Introduction

Despite the fact that the Crees were encountered early in the history of European involvement with North America and were one of the groups best known to the traders on Hudson Bay, the regions which they occupied in the protohistoric and early historic periods have been the subject of considerable debate. Early ethnographers argued that the Crees pushed westward from northern Ontario during the fur trade period while more recently ethnohistorians have presented evidence supporting the western presence of Crees in pre-contact times.

The Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric archaeological materials found throughout the area occupied by the Western Woods Cree at the time of contact are referred to as the Selkirk composite. The general consensus among archaeologists has been that, on the whole, Selkirk sites were occupied by pre-contact Northern Algonquians, in particular the ancestors of the Crees. Given the substantial increase in pertinent data over the past few years it is appropriate to review and assess the Selkirk/Cree equation, especially since this is central to our understanding of the territory occupied by the pre-contact Crees, and the time depth of this occupation.

Methodological Approaches

A number of systematic methods for dealing with the ethnic identification of Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric archaeological remains have been proposed for the Great Plains, and it appears that these may have varying applicability in the neighbouring Boreal Forest. Among these methods
are the direct historical approach (Strong 1940; Wedel 1959:19), the direct ethnological approach (Kehoe 1958) and the inferential historical approach (Forbis 1963). The problems associated with applying the direct historical approach to the northern plains have been outlined by Forbis. In essence, a key aspect of this approach involves the identification of the location of one or more sites known to have been occupied by a certain cultural group at the time of contact. In the boreal forest, as in the northern grasslands, this is generally not possible, although it must be noted that Richard S. MacNeish (1958:49) believed he had done so in the case of the Alexander's Point site. Also, referring to the presence of Selkirk throughout the Boreal Forest region southwest of Hudson Bay, James V. Wright (1968:66) has noted:

In so far as the Cree occupied all of this region during the historic period with the exception of the Chipewyan territory in northern Manitoba there is reason to be optimistic that eventually the cultural history of the Cree can be traced by the direct historical approach.

Because of problems with the application of the direct historical approach in the northern plains, Forbis proposed what he called the “inferential historical approach”. He did not present a succinct definition of this approach, but he did note that it is characterized by a dependence on documentary evidence rather than native testimony and that the main line of inference rests upon coincidences in distribution between protohistoric archaeological remains and the territories of those peoples who occupied these regions at the time of contact. In other words, unless there is evidence of dramatically rapid population movements, the protohistoric archaeological materials in a given region can be expected to have been made by those people who were present in that area when initially contacted by Europeans.

A somewhat different approach was taken by Thomas Kehoe in his studies of tipi rings in Montana. Termed the “direct ethnographic approach” (Kehoe 1958), this is described as “a method of archaeological inquiry [which involves] the principle of producing and testing hypotheses on archaeological data by discussing the data with persons active in the cultural tradition, ecological situation, or technological processes associated with the archaeological material” (Kehoe and Kehoe 1985:1).

While this latter approach is not explicitly followed in this paper, some information of this sort will be presented, mainly as gleaned from ethnographic works. As well, Forbis’s inferential historical approach is clearly appropriate in this context. As Forbis (1963:15) has noted, these various approaches may not yield conclusive proof but “when several lines of evidence converge toward a single conclusion, their cumulative testimony cannot be lightly dismissed.”
The Direct Ethnological Approach

Not surprisingly, no European writer has left a description of the stylistic characteristics of Cree pottery. However, there is at least one historic reference which is relevant in this regard. In the 1660s Pierre Esprit Radisson observed pottery vessels when visiting peoples in the area west of Lake Superior, apparently northern Minnesota: “Their drums were earthen pots full of water, covered with stag’s skin; the sticks like hammers for the purpose” (Adams 1961:142). At this time Radisson was in a camp of the “Christinos” which was subsequently joined by some other (Siouan?) group. Perhaps because of this paucity of references to a ceramic technological tradition among the Northern Algonquians, there has been some question as to whether these people even made pottery. For example, Fewkes (1937:150), in discussing pottery obtained from the Lake Winnipeg area by A. Irving Hallowell, wrote: “... as Hallowell (MS) finds by research in native genealogies and traditions, as well as in historical records, the earliest Algonquian-speaking group in the area, the Cree — 17th century — had no pottery; and it remains to be proved that the Ojibwe, locally known as Saulteaux, had any acquaintance with ceramics ...”. According to Hlady (1971:4) this remained the prevailing view until MacNeish worked in Manitoba in the early 1950s and strongly argued that the pre-contact Crees of Manitoba did make pottery.

