

FURS ALONG THE YUKON:
HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY - NATIVE TRADE
IN THE YUKON RIVER BASIN, 1830-1893

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by
Kenneth Stephen Coates

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	iv
LIST OF MAPS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
NATIVE TRADE	8
EUROPEAN EXPLORATION	25
ESTABLISHMENT OF TRADE	57
ROBERT CAMPBELL AND THE PELLY RIVER TRADE	67
INTRODUCTION TO THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	90
HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY PREDOMINANCE 1847-1863	96
EXPANDING COMPETITION 1864-1874	123
DECLINING TRADE 1875-1893	152
CONCLUSION	176
BIBLIOGRAPHY	184
APPENDIX A	197

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. H.B.C. Fur Returns and Outfit Costs 1847-1863	99
2. H.B.C. Expenses and Profits 1847-1863	101
3. H.B.C. Fur Receipts by Species 1847-1863	112
4. H.B.C. Indent 1847-1863	114
5. Payments to Indians, Gratuities and Indian Debt 1847-1863	117
6. H.B.C. Fur Returns and Outfit Costs 1864-1874	133
7. H.B.C. Expenses and Profits 1864-1874	136
8. H.B.C. Fur Receipts by Species 1864-1874	143
9. H.B.C. Indent 1864-1874	144
10. Payments to Indians, Gratuities and Indian Debt 1864-1874	146
11. H.B.C. Fur Returns and Outfit Costs 1875-1892	158
12. H.B.C. Expenses and Profits 1875-1892	160
13. H.B.C. Fur Receipts by Species 1875-1892	164
14. H.B.C. Indent 1875-1892	167
15. Payments to Indians, Gratuities and Indian Debt 1875-1892	170

LIST OF MAPS

Map	Page
1. Tribal Distributions in the Northwest	11
2. Kutchin Band Distribution	18
3. Hudson's Bay Company Exploration Routes 1831-1872	51
4. Hudson's Bay Company Trading Posts in the Yukon River Basin	63

INTRODUCTION

It has been suggested, not without considerable justification, that there may have been an overemphasis on the fur trade in the historiography of the Canadian west and middle north.¹ While this may be true for some sections of western and northern Canada, it cannot be said for the Yukon River basin. The written history of the Yukon Territory, with only scattered exceptions, is the history of the Klondike Gold Rush. Numerous diaries, biographies, articles and historical studies have been written on that brief (1896-1904) period while previous historiography of the fur trade in the region is, in contrast, very limited both in scope and quantity.

Most of the literature of the pre-1900 fur trade can be classified as strictly narrative accounts of the trials and exploits of the various explorers and traders (primarily those employed by the Hudson's Bay Company) active in the area. Of these, the most comprehensive study is Prelude to Bonanza by A.A. Wright.² This work discusses the pre-gold rush activities of the non-native population in what is now the Yukon Territory, including those of American and H.B.C. fur traders, early prospectors, missionaries and scientists.

Besides Prelude to Bonanza and Clifford Wilson's Campbell of the Yukon, several articles have appeared,

primarily in the Beaver, relating to isolated aspects of the fur trade along the Yukon River and its tributaries.³ Unfortunately, none of these studies deal in any significant way with the Yukon trade after 1870. Following the appearance of (comparatively) large numbers of white men engaged in a variety of activities including surveying, missionary work, mining, exploration, and adventure seeking, the fur trade lost its place as the most important non-native pursuit in the area, although it did remain vital to the local natives. Discussions of the operations of the H.B.C. and other fur traders between 1870 and 1893 (when the H.B.C. withdrew from the region) have been restricted to those occasions when their activities were of consequence to other white travellers.

Within the framework of the Hudson's Bay Company's North American operations, the Yukon fur trade, especially after 1869, bordered on the inconsequential. It is not surprising, therefore, that the major works on the Canadian fur trade deal with the Yukon River basin in only a parenthetical fashion, if at all. For example, Harold A. Innis' monumental The Fur Trade in Canada uses the Yukon trade as an example of the transportation difficulties overcome by the Company in the pursuit of trade, but does not analyze the changing patterns of trade during the firm's forty-six year tenure in the region.⁴

The most important work on the Canadian North

after 1870, Morris Zaslow's The Opening of the Canadian North 1870-1914, refers to the departure of the H.B.C. from the Yukon only in passing. In a short section dealing with the declining northern fur trade, Zaslow suggests that falling fur prices in Europe, over-trapping of fur bearing animals, and a shortage of provisions had led to declining H.B.C. profits and had forced a "retrenchment" of the trade.⁵ Given the general character of his study, it is understandable that Professor Zaslow did not discuss how any of these particular factors related to the Yukon trade, or suggest why that particular region was singled out for abandonment.

