

THE KEEWATIN INUIT  
AND INTERBAND TRADE AND COMMUNICATIONS  
1717-1900

BY

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A thesis  
presented to the University of Manitoba  
in fulfillment of the  
thesis requirement for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies

Department of History  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
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## ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Inuit of west Hudson Bay were expanding southward from the area around Chesterfield Inlet into the fringes of Chipewyan territory. Almost simultaneously with the move into new territory, they established first contact with Europeans. Between 1718 and 1790, Hudson's Bay Company ships made frequent trading voyages to the coast camps. While the Inuit learned about European trading methods, in some ways adapting their own ways to those of the newcomers, in other ways forcing changes upon the Company, they maintained relations, including trade, with the Chipewyan to the south and west, and with more northerly Inuit groups.

After the Hudson's Bay Company trading voyages ended in 1790, the south Keewatin people began to make regular trips to the post at Churchill combining their harvesting of marine mammal oils with trading activity. In the process they began to spend more time inland, hunting greater numbers of the furs most in demand by the Company, and amassing a surplus of European goods. The surplus was much in demand by other Inuit groups farther to the north.

Although a purely native trade existed before Europeans arrived in the arctic, the number of trade items was limited and trading contacts were probably infrequent. The presence

of highly desirable European items on the west coast of Hudson Bay led to an increase in the number and frequency of trading contacts among Inuit groups. Pre-contact Inuit geographical knowledge was extensive, and routes linking neighbouring bands from Siberia to Greenland were known. Certain sites along the travel routes, frequented by more than one group or band, had long been gathering places where social, economic and commercial activities took place, and they continued to be used as trade centres for the dissemination of European goods.

Perhaps because opportunities to trade were limited in the pre-contact situation, the Keewatin Inuit seem to have lacked trading rituals of the kind developed by many North American Indian groups. Goods exchange was not connected to individual prestige or alliances between groups. Inuit perceptions and conduct of trade paralleled European commercial understandings and behaviour more closely than those of their neighbours.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research and writing, though solitary in the execution, are nevertheless social activities, growing out of the hands and minds of many people. The person most closely associated with my work over the past two years has been my teacher, faculty advisor, thesis supervisor, and friend, Professor Jennifer S.H. Brown, of the University of Winnipeg. To her go my first words of thanks. To the members of my thesis committee, Professor D.N. Sprague and Professor Jean Friesen of the University of Manitoba, and Professor Chris Meiklejohn of the University of Winnipeg, I wish to express my appreciation. I recognize a further debt to both Dr Sprague and Dr Friesen who have also been my teachers and have taught me a great deal.

I am also indebted to the librarians of the Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, especially those in the Inter-Library Loan Department, and to the archivists of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

The last word of thanks must go to Professor Gerald Friesen of the University of Manitoba, although in chronological order his was the first word of encouragement that set me on my course.

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## CHAPTER 1

### EVIDENCE AND EYE-WITNESSES

#### Historiography of Inuit Trade and Communications

The existence of communications networks, including the exchange of ideas and objects, over great distances among the Inuit of the Canadian arctic is attested by the relative homogeneity of Inuit customs, language and material culture, noted by the earliest northern ethnographers (Boas 1964 [1888]:11; Rink 1975 [1891]:4,18) and by the presence of non-indigenous artifacts in places far distant from their points of origin. Archaeological evidence supports the notion that communications, commerce, and social relations persisted among widely-separated Inuit groups over many centuries both before and after the arrival of Europeans.

Manufactured objects found in the Canadian arctic far from their areas of origin raise questions concerning the means and circumstances of their relocation. Possible explanations exist for some of them. A pendant of Norse copper found on the east coast of Hudson Bay (McCartney and Mack 1973:336), a drilled bead of Scandinavian amber (Mathiassen 1927:72), iron boat rivets, knife blades, fragments of Norse chain mail and scraps of woven wool cloth discovered on Skraeling Island a few miles off the coast of Ellesmere Island (Schledermann 1981:575) in pre-sixteenth



century Inuit sites must also have come from Greenland and may have been moved by a number of different means -- transported by Norse explorers or Inuit travellers, or by a combination of both, and by several different routes.

