

## Conquest of the Prairie West

*It is only a step from market to colony. The exploited have only to cheat, or to protest, and conquest immediately follows.*

Fernand Braudel

Before the Mounties arrived on the western prairies, evidence of European culture could be found in the log houses and huts of pioneers and fur traders that sparsely dotted the landscape. The role of these early traders and settlers did not allow them to create exotic structures nor was there a need for any unduly grand display of power. The difference between early fur trade material culture and Native culture was not great. Accordingly, expressions of power by the police when they arrived were more overtly military or paramilitary, though the hegemonic function of culture was certainly present in the red coats and military discourse of the "March West." Thus, the red coats, lances and military equipment of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) announced power: the power to act in the name of the law, to call in reinforcements and to embark on punitive expeditions. The solitary Mountie, mythologized by Anglo-Canadian culture, served as a floating signifier for those who knew how power operated. The mystery and romanticized military image of the NWMP served the function of force, but force is not the most efficient way to run a society, nor is it the cheapest. Sooner or later, new societies will seek a more efficient and cheaper means of maintaining power. Battleford provided a classic example of this process in the nineteenth-century Canadian West.

The study of social control has changed radically in recent years. Until the 1960s, the history of police forces was generally written in a narrative form that emphasized the gradual evolution of a humane system of punishment, policing and imprisonment. This process was initiated by a group of Enlightenment thinkers led by theorists like Beccarian and Bentham, along with religious men and women of conscience like the Evangelicals and Quakers who "set out to convince the political leadership of their societies that public punishments of the body like hanging, branding, whipping and even in some European countries, torture, were arbitrary, cruel and illegitimate, and that a new range of penalties, chiefly imprisonment or hard labour, could be at once humane, reformatory and punitive."<sup>1</sup> It is suggested that these changes, initiated by enlightened reformers, led to a system of social control that was more humane than in the era previous to it; history progressing from "cruelty to enlightenment."

More recent revisionist histories were influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, and they dramatically altered the study of social control:

the libertarian, populist politics of the 1960s revised historians' attitudes toward the size and intrusiveness of the modern state; the history of the prison, the school, the hospital, the asylum seemed more easily understood as a history of Leviathan than a history of reform.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of attention changed. This new perspective looked with scepticism at the projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially as they aimed to change the personalities of criminals. Institutions established and run by the state were thus viewed not as the means to “reform” and “educate” people, but rather as institutions responsible for limiting their freedom. The “Panoptic eye” became an homology for the new and modern ethic of social control in prisons where a guard situated high above in a tower could maintain surveillance over everyone in the prison. The design of the new prisons reflected an ideology which emphasized the need for society to control and reform its subjects in order for them to participate in the economic system.

In Canada, the political and social culture was imported from Europe. It shared the same ideology that produced an industrialized Europe, including the Christian values that accompanied capitalist culture. Introduced along with these cultural values were concepts of liberty and private property. The NWMP were the harbingers of a dramatically new social order in the Canadian West. They represented those who held power, a power that operated in many complex ways. “Putative power is dispersed through the social system: it is literally everywhere in the sense that the disciplinary ideology, the *savoir* which directs and legitimizes power, permeates all social groups (with the exception of the marginal and deviant), ordering the self-repression of the repressors themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

The new system was effective. The Aboriginal peoples who had to cope with the police were confronted by only the first line of power — the police who were charged with keeping public order. Behind the police were many other forms of power, such as the military who were used so successfully in 1885. The systems of social control developed by Europeans were no longer just physical and institutional, but represented cultural and psychological tactics serving the same powerful ideology.<sup>4</sup> The NWMP thus were an arm of the law which was to restrain and guide Native people (as well as the incoming white settlers) into conformity with the dominant culture and society the Mounties represented and were to disseminate.

### **New Approaches to Aboriginal History**

The concept of acculturation is used to examine the cultural confrontation between Natives and newcomers — two radically different cultures.<sup>5</sup> In the classic situation, the white trader-explorer-missionary, who is usually from a European country or empire, meets Aboriginal people. Acculturation explores how both sides change and adapt as a result of communication and through exchanges of material culture and information. This method helps us to understand, for example, how Native society changed due to the European goods it absorbed and how the colonizers adapted as a result of the survival techniques they learned from Aboriginal peoples.

Acculturation as a methodology was developed alongside the establishment of a new interdisciplinary approach to studying Native people: ethnohistory. This new discipline combined methods and approaches both from history and from anthropology in order to better understand Native society and culture. Traditionally, the discipline of history denied the validity of oral evidence and favoured written documents. Ethnographers, though sympathetic and expert in the use of oral evidence, were unfortunately not disposed to study the manner in which societies changed over time and were thus content to take a snapshot-in-time

approach to studying Native societies. Though much important knowledge was brought to light through this approach, it led to the impression that Native societies were stagnant or locked in time. History and ethnology became specialized and mutually exclusive solitudes.

History as a discipline emphasized the diachronic (examining change over time), while ethnology focussed on the synchronic (that which remains the same over time). The cross-fertilization that occurred when these two disciplines were brought together raised new kinds of evidence for consideration and allowed different perspectives to emerge for understanding First Nations. The two approaches tempered each other. While Western European history sought to chronicle the progress and dynamism of peoples and cultures that were European in origin, ethnology sought to study the static and less overtly dynamic cultures of the Aboriginal world. The discipline of history tended to use an empirical and fragmentary approach to explain and gain knowledge about the past within a Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm, while ethnology attempted to study societies as a whole, seeking to understand how the parts related to each other. Historians basically focussed on understanding their own societies by looking from the past toward the present; ethnologists looked from the present and made use of contemporary structures as they looked back to the past.

