

The Nishga and the Fur Trade, 1834-1842

E. Palmer Patterson

The Nishga Indians of northwestern British Columbia are best known for their major role in the land claims protest. Their history of protest dates from at least the 1880s, and this topic has dominated writing about Nishga history.¹ The Nishga were among the first northern peoples to be evangelized; this was done by Anglican and Methodist missionaries in the third quarter of the 19th century. This topic, too, has received some attention.² The earlier history of Nishga-European contact during the fur trade has received much less attention.³ This essay explores the first decade or so of sustained Nishga-European contact in the context of the land-based fur trade, centred at Fort Simpson. This period established a pattern that lasted into the mid-1860s.

The decade of the 1830s saw the founding of Fort Simpson by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), first in 1831 at the Nass River mouth and then in 1834 at McLoughlin's Harbour on the Tsimshian Peninsula. This created a new trading environment for the Indians in the area, primarily Coast Tsimshian, Northern Kwakwaka'wakw, Haida, Southern Tlingit and Nishga. This essay examines the history of Nishga trading at the second Fort Simpson from 1834 to 1842, and attempts to give a fuller and more specific treatment of the Nishga trade in this time period than has previously been available.⁴

The Fort Simpson journals provide a record of the content and pattern of the Nishga trade there. Individual traders began to emerge and the significance of traditional Nishga trade is set in a context of expanded trade with the fort, combining old and new elements, both land-based and ship-borne. Aboriginally, the Nishga were part of a complex intertribal trading system.⁵ The evidence indicates that this continued to be so into the middle 19th century.

From the fort journals (1834-1842) it is possible to construct a history of Nishga trade with the HBC, including not only the names and activities of specific traders (who were important Chiefs from the lower Nass villages), but also information and hints about Nishga trading with ships and with other Indians who traded on the Nass. These elements help us toward a full picture of Nishga trading in that period.

Coastal as well as interior peoples had come to the Nass mouth for the annual spring run of the eulachon since time immemorial, to obtain fish, fish oil and various Aboriginal trade items from each other. Traditionally,

each group of Coastal Tsimshian had a particular place where they camped annually during the eulachon fishing season.⁶ Visits to the fishery were often characterized by rivalry and conflict as well as by peaceful exchange. Early accounts indicate that northern coastal Indians of British Columbia traded with British and American ships visiting at the mouth of the Nass River prior to the erection of a HBC fort there in 1831,⁷ as well as with ships visiting in adjacent areas.⁸ When the first Fort Simpson was built at the Nass mouth, it became an additional attraction to Indians who customarily came to trade and fish.

Oral tradition reveals a varied pattern of relationships between the Nishga and the neighbours who met them at the Nass mouth. These accounts show vigorous, long-standing and deeply developed links among all north coast peoples. Trade, warfare, marriage, shared ceremonies, and exchange of titles and ceremonial artifacts form elements of this web of interchange.⁹ Trading relationships spanned a wide range of styles. The Gitlan, a tribe of the Tsimshian, had a special trading relationship with the Nishga,¹⁰ reinforced by intermarriage between the families of the highest Gitlan Chief and the highest Nishga Chiefs.¹¹ This traditional pattern of special relationships with other groups was characteristic of Tsimshian trading behaviour. In contrast, the territory of the Nass mouth also figured in the exploits of the Tsimshian freebooter, Haimas. A kind of enterprising renegade Chief, he established a temporary village of his followers, mostly drawn from his fellow clansmen of the Tsimshian, but including Nishga and others, in the vicinity of what was to become the location of the first Fort Simpson.¹²

The earliest face-to-face contact of the Nishga with Europeans is likely to have occurred in the 1790s. The impact of the fur trade, however, probably began to be felt earlier through contact with the Haida and Tlingit. In 1831 the fur trade came to the doorstep of the Nishga homeland with the ending of the maritime fur trade, when the HBC established its Fort Simpson trading post near the mouth of the Nass River. Although the fort did not remain long in this location, and the records of its three years (1831-34) are scarce, it is apparent that the Nishga were actively engaged in its economic life. Homes were built at the fort and an Indian settlement developed there. The names of Nishga traders are recorded: Caxetan, Ross' Friend (Ishateen), Skoten and Red Shirt. William Fraser Tolmie's account of the removal of the fort from its Nass location, and the consequent Nishga protest, gives some indication of Nishga commitment to trading there. The Nishga offered violent obstruction to the removal, though no bloodshed occurred despite some shooting and a show of force.¹³

