

Coping with Starvation and Deprivation in Moose
Factory, 1882-1902:
Cree-HBC Interdependence as Revealed in the Moose
Factory HBC Records

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In his 1976 study of *The Fur Trade in the Moose-Missinaibi River Valley, 1770-1917*, Doug Baldwin noted that though “self-sufficient” before the fur trade

the Natives were dependent upon the whims of nature, and a particularly hard winter might result in starvation and ultimately death. ... The introduction of European commodities [however] raised the Indian standard of living and freed them from the demands of nature ... Their need for trading goods forced them to continue hunting and trapping, while their success in these endeavours maintained the fur trading system. The Natives became almost entirely dependent on the posts” (68-69).

Baldwin also pointed out, however, that “Because the fur trade depended upon the Indians, the Hudson’s Bay Company had to maintain their goodwill. The posts thus became places of refuge during times of sickness and starvation” (1976:59).

The Moose Factory Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) records provide a fairly detailed picture of how the Company and the Cree in the Moose Factory region experienced and dealt with starvation and deprivation during the years 1882 to 1902. By studying this more precise time and space intersection within Baldwin’s broader overview we find evidence that supports most of his conclusions, but also provides some important nuances about the nature of what would most appropriately be called Cree-HBC socio-economic interdependence.

This reexamination of the primary sources is important because some of Baldwin’s conclusions, particularly on the question of dependence, do not accord with other studies that

Papers of the 39th Algonquian Conference, eds. Regna Darnell & Karl S. Hele (London: University of Western Ontario, 2008), pp. 94-122.

address this question in an adjacent region in the same period. Moreover, no studies substantially examine the questions of interdependence, starvation and deprivation specifically in the Moose Factory region and in this time frame.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Aside from Baldwin's study, much of the historical and anthropological literature on the Cree and their fur trade relations with the HBC in the James Bay watershed covers the pre-1870 period. If it extends beyond this period, it is often focused on the early twentieth century and/or on regions neighbouring, but not including, the Moose River basin. These include studies by Arthur Ray (1974), Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz (1983), Colin Scott and James Morrison (1993), and Victor Lytwyn (2002). The most important in this case, however, is Morantz' study of the eastern James Bay Cree from 1870 to 1970. It addresses the question of HBC-Cree interdependence in a corresponding time-period and in a closely neighbouring region that was dependent on Moose Factory as headquarters of the Southern Department and later the James Bay District. In this study, *The White Man's Gonna Getcha: The Colonial Challenge to the Crees in Quebec* Morantz notes that

The most significant social cost [incurred by the HBC] was the sharing of food and throughout most of the company's history, until well into the twentieth century, it worked both ways. When Crees from inland were starving and were able to send camp members to the post, the company gave them food. Food-sharing was a strong Cree principle to which the company men adhered, for they, too, were very often beneficiaries (2002:37).

Peter J. George and Richard Preston's article, "Going in Between': The Impact of European Technology on the Work Patterns of the West Main Cree of Northern Ontario" (1987) also challenges Baldwin's conclusions on Cree dependence:

When game populations dropped, or when disease, forest fire, or other natural disasters left the Cree starving, they looked to each

other and to the Hudson's Bay Company for relief. The outposts of the fur trade empire depended in turn, on the Cree not only for freedom from attack and the supplying of furs, but also for such basic needs as food, firewood, and so forth. Europeans were only very gradually able to reduce their dependence upon the Indians for both food and cross-country transportation, as well as for furs, and until the late nineteenth century they had little tangible means to coerce the majority of hunter-trappers into greater engagement in, and dependence upon the fur trade economy (1987:453).

The authors' main contribution, however, is an interpretive one, based primarily on a review of other secondary sources, none of which address the specific time and space intersection of Moose Factory, 1882-1902. The authors do, however, refer to some early anthropological fieldwork done in the region.

In the Moose Factory region, the anthropological fieldwork in the 1930s by John M. Cooper and Regina Flannery is particularly important, for although they focus on subjects other than Cree-HBC interdependency, their studies of the Cree witiko psychosis and starvation cannibalism are very relevant (Cooper 1933; Flannery, Chambers, & Jehle 1981). Moreover, their fieldnotes also include invaluable information about the life histories of Crees in the Moose Factory region during the period in question. Based on her fieldnotes, for example, Flannery published the life history of Ellen Smallboy (discussed below). This important work gives a human face to the useful but dry analysis of historical statistics relied on by other researchers.

Robert Hoppa's analysis of mortality in Moose Factory from 1851 to 1964 concludes that the "changing socio-economic environment" and "increased reliance on European commodities" of the late 19th century made it "a period of transition for the Moose Factory Cree" – one with surprisingly higher rates of survivorship than the years 1914-1945 (1998:190-192). This conclusion is based on statistical analysis of death records supplemented primarily by brief reference to articles by Edward S. Rogers – on the "Northern Algonquians and the HBC, 1821-1890" (1994) – and J. Garth Taylor – on the "Northern Algonquians on

the *Frontiers, 1890-1945*" (1994). Despite several references to Moose Factory, however, these articles serve primarily as historical overviews of much broader regions and time periods. A more focused study based on primary sources is clearly merited.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Although this study is founded on the HBC records available for Moose Factory in the 1882-1902 period, it also reviews examples of three other sources which, by comparison, highlight the nature and limitations of the perspective provided by the HBC records.

