



# The Rupert's Land Newsletter



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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Centre for  
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## A Message to Our Readers

### Director's Message

Welcome to the spring 2019 edition of the Rupert's Land Newsletter. Please check your mailing label for your CRLS membership status; are you current for 2020/21?

### 2020 Colloquium

We are pleased to announce that the 19th Rupert's Land Colloquium will be held at the University of Winnipeg, from May 13 to 16, 2020. Please see inside this newsletter for the call-for-papers and forms for paper-, poster- and display-proposals.

### 2018 Colloquium Proceedings

The Selected Papers of the 2018 CRLS Colloquium in Grande Prairie, Alberta are now available on CD. Please see book order form at the end of the newsletter for prices. CRLS would like to thank Roselle Panganiban for her tireless efforts in editing the 2018 Colloquium Proceedings, as well as this newsletter.

### New Acquisitions and Initiatives at the Manitoba Museum

The Hudson's Bay Company Collection at the Manitoba Museum recently acquired a collection of beading, photographs and other items from the family of George Fowlie, a clerk of the HBC in the early twentieth Century.

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# The Six Seasons of the *Asiniskow Ithiniwak*: A Preliminary Survey of Published Historical Sources

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## Introduction:

This report is intended to provide members of the “Six Seasons of the *Asiniskow Ithiniwak*: Reclamation, Regeneration, and Reconciliation” project a brief overview of the existing published literature that deals with the early history of the Rocky Cree people of what is now northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan. It surveys a number of published historical works that are rooted in the observations of European fur traders and commentators in the Churchill River basin, west of Hudson Bay during the early decades of contact and Indigenous-newcomer relations. This report covers the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While some of the information from these written sources is based upon direct contact with Rocky Cree peoples, other descriptions are based upon second hand reporting, specifically from early European conversations with the Muskego Cree of the Hudson Bay lowlands. The Muskego, or Swampy, Cree peoples occupied the territory east of the Rocky Cree, around York Fort, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s important western bayside post founded in 1684.

It should be stressed that this preliminary report makes no claim to being any kind of authoritative or definitive history of the Rocky Cree. It is simply an analysis of the observations made by early European observers of those Indigenous groups they first referred to as the “Upland Cree” that have been recorded by more contemporary historians. Moreover, the material I have summarized below is from non-Indigenous historians, ethnologists, and anthropologists. Much of it is speculative in nature, and as far as I am aware, there was little or no consultation with Rocky Cree elders at the time of their research and writing.

Hopefully, this report and any subsequent elaborations will form a small part of the overall Six Seasons project perspective. Like the first book in an anticipated series, *Pīsim Finds Her Miskanow*, the project’s cumulative research will be based on collaborative, community directed archaeological fieldwork, and will in part be grounded in archival research, published ethnography, traditional knowledge, and oral history. Like the story of the remains found of a young Cree woman from 350 years ago which began this tale, the project will contribute to a fuller understanding of the Indigenous histories of north-central Canada during the 1600s, a period in which the *Asiniskow Ithiniwak* (Rocky Cree) would not have had direct contact with European fur traders but would have known about their presence in the lands to the east. The historical research will also explore the later period of direct contact with the Rocky Cree when Indigenous groups travelled to the bay to trade, and when Europeans moved inland from their bayside posts. This interpretation is preliminary in that, while I have reviewed a number of the relevant published sources (including published primary sources), I have yet to complete a review of all published sources pertinent to the early history of the Rock Cree. The format of the report, though in part thematic, does concentrate upon specific sources, much like a literature review.

## The Rocky Cree and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Pre-Contact History

In 1670, a group of London merchants founded the Hudson’s Bay Company to trade for furs with the

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Indigenous Peoples of subarctic Canada. Using a royal charter, the company made claim to those territories drained by Hudson Bay. It was a vast region they called “Rupert’s Land” although its extent was unknown to them at the time of the charter. Not long after its’ founding the company established a number of posts on the shores of Hudson and James Bays. The earliest post closest to the traditional lands of the Rock Cree was York Factory (or York Fort as it was first called), established in 1684 near the mouth of the Hayes River on the Bay’s west coast. Granting royal trading charters to independent concerns (and often undercapitalized companies) like the HBC was a mainstay of European foreign policy in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and typified the viewpoint of early colonialism and the non-Indigenous perspective of newly “discovered” lands in North America and elsewhere.

