An Economy of Survival: Examining the Trade Relationship between the European Fur Traders and the North American Indigenous Tribes at the Level of Local Exchange

by Margaret Ayriss, HTST 528

The societies of the North American Indigenous tribes contained complex socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic relations within and between the tribes that determined political alliances, hunting and trading grounds, and war. Geo-politics specifically relates to the actions used to exert political power over geographical territory, and geo-political systems among the early Indigenous tribes were created out of an intricate network of relationships that connected tribes politically, culturally, and economically. As European fur traders began to establish trade and trading posts within North America, Indigenous tribes began to incorporate the fur traders into their geo-political systems.[1] Trade between the Indigenous tribes and the fur traders existed on three levels, local trade, middleman trade, and indirect trade. The local trade economy was the everyday relationship between the fur traders and the tribes closest to the trading post. The middle-man economy was the trade that went on between the fur traders, the powerful local tribes, and the inland tribes. Inland tribes were located in the indirect trading zone, which was difficult to reach, and these tribes had no direct contact with the fur traders as travel between this area and the trading posts were limited to only a few months a year.[2]

At the level of the local economy, trade relationships often went beyond a capitalist exchange, rather Indigenous culture and politics were expressed through the local economic relationship between the fur traders and the Indigenous tribes, creating a trade relationship between the two cultures that was based on necessity and reciprocity, and providing a source of subsistence that the traders relied on for their survival in North America's harsh environment. A quantitative research analysis collects numerical

[1]Susan Marsden and Robert Galois, "The Tsimshian, the Hudson Bay Company, and the Geopolitics of the Northwest Coast Fur Trade, 1787–1840," *The Canadian Geographer* 39, no. 2 (June 1995), 169-170.
[2] Arthur J. Ray and Donald B. Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure: An Economic Analysis of the Relations between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company before 1768* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 48-49.

data as evidence from primary sources and a qualitative analysis examines textual elements within the primary sources; both types of analyses establish patterns that can be used to identify a specific theme within the primary source(s). Applying a combined approach of both quantitative and qualitative analyses from an economic perspective to the early nineteenth century *Lake Winnipeg Journals* of English fur trader, George Nelson (1786-1859), shows the importance of the local economy of exchange to the fur traders by providing examples of the needs of both the fur traders and the Indigenous tribes, and the reciprocation that constituted the basis of the local economic relationship between the Indigenous and the fur traders.

The North American Indigenous geo-political system was based on highly organized kinship structures maintained through familial relationships. Tribes were the larger collective societies of Indigenous people and consisted of smaller collectives known as wintering band assortments. Tribes shared institutions of language, religious beliefs, economy, and politics among all its bands. Wintering bands were related through family ties, and each band was represented by a chief. Although there were exceptions, most tribes had a ruling band whose chief was the tribe leader, and the other chieftains made up his tribal council. Together these men managed the political and economic systems within and outside of the tribe, organizing alliances and trade relationships. Geo-politics was the execution of power to determine the hunting and trading territory of each tribe, and to regulate the regions and resources within the tribal territory that each of the bands had access to.[3]

The access to resources was flexible and was negotiated between bands on a need and reciprocation basis. Most bands hunted in the same general regions every year, however if a portion of that region was not being utilized by the band controlling the area, other bands could obtain permission to access the area if they needed resources. Other bands could also access specific animal species in the

[3] Marsden and Galois, "The Tsimshian," 170 & Ray & Freeman, *Give us Good Measure*, 15.

region if the controlling band did not trap or hunt that animal. Historians Aurther Ray and Donald Freeman indicate that this "system probably evolved out of necessity to provide mutual assistance in times of need."[4] However, hunting rights granted to an outside band did not give that band trading rights within that zone, or the right to cross geo-political regions for trade purposes elsewhere. Trading rights were a separate negotiation between bands and required payment to the controlling band. When the trading companies first began to establish themselves in North America, the companies set trading policies that incorporated Indigenous trading practices into the exchange for furs. Indigenous trade was closely tied to the Indigenous political structure and relationships needed to be established before trade could commence. Thus, the fur traders were inevitably drawn into the politics of the Indigenous trade system to ensure the success of the fur trade.[5] The European fur trade economy in North America was a complex system that was based on the institution of Indigenous economy and adopted many Indigenous trading customs.