The fort's new site, McLoughlin's Harbour, on the Tsimshian Peninsula, retained the name Fort Simpson. Although the new location lacked the attraction of being near the Aboriginal gathering and fishing place on the Nass, the Nishga became one of many peoples trading there. The first

mention of Nass Indians trading at the relocated fort appears in the journal dated 22 October 1834.¹⁴ Cackautan (Caxetan, Coksawtan and other spellings) became the first Nishga identified by name to trade at the new fort. He arrived on 14 November, and traded eleven beaver and one hundred pounds of eulachon grease on the following day. On 17 November another Nishga came and also traded beaver skins and grease.¹⁵

Chief Cackawtan was from a lower Nass village, perhaps Gitiks. He had accompanied Donald Manson, a HBC officer, on a reconnaissance voyage up the Nass in September 1832.¹⁶ He may have been the one known to the Anglican missionaries in the 1860s and 1870s, R.R.A. Doolan and Robert Tomlinson, as Akshetan. The form of this name most commonly found in the HBC journal in later years is Caxetan. Cackawtan's successor and that successor's son continued to trade at the fort. Old Kocksetan, arrived at the fort on 11 April 1852, with other "principal men" to trade. He was there again (as Cocksetan) on 16 July of the same year.¹⁷ On 21 April 1853, young Cocksetan traded martens, beaver and smallfish (eulachon) oil. His son traded a mountain goat and other furs on 15 June 1853.¹⁸ Also arriving in one of the Nishga canoes on this occasion was "Old Skoten." These individuals indicate the continuity of Nishga traders from the old fort to the new over a period of two decades.

By the middle and late 1830s the newly located fort had succeeded in drawing not only the Nishga and the nearby Tsimshian, but also many other of the surrounding peoples to its trading facilities. The post's journal records their arrival and departure, and lists the furs and provisions traded by many individuals and groups. These included a number of different groups of Haida: Massett, Skidegate, Cumshewa, Chatsina, North Islanders and Kaigani. Tlingit groups visiting were Stikine, Cape Fox and Tongass. Northern Kwakwiltl traders included Kitimat and Millbank Sound Indians (Bella Bella). At the fort the Nishga met, traded and participated in the ceremonies of a variety of these people. They also interacted with the fort personnel. Some of the employees' wives were Nishga and their family ties effected visits and movement. Not all interaction was pleasant, however: clashes and disagreements sometimes occurred in the post's trading shop, and Nishga were sometimes suspects in depredations against the fort's garden.

After 1834, the extended visiting of the Nishga with the cosmopolitan assortment of peoples assembled at the Nass fishery each spring was supplemented by shorter, but year-round, visits of the Nishga to the cosmopolitan Fort Simpson. The post's personnel in the 1830s consisted of officers of British and Euro-American origins, and of "the men," predominantly French Canadian, Hawaiian and Iroquois. During much of the late 1830s, Dr. Kennedy (a man of Scots-Indian ancestry, trained in medicine in Scotland) was both surgeon and a main trader for the fort. His grasp of the language and his family connections as son-in-law of the Legaic

of that period were probably of assistance to him. By the late 1830s there had grown up at the fort a settlement of Coast Tsimshian, referred to as "stationary" Indians or as "Fort Simpsons."

The pattern of Nishga visits to Fort Simpson that quickly developed in the 1830s was continued for the next thirty years. It was not, however, the sole basis of Nishga trading. In the mid-1860s a new pattern was created when an auxiliary trading post was established in the lower Nass village of Ankida. Prior to that, Nishga trading with the HBC occurred either at the fort or when company ships visited the Nass. The latter circumstance grew out of the company's need to meet its "opposition." These opposing traders were generally Americans who went directly to the Nass, offered better prices than the HBC and thereby obtained furs in the Nishga territory. The Nishga frequently transported furs to the fort and then declined to trade them. These might be retained to trade at a later time with anticipated "opposition" ships. On 5 December 1837, several Nishga canoes left the fort after a few days there. They were known to have furs, but were holding them back in hopes of the coming competition. In April 1838 Nishga refusals to sell were reported to be reaching a peak. They were no longer perceived as prominent traders. Again it was the anticipated opposition that motivated them, according to the fort journal.¹⁹

The furs traded by the Nishga included beaver, marten, bear, fishers and lynx that they had hunted or gained in trade with others. Their "interior" trading partners are not named, but they may have included the Gitksan, the Carriers and the Tsetsauts. Other Nishga trading occurred at the Nass fishery during the spring months, when thousands of northwest coast Indians gathered to catch and process the eulachon fish or to trade eulachon and eulachon oil. Here, Tongass, Massett, Stikine, Cumshewa, Skidegate, Tsimshian, Kitimats and others joined the Nishga in their Aboriginal activity.

