

## Coping with Powerful People: A Hudson's Bay Company "Boss" and the Albany River Cree, 1862-1875

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### Introduction

Historians have argued that, during the early years of the fur trade, the James Bay Cree and other northern Indians benefitted from rivalry between opposing fur traders (a view not held today by the Cree). Following the union of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company in 1821, the Albany River Cree and their Ojibwa neighbours faced some eighty years of monopoly conditions, until the arrival of Revillon Frères in James Bay in 1903. Cree oral tradition indicates that it was difficult to deal with a powerful HBC *okimaw* ("boss") like Chief Factor Alexander Macdonald, during the period 1862-1875, but they too were powerful people, and there were limits to their tolerance. In this paper, Cree Elder James Wesley's narrative account of Macdonald will be compared with documentary sources from the Church Missionary Society and the Hudson's Bay Company Archives.

According to Cree oral tradition, early fur traders took advantage of the Albany River Indians, requiring them to pile up their furs as high as eight feet to obtain a single gun.<sup>1</sup> Cree Elders maintain that their history of dealings with "Whitemen" over the past three centuries, from fur traders to treaty commissioners, has been characterized by past injustice ("unfair treatment of our grandfathers") and present inequity ("the Whiteman will not acknowledge the origin of his wealth").<sup>2</sup>

Among the western James Bay Cree, it would seem that the "Whiteman" has not yet redeemed himself for these past sins, because he has not understood the Crees' version of their history and, in particular, their expectations of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup> The narrative of "Mr. Macdonald" (as Cree Elders still refer to him) is of great interest because, among hundreds of HBC employees in James Bay during the nineteenth century, he is remembered in Cree oral tradition by name.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, there are complementary documentary accounts of Macdonald and his times. His story thus provides a unique opportunity to compare two sides of an encounter between Crees and Euro-Canadians on the Albany River.

## Historical Background

The London-based Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), formed in 1670, established trading posts in James Bay at the mouths of major rivers like the Rupert, the Moose and the Albany. Inland competition from French "pedlars" forced the Company to leave its "sleep by the frozen sea" and penetrate the interior, beginning with an outpost in 1743 at Henley House, on the Albany River system.<sup>5</sup>

Charles Bishop, who has studied the northern Ojibwa and the fur trade in the period immediately prior to Macdonald's era, finds that after its union with the rival North West Company in 1821 the HBC "had greater freedom to experiment and manipulate relations with the Indians."<sup>6</sup> The Ojibwa, like their Cree neighbours, were accustomed to receiving an advance of supplies each summer or fall under the "debt system," and repaying this debt with furs the next spring. The HBC attempted to replace this with a "ready barter system" several times from the 1820s through the 1870s, but each time the Indians opposed the change and the debt system was eventually reinstated.<sup>7</sup> The trading of alcohol persisted in the Albany district until 1839, and even then, despite the HBC's near-monopoly, the northern Ojibwa reacted angrily each time it was abolished, and the prohibition was modified.<sup>8</sup>

The Ojibwa on the upper Albany River clearly retained a significant measure of control during the so-called monopoly years, according to the historical records. Those records also show that the Company had difficulty imposing its will on the Cree of James Bay, for at least two decades following the merger of 1821.<sup>9</sup>

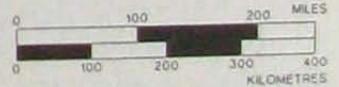
Some inland posts were closed following 1821, but by the 1860s the Albany River district still included outposts at Osnaburgh, Martens Falls and – across the height-of-land – Lac Seul (see map on following page). To the north was the (Fort) Severn district, to the southeast was the (Lake) Superior district, and to the southwest was the Lac la Pluie (Rainy Lake) district. In the east was Moose Factory, headquarters for the Moose River district and the entire Southern Department.<sup>10</sup>

In March 1862 Chief Trader G.S. McTavish, then near the end of his assignment at Fort Albany, was much concerned about the possibility of competition on the upper Albany River.<sup>11</sup> Fur traders had to adapt their methods in the face of such opposition by literally "running after Indians," taking the trade to them in their camps.<sup>12</sup>

Two months later, McTavish reported that the "Homeguard" Indians (those who wintered near the coast of James Bay, hunted geese for the HBC each spring and fall, and sometimes laboured for the Company during the summer) and some of the "Inland" Indians had arrived at Fort



MAP BY:  
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Orangeville, Ontario



## HBC Posts: Albany River and Adjacent Region

Albany – "but none of them [had] made good hunts, in fact, most of them were starving all spring." The "grey" or Canada goose hunt had not been successful, and no "wavies" (lesser snow and blue geese) had been killed at all.<sup>13</sup>

McTavish left for Great Whale River, and Charles Crowe temporarily took charge at Fort Albany in June and July of 1862. Crowe expressed the opinion that another "Whiteman" was needed there, because Indian "cattlekeepers" could not be relied on to take good care of the Company livestock.<sup>14</sup> He had warned young John Goodwin to keep the huskies chained, but they had somehow managed to destroy two of the Company's pigs. As punishment, Goodwin was fined ten "Made Beaver" – the equivalent of ten beaver furs, or about two weeks wages.<sup>15</sup>

In August 1862, before he departed upriver for Martens Falls, Crowe informed Chief Trader James Anderson of Moose Factory that 31-year-old Alexander Macdonald had arrived to take charge of Fort Albany.<sup>16</sup> Although Macdonald's birthplace is not readily known, his parish of origin was listed as "Canada" when he entered the Company's service in 1854. Prior to arriving at Fort Albany, he had completed a three-year stint as clerk-surveyor in the Great Lakes region, and another five years in the same capacity in the Eastmain district (where he surveyed southwestern Hudson Bay, site of the HBC's beluga whale operation).<sup>17</sup>