The most important Indigenous institution adopted by the trading companies was the trading ceremony that had to take place before every trade negotiation. Smoking rites were an important part of the ceremony and represented a bonding ritual between two parties who were entering into an agreement. The officiator of the ceremony would recall the past relationship between the two parties, focusing on the favors exchanged between them. Smoking a pipe with a sacred stem automatically removed any past disagreements and all grudges had to be relinquished. All participating parties had to undergo purification rituals before partaking of the ceremony, and "all contracts solemnized by this smoking ceremony [were] held inviolable."[6] Importantly, trade was never undertaken between warring tribes, therefore the other fundamental practice within the trading ceremony was gift-giving. Exchanging

[4] Ray & Freeman, *Give us Good Measure*, 17.
[5] Ray & Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure*, 16-18, 54-56.
[6] John Dunn, *History of the North American Fur Trade: With an Account of the Habits and Customs of the Principal Native Tribes on the Northern Continent* (London: Edwards & Hughes, 1844), 109-110.

gifts both created and fortified friendships and alliances between the trading parties. Gift exchanges were complex and took place over several days in which copious quantities of goods and furs were exchanged as gifts. These ceremonies were a non-negotiable part of the Indigenous trade economy, and without this acknowledgement from European traders and trading companies, the fur trade would not have been successful.[7]

George Nelson's *Lake Winnipeg Journals* is a collection of the English-born trader's experiences in the Hudson Bay area in the early nineteenth century. These journals have become an invaluable historical source that provide a unique perspective on the trade and encounters with the Indigenous tribes of North America. Nelson joined the Montreal-based XYC Trading Company at the age of 16 in 1802. His literary skills made him invaluable as a trading assistant, and it was his job to record the trading activities for the company. In 1804, Nelson was assigned to the Lake Winnipeg district and the winter of 1805-06 was his first winter there. The section titled *The Lac du Bonnet Journal* will be the focus of this analysis, which documents the trade year of August 1805 – March 1806, tracing Nelson's winter at the Lac du Bonnet temporary Fort.[8] This diary is a day-by-day account of life at the fort and recounts the everyday interactions with the local Indigenous tribes. The winter was harsh, and Nelson recorded much cold weather. In the introduction to the diary, editor Harry Duckworth also mentions that this winter was not particularly profitable. All around, it was a tough year for everyone.[9] These circumstances and the focus on Indigenous connections for the purpose of meeting the fur traders' subsistence needs make this diary a solid background for the argument of a local economy between the

[7] Ray & Freeman*, Give us Good Measure*, 55-57.
[8] George Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805–1806," in *Friends, Foes, & Furs: George Nelson's Lake Winnipeg Journals, 1804–1822*, ed. Harry Duckworth, (Montreal & Kingston; London, Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 85-104.
[9] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 14-15 & 85-86.

fur traders and the Indigenous tribes based on an equitable relationship where needs were met through various forms of reciprocation.

Nelson's entries begin on August 29, 1805, when he and a group of traders set off from the Lake Winnipeg camp for Lac du Bonnet to set up a winter camp and trade with the tribes in the area. These entries end on March 8, 1806, for a total of one hundred and fifty-four entries. The party included seven men: M. Perignie as trade master, George Nelson as the record keeper, and five men who would do the labour, fishing, and perform other general duties. From the start, Nelson's diary is centered around the survival of the traders and their struggle for subsistence. Out of the one hundred and fifty-four entries, Nelson records seventy-six entries that talk about obtaining or needing food. Forty-eight of these entries discuss the traders' own experiences with hunting or fishing, and forty-two entries record food trade with the Indigenous tribes. It is important to note here that many of these entries about food overlap, and food traded, and food obtained through the traders' own fishing and hunting is sometimes recorded in the same entry. The traders were largely unsuccessful at catching, hunting, or gathering their own food and the amount of food obtained by the traders' attempts was much less than that obtained from trading with the Indigenous tribes. Comparatively, only eleven of Nelson's entries record trading for furs, which was the purpose of the fort, and much of the time these furs were obtained alongside foodstuffs. The difference between entries recording fur trade and food trade is quite notable, with fur trade entries amounting to only fourteen percent of the Lac du Bonnet journal entries, while food trade entries consist of forty-nine percent of the diary, validating the importance of the local economy to the survival of the fur traders. Unfortunately, the diary is also incomplete, missing the large spring trade when the company would have taken in the majority of their furs.