To continue in this theme, it may be noted that early ethnographers did record some memory of pottery making among these Algonquians. For example, Skinner (1911:130) recorded a fairly convincing description of pottery making from the northern Saulteaux. In a later paper (1923:428) he added that this “information was obtained from some Saulteaux encamped on Lac Seul opposite the old Hudson’s Bay Trading Post”. Skinner (1914:82) also recorded some memory of pottery making from the Plains Cree of southeastern Saskatchewan.

It is worth presenting, also, some information which came to the attention of this writer in the course of archaeological work on the Churchill River of northern Saskatchewan in 1973 and 1974. At that time a middle-aged Cree from Stanley Mission, Joseph Ratt, was employed on the Churchill crew. Mr. Ratt became interested in the pottery we were recovering and told his relatives about it. He subsequently gave us his mother-in-law’s response: she knew that Crees had once made pottery and that “when a woman broke a pot she would cry”. In short, Cree pottery making in the past was known to her and she was also able to place this pottery in a social context.

There is also some linguistic evidence which indicates the presence of a ceramic technology among the northern Algonquians. Frederic Baraga (1878,2:24) appears to have been the first to posit an etymological connec-
tion between the Algonquian words for ‘clay’ and ‘kettle’. Alanson Skinner apparently made an independent discovery of this perceived connection. In this regard he wrote (1923:429): “In Ojibway (Saulteaux) we have ‘akik’, in Cree ‘askik,’ and in Menomini ‘akax,’ all specifically meaning an earth­ern vessel, although the term is now applied to metallic utensils.” Unfortunately, however, this apparent connection does not fare well when subjected to contemporary linguistic scrutiny.

According to Wolfart and Pentland (personal communication), it is tempting to posit an etymological connection between the Cree words askiy ‘earth, clay’ and askihkw- ‘pot, kettle’. The initial elements, Proto-Al­gonquian *axk-, appear to match, and the -ihkw- element is reminiscent (especially if the -w- could be interpreted as a noun-final) of the verbal suffix ihkē- ‘make’. Unfortunately, however, the identification of -ihkw- with ihkē is problematic, and the entire connection must therefore be treated as highly speculative. However, there is another Cree word, oyakan ‘vessel, dish’, which provides stronger evidence of the past existence of an Algonquian ceramic tradition. The Proto-Algonquian form of this word is *welakani, a fairly transparent form based on the root *wel ‘do properly, shape properly’ and thus strongly suggestive of pottery. In this regard, a literal translation of oyakan would be ‘that which is properly shaped’. In contemporary Cree speech the term oyakan is used to refer to ceramic objects such as bowls, plates and cups. In short, both of these terms suggest that the Crees had pottery. The technologically-explicit term oyakan suggests further that they made pottery.

Another avenue by which the ethnic identification of Selkirk archaeolog­ical remains might be pursued is through the results of ethno-archaeological studies. In part, these have involved the examination of artifact styles in re­lationship to social and cultural boundaries in contemporary small scale so­cieties. This has provided not only a body of theory but also of substantive data against which to assess the likelihood that artifact assemblages, such as those characteristic of Selkirk, are coterminous with a particular cultural group. Some of these studies have demonstrated a fairly close co-occurrence of certain artifact styles with specific ethnic groups (e.g., Weissner 1983). However, as Hodder (1979:452) has argued this is not necessarily, or even characteristically, the case:

As a result of long-term historical processes, different ethnic groups may have very similar material culture, while the same ethnic group may have a varied material culture in an ecologically varied area. It is therefore invalid to tot up the numbers of cultural similarities and differences between archaeological assemblages, erect “cultures,” and assume that these have some ethnic, linguistic, or other significance.
In reference to Selkirk archaeological remains, this means that although we see considerable homogeneity in the styles of Selkirk artifacts over a huge area of the Canadian Boreal forest we cannot conclude that these are the material remains of one culturally homogeneous group. However, the Selkirk complexes date to the Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric periods and, indeed, may continue into the historic period in some areas. Given this relatively recent time frame, it is likely that Selkirk can be related to a historically known cultural group with some confidence.