The main limitation of the HBC records is that they are centered on life and commerce at the posts and are, with rare exceptions, written by Company men. In addition there are limitations with regard to the availability and completeness of the HBC records for the period covered by this study. Nevertheless, they are the richest and most detailed source of information available. They include district, department and inspection reports; correspondence books; post journals; account books; and other miscellaneous items.

The Moose Factory district, department and inspection reports (HBCA, B.135/e/3-33) are the richest and most concise source of information. From 1882-1902, Moose Factory was the headquarters of the Southern Department and after the Company's reorganization in 1901, the James Bay District. No reports are available from 1830-1884; afterwards they are available only for 1885, 1886, 1889, 1890, 1891 (two reports), and 1901 (two reports).

The 1885 report for the Moose Factory district consists of a letter written by the Chief Factor in response to a series of questions posed by the HBC Commissioner in Winnipeg. This is a very valuable report because it portrays Moose Factory as it was prior to the lean years that soon followed. The 1886 report (on the 1885 "outfit") from the Chief Factor at Moose Factory to the Commissioner in Winnipeg pertains to the entire Southern Department. The 1889, 1890 and 1891 reports (for the 1888-90

“outfits”) also pertain to the entire Southern Department, but appended to them are reports submitted to the Chief Factor at Moose Factory by traders in charge of the dependent districts. Moreover, included in this file are responses sent by the HBC Commissioner in Winnipeg to the officers in charge of these districts. Also available for 1891 is a detailed inspection report, written by an Inspecting Chief Factor, that pertains specifically to Moose Factory. There are two 1901 reports: an inspection report on Moose Factory similar to that of 1891 and a special report on transportation in the newly established James Bay District (comprised of the coastal James Bay posts of the former Southern Department).

Correspondence books (HBCA, B.134/b/51-59) include a variety of correspondence for the period of 1882-1902, but only a few items are relevant. The post journals are missing for the years 1882 to 1891,¹ and those from 1892 to 1901 (HBCA, B.135/a/184-189) are generally not very rich in content, tend to focus on the servants' work activities, and provide only cursory and random accounts of Cree activities. The account books (HBCA, B.135/d/132-167) include a variety of account records for every year from 1882-1902; however, the information available for each year often varies greatly in content and format, making comparisons difficult. Additional records include miscellaneous files (HBCA, B.135/z/4 & 6-11).

This study excludes HBC records unavailable on microfilm, but they are few in number.² Given the lack of consistency in the account books, this study has relied more heavily on the statistics and narratives provided in the reports. Additionally, this study does not include a thorough examination of three other types of sources that are relevant and available. Nevertheless, an example of each of these sources is examined here in order to help elucidate, by comparison, the nature and limitations of the HBC records and to indicate further avenues for research on this topic.

From 1840 onward, with only one gap of four years (1847-51), there were missionaries resident at Moose Factory. Wesleyan

missionary George Barnley was the first to arrive, but he left after 7 years. In 1851, he was replaced by Anglican missionary John Horden, later ordained Bishop of Moosonee (resident at Moose Factory). Horden remained at Moose Factory until his death in 1893 (Ontario Heritage Foundation 2002:14; Long 1986:101-137). His correspondence, a selection of which was published in 1976 (Horden 1976), constitutes one of the most important of several missionary sources that would need to be examined in a more extensive study of the question at hand. It provides insights on life at Moose Factory from a perspective that is neither HBC nor Cree.

In January 1884, Horden wrote about recent sufferings caused by starvation and sickness in the James Bay region:

Moose suffered, but the sufferings at Albany were more severe. ... Forty five deaths had occurred and we may hear of many more in the spring. Indians going to their winter hunting grounds must have taken the disease with them. ... the yearly ship on which our existence almost depends, was late in making its appearance, we had given it up as lost and the feeling of depression here was deeper than ever before I had experienced. While our crops of potatoes were not anything like half the usual yield, the cry on September 21st ..! "The ship's come! .. made a wonderful change and did the sick more good than all our doctor's medicines. And from that time, we have had scarcely any more deaths. Fort George too, on the eastern shore of James Bay, had its trials too, but of a different and more appalling character. Upwards of twenty Indians were starved to death in consequence of the failure of deer in their hunting grounds (Horden 1976:25).

In another letter, written later that same year, Horden remarked the following:

We landed at Rupert's House the next morning ... the Indians ... are excellent hunters and they always were a well clad, well to do people, liberal in their support of the mission, always kind and benevolent. They would assist anyone who might need their help. But within the last few years, a sad change has taken place. In the first five and twenty years of my residence here, I do not remember a case of starvation among the Rupert's House

Indians. Now, cases occur almost every year. ... I received the names of four more and two women and their nineteen children who had suffered to the end in a similar fashion (Horden 1976:35-37).

Geologists, explorers, and other government officials also provide a different perspective on the situation at Moose Factory. After the 1870 “Rupert’s Land transfer” they began visiting Moose Factory, first on behalf of the federal government, and later on behalf of the provincial government. There was no resident government official at Moose Factory, however, until after Treaty 9 was signed in 1905. Although their observations may sometimes lack the historical depth and familiarity of Horden’s, they can nonetheless be informative. Edward Barnes Borron, Stipendiary Magistrate for the Province of Ontario, is a good example. He visited Moose Factory in 1882 and his *Report on the Basin of Moose River and Adjacent Country Belonging to the Province of Ontario*, published in 1890, includes an extensive section on “The Social Condition of the Natives and Others.” This is one of the more important sources of observations on Moose Factory from an outside perspective during the period in question.

