The territory occupied by the Assiniboine in the early historic period is an issue that is generating considerable controversy. The period debated is between first contact in the seventeenth century and the early part of the eighteenth century. The territory that is disputed is primarily the southern margins of the Boreal Forest and the Great Lake Deciduous Forest both north and west of Lake Superior extending through the Rainy River–Lake of the Woods area (Boundary Waters region) and ending at Lake Winnipeg. One group of scholars suggests that this territory was occupied by the Assiniboine in this early historic period, while another group of scholars suggest an Algonquian speaking group, either Cree or Ojibway. In this controversy both groups of scholars depend heavily upon historical documents to support their arguments.

The resolution of this controversy is essential to an understanding of the prehistory and ethnohistory of the Boundary Waters region. If the direct historic approach in archaeology is to prove fruitful, there can be no debate over the cultural identity of the occupants of this region at first contact. On the other hand the assessment of cultural ecological relationships and their historic maintenance and/or change is dependent on this same information.

It is my intention to deal with those scholars who maintain the Assiniboine occupied the Boundary Waters region at first contact, and are primarily dependent upon seventeenth and eighteenth century sources for making this assertion. This group of scholars consists of Jenness (1932), Hlady (1964), Ray (1974) and Bishop and Smith (1975).

I shall be critically examining both the work of these scholars and the historical documents they cite. This analysis will follow the position taken by the historical relativists (Becker, 1959; Beard, 1959) in its assessment of the historic facts. By this I mean simply that history does not speak through the historical scholars but rather the historical scholar speaks about history. The historic events are obviously past and our means of knowing about these events comes from those sources of information that are present. These sources of information are scrutinized, in order to provide historic facts. The historic facts are finally given meaning by the translator of the facts.

Facts, multitudinous and beyond calculation are known, but they do not select themselves or force themselves automatically into any fixed scheme or arrangement in the mind of the historian. They are selected and ordered by him as he thinks. (Beard 1959:140).
With the epistemology of historical relativism as a framework, certain questions emerge as essential to the resolution of this historical controversy. First, what is the historical evidence from which historical facts have been drawn? How valid are these historical facts, and do the facts corroborate one another? How have these scholars used the historical facts and developed their arguments to the present? Finally, are the questions asked of the historic documents appropriate, given the type of information contained in these documents?

The earliest and most often cited scholar involved in this Assiniboine controversy is Jenness. Jenness used both contemporary anthropological research and historical documents when writing *The Indians of Canada*. The statement Jenness made was concise and to the point:

The Plains tribe that lived nearest to the Iroquoians during the early seventeenth century was the Assiniboine ("the people who cook with hot stones"), who had probably separated off from the Dakota Sioux only a few generations before. They were then hunting in the country around the Lake of the Woods and Lake Nipigon, and though depending mainly on the chase, gathered large quantities of wild rice, which they cooked like their neighbours the Ojibwa, in clay pots and vessels of birch bark. (Jenness 1932:308).

Jenness cites one reference for this statement. This was the Jesuit Relation of 1669-71 which in fact states:

The Assinipouars, who have almost the same language as the Nadouessi, are westward from the Mission of St. Espirit, being fifteen or twenty days journey distant on the lake, where they gather wild oats and fish are very plenty. (Thwaites 1896, vol. 54:193).

A confirming statement comes from the next Jesuit Relation, that of 1670-72; though the author of this relation is uncertain whether the "Assinipoulac" are a tribe living in one large village or thirty small villages (Thwaites 1896, vol. 55:99).

The distance mentioned of fifteen to twenty days is almost impossible to determine with precision. Jenness appears to have considered the occupational area of the Assiniboine to include the large lakes bearing wild rice west of Sault Ste. Marie. This may be somewhat misleading as the Jesuit Relation of 1670-72 contains a map showing the Mission of St. Espirit to be near the western tip of Lake Superior close to the contemporary city of Duluth (Thwaites 1896, vol. 55:95). West of the Mission of St. Espirit lay a large number of lakes that contained wild rice. Leech Lake, Cass Lake, and Red Lake are all in Minnesota and consistent with the Jesuit's statements. Jenness' suggestion of Lake Nipigon, far to the northeast of the Mission of St. Espirit, is not borne out by careful examination of the evidence. The Lake of the Woods is northwest of the Mission of St. Espirit, and while it is possibly the lake mentioned, the three previously mentioned lakes seem more likely. The evidence does not demonstrate Jenness's historic fact. I would suggest the evidence, though moot,
would lead one to suggest the Assiniboine were considered to be far to the south of the Boundary Waters region or Lake Nipigon by the Jesuits in 1669-71.

