

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Subarctic Fur Trade: Native Social and Economic Adaptations.
Edited by Shepard Krech, III.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/22j7r316>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 8(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Eccles, W. J.

Publication Date

1984-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

The Indian Frontier of the American West is a masterful synthesis that will long rank as the standard survey.

C.B. Clark
California State University,
Long Beach

The Subarctic Fur Trade: Native Social and Economic Adaptations. Edited by Shepard Krech, III. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984. xix + 194 pp. \$23.95 U.S. (\$28.95 Cda.) Cloth.

This work consists of six papers presented in 1981 at the American Society for Ethnohistory. Spanning from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, they take as their theme the American Indians' role in the fur trade and the effects it had on their lives.

Arthur J. Ray deals with "Periodic Shortages, Native Welfare, and the Hudson's Bay Company 1670-1930." His argument, rather contrived, is that the northern American Indians today rely, to a large extent, on government assistance for their economic survival and that the Hudson's Bay Company is mainly responsible for their failure to regain the economic self-sufficiency they once had. It is maintained that the Company's provision of relief by the credit barter system kept the American Indian trappers and hunters in a state of economic subservience and prevented their adjustment to a cash economy. Ray points out that the Company could well afford to grant credit and cancel old debts on occasion since its profits were extortionate and it had to support the providers of those profits. But was the Company's practice really "relief," akin to that provided by the government today, as the author claims? It seems to have been merely a necessary easing of the Company's exploitation of the American Indians when circumstances so dictated.

Two other points require comment. Ray asserts, "Very quickly, another specialty emerged: engaging in the trade as middlemen. American Indians who became middlemen devoted little or no time to commercial trapping activities. . . ." No particular tribes are mentioned and no evidence is offered in support of the statement. The implication is that these middlemen were capitalist entrepreneurs in moccasins. This reviewer has yet to see a scrap of

convincing evidence to support such a notion. The American Indians exchanged goods for four discernible reasons: friendship exchange as a social convention; to settle disputes, seal a treaty, or to gain permission to travel through or hunt on another's territory; gifts in exchange for favours received; the mutually beneficial exchange of commodities. Conspicuous by its absence was the profit motive. The second point is economic dependence; Ray proclaims that certain European goods became essentials, but he does not say how soon after contact this was established.

Charles A. Bishop, in his paper, "The First Century: Adaptive Changes among the Western James Bay Cree between the Early Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," also takes issue with the scholars who claim that the American Indians were not as reliant on European goods in the seventeenth century as was claimed by E.E. Rich; rather he asserts they became dependent on the Hudson's Bay Company for survival. He also states that superior European technology and new modes of production to obtain it brought about behavioral and structural changes in Cree society. This reviewer remains unconvinced.

Dr. Bishop accepts at face value Jesuit accounts of Iroquois attacks on Cree far to the north. Twenty French leagues are rendered as 25 miles, but in fact the French league was 2½ miles. In mentioning the 1709 French attack on Fort Albany Bishop states that it was made by ". . . a contingent of French and their Mohawk allies." The French had no Mohawk allies. In the Report of the Company Committee wherein the attack is discussed it is merely stated that there were some 30 Indians in the party. The French casualties cited by Bishop do not agree with the figures given by Governor General Vaudreuil who had no discernible motive for falsifying them. Dr. Bishop's inability to read French is manifestly a serious handicap. The statement that western James Bay was ". . . settled by the Hudson's Bay Company in the mid-seventeenth century . . .," boggles the mind. In discussing the starvation conditions rampant among the Hudson Bay Indians in 1674, 1701, 1705-6 and 1717 Bishop aptly remarks that climatic conditions had made hunting difficult, but he fails to note that those years were among the worst of the Little Ice Age.

Toby Morantz, in her paper, "Economic and Social Accommodations of the James Bay Inlanders to the Fur Trade," also notes that starvation was severe in 1703 among the Natives on the east

coast of James Bay. More significantly, she states that among the American Indians with whom she is concerned, Ray's "entrepreneurial class" middlemen are not to be found. "Although men served in this capacity . . .," she notes, ". . . it was an informal, intermittent arrangement. No specialized middleman class arose in James Bay." She warns of relying on accounts of American Indian lifestyles by traders and priests, stating, "Clearly one can find in the records whatever one is looking for." She might have added that in most such accounts the American Indians are judged by European values and standards. She also casts doubt on contemporary tales of Iroquois attacks on the James Bay Indians. Her main conclusion is that the eastern James Bay Indians' life style was not altered in any significant way by the fur trade. They were able to garner enough furs to satisfy their needs while pursuing their normal subsistence hunting activity.