Meteoritic iron tool and weapon fragments found at Naujan (Mathiassen 1927:72, 82-3), though not definitely identifiable as Norse, are also associated with Greenland; they could only have come from the Cape York, Greenland, meteorite shower<sup>1</sup> or the eastern coast of Ellesmere Island where a very few fragments from this shower are known to have landed (McCartney and Mack 1973:329,332).

William Fitzhugh suggests that the pendant and other objects may have been carried to the Richmond Gulf area by Norse explorers or traders. He believes that the presence of Norse items in Inuit territory has

forced a reappraisal of the previous model emphasizing unplanned and infrequent Eskimo interaction with Norse explorers. The growing number of new finds ... suggest that trade with Canadian Eskimo groups provided a significant incentive for Norse voyages west of Greenland (Fitzhugh 1985:29).

Peter Schledermann, the discoverer of the Skraeling Island artifacts, agrees that Norsemen may have reached Ellesmere Island or the coasts of Hudson Bay in spite of the absence of written records of such voyages, but he also suggests that Greenland Inuit may have acquired the objects

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<sup>1</sup> Meteoritic iron is site-specific. Its place of origin can be identified by laboratory tests.

through trade with Norse residents of Greenland or by looting their abandoned villages, and that trade between Greenland and Canadian Inuit may account for their wide dispersion through the arctic (Schliedermann 1981:600).

Although European items from the period of southwest Greenland's Norse occupation are easily recognized as foreign objects and their presence in Inuit sites can be attributed to Norse voyaging, other objects, not associated with Greenland and Norse voyagers, can only have been transported to various sites by the indigenous peoples themselves. Metal-tipped "dartes," possibly arrow or spear heads, found on Silimiut Island just south of Cape Fullerton in Hudson Bay by Luke Foxe in 1631, have been variously identified as fashioned from nails salvaged from Jens Munk's abandoned ship (Christy 1894:320), as Norse iron from Greenland (McCartney and Mack 1973:334), and as native copper from the arctic coast (Merbs 1971:22). Whatever the real nature and origin of the "dartes," their occurrence at Silimiut can only be the result of Inuit long-distance harvesting of resources or by trade.

Objects made entirely of native materials in native styles are less easily recognized as imported items, but their presence in areas far from their place of origin can also be explained only by the existence of widespread Inuit communications, either long-distance resource harvesting or native trade systems. Items originating in Coronation Gulf

but found on the west coast of Hudson Bay point to an exchange network that could transport and transmit articles across a thousand miles, around or through the territories of at least four major native groups. Examples of articles from this category include the Coronation Gulf copper artifacts found in pre-sixteenth century sites at Naujan (Repulse Bay) during the Fifth Thule Expedition excavations (Mathiassen 1927:82-3), a Copper Eskimo ivory comb discovered at Pelly Bay (George Swinton, pers. comm. 1988), and an ivory pendant and seal skin shoes of Copper Eskimo design collected on the west coast of Hudson Bay, probably by Captain George Comer for Franz Boas (Boas 1975 [1901]:107-8,113). The five-hundred year old copper fragments from Naujan and the more recently manufactured items from the Comer-Boas collection indicate that the Inuit were able to move goods between the arctic coast and the west coast of Hudson Bay at least on some occasions prior to Euro-Inuit contact.

In the first scientific monograph on the Canadian Inuit, Franz Boas recognized that some essential raw materials had to be obtained from distant places, through trade or through harvesting. He concluded, however, that while long-distance resource harvesting occurred, travel and trade between groups seldom, if ever, took place. He believed that communication among Inuit bands was limited to immediately neighbouring groups who shared kinship links,

while more widely separated groups were strangers whose accidental encounters were often occasions of fear and mutual hostility (Boas 1964 [1888]:54,56).