The next major statement affirming the Assiniboine occupancy of the Boundary Waters region came from Hlady (1964). The statement from Hlady comes after the Assiniboine territorial position at first contact had been disputed by Evans (1961). Hlady turned to the use of historical documents to establish his case.

Our earliest historical reference to the Assiniboine is in the Jesuit Relations. The Assiniboine are placed at Lake Nipigon in 1637-38. Jenness places them around Lake of the Woods and Lake Nipigon in the early 1600's. (1964:32).

The Jesuit Relation of 1637-38 does not refer to either the Assiniboine or Lake Nipigon, but rather refers to Huronia. I would agree with Ray (1974:4) that the earliest reference to the Assiniboine in the Jesuit Relations is that of the Jesuit Relation of 1640. Hlady noted the Jesuit Relation of 1669-71 in a footnote on the same page, but this is the source that I contend was misinterpreted by Jenness. Having cited Jenness's source Hlady then cited the passage in Jenness where Jenness interpreted his source. Hlady failed to demonstrate any new evidence to suggest Assiniboine occupancy of the Boundary Waters region and re-asserted a dubious interpretation by Jenness.

In a more recent and well documented re-statement of the opinion that Assiniboine are in the Boundary Waters region Ray (1974) has provided an invaluable new synthesis of the historical evidence. The initial reference to the Assiniboine is suggested to be in the Jesuit Relation of 1640 though it is contended little specific information is given (Ray 1974:4). It is perhaps useful to examine this reference.

Passing this smaller lake, we enter the second fresh water sea, upon the shore of which are the Maroumine; and still further upon the same banks, dwell the Ouinipigow, a sedentary people, who are very numerous; some of the French call them the "Nation of Stinkards", because the Algonquin word ouinipeg signifies "bad smelling water", and they apply this name to the water of the salt sea,"--so that these people are called Ouinipigow because they come from the shore of a sea about which we have no knowledge; and hence they ought not to be called the nation of Stinkards, but the nation of the sea. In the neighbourhood of this nation are the Naduesiu, the Assinipour, and Erinouai, the Rasouskoueton, and the Pouutouatam. (Thwaites 1896, vol. 18:231).

There are some tentative conclusions that can be drawn from this statement. The ethnic groups mentioned are listed as follows:
Ouinipou - Winnebagoes
Naduesiu - Sioux
Assinipour - Assiniboine
Maroumine - Menomonees
Eriniouai - Illinois
Pouutouatami - Pottawatomies
Rasouakoueton - Mascontins
(Thwaites 1896, vol. 18:258).

All of the aforementioned groups can with confidence be listed as living south of Lake Superior and/or Lake Huron in 1640 with the possible exception of the Assiniboine and the Sioux. This reference, though vague, would not support the suggestion that the Assiniboine are in the Boundary Waters region, or at Lake Nipigon at first contact.

It is also Ray's contention that the Jesuit Relations of 1658 first gives the position of the Assiniboine (1974:6). Again it is most profitable to examine the exact statement made in the Jesuit Relations:

The ninth, situated beyond the Nadouechiousk, thirty-five leagues or there about from Lake Alimibeg, is called the Nation of the Assinipoualak, or Warriors of the Rock.
(Thwaites 1896, vol. 44:249).

Two points are of immediate interest: first the Jesuit is not precise about the direction of the Assinipoualak territory from Lake Alimibeg (Lake Nipigon), though contextually it would seem to be to the west; second the Jesuit is not sure of the distance and has qualified his statement with "or there about".

Ray's interpretation is:

Considering the league was a rough time-distance measurement (the amount of territory canoeists could travel in an hour, approximately three miles) it follows from this account that the Assiniboine lived some one or two days travel or a hundred miles to the west of Lake Nipigon.
(Ray 1974:6).