There also exists an interesting and extensive body of ethnographic literature on the natives and native trade in the Yukon River area. Of these works, Adrian Tanner's thesis "The Structure of Fur Trade Relations" is the most relevant to the present study. As the title suggests, Tanner's thesis deals with the structure of relations between participants in the Yukon fur trade from the pre-contact period to the present day. The thesis contains excellent analysis of the function of native partnerships, trading chiefs, the individual debt system, and market trade.⁶ The study, however, is concerned primarily with the manner in which trade was conducted and does not discuss the effect of competition on either the H.B.C. or the natives, beyond mentioning the structural variations (i.e.

the shift of a large number of the Indians to the American trading area) in the trade. Besides Tanner's thesis, there are a number of other works which deal with the structure and function of the fur trade in native societies in the Yukon River watershed, but none link the native trade to the trade of the Hudson's Bay Company or vice-versa.⁷

Existing literature on the fur trade in the Yukon stops short of providing an understanding of the effect of competitive trade on either the H.B.C. or the natives' relations with the Company. Despite the continued significance of the firm in the fur trade after 1870, the few studies which exist of the post-1870 period have tended to ignore the H.B.C. and concentrate on the activities of others.

The following study is not intended to be a narrative account of the Hudson's Bay Company's tenure in the Yukon River basin. Instead, an attempt will be made to analyze the Company's motives and incentives for undertaking the costly voyages of exploration and for establishing posts in the new regions. The natives' response to the appearance of the European traders, the emergence of competition and its effects on the trade of both the H.B.C. and the local natives and, finally, the reasons for the Company's total withdrawal from the region in 1893 will also be examined.

This approach to the study of the fur trade has

been adopted elsewhere with considerable success. Robin Fisher's Contact and Conflict and Give Us Good Measure by A.J. Ray and Donald Freeman are but the most recent examples of this type of analysis. Both these works, although dealing with different chronological and geographical reference points than this study, offer valuable insights into the structure of the fur trade and the effects of competition on Indian-white trading patterns. These two studies (as do others) illustrate convincingly that the natives played a major role in determining the structure and content of the fur trade, and were ready to exploit and encourage competitive trade whenever and wherever it occurred.⁸ By developing the concepts brought forth by these authors, it is intended to place the Yukon River trade in the wider context of the Canadian fur trade, and show that the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company and the natives in this region fit into a larger pattern of Indian-white relations, a pattern extant in North America from the first days of the Company's trade along the shores of the Hudson's Bay.

NOTES - INTRODUCTION

¹Morris Zaslow, The Opening of the Canadian North (Toronto: Macmillan and Stewart, 1971), p. 309.

²Alan Wright, Prelude to Bonanza (Sidney, B.C.: Grey's Publishing, 1976).

³Clifford Wilson, Campbell of the Yukon (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970); C.L. Andrews, "Alexander Hunter Murray, Founder of Fort Yukon," Alaska Life, Vol. 10, No. 4 (April 1947), 4-6, 21; B.D. Lain, "The Fort Yukon Affair, 1869," Alaska Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 1977), 12-7; C. Parnell, "Campbell of the Yukon, pt. 1," Beaver, Outfit 273 (June 1942), 4-6; C. Parnell, "Campbell of the Yukon, pt. 2," Beaver, Outfit 273 (September 1942), 16-18; C. Parnell and J. Kirk, "Campbell of the Yukon, pt. 3," Beaver, Outfit 273 (December 1942), 23-37; R. Watson, "Chief Trader Alexander Hunter Murray and Fort Youcon," Beaver, Outfit 260 (June 1929), 211-3.

⁴Harold Innis, The Fur Trade in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975). See also A.S. Morton, A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); E.E. Rich, The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

⁵Zaslow, The Opening of the Canadian North. Zaslow's work on the H.B.C. after 1870 is based largely on an MA thesis he supervised. See Gary Sealey, "The History of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1870-1910" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1967).

⁶Adrian Tanner, "The Structure of Fur Trade Relations" (unpublished MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1966).

