THE TRACK TO HEAVEN: THE HUDSON BAY CREE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT OF 1842-1843

Jennifer S.H. Brown
Northern Illinois University

In 1842-1843, a powerful religious movement spread rapidly among the Hudson Bay Cree between Churchill, Manitoba, and the Albany River area in Ontario. The meteoric rise and downfall of its principal prophet, Abishabis, are traceable in some detail in contemporary Hudson's Bay Company post journals and correspondence and in records of George Barnley, first Methodist missionary in the James Bay area.¹

Unusual religious activity among the Cree was first recorded at York Factory, Churchill, and Severn during mid-1842. At York during that summer, HBC officer James Hargrave and visiting Methodist missionary James Evans, who had been based at Norway House, Manitoba, since 1840, cooperated in efforts to crush "the absurdities so general among our North River Indians . . . . their new Creed of 'faith without works'" (Hargrave, 23 Jan. 1843, to Robert Harding; see also Harding, 23 June 1843, to Hargrave). On 4 September 1842, John Cromartie, trader in charge at Severn, a post to the south of and subsidiary to York, noted that the Indians gathered there "have been a pest to me . . . with their psalm Singing and painting Books that has been all there occupation this three weeks Back." On 15 September, they were "doing nothing but Roaring and Singing night and day in place of hunting Geese." By late October, more Indians had assembled, "making the woods to Ring . . . with musick and at the Same time they have empty Stomacks and I am afraid it will be the Case with them after this if they Continue as they have done all the fall" (HBCA B.198/a/84, fos. 9, 10, 13).

The movement expanded during the winter of 1842-43. Its strength was manifest at Albany when the Indians gathered there in the spring, and George Barnston, HBC officer in charge, found action necessary. Addressing his hunters on 8 June 1843, he referred specifically to "two York natives who they believe have been in heaven,

¹ A briefer article on the prophet Abishabis will appear in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 8 (University of Toronto Press). I wish to thank the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA), Winnipeg, for the use of their collections. Charles A. Bishop directed my attention to the Albany data when in the course of conversation we discovered that his southern and my northern information referred to the same phenomenon, and that its history could be reconstructed. And John S. Long has shared with me other data from the James Evans Papers at the University of Western Ontario which could not be incorporated here but will assist preparation of a future, more detailed study.
and returned to bring blessing and Knowledge to their Brethern.”
He pointed out that “the Impostors [Abishabis\(^2\), also known as Jesus
Christ, and Wasiteck or ‘the Light’] were assuming characters which
were known to the Indians at first only by the preaching of the Mis-
SIONARIES” (i.e., Evans at Norway House and George Barnley, then
stationed at Moose Factory), and that these leaders’ claims—notably,
of being able to map the “Track to Heaven” with lines drawn on
paper or wood—were false and “wiles of the Devil.” The Indians then
assured him that they would give up “these foolish notions,” and a
paper portraying the road to heaven was handed to Barnston for burn-
ing by “the priestess, an elderly woman who walked from York last
fall” (HBCA B.3/a/148). The growing concern of Barnston and other
HBC men about the movement was twofold: first, it distracted its
converts from hunting furs such that the trade suffered; and second,
some adherents reportedly were so absorbed by their new faith that
they gave up all other activity and starved, as did one Albany Indian
who “depended on the Charts that he had in his possession, of the
roads leading to Heaven and to hell for all his wants. On these un-
meaning scratches—traced on wood or paper—... he did not cease
to look from the moment he pitched his tent in the fall to the hour
of his death” (HBCA B.3/a/149, fo. 30).

