Trapper-Trader:  
An Analysis of the  
Structure of Relations

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This paper will examine Cree-trader relations in western James Bay in the early 20th century, focussing specifically on the communities of Winisk and Attawapiskat. The objectives of this paper are threefold: 1) to place the Cree trapper and White trader in their respective cultural contexts as well as the intercultural nexus of the trade itself; 2) to place the Cree trapper on an equal footing with the White trader in the analysis of trapper-trader relations; 3) to examine and question the nature and extent of trader domination in 20th century western James Bay.

Before embarking on specific discussions of the Winisk and Attawapiskat fur trades, it should be noted that the archival records are replete with evidence and references to the Mushkegowuk Cree trading widely throughout the western James Bay region. Thus, Albany Indians are found to trade in Severn, Attawapiskat Indians at Winisk and so on. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the Cree were cognizant of trading practices and prices paid at different posts.

It is useful to note the way in which, historically, trapper-trader relations have been perceived in James Bay. In terms of the Attawapiskat fur trade Nonas (1963) has made the following observations:

... the Hudson's Bay Company and their men are ... more than just traders and store-keepers, they are in every way the bosses the Indians recognize them to be. ... The HBC man is The Boss. ... his presence is all pervasive ... The personality of this northern community is more often than not a reflection of his personality. And, more often than not he lives the role, as judge, mayor, merchant, and all: Boss. (Nonas 1963)

John Honigmann did more research in Attawapiskat than any other researcher and his findings are somewhat less adamant than those of Nonas.
Indeed, Honigmann never loses sight of the fact that the fur trade was an inter-cultural nexus of two distinctly different ways of being. He wrote:

The Hudson’s Bay Company ... has never regarded it as necessary either to train their employees as human administrators or secure a body of theoretical information concerning their native clients. ... communication of a non-commercial sort does not flow freely in his direction nor is it particularly sought for. It is not uncommon to find the post manager deeply sympathetic to what he regards as the impoverishment of the Indians.

The policy of the Company operates to encourage industrious trapping through a system of rewards and punishments. A man who traps large quantities of fur is praised, respected and assured of as generous a credit the following fall as circumstances will allow. The trader is guided by the values of his own society ... (Honigmann 1961:33-34).

In addition to these observations, Honigmann — in contrast to Nonas — stated that in general the directive role of the post manager is slight, and that he personally exercised little power. The Cree, he noted, do not look at him as a leader in community affairs.

It is during the numerous periods of crisis that we can best examine the relationship between trader and trapper in Attawapiskat. It is fair to say that the response of the Bay to the Cree’s plight during the numerous periods of starvation was ambiguous at best. While there are weekly references in the post journals to the issuing of rations to the sick and destitute, it is also apparent that the profits of the stores were a priority. The following entries from the Attawapiskat Post Journals suggest that the bottom line was never far from the trader’s mind:

Frank Rickard and Dan Wesley came in this evening and reported being nearly starved, their families having had nothing to eat for two days. I gave them some grub but can’t do much for Frank as he has an old balance. (January 24, 1920)

Issued rations to ... destitute Natives ... brought a few skins to trade, the half value of same being retained for his debt at Albany. (March 14, 1931)

Periods of starvation were frequent in Attawapiskat during this century. One of Honigmann’s informants stated that appeals to the post’s manager and to doctors for food during these times were met with admonitions to “Go out and trap” when there were no furbearers left. In the eyes of the Cree a relationship that had been established — a relationship that had been relatively symbiotic when times were good and animals abundant — was drastically changed.

One must attempt an understanding of the relationship that existed between the Cree and the trader in Attawapiskat from a Cree perspective. Cree society is one which is based upon a number of given assumptions: egalitarianism, balanced reciprocity and political leadership that amounts
to little more than *primus inter pares*. These must be examined in turn to appreciate the unfolding of events during the lean years in the first half of the century.