The findings of the combined discipline of ethnohistory led to new perspectives for understanding Native societies and dynamics of change within them. To combat the idea that Native plains peoples simply roamed the prairies indiscriminantly, locked in a hopeless feast-or-famine conundrum, the "seasonal cycle" method of explaining their movements was developed. This corrected the impression that they wandered in an undirected and largely purposeless manner. It drew attention to the significance of Aboriginal movement and the way in which these people relied on their understanding and knowledge of the environment: its flora, fauna and weather. The seasonal-cycle approach helped to counter the prevailing notion of European culture: that there was progress or a sense of progress to history. The seasonal-cycle framework showed instead that those cultures not driven by ideas of progress could still live full and creative lives as they moved in response to seasonal change. Native people were content to live in their environment, taking from it only what they needed. To them, there was economic security in being able to survive without having to carry or accumulate cumbersome material goods.

European standards and discourses were very damaging and unsympathetic in their descriptions of the cultural institutions of Native society. They equated living in harmony with nature as "savage" while considering the exploitation of nature as "civilized." In actuality, Natives who moved with the seasonal cycles were far from "savage" or static:

Native economies in America were not poorer, more precarious, or more miserable than their contemporary European counterparts. Indeed, recent studies of hunting and gathering societies suggest that natives of the western interior may have lived a life of relative comfort and plenty... The hunter-gatherer did not labour endlessly in quest of food. Indeed, it is apparent that when societies give up a hunt-based economy in favour of agriculture, they actually increase the per capita work-load... The hunting and gathering societies of the western interior achieved economic, political, and religious arrangements as satisfactory and as conducive to human happiness, for most members of the community, as those of any other society.<sup>6</sup>

## The Cree on the Prairies

In the late nineteenth century, there were two reasons for choosing Fort Battleford as the site of a North West Mounted Police post. First, Battleford had been chosen as the new territorial capital. The members of the Territorial Council would therefore need a police force to protect them and enforce the laws they would pass. The police were thus a necessary adjunct to the administration of the North-West Territories. Second, and perhaps most important, was the presence of a large number of Aboriginal people in the area. The Thickwood and Eagle Hills areas to the north and east respectively had traditionally been wintering places for Cree and Assiniboine, but by the late nineteenth century, the buffalo no longer migrated north of the South Saskatchewan River and could no longer be relied upon as a primary source of food and clothing. As a result, the plains tribes began to settle on reserve land promised to them in Treaty 6. They chose the land around Fort Battleford, as they were familiar with the territory and small game could still be found.

Settlement onto reserves was a major watershed for the Cree. Ahead of them lay compliance to the laws of another culture and adjustment to subsistence agriculture that was controlled by government regulations. Behind them lay a long tradition of adaptation to the forest and plains environments, the fur trade, missionaries, diseases formerly unknown, alcohol and the disappearance of the buffalo. Rapid change in a few short years contrasted with previous times when change occurred more slowly, allowing for gradual adjustment.

After more than two centuries of contact with European culture, the Aboriginal way of life still stood in stark contrast to Euro-American culture. The plains tribes, especially the Cree, had adapted to the economic changes they had first faced with the arrival of the horse, then the gun, then the traders. At its core, Native culture absorbed change on its own terms and retained beliefs and practices that enabled it to thrive on the plains. The Christian, Western European world perceived the environment as hostile and advocated a systematic harvest of the land, while the Aboriginal people lived with this environment, not against it, and adapted to it as each season allowed or demanded.

The Cree, originally located in woodland areas to the east and north of the Great Lakes, were band societies in which the ultimate unit of organization was the family. They were not tribal units under a common leader. In small groups, they moved over their territory in search of game or to collect other food. Each family unit had an appointed leader. A number of bands could come together at various seasons, but this was rare and occurred only for short periods of time.

The scarcity of fish and game made very large gatherings of band people impossible. The inability to meet in large numbers meant that they rarely went to war with neighbouring peoples. In the woods, scattered in small groups, they were a difficult target for an enemy attack. By contrast, tribal societies were composed of much larger units that stayed together for longer periods of time. On the prairies, it was difficult to hide from neighbouring tribes, making tribal cohesiveness a necessity for self-defence and creating more opportunities for military conflict than in the heavily forested woodlands. Food was also more abundant on the plains. Up to the late 1870s, large herds of buffalo still migrated into Canadian territory, providing many plains tribes with a steady food supply and facilitating the organization of larger groups.

The nature of life on the plains demanded greater organization and social control. The annual buffalo hunt, for example, required many horsemen who needed to be tightly coordinated. Such pursuits made it necessary to have a firmer political organization. In the spring, when all the Indians gathered together before the buffalo hunt, a council of men elected a chief. The use of the horse contributed to the development of a more organized political structure, as it led to a mobile society in contrast with the isolated, foot-locomoted woodland bands. Thus the plains tribes could be readily mobilized for both political and military purposes.

### **Aboriginal Cosmology**

As with the Europeans, Cree religious life was centred around the concept of one supreme being who had created the world. This was not a being who could be approached directly as with the Christian god, but could only be reached through intermediary spirits that resided in nature. Although their god was not believed to reside in any specific place or to be personalized in any way, it was nevertheless thought to have power over all things.