The spring and summer of 1843 saw a waning of the movement in
the Churchill-York area, owing in part to the whites’ pressures
against it, and in part to the behaviour of Abishabis himself. While
gaining influence “as a prophesy man,” he gathered from his follow-
ers, “tithes of clothing, arms and ammunition” in great quantities.
When, however, he also demanded five or six wives from his follow-
ers, “some giving their daughters and others being obliged to surren-
der their wives,” along with more goods, support weakened (HBCA
D. 5/9, fo. 308, Hargrave to George Simpson). On 13 March 1843,
James Hargrave at York wrote that one wife had returned to her first
husband, and that “the crowds that used to flock to him with pre-
sents of clothes and ammunition have now entirely diserted him.”
That spring, reports reached York Factory of his being “in a state
of as great beggary as that from which he had at first arisen” (Har-
grave, 13 Mar. 1843, to James Evans).

In July 1843, Abishabis, alienated and desperate, murdered an
Indian, “Canesetu, a good old Indian of infirm health,” and his
wife and two children on the North River in the York area, and stole
their guns, ammunition, and a canoe, evidently to support himself
on a trip to his home district of Severn (HBCA B. 239/a/157, fo.

\(^2\) Mary Black Rogers has kindly communicated that HBCA B. 239/z/26, fo.
10, listing the Indian population belonging to York Factory in 1832, contains the
name Abesshabis, no. 57, unmarried, son of Secappenesew.
Supposedly pursued by a brother of the man he had killed, he reached Severn on 9 August. Three days later, he was put in irons by John Cromartie, officer in charge; the local Indians, knowing of his crime, were “making Complaints that he was threatening them if they Did not Comply with his Requests in Giving him food &c and in fact they was afraid to leave Place while he was hear.” On 13 August, he was allowed to escape, Cromartie hoping that he would “Leave the quarter when Liberatted” (Hargrave, 3 Aug. 1843, to Donald Ross; HBCA B.198/a/85, fos. 5, 6, 13). He left but briefly; on 28 August he was in custody again. On 30 August, three of his countrymen resolved to mete out their own justice to him; they dragged him from the house, knocked his brains out with an axe, and burned the body on a nearby island, “to secure themselves against being haunted by a ‘windigo’” (HBCA B.198/a/85, fo. 8: D.5/9, fo. 309).

His movement retained visible adherents in the Albany area through much of the next winter, especially among inland Indians unaware of his death (HBCA B.3/a/149, fo. 30). Thomas Corcoran, in charge at Albany in 1843-44, warned his colleagues at Moose Factory and Martins Falls to watch for its appearance and “counteract its evil tendency,” and complained to Governor George Simpson of its effects on his trade (HBCA B.3/b/70, pp. 9-10, 19, 27). Simpson, however, assured by James Hargrave at York (HBCA D.5/9, fo. 309) that the death of Abishabis had “entirely tranquilized the ferment” in the north, advised Corcoran that he now saw little cause for concern and added unsympathetically, “If gentlemen in charge of Districts possessed the influence, which one would expect their position would afford them an opportunity of acquiring, I should think it would be no difficult matter to put down such impostors” (HBCA B.3/b/70, p. 45, 11 May, 1844).

In fact, although the most visible “impostors” had been “put down,” the chances are good that the movement survived in less conspicuous forms. Robert Harding, HBC officer at Churchill, argued the likelihood of its underground persistence to James Hargrave in a letter of 23 June 1843 (Hargrave Correspondence), “for tis not an easy matter for the whites discovering the opinions of the scamps who are both rogues and cunning enough to appear convinced without being sincere and tis only from other Indians that this can be learned and that only at times by soundings deep.” In short, the Indians, being skilled at impression management, could have maintained the belief system while concealing and modifying its public

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3The use of an axe on a person feared to be a windigo was customary Cree practice according to HBCA B. 141/e/1, fo. 3, Nelson House, 1815: “as they consider them [windigos] unworthy of being killed with the Gun.”
manifestations to accord more with white ideas of accepted religious observances—notably with Christianity, with which connections already existed.