Borron wrote of the Cree that:

They have, in the course of two centuries, become dependent on the fur trade not merely for ornaments, or even luxuries, but for the very necessities of life. ... They may, and sometimes do, suffer great privations and hardships during the winter, if game (rabbit especially) should be scarce, or if sickness should prevent them from hunting. But during the summer they are not only sufficiently clothed to protect them from the winter, but so far as I could judge, they had enough to eat, both at Abitibi and Moose Factory. They will, however, eat almost anything, from a bear down to a skunk, a fact of which I have had ocular and other demonstration (1890:74-76).

Many of Borron’s views, however, were based primarily on observations of and queries about activities connected with the fur trade posts. Few non-Cree perspectives escape this bias.

Historical sources from a Cree perspective are the most important and the most difficult to obtain for an academic study such as this one; yet they are available. Ellen and Simon Smallboy lived and hunted in the Kesagami Lake region, southeast of Moose Factory, during the entire 1882-1902 period. Simon traded at Moose Factory and he and his wife eventually settled there in their later years. In 1933, 1935 and 1937, Ellen, by then in her eighties, shared the story of her life with Regina Flannery, an anthropologist from Washington. She died in 1941. *Ellen Smallboy: Glimpses of a Cree Woman's Life* is the published account of her life based on notes taken by Flannery (Flannery 1995).

Flannery's biography includes the following story of an exceptional hardship that Ellen and her family lived through in the early years of her marriage. In her words, translated from Cree into English:

There was nothing to eat and all that was there was some dried tea. My old man was going off to the Post, leaving me and the children to be gone five nights. He was very thin and poor, so the night before he left I made him a rabbit-skin blanket. He would never have made it without that. He would lie on the rabbit-skin next to the fire and would be afraid to sleep too long because he might freeze to death. We had nothing to eat the morning he left. The two boys were not old enough to be useful to me and the baby was less than a month old. I took the baby in the cradle board on my back when I went the next day to the snares and left the two boys at the tent. ... I got a few rabbits and we ate them. The next day I went to the snares but there was nothing there (Flannery 1995:38-39).

Although often more difficult to obtain, assess and date, Cree oral accounts (or transcribed oral accounts) are invaluable because they provide a Cree perspective. In this case, the perspective provided by Ellen Smallboy is especially valuable because she and Simon lived most of their married life well away from the post. They were inland Crees, whose life did not revolve around activities at Moose Factory.

PORTRAIT OF MOOSE FACTORY

Moose Factory was the main trading post in the Moose River District and the headquarters and supply depot of the Southern Department. The Southern Department was comprised of numerous districts, many of which included dependent outposts. These other districts were: Rupert River District, Eastmain District, Albany River District, Kenogamisse District (until c. 1889) and New Post District (attached to the Moose River District after 1890). As head of the Moose River District and the Southern Department, the Chief Factor at Moose Factory reported to the HBC Commissioner in Winnipeg and the HBC Secretary in London; the traders in charge of the other districts reported to him (HBCA, B.135/e/28a-29).

As transportation links from southern Canada were stretching into northern Ontario, however, Moose Factory was declining in importance. In 1892, the HBC Commissioner in Winnipeg commented in a letter to the HBC Secretary in London that “this Department has for years been gradually decreasing in importance by the transfer to the Montreal and Northern Departments of Districts which used to receive their supplies through Moose Factory” (HBCA, B.134/e/31). In 1901, the HBC reorganized its structure and Moose Factory became the headquarters of James Bay District, with the dependent posts of Albany, Fort Hope, Rupert’s House, Fort George and Whale River (HBCA, B.135/b/57 & B.135/e/33).

A special 1901 report opened with the statement that “The nature of the business at Moose Factory and the cause for the large establishment it has been necessary to maintain there is best explained in a full and detailed report on the “Transport of the Supplies from the London Ships’ side to the different Ports in the Bay” (HBCA, B.135/e/33:1). As transportation hub and supply depot for the bay-side posts, and their dependent inland outposts, Moose Factory had been and remained the largest HBC establishment in James Bay. In 1901 it had 62 buildings, only a small number of which were part of the Anglican Mission (HBCA,

B.135/e/34:11-12). Even the church, built in 1864, belonged to the Company (Ontario Heritage Foundation 2002:10).

Despite its declining economic importance and despite epidemics, however, Moose Factory's population was growing. According to an 1891 inspection report, the Company population at Moose Factory, including the Chief Factor, five officers, 29 servants and their family members, totaled 134. The classification of the Company servants was as follows: two blacksmiths, two boatbuilders, one cattle-keeper, one cooper, two joiners, one sawyer, eleven sloopers and apprentices, two stewards, one storesman, three apprentice mechanics, and one laborer (HBCA, B.135/e/29:38-43). The 1901 transportation report indicates that the Company population had risen to almost 200 (HBCA, B.135/e/33:5). These numbers did not include any of the missionaries who had been resident at Moose Factory, with only one four-year interlude, since 1840 (Ontario Heritage Foundation 2002:14).

In order to feed this relatively large population, Moose Factory relied -- as did the entire Southern Department -- on imported provisions, such as salt pork and beef, oatmeal and flour, as well as country produce, which included: livestock, vegetables, geese, fish and other local game.