## Macdonald in the Albany District

During Macdonald's first winter as Chief Trader at Fort Albany, the Indians brought in good returns.<sup>18</sup> There was no opposition at Martens Falls nor at Osnaburgh, although there was some "falling off" at the latter place.<sup>19</sup> William Corston, an Orkneyman and an old acquaintance of Macdonald's from eastern James Bay, took charge of Martens Falls.<sup>20</sup> At Lac Seul, the competition began providing the Indians with "Spirits" and the returns were reduced at that post; efforts were made, in 1864, to prohibit alcohol in the Lac la Pluie district.<sup>21</sup>

A poor goose hunt in the fall of 1865 prevented the Fort Albany Indians from storing up enough food to go "to their Marten grounds."<sup>22</sup> The following spring Macdonald reported that some of the "Kaypusko"<sup>23</sup> Indians had "paid up" their debts (with furs) but none had "much over to trade," yet over 4,000 geese were killed.<sup>24</sup> In the fall of 1866 some 20,000 geese were harvested for the Company's use.<sup>25</sup>

Macdonald's letters portray him as a seasoned trader. When forest fires destroyed some of the hunting grounds upriver, he told HBC Governor A.G. Dalles to expect a decrease in returns from the inland posts.<sup>26</sup> In 1863, when the fall hunt at Kaypusko and Chickney<sup>27</sup> goose stations



Alexander Macdonald  
Undated photo by W. Notman

HBCA Photograph Collection  
1987/363-E-700-MC/42 (N8146)

Credit: Hudson's Bay Company Archives,  
Provincial Archives of Manitoba

produced only half as many barrels of geese, he realized it was caused by a "failure in the hatching ground."<sup>28</sup>

He understood that the Indians could not trap furbearers when they were short of food, and made this clear to William Linklater at Osnaburgh:

It cannot be expected that Indians will hunt much when they are hard up as they must then look to their families, but when game is numerous, you should induce them to look for furs.<sup>29</sup>

When the ready barter system was adopted in the Albany district in 1864, Macdonald instructed William Corston at Martens Falls not to be

too severe on the indians. Bear in mind that by the Rules of the Service, an indian is entitled to receive in debt such necessaries as will make him to support himself, such as ammunition, twine &c, &c, even if he cannot pay for them.<sup>30</sup>

After Linklater drowned at Osnaburgh in 1864 while checking his fishing nets, Macdonald instructed the man's successor, C.B. Savage, to give ammunition, tobacco, needles, thread and other gifts to every Indian: "these he is entitled to though he has not cleared off his debt."<sup>31</sup>

Macdonald sympathized with Savage when some of the inland Indians took their furs to Nipigon for higher prices, recognizing that "we have no power . . . to stop them when they are inclined to do so unless by persuasion."<sup>32</sup> When such efforts failed to keep the Indians loyal to the Company, however, Macdonald made it clear that punitive action should be taken:

When they refuse to be guided by the advice of the officer in charge of the post to which they are attached, it is nothing but just that he should discontinue to make them advances on their hunts. You will therefore for the future (at the same time that you take what furs they may offer you) *treat the indians to whom you refer, as strangers*, by giving them nothing in debt [emphasis added].<sup>33</sup>

Retribution was also ordered when the Indian who brought Macdonald news of William Lane's death at Lac Seul in 1863 was found to have run "away from Mr Corston & stole the greater part of his provisions"; Linklater was directed to fine the man ten Made Beaver.<sup>34</sup> Macdonald even felt that corporal punishment was sometimes justified. After learning of a "burglary" at Trout Lake in the Severn District, Macdonald ordered Charles Crowe at Lac Seul to "seize any furs that the Scamp may have up to the amount that he Stole — & as for punishment a hammering would, perhaps do him no harm."<sup>35</sup>

Within the HBC service, officers could administer corporal punishment to their servant underlings.<sup>36</sup> However, it was not Company policy to treat Indians this way.<sup>37</sup>

Chief Traders in neighbouring districts were apparently called upon to settle alleged territorial disputes between "their" Indians. When Isaac Hardisty complained that Apisch[ap?]aish from Moose Factory had broken into some of his beaver lodges, or when Macdonald learned that Ootappe "took a Bl[ac]k Bear, or rather stole it out of a snare set by one of our Indians," he asked his superior, James Anderson of Moose Factory, to see that the "skins" were returned.<sup>38</sup>

## Transportation

All imported supplies came from England on the annual supply ship, which arrived at Moose Factory in late summer, offloaded its goods and took on furs and ballast for the trip home. Supplies were warehoused at Moose Factory for the winter, and then taken to Fort Albany (and other districts) by sloop the following year. Osnaburgh and Martens Falls each sent two boats down with the previous season's furs, arriving at Fort Albany in mid-July. Macdonald reports that the return trip took eighty days from Osnaburgh and sixty from Martens Falls,<sup>39</sup> and employed some sixteen Indians in addition to the Company's servants.<sup>40</sup>

Macdonald proposed to streamline this process by supplying Fort Albany with imports in the fall. The following June, two large boats manned by sixteen Indians would be sent to Martens Falls, with supplies for all three interior posts. During high water in early summer, the trip would only take fifteen to eighteen days, instead of the usual twenty-five to thirty days in August. Osnaburgh and Lac Seul would each send a boat to Martens Falls with their fur returns, and the boats would exchange cargoes there. Macdonald estimated that his plan would eliminate half of the cost of "pay & feed to Indians for voyaging."<sup>41</sup>

## Macdonald at Moose Factory

In 1874 Macdonald again succeeded his associate George S. McTavish, who had briefly taken charge at Moose Factory. In August of that year McTavish left Moose Factory in poor health and Macdonald was promoted to the position of Factor, in charge of the Southern District. With his counterpart in the Northern Department (at York Factory) and the Chief Commissioner of the Company, he was now one of the three most powerful HBC officers. He was forty-two-years old and had two decades of experience in the fur trade.

