

## INTRODUCTION

### On the Name “Beaver Hills”



**T**he Beaver Hills rise subtly out of a hospitable and moist mixed-farming region identified with the Aspen Parkland, a web of grasslands and trees running in a broad swath from south-central Manitoba towards Edmonton. Trees characteristic of this region include the Trembling Aspen and the Balsam Poplar, along with willows. Manitoba Maple and Burr Oak appear in the eastern portions of the range south of the Qu’Appelle River. A variety of other species are found, some associated with the Boreal Forest to the north and others with more southerly climes that favour deciduous growth. Thus, in the Beaver Hills one can find the Paper Birch, White and Black Spruce and Tamarack.

This Aspen Parkland belt is one of the distinctive Canadian landscapes, for many centuries providing favoured wintering areas for the great herds of bison. The groves of trees were a source of shelter from the bitter prairie winds while much-needed grass could also be found for winter forage. It is a genuinely transitional type of landscape, embodying elements of the somewhat more uniform features which lie to the north and south of the belt.<sup>1</sup> These diverse qualities have made the uplands an important place of resort for many generations of Native peoples.



**Aspen Parkland Belt, 1915** The Aspen Parkland in Western Canada, shown in mottled pattern, runs in a northwest direction from the Red River Valley of Manitoba, across Saskatchewan and into central Alberta where it then follows a line south along the edge of the foothills.

Representations of these gentle hills have appeared in European cartography since the mid-eighteenth century. On a map prepared in 1760 under the sponsorship of Moses Norton, Chief Factor for the Hudson's Bay Company at Churchill Fort, what is clearly the North Saskatchewan River is identified as the Beaver River. The map shows "Beaver Mount" from which there is a trail route described as "Ye track to Henday's tent." The chart was, Norton claimed, "Laid Down on Ind'n Inform'n" gathered no doubt with the assistance of Attickasish, "that trusty leader" who had conducted Anthony Henday in his Journey inland to the Earchithinues country in 1754–55.<sup>2</sup> The identification of "Beaver Mount" is probably an early intimation of the Rocky Mountains, the presumed source of the Saskatchewan River. On Norton's map, however, only the presence of a river flowing from this western quarter was known, for "ye river Kish-stock-ewen" is misconceived and appears on his chart as the river flowing east in to Baker Lake, far to the

north. By 1774, however, a map produced by Andrew Graham demonstrated a fairly modern understanding of the course of the Saskatchewan River.<sup>3</sup>

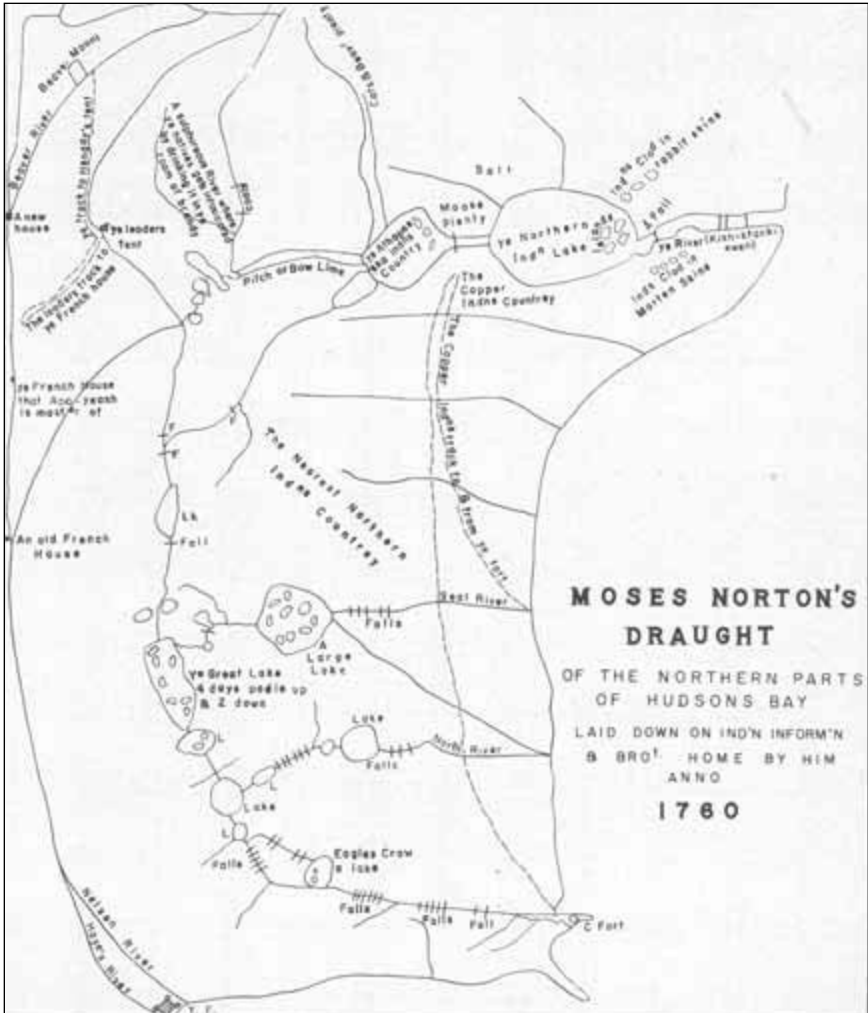
In 1793, Hudson's Bay Company cartographer and explorer Peter Fidler made rough reference sketches of the Beaver Hills on a number of occasions. Beaver Hills Lake appears prominently on David Thompson's great final map of western North America of 1814. Thompson remarked upon the hills, along with their currency in Native parlance, indicating that they were an area of resort amongst several of the major tribes, especially the Cree and Sarcee.<sup>4</sup> For the Cree the hills were known as the *a-misk-wa-chi*, which captures the notion of a place rich in beaver. Among the Stoney they were called the *chaba bei*. To the Blackfoot they were the *kaghghik-stak-etomo*. Beaver Hills Lake was called by the Blackfoot the "*Kakghikstakiskway* – the place where the beaver cut the wood."<sup>5</sup>