Cree Territory at First Contact

Apparently influenced by earlier writers, especially Alexander Mackenzie, Diamond Jenness (1963:284), writing in the 1930s, argued that the Crees expanded westward and northwards in the 1700s as they obtained trade goods, particularly guns, and so gained an advantage over their neighbours. About the same time, and apparently independently, David Mandelbaum (1940:169–187) presented the same view in considerable detail. He believed that the region occupied by the Crees at the time of first contact was quite small, centred between James Bay and Lake Nipigon to the southwest. This view subsequently became established in the literature, being followed by Hlady (1964:26–29) and several other archaeologists and ethnographers.

In more recent years as archival documents unavailable to earlier researchers have been studied, a significantly different view of Cree territory in the early historic period has emerged. Beryl Gillespie (1975) has provided a succinct overview and re-evaluation of Athapaskan (Chipewyan, Beaver) and Cree boundaries in northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, and the adjacent Northwest territories. She has presented evidence supporting the view that “Cree groups were the aboriginal inhabitants of the Churchill River drainage as far west as Lake Athabasca and that the Athapaskan people, the Chipewyan, were intruders into Cree territory as a result of the fur trade” (1975:352). Another researcher, who has studied the protohistoric and early historic distribution of the Western Woods Cree is James Smith. He also concluded that Crees were pre-European occupants not only of northern Ontario but of northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan as well. In addition, he noted that there appeared to have been recent (mid-1700s) Cree expansion into northern Alberta at the expense of the resident Athapaskans, the Beaver (Smith 1976:427–428). In this regard, Dale Russell (1982:154–155) has noted:

The entire thesis for an historic expansion of the Cree and Assiniboine is based upon an interpretation of “first sightings” by the various inland explorers in the early historic period. These interpretations have been used, in a general sense,
to demarcate a western boundary of occupation which, through time, appears to expand (e.g., Ray 1972, 1974). To the contrary, it can be argued that these “first sightings” do not necessarily represent an expansion by any group other than that of Europeans into previously unknown territories. That is, in no single case do the early documents specifically argue for a recent expansion by the Cree or Assiniboine but, instead, simply expand upon the limits of their then known territories.

In a similar vein, Smith (1976:415) has written: “It is suggested that it was the term Cree (and its variants) that spread west and was applied to Cree groups known by other names, or unknown until the relatively late exploration of the Canadian Northwest, . . .” The idea that Crees expanded westward in the historic period has not, however, been abandoned by all researchers. For example, on the basis of linguistic data, David Pentland (1978:109–110) has argued that there was a westward migration. He is, however, apparently in the process of rethinking his data and arguments in this regard.

In summary, in the early contact period, from approximately 1690 to 1720, Western Woods Crees occupied the Boreal Forest area extending west from James Bay and Hudson Bay to western Saskatchewan. On a north-south axis their area of occupation extended from the northern limits of the Boreal Forest to Lake Manitoba and Lake of the Woods in the south (Figure 1).

**Selkirk Distribution and Characteristics**

In 1958 Richard S. MacNeish published the results of excavations at several sites in southeastern Manitoba. In this monograph he described a number of new archaeological complexes, one of which dated to the late prehistoric and protohistoric periods and which he named “Selkirk”.

