



Exchanging What We Had for What We Want

The Fur Trade Era in the Canadian West

THE TRANSFORMATION OF the Canadian West from a wilderness to an outpost of European culture was as much commercially as politically motivated. It is no accident that corporate interest was sewn into the very fabric of the history of the Canadian West and into the process through which our national parks system came into existence.

The corporation as we know it today was a product of a new wave of thinking that swept Europe in the sixteenth century. Before the notion of limited liability – which is the foundation of the corporate ideal – debt was held to be trans-generational. Quite simply, the debts of one generation were passed on to direct descendants in the next, which severely restricted the amount of risk that merchants were prepared to take in development of their businesses.

The discovery of the New World radically altered the degree of risk required to take full advantage of the opportunity to profitably exploit fabulous new resources and markets. Fortunes rode on precious cargoes that were all too often lost in shipwrecks or to the enterprise of pirates and thieves. It soon became clear that the old debt system was not adequate to the opportunity that was emerging in an increasingly global marketplace. Early state-chartered corporations were created to

underwrite the liability of shareholders in bold new trading endeavours in the New World.

On May 2, 1670, during the reign of Charles II, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was incorporated by Royal Charter to trade in those regions of North America draining into Hudson Bay. Though it took more than a century, the Hudson's Bay Company and its rivals gradually advanced westward across the seemingly limitless continent toward the Rocky Mountains. The Bay's influence on the lands and peoples of the West would go far beyond the mere harvesting of furs. Aboriginal cultures would be utterly transformed by the desire to trade.

The corporate ideal proved enormously successful. Granted access by various governments to vast tracts of the freshly colonized America, the corporation set out to profit from the expanding geography of the New World. In so doing, corporations reshaped the history and culture of every place they touched.

At the time of European contact, the tools and implements North Americans possessed were principally made of flint, stone or bone. The people of this continent instantly recognized the advantages of European iron tools and woven goods. All they had in quantity to be traded for axes, pots, blankets, guns, powder and shot were the skins of the abundant animals around them. In exchange for the goods they so desired, Native peoples entered into a market economy that yanked them, often in a single generation, from the Stone Age into the Iron Age. The impact on their lives was profound. In the end the fur trade would leave many Native peoples without a means to earn a living and without a way to return to their pre-contact lifeways. In the opinion of many historians, it was not the land hunger, political greed, disease or rum that destroyed many of the Native peoples of the West. As Wallace Stegner pointed out, it was iron and steel, guns, needles, and woollen cloth that altered Native way of life, the things "that once possessed could not be done without."¹ Native culture was not all that was altered irrevocably by the fur trade. The impact on the ecosystems of the North American continent was catastrophic.

It is estimated that there were between 60 and 400 million beaver in North America at the time of European contact. (The figure of 60 million, calculated by naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, seems more likely.)² Seventeenth-century fashion was not as fickle as it is today. The beaver hat was the rage for 200 years. While a continent was explored in search of it, hundreds of Native peoples came under the spell of the



ATHABASCA FALLS

Not far downstream from where the Sunwapta and Athabasca rivers meet, the entire flow of the Athabasca River tumbles over a wall into a canyon so narrow the river has to change shape to pass through it. When the river is in spring flood, the roar of the falls can be heard kilometres away.

Photograph by R.W. Sandford.

European trade system. The beaver ultimately became the symbol of our nation as well as our national park system.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the beaver is also a symbol of the power of self-generation of habitat, biodiversity and natural systems of water purification. Though they are hardly threatened, beaver populations are likely only a fraction of what they were in Canada two centuries ago. Much of the wetland they occupied has been drained and altered. No one in this country knows what kind of impact the virtual elimination of the beaver has had on the water resources and aquatic ecosystems of this country. All we know is that the West today bears little resemblance to what existed before the fur trade.

The fur trade had an obvious impact on wildlife populations and on natural ecosystems throughout the continent. While hardly anywhere in the West was not in some way affected by the fur trade, the area within what is now the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks World Heritage Site most associated with it is Jasper National Park. If what happened at Jasper House is any indication, its impact on wildlife populations must have been stupendous.