Cree religion expressed an affirmation of nature. The intermediary spirits could be found in birds and animals (such as the crow or bear), and other natural phenomena. Thunder, wind and sun were thought to contain the most powerful spirits. The powers of these spirits could be used by mortals if, in a vision, an image of the object appeared to the person. When this occurred, it was believed the powers of the spirit could be harnessed by the vision-seeker. The individual would then take on the name of the source of the power and be protected by the supernatural strength attributed to it. A spirit bundle might be made and carried by the person for protection or guidance. This religion affirmed the strength and power that the Natives felt resided in the world around them. They made this reverence of nature an integral part of their religious attitudes. Much of the Aboriginal art, whether tent drawings, clothing decoration, rock paintings, or on drums and other instruments, reflected a deep respect for the spiritual power of the natural world. Their sun motifs and animal paintings were the most obvious example of their worldview, which held nature, rather than humans, as sacred.

Though there were many ceremonies (both religious and otherwise), that showed this symbolic kinship with nature, the most commonly known and most central to Cree life was the Sun or Thirst Dance. By asking for spiritual strength from nature, this dance served not only as a symbolic rite of rebirth but was an opportunity for members of the tribe to earn the rite of passage into adulthood and for all those present to feel and ask for protection and power from the spirits of the natural world around them, especially the Thunderbird. One member of the band initiated the dance in order to fulfill a vow. The ceremony began when the pledgers, through rituals of song and dance, asked for the power to stage a dance, usually from the sun or thunder spirits. The pledger would engage assistants from his band to conduct the dance: they sang the songs with him and helped build the Sun Dance lodge. Traditionally, the Sun Dance lasted four days, during which time the participants fasted and abstained from sexual activity. It was believed that during these four days the spirit powers took pity on the dancers and would send rain to quench their thirst.

As the singers sang and the drums were beat, the men prepared themselves for the successful completion of their dance. Once completed, the spirits would

bless those who had participated; this, in turn, bode well for the entire tribe. Prayers were said throughout the ceremony: "The burden of all prayers was that a ceremony very dear to the powers was about to be given, that the powers help the participants complete the Sun Dance, so that mankind might be blessed."<sup>7</sup> It was a communion with nature, a request for mercy by those who lived in the continual presence of the awesome elements that confronted them on the plains. In this humility, there was a peace offering to the natural world in which the Cree would be attempting to harvest what they needed for their own survival. The participants hoped to be worthy of what they would kill during the buffalo hunt. They wanted to appease the natural world they held in respect, but from which they also took. In this sense, the Sun Dance was a symbolic gesture towards the life-giving sun and the thunder with its accompanying rains.

### **The Fur Trade**

The Aboriginals' role in the fur trade, their consequential move onto the plains, and the resulting diplomatic systems that emerged have only recently been explored by scholars. It is perhaps a telling comment on the bias of early western Canadian historians that so little has been written about the role played by the Natives in the history of the fur trade. The primary debate of more recent studies has focussed on the adaptability of the Natives to this system of trade. One side has argued that the role of the Natives changed very little and their basic institutions did not change dramatically as they traded with Europeans. It is contended that the Indians had traded among themselves long before they traded with Europeans. The other side of the argument claims that the Indians adjusted rapidly to the presence of traders and competed actively to obtain as many European goods as they could. They acted as "economic men," adapting to the marketplace as conditions allowed. The former view is put forward by A. Rotstein and E.E. Rich, while the latter is delineated by Arthur Ray and John Milloy.

According to Rotstein's argument, there was less change in Aboriginal society during the fur trade than some would believe. He states that it was the European trader who was forced to adapt to the Indians' trade practices and learn the protocol of their trade patterns.<sup>8</sup> He believes the fur trade was already imbedded in the Indian way of life prior to direct contact with Europeans, and that it was their alliances and intertribal relations that determined their actions, not their contact and trade with Europeans. Rotstein further argues that the motivating factor among the Natives was tribal and collective rather than individual. Thus, the alliance system among the Natives would be based more on collective determination of their economic activities than on individuals entering the marketplace motivated by their own desires for accumulation of material goods. Rotstein backs up his arguments by referring to accounts of missionaries, traders and explorers describing alliance systems among plains tribes. These sources are used to support the claim that elaborate diplomacy was already in place to control the territorial imperative of Natives in the North-West before the arrival of European traders. Elaborate trade ceremonies and methods of obtaining essential goods were also present before the entrenchment of fur-trade society. Indians thus adapted naturally to their role as middlemen in the fur trade, since this role fit patterns already known to them.

Rich agrees with Rotstein's basic argument, but the tone of his perspective is,

by implication, more negative toward the Indians.<sup>9</sup> Rich states that the Natives were not "economic" men like most Europeans, in that they possessed no sense of property and were not motivated by a desire to accumulate wealth. He claims the Natives were firmly entrenched in their old ways and could not change to adapt to the fur trade in the same way as Europeans. Rich suggests the Native fell into the role of middleman, then exploited it to gain full advantage over the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and other Native groups. He finds it somewhat puzzling, and considers it an indication of inferiority, that the Aboriginal did not adopt European concepts of property and acquisitiveness.

On the other side of this debate, Ray maintains the Natives were continually and actively adjusting to the economic conditions confronting them.<sup>10</sup> The fur trade was a partnership between European and Aboriginal traders, both needing each other in some way. This partnership had a wide range of consequences for both sides, as each group had to make significant adaptations during the fur-trade period. Ray disagrees with Rotstein and Rich's view that the ceremonial practices introduced by Aboriginals were an affirmation of political position; instead, he argues that ceremonial activities were simply one aspect of trading. To support this, he states that the Cree traders were free to shop around for the best bargains for their furs, and in fact frequently did. They were not simply trading to maintain and mark out territory. He points out that before the arrival of the HBC, the Cree traded along the east-west axis established by North West Company traders from Montreal, and that even when the HBC moved to the bay area the Natives chose not to trade there. Ray states that the Cree trading with the HBC during these years held an advantage and bargained from a position of power with the company. Furthermore, he shows that it was not always (or even usually) the case that Aboriginal leaders were involved in trading; rather, various individuals from each tribe conducted the trade. This point diminishes the importance that Rotstein and Rich attach to the ceremony of the trade and shows that Aboriginals would often participate in trade individually, with the intent of making the best deal they could for the European goods they sought. Ray also demonstrates how the Cree traders often played the companies against each other to obtain their commodities. This situation helped the HBC decide that it would have to move inland if it was going to obtain quality furs and remain competitive with free traders and the North West Company.

