Introduction

In May of 1841, Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company—the principal fur trade company operating in North America at the time—set out on his annual tour of inspection of the company’s trading posts, a journey that was made possible by an elite crew of Métis and First Nations voyageurs. Taking with him his secretary, Edward Hopkins, Simpson left from Montréal, travelling by canoe across the Great Lakes, then to Lake Winnipeg, down to Red River, over the prairies to Fort Edmonton, and across the plateau and the Rockies to Fort Vancouver. The group then continued on to San Francisco, where Simpson sent Hopkins back eastward, while he kept heading west, to Hawaii, across Russia, and eventually to England (Simpson 1847).

As they travelled, Simpson and Hopkins amassed a large collection, which included hunting equipment, such as a gun case, bows and dozens of arrows, a hunting hood, a cradleboard and an embroidered bag, two scalps, and a mask from the northwest coast of Canada, as well as carved clubs and swords edged with shark teeth from the Pacific—over two hundred objects in all. Five shirts and five pairs of leggings, described as Blackfoot, were also acquired on this journey. Edward Hopkins kept the collection, which he displayed first in his house in Montréal and then in his homes in London and later in the town of Henley-on-Thames, near Oxford, when he retired there in 1870. After his death in 1893, Hopkins’s family transferred the collection to the Pitt Rivers Museum, in Oxford.

The five shirts are all quite different. Three of them are “hairlock” shirts, that is, shirts adorned with locks of either human or horse hair. Another has intricate quillwork and long hide fringes, while the fifth has no decoration and is made of poorer quality hides. Each of them has stories to tell, stories that are now partially lost but that remain important to Blackfoot people today.

At the request of Blackfoot ceremonial leaders, these five shirts—and the spirits of those who made and wore them—came home to Blackfoot territory for
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In the spring of 2010, a visit was possible, about how Blackfoot people responded to the presence of the shirts, about the significance of these shirts for Blackfoot people today, and about why projects such as this one need to happen.

This is also the story of developing relationships across cultures and between Indigenous communities and institutions. Both the Blackfoot and non-Blackfoot partners in this project hope that our experiences will assist others in building similar relationships—relationships that will contribute to changes in the way that museums care for and interpret Indigenous material heritage and that will allow this heritage to become more readily accessible to those whose ancestors created it. Developing these relationships is a challenge, and one of the things we try to convey in this volume is a sense of the tensions in that process, as well as why it was necessary to work in the way we did. This was, in many respects, a difficult project: it challenged the assumptions on which museums ordinarily operate, and it challenged Blackfoot cultural protocol. For that reason, it was also profoundly transformative for all who participated in it.

This has been a collaborative project from the start. It originated with Alison Brown’s doctoral research, which focused on collecting expeditions in Canada and involved fieldwork with Blackfoot communities in southern Alberta as well as research in Canadian museums (Brown 2000; see also Brown 2014). The two of us then spent five years working with the Kainai, one of the four Blackfoot nations, on a project about historical photographs (see Brown et al. 2006). During this time, we also got to know Blackfoot from the other three nations—Piikani and Siksika, in Canada, and Blackfeet, in the United States—at community events celebrating Blackfoot cultural heritage. Although we knew little about the Blackfoot shirts in the Pitt Rivers Museum at that time, we suspected that they were important and relatively rare, so we sometimes showed photographs of them to Blackfoot friends and colleagues and asked whether they were familiar with this kind of clothing and whether they had any suggestions about how best to look after the shirts. In 2004 an opportunity arose to invite Andy Blackwater and Frank Weasel Head to Oxford to view the shirts themselves. After that visit, Frank and Andy asked the staff of the Pitt Rivers Museum whether the shirts could come home for a visit, to inspire other community members, and the
Blackfoot Shirts Project was born. We then embarked on a year of formal consultation with all four Blackfoot nations, with the support of the universities of Aberdeen and Oxford. This consultation work was crucial to ensure that community needs and cultural protocols for handling sacred items would be built into our work with the shirts before we submitted a grant application for project funding.

Just as the project itself was developed with guidance from Blackfoot colleagues, so was this book. At a meeting in the spring of 2011, held at the Pitt Rivers Museum, we sat with many of the people who had most intimately guided this project and worked through the themes they wished to include in the book, the basic story of the project, what the goals of the book would be, and for whom it would be written. Our Blackfoot mentors wanted to emphasize the relationships that have surrounded the shirts from the time they were made and then acquired by George Simpson and Edward Hopkins and compare these relationships to those developed in the course of this project. The book is therefore as much about the process underlying this project as it is about the shirts themselves.

The book begins with the story of Paya’kskii, who was given hairlock shirts by the Sun. We then discuss the historical context in which George Simpson and Edward Hopkins acquired the shirts, including the nature of the relationships between Blackfoot people and fur traders at the time. Relationships are at the heart of Blackfoot world view and are central to understanding how this project unfolded. We discuss how the relationships essential to this project evolved and how both Blackfoot people and museum and university project partners negotiated different needs and goals. Bringing the shirts from Oxford to Alberta required extensive preparation, and, in chapter 7, we describe the fundraising, community consultation process, and conservation of the shirts that occurred prior to travel. The following chapter, “Visiting the Shirts,” then describes how people from Blackfoot and Blackfeet communities (in Canada and the United States, respectively) encountered the shirts at the Glenbow and Galt museums and how they responded to their presence. The project spilled over from these sessions into Blackfoot and Blackfeet communities in many ways, including special school projects and learning of different kinds, and we discuss some of these as well. We then address what has happened since the shirts returned to Oxford
and how this set of relationships might continue into the future to ensure that new generations of Blackfoot people continue to have access to the shirts.

We have written this book with two very different audiences in mind. We hope that the book will be useful to Blackfoot people, in part for the information about the shirts that it contains but also as a series of reflections on why access to heritage items is needed and on some of the issues that surround efforts to dismantle existing barriers to access. The second audience is museum professionals and students of museum studies and museum anthropology, for whom we hope the book will serve as a case study of a challenging but ultimately successful model of collaboration between museums and Indigenous peoples. We also hope that the experiences described will be of value to Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world and to museum professionals and students beyond those whose regional interests centre on North America.

The book brings together many voices. All those involved in the Blackfoot Shirts Project—whether as core project team members, as students who had the opportunity to visit the shirts up close, or as residents of Blackfoot communities in southern Alberta and northern Montana who viewed the exhibition—experienced the project differently. To capture a sense of these differing perspectives, we invited several participants in the project to reflect on their experience in written contributions to this book. These sections are identified with the author’s name. We co-authored all the other sections. All persons quoted in this book were asked how they wished to be named in the text. In some cases, individuals have chosen to use both their Blackfoot name (with or without a translation) and their English name; others have chosen to use their English name only.

For over a century and a half, the Blackfoot shirts were kept in private homes and then in museum storage, far away from Blackfoot people. This is what happened when they came home for a visit.