According to Nelson's diary, much of the food that the men relied on for this particular winter was obtained from the local Indigenous tribes. Importantly, the traders and the Indigenous people,

mainly the men, had regular contact on an almost day-to-day basis through this food trade. Out of the forty-one entries recording food trade, the diary contains twenty-four entries recording trade for fresh meat, one for trade of dried or pounded meat, seven entries for trade of fish and fowl, and ten entries for trade of wild rice. However, the trade for wild rice was only recorded in early September and the main day-to-day contact occurred through the trade for meat and fish that was hunted and caught by the Indigenous people. It is apparent that the traders preferred fresh meat over dried meat or fish. Nelson's journal does record the traders' own fishing escapades and there is one entry that tells of the traders hunting fowl, when on October 17 Nelson records that he "killed ten ducks", yet there are no records of the traders hunting for any game. All red meat was obtained directly from the Indigenous hunters. [10]

The lack of success in the traders' hunting and fishing expeditions can be explained through the traders' lack of survival skills. The traders were far less competent than the Indigenous at hunting, tracking, and canoeing, making the traders highly dependent on the Indigenous tribes for survival. For example, the traders were not as adept at manning their canoes, particularly through rough waters and rapids. The very first entry in Nelson's diary on August 29 tells of a group of traders who arrived at the main camp before Nelson and his party departed. The trader, William McKay, arrived with thirteen canoes loaded with trade goods, as well as having cached some goods upstream of the main camp, however Nelson informs the reader that McKay had "the misfortune of loosing two of his men in the first rapids of that dangerous river"; the river referred to here is the Winnipeg River and the rapids are in the lower part of the river.[11] It was not uncommon for traders to lose their lives navigating the dangerous waters of turbulent North American rivers in the canoes used by the Indigenous tribes.

In another entry on October 26, Nelson tells his reader about a hunting trip where he set out to track a bear and ended up becoming lost. Nelson began following the bear tracks, but having no luck, he

[10] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 86-87, *n*2.
[11] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 92.

deviated from the trail and headed in the direction he thought the camp was located. However, after two hours he realized this was the wrong direction and turned around. Nelson began following human tracks he thought to be his own but soon found that this was not the case. He then thought they were Indigenous tracks and continued to follow them in hopes of finding a lodge to stay at for the night. It was not until sometime later that Nelson realized he was actually following the old tracks of his fellow traders who had also previously become lost. Nelson literally continued to walk in circles until by chance he found the bear tracks he had followed out and made his way back to the camp, arriving about 9 pm, exhausted and empty handed.[12] These narratives are excellent examples of the dangers faced by traders and the reliance they had on the Indigenous tribes for basic needs.

The story of Nelson's bear hunt also shows the difficulty of obtaining fresh meat in the wintertime. Food sources were highly seasonal and more difficult to obtain during the winter months. Early in the diary at the beginning of September, Nelson records trading rum for wild rice that was harvested and bagged by the Indigenous women and then exchanged with the traders. The entry on September 1 records that "La Grosse Tete and trading Noir" inform traders where they can obtain wild rice. For this information, "Perignie gives each of them a small bit of tobacco and rum." On September 2, the diary records one large keg of mixed rum was traded for seven small bags of oats, and the Indigenous men were instructed to return with more. On September 9, Nelson's entry states that Perignie gave "half a keg of mixed rum among the whole of the indians rather as an incentive to trade the remainder of their oats [wild rice] than any present gain he has from it."[13] Gift giving throughout the year maintained the traders' and Indigenous ceremonial relationship, and it was vital that the traders did not neglect this important aspect of trade.[14] Not only was this trade relationship important in the trade

[12] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 92.
[13] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 89.
[14] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 88-89 *n*10.

for furs, it was even more necessary to create a reciprocal relationship with the Indigenous that would generate a continuous source of food during the winter. Although there are only a few records of gift giving, there is evidence that the traders and the Indigenous men drank together often at the expense of the traders. On January 24, Nelson remarked that he "gave rum as usual but did no trade", which implies that giving rum to the Indigenous was a frequent practice preceding trade negotiations at the local level. On March 2, the Black Moose visits the fort with his family and a drink is given to them, which reveals that as both guests and friends the Indigenous people were treated generously by the traders.