Ray's propositions show that the Cree reacted to the marketplace, not to customs or rules that their own society or culture brought to bear on them. Exchange rates set by the competition were determined by the market, not by gift rituals. For example, when the English raised their prices the Natives went to the French to obtain needed goods. Often they were willing to pay higher prices when they wanted particular products, such as the superior English knives or tobacco. By the end of the seventeenth century, the ceremonial trade practices that transpired at the outset of bartering were less frequent and the pure market trade introduced by the English had become dominant. In accommodating some points made by Rotstein, Ray agrees that the Cree did not always trade to increase wealth. He notes that, as trading relations developed, individual Natives did gain status among their own people by gathering and accumulating European goods.

The significance of this debate between Ray and Rotstein lies in the analysis of Aboriginal motivations. These motivations enabled them to preserve a good part

of the basic structure of their internal institutions, including their religious beliefs and kinship systems. These internal institutions were preserved, even though they made significant adaptations to the new economic environment necessitated by their pursuit of economic goals.

### **Post-Contact Cree Movement on the Plains**

According to historian John Milloy, three distinct phases can be identified between the first direct contact with Europeans and the end of the fur-trade era around 1870. The first period began in 1670 with the alliance between the Cree and Blackfoot situated to the west. The second phase was the period in which the Cree developed a stronger alliance with the Mandan to the south, who also supplied them with horses. Milloy labels this phase as the Horse Wars era lasting from 1810-50, a time when the Cree were increasingly in need of horses and were seeking alliances to the west. The third phase is labelled the Buffalo War period of 1850-70, when the Cree were competing with other plains Natives for the diminishing buffalo herds which had become their source of food. By the end of this last phase, the fur trade was in decline and the Cree no longer played a crucial role in its function.

In the initial period of contact, the Cree lived along the shores of Hudson Bay, north of the Ojibwa. They became the first and primary consumers of European goods in the seventeenth century and began to carry the trade of these goods to other Natives to the south and west. Their strategic position gave them control of all the major waterways that flowed into the bay. They blocked the access to Hudson Bay to all but the Assiniboine, who became allies as the Cree moved south from the bay. During these early years of the fur trade, the Cree began a two-pronged push westward: one to the northwest and another along a more southerly route. By 1760, 100 years after their first contact with Europeans on Hudson Bay, they had pushed back the Beaver tribe to the north and had reached as far west as Lesser Slave Lake. This northern Cree society grew towards a greater dependence on European goods. After an initial period of relative prosperity, these traders were extended far beyond their traditional habitat. As their dependency on the fur trade grew, they had less time to live off the rich environment they had inhabited before Europeans came to the bay. Their position was exacerbated by 1776 as the HBC moved inland, leaving their own role in the fur trade less significant. The band was still the social unit of the Cree at this time. This division could be maintained because there were few enemies to threaten it.

The other group of Cree that moved westward were those who eventually became the Plains Cree. They moved down the Saskatchewan River system, which they followed to the west. During this move, the Cree allied themselves with the Blackfoot and Mandan against their common enemy, the Dakota. The Cree traded with both of these allies, as they were among the first to obtain the coveted European guns for trade with plains tribes. The trade-in-arms to the Blackfoot was particularly intense during the years 1732-54. This period, characterized by Milloy as the wars of migration and territorial domination,<sup>11</sup> ended by the turn of the century as the inland posts of the HBC became more accessible to other Natives. Thus, the Cree were no longer needed as the suppliers of European goods. From 1680 to the 1720s, the Cree and Blackfoot lived peacefully next to each other and fought as allies against the Kootenay and Gros Ventre peoples.

## Horse Wars, 1800-1850

As the southern Cree were now less significant as middlemen in the fur trade, they began their adaptation to plains life. They became dependent on hunting buffalo for their survival, but were also suppliers of pemmican to other traders. This plains life necessitated the use of the horse, so the Cree forged an alliance with the Mandan to the south. The trade in horses had gradually moved north from the Gulf of Mexico where the Spaniards first introduced them in the seventeenth century. The Cree continued to supply the Mandan with European goods, such as kettles, axes, muskets and powder. In return, the Mandan supplied the Cree with agricultural products: corn, beans and tobacco. By the mid-nineteenth century the Cree had lost their position as primary suppliers of European goods to the Mandan, as the latter were now able to trade directly with the inland posts being established in their territories. With the Mandan trade crumbling, the Cree were forced to look elsewhere for a supply of horses. They had to make careful, rational decisions as they moved west and south in search of horses. Inevitably, they came into conflict with the horse suppliers to the south, especially the Gros Ventre. During the period from 1790 to 1810, there was much fighting on the plains as new alliances were sought. The Cree took to raiding horses from their previous allies, the Mandan. Much of this happened as a result of the move inland by the Hudson's Bay Company and the subsequent displacement of the Cree as middlemen in the fur trade.