In Jasper the Native prehistory is far more extensive than most residents suspect. The park alone has 474 historic sites, of which 221 are



PORTRAIT OF DAVID THOMPSON

Admirers see David Thompson exalted as a model of what a fur trader should be: understanding of his customers and partners, the First Nation's peoples; phenomenal in physical endurance, covering more than 90,000 km (55,000 mi.) in his travels; and pious, sober, and faithful. Detractors see a different man: a man who was disloyal to employers, bore grudges, and shaved the truth in his narrative of his adventures. Everyone, however, even detractors, agree that Thompson was the greatest North American land geographer of his time. There is no likeness of David Thompson in existence. This remarkable painting by Alice Salties Marshall of Canmore was pieced together from descriptions of Thompson offered in the journals and accounts of those who knew him.

Photograph courtesy of the artist.

prehistoric dwelling sites. We now know that the main ranges of the Rocky Mountains were of marginal ecological and cultural importance to the Native peoples of the regions. Native use of the area during the period of early European contact was seasonal. The great majority preferred to live and hunt in areas outside the mountains with more game and shorter winters. While in the Rockies, however, they hunted wood and plains bison, woodland caribou, moose, mule deer and the ever-popular big-horn sheep. They also fished and hunted waterfowl when available.

To Native peoples the mountains were not barriers as they were to early Europeans. The highest peaks of the Great Divide were permeated with passes used regularly by Native peoples for hundreds of years before the arrival of the first Europeans. Through pre-history the major route through the mountains of what is now Jasper National Park was Yellowhead Pass. With the advent of fur traders, however, far more travellers used Athabasca Pass, which connected to the Columbia. The man responsible for both the trade and the change of route was map-maker and surveyor David Thompson. To understand the impact of the fur trade on the West, it is important to understand the period in which David Thompson lived.

Thompson was born poor in Westminster, England on April 30, 1770. At 14, he became indentured to the Hudson's Bay Company and, in 1784, found himself aboard the *Prince Rupert* bound for Hudson Bay. Of a largely independent nature, Thompson disliked his job as post clerk and soon used his mathematical skills to begin work on behalf of the HBC in mapping and surveying. During this time, however, it became clear there would be limited opportunity in these fields, especially compared with what was being offered by the North West Company (NWC), the Hudson's Bay Company's only serious rival.

In 1797, armed with a promise from the NWC that he would be able to explore and map to his heart's content, David Thompson left the venerable HBC. While working with the Nor'Westers, Thompson was encouraged to explore new passes across the Rockies in a quest to secure the lucrative furs said to exist on the upper reaches of the Columbia River.

The first major pass across the Rockies that Thompson explored was near the headwaters of the North Saskatchewan River. By following the

west fork of this river with a band of Kootenays in 1807, David Thompson was able to find his way over what is now called Howse Pass to the Columbia, and establish successful inter-montane trade with Native peoples in the interior of British Columbia. The fierce Peigan, or Pikani as they called themselves, were not excited about the establishment of trade and the selling of guns to their hereditary enemies, the Kootenays. They blockaded Howse Pass and threatened to take Thompson's life should he attempt further trade with their enemies.

In the winter of 1806-1807, the American Fur Company under John Jacob Astor conceived a plan to capture all the trade at the mouth of the Columbia and to deliver the entire unclaimed region to President Jefferson. When Astor invited the North West Company to join, they declined. They had their own ideas about the future of the West coast of British North America, which did not include the Americans.

In July of 1810, the NWC instructed Thompson to cross Howse Pass to the mouth of the Columbia before American Fur Company could establish a post there. When they presented him with a parcel of tiny British flags that he was instructed to give to every chief and to plant on the fork of every major river, Thompson recognized that his was more than just a trade mission.

When men sent to bolster Thompson's party reached the traditional route up the North Saskatchewan, they were confounded to find their way blocked by four tipis of hostile Peigans. After discovering that Thompson was waiting for them on the Brazeau River, they eluded the Peigan, joined their leader and began the difficult march north to the next pass they might cross to reach the Columbia. Due to delays in travelling through the mountainous terrain, Thompson and his twenty-four men did not reach the Athabasca River until December of 1810.

