had also greatly altered trade routes (p. 143).

3. Describe some of the main differences between the impact of trade on the Pacific coast and the Atlantic coast.

The first trading ship did not arrive on the Northwest Coast until 1785, and it was a British ship. For the next 40 years, a variety of vessels from different nations traded in the region. Many only made one visit, and by 1825, the sea otters were already disappearing. Trade in Acadia and the Gulf of St Lawrence lasted over a century and was not subject to the variety of traders that frequented the West Coast. Having said that, trade on both coasts depended on Indigenous trappers and had the same effect in terms of decimating the population. (pp. 149-150).

Additional Resources

Further Readings

- Abel, Kerry. *Drum Songs*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1993.
- Arima, Eugene Y. *Blackfeet and Palefaces: The Pikani and Rocky Mountain House*. Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1995.
- Carter, Sarah. *Aboriginal People and Colonizers in Western Canada to 1900*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
- Dempsey, Hugh A. *Indian Tribes of Alberta*. Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1986.
- Fisher, Robin. *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774–1890*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977.
- Hämäläinen, Pekka. “The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures.” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 3 (2003): 833-862.

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- McCormack, Patricia A. *Fort Chipewyan and the Shaping of Canadian History, 1788–1920s*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010.
- Morrison, David A. *Profit & ambition: The North West Company and the fur trade 1779–1821*. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2009.
- Rich, E.E. *The Northwest to 1857*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967.
- Roe Frank Gilbert. *The Indian and the Horse*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951.
- Ross, Helen E. *Letters from Rupert's Land, 1826–1840: James Hargrave of the Hudson's Bay Company*. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2009.
- Thompson, Duane and Marianne Ignace. "They Made Themselves Our Guests: Power Relationships in the Interior Plateau of the Cordillera in the Fur Trade Era." *B.C. Studies* 146 (2005): 3-35.

Websites

Archives of Manitoba – "Hudson's Bay Company Archives – Common Research Topics." Useful for historical research on the fur trade and HBC more generally, also includes more specific links, including the one to Keystone Archives Descriptive Database

- http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/common_research_topics.html

John Douglas Belshaw - *Canadian History Pre-Confederation*, "8.7 Cultural Change on the Plains"

- <https://opentextbc.ca/preconfederation/chapter/8-7-cultural-change-on-the-plains/>

Native American Netroots – "Horse-mounted Buffalo Hunting on the Northern Plains"

- <http://nativeamericannetroots.net/diary/2166>

Hudson's Bay Company Heritage - North West Company

- <http://www.hbcheritage.ca/history/acquisitions/the-north-west-company>

Hudson's Bay Company Heritage – Fort Vancouver

- <http://www.hbcheritage.ca/places/forts-posts/fort-vancouver>

Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Koyah

- http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/koyah_4E.html