The wars with the Gros Ventre occurred as the Cree attempted to gain more direct access to the horses being traded onto the plains by the Arapaho to the south. This could only be accomplished by taking control of territory traditionally held by the Gros Ventre. The Blackfoot, traditional allies of both the Gros Ventre and the Cree, were called upon to assist the Gros Ventre in defending their territory from the Cree. These were the same Blackfoot tribes the Cree had once helped to drive the feared Kootenay and Gros Ventre peoples across the Rockies. Guns obtained by the Blackfoot from the Cree had given them a decided edge in these conflicts.

The new allies for the Cree during this time became the Flathead Indians, who supplied them with horses. In return, the Flathead received European goods the Cree were still obtaining from the HBC. From approximately 1800 to 1850, the Cree consolidated their power on the plains but did not decentralize as the Blackfoot did. In the span of time since the company had moved inland, much had changed. The old alliances with the Mandan and Blackfoot had dissolved. Yet, with great ingenuity and an ability to adapt and forge new alliances, the Cree not only survived but prospered on the plains.

During the early nineteenth century, the Cree were able to exist in their centralized tribal way of life because they maintained many of their traditional social and cultural values. Status was still gained by common activities within the tribe and not by individual conquest or accumulation of wealth. They kept the tradition of distribution through gift giving and a "disdain for material possessions."<sup>12</sup> This was in contrast to the Blackfoot, who were growing more towards a social system based upon status through accumulation of wealth and a decentralized power structure. The gun and horse were absorbed into Cree society without drastic changes to their social structure, although some adjustment had to take place. Tribalism remained the strongest bond for the Cree during the years up to 1850. At the end of this period, they were one of the strongest tribes on the plains.

The once-powerful Blackfoot were enemies not only of the Kootenay, Gros Ventre and Crow, but now also of the Cree.

### **Buffalo Wars, 1850-1870**

The years 1850-70 were characterized by dwindling buffalo herds. The Cree blamed the Métis and whites for the decline, but did not openly clash with them since they still relied on their trade goods. The Cree partnership with the whites was no longer as useful as it had once been. The Cree made their own choices based on what was in their best interest; buffalo were most important to them in the mid-1800s.

The Cree often fought with the Blackfoot during this period. By the late 1870s, buffalo came into Cree territory less frequently but were still found regularly on Blackfoot land. The Cree therefore clashed with the Blackfoot in their quest for territory where the buffalo still roamed. In 1869, during one of the frequent battles with the Blackfoot, one of the Cree head chiefs, Maskepetoon, was killed. It was partially in revenge for his death that the Cree undertook a large campaign against the Blackfoot in 1870-71. One of the last major battles was fought along the Oldman River in present-day Alberta. The Cree lost both the battle and the larger goal of driving the Blackfoot out of buffalo territory.

In the late 1870s, the buffalo rarely came far onto the Canadian prairies and the herds were soon to be depleted even more rapidly as the hide hunters from the United States slaughtered the animals in large numbers. These hides were sold to merchants in Montana who shipped them east, where they were made into large leather belts which were used for pulleys in factory machinery at St. Louis, New York and Chicago. Buffalo leather was in great demand as it made the best belts for these purposes.

The era of this trade in buffalo hides was to be short-lived. It ended only a few years after it had begun with the Cypress Hills Massacre in 1873, when a group of American desperados killed thirty Assiniboine in the Cypress Hills.<sup>13</sup> The massacre brought out the NWMP, who established Canadian authority in the area just north of the Canadian-American border, putting an end to the forays of American hunters onto Canadian lands.

### **Decline of the Fur Trade and Buffalo Culture**

In the early 1870s there was no one the Cree could turn to for assistance but the Canadian government, which was offering to settle them on reserves in return for title to their lands. Some Natives had turned to agriculture in an attempt to alleviate starvation, but crop failure, government regulation and the elements made these attempts difficult. More frequently, the Aboriginal traders sold furs to independent American traders who had established their posts across the southern Canadian prairies. Some of these traders remained in the territory and continued their trade even after the arrival of the NWMP, but the Aboriginal hunters found fewer pelts and hides to trade with them. The Natives' options for survival were running out as Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's National Policy, with its aim of a West settled by Euro-Canadians, closed in on them.

What is clearly evident from accounts of Cree life is that they remained a functioning and vital people. They were never directly the victims of white people or

other tribes, but consciously and rationally adjusted to new circumstances. However, over the years their conditions increasingly presented them with new problems. By 1870, the Cree were as powerful as they had ever been and were in a strong position to meet any challenges put to them.<sup>14</sup> They had an enviable military and diplomatic record as they faced the Canadian state that was moving westward. In the past, they had often faced new economic and military situations and had come through each crisis: from their life in the woodlands, to the first contact with Europeans, from their adaptation to the gun and horse, to their role as middlemen in the fur trade where they traded with whites and Aboriginals alike, and finally as plains buffalo hunters. None of these changes had dramatically affected their internal social dynamic.