Chief Factor Joseph Fortesque, in his 1890 report on the Southern Department, made several references to the importance of country provisions, both those provided by the Cree and those provided with the help of Cree labour. He expressed regret that "our own hunts and fisheries were extremely unproductive, and scarcely availed at all to lessen the drain on our imported provisions" (B.135/e/28a:5-6). He also made reference to "15 or 20 Indians ... [as] the standard hunting staff of ... [New] Post," just south of Moose Factory, on which this outpost depended. Finally, he also noted that

Eastmain Post ... supplies Rupert's House equally with Moose in cattle, without which neither Post could manage, and which ought to be raised more economically there than here, where

[Cree] labour for hay cannot be procured under \$1.00 per diem and extra rations" (B.135/e/28a:16-17).

The 1891 inspection report reveals that Angus Faries, an HBC servant, received a gratuity for "conducting the goose-hunt [with Cree help] at Hannah Bay" (HBCA, B.135/3/29:39). The spring and fall goose hunts were among the most important events of the year. As spring approached, for example, the anticipation of the hunt would grow. This is evident in the Chief Factor's comments in the 1895 post journal (HBCA, B.135/a/88): "no geese seen yet" (April 13), "1st goose seen" (April 17 -- double underlined in the original), "1st goose killed ... 1st goose brought in" (April 18 -- underlined in the original), "Very few geese seen yet & nothing being killed" (April 20), "gave one half the men their customary two days hunting" (April 30).

The post journal for 1895 provides a sense of the other key events and occupations at Moose Factory throughout a typical year. In the winter, the servants and officers would usually be occupied with cutting and hauling firewood and building lumber, fabricating items for trade (in the blacksmith shop for example), making and repairing barrels, preparing packets for shipment, tending the livestock, repairing boats, sawing boards, moving and transporting supplies, making mail runs, and performing various clerical duties (HBCA, B.135/a/88).

In the spring, following the first geese, came the southern melt-waters of the vast Moose River drainage basin, breaking and pushing the ice in its path. It was a time of anticipation, excitement, worry and danger. Flooding often occurred, sometimes causing damage and even loss of life. Around break-up and shortly afterwards, Cree trappers would begin to arrive from inland with their furs to pay their "debt" or "advances" of supplies received on credit the previous fall (HBCA, B.135/a/88). Once the river had broken up, there were sometimes repairs to do on account of flooding and ice damage. Logs cut in the winter would be rafted to the island; supplies would be prepared for shipment to the other districts and packets of furs for shipment to London. As the days got warmer, the fields would be planted. By this time, local sea-

going vessels based at Moose Factory would often be en route to the other bay-side posts bearing supplies (HBCA, B.135/a/88).

Throughout the summer, servants and Crees would be employed in various tasks, such as collecting hay, manning the sawmill, tending the gardens and livestock, constructing and repairing fences and buildings, and transporting supplies inland by canoe. However, the main work was in preparation for the arrival of the supply ship from England. By mid-summer, the James Bay vessels would have returned with furs from the districts for shipment to London (HBCA, B.135/a/88). From the arrival of the supply ship from England -- usually sometime in August -- until its departure in September, Moose Factory would be the site of intensive activity (HBCA, B.135/a/88; Tyrell 1916). Because of the shallow river (especially at summer water levels), the unloading of supplies involved several laborious transfers, first from the ship, anchored near the mouth of the river, to the schooners, then from the schooners to smaller boats that could reach the dock at Moose Factory. In reloading the ship with fur packets, the process was reversed. The ship also needed to be loaded with ballast for its Atlantic journey. All this had to be done quickly, as delays could make travel dangerous or impossible as autumn winds gave way to winter storms (HBCA, B.135/e/33: 3-5).

After the ship left, HBC servants would then focus on completing or starting other tasks and activities, such as the harvest and the sorting and preparation of newly arrived supplies for shipping to the coastal and inland posts. Around this time, Cree hunters would get supplies and head inland to their winter camps or to the coast to participate in the fall goose hunt (HBCA, B.135/a/88). Some Crees stayed on the island, either because of employment or because they were aged and infirm. The 1891 inspection report, for example, cites the payment of "Gratuities to Indians including 21 aged and infirm men and women who are pensioners as regards rations, amount[ing] to \$560.20" (HBCA, B.135/e/29:33).

PORTRAIT OF CREE HUNTERS TRADING AT MOOSE FACTORY

Those Crees who stayed at Moose Factory in the fall or who left for nearby camps on the coast are often referred to as “Coasters” or “Homeguard Cree.” Those who went inland are often referred to as “Inlanders.”

The Inlanders and Coasters’ combined population in the Moose Factory region appears to have been on the rise in the last decades of the nineteenth century. James Cotter wrote in 1885 that “Even in 1883 when Whooping Cough carried off so many, there were more births than deaths. I would place the number of Indians here at a little over 400 souls. In the year 1858, according to a census taken then, ... their number was 258.” Cotter’s report also indicates that the Inlanders were the majority. In 1885, out of 80 hunters who obtained debt (supplies on credit) at Moose Factory, 50-60 of them were Inlanders and 20-30 were coastal Cree (HBCA, B.135/e/23). The 1901 inspection report, on the other hand, lists over 100 Cree men from the Moose Factory region, not counting women and children, who traded or worked at the post (HBCA, B.135/e/34:19-21). If 80 men, in 1885, translated to roughly 400 people, then it is not unreasonable to assume that 100 Cree men in 1901 meant that the population was increasing significantly. It is unclear, however, if the proportion of Inlanders to Coasters was staying the same. The economic situation would have been a key factor in determining this.