We may look in several quarters for the origins of the movement, and certainly there was no single cause. First, it was not a unique occurrence, other subarctic Indian groups, probably more often than has been recognized, experienced similar phenomena in historic times. George Nelson, North West Company clerk on southwestern Lake Winnipeg in 1807-08, recorded that a religious movement with a component of anti-white hostility spread among the Saulteaux around the south end of the lake in those years. Among other things, the Indians “were convinced that their golden age was at the moment of returning, when their lands would once more be filled with animals of every description and they themselves enjoy all the happiness and comforts they did before the advent of the white” (Nelson: 202). And at Norway House, Donald Ross, in a letter to James Hargrave dated 21 December 1843, recorded that a prophet contemporary with Abishabis was active in the Moose Lake area northwest of Lake Winnipeg: “there is a rising genius in the same line who has been troubling us for the last two summers” (Hargrave Correspondence). Certainly the internal social organization of these northern groups was flexible enough, and religion sufficiently non-dogmatic, that religious innovation by individuals was possible, within limits—which Abishabis eventually exceeded.

For both Abishabis and the other prophets, however, external stimuli were certainly important. The Hudson Bay cult of 1842-43 was surely related to current ecological and fur trade conditions, and more especially to new Christian mission activity in the area.

Hudson’s Bay Company records suggest that the winters of 1841-42 and 1842-43 were characterized by bad weather and bad hunts. On 26 January, George Barnston at Albany wrote, “the country is so wretchedly poor, round about, that it inspires terror into these poor creatures to face the evil and weather out the season.” And on 28 February, “I have never seen any post so distressed by poor, indigent, starving, and sometimes, unfortunately, lazy natives” (HBCA B. 3/a/147, fos. 15, 18). Writing to James Hargrave at York on 23 November 1842, Barnston observed how widespread these conditions were in both the southern and northern departments: “It seems to be a dead heat who shall decline fastest. The Albany District from one end of it to the other scarcely exhibited half a trade and I am sorry to say there is no evidence as yet of a turn in the times” (Hargrave Correspondence). The next winter was no better.

4On similar conditions in the Martins Falls area, see HBCA B.123/a/46, fo. 23.
Around Severn, John Cromartie reported there were “nothing but starving Indians all in this quarter this winter and Some of them is Careless whether they live or die.” The spring of 1843 was the “most Backward” that he had seen “for this thirty years back.” Cold weather made the geese arrive late, and Indians were hungry all along the Bayside (HBCA B. 198/a/84, fos. 26, 31; B.3/a/148, fo. 22).

At the same time, given the scarcities, company traders were trying to urge Indian hunters to conserve what game they found. George Barnston’s attempts to promote restraint at Albany were supported by Governor George Simpson who believed it desirable to encourage the Indians to view their hunting grounds as private property. When they were seen as “common to all,” he argued, “no particular interest is felt in their preservation” (HBCA B.3/b/70, p. 4). Such pressures as these could have contributed to whatever anxiety and discouragement the Indians were already subjected to, given the bad conditions.

These contextual circumstances alone, however, might not have triggered the rise of an Abishabis, and do not explain the details of the new observances. Several features of the movement demonstrate that a major impulse came from the 1840 penetration of Methodist missionaries into the area—and particularly, the arrival of the Rev. James Evans at Norway House. Evans soon began to travel widely, to York and other points, and became well known over a large area as a dynamic and often controversial figure. His colleague, George Barnley at Moose Factory, made a less vivid impression, but was nonetheless diligent in spreading the word of Methodism in the James Bay area.