Basic anthropology informs us that in egalitarian societies a member has as much right (with some exceptions) to the resources of that society as any other members of the society. This, it is admitted, is an ideal type. Thus, a poor hunter is not discriminated against because he is not as proficient as his brother. Therefore, he cannot be denied food because he is a poor hunter or is having poor luck due to game shortages; nor can he be denied the right to be heard.

Similarly, in Cree society the basic system of exchange is reciprocity, that system which is found universally among hunters and gatherers. In its simplest form reciprocity rests upon the fundamental understanding that there is an exchange of items of, in some sense, equal value. There need not be an immediate exchange; rather, it is understood that at some point all exchanges will balance out and everyone will be satisfied.

Finally, it is essential to note that among the Cree political structure is largely informal, based on age and sex. The leader, such as he is, has informal influence, and does not have the means to enforce his decisions or his advice. Honigmann (1957:369) has stated of the Cree that ambivalence characterizes thinking about leadership. Indians regard firm leadership as desirable and yet no pleasure comes from exercising power. Too great evidence of power is resented and feared by those whom it affects.

How then, does this relate to trapper-trader relations in the first half of the century? The initial relationship was seen by the Cree as one of equals. Between the fur traders and the Cree there was initially a balanced reciprocity, insofar as when furs were abundant they were produced by the Indians for the items they needed or desired. Similarly, the post journals contain references to gift exchanges between the traders and Cree of food and other items, such as clothing, when times were good. But the White institutions operate within a different set of guidelines. The fur traders are business and profit oriented. Their society does not function under notions of reciprocity, egalitarianism, and informal leadership. Therefore, the expectations of the trader and the trapper are not similar; and when times are difficult for the trader, profits and productivity take priority. Thus, the order to “Go out and trap” is a reflection of the trader’s primary motivation and the dictates of the company for which he works. In non-Native society competition produces leaders, and the trader stepped out of his perceived role as an equal in the eyes of the Cree to assume a leader role in maintaining and perpetuating the trade he was there to establish. The basic assumption that the Cree held, i.e., that the trade existed between relative equals, was violated. This basic trust was violated by the withholding
of goods and foodstuffs in times of need. Thus, on a number of counts the traders overstepped what was understood to be a relationship between equals: they withheld goods from those in need, they assumed an aggressive leadership role by giving orders, and they denigrated the most competent of trappers. When times were good, the traders could be depended upon for material items; when times were bad, they could not be depended upon. A fundamental Cree tenet was breached.

Further, from a Native perspective, the trader did not understand the hardship involved in the trapper’s lifestyle. Another of Honigmann’s informants declared that “the [trader] does not know how much travel is involved in covering the ground and how hard it is to live in the bush . . . When [he] travels in the bush he has everything he needs . . . when I go . . . sometimes I take only two pounds of flour . . . and get food from the country. I never work by the clock” (Honigmann 1949:27). There existed two different realities, and two different perceptions of The Other.

However, the trader must be understood in terms of his society. He was a minute but vital part in a much larger society, that of the HBC itself and the world, insofar as the individual Bay posts were subject to the vagaries of the world market in furs. This concern is very much in evidence in the journal entries which record the price fluctuations of muskrat, beaver and lynx.

The movements and decisions of the White trader were largely determined by the policies of the Bay and the markets of the world, far beyond his control. One must not lose sight of the fact that Whites in the north function under constraints not of their own making.

But this is not to suggest an “Indian as victim” scenario. The HBC journals are replete with entries suggesting Native influence in the trading relationship:

A number of inland hunters . . . who did not pay were permitted to trade their entire winter catch at Weenusk, despite the fact that the Company’s manager at that post had a list showing the amount of debt each Attawapiskat native had on leaving for his hunting grounds last fall. (Attawapiskat Post Journals, May 30, 1931)

It is in actions such as these, then, that we must look to find the subtle complexities of the trapper-trader relations.