The centrality of the Nass River for Indian fishing and trading is illustrated by the action of Chief Legaic, senior Chief of the coast Tsimshian, in having a picture of himself and his coppers painted on a stone cliff in the lower Nass River valley. He thought that this location was best since so many people regularly came to the area and would see the display of images. This indicates the importance of the lower Nass in the life and the economy of many of the north coast peoples. It likely also illustrates Legaic's efforts at hegemony over both the Tsimshian and the Nishga. He was attempting to assume authority over the territory where the images were painted.²⁰

The lower Nass and lower Skeena areas were thus part of one territory. The Fort Simpson journals indicate that just as the Tsimshian had economic and social activities on the Nass, so the Nishga had parallel activities on the coast and lower Skeena River areas inhabited by the Tsimshian. Oral tradition confirms that Nishga and Tsimshian traders (Claytha and Legaic respectively) competed for trade with the Gitksan of the

upper Skeena.²¹ The Nishga protested and resisted what they perceived as Tsimshian expansion. Legaic was challenged by the Nishga Chief Kinzadah, thought to be the richest and most powerful of the lower Nass Chiefs, in a famous duel.²² Chiefs of other branches of the Tsimshian also resisted Legaic.²³

Potatoes were not a part of the provisions offered by the Nishga in the 1830s, though they were an item traded at the fishery and at the fort by various Haida peoples; and were to become part of the Nishga trade to the fort by the 1850s. On 6 May 1835, some Skidegates, after trading at the fort, proceeded to the Nass to sell the rest of their potatoes, taking with them a few prime furs.²⁴ In mid-May eighteen canoes of Cumshewa left the fort for the Nass with potatoes. Unfortunately, the potatoes offered for trade did not always meet the fort's standards of edibility. They were sometimes too small and too green to be accepted.

Pelts were not, however, the only trade items the Nishga took to Fort Simpson to trade. In fact, the fort relied heavily on the various Indian peoples for a variety of provisions and supplies; the relationship between the Indians and the fort was very much one of mutual advantage. The Nishga sold salmon, halibut and especially eulachon at the fort, as well as eulachon oil, deer-tallow, geese and venison, while other Indians sold other game, seagull eggs and berries. These various foods formed an important part of the diet of the fort personnel. On 27 January 1835, two Nass canoes, having arrived on the previous day, traded ten beaver, six martens, about sixty pounds of eulachon grease, five small halibut, two geese, three ducks and a few dried salmon.²⁵ Tongass and coastal Tsimshian people were hired by the fort to hunt and fish, and seaweed was acquired for fertilizing the vegetable gardens, but the main food provisioners were the local Tsimshian.

Most Nishga traders at Fort Simpson came from the lower Nass villages. Their importance fluctuated throughout the decades from the founding of Fort Simpson in its new site to the 1860s. However, the Nishga, some of whom had established themselves as traders in the years of the Nass fort site, continued to be among the major traders, and in the 1850s a new generation of Nishga began to be recorded in the fort journal. Generally only a few Nishga canoes came at the time. They usually stayed for a few days, less than a week. Only a few were mentioned by name; sometimes attention was called to a first visit. The dominance of the lower Nass is made very apparent by the special notice given to those occasions when upper Nass traders appeared.

The Nishga had a reputation for being hard bargainers and for taking away the pelts they had brought if the prices were not to their liking. Occasionally they accused the HBC trader of being dishonest. Such a charge sometimes brought a fist in response, and the Nishga were frequently described in the journal as "insolent," "impudent," "scamps" and other derogatory terms. The Nishga were aware that different prices were

offered to different Indian groups. These variations were based on varying Indian accessibility to the competition. More northerly peoples, sometimes including the Nishga, were offered better prices because they could trade with the Russians; it was necessary to give them more in order to hold their trade. The Nishga either did not understand these considerations or refused to accept the legitimacy of this kind of calculation.

The "insolence" and "arrogance" of the Nishga had previously been noted by Jonathan Green, a missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions who visited the Nass in 1829 to assess the people and territory for possible evangelization.²⁶ He also noted the importance of the area for trading, a view seconded by the HBC in 1831 when it placed its fort at the Nass. Three and a half decades later, in the mid-1860s, British warships, seeking to "pacify" the Natives on the north coast, visited the Nishga. Naval reports of encounters between British naval officers and Nishga again referred to the "insolent bearing" of the lower Nass Chiefs.²⁷

While sojourning at the fort, the Nishga sometimes engaged in the common activity of raiding the fort's vegetable and potato gardens. When they did so, they were again likely to be referred to in derogatory terms. According to the record of 6 September 1837, some of the Nass Indians stopping at the fort were "great thieves." Unlike the locals, however, they were not accused of filching fence posts. In late September 1837, the journal keeper again wrote in disgust and outrage about what he alleged were Nishga depredations. Calling them "vagabonds," he asserted that they had stolen potatoes in the night and then departed. They were "thieving scoundrels" in his book, who stole from the company "everytime they can."²⁸

