

Matonabbee (ca. 1736-1782)

Ask "the man in the street" who was the most outstanding Indian leader of the past, and he is likely to say "Sitting Bull", unless, of course, he comes from Ontario, and then he may say "Tecumseh". Yet one may doubt whether either of these was abler than the Chipewyan diplomat, trader, and explorer, Matonabbee — Samuel Hearne's guide on his final, and successful, journey to the Coppermine River.

Long before white men started importing Africans to their settlements in eastern America, slavery was well known among the Indians, and Matonabbee's mother was a "slave woman" who had been traded to the Hudson's Bay Company at Prince of Wales's Fort at Churchill. There Richard Norton, the fort's governor (1731-41), gave her to the Chipewyan man who became Matonabbee's father.

Nearly all we know about him comes from Hearne, who was so long employed at that post. Matonabbee was early orphaned, and for a while Governor Norton adopted him. He rejoined his Chipewyan relatives after Norton retired in 1741, but he returned to Prince of Wales's Fort at Churchill in 1752, when Ferdinand Jacobs was appointed governor and "employed [him] in the hunting service" — i.e. supplying the fort's larder with game.

At Churchill Matonabbee learned much. He became a "perfect master" of the Cree language, as well as his native Chipewyan; he "made some progress in English" too. Hearne records the interesting fact that he could "tell a better story of our Saviour's birth and life than one half of those who call themselves Christians" — but he never believed it! However, adds Hearne, no man could "have been more punctual in the performance of a promise" and his "adherence to truth" was "scrupulous." Physically, he grew to be "nearly six feet high", and he was "one of the finest and best proportioned men" that Hearne ever saw. He certainly did not lack courage.

In view of these qualities Ferdinand Jacobs made a good choice in selecting Matonabbee "when but a youth as an Ambassador" to make peace between the Chipewyans and the far western Crees of Athabasca. This task was dangerous, because the Crees were treacherous, and slow, because the tribal feud was old and deep-seated. But Matonabbee was alert enough to baffle all Cree plots, and brave and patient enough to repeat his visits to them "for several years successively; and at length, by a uniform display of his pacific disposition and by rendering a long train of good offices to those Indians, in return for their treachery and perfidy," he succeeded "in not only bringing about a lasting peace, but also of establishing a trade and reciprocal interest between the two nations."

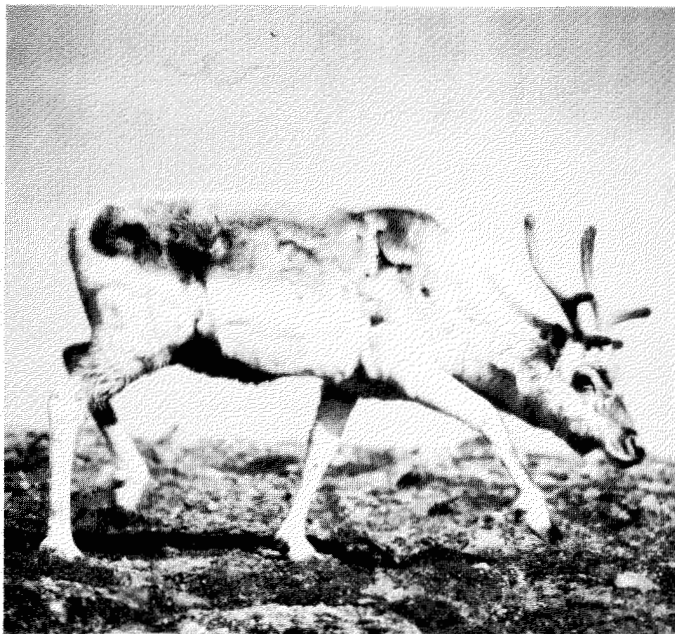
It was doubtless during these early peace-making journeys that Matonabbee took up the career of being one of those "Leading Indians" who were so important in the fur trade. These were men who, regularly and literally, "led" to trade other Indians many of whom might not visit a fort twice in a lifetime. The Chipewyans, who had no convenient waterway to Churchill, commonly came there in winter, when snow provided easy hauling and rivers were bridged with ice. Their

only draft animals were dogs, and they always employed their wives, as early African explorers employed professional native porters, to carry their goods and camp kit; however unchivalrous this latter practice may seem, it was simple common sense in a society that lived by hunting and fishing. For hunting was the men's job, and as Matonabbee said, they could not do it when "heavy laden". Naturally, wives were most important to the men who had most goods to transport, namely, the "Leading Indians", and Matonabbee accumulated no fewer than eight of them — all fine, strong women, chosen for work, not beauty. When they reached a trading post, "Leading Indians" exchanged the furs they had brought for European goods, with which they would buy from Indians far up-country the furs they would carry back on their next trip to the trading post. In this role Matonabbee rendered "great services to the [Hudson's Bay] Company...by bringing a greater quantity of furs to...Churchill River than any other Indian ever did or ever will do." Yet he was still ready to do business with that pioneer of the fur traders from Montreal to the far North, Peter Pond (as the latter told William Walker, of the Hudson's Bay Co., at Cumberland House on 15 June 1779).

It was presumably at this meeting with Matonabbee that Pond first learned of Hearne's explorations. He could hardly have had a better informant, for Matonabbee had contributed so much to them. One may perhaps date his contribution as starting in 1765. In that year Moses Norton — Richard's half-breed son who now commanded at Churchill — sent him with an older Indian, Idot-li-azee, to find the route to the long-famous "coppermine". Three years later they returned, bringing copper samples and "a rude sketch, drawn with charcoal on a deer skin," of the country. With this evidence Norton persuaded the Company's Directors to send Hearne on his explorations.

It is well known that Norton's misguided planning ensured the failure of the explorer's first two attempts, and after the failure of the second, when the guide Norton had chosen had lost all interest in him, Hearne very probably owed his life to a chance encounter with Matonabbee. For the latter gave him a suit of fur clothing, which in September was already becoming indispensable on the Barrens, and directed him to woods where he could make sleds and snowshoes. The two men, English and Indian, also agreed to make yet a third trip to the Coppermine, which, with Matonabbee as the real planner and effective leader, was to succeed.

Matonabbee, however, can hardly be blamed for the unhappy climax of that journey — the murder of the Eskimos at the Bloody Falls on 17 July 1771. That tragedy was due to the evil intentions of a crowd of Indians who attached themselves to him specifically for that purpose. Many of the Indians believed that the Eskimos were "magicians" whose "incantations" caused "all the evils they experience." Matonabbee himself was free from this superstition, so much so that he and Idot-li-azee had traded to the Coppermine Eskimos on his earlier



Moulting Peary caribou (Arctic Island caribou), Prince Patrick Island, N.W.T., July 1974. Photo: R. H. Russell, Canadian Wildlife Service.

journey, and he was to do so again (probably in 1773). For it could only have been from them that he received the first skin to reach Europe of the then unknown deer that we call the Arctic Island caribou, *Rangifer tarandus pearyi* (see *Arctic*, Vol. 13, No. 1; and photo).

Matonabee's death was a surprising one — suicide. Being an old trader at Churchill, he found news of the French destruction of the fort there in 1782 an unbearable humiliation and hanged himself, with the tragic result that "six of his wives and four children all...starved to death" in the following winter.

FURTHER READINGS

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