Bishop John Horden ominously reported Macdonald's arrival at Moose Factory. Horden, who may have met Macdonald at Little Whale River in 1858,<sup>42</sup> noted that the man had been "a source of great anxiety to [Native clergyman Thomas] Vincent, never entering the Church" at Fort Albany.<sup>43</sup> Ten months later, the Factor was dead.

Unfortunately, the HBC's Moose Factory records for 1874-75 have not survived, but one can piece together Macdonald's final months from other documents. By February 1875, Bishop Horden reported that Macdonald was not well, the third invalid factor in three years: "It seems more like speaking of the deadly coast of West Africa than of healthy Moose Factory, where Europeans in general enjoy an almost entire immunity from sickness."<sup>44</sup> Three months later, on 4 May 1875, Horden briefly reported that Macdonald, "now tortured in body and mind," would be replaced.<sup>45</sup>

By this time, Macdonald was aware of his own decline. He had already sent a messenger to Ruperts House, summoning Chief Trader S.K. Parsons to take charge at Moose Factory. Parsons reported Macdonald's problem to Chief Commissioner James A. Graham:

The complaint from which he suffers is disease of the brain & I am assured by the Doctor that there is no prospect of his speedy recovery . . . neither is there any probability of his ever being again fit for business, although sufferers from the disease he is supposed to have (Progressive Locomotor Ataxy) may, I am told, survive in a state more or less insane, from two to seven years.<sup>46</sup>

Parsons revealed that Macdonald, believing Graham would visit Moose Factory that summer, intended to await his arrival before retiring to Canada:

As however he forgets one day all that he has said on the preceding one, I can give you no correct idea of his intentions & it is questionable if he is in a fit state to undertake the journey. He is unfit for writing to anyone.<sup>47</sup>

As late as 20 May 1875 Macdonald apparently still had much freedom of movement, for Parsons added: "The above for obvious reasons I shall not copy in the letter Book where it might be seen by Mr McDonald."<sup>48</sup>

Two months later, on 8 July 1875, HBC Dr. W.B. Malloch buried Macdonald in the Company's graveyard at Moose Factory, listing the cause of death as "softening of the Brain."<sup>49</sup> A tombstone "Erected by Some of his Personal Friends in the Service of the Hon[ourable] Hudsons Bay Company" (still standing) stated his age to be 44.<sup>50</sup>

## Oral Tradition

The story of "Macdonald, the Company Boss" (see Appendix) was voluntarily taped in Kashechewan by Jim Solomon in 1984 in response to a conversation I had with his brother George in Moosonee, indicating my interest in Cree stories. The narrator was the late James Wesley (1906-1991) of Kashechewan, a Cree Elder born some thirty years after Macdonald's death. The story had been told to James by his grandfather (possibly Wapunewoetum, baptised John Wesley).<sup>51</sup>

Although the Cree began adopting the Reverend James Evan's syllabic system of writing about 1842,<sup>52</sup> theirs is still largely a culture based on an oral tradition. This narrative is a *tipaachimowin* (story; news in general).<sup>53</sup>

The narrative describes a trader at Fort Albany who humiliates some Ojibwa Indians, then involved seasonally with the canoe brigades supplying the Company's inland posts, by stripping them naked. In another incident, while being served the prized head of a cow, Macdonald bites into a large piece of lead shot and, angry at whoever has shot the animal, rushes outside to assault the first person he meets. These character sketches set the stage for the main confrontation that follows.

Although the Cree narrator takes care to establish a serious flaw in Macdonald's character, *he does not classify him*<sup>54</sup> as an evil man: "Shortly after each outburst [Macdonald] would return to being a normal, likeable person. The people would say, 'Yes, he was a good man'."

One spring two brothers return from their trapping. One has done poorly, and is apprehensive that Macdonald will not understand his shortage of furs. The older brother, who has done much better, convinces him to explain the matter to Macdonald and arrange to repay the debt later – thus assuming some responsibility for what happens next. When the younger man meets the unpredictable short-tempered Macdonald, he is struck in the face with a key, drawing blood. His brother retaliates, and almost kills the boss with a knife.

Ten days later, Macdonald has not returned to work. The older brother forcibly takes him to his office, orders him to use his key to "open the door," and reminds him of his responsibilities: "Go and sit on your chair. The people are waiting for you."

A senior Company official visits Fort Albany<sup>55</sup> and Macdonald is transferred to Moose Factory. Perhaps later, although Cree biographers are not as concerned as non-Native historians about a strict chronology,<sup>56</sup> the same Macdonald visits the Great Whale River beluga whale fishery and becomes involved in another confrontation.<sup>57</sup> Once again he angrily strikes someone, but this time he is simply warned, "You will find out later."

Returning to Moose Factory, Macdonald experiences severe head pains and becomes "totally out of control" and paranoid, fearing that "these people want to kill me." He is carefully watched, for fear that he will cut his throat (as a Moose Factory clergyman did in 1921). One night he manages to jump from a window in the Factor's residence, and falls to his death.

