The shirts discussed in this book were made during the 1820s and 1830s, and given to Simpson and Hopkins in 1841. This was a period in which Blackfoot interacted frequently with fur traders on both sides of the Canada-US border. The balance of power underlying Blackfoot relations with outsiders began to shift substantially after 1841, with the aftereffects of the 1837 smallpox epidemic and the escalation of the whiskey trade. In the 1830s, however, the Blackfoot still largely retained control over their lives and territory, and outsiders were often fearful of engaging with them. In this chapter, we outline the evolution of Blackfoot involvement with fur traders in an effort to understand the relationships that existed at the time the shirts were acquired by Edward Hopkins and George Simpson.

As the fur trade was a global trade system, and, as local players in this system, the Blackfoot exerted considerable influence over how successfully fur trade companies were able to conduct business in North America. The Blackfoot
initially engaged in trade with Europeans through Cree and Nakota (Assiniboine) intermediaries, whose territory lay to the east and north and who travelled regularly to Hudson Bay and to the Great Lakes area. This pattern of trade via middlemen persisted until the start of the nineteenth century, when fur trade companies began establishing posts in Blackfoot territory (Binnema 2001, 166–67).

The first documented encounter of Blackfoot with a European trader appears to have occurred in October 1754, when Anthony Henday, representing the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), arrived in Blackfoot territory, guided by a party of Cree. The HBC had sent Henday west from York Factory, the company’s post on the southwestern edge of Hudson Bay, on a mission to generate trade with the “Archithinue,” a term traders used to refer to peoples who were neither Cree nor Nakota. Henday’s party was approached by scouts from a large encampment of “Archithinue,” which, according to Ted Binnema, soon grew from perhaps two hundred tents to some 320—approximately two thousand individuals, probably for the most part Blackfoot. Leaders of the encampment received Henday graciously but indicated their lack of interest in engaging directly in trade (Binnema 2001, 13, 103–4; see also Wishart [1979] 1992; Smyth 2001). Over the next two decades several more HBC traders travelled from the coast to Blackfoot territory in order to establish trading relationships.

Blackfoot oral history tells of one such meeting. The late Allan Pard, of the Piikani Nation, told us that on one occasion when Blackfoot scouts were in the northern part of their territory, they came upon some White people from the Hudson’s Bay Company: “Their barge had hit a sand bar on the North Saskatchewan River. The Cree interpreters explained these White people came to establish ‘trade’ with the Blackfoot people and to settle for the winter. The Cree indicated that the White people wanted to meet with the Blackfoot leaders to make this arrangement.” While it tempting to speculate about a possible connection between these White people and Henday’s party, such oral histories are valuable more for the light they can shed light on broader concerns, such as the potential economic and social outcomes of entering trading relationships.

Over a period of two decades following Henday’s expedition, more than fifty other HBC traders travelled from York Factory into Blackfoot territory seeking trading partners (Binnema 2001, 104). By the end of the eighteenth century,
Blackfoot had access to trade goods through a number of posts operated by several different companies. In 1799, both the HBC and its chief competitor, the North West Company, founded posts at Rocky Mountain House, located on the North Saskatchewan in the foothills of the Rockies, to the west of the present-day city of Red Deer. The following year, the HBC also established a post further south and much further east, at Chesterfield House, located at the confluence of the South Saskatchewan and Red Deer rivers on what is now the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. The post was abandoned two years later, however, in the wake of attacks from the Gros Ventre, who were defending their hunting territory from marauders (Ens 2006, 142). Further north, on the Athabasca River, the North West Company set up a post at Jasper House in 1813. Aside from the short-lived Chesterfield House, these posts were located in the more northerly regions of Blackfoot territory. In this period, trade also occurred sporadically through southern networks, although it was not until the 1830s that the American Fur Company and other, smaller companies were successful in establishing productive trade relationships with the Blackfoot in Montana (Binnema 2006, 2009; Smyth 1984; Swagerty 2003).

Relations between the trading companies and the Blackfoot shifted over time, as did Blackfoot relations with the other nations on the Northern Plains. In a relatively short period, access to horses and guns transformed intertribal relations. In order to maintain military and political control over their territory, the Blackfoot had to ensure they were better supplied with guns and ammunition than their neighbours. At first this meant attempting to restrict trade by their rivals, but once their neighbours across the Rocky Mountains had direct access to European trade goods, the Blackfoot began to shift their own policies toward the trading companies. By the late 1820s, the Blackfoot—in particular, the Piikani, whose territory was rich in beaver—had begun to trap enormous numbers of these animals so as to receive greater quantities of trade items. Although Kainai and Siksika also traded furs, beaver were less plentiful in the grassland areas where they lived, and they were usually more occupied with supplying the HBC with provisions such as pemmican, dried meat, and hides.