Most other scientific ethnographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries -- Gustav Holm, William Thalbitzer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Diamond Jenness, Knud Rasmussen, Therkel Mathiasson and Kaj Birket-Smith -- believed that communication and commerce occurred between neighbouring bands within regional dialect groups.

Gustav Holm, investigating the Ammassalik people of East Greenland in 1883-85, the same period in which Boas was observing the people of south Baffin Island<sup>2</sup>, saw no evidence of long journeys undertaken in order to gather raw materials directly. Instead he confirmed what the missionary Hans Egede had written a century and a half earlier -- that East Greenlanders, like their compatriots, routinely made long journeys to get goods through trade, but did not engage in long-distance resource harvesting. Egede's South Greenland informants told him in 1728 that "two years previously natives had been among them from the east side, who had brought with them large pieces of whalebone, to

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<sup>2</sup> Franz Boas' The Central Eskimo, based on field work done in 1883-84 during the German Arctic Expedition, was published in 1888. In the same year Gustav Holm's Ethnological Sketch of the Angmagssalik Eskimo, based on observations made in 1883-85 during the Danish Expedition to Northeast Greenland, was published in Danish.

exchange them for other things they desired" (Thalbitzer 1914:334).

Vilhjalmur Stefansson's (1914) study of the Copper Eskimo remains the only inclusive description of the extent and mechanics of communications and commerce among Canadian Inuit groups. He believed that trading connections existed between neighbouring groups across the arctic from Siberia to the west coast of Hudson Bay. His description of Copper Eskimo trade systems, commodities and routes, however, did not include analysis of Inuit perceptions of trade, the rules by which trade was conducted, or the position and status of trading as a social activity within bands. Personal interviews, oral histories and remembered readings formed the basis of Stefansson's analysis, as he himself pointed out.

So far as a research might be based on the published or unpublished accounts of the explorers of the past, this essay will be found wanting, for the sources are not at hand where this is written. ... Books are not at hand for exact citations (Stefansson 1914:1,4).

He was writing while living in a tent on the arctic coast hoping that a boat would be able to make its way through floating ice pans to a rendezvous arranged a year earlier.

Knud Rasmussen, Therkel Mathiassen and Kaj Birket-Smith, of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24, believed that interband trading relations had existed among Inuit for centuries in the Canadian arctic as they had in Greenland.

Rasmussen, in particular, theorized that the people made long voyages both to trade and to gather resources, and met regularly at designated 'market' centres similar to those of Greenland (1930b:27-28). However, the Fifth Thule Expedition report offered no detailed account of goods exchange among bands within the Caribou Eskimo regional group or between them and other groups comparable to Stefansson's description of Copper Eskimo trade networks. Research since 1950 has not filled these gaps. Although many sociological studies of Inuit adaptation to the permanent presence of southerners in the arctic have been done, few questions have been asked about Inuit history or economic relations before permanent European contact, and fewer answers suggested.

Of all Inuit groups, the Alaskan and Greenlandic have been most often studied. Reconstructions of North Alaskan trade by Robert F. Spencer (1959) and Douglas D. Anderson (1974) discussed trade routes and commodities, and also attempted to analyze native motivations and understandings of goods exchange.

Descriptions of Greenlandic economic life and trading activities also are limited to the post-contact period, for the obvious reason that Euro-Greenlandic contact first took place before A.D. 1000. The only study of native-controlled trade and goods exchange at the beginning of the second Danish colonization of Greenland in the eighteenth century

was done by Inge Klieven (1984). He gave little consideration to native motivations and the place of trade in social life.

Canadian Inuit commercial relations before permanent European contact have received little attention. Robert S. James (1973), James G.E. Smith (1981), and Smith and Ernest S. Burch Jr (1979) addressed one aspect of Inuit 'external affairs' -- their relations with their Chipewyan Indian neighbours. They concluded that trade, cooperative hunting, exchange of intellectual culture such as language and shamanistic arts, and seasonal sharing of territory were more characteristic of the relations between the two groups than the unremitting hostility described by Chief Factor James Knight (Knight 1932 [1717]). The only study which deals specifically with Canadian Inuit interband economic activity is James Savelle's 1985 reconstruction of Netsilik territorial expansion following the abandonment of three European ships<sup>3</sup> with their abundant supplies of wood and metal on the borders of Netsilik territory. Savelle has traced trade routes, noted the emergence of middlemen in native trade, and described the devastating effects of Netsilik expansion on neighbouring groups.