In her paper, "Sakie, Esquawenoe, and the Foundation of a Dual-Native Tradition at Moose Factory," Carol M. Judd gives a brief account of trade and American Indian relations at that post. She makes some interesting and two dubious assertions. She notes that the traders at Moose Fort distrusted and feared the inland Indians who not only played the fiercely competitive French traders off against them but also the traders at Fort Albany. She states that the traders suspected those Indians of plotting with the French to destroy Moose Fort and she cites one such suspected plot in 1759. What motive the American Indians could have had for this, she does not say. Moreover she might have noted that in 1759 the French were preoccupied with the British fleet and army besieging Quebec. She also makes the interesting observation that references to starving Indians having to be fed at the Company's posts could well have been, in reality, concubines being sustained at the Company's unwitting expense.

Ms. Judd's assertion that "homeguard" Indian captains and lieutenants formed a core group with authority over their people is dubious. The French experience was that no American Indian could exert authority over other American Indians. The assertion that the Indians ". . . were shrewd traders who were skilled at turning a reasonable profit . . ." is also suspect. The American Indians could not comprehend or accept either the free market concept or the profit motive. They demanded stable prices; haggling was beneath their dignity.

Shepard Krech has several revealing things to say in his paper, "The Trade of the Slavey and Dogrib at Fort Simpson in the Early Nineteenth Century." The arguments for and against American Indian "dependence" on the fur trade are summarized without the author coming down on one side or the other. He does note that his American Indians trapped only enough furs to supply their wants, which the traders regarded as laziness. It was laziness also, in the traders' view, that caused many to decline to make the trip to the Fort, preferring to remain in camp and to give their furs, presumably with a shopping list, to those who chose to go. Could this not be the origin of the middleman myth? The most valuable contribution of this paper is the ledger entries and the author's comments on the uses that can be made of them, along with some very useful tables giving the values, in Made Beaver, of furs and trade goods.

Robert Jarvenpa and Hetty Jo Brumbach note in their article a marked shift at the turn of the nineteenth century in the American Indians' diet from high protein food garnered by hunting and fishing to imported flour, lard and sugar. They give tables of caloric values of the foods consumed, but for some odd reason they include tallow, which was used to make candles and soap. This shift from nourishing land-produced food to imported supplies, which provided the Hudson's Bay Company with greater profits but provided the American Indian consumers with an inadequate diet, was remarked on in 1947 by Dr. Frederick Tisdall while testifying before the Senate-Commons Committee on Indian Affairs (vol. I, p. 8). He pointed out that the American Indians of Norway House were smaller in stature than the American Indians of 40 years ago, judging by the smaller size shirts and trousers stocked in recent years by the Hudson's Bay Company. Jarvenpa and Brumbach go beyond that; they reveal how old values and customs were eroded. The ancient food sharing networks that helped to sustain all in meager times had, by 1900, broken down; some American Indians were trading meat at the trading post while others starved. The article concludes with two felicitous, trenchant and contradictory observations by American Indians of the 1870s on what life was then like for them: the best of times; the worst of times.

This collection of useful papers asks significant questions and indicates where answers should be sought. There is, unfortunately, one question that none of the contributors addressed; namely, whether or not the Hudson's Bay Company factors

could understand, let alone speak, Cree. Dr. Krech notes that at Fort Simpson the absence of the interpreter caused the suspension of trade. If interpreters had to be used, who were they; British, French Canadian, American Indian or Métis?

W.J. Eccles
University of Toronto

Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies. Edited by Michael K. Foster, Jack Campisi and Marianne Mithun. A publication of the D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984. 396 pp. \$48.50 Cloth. \$16.95 Paper.

The Iroquois Indians have been for centuries among the most written-about of all the North American tribes. In 1727 Cadwallader Colden endowed them with a vast "savage" empire in his *History of the Five Indian Nations Depending on the Province of New-York in America*, and in the mid-nineteenth century Francis Parkman revived the empire, gave it a racist turn and embellished the "savagery." Simultaneously Lewis Henry Morgan described, more reliably than Parkman, the Iroquois political system, but he drew from it and other sources a universal theory of social evolution that made him into an international celebrity as well as a founding father of anthropology in the United States.

In recent years students have been less concerned with grandiose schemes of ideology and more interested in the American Indians. A Conference on Iroquois Research began to meet annually in 1945, involving ethnologists, archaeologists, linguists, historians and some odd fish [?] in its discussions. A number of scholarly publications have been produced by participants in these meetings, not least the Iroquoian sections in the *Northeast* volume of the Smithsonian Institution's *Handbook of North American Indians* (1978). Now we have *Extending the Rafters*, a collection of essays by some of the same and other authors. This book was conceived as a *festschrift* for William N. Fenton, the founder and dean of the Conference on Iroquois Research; but the book is far superior to your ordinary *festschrift* "grab-bag." It has been carefully organized and focused as a state-of-the-art assemblage of new work conducted by the most advanced