From 1821, when the HBC merged with its former competitor, the North West Company, until the early 1830s, the HBC monopolized the fur trade in
Figure 9. Encampment of the Peikann Indians.
Lithograph after a painting by Karl Bodmer, 1832–34.
Image courtesy of Edward E. Ayer Collection,
Newberry Library, Chicago.
the Rocky Mountains area. The Saskatchewan District, centred around Fort Edmonton, was one of the company’s most profitable regions, and, according to historian David Smyth, this prosperity was in large part due to the Piikani beaver trade:

The Piikani were largely responsible for the greatest period of economic prosperity ever experienced by Euroamerican traders on the Saskatchewan. . . . For decades almost solely a provisioning district, which sold its wares to other, more lucrative districts, the Saskatchewan virtually overnight became the richest beaver supplying district in the company’s entire North American domains. (Smyth 2001, 339)

Indeed, as Smyth goes on to observe, “The Piikani beaver trade (and the regions from which it derived) was considered so valuable that the HBC excluded the Saskatchewan District from the conservation schemes which it implemented in the Northern Department in the mid-1820s and 1830s” (2001, 339).

HBC policy at this time was to encourage Blackfoot people to travel to their posts on the North Saskatchewan River, on the northern fringes of Blackfoot territory (Smyth 1984, 5). Many Blackfoot groups, as well as members of other tribes, chose to engage with the newly established trading posts, although certain groups preferred some posts over others, for reasons of practicality, just as the HBC came to view some posts as associated primarily with particular trading partners. By the 1830s, for example, the HBC regarded Rocky Mountain House as intended principally for trade with the Piikani, although other groups, including Cree, Nakoda (Stoney), and Gros Ventre, are also recorded as having visited this post (see Smyth 2001, 344–45).

Fort Edmonton, where the shirts were acquired, was the headquarters of the Saskatchewan District from 1821 to 1824 and again from 1827 to 1873. The HBC established a series of posts named Fort Edmonton, the first founded in 1795 (Binnema 2001, 165). All but the third (1810–12) were located in the vicinity of what is today the city of Edmonton. The fort at which the five Blackfoot shirts were acquired was the fifth (and final) Fort Edmonton, which operated from 1830. Very few HBC records about life at Fort Edmonton during the period when the
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shirts were acquired have survived, but those that do show that Blackfoot visited this post throughout the year. On 20 February 1834, for instance, the author of the Fort Edmonton post journal, the daily record of events at the post, wrote that a group of fifty-seven “Blackfeet” (which group he referred to is unclear) and a small number of “Circies” (the spelling used by some traders for the “Sarcees,” or Tsuu T’ina), had left the post following a trading exchange that involved “74 wolves, 60 half buffalo skins, 70 kit foxes, 227 buffalo tongues, 11 Red foxes, 400 # [pounds] grease, 2 badgers, 24 kegs pounded meats, 2 otters, 2 horses, 1 beaver, 4 robes buffalo, 110 rats and a little fresh meat” (HBCA B.60/a/28 Edmonton Post Journal, 1833–34). The author complained that this was “very indifferent for such a number of Indians,” and although he did not record what was received in exchange for these goods, it probably included cloth of different colours and weights, awls, ice chisels, axe and hatchet heads, blankets or capotes (blanket coats), tobacco, ammunition, guns, liquor, glass beads, thimbles, and small bells used for decoration.

The size of the groups who visited the HBC posts varied considerably, and sometimes bands from several nations travelled together. For example, according to the post journal, on 28 July 1834, 260 “Blackfeet men, women and children” visited Fort Edmonton and stayed for two days. On 28 December 1834, a smaller group of “eight Blackfeet men” and “some women and children” visited the post with a few pelts to trade. Just as the number of people who came to the posts varied, so did the length of their stay; often, however, visits were for no more than two days. Although archival records show that Blackfoot visited fur trade posts throughout the year, it was a long journey to Fort Edmonton, or even to Rocky Mountain House, from the southern parts of Blackfoot territory, and records from the second decade of the nineteenth century suggest that the Piikani, in particular, were keen that the HBC establish a trading post closer to their hunting grounds. As Smyth notes, in 1815, during a period in which Rocky Mountain House was closed, the Piikani petitioned the HBC to build a post on the upper South Saskatchewan River or the Bow River, promising to “exert themselves more in procuring Beaver than they have hitherto done” (Edmonton House district report, James Bird, 31 August 1815, fo. 4d., B.60/e/1, reel 1M777, HBCA, cited in Smyth 2001, 290–91).
By this time, beaver were growing scarce in the region of the North Saskatchewan River, and many HBC officers were of the opinion that extending the company’s influence into the southern Blackfoot territory would bring them improved profits. No action was taken for a number of years, as the HBC was addressing the complicated merger with the North West Company, but, in the summer of 1822, the Bow River Expedition established a small post below the forks of the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan rivers, in Siksika territory (Smyth 2001, 295), not far from the earlier site of Chesterfield House, and from there sent out exploratory expeditions to search for extensive beaver populations. It turned out that there were fewer beaver than expected, and the location of the post firmly within Blackfoot territory made it more dangerous for the traders than was the case further north. Given its ease of access, entire bands or large encampments made up of many families could now visit the post all at once. An entry in the journal of the Bow River Expedition records that, at one point, a group of six thousand Blackfoot and Gros Ventre gathered at the post, a number larger than had ever been seen at any of the posts on the North Saskatchewan River (Bow River Expedition journal, 14 October 1822, B34/a/4, reel 1M20, HBCA, cited in Smyth 2001, 298). Other entries from the journal highlight the aggressive behaviour of the Blackfoot toward the traders, although Smyth (2001, 298) notes that no member of the HBC expedition was actually wounded or killed. Given the sometimes tense relations between the traders and the Blackfoot, and given that the extensive beaver populations had not materialized, the HBC abandoned the post the following year, in 1823.