Considering the ambiguity of the Jesuit's statement this is a remarkably precise location. However, this Jesuit did not use the league as a "rough time-distance measurement". When mentioning the speed with which the Indians travelled this Jesuit refers to one journey 60 leagues in length, that was travelled in 10 days with the return requiring five (Thwaites 1896, vol. 44:241). A second trip of 40 leagues took 3 days while a third, of 70 leagues took only 4 days (Thwaites 1896, vol. 44:243). Consequently, it seems apparent that, in these cases at least, that the league is not used as a "measure of time-distance", but refers to absolute distance travelled.

From the context of the Jesuit's previous statement, it would appear that he was probably never with the "Assinipoualak" but was relaying information based on the statements of Ojibway informants. As such it is perhaps best to bear in mind some of the difficulties that have been encountered by contemporary

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fieldworkers when discussing the Ojibway conception of distance when compared with their own.

I do not believe that I ever succeeded in conveying to them any realistic notion of the distance I had travelled to reach their country. Matters were further complicated by the fact that my rate of travel in different kinds of conveyances was not the sort of knowledge that could be taken for granted. Consequently, my attempt to convert distance into the qualitative units intelligible to them (i.e., "sleeps") made my home only twice the distance the mouth of the river lay from Lake Pegangikum, about 260 miles. Actually, it was more than six times that distance. (Hallowell 1955:207).

While part of Hallowell's difficulty lay in the fact that he had travelled by railroad, at speeds in excess of that with which the Ojibway were familiar, perhaps the major difficulty lay in that the Ojibway did not consider distance in quantitative discrete linear units. The 'sleep' is not correlative with a fixed distance measurement. I would contend that the question of what distance the Jesuit referred to is as vague as the direction from Lake Nipigon the "Assinipoualak territory" lay.

The Assiniboine were encountered trading in the Lake Superior and Lake Nipigon area in 1678 by Sieur de Lhut. In 1684 Sieur de Lhut built a post on Lake Nipigon that seems to have successfully diverted much of the Cree and Assiniboine trade from going up to Hudson Bay (Ray 1974:11; Burpee 1927:47).

Of further interest are three references cited by Ray from the period 1680-90. The suggestion is made that these references define the Assiniboine territory as extending from the Boundary Waters region to the Touchwood Hills in Saskatchewan (Ray 1974:11). This would mean the Assiniboine were residing in two discrete ecozones; the Great Lake Deciduous Forest and the Parklands.

In 1680 Father Hennepin reported the Assiniboine lived 6 or 7 days journey northeast of Mille Lacs and Ray (1974:11) suggests this was Rainy Lake. Hennepin was a priest who had never been with the Assiniboine, but was relaying second hand information about their location. The distance from Mille Lacs is open to question, as no landmarks are given. Furthermore, Hennepin's map and statements lead Thwaites (1903:267) to conclude the territory under discussion was in the neighbourhood of Lake Winnipeg and this interpretation is the more probable of the two.

Another statement in this same vein comes in regard to Jacques de Noyon's meeting with the Cree and Assiniboine in the vicinity of Rainy Lake in 1688. Ray (1974:11) contends the lake beyond Rainy Lake from which the Assiniboine had come was the Lake of the Woods. Innis (1970:50) carefully scrutinized the original source material and concluded the Assiniboine had come from the neighbourhood of Lake Winnipeg and from the evidence I have seen I would have to agree that Lake Winnipeg is the most probable choice.
The final reference is that of Kelsey in 1690-91 who encountered the Assiniboine living in the Touchwood Hills region of the Parklands in Saskatchewan (Ray 1974:12). Kelsey is one of the few in this early period who actually appears to have been with the Assiniboine and left an account that can be corroborated by the later historical sources. I would suggest that the Parkland ecozone from Lake Winnipeg to the Touchwood Hills in Saskatchewan is the more probable territory referred to in these three references. A Parkland-Plains seasonal cycle for the Assiniboine is consistent with the bulk of the historical information for this group.

Ray also suggests there is evidence that some Assiniboine were west of Lake Winnipeg as late as 1740 (1974:16). The source of this information is Arthur Dobbs and is based on the travels of Joseph La France between 1739 and 1742. The passage from Dobbs states:

The Migichihilinious, that is Eagle ey'd Indians, are at 200 Leagues distance; the Assinibouels inhabit the West and the North; they are reported to be the same nation, because of the great Affinity of their Language. The Name signifies Men of the Rock. They use the Calumet, and live at 250 Leagues Distance. They paint their Bodies, and Grave, and have much Phlegm, like the Flemings. (Dobbs 1744:24).