⁷Asen Balikci, Vunta Kutchin Social Change (Ottawa: Northern Co-ordination and Research Centre, 1963); Shepard Krech, "The Eastern Kutchin and the Fur Trade, 1800-1860," Ethnohistory, 23/3 (Summer 1976), 213-35; D. Leechman, Vunta Kutchin, National Museum of Canada Bulletin, No. 130 (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1954); Catherine McClellan, "Culture contacts in the early historic period in Northwestern North America," Arctic Anthropology, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1964), 3-15; Catherine McClellan, My Old People Say (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1975); Cornelius Osgood, Contribu-

tions to the Ethnography of the Kutchin, Yale University Publications in Anthropology, No. 14 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936); c. Osgood, The Han Indians, Yale University Publications in Anthropology, No. 74 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); C. Osgood, "Kutchin Tribal Distribution and Nomenclature," American Anthropologist, Vol. 36 (1934), 168-179; William Ostenstat, "The Impact of the Fur Trade on the Tlingit" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1976).

⁸ Robin Fisher, Contact and Conflict (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977); A.J. Ray and Donald Freeman, Give Us Good Measure (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

NATIVE TRADE

Long before European traders entered the Yukon River basin, the natives of the region had developed extensive inter-tribal trading networks. Originally established to facilitate the exchange of indigenous commodities, these pre-contact trading arrangements were, with some modifications, used to pass on European manufactures after Russian and British traders arrived on the periphery of the region. After the Hudson's Bay Company penetrated the area in the 1840's, a task made extremely difficult by the existence of these networks, the Company used many of these inter-tribal connections as a means of further expanding their own trading hinterland. It is important, therefore, to the subsequent analysis of the H.B.C.'s activities in the Yukon to first understand the structure and content of this pre-contact trade.

Almost all of the goods traded before the arrival of European traders on the periphery were region-specific. The Tlingit Indians, for example, who inhabited the area now referred to as the Alaskan panhandle, traded such goods as dried fish, eulachon oil, shell ornaments and cedar bark baskets with the interior tribes. In return, they received, among other items, caribou and moose hides, moccasins, and placer copper.¹

The Kutchin Indians traded through intermediaries

with natives from the Bering Strait for such coastal produce as skin clothing, oil and bone. To the north, the Inuit traded primarily sea-based products, including seal oil, walrus tusks and whale bone, although they did exchange furs as well. It is important to note that trade in many native commodities, primarily those without manufactured supplements, continued long after the H.B.C. had entered the region.²

In addition to inter-regional trade, there was limited intra-regional exchange involving native commodities and, of course, the trade of extra-regional goods by natives within a region. The Kunta Kutchin (Yukon Flats), for example, had no caribou herds in their vicinity, so in order to procure a supply of the hides of these animals, they turned to trade with other native groups, presumably offering in return such products as dried salmon which they had in abundance.³

This aboriginal trade was conducted on a fairly regular basis throughout the region. With the arrival of Russian and British traders along the Pacific coast and on the Mackenzie River, however, the inter-tribal trade networks assumed even greater importance.

