

A Savage Commerce

Too often the folk memory of the Indian – Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) trading relationship is reduced to the nature of a simple swap: furs for trinkets. That may have been temporarily true during initial European contact, but as the interchange between societies grew in frequency and intensity, it evolved its own complicated cultural repertoire.

The tribes saw themselves not as fur suppliers to the HBC or as trappers for gain but as part of an interlocked, animate universe in which every animal was treated as a relative of man. Hunting was very much a spiritual experience. They communicated in dreams with the sacred “keepers of the game” who told them where to hunt and sought permission to kill from the animals themselves. They knew that they would be granted the bounty of pelts only if they proved worthy of it. When invading Europeans demanded that the Indians slaughter the creatures of the woods merely for profit, they could not know how very much they were asking.

The main reason the fur trade operated as smoothly as it did was that, without really being aware of it, the HBC traders tapped into an existing Indian economic network dating back as much as five thousand years.

It extended from Hudson Bay across the prairies, inland from the Pacific, from the St. Lawrence to the Great Lakes, and eventually right across the continent.

Some Indian academics take a more severe view of the relationship between the Indians and the Hudsons Bay Company. “The Indian People inadvertently became dependent on European goods for their own survival,” states Blair Stonechild, a Cree who heads the department of Indian Studies at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College in Regina. “Some goods such as knives and kettles made life easier, but soon items such as traps and rifles became necessary to ensure the economic and political welfare of Indian groups and so-called ‘traditional enemies’ among Indians developed.

One example of this phenomenon was the Cree-Dené animosity, some of which arose out of trade-based conflicts. Indians identified bows and arrows with hunting, not human carnage, but the arrival of the rifle brought a marked increase in human violence.”

Stonechild and others point out that even if the actual trading patterns was not unjust, the economic base of the Indian survival mode was undermined through the massive slaughter of fur-bearing animals and, later, through depletion of the buffalo.

Newman, Peter C. (2005). *Company of Adventurers* (p. 161-164). Toronto, Canada: Penguin Group.