The personal visits of the Methodists were not the only occasions on which Christianity was promoted at the posts; HBC officers themselves were expected to hold regular Sunday services for their men and local Indians. Robert Harding at Churchill took this duty seriously, and affirmed some success at conversion of Indians in the vicinity. On 19 June 1842, he asserted that the Cree “had some time since given up their conjuring and some other superstitions and duly observed the sabbath Inland and since their arrival here.” On 18 December of that year, “The Crees at their own request were reminded of some religious topics that they had partly forgotten since last summer and am happy to find that they are still anxious to learn and withal obey all that we can make them understand thus far.” On Sunday, 30 April 1843, “the Crees appear very attentive and anxious on the subject,” and on the following Sunday, Harding wrote of them, “I do think they bid fair to become Christians” (HBCA B. 42/a/77, fos. 3, 17, 24, 25). Contact with Christianity, then, did not depend solely on direct contact with the missions; some traders also promoted it in their own way, stimulating Indian interest.
Most important, however, was the rapid selective adoption of some of the new ideas by the Indians themselves within their own communities. The rise of Abishabis was made possible by the considerable geographic mobility of Indians carrying and communicating the new religious beliefs; the prophet's role became that of interpreting and synthesizing them in his own way within Cree social and cultural frameworks. He probably had had some direct contact with James Evans, but such contact would not have been a prerequisite, given Indian abilities to spread new ideas widely among themselves if they so chose. What is clear is that Evans' distinctive approach and innovations are reflected in several of the activities of the new prophet and his followers.

Evans' major concern was to make the Indians able to read the scriptures in their own language. To this end, he began in the fall of 1840 to teach his system of phonetic syllabic characters and to encourage Indians to teach it among themselves. The invention was rapidly "carried to distant hunting camps" by means of texts that the Norway House Indians copied on birchbark. The missionaries' reports that its introduction caused "intense excitement" were probably not exaggerated; "that birch bark could 'talk', and above all that it could talk about the Great Spirit and say His words, was indeed a thing of mystery and astonishment" (Young 1900:190). Evans and his converts soon put into operation a primitive printing press consisting essentially of an old fur press, and began to produce syllabic books with pages sewn into deerskin covers. Some of the texts were hymns, the tunes of which the Indians were said to be quick to learn. Several hundred copies of hymns in Cree syllabics were printed in the winter of 1840-41. By the spring of 1842, Evans was "delighted and encouraged" at the numbers of distant Indians who had already heard of the syllabics when they arrived to trade at Norway House (Murdoch 1981: Young 1900:190-191).

Word of the syllabics reached Moose Factory through Indian communication networks by the fall of 1842. On 6 October, the Rev. George Barnley recorded in his journal that he had spent most of the day

endeavouring to decipher a piece of writing the work of an Indian who has not seen a Missionary till his interview with me on Monday last. The subject was a hymn and the characters employed those of the Rev. J. Evans' invention. Some of the York Indians had obtained the original document of which this was a copy from Norway House, and by them it had been communicated to the Severn Indians... two of them after hearing Mr Evans when they again met their countrymen occupied an entire day in recounting the wonders they had become acquainted with. Owing to the imperfect knowledge of this new scribe I was not successful in my attempt at understanding the system.
It is entirely possible that the two York Indians with Severn connections were Abishabis and Wasiteck, whose emerging “heresy” was not yet visible to the whites on James Bay. Their authoritative position was in any case probably enhanced when the Indians who visited Moose reported that Barnley could not read the syllabics; and indeed, James Hargrave later reported that Abishabis asserted greater wisdom than the clergy, “taking upon himself the character of a preacher, giving out the most blasphemous stories of his intercourse with the supreme Being, and stating that all our white missionaries know nothing in comparison with him” (3 Aug. 1843, to Donald Ross). Barnley’s ignorance of the syllabics in the fall of 1842 (he later learned and began teaching them), along with the spreading impact of Evans’ preaching, could have fueled the movement.

Certainly the echoes of Evans’ missionizing in the Indian movement are striking, and suggest that the Cree syllabics played a special role. Not only did Abishabis call himself Jesus Christ and take up preaching and singing; his followers were also, as noted at Severn, “painting books.” The nature of their markings is variously described: for example, “unmeaning scratches—traced on wood or paper” (birch-bark was not available on the Bayside). HBC officer George Barnston gave some details about them on 8 June 1843 when the York “priestess” handed him for burning “a paper whereon there were lines drawn, some straight, and many Crooked or waved, which they conceived to be the ‘Track to Heaven’” (HBCA B. 3/a/148, fo. 22). His description indicates that the paper surely contained Cree syllabics. The books that Barnston was seeking to burn were probably Indian facsimiles of the Norway House books, which the Bayside Cree had created and adapted for their own purposes and interpretations.