James Cotter’s 1885 report paints a very useful portrait of the Inlander population and their economy:

The trade at Moose Factory is still carried on in the usual manner ... since the coalition of the Companies. In the autumn each Indian hunter receives advances in proportion to his ability & trustworthiness. Those who winter inland generally leave for their hunting grounds about the beginning of October, and no more is seen of them until May or June following, when they return with their packs of fur, & pay up their debts. As a rule little difficulty is experienced with these men who winter on their inland hunting grounds, for the reason that the country which they inhabit is well stocked with fur bearing animals, &

the most ordinary industry can produce good results. Each man's capacity being known, & his debt given according to it, unpaid accounts are not common among this class. Sickness & death, of course, sometimes leave debtor balances, but as a rule the inland hunters attached to Moose pay their accounts regularly, & are a well to do and respectable set of men (HBCA, B.135/e/23).

Cotter's assessment of the Coaster population, "those families of Indians who live on or near the coast all the year round," was not so positive:

Some of these hang about the shore because they have no family hunting grounds in the interior to repair to ... they contribute little to the Returns, & are themselves of poor consequence. It is their poverty & their laziness which make them so difficult to manage. Leave them unaided, & there is a chance of their starving to death in Winter. Assist them, & it is always difficult & sometimes impossible to get payment. Thus the trader is pulled in one direction by prudence, & in the other by humanity, & he is ... fortunate if he can hold a middle path between the two (HBCA, B.135/e/23).

Despite the heavy indebtedness of some Coasters, however, the debt system appears to have benefited both the HBC and the Cree. In his 1885 report, Cotter explained:

With regard to the debt system, I do not think it would be advisable to do away with it here as long as the present state of things exists. It would be time to consider the question when opposition had made its appearance, or when the Indians began to wander to other places with their furs. In the meantime I cannot help thinking that if we ceased giving the usual advances, our hold on the Indians would be weakened, & much harm would ensue (HBCA, B.135/e/23).

It would not take long for the opposition to make its appearance. In 1890, Joseph Fortesque, the new Chief Factor at Moose Factory, reported that

for the first time we have suffered from the almost continuous presence of opposition, not on a large scale, but quite enough to

unsettle the minds of the Indians, and make them very difficult to deal with, and threaten to give their Furs to the opposition unless they got exactly all they wanted (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:4).

Competition, however, was not exclusively for furs, but also for Cree labour, and this sort of “opposition” had already made its appearance. Cotter had reported in 1886 that

the Indians have been in a ferment not only about the fur tariff but about the labour tariff as well ... The Boatmen hearing of the high wages on the CPR line, now within ten days of us, struck for more pay. I was in an awkward dilemma; for if I had refused and held out even for a week, it is possible the inland Outfits might not have reached their destinations; for a dry season was causing the water in the river to fall fast ... (HBCA, B.135/e/26:1-2).

Clearly, Cree labour was vital to the HBC operations at Moose Factory:

it must be borne in mind that we are absolutely dependent on the Indians for the whole of the summer work. Indians do the voyaging, make the hay, fetch home the rafts of logs, gather ballast for the ship - a very considerable piece of work -, load and unload the ship and the country vessels, besides many smaller jobs. Any stoppage therefore arising from discontent or other causes would have serious consequences, as we work here for the whole Department. The management of these Indians is becoming yearly more difficult ... (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:8).

Chief Factor Fortesque, referring in his 1890 report to the poor design and placement of the sawmill at Moose Factory, stated: “we have to employ 20 or 30 Indians hauling up the logs while it is running” (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:8). According to Inspecting Chief Factor Parson’s 1891 report on Moose Factory, “Nine boats are employed in conveying green hay from the marsh to the factory where it is dried. In each of these boats 4 [Indian] men are employed and make 3 trips per week ... 160 loads are required” (HBCA, B.135/e/29:36).

If the Company benefited from Cree labour, so did the Cree. Parson commented in 1891 that “During summer ... every Indian who wants work is employed, and at shiptime they cannot be dispensed with, but in winter a great many Indians are engaged on monthly pay” (HBCA, B.135/e/29:36). The Inspecting Chief Factor, however, clearly did not approve of the high numbers of Indians employed through the winter: “Many of these are no doubt useless hunters, but many among them could make fair hunts, and in any case the staff of people to pay and feed is far more than sufficient if they were kept properly to their work” (HBCA, B.135/e/29:36).

In 1885, Cotter had explained his criteria for determining what was a good hunt: “The best hunter here in a good year will give in about 500 Made Beavers’ worth of furs. I have however only two men of this sort. From 200 to 300 M.B. may be considered a good hunt. From 100 to 150 M.B. medium, & anything below 50 poor” (HBCA, B.135/e/23). By the turn of the century, a good hunt was clearly harder to obtain. In the 1900-1901 season, of about 100 Cree trappers trading at Moose Factory, only 28 brought in over 50 M.B. in furs, but 60 of them earned over 50 M.B. in credit for their labour, and almost all of them did some labour at the post (HBCA, B.135/e/34:19-21). Something had clearly changed since Cotter wrote his 1885 report.

EVIDENCE AND ACCOUNTS OF STARVATION AND DEPRIVATION

James Cotter commented in 1885 that “The Moose Indians have not changed much since I first knew them 18 years ago. ... They are, taken as a body, a prosperous community, & are likely to remain so ...” (HBCA, B.135/e/23). Then, from 1888 to 1891, HBC traders began to report seasons of shortage, deprivation and starvation. Moreover, it was a trend that would continue through the turn of the century.