## Analysis

To historians, Macdonald sounds more like a vicious Henry Morton Stanley on the upper Congo<sup>58</sup> than a typical HBC trader. His story was likely of interest to the Cree for the same reason: he was unusual.

Neurologist Douglas F. Waller suggests that "a very rapid course of syphilis of the central nervous system" could explain Macdonald's final months.<sup>59</sup> The tertiary stages of this disease might have caused some of the bizarre behaviour reported in Cree oral tradition, at the end of what the written records portray as an exemplary career. Macdonald would likely have contracted the malady on a visit to the outside world, since venereal diseases were not reported among the James Bay Indians at the time of the first treaty doctor's visit in 1905.<sup>60</sup>

A strange disease would not have gone unnoticed by the observant Cree who frequented the posts (nor by the Native servants who disposed of their boss's waste); the late Bertie Morrison of Moose Factory attributed the 1928 suicide of a forty-eight-year-old Revillon Frères fur trader at Rupert's House to the same cause. But venereal disease must have been anathema to Victorian missionaries; the impact of these diseases on their society has been compared with that of Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) on our own a century later.<sup>61</sup>

The suicide is problematic. Fred Moore, a Moose Factory Cree Elder, had only heard of one suicide by a Whiteman at Moose Factory — that of an Anglican clergyman, the Reverend William Haythornthwaite in 1921.<sup>62</sup> Haythornthwaite, like Macdonald, worked at Fort Albany — but in James Wesley's lifetime. He began work as a carpenter and lay assistant with Archdeacon Thomas Vincent, prior to moving to Moose Factory.<sup>63</sup> The narrator may have merged the two biographies, in the natural course of what Robert Borofsky calls "making history."<sup>64</sup>

For the Crees, the Elder's story of Macdonald is a biography of one specific man, an insider's history of the times, a cultural statement of how an *okimaw* should treat people, and a lesson about how Indians were generally able to cope with past difficulties. The documents add an important historical dimension, for today there are many Crees named Linklater, Corston, Goodwin, Crow(e) and MacDonald. And, as we



Moose Factory in the 1920s  
HBC Manager's Residence Facing Camera

Built in 1832, the "Factor's House" was torn down in 1959.

Credit: R.L. Trolove Collection,  
Ministik School, Moose Factory.

See Herbert Stovel "The Buildings of Moose Factory"  
*Canadian Collector* (July/August 1981), pp. 24-25.

discuss the inherent right to Aboriginal self-government in Canada in the 1990s, we can reflect on the difficulties which lie ahead. For the traditional Cree *okimaw* has been transformed by fur traders, missionaries and Indian agents into a subservient stand-in or substitute leader: the *okimahkan*.<sup>65</sup>

James Wesley's story indicates some hostility towards a Company servant of mixed ancestry, a translator. Ironically, Macdonald also expressed concern over employing such "natives," fearing that their "sympathies go too much with the indians,"<sup>66</sup> and he was no fan of Native clergyman (later Archdeacon) Thomas Vincent.<sup>67</sup> As for the interior Ojibwa, Macdonald's reorganization of the transport system meant less employment, and they must consequently have been at least figuratively naked.

The monopoly years are portrayed in Cree oral tradition as difficult times when "no one ever retaliated, for fear that their trading would be cut off by the Company." Besides direct physical or verbal conflict, however, the narrative indicates that the Cree believed they had other resources, for improper actions could lead to anyone's "downfall." Willy Allen of Fort Albany explained to anthropologist John M. Cooper in the 1930s that "the Indians still believe that if they waste meat or do not use it right they will not have luck in hunting. If a man does that, *kapastahu* ('he will bring evil or vengeance upon himself')." <sup>68</sup>

Today, descendants of the late James Wesley distinguish between *pashtahu(n)* ("haunted by what you did") and *pashtamuwin* ("haunted by what you said").<sup>69</sup> John J. Honigmann, an anthropologist at Attawapiskat in the 1940s, found that sorcery was sometimes used by the Cree as a "post hoc explanation for illness."<sup>70</sup> Today *pashtahun* is sometimes loosely translated as "it will come back on you" ("backfire"); in Elder Fred Moore's words, "God will get you for that."<sup>71</sup> Although the James Bay Cree have been heavily influenced by Christianity, perhaps the consequences still include sickness and death caused by sorcery.

If Macdonald was actually cursed by a Cree shaman, the narrative is not explicit on this point. Neither (*kichii*)*manitu*, the Cree superior being, nor *powakanak*, the pre-Christian personal guardians, are explicitly mentioned in this story.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, the narrative implies that the Crees were protected from powerful HBC bosses by spiritual forces.

John Oldmixon, drawing on a journal kept by Thomas Gorst in the 1670s, was the first to describe the *okimaw* or leader concept of the James Bay Cree.<sup>73</sup> Although often translated today as "boss," a Cree *okimaw* is a boss with a difference. According to Cree translator Greg Spence of Moose Factory, a Cree does not work for a boss; rather, "a boss works for [i.e., looks after] you." Anthropologists note that *okimaw* comes from a Cree verb meaning "to give away."<sup>74</sup>

Unlike traditional Cree leaders, who “never used physical punishment on adults,” and did not lose their tempers, HBC bosses could sometimes lose their self-control and treat Indians like their employees, fining them or – in rare circumstances – administering a “hammering.” As a bachelor, Macdonald could never have become a Cree leader, and a Cree leader had “no right to tell the people what to do.” A Cree leader helped his followers to find food, and redistributed his own surplus meat among them, while a Company boss would hoard his cattle for the people of the post, save the choicest parts for himself, and arbitrarily implement a change in the debt system.<sup>75</sup>

The patient<sup>76</sup> Crees could still consider a boss who occasionally lost his temper and mistreated people as “a good man,” and they could laugh about his weaknesses. A company boss was less tolerant, readily classifying any Indians who traded with the competition as disloyal – literally treating them “as strangers.” The story of Alexander Macdonald provides us with a priceless glimpse of history “from the other side.”