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<sup>3</sup> Captain John Ross's ship, Victory, was abandoned on the east coast of Boothia Peninsula in 1832. The ships of the John Franklin Expedition, Erebus and Terror, were deserted by their crews in Victoria Strait off the northwest coast of King William Island in 1848.

Several reasons might be advanced to explain why Inuit history, in general, and Inuit commercial history, in particular, have not been adequately researched and written. Perhaps Inuit history has been ignored or denied because it does not conform to the familiar European patterns. All individuals in Inuit society tend to be occupied, not in invasion, conquest, treaty-making or manipulation of populations, as the 'movers and shakers' of some societies are, but in providing and caring for small family units in isolation. Such essentially peaceful, domestic activities have long been seen as both feminine and lower class, and in the traditionally male-centred and elitist context of older European historiography domestic and lower class concerns were not only undervalued, but often overlooked entirely. The apparent absence of political structures and military activity, and the domestic and isolated nature of the economy, have disqualified the Inuit past as serious history.

If the Inuit past has not been accepted and written as history, it has been repeatedly described as enduringly static, experiencing only minimal changes which are attributed to forces outside the control of the people concerned. The anthropologists' concept of the ethnographic present is a reason why the Inuit past has not been subjected to the usual methods of historical research and interpretation. The notion of an ethnographic present



reinforces, perhaps even arises from, the assumption that "only those people which have succeeded in organizing their society in some degree cease to be primitive savages and enter into history" (Carr 1964:127). The 'organization' referred to was, of course, organization which was recognizable to European historians, and involved obvious and identifiable institutions such as armies, banks, codified laws and law enforcement, centralized governments, and bureaucracies. Societies without these institutions, or in which these institutions take decidedly un-European forms, were, by definition, primitive and savage. The 'history' of which Carr writes is European history.<sup>4</sup>

Because socio-economic institutions similar to the European models were not immediately apparent, the earliest scientific observers of Inuit life assumed that complex, dynamic political and economic systems did not exist. This impression persists in spite of the work done by the first four scientific studies of Canadian arctic peoples: the Baffin Island field work of Franz Boas in 1883-84; the Stefansson-Anderson Arctic Expedition to the Mackenzie Eskimo in 1908-12; the Canadian Arctic Expedition to study

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<sup>4</sup> The use of the ethnonym 'European' in this context is misleading because it is not inclusive. Europeans are not the only people who have undervalued and ignored unfamiliar cultures, nor are historians. By the same token, Europeans and others, whether historians or not, have unhesitatingly recognized some unfamiliar societies, such as those of Pharaonic Egypt and Mohenjodaran India, as well as some modern Asian societies as neither primitive nor savage.

the Copper Eskimo in 1913-18, of which Vilhjalmur Stefansson and Diamond Jenness were members; and the Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921-24, led by Knud Rasmussen, and including Kaj Birket-Smith and Therkel Mathiassen, which examined all the major groups of the Central Eskimo. The work done by these expeditions included detailed observation and description of Inuit customs, religious beliefs, occupations, recreations and physical characteristics; genealogies; a census; collecting of songs, music, folklore, and material artifacts; archaeological excavations; and oral histories. The resulting publications are a vast reservoir of observations of Inuit life within families and local residential bands, but large-group interactions, such as trade and commerce, interband meetings, long-distance travel, and 'foreign' relations were seldom observed or described.