We have more recent academic writings on the community of Winisk, which lies northwest of Attawapiskat. In 1988 scholarly writings on the community of Winisk argued that the Hudson’s Bay Company discriminated against those trappers who had previously dealt with the opposition, i.e., the Revillon Frères Company. The writer states that between 1915 and 1927 the two companies were in competition and following the absorption of the latter “those families that had traded with [RF] were treated . . .
with disregard by the Company traders and suffered considerable ostracism along with decreased credit for outfitting" (Graham 1988:7). The evidence cited for this assertion is oral testimony from a local informant who stated that one "entrepreneur" [a trapper?] "was treated sort of secondary, like he lost a lot of prestige".

A similar argument has been made by Trudeau who has probably conducted the most extensive research in Winisk. He writes:

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\text{... credit — better known as "debt" — varied between $50 and $300 per individual per part-season, that is from September to December and from January to June. The amount issued depended upon the trapping abilities of the Indians and other personal qualities interpreted by the trader. A "good Company man", that is one who besides being an average to good trapper traded all his pelts at the Company store and did not argue about fur prices, could easily get $300 credit, while an average or even good trapper who argued too much with the trader about prices or the quality of his pelts, or who traded too often at the Revillon store, would obtain only between $100 and $200, sometimes as little as $50. Although the power of the Hudson's Bay Company manager was somewhat minimized ... when Revillon Frères traded in Winisk, it was always strong and the sanctions imposed by him, such as the reduction or cancellation of credit, were effective in keeping the Indians in line. ... the credit system has generally been recognized as having contributed to putting the Indians in a state of total and continuance dependence upon the Company. As one of the early missionaries said "The Indians lived from debt to debt and the Company kept them in a state of subservience." (Trudeau 1966:35-36) }
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Later, Trudeau goes on to extend his argument even further, contending that the Cree became over-dependent on the Company. The period to which he is referring is 1901-1955, what he labels the "sustained contact phase".

What is being argued here is that archival research raises questions about the contentions of Graham and Trudeau. This writer suggests that the trappers, rather than being passive recipients of trader dicta, frequently and successfully were able to shape and define the way the fur trade would be played out on the ground. If, indeed, the HBC functioned the way it is suggested by Graham and Trudeau, then one must acknowledge the possibility, if not the very existence, of Cree resistance to this "ostracism", "discrimination" and "control".

Thus, what is being argued here is that the Winisk Cree played an active role in determining and shaping the way the fur trade would be conducted in their region. Rather than being ineffectual pawns in the fur trade, the Cree were willing and capable of establishing parameters and guidelines for conducting the trade. In 1902 G.E. McAlpine, the trader at Severn Post (and Weenusk) was reprimanded for the prices he was paying for furs at Weenusk. He was issued the following directive by J. MacDonald (who later assumed charge of Weenusk Post):
It is found that the Prices paid for Furs by you at the Weenusk River, and those paid at Albany are so much higher with you [?], that it has caused much dissatisfaction with the Albany Indians, and it would be well that we assimilated ours to those of Albany as much as possible.

As well as this the Fur Market has a downward tendency, and to show good results we must unwillingly reduce some of our Prices as follows:

**Weenusk River**

- Marten to average 4 MB
- Beaver 5, 3 and 2 MB
- Fisher to 8 MB
- Fox Cross 12 for the best Red Fox
- 2 MB Silver Fox
- 50 MB White Fox
- 1 to 1 1/2 Lynx
- 3 MB Mink to 1 1/2 Rats (spring) 8 per MB
- Otter 6 to 10 Wolf 4 for Black Wolverine 3 MB.

(HBC Arch. B.239/b/135, fo. 117)

While the above might suggest that the Bay was setting prices by which the Cree must abide, one must question how such high prices were arrived at initially. At the time, Revillon Frères was quite willing to pay $100 and upwards for unprime fox fur (HBC Arch. A.74/47/, p. 69) a fact which the Cree were only too willing to bring to the attention of the HBC. The point that must be stressed, then, is that it is quite conceivable that the Winisk Cree were able to influence both terms of trade and their working conditions at their post.