In the eyes of Euro-Canadians, the ironic tragedy for the Cree in the 1880s was not their new dependence on white people, but that they had not internally changed to become the materialistic, acquisitive people that would have adapted well to the capitalistic society they now had to live in. The social system that had served them so well for hundreds of years would now be restricted. "What was led into the bondage of the reserves was not the ruin of a political and social system, but rather a healthy organism which had taken root and grown strong on the plains. The fate of the Plains Cree nation followed that of the buffalo — not to death, but into a white man's pound, the reserve."<sup>15</sup> The 1870s were years of dramatic change for the Cree as well as for the white people in the West, especially with the creation of the province of Manitoba. The new political divisions and institutions were harbingers of change that many Aboriginal people had witnessed on the American frontier. These were transitional years where the Cree would move from a life based on migrating herds of buffalo to a sedentary life on reserves: when European concepts of time and landholding became dominant on the prairies and when the idea of landholding "in common" would change to land ownership based on private property.<sup>16</sup> These were also the years when the Aboriginal idea of time, which was based on a close and synchronized relationship with nature, would be lost as they moved onto reserves. There they were faced with the whites' Newtonian sense of absolute and progressing time as well as the related concept of "wasted time."<sup>17</sup>

### **The European Worldview**

The ideology of the Christian worldview brought to the plains by the European missionaries and traders stood in stark contrast to that of the plains tribes. Christian attitudes toward nature differed markedly from those of the Natives. They did not live in the same proximity to nature and did not feel the same communion with nature as the Natives did. European Christians adopted an adversarial attitude towards nature and viewed it with suspicion and fear. Nature was something to be conquered or overcome, as were their own emotional and physical desires.<sup>18</sup> The Christian worldview was person-centred and only incidentally concerned itself with living in concert with nature or its seasonal cycles. Their god was one to be feared. According to some missionaries, in order to appease this god people would need to toil on earth and prove their worth to avoid the damnation of burning for eternity in hell, a concept alien to Native religion. In Indian belief, an individual might be denied the fruits of a pursuit because spirit powers were not properly appeased, but the consequence was not the drastic punishment the Christian god was supposed to hand out.

The Natives were familiar with Christian concepts through their fur-trade contacts. The European traders did not, however, make any attempt to convert them. As missionaries began arriving, it was soon apparent that they saw it as their role to try to convert what they regarded as a "heathen savage" people to Christianity. These Christian missionaries, unlike Native religious people or shamans, had what has been described as a compulsive need to convert Natives to Christianity.<sup>19</sup> The missionaries felt threatened by the unknown.

These agents of European culture were represented by Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries. The first missionaries to the plains in the mid-eighteenth century were French Jesuits led by Father Merenerie, coming west with Pierre de La Vérendrye. Other French Oblate missionaries who arrived in the Red River area at this time included Fathers Taché and Aubert. Some of these Oblate priests, such as Father Scollen, worked among the Blackfoot in the nineteenth century. Other Catholic priests, such as Father Thibault, made frequent journeys across the prairies, spreading the Christian message. By the 1860s, the Grey Nuns had established mission schools at Lac St. Anne, Île à la Crosse, St. Albert and Athabaska. In 1888 a mission was established at St. Boniface by Father Joseph Provencher.

Anglican missionaries were also among the first to arrive in the West. Under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society, Reverend John West established a school aimed at educating Native boys in the ways of European society. Several other missionaries arrived to expand the program in the Red River area and to assist West in his mission, with additional schools being built across the prairies for similar purposes. In 1840 Henry Budd, a Cree and a Christian convert, established a mission at The Pas, and soon more schools like his were begun by other converts among the indigenous peoples. Like the Catholic missionaries, the Church of England missionaries moved westward by the 1860s into what is now Alberta.

Although they arrived later than the Catholics and Anglicans, the Methodist missionaries were no less enthusiastic in bringing the message of the Bible to the Natives. Among the Wesleyan Methodists were some of the more prolific authors who published accounts of their life on the prairies and their experiences with the Natives. The most famous were Reverends Robert Rundle, John McLean, Egerton Ryerson Young, and the renowned father and son team of George and John McDougall. John McDougall published many books describing his early experiences on the plains and perhaps more than the others he tried to understand the Natives' way of life. In spite of his many years among the plains tribes, however, he could not rid himself of the belief that the way of life of the society and culture he was promoting was superior to that of Native peoples.<sup>20</sup> McDougall, despite his attempts to overcome his biases, left the overall impression that the Natives were a feeble, backward race, and as a consequence he argued that the land should eventually be occupied by his own people, whom he believed were stronger and more industrious. The biblical injunctions that informed and directed the missionaries compelled them to reject Aboriginal culture and society. At the cornerstone stood the dictum from Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." This was the directive for the Christian "sodbuster" to break the land.

## The European Critique of Aboriginal Life

Though they had often adjusted to changing circumstances, the plains tribes still lived in close proximity to nature. The seasonal cycles and pulse of nature, not the Newtonian clock of absolute time ticking by the second, dictated their movements. These contrasting concepts of time made it easy for the Europeans to criticize what appeared to them as laziness, since their unit for measuring the time by which tasks were to be accomplished, the "second," was much smaller than that of the Natives. The Europeans seemed to race against time in order to harvest what they saw as the vast potential for power around them.

There were other characteristics of Aboriginal society that made Victorian Canadians critical of Native life. The Aboriginals' apparently casual attitude towards private property was quite alien to the European, whose idea of worth was based upon the concept of accumulation of individual wealth. The European concept of private property eventually destroyed the Natives' claims to the use of the western prairie, and it was the consequences of implementing this idea that ultimately would erode the Aboriginal way of life. The concept of property title for land ownership was alien to Native peoples. The movement of Natives across the plains without an easily perceptible purpose was seen as evidence of a shiftless people, ill-equipped by religion and unprepared by culture to recognize the value of property ownership. Victorians saw private property as a necessary requisite in establishing a habit of work and the desire to strive for improvement. Hunting was not a respected pursuit to the Victorian frame of mind unless as a sport or pastime. Such a lifestyle, based on a feast-or-famine cycle, was thought to be "improvident" and evidence that the Aboriginal, whose economy was based on hunting, was incapable of careful planning for the future. To live so close to nature and be virtually at its mercy was an indication of a "primitive" society; not to accumulate a surplus proved a lack of mastery over nature.