### Appendix: Macdonald, the Company Boss

There was this boss whose name was Macdonald; he knew and saw Thomas Vincent. He was the boss here for fifteen years.<sup>77</sup> He was the Chief Trader, also in charge of the expedient and orderly shipment of supplies upstream.

Macdonald had left another man, a half-breed, in charge of supervising the daily loading and unloading of supplies. Macdonald left instructions that he was to be informed immediately if any person was not working up to his expectations.

And one man was reported for not living up to his expectations. Macdonald, once informed, came down to the loading area to speak to this man. “Are you sick,” he asked, “is that the reason why you cannot work?”

The man answered, “No.”

At this point Macdonald said, “You are only lazy. That’s why you don’t work.” After saying this, the man was stripped of all his clothing.

Totally embarrassed, humiliated, and covering up his private parts, the naked man went up into the bush with the intention of returning home. He was an Ojibwa from upriver. Seeing that it would be impossible for him to return, Macdonald later granted him a reprieve and took him back on. The man returned home with the next brigade.

This happened twice. The second time, two others were seen not far upstream from here heading home, walking along the shore naked. The oldest of the group that saw them from their boat knew that this was the work of Macdonald. When they were approached, the two naked men

confirmed the anticipated story. The two had known that their work party would eventually return home, so they had started walking upstream, expecting to be picked up later.

It was known that this Macdonald had a quick and ill-temper, and could not hold himself back from physical outbursts. Shortly after each outburst he would return to being a normal, likeable person. The people would say, "Yes, he was a good man." But it was his unexpected behaviour that was his downfall.

Macdonald was always known to keep a door key in his pocket. It was this key that he usually used to strike people across the face during his outbursts. He never struck the person in the eye. It was always across the face, generally drawing blood. No one ever retaliated, for fear that their trading would be cut off by the [Hudson's Bay] Company. He had the upper hand.

There was once when he was challenged, only once. There was a time when one person retaliated. But first I will tell this brief story to demonstrate Macdonald's character.

Macdonald kept many cows at the post, and each spring he would have the cows and calves taken down to the coast to graze and become fat. This was his winter food. One winter the head of a very fat cow was thoroughly cooked so that the meat was very tender and delicious, and the table was set for him. As a rule he ate alone; he was single and never had a wife. While Macdonald was seated, the obedient cook stood and watched, waiting to respond to any request. In a flurry, Macdonald jumped up and shouted, "So that's all these people have been doing, shooting the cows as they graze downstream!" He had apparently bitten into a piece of shot. He rushed out of his house and met the first man coming down the path, and struck him.

This was Macdonald's nature. Many times people would laugh at his behaviour when this incident was recounted. My grandfather told and laughed about this incident many times. He said there were three sizes of shot in those days: the smallest was number one shot, next was number two, and then the largest of all (*amisk asinii*) was used for shooting beaver. "It was no wonder. He bit the largest one," my grandfather would say, laughing.

Now about the incident of retaliation. There were these two brothers who had received one hundred dollars in credit from the Company for supplies to trap for the winter. It just happens sometimes, and this was the case for these two men. By the spring the younger one had very few furs; his older brother had done quite well.

Realizing what would happen to him, the younger brother had second

thoughts about seeing Macdonald. "He won't understand," he said. It was his brother who finally convinced him to see the boss, explain the situation and arrange for later payment.

So he went in to see Macdonald. It just so happened that my mother's father [James Sutherland?] was at the post when this young man paid his visit. Two others who witnessed this incident were *Kitchii* Sandy and Jacob; there were three altogether. After the younger brother went into Macdonald's office, the others could hear voices coming from inside. Then they could hear a loud thump, like something falling. This was followed by a quivering moan, "Aah ha ha ha. Aah ha ha ha ha." The door opened and the young man appeared, holding his face; a steady flow of blood was clearly visible, dripping onto the floor.

"What's wrong?" his brother asked.

"I was struck in the face by the boss," he said.

"Then why didn't you fight back?" exclaimed his brother, as he rushed into the office. There was a struggle, during which Macdonald managed to back off and manoeuvre his way out of the office into the main store. The older brother grabbed him around the neck with his left hand, held him there momentarily, and flung him onto the floor. Again Macdonald was held there by the throat, and the man reached for his knife. But as the knife was going for its mark two people grabbed the arm just in time, saving Macdonald's life.

"If it wasn't for those two," said my grandfather, "surely that would have ended it all."

Macdonald had an interpreter, a big man, who jumped in and grabbed the attacker around the waist, pulling him off. The brother swung around, escaping from this hold, and then got hold of the interpreter, forcibly tossing him out of the store onto the ground. "Do you want to fight too?" asked the brother.

"No. No," came the reply.

Now it was the boss's turn. "Aah ha ha ha, aah ha ha ha ha," he moaned. He got up from the floor and ran home.

Ten days later the older brother returned and asked for the boss. "He's still at home," was the reply. So he immediately left for the boss's house, but he was followed by another person who suspected he might kill Macdonald.