Identifying the Rocky Cree from European historical sources is problematic, especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and before direct contact. For instance, in the venerable *Handbook of North American Indians* ethnologist James G.E. Smith described the “Western Woods Cree”, a large group that encompassed the Rocky Cree of the Churchill River basin, the Western Swampy Cree who inhabited the furthest western portions of the Hudson Bay lowlands, as well as the Strongwoods Cree who lived further to the west.<sup>1</sup> The territory of the Western Woods Cree is enormous, covering much of northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Smith believed that the Western Woods Cree represented a western Cree migration due to game depletion east of Lake Winnipeg, but at the same time he argues that the Rocky Cree had long been present in their territory, or at least their territory at the time of indirect and direct contact in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In fact, archaeological work at South Indian Lake has discovered materials associated with Rocky Cree culture dating to AD 900<sup>3</sup> and local oral history states that the people occupied the Churchill River region from time immemorial. Among the Rocky Cree, the traditional name for the Churchill River is the *Missinippi*, and among the HBC (and later French traders) it was known as the English River. For early fur traders on the Bay, the Rocky Cree were known in general terms as the “Upland Indians”, although that term encompassed other groups as well. According to Andrew Graham, who was stationed at York Fort and Prince of Wales Fort at Churchill in the middle to later 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Upland Indians or what he labeled the *Mantua-Sepée* of the lower Churchill River consisted of a number of sub-groups including the *Pimmechikemow*, the *Poethinecaw*, the *Missinepee*, and possibly the *Wenunnetowuck*.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Graham’s names and general territorial identifications are to a degree speculative and based on accounts from inland HBC travelers and from Graham’s own interpretation of accounts from those Indigenous groups who visited York Fort and Churchill. Writing in 1787, company trader and mapmaker David Thompson described his conversations with Upland Cree who had moved west from the eastern part of lake Winnipeg due to the movement of the Northern Ojibwa into that territory.<sup>5</sup> While Thompson’s remarks are reflected in the conclusions made by Smith, it remains unclear whether the large and amorphous group known to white traders as the “Upland Cree” actually included the Rocky Cree (it might have referred to the western Swampy or Muskego Cree), although one suspects that it did. It seems that in their daily journals the HBC named all groups with a similar language structure who lived in the interior south and west of the Muskego Cree as “uplanders”. Uplanders could also have included the Assiniboine (or Assinipoets, Senipoets, or Stone Indians as reported in HBC journals), who were Siouan

1. James G.E. Smith, “Western Woods Cree” in *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1981), 256.

2. Ibid, 257.

3. J.V. Wright, “Cree Culture History in the Southern Indian Lake Region”, *Anthropological Series 87*, National Museum of Canada Bulletin 232, Ottawa, 1971, 3.

4. Andrew Graham, *Andrew Graham’s Observations on Hudson Bay* as cited in Victor Lytwyn, *The Hudson Bay Lowland Cree in the Fur Trade to 1821: A Study in Historical Geography* (PhD dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1993). 54.

5. David Thompson, *David Thompson’s Narrative of His Explorations in Western America*, edited by J.B. Tyrell (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1916), 48-49.

speakers living farther into the interior and allied with the Rocky Cree.