Cotter himself was, in fact, among the first to anticipate the new trend towards lean hunts. In September 1888, he informed the HBC Secretary in London that “Requisitions especially for

provisions are now likely to increase, rather than decrease or remain stationary” (HBCA, B.135/b/59). Next year, William Broughton, Moose Factory’s new Chief Factor, reported that Moose Factory had experienced a 15% decline in trade in the 1888-89 season

entirely owing to the great falling off in Beaver which were very scarce during the past Winter and which always form the bulk of the returns ... so scarce were they in some sections, that hitherto considered good hunters, failed to collect even a dozen skins during the season (HBCA, B.135/e/26).

He noted, however, that “Small furs have generally increased in those sections where Beaver have been scarce” (HBCA, B.135/e/26).

In 1890, Broughton’s replacement as Chief Factor, Joseph Fortesque, reported that Moose Factory had

been under peculiar conditions throughout the Outfit [1889-90 trade season]. It has been subject to an abnormal scarcity of all kinds of country food, ... Beaver, which is both food and trade to the Indians, has declined most. There was no other course to pursue than either to give food gratis, or trade the Fur, and, in some cases, advance food on debt, which last plan was mostly adopted, in consequence of which, the debts are so largely increased. In cases where Indians were too reduced to come in, or were brought in sick, we were compelled to relieve gratuitously (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:4).

The shortages, however, were not limited to beaver:

the great scarcity of food of all descriptions, Rabbits especially, which are the staff of life of the Indians of this Department, has prevented those on the Coast from hunting to any distance, and caused them to hang around the Forts, paying periodical visits fortnightly and trading over the counter what little Fur they were able to scrape together, and in many cases increasing their already heavy indebtedness (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:2-3).

Fortesque did not hesitate to point out that “There are many, however, thoroughly honest, and who were never in debt

before, and who will strain every nerve this season to clear themselves” (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:4). Moreover, even the Company’s “own hunts and fisheries were extremely unproductive, and scarcely availed at all to lessen the drain on ... [their] imported provisions” (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:4-5).

From 1874 to 1884 the total Indian debt at Moose Factory had surpassed 500 Made Beaver only four times, and 1,000 M.B. only once. From 1884 to 1885, however, it nearly quadrupled from 470 to 1789 M.B. From 1886 to 1888 the average debt was 2,676 M.B. Then in 1889, it jumped to 8,732 M.B. By 1890 it was 15,660 M.B. (HBCA, B.135/e/29: 26). In 1901, the closing balance on Indian debt for the 1900-1901 outfit was listed as 2,675.25 M.B., but that did not include 6,377.25 M.B. that had been written off (HBCA, B.135/e/34:24).

The “scarcity of Fur and Food ... [was] engendering great poverty and want [throughout the Southern Department], and in every District but Eastmain, death from starvation” (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:22). The Rupert’s River District appears to have been one of the hardest hit. “Unprecedented scarcity of food,” was reported,

and to such an extent that several ... Indians succumbed and were starved to death. As an illustration of the scarcity of Rabbits, the staple food (with Beaver) of Indians in this District, ... the number of Rabbit skins traded this Outfit is 90% short of previous averages” (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:22).

Such shortages were certainly not unprecedented. We find evidence of it in the oldest surviving official HBC letter from James Bay, written by Captain Fullartine in 1703, little more than three decades after the arrival of the first fur trade vessel there:

It was a very hard winter (for provision) all over the country, for abundance of the poor Indians perished and were so hard put to it that whole families of them were killed and eaten by one another: the young men killed and eat [sic] their parents and the women were so put to it for hunger that they spared not the poor sucking infants at their breasts but devoured them. The reason of

this famine amongst them was the little snow that fell so that they could not hunt beasts (Davies & Johnson 1965:9).

Fullartine does not explain the context or degree of cannibalism that occurred in this year; nor does he indicate the response by other Crees. Later HBC and Cree accounts of cannibalism during time of starvation indicate that this would have been considered a grave breach of the ethical norm. Those who had – in Alexander Christie’s words (HBC trader at Rupert House in 1818) – “been reduced to the dreadful necessity of eating human flesh” would sometimes be killed, even by their closest relatives, for fear they had become dangerous *witikowak* (plural of *witiko* or windigo) with a taste for human flesh (Davies 1963:321).

COPING WITH STARVATION AND DEPRIVATION

If both the Company and Cree had previously encountered privation and the threat of starvation in the region, how did they cope with it? The Council of the Southern Department, in an 1825 meeting held at Moose Factory, resolved

that all Commissioned officers and clerks be enjoined to follow up the same system [of fair and kind treatment towards the Indians, for] ... by this humane and kind treatment, we shall prove to them by example, and corresponding acts, that we look upon them as creatures too often subject to harsh restraint imposed upon and making them subservient to modes a like repugnant to their nature and strong local attachment ... every good Indian ought to be regarded as a Servant of the Company, and entitled to our care and kindness, therefore when they are in health, let us attend to their comforts, when they are afflicted with sickness let us soothe and [illegible] them, and when they are in a state of starvation, which is too often the case, let them see and feel that we have compassion in us (HBCA, B.135/k/1).

At least two of the five HBC men present at this meeting, Joseph Beioley and Alexander Christie, would have had in their recent memory the significant events of the winter of 1817-1818, when a number of HBC employees sent from Rupert House to

establish an inland post had starved to death or resorted to cannibalism. They had planned their journey poorly, had been caught off-guard by the weather, and had refused assistance offered by several Cree trappers (Davies 1963:318-322).

