What was going through their minds, when they gave those shirts?

**Earl Old Person**

What was the mindset of the trade, the mindset of our own people at the time? Some of those [shirts] were given as gifts in good faith, that working relationships would be [held] together where people went, sort of a treaty pact.

But we don’t know . . .

**Frank Weasel Head**

Shirts like that are very important to their owner. And sometimes we give gifts. We give away as gifts our most prized possession, we give them to honour somebody else. And sometimes, I think about the fur trade and the association with the Hudson’s Bay Company, and it makes me wonder if that was the time when our people were starving. There was a period of time when our people were
starving. Like I said, so many things go through my mind. Why were they given to these people? And the other thing is, if somebody told me, “Oh, you got a nice shirt,” in the old days you give that to whoever complimented you. . . . It could be a number of things. If he really liked them, and he told them, they might have just given them to him. They maybe thought, “Well, we met this important person, we’ll give him this gift.” Because if somebody comes to my house today I give them a little something. They don’t go out of my house empty-handed.

**NAPIAKI (OLD WOMAN) / CAROLLA CALF ROBE**

Across the Northern Plains, gift giving between individuals and between groups was a common way of establishing alliances. The exchange of gifts was not simply trade; it was a demonstration of the goodwill and mutual respect considered essential for trade to occur. Alliances with traders and other outsiders were also created to influence the possible benefits that traders might bring to Indigenous trading partners. Highly decorated clothing often formed part of these exchanges. In 1843, for example, Alexander Culbertson, the head trader at Fort McKenzie, was given a hairlock shirt by a Blackfeet warrior, Woman’s Moccasin.\(^1\) The gift of shirts within this process of alliance building points to one possible explanation of how and why the five Blackfoot shirts might have come into the possession of senior Hudson’s Bay Company officers.

Fur traders and other outsiders quickly came to appreciate the cultural significance of gift giving. When explorers travelled across the plains, they came equipped with gifts to serve the purposes of diplomacy. Lewis and Clark, for example, carried large quantities of goods with them to give to American Indian leaders, and, as a May 1806 journal entry indicates, they were given clothing in return: “We gave the young men who had delivered us the two horses this morning some ribbon, blue wampum and vermillion, one of them gave me a handsome pare of legings and the Broken Arm gave Capt. C. his shirt, in return for which we gave him a linin shirt.”\(^2\) Similarly, fur traders exchanged gifts with Aboriginal peoples at the beginning of each trade season as a way of confirming friendly relations. This was a standard part of the trading procedure.

During the period in which Simpson and Hopkins travelled, fur traders frequently presented woollen “chief’s coats” to those men with whom they wished

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1. This shirt is now in the collection of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery (Peterson, with Peers 1993, 71; see also Wischmann 2004).

to create alliances (Hanson 1982). These coats were often a bright scarlet colour and were decorated with gold braid at the collar and cuffs. Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied described Blackfoot men wearing such coats during his 1833 visit to Fort McKenzie:

We saw three or four chiefs in red and blue uniforms trimmed with lace, and wearing round hats with plumes of feathers. The most distinguished among them was Mi’kskimmiisoka’simi [Iron Shirt], dressed in a scarlet uniform, with blue facings and lace, with a drawn sabre in his hand; riding without stirrups, he managed, with great dexterity, his light bay horse, which was made very restiff by the firing of the musketry. (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1976, 100)

Maximilian also described the process of clothing exchange following a meal hosted by Mi’kskimmiisoka’simi:

After we had finished, the chief ate what was left in the dish, and took out of a bag a chief’s scarlet uniform, with blue facings and yellow lace, which he had received from the English, six red and black plumes of feathers, a dagger with its sheath, a coloured pocket-handkerchief, and two beaver skins, all which he laid before Mr Mitchell as a present, who was obliged to accept these things whether he liked or not, thereby laying himself under the obligation of making presents in return, and especially a new uniform. (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1976, 101)

The Kainai leader Mi’kai’sto (Red Crow) told R. N. Wilson—a trader and Indian agent who recorded information about Blackfoot culture—about an encounter with traders that probably took place in the mid-nineteenth century and that involved a similar exchange of clothing:

Away up on the Saskatchewan we saw a fleet of thirty boats going down the river. The white men landed on our side, and we sat in a big circle and received many presents. There were three principal chiefs in our
Figure 32. Sir George Simpson, Governor of Rupert’s Land, by Stephen Pearce, 1852. Oil on canvas. HBCA 1987/363-S-25/T78.
Figure 33. *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall*, by Frances Anne Hopkins, depicting herself and E. M. Hopkins, 1869. Oil on canvas. Library and Archives Canada, acc. no. 1989-401-1.
The presentation of cloth outfits to chiefs as part of treaty signing was an extension of this older practice of acknowledging alliances through gifts of clothing. Many of the items of clothing acquired both by gift and by purchase by representatives of the colonial government eventually found their way into UK museums. For example, Cecil Denny, an officer of the North-West Mounted Police who was present at the signing of Treaty 7 in 1877, purchased a full set of regalia, including a beautifully decorated buckskin shirt and leggings, from the Siksika chief Issapoomahsika (Crowfoot).\(^4\) These items have been in the collection of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, in Exeter, in the southwest of England, for over a century, though negotiations to repatriate these and associated items are presently underway (see Brown, Eccles, and Herle 2016). Similarly, the holdings of the British Museum include a shirt that belonged to Mi’kai’sto (Am1983, Q.288). Mi’kai’sto was photographed wearing this shirt in 1886, at the time that he and other Blackfoot leaders were invited to Ottawa by Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, and it is possible that the shirt was later presented to Macdonald.