The assumption that source material cannot exist in non-literate societies that create no contemporary, emic, 'documentary' accounts of events is yet another reason why little has been done to reconstruct Inuit history. However, observation does not have to be direct or emic. What is needed is, as Raymond Fogelson has pointed out, "an expanded conception of what constitutes documentation" (Fogelson 1989:134). Twentieth century 'observers' can view nineteenth century life through the accounts of eye-witnesses, whether written or oral histories, and through maps, artifacts and

mythologies. Rasmussen and Stefansson were, in effect, doing so when they recorded the oral histories of elderly informants, and Boas and Jenness did it when they searched explorers' accounts for clues about their subjects' past histories. Rasmussen's belief in an indigenous trading centre in the Canadian barren lands came from his acceptance of mythology as historical documentation.

The existence of a number of logs, diaries and journals kept by European explorers, traders, whalers, missionaries and travellers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the nature of the contact experience of the Canadian Inuit, particularly the Keewatin people, combine to make possible the retrieval of at least some west Hudson Bay pre-contact human history.

The contact experience of the Inuit differed considerably from that of Indian groups to the south. Encounters were brief, infrequent and sporadic. During the nearly two centuries between the first tenuous encounters at the beginning of the eighteenth century and the pervasive contact of the twentieth when Inuit life was heavily influenced by a permanent, alien presence, the intellectual culture, and to a large extent, the material culture of the west Hudson Bay people were only slightly affected.

Before whaling began in 1860 the Eskimo groups inhabiting western Hudson Bay and Foxe Basin had been affected very little by direct contact with European culture.... Eskimo-white contacts were few and far between and did not result in any

significant modification of the aboriginal culture (W.G.Ross 1985:16-17).

The encounters, nevertheless, provided an opportunity for observation and the production of written descriptions of a few aspects of native life. Most of the eye-witnesses were trained observers -- Hudson's Bay Company officers, ships' captains, and leaders of exploration or survey expeditions. They had not only education and rank but also orders from their superiors to keep complete and accurate records of their meetings with native peoples. The daily journals and account books of the Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort Churchill from 1717 to 1860 and the logs of Company ships on the northwest coast between 1718 and 1790 contain considerable information on Inuit demography, material culture, and socio-economic relations, as do memoirs of a few Company employees. Other information and points of view are contained in the accounts written by explorers, expedition leaders, sportsmen, whalers, missionaries and civil servants between 1820 and 1920. Such second-hand accounts must be approached with caution and the biases and assumptions of the observers identified. Andrew Graham's description of seventeenth century Caribou Eskimo, for example, draws heavily on David Crantz' *History of Greenland* (1765) which does not apply to Canadian peoples, and on his own superficial experiences with the people of Hudson Strait as well as his encounters with the Hudson Bay Eskimo.

Richard Glover's cautionary remarks in his introduction to Graham's **Observations** are worth repeating.

Graham can have met Eskimos there [on Hudson Straits] on two occasions at most, on his voyages out in 1749 and 1770. As a youth he had sailed on the trading voyages north from Churchill in 1750, 1751 and 1752 to Knapp's Bay, Navel's Bay and Whale Cove. He had also known well the four Eskimo youths who had been at Churchill in 1774 and 1775. Anthropologists must then be warned, first, that Graham's observations cover two quite different groups of Eskimos; second, that he had seen very little of either on their native hunting grounds; third, that he had seen them there only in summer; and fourth, that much of what he has to say consists of boyhood recollections written down by a middle-aged man (Glover 1969:xl<sup>ii</sup>-xl<sup>iii</sup>).<sup>5</sup>

However, if the personal and cultural biases of eye-witnesses are understood and critically analysed, their observations provide considerable information on the events and activities of the Inuit past.

The last descriptions of Keewatin peoples to be written before permanent contact with newcomers are the abundant oral histories included in the **Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition** of 1921-24. In addition to the written records, artifacts and native-drawn maps are sources of information on Inuit activities during the pre- and early contact periods.

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<sup>5</sup> Glover's choice of anthropologists, rather than historians, as the target of his warning reveals his own assumption that the Inuit past would be of interest to the former, but not the latter -- a failure to recognize the existence of an Inuit **history**.