All the HBC records from 1882-1902 indicate that the traders continued to follow the policy of assisting those who turned to them in time of need. In his 1890 report, Fortesque called “attention to Mr. Broughton’s proposal to establish a small Wintering Post at the first lake above Rupert’s House,” and commented that “it might also operate towards preventing the recurrence of such extreme cases of starvation” (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:15). He also emphasized that Eastmain House could not be abandoned “without risking the existence of hunters who are already disappearing from this [the Rupert River] District” (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:15).

In 1891, Fortesque reported further shortages, the worst seen thus far: “This scarcity has been prevailing now for two years but reached its hitherto lowest culmination in the Outfit now concluded. In addition to the almost total disappearance of Rabbits ... the steady decline in Beaver ... has been ... crippling” (HBCA, B.135/e/30:1).

How did the Cree cope with this situation? According to the HBC records, they sought the Company’s assistance, and there can be little doubt that they also sought each other’s help. Bishop Horden had commented in September 1884, that the “Rupert’s House ... Indians ... are excellent hunters ... liberal in their support of the mission, always kind and benevolent. They would assist anyone who might need their help” (Horden 1976:35). Ellen Smallboy’s account suggests that this ethic was no less valued in Moose Factory: “in the past hunters would share out some of what they killed to old people who couldn’t get to the bush” (Flannery 1995: 60).

On the other hand, the Cree might deal severely with those who crossed the ethical line and became *witikowak*. Fortesque noted in 1890:

Mr. Factor Broughton [at Rupert House] reports to me that the lad I wrote of last Winter as having resorted to cannibalism is still at Eastmain supported by the Company, and wishes to know how to dispose of him. He reminds me that he is some expense to the Co., but that he could not turn him loose again without giving him the means of subsistence -- his gun, ammunition, etc. -- and that, in that case, he might either resort to his practices of last Summer again, or he might be hunted down and shot by the other Indians, neither of which events is to be desired (HBCA, B.135/e/28a: 17).

There is no further indication in the Moose Factory records of what was done with this young man, but clearly there was some concern for his well-being, not just for the expense incurred by the Company in supporting him.

The traders, faced with rising costs and diminishing returns, soon looked to the Government for assistance. Broughton made a suggestion to this effect in 1890, while stationed at Rupert's House:

I would here beg to enquire whether in hard seasons the Government would not be willing to make a grant in money or kind to help to keep the Indians alive. I believe it to be to the Company's interest to keep them from dying out, but this can only be done in seasons like the past by greatly increasing the expenses of the Post, as well as the Indian Debts ... (HBCA, B.135/e/28a)

By 1901, Broughton's idea was a reality. Now Chief Factor at Moose Factory, he reported that year that "All country food continues very scarce in this District and it has been necessary to give a large amount of assistance to sick and starving Indians, particularly the former, numbers of whom returned from their hunting grounds as soon as the epidemic reached them. These supplies will be charged as directed to Government" (HBCA, B.135/b/56, file 1).

EXPLAINING STARVATION AND DEPRIVATION

Faced with shortages and the consequent deprivation, many fur traders and Crees were asking how long this lean period would last and what had caused it:

the concurrent opinion of the other Commissioned Officers, combined with that of many of the older Indians is that this is a recurrence of the periodic scarcity that occurs every ten years; that Returns and food having both been plentiful for some years past, they are now on the decline, and will probably reach their lowest this Winter or next, when they will regain, it is hoped, their average, and pass on to a maximum (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:22).

Periods of starvation and hardship were not new, as noted earlier, but Broughton at Rupert's House commented in 1890 that he had "never, during the course of a long connection with the Fur trade, known all kinds of country provisions so scarce as they were last winter" (HBCA, B.135/e/28a). This opinion echoed that expressed by Bishop Horden (cited earlier) in 1884.

Fortesque, in his 1890 report, identified one of the immediate causes: "Beaver is reported to be steadily declining everywhere over the Department" (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:22). This was, he elaborated,

probably ... due partly to the Indian hunters of Abitibi and Kinogumissee, who, having no employment in Summer, come down near the Coast, and hunt up the Beaver of the Moose and Rupert's House Indians, thus depriving them of their anticipated food and hunts in Winter (HBCA, B.135/e/28a:23).

S.K. Parson expressed a similar opinion with more certainty the following year:

Some say that we are merely passing through a series of bad seasons; it is however pretty certain that in this district, the Beaver are rapidly getting killed out, while other animals vary in

number according to recurring circumstances as has always been the case (HBCA, B.135/e/29:25).

In 1901, Inspecting Chief Factor Milne was even more explicit:

Beaver have disappeared from the section of country hunted by the Moose Indians, where they used to be abundant. They have been killed out with intent apparently in later years as Indians came to expect that their titles to their hunting grounds would be disputed by the inflow of the whites.

The Indians are too numerous to make good hunts of other fur-bearing animals, although one year with another, the collection should not decrease very rapidly (HBCA, B.135/e/34:6).

The arrival in the 1880s of the Canadian Pacific Railway within just ten days' travel to the south had brought with it more than a decline in Moose Factory's importance as a transportation hub. It had also brought newcomers whose needs and wants did not require a complementary relationship with the Cree (John Long, "Historical Context" in Flannery 1995:71; Taylor 1994: 361; George & Preston 1987: 450-451).

These newcomers stood in stark contrast with the fur-trading HBC – the old "newcomer" – whose commercial venture had been enormously dependent, from the very beginning, on the Cree for its success, and, often, for the survival of its men. In contrast, it had taken a much longer time for the Cree to form a comparable dependency on the HBC.

