

my child will look upon my face
it will not be with shame or hate
i will dance my dreams upon an eagle's wing
and fly higher, higher, higher (p. 18)

Barbara Belyea
Department of English
University of Calgary

"The Fur Trade." Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary, Alberta. Opened October 1991.

Glenbow Museum's new fur-trade exhibit is a permanent addition to its "Canadian West/Native Peoples" floor. It fills a gap between exhibits on Native peoples and on settlement by addressing Native/European first contacts in the fur trade.

The ethnology department and museum designers have successfully made much of a very small space. The exhibit is built around two central structures: a birch-bark canoe and a representation of Nottingham House post on Lake Athabasca. The text is succinct and readable, with messages more subtly contained in the imagery and artifacts. For instance, visitors are greeted by two figures labelled "The Indian" and "The Trader" which illustrate, by their apparel, the merging of cultures. The exhibit has a notably "modern" look next to those from the 1970s, both in its clean, bright, uncluttered look and in the attention to an interpretive story line, as opposed to a focus on outstanding but uncontextualized artifacts. It is "modern" in other senses as well. A close look reveals the incorporation of some interesting new themes and interpretations.

This is not the oft-told story of Native peoples enthusiastically drawn into trade by exploitative entrepreneurs using the lure of superior European technology and civilization. Nor is it a celebration of the newcomers' heroic determination and accomplishment, their "discovery" of transportation routes through North America, and their conquest of climate and geography to bring trade goods in and furs out of the interior of the continent. The exhibit focusses on the part played by Native peoples in the fur trade. The various essential roles of Native women are itemized, and the unique contributions and society of Métis peoples highlighted. These roles are discussed with reference to the interdependence of Natives and traders, emphasizing the traders' dependence upon Natives. The usual "great men" of the fur trade are played down — photos of only four fur traders are featured, and none of the traditional explorers are mentioned.

The exhibit is unusual for interpreting the trade as more than economic. In the text about trade ceremony we read that for Native peoples, trade "was a way of developing and reinforcing social relationships between individuals, between families and between nations. Only relatives would engage in trade with each other. Where no blood relationship existed, people created relationships by marriage or by exchanging gifts and promising to treat each

other like brothers and sisters." While there is little mention of motivations in the trade, either of the traders or of the Natives, the new technology is downplayed as the attraction: muskets are shown with the comment that "many were unreliable and most were not as accurate as bow and arrow." The text by the steel-headed arrows notes that stone arrow points had "the advantage of being readily available and easily sharpened when the points became dull." Also remarkable is the way the exhibit brings the fur trade into the present: a clothing artifacts display, featuring a head-dress, a beaded moose-skin dress and a capote, all date from the twentieth century, one as late as the 1950s. Sixteenth century beaver hats are juxtaposed with a picture of hats from 1910 and 1920. Another segment features a snowmobile and talks about how Native skills and values are passed on in contemporary trappers' bush camps.

The nature and speed of change are topics in the forefront of debate for ethnologists and fur-trade scholars. In this exhibit, the predominant theme is continuity. Complex trade networks and relationships are noted to be an indigenous characteristic of Native societies long before the first European arrived. Explicitly stated, the point is that "The first arrival of Euro-Canadian traders did not greatly disrupt native ways of life" (a hotly disputed idea by some scholars who argue that the very earliest contact resulted in pandemics with catastrophic effect on Native populations). The continuity theme is reinforced by the direct link the exhibit makes between past and present.

Some small changes could have strengthened the two central features in the exhibit. The birch-bark canoe is excellent for showing materials and craftsmanship and is suitable to the small space. But it is clearly not a "fur-trade canoe," which were enormous craft. Yet, the packs in the canoe suggest freighting. Perhaps it could more appropriately have been carrying newly tanned hides and the personal effects of a family on a trapline, to draw attention to the fact that individual family canoes played an important role in transporting furs from hunting grounds to the trade depots.

As for the Nottingham House representation, interpretation and design functions were clearly the priority here. Clearer messages about the original post's scale and architecture would have been useful. The structure needs stronger clues to place it in its time period (1802-06) and to differentiate it from any tidy settler's cabin — for instance, more attention to architectural detail (perhaps hand-hewn floor boards or a mudded floor and parchment windows); artifacts besides the HBC blankets to link it to the trade; and better illustration of the crowded interior which the accompanying text describes.

Perhaps most striking is that the exhibit makes few references to how the involvement of Native peoples in the fur trade affected their lives. As for the effect of the fur trade on the newcomers, we are told "expansion in search of furs introduced the world to the vastness of Canada," and "the foothold of the fur trade led to Euro-Canadian settlement." These statements could have been more courageous. It is certainly relevant, after all, that the fur trade was bound to a charter and claims to land, that distant monarchs

fought over the ownership and use of these lands, and that the fur-trade "foothold" led to the takeover of the continent and the marginalization of Native peoples. It will be interesting to see how these realities will be communicated in the planned revamping of the "Native peoples" and "settlement" exhibits on this floor over the next few years.

The exhibit shows virtually no suggestion of conflict in the fur-trade era. The only conflict evident is the modern-day controversy of animal rights groups which has affected the fur industry. Behind the entrance display is a commentary on the animal rights/animal welfare debate, with examples of new technology for humane trapping. The message is that the disappearance of markets is threatening the "traditional Native economy." It leaves the impression that the fur trade was a beautiful, smooth-working, symbiotic relationship only recently entering into problems because of the intransigence of the animal rights movement. The generalized message that with relationships of mutual obligation and interdependence, traders and trappers were united as partners in the common pursuit of fur needs at least the qualification that it was not always like that in every district at all times.

This exhibit clearly attempts to address some old stereotypes, bring in some of the new scholarship and give attention to groups overlooked in the past. It successfully does this, and it also broaches a relevant contemporary issue. With the necessary brevity of exhibit texts, however, museums tend to make clearcut statements that sound authoritative. There is some danger of replacing old with new stereotypes. While it is impossible to incorporate the complexity of debate, to footnote or to qualify each message, perhaps this exhibit could benefit by a panel with a reflective commentary recognizing that the understanding and interpretation of the fur trade has changed, especially with the relatively new approach of recognizing Native peoples as significant shapers of the history of this country. Indeed, how we see the fur-trade era will continue to evolve as we actually incorporate Native peoples' perspectives on this history.

Frieda Esau Klippenstein

Fur Trade and Native Sites Historian

Canadian Parks Service, Western Regional Office, Calgary