For the traders, most of the winter of 1805-1806 was spent finding and contacting the local tribes for trading purposes. However, the main interactions were around food trade rather than furs. Establishing food sources was important for the traders, because the trading companies expected the men were expected by the men to sustain themselves throughout the winter months at the fort. Hudson Bay records indicate that food consumption of the traders generated a requirement for quite a large amount of food. These records show that for men, trading companies allotted five pounds of boneless, fresh meat or seven and a half pounds of fish per day, along with two pounds of other food. Men would also often eat more than the allotted pounds of fish per day when possible. Nelson's trading party consisted of seven men. At the allotted rate for food consumption, Nelson and his men would have consumed about two hundred and forty-five pounds of fresh meat or three hundred and sixty-eight pounds of fish per week, and ninety-eight pounds of other food, such as wild rice. This is quite a large quantity of food to maintain when starting quite literally with nothing.[15]

The amount of food required by the traders can help to explain the price difference that was spent on meat in comparison to other food. On September 12, La Grosse Tete traded "the meat of a moose

[15] Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters and Middlemen in the Lands of the Southwest Hudson's Bay, 1660–1870* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 128-130.; Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 87 *n*5.

dear and a little bear's meat" for six quarts of mixed rum. On September 23, the Duck and his brother arrive with an undisclosed amount of bear meat and moose meat, however the exchange is recorded as one keg of mixed rum. In comparison, the diary records one and a half kegs of rum traded for twenty bags of oats, and approximately half a keg of this rum was given as a gift to promote the exchange. The diary also mentions trading for oats twice after this, however the amounts of oats and exchange goods are undisclosed. Fresh meat was the preferred food, as is evidenced in the higher exchange rate given for this product. There is also a possibility that the traders increased the exchange rate for fresh meat to encourage the continued trade with the Indigenous tribes throughout the winter. However, fish were much easier to obtain on a regular basis and in larger quantities, thus fish were a daily staple.[16]

Fish were usually caught by "seining" or suspending large nets in the lake. Traders fished for and ate whatever could be caught, however their attempts were not very successful, and the majority of fish was obtained through trade. Nelson's journal records just over a handful of food trade for fish, however the only type of fish that is recorded as being traded are sturgeons. Sturgeons are the largest freshwater fish in North America and average a length of six meters and a weight of six hundred kilograms. The largest number of sturgeons traded at one time was twenty-one, exchanged for "as many pints of rum." This is the only record out of all the recorded food trade activities of an equal exchange amount on both sides. Most diary entries that discuss the results of the traders' own fishing attempts record the capture of few fish, usually one or two and most often none. The most successful fishing trip recorded in Nelson's journal was on September 6 when several of the traders were generously guided to a fishing spot by the Indigenous man, Red Stomach, where they caught nine fish, splitting them with their guide. The traders took five fish and Red Stomach took four.[17] This shows the reciprocal relationship between the

[16] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 87-90.
[17] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 88.

Europeans and the Indigenous men with whom they traded, as Red Stomach apparently took nothing in exchange for his services and even took the lesser number of fish.

Red Stomach is mentioned quite often in the diary, visiting, travelling, and fishing with Nelson and his men, as well as procuring fresh meat for the traders. It appears from Duckworth's footnotes that Red Stomach was an Ojibwa hunter who resided with the Nepissing tribe at Nipissing Lake, which is east of Lake Superior and was the furthest Indigenous camp from Lac du Bonnet.[18] The journal contains ten entries that record interactions between the traders and the Indigenous man, all concerning obtaining food. Twice the diary mentions Red Stomach guiding the men to fishing spots, and twice the Indigenous man kills an entire moose, which the traders dress and transport to their fort. Red Stomach also accompanied the men on their snowshoe treks to Indigenous camps five times, and two entries record an incident between Red Stomach, his women, and the traders. On September 27, the diary indicates, "Red Stomach's women arrive with half rotten meat, but is refused by Peri." Later, on October 1, Nelson notes that Red Stomach had come on September 28 to "vindicate the lost Character of his women for bringing us rotten meat. He soon makes up again and takes for eighty-six more skins upon debt."[19] These entries are evidence that the relationship based on necessity and reciprocity went both ways and was just as important to the Indigenous people as to the fur traders. Red Stomach both restores his relationship with the traders after being embarrassed by his wives and he takes more goods on credit, to be paid in the spring with furs.