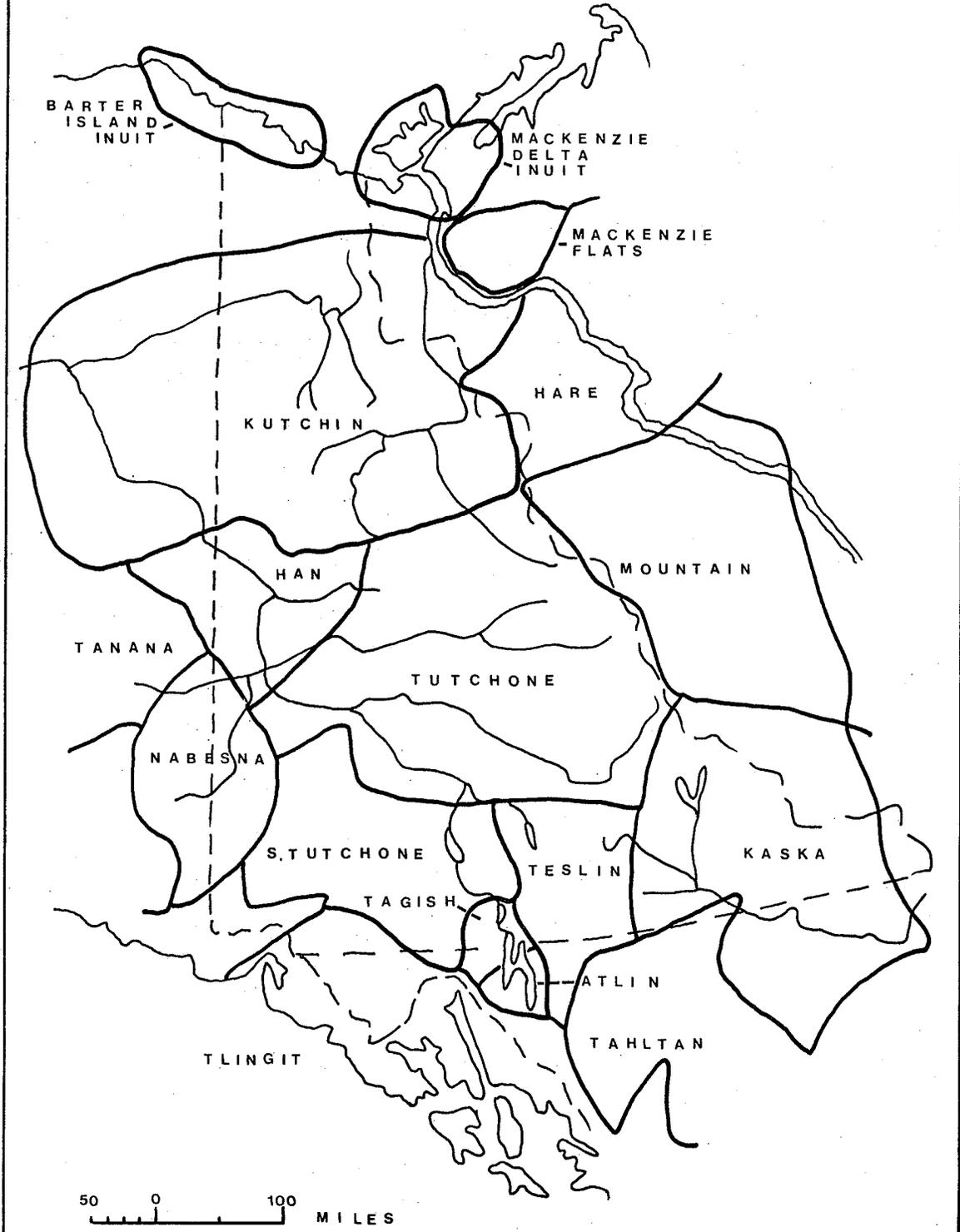
The elaborate patterns of inter-tribal exchange which developed in the pre-contact period reached virtually every part of the Yukon River watershed, and involved not only the natives inhabiting that area, but also those in

contiguous geographical regions. In fact, the trade was not so much intra-regional as it was inter-regional, with the exchange being conducted between the Indians in the Yukon basin serving primarily to facilitate the transfer of goods originating outside that area. While there was, for instance, considerable pre-contact trade between the Kutchin and the Han, and the Han and the Tutchone, it was mainly restricted to the exchange of goods received from either the Inuit of the Arctic slope or the Tlingit of the Pacific north-west coast.

The latter group, the Tlingits, conducted the most vigorous and extensive inter-tribal trade of any of the native groups in the area. Originally developed in the pre-historic period as a means of exchanging coastal products for those of the interior, the Tlingits' inland connections became increasingly important in the late eighteenth century, when hunting pressure along the coast had led to a serious depletion of the sea-otter herds, the mainstay of the Tlingit trading economy at that time. Anxious to preserve their profitable trade with the Europeans, these natives expanded their inland trading operations, replacing their exhausted coastal reserves with the more bountiful fur resources of the interior.⁴

With access to the inland tribes largely blocked by the coastal mountain range, the Tlingits were forced to use one of five principle routes providing access to the

TRIBAL DISTRIBUTIONS IN THE NORTH-WEST



Adapted from A. Tanner, "The Structure of Fur Trade Relations," and P. Usher, "Canadian Western Arctic: A Century of Change."

interior. Four of the interior routes followed the major rivers flowing out of the mountains; the Alsek, Chilcat, Taku and Stikine Rivers, while the fifth crossed the Chilcoot Pass, later made famous by the Klondike Gold Rush. The Tlingits' inland trade was remarkably extensive, reaching as far east as the Finlay and Liard Rivers and well up into the Yukon River watershed, with trade being conducted directly with the Tagish, Inland Tlingit, Southern and Northern Tutchone, Han, Kaska, Tahtla and Sikani Indians. Other natives, including the Kutchin, were drawn into the Tlingit trade through additional inter-tribal trading connections.⁵