Reports came to the fort of trading activities on the Nass: various Tsimshian Chiefs were reported as trading there during this period, including Legaic. Tsimshian traders circulated along the coast at least as far south as Fort McLoughlin and the west coast of Vancouver Island, and into the interior on the upper Skeena River. Haidas and Tlingits were also active traders at the Nass mouth. In the early spring of 1835 as many as 600 to 800 Tsimshian canoes regularly visited the Nass for extensive periods in connection with the eulachon fishing season. These visits included trading with Nishga and the others at the fishery. Tsimshian sometimes arrived at Fort Simpson as early as late January in preparation for departure to the Nass fishery.²⁹

Nishga visitors sometimes visited Fort Simpson on mixed business; they not only traded but engaged in ceremonial and social events with the resident Tsimshian. "Giveaways," "feasts" and "socials" were noted in the fort journal. Nishga and Tsimshian participants were sometimes identified by name, but the fort journal keeper, the post commander, who knew the names of many Indians, did not know many Nishga. Although not covered in detail, much of the social (and anti-social by company standards) life in the local Tsimshian community was mentioned in the journal. Information about traditional social events within the village was easy to gather, since

fort personnel were married to local Indian women, as in the case of Dr. Kennedy, who in the 1830s was the son-in-law of the Legaic of that period.

Nishga travelled to various places in the fort's vicinity as part of their economic and social activity. Visits to Pearl Harbour and the Skeena mouth are noted. On 21 November 1834, two canoes of Nass Indians who had arrived at Fort Simpson on 17 November and traded beaver skins and grease, departed for Pearl Harbour to trade. The next day these two canoes returned with Pearl Harbour Indians, including Chiefs Cackas and Legaic.³⁰ A few days later the Nass people went home, accompanied by the Pearl Harbour Indians.

Anything that might bear on trade was of interest to the fort: even canoes not stopping, but only passing by were recorded. On 25 April 1835, four canoes coming from the Nass, which may have been transporting Tsimshian, passed by on their way to the Skeena.³¹ In late spring 1839, a visit by Nishga to the Kaigani of Prince of Wales Island was noted.³² These Nishga travellers brought news to the fort of Kaigani affairs, reporting that internecine fighting was going on. Both Nishga travel and Kaigani internal conflict could have implications for the fur trade.³³ The fort personnel knew that various peoples spent extended periods with each other; the presence of Nishga hunters on the Skeena was noted along with the length of their stay.

New Nishga traders and visitors to the fort continued to arrive for years after the fort had relocated. As late as April 1840, Nishga who had never visited the fort before were appearing there. At noon on 7 April, six canoes arrived from the upper Nass, including some who were still strangers to the fort. They brought about a hundred beaver skins to trade, and on that day and the next they also traded beavers, lynxes, martens and fishers.³⁴

The Nishga as a group or cultural community were recorded by a variety of names, all of which were essentially the same, a designation by their Nass River location: "Nass canoes," "Nass Indians," "Nass people," "Nascars," "Nascas" and "Naskhah." Spellings varied from one journal to another and more than one usage might be employed by a single individual.

Contextual information about Nishga life can be gleaned from journal entries. For example, on 21 March 1842, the passage of several sea gulls on their way to the Nass mouth was noted; this was a sure sign of the annual arrival there of the eulachon.³⁵ Many years later Alfred E. Green, Methodist missionary at Lakkalsap, 1877-90, wrote of this phenomenon,

In the spring, when the small fish come into the river, the gulls are so numerous as to resemble a heavy fall of snow. The eagles soar above the myriads of gulls, seeking chance. In the water are seals and larger fish after the small fish, all under intense excitement. ... We have many life, fish life and bird life, all seeking to destroy the delicious fish.³⁶

In late May 1836 the fort received the portentous information that a smallpox epidemic was "carrying off great numbers" of the Tlingits of the Sitka and Stikine areas.³⁷ Nevertheless, Stikines continued to come to the fort; in early June, Seix, the Stikine Chief, and his brother Ancago came to trade.³⁸ Nishga also traded at the fort in May, June and July, along with Tongass and Cumshewa. Legaic was active in trading in late June, as were Cackas and Neshot in July and August; all three were major Tsimshian traders. In mid-August, the Stikines, Seix and Ancago were back again. August and September were busy, though not notable for the quantity of furs taken. Throughout the summer, Nishga, Tsimshian and Tongass came repeatedly to the fort.

Then, in October, word arrived that Neshot was dying of smallpox at the Skeena River. The following day, those bringing this information killed Chief Conguele, a Tsimshian Chief. They had made him drunk and while he slept they shot him in the head. Another man was also killed. This murder was perpetrated in revenge for Neshot and his people having caught smallpox from Conguele's people. Later, in October 1836, some of the Tongass traders were also victims of smallpox.³⁹ On 11 October, a Nass canoe visited the fort. Two days later a "local" Chief, "Mr. Jackson" a settler at Fort Simpson, died of smallpox. He was the second to die at the fort of thirteen known cases that developed there. The week's trade of 15 October 1836, was "very poor."

