

The 1857 Parliamentary Inquiry, the Hudson's Bay Company, and Rupert's Land's Aboriginal People

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ABSTRACT. In 1857 a British parliamentary Select Committee investigated the Hudson's Bay Company. In the course of its hearings, the committee often directed its attention to Rupert's Land's First Nations. Despite an obvious polarization between supporters and opponents of the company on many issues, a consensus emerged on the fate of Rupert's Land's indigenous citizens in what all presumed to be the inevitable European settlement of the Plains and adjacent woodlands. Hudson's Bay Company officials and their opponents shared the paternalistic assumption, based on nineteenth-century liberalism, that the Native peoples would be unable to cope with the onslaught of a supposedly superior, modern, and educated population. Without consulting the objects of their concerns, the participants at the committee's hearings agreed that it was the task of the state and church to protect the aboriginal nations from and educate them into the new order. On this point, the committee's report was an important omen for the subsequent history of western Canada's Native inhabitants.

SOMMAIRE. En 1857 un comité parlementaire particulier de la Grande-Bretagne fit une enquête sur la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson. Au cours des audiences, ce comité se concentra fréquemment sur les Premières Nations de la Terre de Rupert. En dépit d'une évidente polarisation sur de nombreux points entre partisans et adversaires de la Compagnie, ce fut le consensus général que les citoyens indigènes de la Terre de Rupert verraient inévitablement une implantation européenne sur les plaines et dans les bois adjacents. Les fonctionnaires de la Compagnie partageaient avec leurs adversaires la supposition paternaliste, basée sur le libéralisme du dix-neuvième siècle, que les autochtones seraient incapables de faire face à l'assaut d'une population moderne, éduquée et supposée supérieure. Sans consulter les personnes concernées, les participants aux audiences du comité tombèrent d'accord qu'il incombait à l'état et à l'église de protéger les nations autochtones des nouvelles circonstances et de les y insérer. Le rapport qui s'ensuivit constituait un lourd présage de l'avenir des autochtones de l'ouest du Canada.

In 1857 the British Parliament appointed a Select Committee to review the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company, which had possessed a chartered fur trading monopoly in Rupert's Land since 1670.¹ Sitting for over forty days, the committee took testimony from nearly two dozen witnesses. The transcript of their evidence furnishes an extremely detailed snapshot of how these observers viewed ecological and cultural conditions in the region at mid-century. In particular, the committee's report offers a unique glimpse into the attitude of Europeans towards the aboriginal nations in the northwestern interior of British North America and portrays what they perceived to be the long-term future of those peoples.

The portrait of the indigenous peoples² that emerges from the pages of the Select Committee's report reflected the context of the time. Witnesses and questioners alike believed that over the past two centuries, the powerful combination of science,

1 Under a twenty-year license granted in 1839, the Hudson's Bay Company also controlled trade in areas west of Rupert's Land, known as the Indian Territory. In fact, it was the end of the license that inspired the establishment of the Select Committee.

2 The Select Committee did not discuss the Métis at all, considering them not as indigenous people but as British citizens in no need of special attention.

technology, and capitalism, flourishing under increasingly free political and economic institutions, had created the great and wealthy British empire. To sustain the pace of economic growth and an improving standard of living, Britain's leaders scoured the globe for raw materials for the nation's machines, food for its workers, and employment for its surplus populations. They believed that the country's mandate was to develop the natural and human resources of the entire world. Thomas Carlyle, the Victorian essayist, angrily lamented the lingering remnants of poverty in industrial Britain when there was "a world where Canadian Forests stand unfelled, boundless Plains and Prairies unbroken with the plough ... green desert spaces never yet made white with corn; and to the overcrowded little western nook of Europe, our Terrestrial Planet, nine-tenth of it yet vacant or tenanted by nomades, is still crying, Come and till me, come and reap me!"³ Carlyle thus eloquently articulated a powerful civilizing mission, an expansionist creed that urged western Europeans to tame the world's remaining wilderness regions and manage them for the desires of humanity. At the same time, Victorians believed that this civilizing task also included the mandate to share with other people in the world the knowledge that had produced this unprecedented wealth. Thus, a host of civil servants, entrepreneurs, teachers, and missionaries spread across the globe to bring the gospel of liberalism to uneducated people everywhere. The whole world must be civilized, they assumed; that is, peoples everywhere must be raised to the level of enlightened, Christian, industrial, and urbanizing Victorian Britain.⁴