It is often claimed that David Thompson was the first European to visit the Athabasca Valley. But even Thompson noted that there were others in the valley when he visited in 1810, for he passed a hunter's cabin on an island in Brule Lake. It has also been said that the Athabasca River Valley was a desirable route for Thompson and the fur trade, but it was not. Even before departing for Athabasca Pass in the fall of 1810, Thompson noted that the use of a northern pass "would place us in great safety [from the Peigan], but would be attended by great inconvenience, fatigue, suffering and privation."³ He was not wrong. As Thompson and his men approached the pass, the cold of the January peaks chilled their bones. One of the Native persons accompanying the expedition argued that the pass was the known haunt of the mammoth. Though they

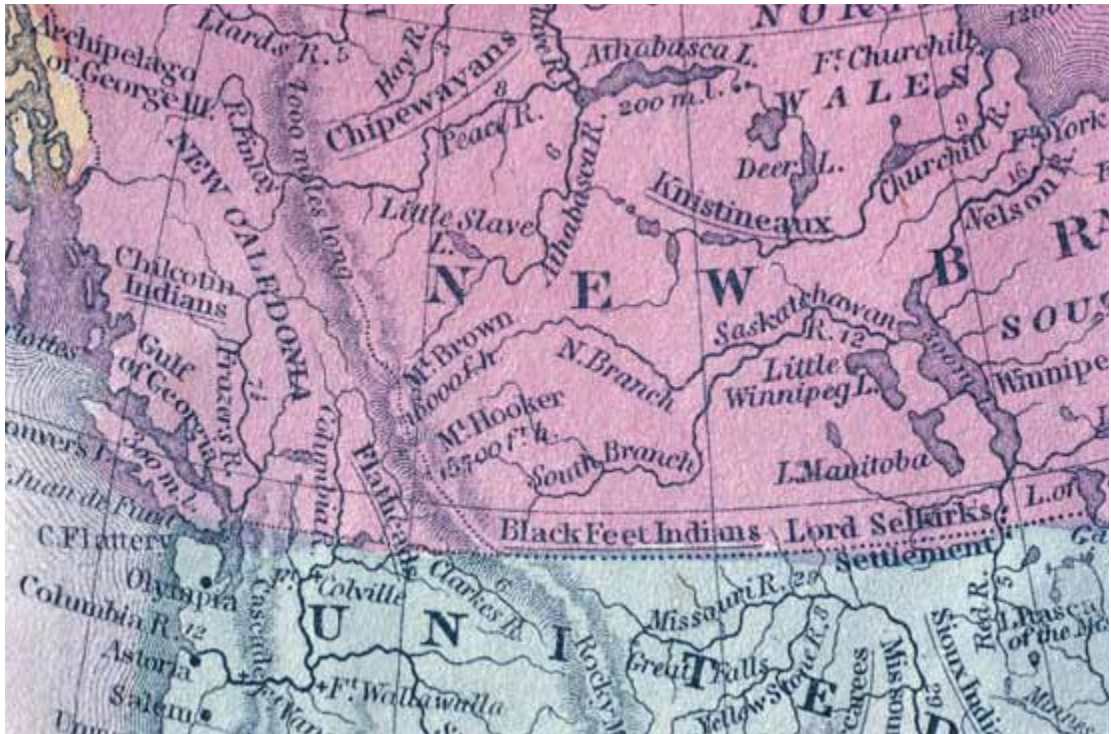
found no evidence of the creature, all were in great fear. At the summit of the pass, Thompson wondered what would happen next. A new world lay before them, unknown and unnamed. With his men ready to desert, Thompson wondered if he could get to the mouth of the Columbia in time to head off the Americans. They did indeed but the issue of the future of the Columbia quickly became a larger geopolitical issue between Britain and the United States.

After his exploration of Athabasca Pass in January of 1811, Thompson established it as part of Canada's first national highway to the west coast. Since Thompson was only passing through, he left William Henry behind to establish Henry House. Later, in 1813, the NWC built a post on the northwest shore of Brule Lake in the Athabasca Valley. It was one of the loneliest and most remote posts in the entire fur trade system. It appears that the first trader stationed there permanently was Francois Decoigne. Early travellers through the area noticed that Decoigne's primary role was not the trading of furs but the maintenance of the house as a provisioning depot serving the needs of brigades returning to and from the Columbia. It was only open in spring and fall. In summer and winter, the trader usually repaired to more comfortable and less remote Fort Edmonton.