Among the Tsimshian at the fort, more cases of smallpox broke out. On 19 October, the wives and children of four of the company's employees returned to the Nass River along with visiting Nass traders. They were becoming alarmed at the smallpox epidemic. Only six Indian men at the fort were thought to be free of infection.⁴⁰ The disease at first appeared to be more virulent among men than among women, children and slaves. Men were the main traders and had more contacts with those outside their community. The epidemic was taking its toll, but the Nishga continued to come to the fort in late October to trade furs, grease and salmon, though the trade in general remained poor for the rest of October.

Tsimshian from the Skeena, arriving for the first time since the murder of Conguele, reported on 2 November that more people were dying there. Among the dead was Chief Cackas, one of those implicated in Conguele's murder. He had never brought anything for trade, so from the fort's point of view there were no reasons to regret his death. He was recorded as a "good for nothing villain" and his death was more a cause for happiness than sorrow to the journal keeper.⁴¹

In mid-November, as the trade continued to be only "pretty fair," word came that Legaic's son Looking Glass, also a trader, had died of smallpox.⁴² A wife of Legaic died of the same disease 1 December. The Indians were reported to have made sacrifices to the sun to stop the disease, but the sun had not accepted the offerings, for only the sick and the dead would satisfy him.

By the end of November, though the trade remained small, the epidemic among the Tsimshian was believed to be abating. Some Indians came to the fort thinking to escape it there.⁴³ Traders from Port Essington, however, contradicted the reports of the epidemic's abatement; it was still virulent and was killing vast numbers. If, as James Gibson proposes, the Tlingit were the first victims and were also carriers, visits by them to the fort, to the Nass mouth and to other places would have affected the spread of the disease without regard to the fort as a centre for infection.⁴⁴

The smallpox was at its yearly height from late fall to early spring. This seasonally varied pattern coincided with the period of sedentary life when most people were gathered in their winter villages, and with the period of the large gathering of people at the Nass mouth eulachon fishery. Visits to the fort probably provided additional opportunity for transmission of disease at a gathering place. Probably the decline of trade at the fort was not only a result of illness, but of deliberate avoidance. The death toll among the Tsimshian generally may have reached one-third of their population.⁴⁵ If so, the toll among the lower Nass people may have been about the same, given their frequency of contact with the other affected Indians and the virulence of the epidemic among them.

On 4 December 1836, the Nishga wives of fort personnel and their children, who had gone home to the Nass to escape the smallpox at the fort, returned. They reported that the disease was occurring on the lower Nass, but had not yet reached the upper Nass villages; so far only one person had died. Through December, January and February there were a few more deaths. Stikines were actively trading in February and no news of smallpox was reported.

The spring of 1837 saw the usual departure of the Tsimshian to the Nass fishery. From time to time Nishga traded at the fort; and in late March they began to bring eulachon, but they brought few furs. By mid-April 1837, the Nass people had brought little or nothing in the way of furs, even though they had already brought little through the winter. The decline in fur trading was attributed to the severity of the smallpox and to the "great numbers" carried off by the epidemic.⁴⁶ A Nass canoe arriving 29 April brought no furs and told of a "considerable number" of Nishga casualties in "their quarter," presumably the lower Nass; people were still dying of smallpox. This portrayal was repeated the next day when another Nishga canoe arrived, again without furs, but with a few dried salmon. "They still bring awful account(s) of the ravages smallpox have committed" among the Nishga, the journal keeper wrote. In ten houses not a man was left alive, though some women and children had escaped the pestilence.⁴⁷

Well into May the accounts of the dreadful effects of the epidemic continued. For the fort this meant the loss of the furs usually brought by the Nishga traders.⁴⁸ Ross' Friend reached the fort 15 May, but he too had little to trade, though prior to the epidemic he had been a major Nishga trader. By this time the decline in trade was attributed not so

much to the effects of the epidemic on the lower Nass as to its spreading to the interior. The Nishga were traders to adjacent though unidentified peoples from whom they received the skins, which they then traded to the fort.⁴⁹

In late July, two or three canoes of Nishga arrived. They were among the very few who had come to trade since the previous autumn. Presumably the disease was at last actually abating. It had apparently run its course not only among the Nishga, but also among their trading partners, the unnamed interior peoples, who may have included Gitksan, Carrier and Tsetsaut as well as upper Nass Nishga. As the fort authorities had predicted, the Nishga trading season of the spring and summer of 1837 was largely eliminated by the effects of the epidemic.