The brother entered Macdonald's house and called out, "What's the problem?" Once again he was holding a knife in his hand. There was no reply. "If you don't get up, this is where you will surely die," said the angered brother.

Macdonald quickly jumped up and, held by the scruff of his neck, he

was led to the trading post. As they approached the post the brother said, "Open the door." After this was done, Macdonald was pushed inside, falling on the floor. The brother picked him up and went over to his office. Again he gave the instructions, "Open the door." And again Macdonald was pushed inside and fell on the floor. The brother said, "Go sit down on your chair. The people are waiting for you." Macdonald picked himself up, stumbled over to his desk and sat on his chair.

That spring the head man of the Company came to Fort Albany, and Macdonald was transferred to Moose Factory where he stayed for two winters. He left late one winter to go east along the coast to a place known as Great Whale [River]. This is the place where white whales were caught as food for the sled dogs [and as oil for export]. One man was in charge of the men trapping the whales. Nets were strung across an inlet at the mouth of the river, and as the tide receded the whales were trapped. When the tide was fully out, the whales eventually beached themselves.

While they waited for the tide to go out, the men would all sit around sharing a drink or two of liquor. The person in charge was responsible for sharing out the drinks. Macdonald, in his assertiveness, wanted to take control. When he was told that this wasn't his responsibility, Macdonald struck the person in charge, in one of his usual outbursts. This time there was no struggle or retaliation. But he was told, "You will find out later."

Macdonald returned to Moose Factory that summer. At the mouth of the Moose River, long poles were erected as beacons, marking the river channel so that the ships could safely navigate the waters. Macdonald was on deck as they approached and passed the beacons. Those who were on deck saw Macdonald grasp the side of his head and fall, rolling around in excruciating pain, totally out of control. He was kept restrained all the way to Moose Factory, and even as they disembarked Macdonald was totally out of his senses. He was watched closely at all times, as he would suddenly take hold of a knife in an attempt to slit his throat. He would say, "These people want to kill me!"

Day and night shifts of two people were always left in charge to take care of him. But one mistake was made. At night, Macdonald was kept on the second floor in a room by himself. It isn't known exactly what took place that fatal night. Perhaps the two people who were left in charge were tired and became careless. Macdonald jumped through his window and fell to the ground, putting an end to his misery.

That is the story of Alexander Macdonald, the Company boss.

— narrated by James Wesley,  
translated by Norman F. Wesley,  
1984.

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## Notes

1. John S. Long, "Narratives of Early Encounters between Europeans and the Cree of Western James Bay" *Ontario History* 80, no. 3 (Sept. 1988): 227-245.
2. Hosea Wynne, *Mushkegowuk Council News* 2, no. 5 (May 1990).
3. Colin Scott, "Ideology of Reciprocity between the [Eastern] James Bay Cree and the Whiteman State," *Outwitting the State*, edited by Peter Skalnik, pp. 81-108 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers: 1989).
4. See also John S. Long "Too Many of One Kind Together: Norwegians at Moose Factory," presented at the 1988 Rupert's Land Colloquium.
5. Edwin E. Rich, *Hudson's Bay Company 1670-1870*, vol. 1 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960), pp. 549-54, 589.
6. Charles A. Bishop, *The Northern Ojibwa and the Fur Trade: An Historical and Ecological Study* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), p. 110.
7. Under the ready barter system, the Indians' credit was restricted to only "a few small items." According to this unpopular system, aimed at eliminating Indian debts, the Indians were expected to trade for the bulk of their store goods only after bringing in furs. Bishop *Northern Ojibwa*, pp. 118-22.
8. Bishop, *Northern Ojibwa*, p. 131.
9. Victor Lytwyn, personal communication, 18 Oct. 1992.
10. Bishop *Northern Ojibwa*, p. 117. See also Elizabeth Arthur, "Far from the Madding Crowd: Hudson's Bay Company Managers in the Country North of Superior," *Ontario History* 82, no. 1 (March 1990): 9-27.
11. Hudson's Bay Company Archives (hereafter HBCA), G.S. McTavish to John McKenzie, 29 Mar. 1862, B.3/b/94, fos. 1-2. Thomas Taylor of Martens Falls reported that the Indians who hunted near Lake Nipigon had not met any "opposition parties" during the winter of 1861-62. HBCA, G.S. McTavish to Thomas Taylor, 24 Mar. 1862, B.3/b/94, fo.3; G.S. McTavish to J.W. Wilson, 27 May 1862, fo. 3d.