An accompanying map (Dobbs 1744) can be used to suggest that the "Eagle ey'd Indians" lived to the east of Lake Winnipeg. It is Ray's contention that because Nicholas Jeremie, in his journals of 1694-1714 mentions that the Eagle ey'd Indians speak Assiniboine, a statement with which Isham in 1743 agreed, that the case for an Assiniboine band living east of Lake Winnipeg in 1739-42 is confirmed (1974:18).

This passage from Dobbs is not information derived from his informant Joseph La France as he claimed, but is a plagiarized and faulty translation of an earlier statement by La Potherie. The statement made by La Potherie in a reliable translation reads as follows:

The Migichilinious, i.e. "Indians with Eagles' eyes," live two hundred leagues away.
The Assiniboines live in the west and the north. They are considered one and the same nation on account of the similarity of their language. The name means "Men of the Rock". They also use the calumet and live two hundred and fifty leagues away. They tatto great marks on their bodies. They are sober and seem very phlegmatic, resembling the Flemings in character. (C.F. Tyrrell 1931:orig. 1716).

From the above statement it would seem that La Potherie did not consider the "Indians with Eagles' eyes" to be Assiniboine and suggested as a minimal distance "fifty leagues" lay between the two groups' territories.

It should also be noted that in 1695 Father Marest remarked on the ability of many of the Cree to speak Assiniboine and
vice-versa (Tyrrell 1931:68). Isham in 1743 mentioned he had heard the "Eagle ey'd Indians" were Assiniboine but that he had never seen them himself (Rich 1949:115). As to the veracity of Dobb's account, based on Joseph La France's statement, Isham in 1748 made the following comment:

I can not conceive why Joseph La France, who pretended to know so much of the Country, as no Doubt he Did the south parts, shou'd Give no better, or truer acc't as Mr. Dobbs mentions, a great Deal of Which I know to be very Eroneous ..... (Rich 1949:237).

Isham went on to give one specific example of what he considered a deliberately false statement by Dobbs. Ray (1974:16) has also suggested that La Verendrye's encounter with Assiniboine around Lake of the Woods and the Winnipeg River and Red River systems (Burpee 1927:240-244) argues for Assiniboine occupancy of eastern Manitoba as late as 1737. This is not supported by La Verendrye's maps of the distributions of the Cree and Assiniboine (Burpee 1927). Nor is this suggestion consistent with La Verendrye's statements about being with the Cree at Lake of the Woods and encountering the Assiniboine there. It is clear that the Assiniboine had travelled from some distance to the west, solely for the purpose of trade with the French.

The final set of arguments to be dealt with are those of Bishop and Smith (1975) who also maintain that the Assiniboine occupied the Lake Forest of the Boundary Waters region. Bishop and Smith have summarized their position:

(1) The Assiniboine occupied the entire international border region from Lake Superior to west of Lake of the Woods; (2) the Ojibwa resided no further west then Michipicoten Bay on the northeast shore of Lake Superior; and (3) most of northern Ontario north of the Ojibwa (in the east) and Assiniboine (to the west)—including the north shore of Lake Superior between Michipicoten Bay and the mouth of the Kaministikwa River—was occupied by the Cree. (Bishop and Smith 1975:56).

It is not my intention at this time to debate the locations of all the groups mentioned in the early historic literature, but to discuss the historical evidence pertinent to the territory of the Assiniboine at first contact. Bishop and Smith note that the Jesuit Relation of 1656-1658 (Thwaites 1896, vol. 44:249) places the Assiniboine 100 miles west of Lake Nipigon (1975:57). This reference I have already presented in my discussion of Ray (1974) and I will contend it is too vague to allow any precise location.

The second argument of Bishop and Smith's (1975:57) is that the fort built at Lake Nipigon in 1684, by Sieur de Lhut for purposes of trade with the Cree and Assiniboine suggests the latter in the Lake Forest and not further west. Otherwise the Lake Winnipeg-Hays River route to Hudson Bay would be the shorter and more likely route of travel to trade with the European fur traders.