Among other important trading partners of the Nishga, there were various Coastal and Southern Tsimshian groups who camped for several months each spring at the Nass fishery. They were closely linked to the Nishga culturally, by marriage and by ceremonial obligations, and their trade was affected by the economic activity of the Nishga. Generally, in May hundreds of canoes of Tsimshian returned from the Nass, bringing fish, oil, furs and other trade goods. Though the disease did not prevent them from making their annual visit, it did affect the amount of furs they acquired from that area.⁵⁰

Food from the fishery was essential to the survival of fort residents, even though the number of furs obtained was reduced to almost nothing. By August the Nass trade was recovering, and about six canoes went to the fort. Five canoes had come in June, but only one in July. The Nishga demeanour, however, had not been affected. They objected to the prices offered for their pelts and took away some they had brought.⁵¹ In June of 1836, seven canoes arrived, followed by ten in July and three in August. The HBC steamer *Beaver* visited the Nass to trade in mid-July and may have contributed to the dip in August trading.

Nishga from the upper Nass, in four canoes, were part of the seven or more canoes that travelled to the fort in September 1837. Although these upper Nass people had come this distance, they had few furs. Perhaps they came to see the place, or for reasons related to the large gathering of a variety of peoples at the fort and the adjacent Tsimshian village. In early September there was a cosmopolitan gathering there. Peoples assembling included Massetts, Skidegates, local Tsimshian, Skeena River and Port Essington Tsimshian, Tongass and Sebassas (southern Tsimshians).

This was a volatile mix, and friction and violence were not uncommon when so many people were at the fort. Old and new rivalries and injuries led to new and additional disputes and outbreaks of violence. The Nishga witnessed these fights even when they had no part in them. In early September 1837 a Tongass Chief fired on the Massetts and Skidegates. Both Tsimshian and Nishga were accused of stealing potatoes. When a number of groups were simultaneously at the fort there was sometimes

competition and pressure to get into the trading shop ahead of others. This sometimes led to fisticuffs and more serious violence.

As mentioned, the Nishga were aware that various traders at the fort were receiving different prices for the same kinds and qualities of skins. The HBC paid better prices to the Haidas and Tlingits, probably because these also traded with the Russians.⁵² Apparently the Nishga were not trading with the Russians. Prices also fluctuated with presence and absence of the American competition.

Undoubtedly some visits to the forts were primarily for purposes of meeting with the local Tsimshian. The post's journal keeper occasionally noted ceremonial events to which Nishga were invited. It is likely that other visits also had more to do with Indigenous social and ceremonial occasions than with commercial trading at the fort. Although the scope and details of the Nishga activities are not usually clear from the limited information available, most of their movements and visits must be understood as part of their Aboriginal patterns of behaviour.

The trader who was most prominent in the two years after the epidemic was Ross' Friend. The pattern of half a dozen or so canoes arriving per month was restored for October and November of 1837, and the Nishga practice of holding back some furs continued. Besides the desire to sell for better prices to the opposition, which was generally the journal's explanation for the Nishga behaviour, probably some furs were used for trading with other Indians, an important consideration for Nishga traders. Their trade with the fort was but one of several places and peoples in the Nishga trading pattern. The evidence indicates that they were still not dependent on the fort's trade goods by the late 1830s; instead, trade goods were incorporated into the existing culture.

The pattern of diminished Nishga trading continued as few Nishga canoes went to the fort from May through August of 1837. In September, although the number of canoes increased, the amount of furs they offered were still few. The HBC hoped that many or most of the furs that the Nishga sold to other Indians would eventually find their way to the trading shop by way of other Indian traders.⁵³

The willingness of the Nishga to wait for the opposition is an illustration of their independence. A drastic decline in furs offered for trade by them was again noted on 24 April 1838, and attributed to the anticipated arrival of the opposition, although the availability of trade goods at the fishery may also have been a factor. Two major Tsimshian traders, Legaic and the Cripple Man,⁵⁴ were at the Nass fishery. In early May, Wass, another prominent Tsimshian trader in the late 1830s, was also at the Nass.⁵⁵

Presumably many of the trade items desired by the Nishga were attainable through their Indian trading partners, so that for them the fort was not the hub of Nishga trade. The main intermediaries for the Nishga were the Tsimshian,⁵⁶ they traded products to the Nishga and took Nishga

trade products to others. Tsimshian pre-eminence in trade at the fort is demonstrated by the continuity of their important role over several decades. As both fur suppliers and provisioners, many Tsimshian Chiefs were cited by name. Especially important were those traders who from the middle 1830s began to settle at the fort and create a major Tsimshian village there. The Nishga produced no Chief of the wealth and influence of Legaic, even in the 1850s and 1860s, when they were most active and perhaps reached their heights of wealth and creativity.