- 12 Bishop, *Northern Ojibwa*, pp. 136-137; Herbert F. McLeod, *Memories of Fur Trading Days in Moose Factory and Vicinity*, (Kapusksing: Marc Plouffe, 1978), pp. 15-17; J.W. Anderson, *Fur Trader's Story* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1961), pp. 28ff.
- 13 HBCA, B.3/b/94, G.S. McTavish to J.W. Wilson, 27 May 1862, fos. 3d-4.
- 14 The cattle barn at Fort Albany was an impressive feature. It was described by Bishop David Anderson, who visited James Bay in 1852, as a "large solid substantial building, superior to anything I have seen in the country. The Company's cattle is [sic] mainly kept here, and sent to Moose or other parts of the district as required. David Anderson, *The Net in the Bay; or The Journal of a Visit to Moose and Albany* (London: Hatchards, Piccadilly, 1853), p. 180.
- 15 HBCA B.3/b/94, Charles Crowe to John McKenzie, 17 June 1862, fo. 6; Crowe to Joseph W. Wilson, 14 July 1862, fo. 10. The author thanks Bob Coutts for equating the fine with wages.
- 16 HBCA B.3/b/94, Crowe to Anderson, 6 Aug. 1862, fo. 15. Macdonald's tombstone at Moose Factory states that he was 44 years old when he died in 1875, so he was born circa 1831.
- 17 HBCA B.135/g/39, fos.3-4; B.135/g/40, fo.3; B.135/g/41, fo.3; B.135/g/42, fo.3; B.135/g/43, fo.5; B.135/g/44, fo.4; B.135/g/45, fo. 5; Richard I. Ruggles, *A Country So Interesting: The Hudson's Bay Company and Two Centuries of Mapping, 1670-1870* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), pp. 109, 285n, 228, 253-54; Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, *Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay 1600-1870* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), pp. 143-50.
- 18 HBCA B.3/b/94, fo. 17.
- 19 Ibid., fos. 22d, 28d.
- 20 Ibid., fos. 29d & 32d.
- 21 Ibid., fos. 22d, 38d; Macdonald to Horace Belanger, 27 Feb. 1864, fo. 43.
- 22 HBCA B.3/b/95, Macdonald to Governor William MacTavish, 10 Feb. 1866, fo. 29.
- 23 Kapiskau River is some 30 km (20 miles) south of the Attawapiskat River.
- 24 HBCA B.3/b/95, Macdonald to James Anderson, 20 June 1866, fo. 30.
- 25 HBCA B.3/b/95, Macdonald to McTavish, 21 February 1867, fo. 40. The goose harvest is still important to the James Bay Cree; see Bryan David Cummins, "Attawapiskat Cree Land Tenure and Use, 1901-1989," Ph.D. thesis, McMaster University, 1991.
- 26 HBCA B.3/b/94, Macdonald to Dalles, 12 Feb. 1864.
- 27 The Chickney channel of the Albany River discharges into James Bay some 10 km. (6 miles) north of the north channel of Albany River.
- 28 HBCA B.3/b/94, fo. 39d.
- 29 HBCA B.3/b/94, Macdonald to Linklater, 21 July 1863, fo. 33d.
- 30 HBCA B.3/b/94, Macdonald to William Corston, 26 Feb. 1864, fo. 40.
- 31 HBCA B.3/b/95, Macdonald to Savage, 28 Feb. 1865, fo. 15.
- 32 Ibid., 27 Feb. 1867, fo. 41.
- 33 Ibid.

- 34 HBCA B.3/b/94, Macdonald to William Linklater, 26 Feb. 1864, fo. 42.
- 35 HBCA B.3/b/95, Macdonald to Crowe, 23 July 1865, fo. 21.
- 36 See Michael Payne *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday Life in Hudson's Bay Company Service — York Factory 1788 to 1870* (Ottawa: National Historical Parks and Sites, 1989). See also Long, "Too Many of One Kind," for imprisonment of Norwegian servants at Moose Factory in the 1850s.
- 37 Elizabeth Arthur, personal communication, 14 July 1990.
- 38 HBCA B.3/b/94 Macdonald to Anderson, 14 Mar. 1864, fo. 44; B.3/95, Macdonald to Anderson, 27 Sept. 1864, fo. 11. See also HBCA B.372/b/1, Great Whale River Correspondence Books 1857-1860, Robert Hamilton to Joseph Gladman, 24 Dec. 1857, fos. 1d-2. On territoriality see Toby Morantz, ed., *Who Owns the Beaver? Anthropologica* 18, nos. 1-2 (1986).
- 39 The actual travel apparently took about sixty-two days, with the rest of the time spent loading and unloading and waiting at Fort Albany. In the fall, the trip inland from Fort Albany took thirteen days to Martens Falls, and eighteen days from there to Osnaburgh (a combined one-way trip of thirty-one days). See Victor Lytwyn, "Transportation in the Petit Nord," Plate 63 in R. Cole Harris, ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada*, vol. 1, *From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
- 40 HBCA B.3/b/95, Macdonald to Governor McTavish, 10 Sept. 1866, fo. 38.
- 41 *Ibid.*, fos. 38-38d.
- 42 Ruggles, *A Country So Interesting*, p. 228; Church Missionary Society (hereafter CMS), Horden to Venn, 9 Aug. 1858, A-80.
- 43 CMS, Bishop Horden to Wright, 15 Sept. 1874, A-100.
- 44 CMS, Horden to Wright, 20 Feb. 1875, microfilm reel A-81.
- 45 CMS, Horden to CMS, 4 May 1875, A-101.
- 46 HBCA A.12/16, Parsons to Graham, 20 May 1875, fos. 596-597.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Moose Factory, St. Thomas Anglican Church, Burial Register 1851-1906, no. 177; Archives of Ontario, MS. 161, MS. 311 Series III. See also HBCA A.6/49, fo. 471.
- 50 A photograph of the grave by John Goddard is published in *Harrowsmith* no. 93 (Sept./Oct. 1990), p. 48.
- 51 See John S. Long, "The Reverend George Barnley and the James Bay Cree," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 6, no. 2 (1986): 319.
- 52 Jennifer S.H. Brown, "The Track to Heaven: The Hudson Bay Cree Religious Movement of 1842-43," *Papers of the 13th Algonquian Conference*, edited by William Cowan, pp. 53-63. (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1982); John S. Long, "The Cree Prophets: Oral and Documentary Accounts" *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 31, no. 1 (Apr. 1989): 3-11.
- 53 See C. Douglas Ellis, "Now Then, Still Another Story —": *Literature of the Western James Bay Cree, Content and Structure*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba), 1989.