CONCLUSIONS

Before the HBC arrived, there were periods of hardship for the Cree that coincided with cyclical fluctuations in animal populations. With the alternative source of provisions and helpful tools made available by the HBC, however, the Cree did not necessarily become entirely dependent on the posts, but rather found new tools and a new source of help in time of hardship.

This was especially true for the inland Cree, whose lives did not revolve around the post, which they visited only a few times a year or where they gathered only during the summer. To repeat what Cotter noted in his 1885 report for Moose Factory, “unpaid accounts are not common among this class” – they are “a well to do & respectable set of men” (HBCA, B.135/e/23).

The “homeguard” or coastal Crees were more closely associated socially (often through intermarriage) and economically with Moose Factory. This was largely due to the HBC’s dependence on them, which had evolved and diminished, but had not disappeared by the end of the 19th century. It was also due to these Crees’ recognition of the reciprocal benefits.

The primary work undertaken by these coastal Crees in exchange for provisions and goods, with few exceptions, was not the result of a make-work project designed to occupy a dependent population. It was necessary work and the HBC depended upon the Crees to do it. Much of it, moreover – such as hay-making, tending cattle, unloading provisions from the ship and transporting them inland, hunting and fishing – was directly related to provisioning. Cotter put it bluntly when he said that the HBC was “absolutely dependent upon the Indians for the whole of the summer work” (HBCA, B.135/e/23).

Thus, while many of the coastal Cree had become more “dependent” upon the HBC’s imported provisions and country produce, the HBC still depended on the Cree as well, both to transport these imported provisions and to sustain livestock and procure country produce. The coastal Crees’ relationship with the HBC was an interdependent one quite comparable to that of the HBC’s more formally employed “servants.” Whether they heartily agreed with it or not, the traders generally followed the guidelines set by the Council of the Southern Department in 1825, that “every good Indian ought to be regarded as a Servant of the Company, and entitled to our care and kindness” (HBCA B135/k/1).

From 1888 to 1891, the Cree in the Moose River District and the James Bay region passed through several seasons of acute shortage of country provisions. Although some thought it might be

another cyclical period of hardship, it soon became clear that this was a longer-term phenomenon. Some commented that it was the worst shortage they had ever seen, and soon they realized that the beaver were being eliminated. If the Cree relied more heavily on the HBC to alleviate their hunger during the subsequent years to 1902 (not to speak of what came after), it was not due as much to the introduction of European goods as it was to the introduction from the south of European or Euroamerican pressures on their traditional resources, either directly or indirectly through more southern Algonquians. It was also due to the spread of diseases that weakened and incapacitated many of them, preventing them from accessing what traditional resources remained. Population growth in the south, however, had its counterpart, small as it might have been, in the north.

Surprisingly, the Cree population at the close of the 19th century appears to have been on the rise despite epidemics. Therefore, if the HBC was providing more provisions to the Cree at this time, it may be that this was due as much to an increase in population as to an increase in dependency among all Cree on account of the introduction of European commodities. As Milne noted in 1901, “The Indians are too numerous to make good hunts of other fur-bearing animals” (HBCA, B.135/e/34:6).

Conversely, however, the introduction of European commodities and the presence of the HBC as another recourse in times of deprivation and sickness may have been precisely what allowed the population to increase, despite the epidemics.

In 1885, Chief Factor James Cotter had noted:

The Moose Indians have not changed much since I first knew them 18 years ago. They are better off perhaps, & spend more on dress, & in the purchase of imported provisions; but their habits otherwise have undergone no change that I can see. They are, taken as a body, a prosperous community, & are likely to remain so, as long as we are shut out from the outside world (HBCA, B.135/e/23).

Almost a hundred years later, in 1978, John Kawapit, a Cree elder from Whapmagoostui (Great Whale River), on the coast of Hudson Bay, told anthropologist Pierre Trudel a story about first contact that he had heard from Harold Utgardeen, an HBC employee of mixed Norwegian, English and Cree ancestry. Utgardeen, who was fluent in Cree, had moved to Whapmagoostui from Moose Factory, his birthplace. It was at Moose Factory that he had heard the following story, passed on later by Kawapit who did not question Utgardeen on account of his affiliation with the Company:

They built a shaking tent and there was someone among them who could penetrate it. The Mistabeo [spirit helper] told him “The noise you heard [a canon shot] means that they are trying to contact you. If you are not afraid of he who made it [the noise], he will give you something that you can count on if ever you have need of anything” (Trudel 1994:64).³

If the arrival of the HBC gave the Crees access to better tools, exotic goods and additional assistance in time of need, the arrival of other non-Crees was bringing with it both hindrance and assistance in proportions that only time could reveal. Baldwin put it this way: “The railways had brought competition -- but it was a new type of competition. Pitted against the settlement of towns, the demands of mining, lumbering and hydroelectricity, the old fur trading post gave way to a new era of progress” (1976: 80). Although neither one was inevitable, “progress” of the fur trade depended from the start almost entirely on the Cree, whereas “progress” of southern Canadian industrial development did not.

ENDNOTES

¹ The post journal files from this period contain only meteorological records.

² The files relating to Moose Factory that are unavailable on microfilm at the Library and Archives of Canada include: the correspondence inward for this period (HBCA, B.135/c/3), which contains both originals and contemporary copies of letters received at Moose Factory – many of them not copied into the correspondence books; some of the miscellaneous files (HBCA, B.135/z/4 & 7-11); and all of the private records (HBCA, E.50/3 and E.225).

³ This is an English translation of a French translation of a Cree account.

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