The theme, that the enormous resources of Rupert's Land must be opened to private enterprise, that its indigenous peoples must be educated, and, in other words, that the days of the Hudson's Bay Company's hegemony over its resources and peoples were numbered, echoes throughout the Select Committee's report. While contemporary observers likely saw two distinct points of view emerging from the evidence placed before the committee, a modern historian, reading the manuscript a century and a half later, may notice a remarkable similarity in the statements concerning Rupert Land's resources and its aboriginal nations. Seemingly, one perspective encouraged the continuation, for as long as possible, of the monopoly and the preservation of the supposedly traditional (but post-contact) indigenous lifestyles; the other view, advocated the commencement, as soon as feasible, of the colonization of the territory's arable lands and the integration of the Native peoples into this new society. This polarization, however, mirrored specific objectives; in actual fact, both perceptions were remarkably similar as each was based on an imperialist view of the environment and the aboriginal nations.⁵ All witnesses, as well as committee members, assumed that the resources of the vast interior were to be

3 Cited in Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 218.

4 Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century 1815-1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1976), 31-36.

5 The concept of an "imperial" view of nature is developed in Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 29-30. Worster argues that in the imperialist schema a mechanistic, rational, and technological nature was considered to be the domain of humans, to be altered and rearranged for their purposes and needs. Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) suggests that bacteria, viruses, weeds, domesticated seeds and animals as well as rodents imported from the Old to the New World partly explain the success of Europe's conquest of the American continent. John S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869* (New York: Octagon Books, 1977) uses imperialism in the more traditional but still very useful sense.

exploited for the benefit primarily of Europeans. While Hudson's Bay Company officials and their friends seemed more sympathetic to maintaining the lifestyles of the Native peoples, and while their economic objectives differed from their opponents, all witnesses believed that the aboriginal people were uncivilized, culturally homogenous, and that their fate was to be decided in London. All the participants adopted a paternalistic attitude towards the aboriginal prairie peoples, believing that in their supposed ignorance they could not cope with either the fur trade or impending settlement without the guidance of the European newcomers. In fact, no one thought it necessary to invite anyone of the First Nations to testify at the hearings.

Not unexpectedly, the Hudson's Bay Company welcomed neither the Select Committee nor the impending settlement of the North-West. While the former would likely cast unfavourable light upon the company's activities, the latter would inevitably and unfavourably affect the company's business. Yet, the future course of events was quite clear to the company's governors and they acknowledged they must accommodate themselves to the new reality. In the meantime, they would do all in their power to persuade the committee to preserve the *status quo*. The governors informed their Canadian representative, Sir George Simpson, that "our great object before the Committee of the House of Commons will be to shew that all our regulations for the administration of the country and the conduct of our trade, have been such as were calculated to protect the Indians and prevent their demoralization, and that, as far as can be reasonably expected, we have been successful."⁶ By demonstrating their good stewardship, company officials thought, they could, by implication, be trusted to retain the monopoly and ensure the welfare of the Natives.