Further evidence supporting this thesis is suggested in subsequent HBC correspondences. In January, 1904 for example, G.T. Vincent (trader at Weenusk) wrote a letter to G.B. Boucher (officer in charge of York Factory) indicating that the Cree wished him (Vincent) to inform his superiors at the HBC that they would not be travelling further than Severn in order to pick up freight that summer. Their reasons were clear: when they did go to York Factory (their usual destination) they were kept too long away from their families who starved while the men were absent. Vincent apparently tried to convince them that any trip would be short and that the men would come back at once, but the Cree insisted on more pay for the trip (HBC Arch. B.239/c/26).

Similarly, a firm stance was taken with the Winisk Crees' dealings with Vincent later in 1904. A memo from McTavish (Vincent's superior) to Vincent suggests both incompetence and/or personality flaws in Mr. Vincent's dealings with business and people. McTavish writes: "Your servant Wm. Cromarty would not go to Weenusk if you were in charge. The Indians had all sorts of complaints; one was, they could not trust you." Later, he notes that "When the Indians saw you took no interest in them, they would not hunt, which accounts for your poor returns" (HBC Arch. B.239/b/13, fo. 103).

The ramifications of this "strike" on the part of the Winisk Cree were felt immediately, and suggest the influence that they were able to exercise over the trade. The following correspondence was issued from J.G. Boucher to B.D. Purves, who went to work in Winisk. The letter is undated but HBC archivists state that it was written about August 31, 1904. The letter
also suggests a certain amount of compassion on the part of the HBC toward the Cree. The letter is presented virtually in its entirety.

1) Endeavour by all reasonable & fair means to regain the goodwill of the Weenusk Indians. By a little diplomacy on your part, this ought not to be difficult.

3) You can promise the Weenusk River Indians that they will not be detained at YF next summer, the outfit will be here for them, what we have not got will be sent to Severn in the fall with the N. boat [sic].

5) Use every means to keep the Indians from getting to Albany by keeping in touch with their camps, ought to stop this [sic].

7) You can give a little on a/c S. & D. to the wives & children of those who died at YF. also [sic] if measles break out at Weenusk, remember you are in charge of them, and you are expected to act in a humane and kind way to them. Don't [sic] let them if you can help it (when they are sick) suffer for want of food. If you don't [sic] do this, the priests will cause a lot of talk detrimental to yourself and the Company you represent.

8) Oblige the Mission whenever you can, without of course hurting your own trade or business. (HBC Arch. B.239/b/137, fo. 127)

While some of the above instructions suggest motivation other than charitable benevolence, they also suggest an ability of the Cree to shape HBC policy, at least at the local level. Also implicit is a willingness on the part of the HBC to deal reasonably and fairly with the Cree.

Despite the clear and frank directives on the part of the HBC management, by December, 1905 the Cree were once again beginning to deal at Albany. G.B. Boucher, in a letter dated the 8th of that month to B.D. Purves, who went to work in Winisk, notes how he “is extremely sorry that the Weenusk Indians are beginning to drift Albany way” (HBC Arch. B.239/b/137, fo. 311). While the reason[s] for this shift is/are not immediately apparent, hints are suggested in another letter from Boucher to McTavish, Officer in charge of Keewatin District, dated December 12, 1905.

... Mr. Purves says the French Company are [sic] not at Weenusk River yet, as they could not get a crew to bring their boat last Summer, but will be there first open water. The furs are not coming in as well as they were last year, as five or six of the Weenusk Indians who went into Albany last spring to pay their debts took about 200 skins fresh debt with the Company and another 200 skins with the French Company & never came back again to Weenusk. But I hope I will manage to pull up again in the Spring. (HBC Arch. B.239/b/137, fo. 314)
Further evidence that the Winisk Cree were able to exert influence over the trade is suggested in a number of correspondences elsewhere. W.C. Campbell wrote to W.F. Ewen, an apprentice clerk in charge of Weenusk post in August, 1909.

... In giving advances for fur to Indians you will keep the amount as low as possible, you will [sic] carefully guard your provisions and do not be extravagant with them in the first part of the Winter unless on account of a large hunt you will require all you can keep for the spring. ... In the event of Opposition coming in and paying higher prices than the Company for Fur you will have to come up to their prices and charge accordingly for the Trade Goods ... (HBC Arch. B.239/b/138, fo. 48)

Four months later, on December 9, 1909, Campbell wrote to C.C. Sinclair regarding the management of Winisk and the Cree perception of management.