When Ross Cox crossed Athabasca Pass in 1817, Decoigne's remote cabin was named Jasper House, after Jasper Hawes, the factor who now occupied the post. In 1824, three years after the amalgamation of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, governor George Simpson of the HBC concluded that there was enough work at the post to require the services of an additional clerk.

In 1830, Michael Klyne rebuilt the dilapidated Jasper House at a new site further up the Athabasca River, near the point where it becomes Jasper Lake. In 1846, the artist Paul Kane described Jasper House, which consisted of

only of three miserable log huts. The dwelling-house is composed of two rooms, of about fourteen or fifteen feet square each. One of them is used by all comers and goers: Indians, voyageurs, and traders, men, women, and children being huddled together indiscriminately; the other room being devoted to the exclusive occupation of Colin Fraser and his family, consisting of a Cree squaw, and nine interesting half-breed children. One of the other huts is used for storing provisions in, when they can get any, and the other I should have thought a dog-kennel had I seen many of the canine species about. This post is kept up only for the purposes of supplying horses to parties crossing the mountains.⁴



MOUNT HOOKER AND MOUNT BROWN

Botanist David Douglas returned to England in 1827 to report Himalayan-sized mountains in the Canadian West. Soon, Mount Hooker and Mount Brown began to be represented on maps as being among the ten highest peaks on the continent. The mystery of the height of these mountains was not solved until Toronto geologist Professor Arthur Philemon Coleman visited Athabasca Pass in 1893. This story is well told in a novel written by Jerry Auld called *Hooker & Brown*, which was published by Brindle and Glass in 2009. This image is from a map from the late nineteenth century. From the collection of R.W. Sandford.

Jasper House in its various incarnations had a profound impact on wildlife in the Athabasca Valley. Prolonged hunting pressure associated with the need to supply food for Jasper House traders, their families, and passing brigades had reduced bighorn sheep and moose populations. Father De Smet’s account of his visit to Jasper House, also in 1846, gives us an idea of the nature of the problem. He observed that during twenty-six days, Jasper House hunters killed twelve moose, two caribou, thirty bighorn sheep, two porcupines, 210 hares, a beaver, two muskrats, twenty-four geese, 115 ducks, twenty-one pheasants, a snipe, an eagle, an owl, thirty to fifty whitefish a day, and twenty trout. It is not surprising that a few years later the game was gone and the Hudson’s Bay Company had to prohibit freemen from hunting within 50 kilometres of Jasper House. But the reduction of wildlife populations by hunting was insignificant compared to the impact of the fur trade itself.

In a good year, North America exported to Europe the pelts of 300,000 beavers; 50,000 wolves; 30,000 bears; 22,000 otters; 750,000 raccoons; 40,000 lynx; 50,000 to 100,000 pine martens; and 250,000 foxes. For decades this was a normal annual take, during the heyday of the trade. By 1700, the beaver was gone from the east coast of the United

States. While efforts to sustain beaver populations in Canada kept numbers at harvestable levels, at least for a time, the thirst for more and more furs drove traders farther and farther west, with predictable results.

EARLY RECOGNITION OF CONTEMPORARY IMPACTS

ONE OF THE FIRST to recognize contemporary human impacts on extinction rates was William T. Hornaday, who voiced concerns about the future of the grizzly bear early in the twentieth century. As the Director of the New York Zoological Park, Hornaday travelled extensively in North America and abroad. In 1913, he was home long enough to publish *Our Vanishing Wildlife*, a book in which he reported that, except within nature reserves, there was no place on Earth where wildlife was disappearing faster than in North America. Hornaday was appalled at the evidence in both Canada and the United States that, in every state and province, proved that “the existing legal system for the preservation of wild life is fatally defective.” He went on to claim that the carnage taking place early in the twentieth century was greater than what had occurred during the 1870s when, he maintains, nearly sixty million buffalo and hundreds of thousands of antelope, deer, elk, bears and wolves were slaughtered on the Great Plains.⁵ But the diminishment of wildlife populations was just one of many changes taking place in the mountain West. Ecosystems were in visible decline, but even more hard hit were the cultures depending upon them for subsistence.