Nelson records credit being given to various Indigenous men or lodges six times in his journal including the exchange with Red Stomach. Five of these entries are recorded in the fall between September 9 and October 3; one of these five entries records the credit directly after a wrong done by the Indigenous was rectified, and one of the five entries records credit given two days after the same

[18] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 88 *n*9.
[19] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*, 91.

man "gives Perignie three geese." The sixth entry recording credit given is on December 20 and occurs after the traders obtain a large quantity of furs and meat from that lodge. The times when credit was given indicates that it was also important to the Indigenous to maintain a proper social and political relationship with the traders.

Besides Red Stomach, seven other men are named frequently in the journal and always with reference to food trade, indicating the traded food was obtained through the same channels repeatedly. Two tribes are also named, the Nipissing, and the "Courtes Oreilles." or Ottawas, however there were possibly more operating in the area. The hunting population in the Lake Winnipeg area at this time was complex. This was a transitional period where, between 1763 and 1821, the number of trading posts heavily increased in the Hudson Bay area, generating a need for consistent food supplies, and creating and extending networks with the local tribes to support this need.[20] Through the frequency of contact between these eight Indigenous men and Nelson's group, we can assume that there was a close relationship between these men, as the traders not only exchanged with them, the Indigenous men and traders travelled, hunted, fished, and drank together.

One final example of the importance and reciprocity of these relationships is found in the poignant story recorded by Nelson on September 14 about the young son of a Chief, The Duck. The boy was the tragic victim of a gunpowder horn accident in the traders' camp while the parents were negotiating with the head of the fort, Perignie, for liquor. Nelson and the other traders learn of death from the chief's brother, who brought "two sturgeon and a goose" to ask for rum so that he could "cry for his nephew." At this time, the chief's brother received four quarts of mixed rum. The same entry tells us that two men from the Nipissing tribe, who did not have as close of a trading relationship with the fort, brought "two geese and seven stock duck," however these men only received three quarts of rum.

[20] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, & Furs*: 87 *n*7.; Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 125-126.

Although the chief's brother brought a similar quantity of food, the trade obviously went beyond just an exchange of goods. Responsibility and kinship are tied to this trade, which can be seen in the differences in quantity of rum given to the chief's brother and the Nipissing men. This is further implied and strengthened when at the end of the entry Nelson notes, "The Duck himself comes escorted by a band of indians all in mourning: they bring six bags of oats, for which Perignie gives them half a keg of mixed rum."[21] Here, although the men only bring six bags of oats, they are given a large amount of rum, once again as an acknowledgement of responsibility and kinship, and here, in respect to the status of the chief. We can compare this exchange amount to an entry on September 22 when two bags of oats were exchanged for eight vials of rum, which is approximately two pints.[22] A half a keg is approximately one hundred twenty-four pints, so this is a massive increase in exchange rates, considering this was given in trade for only six bags of oats. Although there is no size given as to the bags of oats, one can assume they were relatively similar. The fact that so much rum was given to The Duck in exchange for such a small amount of food, the circumstances under which his son was injured and died, the accountability given to the traders as well as their acceptance of this responsibility, and the traders' acknowledgement and respect for the chief are all evidence of the necessity and reciprocity that the economy of local exchange was built upon.

Over half of Nelson's diary talks about food obtained either through the traders' own skills or through trade with Indigenous tribes. The quantity of food traded was much greater than that of food obtained by the traders' own hunting and fishing escapades, and more meat was exchanged than any other type of food. Higher amounts of rum were also exchanged for meat and fish than for oats, which can be attributed to the higher value placed on meat by the traders and also identifies this trade as an incentive for the Indigenous tribes to continue the consistent food trade throughout the winter. Credit

[21] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, and Furs*, 89-90.
[22] Nelson, "Lac du Bonnet Journal, 1805-1806," In *Friends, Foes, and Furs*: 90.

was also given to the Indigenous people to encourage and assist continuous trade throughout the winter months, and gifts were exchanged to maintain the political trade relationship as well as to signify the friendship shared by the traders and Indigenous. The exchanges between Indigenous tribes and traders who had close relationships often went beyond mere trade, reflecting reciprocity and kinship. Through the evidence found within the text of George Nelson's diary, it becomes apparent that the local economy was vital to the survival of the traders and was created out of their need for subsistence and the Indigenous' need for trade goods, revealing that reciprocal relationships were the basis of the local exchange economy during the fur trade era in North America.

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