The star witness defending the company's position was its Canadian governor, Sir George Simpson. Born in February 1786 or 1787, Simpson joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1820 just prior to its merger with the North West Company. Renowned for his many incredibly fast journeys across the vast territories, he devoted most of his time capitalizing on the company's monopoly, economizing its operations, and imposing a stringent discipline on all employees. Dynamic and aggressive, Simpson was a fast learner and a very capable, shrewd manager, keeping himself well informed on all aspects of the business and adapting it quickly to new environments. Although he forbade his low-ranked employees to form relationships with the Natives, Simpson himself had short liaisons with at least three Métis women and sired four children. These associations, his sojourn in the territories, and his incessant, restless travels, gave Simpson a comprehensive knowledge of Rupert's Land and its peoples.⁷

Despite his relations with the Métis women, Simpson nurtured a prejudice against North America's indigenous people. Obsessed with the early Victorian ideal of the beautiful, pure, cultured, and genteel lady, he refused to marry any woman born in Rupert's Land and in 1829 abruptly ended a relationship to wed his eighteen-year-old Scottish cousin, Frances.⁸ Even though Frances lived in Red River for nearly four years, at Simpson's insistence she socialized only with the few white women in the

6 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, [hereafter cited as HBCA/PAM], A7/2, Shepherd to Simpson, 2 January 1857.

7 John S. Galbraith, "Sir George Simpson," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, 1851-1860*, 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 812-18; J.S. Galbraith, *The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976); A.S. Morton, *Sir George Simpson, Overseas Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company: A Pen Picture of a Man of Action* (Toronto: Dent, 1944).

8 Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 183-86.

settlement and thus met no Native females and only Métis servants.⁹ In 1833, she returned to Scotland, and in 1838 settled into Simpson's permanent residence in Lachine, Canada East.

George Simpson's testimony before the Select Committee reflected that of his Montreal and London peers. As an investor, not only in the fur trade, but also in banking, mining, and railways,¹⁰ Simpson understood the mid-nineteenth-century resource development mentality. Like many of his peers, he was glad to have escaped the so-called wilderness, had cultivated a condescending antipathy to the Native people, especially their women, and had attuned himself to the restless energy of Canada's emerging technological culture and looming expansionist ambitions.¹¹ Although his testimony advocated the preservation of the traditional fur trade and the aboriginal way of life, he consciously participated in business endeavours that were central to the new order.

Sir George Simpson's contention, that the Hudson's Bay Company was best suited to protect the prosperity of Rupert's Land's Natives, was challenged by the Aborigines Protection Society, a humanitarian association, deeply concerned about the well-being of the indigenous nations. Founded in 1837 to fight the dispossession, massacre, and enslavement of aboriginal people by invading colonists, the society took a special interest in North America and persistently lobbied the imperial government to protect, educate, and integrate its First Nations into the newcomer society. From its humanitarian platform, the Aborigines Protection Society valiantly attempted to persuade church and state to shield indigenous inhabitants from the whites: it advocated that British North America's Native peoples be regarded as British subjects, that their lands not be further alienated without proper compensation, that they be educated into British culture and religion, and then integrated into the new white society.¹² Although the society professed itself not to be an opponent of the Hudson's Bay Company, in a pamphlet it published a year prior to the Select Committee's hearings, it accused the firm of impeding "the progress of civilization and religion," and of violating what it considered to be the "universal benefits of free trade and free communication."¹³ Mixed in its altruistic position, the society also appealed to practical concerns by arguing that teaching the indigenous peoples the principles of contemporary industrialized society would stabilize and settle them thus creating a much larger market for British manufactures instead of, what it perceived to be, a declining, nomadic population of savage hunters.¹⁴ In any case, the society assumed

9 Frances' first-born, a son, died at eight months. See Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 129-30.

10 See Montreal Mining Company, *Report of the Trustees of the Montreal Mining Company* (Montreal: n.p., 1846) for Simpson's active participation in this Lake Superior mining company.

11 Works that discuss the expansionist resource development attitude are: A.A. den Otter, *The Philosophy of Railways: The Transcontinental Railway Idea in British North America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Doug Owsram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); and Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit against the Wilderness* (New York: Viking Press, 1980). Simpson's prejudices against Native women are described well in Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, and Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*.

12 Standish Motte, *Outline of a System of Legislation for the Securing of Protection to the Aboriginal Inhabitants of all Countries Colonized by Great Britain* (London: n.p., 1840).