By the 1880s, as the Natives became more destitute and dependent upon the whites, many Canadians believed they had been proven right. To them, the Natives' inability to make the land fruitful by settling rather than wandering in pursuit of game was evidence of a people that did not live correctly. Indeed, their own way of life seemed to flourish next to that of the Native.

Attitudes toward "land use" changed on the prairies during the 1870s and 1880s. The transition (some would say the progression) went from the enjoyment of land in common (that is, to be used by all) to "open access," where land is claimed, but can still be used by others, to entrenchment of land held legally as private property. Prior to the systematic settlement of the prairies, Native society functioned on and perhaps survived through communal cooperation. Natives did not believe that anyone had sole rights to resources: "game was the common property of all, and everyone had a chance to share in this gift of nature."<sup>21</sup>

When passing through occupied Aboriginal territory, individuals were free to take or use any resources needed, whether that be game, water or fuel. The plains tribes were "a people who had no notion of exclusive and permanent property rights in land or the other gifts of the Great Spirit."<sup>22</sup> Those with a wealth of resources in band or tribal society would share with those less fortunate; it was considered to be a matter of pride and an indication of status to be able to give to those who were in need.

The plains tribes were in fact living amid wealth, and by the nature of their culture did not need to be conspicuous consumers. Their environment was rich with resources: wood, water, forage, game, fish, berries, honey, wild rice, clothing, housing, weapons, implements, toys and thread. However, in order to have access to all this, a great freedom of movement was required. Farming, which entailed a more sedentary life, was only incidental to plains consumption, and agricultural products were usually obtained by trade. The tribes thus moved with the seasons as they knew the migrations and cycles of plains wildlife.

Most obviously disruptive to this lifestyle was the disappearance of the buffalo herds, which led to a greater dependence on other food sources and increased agriculture. Their movements were not only restricted by his development, but by the increasing settlement of the plains. At first, through the 1870s, those tribes who had not yet signed a treaty protested against white settlers and interlopers who simply occupied territory and gave nothing back in return. It is not clear if they understood the settlers were actually claiming the land. "[E]mphasis was on the use of the lands — indeed, it seems probable that the Indians thought of the problem as that of the right to *use* their lands ... [t]he outright *sale* of those lands was a concept entirely unfamiliar to them."<sup>23</sup>

Gradually, more of their resources such as wood for fuel and game were not only being depleted, but exploited. Several American companies began fishing in Lake Winnipeg, exporting the catch back to Detroit where demand was high. Throughout Whoop-Up Country, the buffalo were being shot in disturbingly large numbers for leather-machine-belt production. At the time, buffalo leather was the best material available for belts used in factories of the rapidly growing industries of eastern cities like St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. By the late 1870s, only a few major buffalo hunts were being reported, the last one occurring on Canadian soil in 1879. As a result, the plains tribes were without the staple they depended upon for survival. As land was used up and movement restricted or no longer of any purpose, their options diminished:

The old balance between a limited human use of the gifts of nature held as common property by each tribe and natural regeneration of those gifts was finally destroyed when they were thrown open to all comers including those intent on commercial exploitation. The disappearance of the buffalo was a classic instance of the "tragedy of the commons," when a common-property resource was transferred into an open-access resource.<sup>24</sup>

Increased settlement occurred almost simultaneously throughout the 1880s. Resources such as hay and wood were now pursued and harvested as never before. Even the open-access system was being eroded as "private property" was increasingly being claimed and occupied. In a sense, the loss of the buffalo overshadowed the disastrous "impact on the native peoples of the new order based on private ownership of all natural resources."<sup>25</sup> As plains tribes began to claim and settle on their reserves, they were perhaps unaware that they would no longer be allowed the free movement they had once enjoyed over the vast plains. Now the real significance of the reserves became apparent. Before the 1870s the society was relatively egalitarian,

in which all had access to common riches provided by nature, and [one] in which, if disparities in skill, strength, and luck gave some more wealth than others, the difference had been to a considerable extent offset by sharing by the more

fortunate of their material means with those in need, in accordance with the strong native tradition. Now they were shouldered aside by wealth-accumulating newcomers, sinking to the lowest position in an unfamiliar order characterized by wide disparities in economic and social status.<sup>26</sup>

### The Treaty Process

The treaties were a last attempt to protect the resources the Cree used and shared with others. The treaties restricted their way of life but they believed they could move on the plains as they always had. Their protest against regulations that attempted to prevent their movement was perhaps best expressed in 1885, when they saw the treaties being used to isolate them. Big Bear and his followers were among the last to have any hope that the new order could be resisted. With the common land gone, the Natives had little choice but to move onto reserves.

The treaties signed in the Canadian West between the government and the plains tribes followed from British practice and were similar to the American tradition of settling claims of dispute. Negotiated settlement was usually preferable. It is generally agreed that the treaties were negotiated and not imposed, but whether they were negotiated between equals remains to be determined and is presently a point of contention among scholars. Each side had its own end in mind. The Natives wanted two goals realized: to ensure the physical and cultural survival of their people, and to improve their material position. In most cases, it was expected this would be achieved through a change in lifestyle from the plains buffalo culture to the agricultural life once Natives were relocated on the reserves.

Before 1830, the British government policy was to keep the Natives content so they would not join in alliances with the Americans. To achieve this, presents were given in an effort to keep these Natives loyal; however, after the 1830s, the motives of the colonial and imperial governments changed. Increasingly, the efforts of the government and its agents focussed on "civilizing" the Natives. Although it was an altruistic goal which was in the best interests of the Natives, it was ultimately generated out of self-interest.