MacNeish noted that Selkirk was characterized by globular pottery vessels and small, triangular and side-notched, projectile points. The pottery was particularly distinctive, characterized by an exterior fabric impression and a consistent range of decorative traits. In the 1960s and 1970s archaeologists working farther north in Manitoba, in adjacent northwestern Ontario, and in northern Saskatchewan, identified Selkirk throughout a vast area of Canada’s Boreal Forest (Figure 2). A few Selkirk vessels have even been recovered in northern Minnesota. By the late 1970s and early 1980s it had become evident that there were regional variations in Selkirk materials. MacNeish’s original materials from southeastern Manitoba were then referred to the Winnipeg River complex (Rajnovich 1983), while Selkirk remains from farther north in central Manitoba were named the Clearwater Lake complex (Hlady 1971) and those in the Southern Indian Lake region of northern Manitoba were assigned to the Kame Hills complex (Dickson
FIGURE 1

Shaded area indicates the known area of Western Woods Cree occupation in the early contact period, ca. A.D. 1690-1720. (Prepared in consultation with Dale Russell.)

FIGURE 2

Map showing the locations of the various Selkirk Complexes.
1980). In adjacent Saskatchewan the Pehonan complex (Meyer 1981) and the Kisis complex (Millar 1983) were recognized. I am informed by Grace Rajnovich (personal communication) that the description of two or three additional complexes in northwestern Ontario is under serious consideration.

While the time range of the various Selkirk complexes is not firmly established, it is clear that Selkirk lasted through to the time of European contact. The approximate time ranges of the various complexes are: (1) Winnipeg River complex: ca. 1200–1700 (Rajnovich 1983:52-56); (2) Clearwater Lake complex: ca. 1350–1700; (3) Kame Hills complex: ca. 850–1750 (Dickson 1980:150); (4) Pehonan complex: ca. 1450–1700 (Meyer 1983:45), and (5) Kisis complex: protohistoric and early historic: ca. 1650–1750 (Millar 1983:96).

As is shown by Figure 2, Selkirk occurs in an area extending from northern Lake Superior and Northwestern Ontario west through southeastern, central and northern Manitoba and through north central Saskatchewan. It should be noted that these boundaries are conservative. In Saskatchewan Selkirk pottery has been found as far north as Black lake, east of Lake Athabasca (Minni 1976). Some Selkirk sites have been found in the parklands of Saskatchewan and Manitoba and occasional vessels are found in the grasslands as well. Selkirk pottery is also sometimes recovered farther east in northern Ontario.

Interpretations and Implications

The distribution of the Western Woods Crees at the time of first contact, therefore, coincides in large part with the occurrence of Selkirk archaeological remains. It must be noted, however, that there are some discrepancies. The Lake Winnipegosis/Lake Manitoba region was almost certainly occupied by Crees but Selkirk is rare there, although Rajnovich (1983:4) has observed that the Late Prehistoric Duck Bay complex which characterizes this region has affinities to both Blackduck and Selkirk. Indeed, she has noted that one of the two Duck Bay types — Duck Bay Decorated Lip — is nearly identical to types characteristic of Selkirk in southeastern Manitoba and northwestern Ontario. She has also argued (personal communication) that Duck Bay should be considered one of the Selkirk complexes. In this regard, it should be noted that from western Manitoba east to Lake Superior Selkirk is bordered on the south by Blackduck. Throughout this area Selkirk ceramics frequently bear some Blackduck traits, apparently reflecting contact.

Given the historic distribution of Western Woods Cree groups one might also expect a wider distribution of Selkirk materials eastward through
northern Ontario to James Bay. While there are occasional occurrences of Selkirk in this latter region, it does not appear to be characteristic of the area. Wright (1971:24) has recognized the problem of equating ethnicity and ceramic occurrences on the southern and eastern fringes of Cree territory where "... the various bands of the Cree could have been using Selkirk ceramics, Selkirk and Blackduck ceramics, Blackduck ceramics, Blackduck and Iroquois ceramics, Iroquois ceramics, or no ceramics, depending upon their geographical location." On the other hand, some of the Selkirk materials in these fringe areas could have been made by other groups entirely, such as the Assiniboine or Ojibwa.

There have also been a number of suggestions regarding possible alternative cultural affiliations of Selkirk on its northern and western fringes. For northern Manitoba Hlady (1971) described two Selkirk phases: Clearwater Lake and Grass River. He saw the latter as the handiwork of the Woodland Cree and also preferred this association for the Grass River phase (Hlady 1971:18–21, 28). However, he also suggested the Chipewyan as the authors of the Grass River phase. This is very unlikely since the Chipewyan spent their summers on the barrengrounds of Keewatin and Mackenzie districts. As summer is the time during which pottery can best be made, the absence of Selkirk ceramics in the barrengrounds may be taken as strong evidence against the Chipewyan hypothesis.