13 Aborigines Protection Society, *Canada West and the Hudson's-Bay Company* (London: n.p., 1856), introduction. The society's name is spelled in various ways, often with an apostrophe. This article will use the more common non-possessive form.

14 Aborigines Protection Society, *Report on the Indians of Upper Canada, 1839* (London: n.p., 1839), 21.

that the British should develop and settle the vast North American continent and that, therefore, its Native people must accommodate themselves to the new order.

The Aborigines Protection Society took a close interest in the Select Committee and placed before it a comprehensive brief which it hoped would help the committee devise measures for the "future improvement and preservation" of the aboriginal populations.¹⁵ In its submission, the society charged that the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company had adversely affected British North America's aboriginal people. Even though the Natives were the real producers of corporate wealth, they had suffered under the company's rule and their numbers had declined precipitously.¹⁶ Although the society believed that alcohol abuse and disease were contributing factors to the problem, dwindling food supplies were the primary and most worrisome cause of the declining aboriginal population. The society acknowledged that vaccinations and prohibitions against the use of alcohol in most districts had already greatly mitigated the impact of those difficulties.¹⁷ What concerned the society was that the fur trade by its very nature continued to contribute to the precipitous drop in animal numbers.¹⁸

15 Aborigines Protection Society to Labouchere, undated [1857], in Great Britain, House of Commons, *Report from the Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Company; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index*, 1857, 441 [hereafter cited as *Report*].

16 Shifting tribal territories and a lack of solid reference points made population estimates highly problematic. In 1844, Lieutenant-Colonel John Henry Lefroy, of the Royal Artillery, who made a two-year scientific journey through the Hudson's Bay territories for the Royal Society, compared his figures with those of Sir John Franklin twenty years previously. Lefroy concluded that the aboriginal population was decreasing rapidly. He noted the greatest decline in the north but also in the south near Lake of the Woods, Rainy Lake, and all around Lake Superior. In the Saskatchewan district, where resources were greater, he believed the decrease was the least [*Report*, 24].

Just prior to the Select Committee's inquiry, the Hudson's Bay Company conducted its own census. Taking the figures to the committee, Governor George Simpson estimated the population of indigenous people in company controlled territories east of the Rockies at approximately 55,570 [*Report*, 57, 366-67]. The Aborigines Protection Society argued that if Governor George Simpson's estimate was correct, the population was "wasting away." It claimed that travellers were confirming this dismal reality. Moreover, citing John McLaughlin, a former resident of Red River, the society estimated that seven-eighths of the Indian population west of the Rockies had disappeared [*Report*, 442].

Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands South of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 187-91, estimates that in the nineteenth century aboriginal numbers increased quite rapidly until the late 1830s when the smallpox epidemic decimated the Assiniboine. Their numbers never recovered. The Cree population, less touched by the epidemic, continued to expand. Ray's findings corroborate Governor Simpson's view that the population of the northern, forest Natives was increasing rather than decreasing as some supposed [*Report*, 85].

17 On the question of disease, see Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 187-91. Virtually all witnesses, hostile and friendly, agreed that alcohol was not used in competition-free and only sparingly in contested areas, mainly in regions bordering the United States. See for example, the testimony of John Rae, Sir George Simpson, Alexander Isbister, Reverend Griffith Corbett, Sir J. Richardson, John McLaughlin, and Richard King [*Report*, 37, 41, 58, 60-1, 65, 85, 88, 91, 122, 146-7, 154-6, 163, 272-4, 316, and 369-70]. In addition, the company's land deed, several standing rules and resolutions, as well as official correspondence, prohibited the use of alcohol as an article of trade [*Report*, 78, 79, 361, 368, 373]. Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 198, concludes that the Hudson's Bay Company made a diligent effort to end the alcohol trade. John Galbraith, *Hudson's Bay Company*, agrees.