It is unsatisfactory to have an apprentice clerk in charge of an outpost like either Severn or Weenusk. Ewen whom I had to send to Weenusk is not fit for it as I already told you and the Indians are also very dissatisfied with the young clerks and I hope that the men you supply for these Posts for next Outfit will be men of some experience in the business. (HBC Arch. B.239/b/138, fo. 179)

It is quite clear from the above evidence that the Winisk Cree were able to shape and influence HBC and Revillon Frères trade policy and practice. Through a variety of means — diverting trade, boycotts, verbal protests, work refusals, patronization of one trader over another — the Cree were able to affect trade.

The contentions by other writers that the HBC discriminated against certain trappers and their families is an intriguing one. Unfortunately, a diligent search of the HBC archives fails to find any evidence to suggest that such credit policies were formal ones. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that specific men were singled out for discriminatory treatment such as that described. What the archival evidence does indicate, is that men were issued small outfits because of perceived incompetence as trappers, or because of poor previous performance. This is not to suggest that Graham's and Trudeau's contentions, or their informants — are misinformed: rather, there is no archival evidence to suggest that the HBC implemented a formal policy of discriminating against men or women who had traded with the opposition. If such did occur, it was likely conducted on an individual basis, i.e., specific traders acted on their own initiative.

This argument is supported by information received from Judith Hudson Beattie, Keeper at the HBC Archives. After consultation with other archivists, she states that
... as far as we know, the Hudson’s Bay Company did not have a policy of refusing to trade with Natives who switched to a competitor. . . . We have all read complaints about such disloyalty, but traders were happy to welcome errants back to the fold unless they were chronically in debt. (personal communication).

Lest Ms. Hudson Beattie be accused of partisanship, it should be stated that the HBC archivists and other staff are employed by the Manitoba provincial government, not the HBC. Further, it is useful to examine trader perception of trappers as evidenced in their journal entries.

Abraham had about $700 for camp trading [an outpost of Winisk] this winter — gave the old fellow a suit on gratuity. (June 22, 1938)

Michael Patrick arrived early am — had $56 worth of fur, mostly rats. He left $20 debt but am quite pleased with him as he had been down at JB [James Bay hospital] sick all winter and we expected to lose his debt. (June 11, 1938)

Ben Matthews jumped debt in spring, arrived back today. (August 7, 1938)

Ben Matthews down also — got a damned good lecture and not a cent of debt did he go off with (August 8, 1938). Wm. Mack and Jonas Andrew arrived from the South today — both starved [illegible] and gave us no fur. Very poor for food. Will have to outfit them to go off up inland. (March 9, 1939)

Indians report fur quite plentiful now and Beaver [sic] especially so — but as usual they had alibis for their failure to fetch any in — however they expect to have a good Spring hunt. . . . Indians are still poor however and have all to be helped on debt to get off to hunting grounds. (April 10, 1939)

. . . if Spring hunt is not good, the Indians always blame Mother Nature for sending too much water or not enough - or too cold a Spring or vise versa. (May 26, 1939)

What the archival evidence suggests, then, is differential treatment operating on an idiosyncratic level, i.e., by individual traders, not as official policy. This discrimination (if one prefers that term) was largely determined by previous performance and competence, and there is no archival evidence to indicate that official policy included differential treatment of those who had traded with Revillon Frères. What the evidence does suggest, however, is a patronizing and condescending attitude on the part of some traders toward the Cree, that is also somewhat denigrating of the trappers and their skills and knowledge. On the other hand, one of the quotations above makes reference to outfitting all the trappers, because they were, in the trader’s words, poor.

Withal, there is also evidence of genuine compassion and caring.