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This argument ignores two vital factors. First the English on Hudson Bay and the French on Lake Superior, and later further inland, were offering different goods (Ray 1974:91). There is good evidence from La Verendrye that the same groups of Indians were more mobile than Bishop and Smith suggest. For example the Cree told La Verendrye that the journey from the Red River to York Factory on Hudson Bay was 10 days going up and 20 days coming down; a distance of 685 miles each way (Burpee 1927:189-190). The trip from Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg was accomplished in 34 days (Burpee 1927:55). Hence it would be possible for a summer trading party of Assiniboine to travel by water from the Red River through to Lake Nipigon to trade with the French, and then go up to Hudson Bay to trade with the English for different goods, finally returning to the western Parklands in a single summer's trading venture. It would, however, be more likely that alternate trading parties would go to the French and the English in a given year.

The final part of Bishop and Smith's historical argument states that as late as 1736 there was a reference to 150 Assiniboine near Lake Nipigon (1975:57). This contentious reference conflicts with the statements of La Verendrye, from the same time period, who placed the territory of the Assiniboine in the Parklands and plains to the west (Burpee 1927).

Conclusions

Having considered the historical evidence I do not consider that the Assiniboine were the occupants of the Southern Boreal Forest and Lake Forest as first contact. The references from the Jesuit Relations between 1640 and 1695 have been given a substantive content they do not merit and/or are misinterpreted. There is no consistency in the placement of the Assiniboine territory in the Jesuit Relations. The only Jesuit mentioned to have, presumably, actually contacted the Assiniboine was Marest (Thwaites 1896, vol. 64:281) and these Assiniboine were trading at Hudson Bay well within the undisputed zone of Cree occupation.

The early French explorer/fur traders such as Jacques de Noyon in 1688 and Sieur de Lhut in 1678 and 1684 seem to have contacted trading parties of the Assiniboine and Cree around the northern shores of Lake Superior and in the Rainy River region. The first well documented French explorer/fur trader to have fully penetrated the Boundary Waters region was La Verendrye who in the 1730's encountered Algonquian speaking groups, probably speaking Ojibway and Cree dialects, living in the Lake Forest as far as the Parklands of Manitoba (Burpee 1927). The suggestion of Bishop and Smith (1975:57) that a reference to the Assiniboine at Lake Nipigon in 1736 establishes part of their territory is not confirmed by the substantive records left by La Verendrye. This reference may well be to a trading party, for as late as 1768 large trading parties of Cree and Assiniboine are still reported to be coming down to Lake Superior to trade (Carver 1778:106). To be concise then there are a handful of vague and uncorroborated references to the Assiniboine territory as being in the Lake Forest or Southern Boreal Forest before the major explorations and substantive journals of La Verendrye (Burpee 1927). I am most dubious of accepting a Cree-Ojibway expansion and Assiniboine withdrawal from the Boundary Waters region before 1720 as has been done by many scholars.

While there is no doubt that a major migration of Ojibway

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moved west through the Boundary Waters region, the possibility that other Ojibway encountered enroute became part of this group is very real. This would explain how E. Rogers (1963:65-66) found genealogical evidence of long term Ojibway residence northwest of Lake Superior, while so many writers such as Hallowell (1955:114-115) found evidence of a historic Ojibway migration.

Another point is the word Assiniboine which is an anglicized corruption of the Cree and Ojibway name for the Assiniboine, for which the recognizable root of the word is /assini/, or 'stone' in Cree and Ojibway. Many Cree groups in particular have identified themselves with stone, for example the Assinicskwawidinniowk of the upper Churchill River system (Smith 1973:III-47). This leaves open the possibility that a group called Assiniboine in a historic source may be a mobile Cree or Ojibway group.

As I suggested in my introduction the historic facts do not speak for themselves and the interpretation is of foremost importance. In most cases where I contest an interpretation of a historic fact I have presented the passage in question so the reader may judge the validity of my interpretation. However, I do not find there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the territory occupied by the Assiniboine at first contact was in the Lake Forest and Southern Boreal Forest from Lake Nipigon to Lake of the Woods. I would further suggest the substantive identification of specific historical groups with definite territories based upon vague and ambiguous references will inevitable lead to continued confusion. The territorial position of the Assiniboine at first contact is such a case.