Earlier sources such as the *Jesuit Relations*, a 73-volume historical account of early French missionary work in Canada during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, provide a few tantalizing clues about the Rocky Cree. Now considered perhaps the earliest ethnographic source to deal with the vast interior beyond the Great Lakes, the *Relations* discuss the “Kristinon,” the French name generally given to describe Cree peoples. In 1637, Jesuit Paul Le Jeune noted that Nipissing peoples of what is now north-central Ontario carried “diverse wares from New France” to James Bay where they traded with the “Kristinon who live on the North Sea whither the Nipisiriniens go to trade”.<sup>6</sup> While it is unclear that French missionaries knew of those Cree groups who lived west of Hudson Bay, a later reference from 1660 mentions the “Killistinons” who were part of the “many surrounding nations” near the bay.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the term “Cree” comes from the French term “Kiristinon,” itself derived from an Anishinaabe or Ojibwa name, and first employed by French traders and missionaries to identify a small band that lived south of James Bay. As these traders (commonly referred to as ‘*coureurs du bois*’) moved farther west, the term was applied to a variety of groups who spoke a similar language. “Kiristinon” was eventually shortened to “Cree” by English-language traders.<sup>8</sup>

## Seasonal Life and Trade

Life among the Rocky Cree, as with most nations who inhabited the subarctic, was seasonal – and of course the cornerstone of the Six Seasons study of Rocky Cree culture and society. Describing the seasonal life of those Cree groups who lived in the woodlands west of Hudson Bay, geographer Arthur Ray stated that bands in winter usually ranged from ten to thirty people. The socio-political organization of these groups, Ray argued, was based upon kinship and the predominant social unit was the nuclear family. These bands consisted of a number of related families, predominantly through the male side, and were exogamous.<sup>9</sup> James Smith describes how the fall and winter saw these extended family groupings using bows and arrows to hunt moose and elk, while woodland caribou were speared in pounds.<sup>10</sup> In late fall and early winter kinship groups engaged in trapping while during the depths of winter these groups were more stationary – recounting legends and oral stories while preparing hides and pelts and producing tools and clothing.<sup>11</sup> In summer, kinship groups tended to be larger and less sedentary as food resources became more plentiful.<sup>12</sup>

Band leadership was fluid, according to Ray, and a chief or ‘captain’ as the European traders called them, had little coercive authority by virtue of his position. Rather, he depended upon consensus from his followers. Consent was given as long as a chief was a successful hunter, warrior, or trader and continued

6. Reuben Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*. 73 volumes (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1896-1901), vol. 11, 197-199, as cited in Lytwyn, 277.

7. Ibid, vol. 46, 249.

8. Flora Beardy and Robert Coutts, *Voices from Hudson Bay: Cree Stories from York Factory*, Second Edition, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s, 2017), xviii.

9. Arthur Ray and Donald Freeman, “*Give Us Good Measure*”: *An Economic Analysis of Relations between Indians and the Hudson’s Bay Company Before 1763*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 15.

10. Smith, 260.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

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to exhibit the kind of behaviors valued by Indigenous society, most notably generosity. Ray's portrayal of Rocky Cree society comes mainly from Andrew Graham, although comments from other HBC post governors are incorporated as well. If Graham and Ray's descriptions are accurate (and they do agree with those assumptions made by other observers), then Rocky Cree society, or at least its' leadership, was a meritocracy, i.e. those with the greatest ability, or those able to best secure scarce resources (whether by hunting, trade, or warfare) were chosen as leaders. Sharing those resources with members of their clan or with the larger kinship group was a critical part of one's leadership qualities. The game resources of the subarctic forests provided the mainstay of the Cree diet. According to HBC sources, the Rocky Cree hunted larger mammals such as woodland caribou, moose, elk, and wood bison. These same sources noted moose and caribou as the most important parts of the Rocky Cree diet.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of contact group territories among the Rocky Cree (as with other woodland groups) were not sharply defined. Ethnologists have referred to the system of land tenure as the "hunting range system," which provided outside groups with restricted rights of passage through extended family ranges, especially for purposes of trade. This system, it has been argued, governed inter-group relations long prior to contact with Europeans. Trade, of course, characterized inter-and intra-group interactions long before contact, but was enhanced with the introduction of the French and British fur trade. Middleman roles were crucial to trade, not just for the Rocky Cree but for all Indigenous groups. As archaeological investigation has discovered, such functions, or pacts, had been prevalent for many generations; finds of materials such as copper, silica, and obsidian (in return for furs) in the Churchill River basin for instance, would suggest trade through middleman groups with Indigenous nations as far west as the Pacific coast or the American southwest.