Fred Gull came in at 4 pm to report that the big storm of Tuesday had wiped out 2 families of Indians who were travelling into the post when the storm struck. Ben Matthews who was in here on Tuesday to take food back to his
family & the family of Wabbie David, went back to find they had all been overtaken by the storm on the coast & were lost. They could not see the trees & must have lost their bearings altogether. Ben’s wife and 5 children were all frozen to death, whilst Wabbie David’s wife & child were also frozen to death. Wabbie was alive but badly frozen when Ben arrived but Ben did not expect him to live. . . . The writer remarked on Tuesday of the extremely sudden shift of wind & the power of the gale & expressed the hope that our team would not be caught out in it. Little did we realize that only 5 miles to the South these poor souls were meeting death. Ghastly to think of the six poor children. (Winisk Post Journal, December 15, 1938)

. . . The first stories were wrong — the dead number four — 2 women & 2 children. Wabbie David’s wife and Ben Matthews’ wife and 2 children. Terrible as it is but not quite as bad as reported at first. (December 16, 1938)

As the entries above suggest, the trader — as an individual — was capable of compassion and generosity. However, within his narrowly defined role as trader — circumscribed and defined as it was by the HBC — he drew limitations for this generosity. Coming as he did from a capitalist, meritocratic society, he rewarded those who performed (witness Abraham and his suit “on gratuity”) and punished those who did not (witness the unfortunate Ben Matthews who skipped out on his debt). The traders were, above all, “good Company men” with loyalties to the “honourable company”. The point being made should not be misconstrued: undoubtedly differential treatment did occur, but it was not official policy. Similarly, it is important to realize the the Cree and the HBC trader were functioning within their respective roles: trapper and trader.

We have as evidence that the trader was discriminatory the oral testimony of the Winisk Cree, testimony as equally valid as the written records of the HBC. If we are to give credence to the Cree data — and we must — we must also give equal time to the trader. We do not have his descendants to give oral testimony but we do have the journal entries written in situ and which reflect his attitudes (quite vividly, it would appear), biases, and moral shortcomings. The traders appear to be cultural mirrors of their times: endorsing merit, patronizing in their relationships with the Cree with whom they worked, generous to those who performed well, and who wept for women and children who suffered cruel and unfortunate deaths. It is not sufficient to state that “those families that had traded with the ‘competition’ were treated afterwards with disregard . . . suffered ostracism . . . and decreased credit”. Such statements have no limitations: traders changed frequently in Winisk and without an official company policy there are no grounds for such unbounded statements.

Finally, we must examine one other issue — that of domination and exploitation to the point of focussing energies on the quest for furs to the exclusion of the quest for food. The fur trade in 1914 and 1915 was, in the
words of the HBC "disasterous". Throughout the Nelson River District of which Winisk was a part, the Indians were preoccupied with hunting for food, claiming that the low prices for fur did not justify hunting fur (HBC Arch. Fur Trade Annual Report, 1915, A.74/24/). It would appear, though, that the decision to focus energies on food production was instigated in part by the Company itself.

It is stated that many of the Indians . . . declined to hunt furs at the low prices obtaining during the Outfit, contenting themselves with hunting meat for food, of their own inclination following the advice given by the Governor and Committee. (Fur Trade Annual Report Outfit 1915 A.74/24/)

The quotation above, then, suggests two things: that the Cree were not (as Trudeau suggested) over dependent on the Company and still considered the procurance of country food a priority, and that the HBC did not seek and could not exert total unyielding control over the Indians.

In conclusion, it is submitted that any analysis of trapper-trader relations must pay careful attention to both the local situation and the role that the Cree played in that relationship. For too long there has been the acceptance of the assumption that the trader exercised total and unequivocal control over both the trade and their partners in it. The archival evidence suggests another story; namely, that the Cree were not always at the whim of the trader, and neither was the trader always the insensitive, non-compassionate tool of the HBC. In the cases of both the trapper and trader we must look for and acknowledge individual behaviours on the ground, recognizing that history is played out at the local level by anonymous people. Similarly, it is important to remember that both trapper and trader came from their own cultural contexts, and were in the process of creating a new one.

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