The fact that trading at the fort played a complementary or subsidiary role in Nishga affairs is well illustrated by journal entries from December 1839 through April 1840. Many of the recorded visits were stopovers *en route* to other places to hunt, trade and visit.⁵⁷ Visits to neighbours were sometimes made in order to participate in ceremonial activities. In December 1841 a major ceremonial event occurred in the Tsimshian village at the fort. On 16 December, the Nishga canoes arrived there to attend a feast, and other visitors were also present.

An additional factor affecting Nishga trading at the fort was, as fort personnel suspected, the availability of the opposition at the Nass. The presence of American trading ships at their doorstep reduced the need for going to the fort, just as did their Tsimshian intermediaries. The situation was made additionally convenient for the Nishga when the Hudson's Bay Company, to compete with the opposition, sent its own trading vessels to the Nass. Besides reducing the need to go to the fort to trade, this perpetuated the role of the Nass estuary as a place of "international" trade and may have contributed to a sense that the Nass itself was indeed a great centre of international trade, even after the relocation of the fort (1834). The Nishga may have been justified in seeing their own territory as a hub of trading enterprise.

While the Tsimshian were apparently the Nishga's main trading partners, a variety of neighbouring peoples were also traders. A list of those going to the Nass can serve as an indicator of potential trading partners, including Kitimats, Sebassas, Tongass, Stikines and Haidas (of various communities, as already noted). In addition, the Nishga had trading partners from the interior whose names are not recorded by the company journal.

The picture that can be drawn from the evidence suggests that the Nishga were independent, vigorous traders. They were not averse to representing their own interests forcefully, and to maintaining control of their relations with the fort. They were well integrated into an international community of trade, ceremony and friendship, as well as of competition and rivalry. Their impression of the centrality of their homeland was reinforced by the traditional and continuing response of their neighbours and by the adaptations of the white traders to them.⁵⁸

Nishga trading in the 1830s and early 1840s consisted of supplying furs and provisions. This was true of their trade both with the Europeans at

the fort and with their Indian trading partners. Unfortunately, little is recorded of what they took away. To form some notion of the goods they received we must generalize from the larger trading of visitors to the fort. The HBC recorded what the Nishga traded at the fort and when, and gives a limited picture of their trade elsewhere.

The introduction of Fort Simpson in 1831 at the Nass mouth and in 1834 at McLoughlin's Harbour provided new trading partners and more intense trade contact for the Nishga. Nevertheless, the pre-existing trading patterns continued. The continuation of major trading with their various Indian neighbours mitigated the impact of the fort and corresponded to Nishga visits to other Indian communities aboriginally. In addition, the visits of ships to the Nass paralleled the regular visits of Indians to the Nass, especially including the major event of the spring season, when eulachon arrived at the Nass fishery.

Insofar as the Hudson's Bay Company journal tells the story of Nishga trade, several elements are observable. Nishga sold furs and provisions, and insisted on being given the best prices offered to other traders at the fort. They were hard bargainers and their boldness and independence were resisted and described negatively by HBC personnel. Their character as described in the journal for these years is consistent with earlier and later descriptions, for example by missionaries, of the Nishga character. The Nishga had a seasonal pattern of visits. They had family ties with the fort personnel, just as they did with neighbouring peoples with whom they traded. They followed a practice of brief visits by a small number of visitors, which was consistent through the period, except when interrupted by the smallpox epidemic. Like their neighbours, they were hard hit by European epidemic diseases.

The breadth of Nishga contacts with other Indians is readily apparent at the fort, at the Nass and in trips to hunt and participate in ceremonies and feasts, as the Nishga continued a pattern of extensive contact with Tsimshian, Haida, Tlingit and Kwakwaka'wakw. Oral tradition tells of intermarriage with trading partner communities, and of the sale of furs and provisions. It also tells of trade and other contacts with the Gitksan of the upper Skeena and with the Tsetsaut. Oral tradition dealing with pre-Fort Simpson days complements and corroborates the impressions gained from the fort journal of Nishga trading as primarily a continuation of the traditional patterns. Not until the 1860s was a new arrangement introduced.

Notes

- 1 Thomas R. Berger, *Fragile Freedoms* (Toronto: 1981), chapter 3: 219-54; Edwin P. May, "The Nishga Land Claim, 1873-1973," M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., 1979; E.P. Patterson, "Nishga and Tsimshian Land Protests in the 1880s," *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Fall, 1983): 40-54; Daniel Raunet, *Without Surrender, Without*