The advent of the fur trade enhanced the middleman role of western Hudson Bay subarctic groups. Historian Paul Thistle refers to this period as the era of "symbiotic" relations between Indigenous peoples and Europeans, suggesting a mutually beneficial arrangement between the two cultures.<sup>14</sup> (How long this symbiotic culture existed, or whether it existed at all, is debatable.<sup>15</sup>) Early in the HBC trade system the Rocky Cree had almost ceased to trap furs for themselves but acted as middlemen for groups living at greater distances. Of course, the Lowland or Muskego Cree tended to control direct access to British traders, however the Rocky Cree traded for furs from groups farther inland in return for European goods such as knives, metal pots, traps, and guns. These valuable goods were exchanged with interior groups at marked-up prices. With the establishment of the first inland post from Hudson Bay, Cumberland House on the North Saskatchewan River in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Rocky Cree lost much of their middleman role as interior groups were now able to access HBC goods directly. Yet, for those peoples too far from York and even from Cumberland House – groups such as the Blood, Blackfoot, and Mandan – the Rocky Cree continued their role as middlemen into the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The neighbouring Assiniboine who had moved into the western portions of Lake Winnipeg and were allied with the Cree, were able to access bayside posts directly. But as Anishanaabe groups moved north, the Assiniboine retreated west and south as a great many new posts were established, especially during the era of competition between the HBC and the North West Company

13. Ibid, 256.

14. Paul Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1986), 5.

15. Certainly Thistle's date of 1840 is too late for his argument that the fur trade was mutually beneficial. Indigenous Peoples like the Rocky Cree were brought into a larger capitalist system of exchange that was less than "symbiotic" and ultimately resulted in exploitation and resource depletion.

between 1784 and 1821.<sup>16</sup> Prior to those years independent traders intercepted Indigenous groups making the long journey to the bay to trade.

Despite certain territorial restrictions, however, the Rocky Cree negotiated passage with their Muskego Cree cousins and were able to access posts such as York Fort in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet, the distance from the bay made the trading journey a hazardous one. Rocky Cree groups from the upper Churchill River region faced the danger of freeze-up if they did not return from York Fort by mid-November of each year. Starvation and death were the usual consequences if this occurred. In the very early years of the fur trade, English traders on the bay (and French traders who controlled York Fort between 1694 and 1713 and renamed it Fort Bourbon) carried only one year's supply of trade goods. If Rocky Cree groups visiting the fort to trade were forced to wait for a delayed ship, they risked not getting home by freeze up. Occasionally, ships from England did not make it to York, such as in 1716, when James Knight, the post governor, complained bitterly when the annual ship did not appear. Waiting Indigenous groups were forced to leave late for the long journey home and a good many perished. After that debacle the HBC begged the Cree to return the following year.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rocky Cree peoples continued to trade furs at York Fort and the recently established Prince of Wales Fort at the mouth of the Churchill River. Of course, contacts with Europeans brought disease and upland groups such as the Rocky Cree were no exception. Not long after contact, infectious diseases became a scourge among groups like the Rocky Cree. In the 1730s, HBC traders reported an influenza outbreak in the lowlands that took a great many lives but added that a greater number of deaths had occurred inland.<sup>17</sup> In the winter of 1757-58, James Isham, who was stationed at York, reported significant mortality inland from the same disease.<sup>18</sup>

These outbreaks, however, paled when compared to the smallpox epidemic that arrived in the early 1780s. Most accounts from the time reported that the epidemic reached the peoples of the boreal forest from the plains to the south; the Rocky Cree and other upland groups most likely contacting the disease from the Assiniboine, with whom they traded. Based on HBC accounts from the period infectious disease historian Jody Decker has estimated that up to 75% of Swampy (Muskego) Cree people died from the disease or from the starvation that resulted from those too weak to hunt.<sup>19</sup> A similar mortality figure is most likely true for the Rocky Cree as well, along with other upland and plains groups. In 1786 Humphrey Martin, the Chief Factor at York reported the western interior as "dismally depopulated".