The coastal Tlingit, themselves a highly diverse people comprising thirteen "qwans," did not have universal access to the trails. Each of the routes was controlled by an individual clan, a sub-unit of a qwan, who alone determined who was to be allowed to cross the pass. Any attempt to break through these transportation monopolies was bitterly resented and often violently prevented.⁶

At the northern extremity of the region, similar exchange had long been a feature of inter-tribal relations. This trade, which originated largely with the introduction of European manufactures, followed two principle lines. The first, travelling east-west, encompassed exchange between the Point Barrow Inuit and the approximately 250 natives (also Eskimo) inhabiting the Arctic coast between

Shingle Point and Barter Island. Additional trade was conducted along a north-south continuum, and involved the Inuit in trade with the Kutchin Indians. Following either the Coleen and Firth Rivers or the Old Crow and Babbage Rivers, Indians from the interior made regular journeys to trade with the coastal natives.⁷

The intermediaries between these two trading 'blocks' were the Han Indians, centrally located in a lucrative middleman position between the Kutchin Indians and the trading hinterland of the Tlingit (Chilcat qwan).⁸ Trading first indigenous goods and later European manufactures with the Tlingits, the Han in turn exchanged these commodities with the Kutchin. C. Osgood raises the possibility that trading goods from the North West Company post built at Fort Norman in approximately 1810 reached the Han Indians via the neighbouring Mountain Indians, but he was not able to provide any evidence for this suggestion.⁹

The Kutchin Indians, and to a lesser degree the Han, as well, were not tied to the north-south trade. In addition to their connections with the Han and, indirectly, with the Tlingit, the Kutchin had also developed extensive trading contacts with native groups on the lower Yukon River. Although these networks existed long before the arrival of Europeans, they became increasingly active after the appearance of Russian traders along the coast in the late eighteenth century. By trading with the Tanana Indians, who

inhabited the region just to the west of the Kutchin, the latter natives received a relatively steady supply of Russian trade goods to supplement their receipts from the Tlingit trade.¹⁰ As a result of these developments in the pre-contact trade, however, the Kutchin, especially the eastern bands (Peel River, Mackenzie River, and Upper Porcupine River) were in a highly dependent position, requiring indirect, inter-tribal trade to secure a supply of the highly-valued European goods.

The arrival of European traders (first of the N.W.C. and later the H.B.C.) on the lower Mackenzie River after 1804, reversed the traditionally subordinate trading role of the Kutchin Indians. The formerly dependent eastern bands now established themselves in a highly lucrative middleman position vis-a-vis the natives to the west, including the other Kutchin bands, the Han and Tanana Indians, and the Eskimo. The Hudson's Bay Company's expansion to the Peel River in 1840 further strengthened the east-west trading network, one which, as will be seen later, the natives did their utmost to protect.

Originally established as a means of exchanging indigenous commodities between geographical regions, inter-tribal trade assumed a new importance following the arrival of European traders on the periphery of the Yukon River basin. The maintenance of these trading routes, however, depended not upon the traditional importance or the size of trade

conducted along a particular route, but on the availability and price of European manufactures. The Tlingit Indians, trading in the highly volatile and competitive market along the coast were able to retain, if not expand, their share of the interior trade despite the incursions of rival native traders and the Hudson's Bay Company. This resulted not from trading loyalty between the interior natives and their Tlingit suppliers, but simply because the Tlingits were able to provide a comparable range of trade goods at competitive prices. The Kutchin, conversely, had been largely dependent in the pre-contact period, relying on other bands for their supplies of European goods. With the expansion of trade into their area, however, they were able to reverse roles with their trading partners and establish themselves in a solid, but not permanent, middleman position.

Pre-contact trade was, it is clear, very extensive throughout the Yukon River basin. The success of this exchange depended upon the maintenance of trading relations with various native groups outside the area, Eskimo, Tlingit and Tanana, who provided either European manufactures or natural products, primarily furs. To facilitate inter-tribal trade, a variety of institutional arrangements developed to ensure the profitable continuation of the exchange. These institutions, some of which were adaptations of existing inter-tribal arrangements and others created specifically for European trade, varied greatly according