18 The society readily admitted that the Natives shared the blame for the dangerously reduced number of animals. They had willingly over-hunted and wantonly destroyed small game. On the general topic of over-hunting among Natives before Europeans arrived in North America see, Richard White and William Cronon, "Ecological Change and Aboriginal-White Relations," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, 4, *History of Indian-White Relations*, ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1989), 417-27. See also, William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the*

Meanwhile, the demand for furs and provisions was increasing and the company was reducing expenditures on trade goods. The society believed the future appeared harsh and starvation was a grim reality. The paramount question, according to the society, therefore, was whether the Natives could survive the end of the fur trade and prospective settlement. "What is to become of the Indians," the society asked, "when their lands can no longer furnish the means of subsistence?"¹⁹

The society's penetrating question laid bare the two fundamental considerations before the Select Committee. Simply put: should the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly be continued and should Rupert's Land be opened for settlement? In 1857, with the Canadas becoming increasingly interested in expanding into the North-West, the answers to these two queries were intricately intertwined and their answers would have enormous implications for the territories' indigenous people. On the surface, the responses that the witnesses provided appeared to be clearly and mutually exclusive, with a distinct fracture line running between the pro- and anti-company camps. Yet, coursing beneath the surface of their testimonies was a consensus, which the committee, itself divided into defence and opposition, also shared. Whether they believed in free trade or the monopoly, in colonization or a fur preserve, explicitly or implicitly questioners and respondents based their arguments on the common and erroneous assumption that the Natives were part of the uncivilized wilderness and that their savagery could not withstand the onward march of Europe's supposedly superior civilization. No one suggested that the aboriginal nations formed complex, differentiated societies and controlled their own destinies.²⁰ All the participants at the committee's hearings saw the issue only as one of timing and responsibility: how quickly could the British government permit the civilizing of the wilderness and its inhabitants to proceed and who would assume the task of educating the Natives for the civilization process?

Opening Rupert's Land to European civilization, that is, to settlement and resource development, immediately raised the question of a competitive fur trade and its impact on the aboriginal populations. While those who sided with the company neatly side-stepped the issue of profits, they pointed to the era of rivalry between the Hudson's Bay and the North West companies at the turn of the century as an example of all that could go wrong in a free trade regime. They recalled an era of violence, widespread lawlessness, general disorder, and flagrant alcohol misuse. Sir J. Richardson, who had made three journeys through the territories, one with John Franklin, testified that in 1819, when the North West and Hudson's Bay companies were at war, both firms supplied the Natives with liquor. "The Indians were spending days in drunkenness" going from fort to fort for liquor "and a contest altogether shocking to humanity was carried on," Richardson asserted, adding, "At that time it scarcely appeared that the Indians had any capability of being civilised at all."²¹ On his

Ecology of New England (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Charles A. Bishop, *The Northern Ojibwa and the Fur Trade: An Historical and Ecological Study* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), 197-206 discusses the consequences of hunting techniques in Rupert's Land.

19 *Report*, 443.

20 Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992) argues that the "disappearing Indian" is one of the prevailing images of Native people in the nineteenth century. For a harsh and emotional assessment of the ideological underpinnings of the destruction of aboriginal cultures in North America see Turner, *Beyond Geography*. Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, cites numerous examples of Native hunters controlling aspects of the fur trade.

21 *Report*, 154.

second trip, the Hudson's Bay Company had re-established its monopoly and had greatly reduced liquor imports. There was a manifest improvement in life in the North-West Richardson noted, although he expressed disappointment that no aboriginal persons had become Christian, which he considered an essential step in the civilization process. Open trade, he believed, would reproduce the violent rivalries of the first decades of the century. "At present the Hudson's Bay Company's influence over the Indians is beneficial," he observed, "the natives are dependent upon the Hudson's Bay Company for supplies: but if they could get supplies elsewhere, and if spirits were brought in (for there is nothing which will prevent the introduction of spirits but the resolution of the Company not to take them in), I think it would require a strong military force to keep the Indians in subjection."²²