There is no record that the HBC men at Severn or Albany had yet heard about James Evans’ syllabics as the Cree religious movement reached its peak; the Indians knew more on that point than they. And it must have been puzzling to Indian believers to see the HBC traders so hostile to a movement that the Cree probably viewed as honouring the white man’s god and as connected with the white man’s proselytizing of their inland brethren around Norway House. When Barnston at Albany asked his baptized Indians to “hold up their Hands if they believed in the Jesus of the Bible,” and then burned their sacred syllabic documents, the natives could be excused for being surprised and acquiescent in the face of their white patron’s mysterious behaviour.

At least in the James Bay area, Evans’ Cree syllabics were not the only symbolic system called upon by the Abishabis movement. At Moose Factory in January 1844, after the prophet’s demise, George Barnley (Journal, 20 Jan. 1844) was shown certain pictographs on wood. An Albany Indian had a small board on which:
the outline of a female figure was carved and round her several squares contain several crooked marks, and having appropriated to each a song about berries deer &c &c. A second board had the outline of a male figure a good deal larger and surrounded by various animals as a Cow, a goat, a buffalo, a sheep &c. They were taught that if they worshipped the latter figure the animals they needed would be supplied without further trouble, and reposing confidence in this gratifying doctrine they lay down in their tents gazing on the figure and of course almost starving... expecting to find deer &c so accommodating as to bring their throats to the knife... These boards were worn next to the heart.

These symbols are more puzzling to interpret. Pictographs were certainly a common means of Indian communication, and song records on boards were used among the Ojibwa (Dewdney 1975:6, 88). But the centrality of the human figures and the prominence of European animals might be more readily explained with reference to Roman Catholicism with its use of iconography, than with reference to either Indian or Methodist traditions. There were no Roman Catholic missions on the west coast of Hudson Bay in those times. But certain HBC men of that faith doubtless had books and images that the Indians were shown. George Barnley (Journal, 11 June 1844) recorded that Thomas Corcoran, who had charge of Albany in 1843-44 and had served for more than two decades in the James Bay area, was a practicing "Romanist" who discussed religious topics with the Indians.

The decline of Abishabis himself is not particularly puzzling; he abused his power and position in ways that neither Indians nor whites would accept. But a contributing factor was surely that he was thrown off balance through cultural misunderstandings with both the traders and the missionaries at the peak of his popularity; the sympathy that he might have expected from them for his "Great Books" and proselytizing was instead hostility and attack. His increasingly self-centred withdrawal and alienation may have reflected in part his disillusionment with the whites' responses to and (as he may have seen it) misunderstandings of his movement. A journal entry of George Barnley supports this interpretation; Barnley (Journal, 19 Jan. 1844) was informed that Abishabis had fled to Severn, "having killed several of the York Indians in revenge for being turned out of doors (as the report has it) by a Miss[ionar]y."

The movement was unique in its linkage with James Evans' introduction of Cree syllabics—an innovation that the Indians readily assimilated and still adhere to in the present. Yet, as noted before, a variety of factors would have served as contributing causes—the bad weather and game conditions of the period, the HBC pressures for changes in hunting practices. And the potentiality within Cree society for such a leader and movement to arise, and to spread widely and quickly through indigenous communication networks, was an essen-
tial component.

It should also be noted that the process of solving the problem of what to do about Abishabis was distinctly Cree—and distinctly in contrast to white approaches. John Cromartie at Severn was clearly at a loss; he simply hoped his unwelcome visitor would be intimidated and go away. His superior at York, James Hargrave, represented the opposite extreme of white behaviour. Ready to categorize Abishabis as criminal, he chafed at inaction once that view had become established in his mind. On 15 August 1843, he wrote in frustration to Cromartie, "As his [Abishabis'] crime is one committed against his own countrymen—we cannot seize upon him and execute that justice which should come from their hands." And on 7 September, before hearing of the prophet's death, he wrote to another Severn acquaintance, William McKay, in still stronger terms, asking if he could not quickly find an Indian "who has sufficient nerve to rid the world of a wretch who by the laws of both God and man should be cut off—for the horrid deeds he has perpetrated?" (Hargrave Correspondence).