- Consent* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre 1984); Douglas Sanders, "The Nishga Case," *B.C. Studies* (Autumn, 1973): 3-20.
- 2 E.P. Patterson, *Mission on the Nass* (Waterloo, Ontario: Eulachon Press 1982); E.P. Patterson, "Nishga Perceptions of their First Resident Missionary, the Reverend R.R.A. Doolan (1864-1867)," *Anthropologica* 30 (1988): 119-35; E.P. Patterson, "Native Missionaries of the North Pacific Coast," *The Pacific Historian* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22-36.
 - 3 E.P. Patterson, "Early Nishga-European Contact to 1860," *Anthropologica* 25 (1983): 193-219. A number of anthropological studies are relevant to this subject and are cited in the various works referred to in this and the preceding footnotes, especially the work of Stephen McNeary, "Where Fire Came Down" (Ph.D. thesis, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA, 1976). Several works dealing with the Tsimshian generally have useful material on the Nishga. One of these is Marjorie M. Halpin, "The Tsimshian Crest System" (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1973); see especially the appendices. See also Margaret Seguin (ed.), *The Tsimshian* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984) and Jay Miller and Carol Eastman (eds.), *The Tsimshian and their Neighbors* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984).
 - 4 Robin Fisher, *Conflict and Contact* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1977); chapter 2, "The Land Based Fur Trade." Fisher touches briefly on a variety of matters relating to the fur trade, including Indian intermediaries, the Indian villages established at forts, mutual dependence between Indians and fur traders, Russian competition, and fur prices. See also Helen Meilleur, *A Pour of Rain* (Victoria, British Columbia: Sono Nis Press, 1980); based primarily on Hudson's Bay Company sources, Meilleur's book is a dramatic account of the life and times of the people who lived and visited at the Fort, both Indian and white.
 - 5 Patterson (1983), *passim*.
 - 6 Patterson (1983), pp. 38, 95, 179, 215.
 - 7 George F. MacDonald and John J. Cove (eds.), *Tsimshian Narratives*, vol 2; *Trade and Warfare* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1987), pp. 194, 196. See also Jonathan Green, *Journal of a Tour in the Northwest Coast of America in the Year 1929* (New York: Charles Frederick Heartman, 1915).
 - 8 MacDonald and Cove, p. 222.
 - 9 MacDonald and Cove, pp. 38, 78, 151, 166, 198, 218, 236.
 - 10 MacDonald and Cove, p. 160.
 - 11 MacDonald and Cove, pp. 20, 219.
 - 12 MacDonald and Cove, pp. 138, 142, 151.
 - 13 R. Geddes Large (ed.), *William Fraser Tolmie: Physician and Fur Trader* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press Ltd., 1963).
 - 14 Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), B. 201/a/3. Fort Simpson, British Columbia. Fort Journal, 22 October 1834.

- 15 HBCA, B. 201/a/3.
- 16 HBCA, B. 201/a/3.
- 17 HBCA, B. 201/a/7.
- 18 HBCA, B. 201/a/7.
- 19 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 11 April 1838; 17 April 1838.
- 20 MacDonald and Cove, pp. 107, 121-22.
- 21 MacDonald and Cove, p. 213.
- 22 MacDonald and Cove, p. 103.
- 23 MacDonald and Cove, p. 96.
- 24 HBCA, B. 201/a/3.
- 25 HBCA, B. 201/a/3.
- 26 Jonathan Green, p. 80.
- 27 Barry Gough, *Gunboat Frontier* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), pp. 194, 263, fn. 12.
- 28 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 22 September 1837.
- 29 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 22 January, 1835.
- 30 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 22 January 1835.
- 31 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 22 January 1835.
- 32 HBCA, B. 201/a/4.
- 33 HBCA, B. 201/a/4, 8 June 1839.
- 34 HBCA, B. 201/a/4, 8 June 1839.
- 35 HBCA, B. 201/a/6.
- 36 Thomas Crosby, *Up and Down the North Pacific Coast* (Toronto: Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1914), p. 209.
- 37 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 24 May 1836.
- 38 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 4 June 1836.
- 39 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 10 October 1836.
- 40 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 19 October 1836.
- 41 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 2 November 1836.
- 42 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 16 November 1836.
- 43 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 19 and 27 November 1836.
- 44 James R. Gibson, "Smallpox on the Northwest Coast, 1835-1838," *B.C. Studies* 56 (1982-83): pp.61-81.
- 45 Gibson, p. 66 ff.
- 46 HBCA, B. 201/a/3.
- 47 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 30 April 1836.
- 48 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 10 May 1836.
- 49 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 15 May 1836.
- 50 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 16, 17, 19-21, 23 May 1837.
- 51 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 17 June 1837; 21 August 1837.
- 52 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 11 September 1837.
- 53 HBCA, B. 201/a/3, 5 September 1837.
- 54 HBCA, B. 201/a/4, 27 April 1838.
- 55 HBCA, B. 201/a/4, 4 May 1838.
- 56 HBCA, B. 201/a/4, 15 and 17 November 1839; 3 and 7 December 1839.

57 HBCA, B. 201/a/4, 27 December 1839; 13 April 1840; see also B. 201/a/6, 24 and 30 October 1841.

58 Patterson (1983).