Several witnesses bolstered Richardson's testimony.²³ Competition in the fur trade, they conceded, might lead to an immediate increase in prices and living standards but eventually, they added, it would destroy the indigenous people. The rivalry would lead to the re-introduction of alcohol, to an increase in crime and intertribal warfare, to starvation and hardship among the Natives, and eventually to their demoralization and decimation. It would, said David Anderson, the Anglican bishop of Assiniboia, ruin the Natives' way of life before they could be civilized.²⁴

Not only would a competitive fur trade destroy the aboriginal people, according to Edward Ellice, the grizzled veteran of the fur trade, it would also ruin their habitat. In areas where the company did not face competition, it urged the Natives to preserve "the animals just as you do your pheasants and hares in this country. [It] ... encourage[d] the Indians only to kill a certain number of animals when in good season for their furs, and not to kill so many as to interfere with the breed."²⁵ But, in territories where the company did not have complete control over traders and aboriginal hunters, it could not impose quotas. Where two or more tribes hunted, if one preserved animals, the other would take more, Ellice explained, unless the company refused to take the fur, something it could not do if a rival would take the surpluses. To make his point, he noted that the company was able to practice conservation only north of the 60th parallel where the Natives had fixed hunting grounds. In the south, where the Plains tribes wandered over vast territories and could sell their furs to American competitors, management was impossible.²⁶ Competition,

22 Ibid., 156.

23 See the testimony of John Ross, John Henry Lefroy, John Rae, John Ffolliott Crofton [ibid., 1-23, 23-6, 26-44, 169-84, respectively].

24 Ibid., 231-47.

25 Ibid., 327.

26 Outside the committee room, Governor Simpson explained that the company's organization in the interior assisted the conservation effort. As shareholders in the firm, the factors had a long-term stake in the trade. "It is their interest to preserve the fur-bearing animals from wanton destruction, to lessen the burdens on the business, and to increase the natural resources of the country, so as to render it independent of foreign supplies of provisions." HBCA/PAM, A12/8, Simpson to Shepherd 26 January 1857. Arthur J. Ray, supports Ellice's assertion that the company practiced conservation when feasible but "without a monopoly it was not possible to manage the fur trade on an ecological sound basis since the primary supplier of fur pelts, the Indians, did not readily support the Hudson's Bay Company's conservation programme." See his, "Some Conservation Schemes of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-50: An Examination of Resource Management in the Fur Trade," *Journal of Historical Geography* 1, no. 1 (1975): 58. Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), blames the erosion of indigenous spirituality for the high incidence of over-hunting.

he predicted, would lead to massive over-hunting and the destruction of the trade within ten years, leading to widespread starvation among the aboriginal people.

As far as Alexander Isbister, a Rupert's Land-born critic of the Hudson's Bay Company residing in England, was concerned, these were all self-serving arguments. Having lived the first twenty years of his life in Red River and served a three-year stint as a company clerk, Isbister felt that the company's only interest in the indigenous hunters was to "procure furs at the cheapest rate" it could. All that needed to be done to end the liquor trade, Isbister stated, was to adopt the American system of licensing. While enforcement of prohibition might be difficult, he argued, it was not impossible nor need it hamper the settlement of the fertile portions of the northwestern interior. Free trade would be a good inducement to settlers, he continued, attracting immigrants to the North-West by the possibility of extra earnings. Although increased settlement in Red River would inevitably lead to greater participation in the fur trade, he believed that the violence and debauchery of the Natives, alleged to have occurred during the period of rivalry between the North West and Hudson's Bay companies, would not redevelop because of the presence of missionaries in the region and public opinion in eastern Canada.²⁷