During the early 1820s, just as the HBC was trying to gain a foothold in the more southerly reaches of Blackfoot territory, companies such as the Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Company and the American Fur Company entered the Upper Missouri region for the first time, inaugurating a new phase of relations between the Blackfoot and outsiders. Over the next ten years, the American Fur Company absorbed smaller trading operations, as it aimed to become the dominant force in the region. Relations between the Blackfoot and the men of the American Fur Company were initially tense, with casualties on both sides. The American traders, led by Kenneth McKenzie, had not asked permission to enter the region or to trap beaver themselves, acts that Blackfoot leaders therefore
viewed as aggressive. Hostilities eased somewhat in 1830, when the Kainai chief Stomi’ksaosa’k (Buffalo Bull’s Back Fat) and his band were persuaded to travel to the American Fur Company’s post at Fort Union, situated on the Missouri near the border of Montana with North Dakota, to trade. In the early autumn of 1831, James Kipp, a trader for the American Fur Company, established Fort Piegan, located further up the Missouri near the mouth of the Marias River. As the first American trading post in Blackfoot territory, Fort Piegan immediately attracted Blackfeet traders, but the post was abandoned in the spring of 1832, when Kipp returned to Fort Union, laden with beaver pelts. That summer, another trader, David Mitchell, travelled back to the area and established Fort McKenzie, six miles further up the Missouri River from the site of Fort Piegan. Not long afterward, Alexander Culbertson replaced McKenzie as the company’s chief trader. Like many traders at the time, Culbertson understood the value of alliances created through marriage relationships. In 1840, he entered into such a relationship with a Kainai woman, Naatoyistsiiksinaakii (Holy Snake Woman), also known as Natawista, whose father and brother were both prominent Kainai chiefs.

The growth of trade along the Upper Missouri posed a problem for the HBC. As well as the family ties that brought some Blackfoot to trade with the Americans, these posts along the Upper Missouri were more convenient for many Blackfoot hunters and trappers than the HBC forts far to the north. In addition, as David Smyth (2001, 429–30) has argued, the American traders benefitted from two natural advantages. First, the Missouri River was more easily navigable than the Saskatchewan. This allowed for trade goods to be shipped more easily to posts located along this route, which in turn led to cheaper prices. Second, the location of these first posts, deep within Piikani territory near the mouth of the Marias River, was especially appealing to Piikani seeking trading relations. Smyth (2001, 430) notes that the valley of the Marias was one of the most favoured wintering grounds for the Piikani at the time, and, given the strategic importance of the area, it was here that the American Fur Company chose to establish Fort Piegan, in 1831, and then Fort McKenzie.

Around the same time, changing fashions and new manufacturing technologies in Europe led to a decline in the demand for beaver pelts, and the American fur trade companies began to trade more heavily in buffalo hides, a
commodity more culturally familiar to the Blackfoot. For all these reasons, the Blackfoot began to engage more frequently, and in greater numbers, with the Upper Missouri fur trade. Interested in maintaining the competition between the American and British companies, however, the Piikani continued to petition for a HBC post within their territory. In 1832, the HBC established Bow Fort (Peigan Post), on the upper Bow River, in an effort to counteract the American trade and to attract the Piikani. But the new post was not a success. The Piikani preferred to trade with the Americans, who gave them a better deal for their beaver pelts, and they simply stayed away. Although Kainai and Siksika came to Bow Fort, they were antagonized by the HBC’s attempts to encourage them to travel to Fort Edmonton, over two hundred miles north, and by what they saw as the company’s favouritism toward the Piikani. Given the existence of American posts that were more conveniently located for the Piikani, Bow Fort was simply not economically viable, and by 1839 the HBC had decided that it no longer made sense to attempt to recover the Piikani trade.

Regrettably, the post journals from Fort Edmonton for the early 1840s, when the shirts were collected, have not survived. It is thus unclear why a large number of Blackfoot gathered at Fort Edmonton in July 1841, when Sir George Simpson, the governor of the HBC, visited Fort Edmonton with his secretary, Edward Hopkins, as part of an annual inspection of HBC posts. During Simpson’s brief visit, he and Hopkins met with a delegation of Blackfoot leaders, and the shirts came into their possession. We do not know why or exactly how this happened. We do know that Simpson and Hopkins acquired the shirts against the backdrop of a long history of often difficult relationships between Blackfoot people and fur traders—political and economic tensions and alliances, as well as personal connections, that informed the actions of both parties in this moment.