While the devastating effects of the smallpox epidemic of 1782-83 have been better understood in recent years, and that the decimation of western Indigenous populations, including the populations of the central and western subarctic, is now known to be far greater than once thought, resulting theories regarding Indigenous adaptation have proven more controversial. In the book *Keepers of the Game* historian Calvin

16. Anishanaabe oral historian William Warren referred to the Upland Cree as the "Kenisteno". Whether this refers to the Rocky Cree specifically or to all interior groups who spoke a version of the Cree language is unknown. See Lytwyn, 113.

17. Lytwyn, 356-359.

18. Ibid.

19. Jody Decker, "'We Should Never Again be the Same People': The Diffusion and Cumulative Impact of Acute Infectious Diseases Affecting the Natives of the Northern Plains of the Western Interior of Canada, 1774-1839". (PhD Dissertation, York University, Toronto, 1989).

Martin concluded that after the epidemic the Cree conducted what he called “a holy war of extermination” against animals for what they considered a “conspiracy of the beasts”.<sup>20</sup> Martin came to his conclusion primarily from HBC reports of the time that described a drastic reduction in fur returns and reports of declining animal populations both in the lowlands and in the subarctic regions upland, including the Churchill River basin. That smallpox spread initially from non-Indigenous traders far to the south is glossed over by Martin as is the reported decline in animal populations actually being the result of a significant drop in fur returns at HBC posts, due to a lack of hunters and trappers inland. Moreover, the diseased-ravaged people of the Churchill basin – or at least those that survived -- were more inclined to hunt for subsistence than to trap for luxuries.<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, oral and archaeological evidence suggests that the Rocky Cree, the *Asiniskow Ithiniwak*, had lived in the Churchill River basin of northern Manitoba for hundreds of generations prior to contact with Europeans. Despite this, much of the writings of geographers such as Arthur Ray have argued that the Cree (along with the Assiniboine) moved in a northwesterly direction after 1670, as they became involved in the fur trade of the Hudson’s Bay Company, using arms they obtained from the company to enforce their strong middlemen roles in the new commerce with Europeans. Ray further suggests that as intertribal trading patterns stabilized after 1720, this movement was generally complete.<sup>22</sup> Whether these population shifts are in fact accurate, especially in regard to the Rocky Cree, remain a question best answered through traditional oral and ethnographic sources rather than the observations of distant non-Indigenous observers. The social, political, and cultural history of the *Asiniskow Ithiniwak* saw both consistency and change in the decades of the fur trade, the intrusion of Euro-Canadians into traditional lands, the role of government, treaty, and the Indian Act, a changing resource-based economy, and the renewed cultural emergence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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20. Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1982.

21. According to David Thompson, his host Cree/Blackfoot Elder *Saukamappee* had told him that with the outbreak of the smallpox epidemic, not only the human population, but also animal populations, such as elk and deer had declined. It is possible that livestock brought to North America by European traders and settlers could have spread diseases, such as anthrax and hoof-and-mouth disease. This may have affected animal populations in the central subarctic as well.

22. See Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1670-1870*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 23. An example of how historical and geographical theories have been proved wrong through oral history and archaeological investigation can be found in the history of the Muskego and Muskego Peoples of the Hudson Bay lowlands. Based on a handful of historical sources, the lowlands were long considered by writers such as Charles Bishop to have been traditionally uninhabited (at least for much of the year), the land being too inhospitable to sustain human occupation on a year-round basis. Cree groups, they argued, only moved into the region after the arrival of the HBC on the coast so as to take advantage of new trading opportunities. However, more recent oral, ethnographic, and archaeological work has shown that the lowlands region has been inhabited for thousands of years, prior to the HBC fur trade.