More informally, it has been proposed that the Blackfoot may have once occupied the forests of northern Saskatchewan and made the Selkirk ware found there. This also seems very unlikely since Selkirk occurs through to the protohistoric and, perhaps, the early historic period in the latter province. If the Blackfoot made this pottery, then they should have been present in the forests at the time of first contact or, at least, have told the fur traders of their recent departure from the forests. As well, we would expect that a Blackfoot population which occupied the forest and subsequently moved south would have taken their ceramic technology with them. In fact, Selkirk components do not occur on the western Saskatchewan grasslands or the Alberta grasslands. Clearwater Lake ceramics which have been described from a site on Lac la Biche in the forests of east central Alberta (McCullough 1982:35–36) have been shown, as a result of more recent excavations and studies, to be affiliated with the Late Prehistoric pottery of the Alberta and Saskatchewan grasslands (Kathleen Connor-Learn, personal communication) This writer has examined the Lac La Biche ceramics and found them most similar to those characteristic of Prairie Side-notched assemblages. This is not Selkirk ware.

In any case, it is clear that the distribution of Selkirk archaeological remains corresponds fairly well to the distribution of Cree groups at the time of first contact. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that on the
whole those peoples who produced the Selkirk materials in the protohistoric period were those who emerged as the Crees in the late 1600s and early 1700s. This, of course, is a conclusion first put forward by Richard MacNeish (1958) and subsequently this view was forcefully supported by James Wright (1968, 1971) and Walter Haldy (1970, 1971). More recently, the Selkirk/Cree equation has been accepted by some ethnohistorians (e.g., Bishop and Smith 1975, Smith 1981) and archaeologists such as Meyer (1978), Dickson (1980), Rajnovich (1983), and others. Syms (1977:108) has provided this succinct analysis:

While there are no ethnohistoric accounts of the Cree making pottery, the site distribution corresponds with the known distribution of the Cree during the early historic period; the dates indicate that Selkirk pottery persists into the historic period; and historic trade items are frequently found associated with Selkirk pottery.

If Selkirk is the product of pre-contact Crees, then it may be concluded that the Cree occupation of the northern boreal forests is of the same age as the Selkirk materials. In short, Cree occupation of northern Manitoba began by at least the 1200s, of northwestern Ontario in the 1300s, and of the forests of Saskatchewan in the 1400s in the east with less time depth to the west. Thus, we have a model of Cree occupation of the Boreal Forest of central Canada which is drastically different from that promulgated by Diamond Jenness and David Mandelbaum.

Summary and Interpretation

Ethnohistorical studies indicate that the Western Woods Crees, at the time of contact, occupied the Boreal Forest of northern and northwestern Ontario as well as of northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Since Selkirk pottery was made in these areas through to the inception of the fur trade period, I conclude on the whole, this pottery was made by these Crees and their immediate ancestors although on the southern and eastern fringes of Cree territory, Selkirk ceramics could have been adopted by some Assiniboines and Ojibwas. Supportive evidence in this regard is provided by Radisson’s observation of pottery in use in a camp which was largely composed of Crees. As well, there are some statements by Crees that their ancestors did make pottery and some supportive linguistic data.

Selkirk begins by at least the 1200s in Manitoba, the 1300s in northwestern Ontario, and the 1400s in eastern Saskatchewan. In all of these areas, a variety of dates provide evidence that Selkirk extends through to about 1700. In short, the Western Woods Cree were present in central and northern Manitoba for at least 500 years before Europeans introduced the fur trade in the late 1600s. In the adjacent provinces the time depth of
Cree occupation may be somewhat shorter, only 300 to 400 years prior to the initiation of the fur trade. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that not only did the Western Woods Crees not move west into Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the early historic period, but that they had occupied these regions for some centuries before the arrival of Europeans.

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