John Palliser's British-sponsored scientific expedition of the late 1850s entered the hills from the eastern side. On the published maps accompanying Palliser's Report, the hills appear a little more boldly than today's atlas makers would probably render them. The hills had registered on Palliser's men with some force. In late 1857, James Hector's segment of the party, moving westerly and south of the North Saskatchewan River, "soon came in sight of the Beaver Hills, a low blue line to the S.W. of us, evidently thickly wooded." About a year later Hector gave a more detailed account of his impression of the land on the eastern edge of the hills through to the western side:

I crossed the Egg Hills which are 300 feet above the plain and to the south-west of which lies a large lake of the same name. Its margins are very swampy, and it was swarming with ducks, geese, swans, and other wild fowl at this season. From the north end of the lake we struck through dense poplar thickets, which continue all the way to the northwest angle of the Beaver Hills, where we again fell on the Edmonton Track.

About the possibilities inherent in this area, Hector stated: "I was much struck with the admirable pasture which is to be found

even at this season all over this extensive tract of country, and of that kind which is most valuable for the support of animals during the winter." The poplar thickets "affording shelter surround and enclose



**Moses Norton's Draught of the Northern Parts of Hudson's Bay (1760)**

This Hudson's Bay Company map was compiled on the basis of reports from other traders and guides. Redrawn in this version by Richard Ruggles, it identifies, very imperfectly, some of the main features of Western Canada and the Rocky Mountain barrier in the vicinity of the source of the Saskatchewan River.

limited prairies that yield a rich growth of vetches and nutritious grass of sufficient growth to bear up the snow and keep it loose, so that horses and cattle can scrape their food from under it at least until the later spring months, when in some winters, the crust might be a serious obstacle." Hector noted spots "where there is a deep rich soil admirably adapted to agriculture" and which are "to be found in every direction."<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-1880s, the ubiquitous Joseph B. Tyrrell of the Geological Survey of Canada remarked upon the hills which he found lying east of the Calgary-Edmonton Trail: "there is apparently high and thickly wooded country which goes by the name of Amisk-wachi or Beaver Hills." Of this country "little could be learned even among those who were living in the immediate vicinity, and it has been left as a hunting ground for the Indians who yearly kill a large number of moose in the deep recesses of its forests." Having gained some firsthand acquaintance of the terrain, he remarked upon their "most striking feature" which was "the absence of the rough hill character which this name would lead one to expect." In fact, the "country is found to be simply low ridges or sandy knobs, often thickly covered with large balsam, poplar and spruce separated by valleys drained by numerous small streams." The hills were apparently well named, for "these streams have everywhere been dammed back by beaver giving rise to extensive meadows." Some of these were "impassable marshes" but others where beaver dams had been broken down "are again drained by the creeks and form beautiful and wide alluvial tracts covered in long grass" sufficient to provide hay for "large herds of cattle and horses."<sup>7</sup>

A few years later, some of the first Irish settlers at Deville, near Hastings Lake, confirmed the presence of Native hunting grounds of both ancient and recent vintage. Stone tools, arrowheads and other projectile points, as well as "pemmican balls" were regularly turned up in the new fields.<sup>8</sup> A formal beginning on the ethnology of the area was commenced in 1892 by that rambling and literate veteran of the Hudson's Bay Company, Isaac Cowie. At the request of the eminent

scholar, Franz Boas, he saw to the collecting and safekeeping of a substantial amount of Cree artifacts drawn mainly from the Bear Hills area of the Battle River Valley, near Wetaskiwin.<sup>9</sup>

Some 35 years after Tyrrell's observations, Alex McCauley, the Mayor of Tofield, gave an address in which he recalled the hills in earlier times:

The large lake at our door was called Beaverhills Lake and the country for over twenty miles west of this lake was called the Beaver Hills, owing to the large number of beaver being found here. Amisk Creek, a few miles east of Town was given its name for the same reason, "Amisk" being the Cree word for



**Isaac Cowie (1848-1917)** This veteran Hudson's Bay Company trader had a literary bent and an interest in Native cultures. He made a collection of Cree artifacts and material culture items from central Alberta for the American anthropologist, Franz Boas. The materials are now in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

beaver. Like the evergreen island you can see from Cooking Lake Station, these hills were covered with jackpine, spruce and tamarac, and the depressions between the hills with water. In this forest were to be found buffalo, bear, moose, deer, as well as beaver and on the lake swam geese, ducks, pelicans and all kinds of waterfowl by the thousands. During the first part of the nineties fire destroyed this great forest.<sup>10</sup>

Over the years there have been many references to the hills, to their reputation as a traditional hunting ground for beaver, and as a well-watered haven for birds and wildlife. While the place name has persisted, Mayor McCauley's testimony reinforced a tradition of commentary which began around the turn of the century. This body of opinion suggested that the hills had undergone radical changes in the early settlement period, particularly through the agency of fire. This tradition was still alive in the 1960s when questions concerning the ideal character of the hills became points of departure for naturalists and parks and lands administrators then seeking to develop a more coherent and reasonable policy for human use of the hills. "If it could only talk, what stories Beaverhills Lake could tell!" exclaimed a local historian at Tofield.<sup>11</sup> The following chapters will attempt to relate some of those stories and to see the hills when they were part of more distant theatres of human action.