We do not have firsthand testimony from the Cree. But the record suggests two things. They may indeed have been a little short on "nerve" as Hargrave claimed—fearful of a man who had exhibited both religious power and capacity for violence. But more interesting is the evidence that they suspended judgment about Abishabis and, unlike Hargrave, delayed final categorization. Hargrave's own account of the prophet's death (cited earlier) suggests their caution in the matter: they burned the body, he wrote, "to secure themselves against being haunted by a 'windigo'." In their minds, Abishabis was apparently not a windigo in life or even just after death, but he had that potentiality. Both his execution and burning were at least as much precaution as punishment—based as much on ideas of what he might become as on judgments about what he already was and had done.

There are parallels between the Cree mental perspectives suggested in the characterization of Abishabis as possible windigo and certain aspects of northern Ojibwa world view as reported by Mary Black [Rogers]. Rogers (1977:103, 104) speaks of the importance of "consequences validation" in Ojibwa taxonomy; one judges the phenomena that one encounters not by their present forms (which constantly change) but by what happens afterwards. The essence of objects encountered at a given time "is often not expected to be known until some later moment"—sometimes after a considerable period of time. It is quite satisfactory, and the better part of caution, to leave the matter ambiguous until then." Percept decisions are often best postponed; in many instances, "prolonged ambiguity of identification is what the 'action' calls for."
This kind of outlook would be consistent with the broader Algonquian views surrounding the windigo category itself. In an article reviewing and criticizing the anthropological literature on windigo psychosis (compulsive cannibalism or cannibalistic desires that have been said to be a distinctive northern Algonquian mental disorder), Louis Marano (1982) points out, "the Northern Algonkian windigo is a much more inclusive folk taxon than the windigo of anthropology." In native usage, the term referred not only to the legendary cannibal monster, but also to persons who exhibited a variety of disturbed behaviours that usually did not comprise cannibalism or even the threat of it but sufficed to make others suspect that they had been possessed by the windigo spirit. There was no one path to being declared a windigo; suspicions surrounding someone's past behaviour and attitudes could build to the point that his associates believed that he had become a windigo cannibal.

The Abishabis materials and Rogers' analysis of northern Ojibwa percept ambiguity hint that the windigo as a folk taxon had a still wider range than Marano ascribes to it. Windigoism could be suspected not only in a person's past (always incompletely known, given the solitary and small-group winter travels of northern hunters), but also in his or her future, even or perhaps especially after death. The Cree hesitancy to execute Abishabis may have been related to apprehensions about the transformations that could follow—potentialities that had to be eliminated by the burning of the body to destroy the heart of ice that characterized a windigo or incipient windigo. To western thinking, it may seem curious that the windigo label should be applied to Abishabis at the end of his story and even then only conditionally, reflecting possibility rather than actuality. But comparison may be informative both about our own world views and our often premature closures of categories, and also about certain distinctive subtleties of Cree outlooks and perceptions.

The story of Abishabis helps to make another point. An Indian religious movement that arose among people who had been trading furs with whites for 170 years and who made a Methodist syllabic writing system their own certainly received essential stimuli from intercultural encounters and borrowings; and such conditions often tempt anthropologists to speak in terms of degrees of acculturation. Here as elsewhere, however, that concept covers and obscures more than it explains, and tends to impose a simple, unidirectional analysis on a complex, dynamic situation. The Cree approach to the new faith was creative, incorporative, and synthesizing. And when Abishabis became an unacceptable outsider and menace, his countrymen remained very much themselves in responding to, defining, and finally resolving the problem.
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