### HOW WERE THE SHIRTS ACQUIRED?

Frustratingly, no records survive that indicate exactly how and why the five shirts came into Hopkins’s possession or whose shirts they were. They are described in the Pitt Rivers Museum accession book only as “specimens collected by Mr. Hopkins when accompanying Sir George Simpson in his voyage round the world” (in 1841 and 1842).

As the head of the Hudson’s Bay Company, Simpson represented Queen Victoria and the British Crown within the company’s territory. Given that relations between the Blackfoot and the HBC had not always been stable or positive...
5. The Tsuu T’ina are a Dene people who migrated southward into the Plains, probably during the eighteenth century. Naming is a political act, and some ethnonyms that were current in Simpson’s day are now used infrequently, and, in some cases, Indigenous self-identifiers have been restored. For example, although “Sarcee” is still used in informal speech, this nation is known today as Tsuu T’ina. The other three groups whom Simpson mentions are Blackfoot, and he identified them using the names with which he was familiar: “Blackfeet” (Siksika), “Piegans” (Piikani and Blackfeet), and “Bloods” (Kainai).

Across the 1820s and 1830s, Simpson’s presence at Fort Edmonton in 1841 offered both parties an opportunity to strengthen relationships with the Company and potentially to extend those to include the Crown. According to Simpson,

> On the third day after our arrival, the firing of guns on the opposite side of the river, which was heard early in the morning, announced the approach of nine native chiefs, who came forward in advance of a camp of fifty lodges, which was again followed by another camp of six times the size. These chiefs were Blackfeet, Piegans, Sarcees, and Blood Indians, all dressed in their grandest clothes and decorated with scalp locks. I paid them a visit, giving each of them tobacco... Our nine visitors remained the whole morning, smoking and sleeping; nor would they take their departure till they had obtained a present for each of the chiefs that were coming behind them. (Simpson, 1847, 104, entry for 26 July 1841)

Even allowing for Simpson’s tendency to exaggerate, “a camp of fifty lodges, which was again followed by another camp of six times the size” is a very large gathering. Not only was this encampment therefore larger than an ordinary camp of the sort set up during the summer bison hunt or for the Sun Dance, but it also included Tsuu T’ina (“Sarcees”), allies of the Blackfoot against the Cree. Quite possibly, then, these groups had assembled for the purpose of meeting the head of the HBC and engaging in political business. Moreover, Simpson very clearly describes the chiefs as wearing shirts very similar to those in the Pitt Rivers Museum collection.

The shirts may therefore have been a formal presentation to Simpson in an exchange of gifts that form part of alliance-making rituals and political negotiations. The archival record shows that the inventory of property owned by the HBC at Fort Edmonton, prepared on 1 June 1841, included “5 chiefs laced coats,” of the sort that would have been given to chiefs in such situations. Some ceremonial leaders and elders have suggested that, in making alliances and strengthening relationships, valuable gifts such as the shirts might have been given to show that the Blackfoot were bargaining in good faith.
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SHIRTS AFTER THEY LEFT BLACKFOOT TERRITORY?

Simpson and Hopkins left Fort Edmonton with Chief Factor John Rowand on 28 July 1841 and travelled to Fort Vancouver. After Simpson continued on his voyage around the world, Hopkins returned with Rowand to Fort Edmonton in early 1842, before continuing east and north to York Factory and from there to London. He later returned to Lachine, near Montréal, where the HBC offices were located and where both he and Simpson had homes (Grafe 1999). The collection amassed during their travels in 1841 was shipped to Lachine and remained with Hopkins, rather than becoming part of Simpson’s own collection. We know that the shirts and other items from the collection were displayed in Hopkins’s home because they are pierced with old nail and tack holes, indicating that they had been hung on walls, and were also covered in coal soot from domestic coal fires, the standard way of heating many homes then. Items from the collection were also used by Hopkins’s second wife, the artist Frances Anne Hopkins, in her paintings of fur trade scenes, which confirms that the collection was in their home (see fig. 33).

In 1870, Hopkins retired from the fur trade, and he and his wife moved to London. Either that year or the following, Frances Anne Hopkins painted a romantic image titled Left to Die, which shows one of the Blackfoot shirts and a pair of leggings from the Hopkins collection (see fig. 35). She depicted the clothing worn by a lone man who is being abandoned by his people, for reasons that are not made clear in the painting, and the image invokes standard Victorian stereotypes about cruel and “uncivilized” peoples. She exhibited this painting at the Royal Academy in London in 1872 (Clark and Stacey 1990, 31). In 1891, the couple moved to Henley-on-Thames, a small town near Oxford. Edward Hopkins died in 1893, and in that year the Pitt Rivers Museum acquired the collection from the Hopkins family.

Once in the Pitt Rivers Museum, the shirts went into storage. Along with other items from the museum’s collection, they were placed for safekeeping in a vaulted stone basement during World War II, when bombs dropped all around the city. After the war, they were returned to the museum’s Textile Store, and one of them was placed on display. In 1987–88, the shirt with painted war honours was included in the Glenbow Museum’s exhibition The Spirit Sings. After a year’s visit to Calgary and Ottawa, the shirt was returned to storage in Oxford (Harrison et al. 1987).
Figure 35.  *Left to Die*, Frances Anne Hopkins, 1872.
Oil on canvas. Library and Archives Canada, acc. no. 1986-28-1.