By the 1870s, the desire was to remove the tribes as an obstacle to settlement. Large numbers of hungry and unpredictable Indians were seen as a hindrance to the massive prairie immigration envisaged by Ottawa. The attitude at the time was that the Natives would be much more controllable on reserves. Under the administration of a government department, they could be socially and economically controlled, and scrutinized and channelled through regulation into areas of economic enterprises agreeable to the authorities. It was hoped that over time, when "civilized," the Natives could be absorbed into the society being ushered onto the plains.

As was the case elsewhere, immigrants drove the indigenous people back, sometimes using them as labour when needed. Then, as immigration increased, their labour was no longer needed and they were moved out of the way onto reserves.<sup>27</sup> The government encouraged immigration to the West, and, as subsequent events were to show, it was far more interested in obtaining Aboriginal lands than it was with assisting these Native prairie dwellers to a new economic livelihood.

There is evidence in all the numbered treaties in the West that the Natives were willing and in some cases anxious to adapt to a new way of life. Most understood the inevitability of losing their former lifestyle and negotiated hard to wrestle what they could from the commissioners who bargained with them. Of scholars who have written about the treaties, only George Stanley argues that they were not really negotiated.<sup>28</sup> He suggests that the Indians were only able to accept or reject what was presented to them and were unable to change or negotiate terms. He states that the Natives did not understand what was happening and had a different interpretation of what the land-ownership clauses of the treaties meant. While the latter point might be conceded, Stanley's position generally implies that the Natives were not capable of bargaining for their own interests. There is considerable evidence to the contrary, as each treaty in its own way reflects different concerns and terms. While starving tribes who had lost their way of life can hardly be seen to be negotiating as equals, it cannot be assumed they did not negotiate at all. The evidence, especially for Treaties 3 and 6, indicates they were astute bargainers getting what they could from an otherwise difficult situation.

In the mid-1860s, the Canadian government began negotiations with Natives in the Fort Francis-Rainy River area, a place referred to as the North-West Angle of Lake of the Woods.<sup>29</sup> The treaty signings proceeded through Manitoba and into the North-West. At Treaty 6, signed at Forts Pitt and Carlton, all of the Natives bargained hard for better terms and made every effort short of not signing. They did this even though they had been presented with an ultimatum by Lieutenant Governor Morris: there would be little change to the treaty as it was being offered, and the Natives could take it or leave it. Though in a difficult position, the Natives were determined to bargain hard. They knew what they wanted and would not easily give up the 121,000 square miles under negotiation.

At Treaty 6, after many impassioned speeches by the major leaders of the Wood and Plains Cree tribes and many days of bargaining, the chiefs came to an agreement with the government officials. While maintaining the major features of the previous numbered treaties, they won three new concessions. First was a clause to assist the Natives in case of famine and pestilence; second, a medicine chest was to be given under the treaty and kept by the Indian agent; third, the Natives were to receive extra provisions to assist them in crop cultivation for the first three years of the treaty. They also got a greater number of cattle and agricultural implements than had been negotiated in other treaties.

Treaty 6 shows that the Cree wanted to make the transition to an agricultural way of life and bargained as hard as they could for provisions that would allow them to do so. The government may have been forced to give some concessions to the Cree, who were perceived to be among the most volatile and potentially violent of the plains tribes. The government was also anxious to have the agriculturally rich plains of the southern grain belt opened for settlers.

With the treaties for the plains tribes signed by the 1880s, attention turned to administration. Many of the Aboriginal signatories were anxious to adopt a new livelihood, but the government would need to live up to its part of the treaty by assisting in this transition. As historian Sarah Carter has argued, the Cree leadership was persistent in demanding assistance towards establishing agricultural economies and was equally persistent in reminding the government of its promises after the treaty was signed.<sup>30</sup>

By this time, Edgar Dewdney had replaced David Laird as Indian commissioner. Dewdney was faced with formidable challenges in the 1880s. He would need to reorganize his department to facilitate the agricultural society the government wanted the Natives to adopt. He would also have to establish a policy for the distribution of relief, especially in Treaty 6 where a particular provision had been made for such a circumstance.

The Aboriginal position had weakened by the 1880s. While at the start of the negotiations they had only wanted to give up a small part of their lands (in Treaty 1 they wanted two-thirds of Manitoba), by the time Treaty 7 was made, there was less and less territory granted to them by the formula the government used to determine the size of reserves. Indeed, it remains unclear whether the government officials ever explained what the reserve system would be like to the chiefs present at Treaties 6 and 7. Most chiefs at Treaties 6 and 7 thought they had agreed to share the land in return for annuities, education, medical and famine assistance, as well as a commitment to establish ranching and farm economies. The Natives were still left with the understanding that they were free to hunt and fish where they saw fit and were not restricted by the boundaries of their reserves. Big Bear was still demanding hunting privileges into the 1880s, but the detailed position of the government on land surrender had not been made clear to the Natives. These provisions were perhaps deliberately kept vague, possibly to avoid a serious point of contention during the negotiations. In spite of this, it was clear that the Natives had little alternative. They did not want war; indeed, they were not united enough to provide a front against the threatened settlement of their land, and the military presence at the treaty negotiations showed them that any resistance would be met by force. Most of the tribes preferred to settle on the Canadian side of the border and were no doubt lured by the attraction of the initial payment the government offered. If they did not sign, they knew they would be left with nothing. In the final analysis of the treaty process, they did more than merely sign to share land. Through their negotiations they were hoping to establish themselves with a new economy, and they committed the government to assist them in their transition to an agricultural society. Whether that society was to be merely for subsistence or one that would participate fully in the market economy of the grain trade along with other settlers was a question yet to be answered.