- 54 See Richard J. Preston, "Interference and its Consequences: An East Cree Variant of Deviance," *Anthropologica* 33 (1991): 69-90.
- 55 Graham's visit in 1875 was the first by a HBC Governor in some twenty-four years.
- 56 H. David Brumble, *American Indian Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 76. The author thanks Jennifer S.H. Brown for this reference.
- 57 The incident could have occurred in the mid-1850s when Macdonald was surveying there.
- 58 See, for example, John Bierman, *Dark Safari: The Life Behind the Legend of Henry Morton Stanley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).
- 59 Letter from Dr. Douglas F. Waller to Dr. Robin S. Davies dated May 23, 1992. This confirmed a suggestion made by Dr. Derek Johnstone (and others) in Stromness at the Orkney-Rupert's Land Symposium, 2 June 1990.
- 60 A.G. Meindl, Report to Hon. Frank Oliver, Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 2 Sept. 1905. Canada, Sessional Papers, no. 27, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs 1905-1906*, (Ottawa: 1906), pp. 293-96.
- 61 Elaine Showalter *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin du Siecle* (New York: Viking, 1991).
- 62 Personal communication, 10 June 1991.
- 63 See *The Moosonee and Keewatin Mailbag*, beginning with vol. 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1907).
- 64 *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). A similar problem with a tag ending seems to have occurred in James Wesley's biography of Thomas Vincent: see John S. Long, "Budd's Native Contemporaries in James Bay: Men of 'Refined Feelings,' Representatives of 'The Whiteman's Civilization' & 'Real Bush Indians,'" *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 33, no. 1 (Apr. 1991), pp. 81-82.
- 65 The *okimahkan* or "chief" of today, seemingly subservient to a government *okimaw*, may have a long history in the fur trade. We can speculate that (when they spoke in Cree) early HBC traders used *okimaw* to describe Indian trading "captains." The Cree came to use the same word for an HBC Factor, expecting him to "give good measure" and eventually (as in Macdonald's time) intervene to resolve issues of trespass and theft by other Indians. A trading captain's followers likely referred to their leader as an *okimahkan*.

For fifty weeks of the year, when they were away from the trading post, the trading captain's fancy coat would guarantee him no authority for he would no longer be a go-between. Fishing or hunting parties would delegate limited authority to a situational *okimaw*. The influence of the trading captain would rightfully appear to Europeans as "trifling."

The *okimahkan* became a full-time role after treaty-signing and the adoption of year-round village life; it was institutionalized by Indian Affairs' chief and council system. In the 1920s and 1930s the Canadian government tried to crush Indian leaders who questioned this subservient role. In October 1992 we are reminded by Ovide Mercredi's troubles in selling a new Constitutional

accord that an Indian leader's influence still appears to outsiders as "trifling." It is still delegated and limited to specific circumstances.

The author thanks George Hunter for explaining the significance of *okimahkan*. See also C. Douglas Ellis, "A Note on Okimahkan," *Anthropological Linguistics* (Mar. 1960): 1; Toby Morantz, "James Bay Trading Captains of the Eighteenth Century: New Perspectives on Algonquian Social Organization," in *Actes du Huitieme Congres des Algonquistes*, edited by William Cowan, pp. 77-89, (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1977), and her *An Ethnohistoric Study of Eastern James Bay Cree Social Organization, 1700-1850* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1983); Arthur J. Ray and Donald Freeman, "Give Us Good Measure": *An Economic Analysis of Relations Between the Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company Before 1763* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); June Helm and Eleanor B. Leacock, "The Hunting Tribes of Subarctic Canada," in *North American Indians in Historical Perspective*, edited by Eleanor B. Leacock and Nancy O. Lurie (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 343-74; E. Brian Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), chapter 6.

66 HBCA B.3/b/94, fo. 29.

67 John S. Long, "Archdeacon Thomas Vincent of Moosonee and the Handicap of 'Metis' Racial Status," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 3, no. 1 (1983): 100.

68 John M. Cooper, "The Northern Algonquian Supreme Being," *Primitive Man* 6, nos. 3-4 (July-Oct. 1933): 58.

69 The author thanks Archie Wesley for explaining the differences. Churchmen equate *pashtamuwin* with blasphemy: see Richard Faries et al., eds., *A Dictionary of the Cree Language* (Toronto: Church House, 1938), p. 408.

70 John J. Honigmann, "The Attawapiskat Swampy Cree: An Ethnographic Reconstruction," *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 5, no. 1 (1956), p. 77.

71 Taped interview.

72 John S. Long, "Manitu, Power, Books and Wihtikow: Some Factors in the Adoption of Christianity by Nineteenth-Century Western James Bay Cree," *Native Studies Review* 3, no. 1 (1987): 1-30; see also Jennifer S.H. Brown and Robert Brightman, eds., "The Orders of the Dreamed": *George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), pp. 48-49, 134-35.

73 J.B. Tyrrell, ed., *Documents Relating to the Early History of Hudson Bay* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1931) p. 382.

74 Scott, "Reciprocity," p. 85.

75 Honigmann, "Attawapiskat," pp. 58-59.

76 Preston, "Interference."

77 As we have seen, Macdonald was there from 1862 to 1874 (twelve years). The exact detail would have been considered unimportant to Cree listeners. The narrator's claim gives a fair order of magnitude; nitpicking non-Natives who care about such details can easily find such data in the archives.