Other witnesses agreed that an open fur trade would not lead to a bitter life-and-death struggle as had occurred at the turn of the century. Although no one made the specific reference, a growing number of Métis had already been trading in furs, pemmican, provisions, and other articles for a number of years, particularly after 1849 when four of them had been found guilty in court of violating the company's charter but were not sentenced.²⁸ With this experience in mind, some witnesses asserted that free trade would greatly benefit the Natives economically and culturally. "It is only by competition, of course, that the Indians will receive anything like fair play," argued John McLaughlin, a company critic who had lived in the North-West for about five years in the late 1840s as a private settler and merchant.²⁹ Donald Gunn, a free trader in the Lake Superior area, agreed and added that the Natives would shake off their dependence upon the Hudson's Bay Company for their supplies; they would become more self-reliant. Competition would allow them to obtain necessities like clothing and provisions more easily and more abundantly; it would lessen privation and suffering due to shortages of supplies. Referring to specific examples from the Sault Ste. Marie and Lake Superior region, Gunn demonstrated that under company control, the aboriginal peoples suffered hardship and hunger but once freed from its grip they earned more for their hunting efforts or they diversified into farming, including cattle raising and wild fruit gathering, or they worked in the mining, lumbering, or fishing industries. Exposed to "all the various industrial pursuits of civilised life," competition would "at the same time advance them to civilisation."³⁰ All these new opportunities, therefore, meant that the Natives would "no longer [be] obliged to roam over the country in search of a livelihood, families would congregate

27 Ibid., 120-37, 353-56.

28 Provincial Archives of Manitoba, District of Assiniboia, Court Records, 17 May 1849; Irene M. Spry, "The 'Private Adventurers' of Rupert's Land," in John E. Foster (ed.), *The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honor of Lewis H. Thomas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983); A.A. den Otter, "The Sayer Trial: An Ecological Perspective" (unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Studies Conference, Edinburgh, May 1999).

29 *Report*, 276.

30 Gunn to Vankoughnet, 6 March 1857, in *ibid.*, 388, 389.

together, become tillers of land, and their condition be thus greatly improved."³¹ Thus, in Gunn's opinion, free trade was part of the civilization process. Specifically, he and other critics charged, the monopoly, where it still existed, had created an impoverished society. By using an outdated credit system and excessive markups, the Hudson's Bay Company, they censured, not only exploited the Natives, causing periodic famines, but also thwarted their education and civilization.³²

The Aborigines Protection Society elaborated on this theme. Committed to the *laissez-faire*, free enterprise, capitalist economy that had reached a zenith in mid-nineteenth century Britain, the society viewed the problem not as a question of pricing or methods of exchange but as the presence of a state-sponsored monopoly. "We have given unlimited scope to the cupidity of a company of traders," the society chided, "placing no stint on their profits, or limits to their power."³³ Since it did not operate for the benefit of the Natives, the monopoly was an injustice. Not only did it deprive the hunter of fair value for his work but, from its humanitarian, paternalistic, and British supremacist perspective, the Aborigines Protection Society imputed that it barred him from contact with civilized man and the supposedly ameliorating influences needed for his advancement on the scale of humanity. The company, whose monopoly had been virtually unchallenged for the past thirty years, had squandered the opportunity to civilize the aboriginal people. What was the result, the society asked: an unhappy race of people toiling for the company's profit; a people who were perishing in frequent famines. While the Hudson's Bay Company was rich, prosperous, and powerful, the indigenous hunter was a slave, wandering about without a home, with little clothing, "as much a stranger to the blessings of civilisation as when the white man first landed on his shores." Although the society did not censure individual Hudson's Bay employees, seeing most as benevolent, humane, enterprising, and intelligent, it charged that the corporate character, the habits and the policies of the company were "unfavourable to that progressive settlement and civilisation of the country which has been going on in so remarkable a manner to the south of the British and American boundary."³⁴ In this surprising lack of understanding of the fate of many Natives in the United States, the Aborigines Protective Society expressed its fundamental faith in nineteenth-century culture; it believed that free enterprise United States had made much greater progress in civilizing the wilderness and its indigenous human inhabitants than mercantilistic Great Britain; obviously, in its view, redemption lay not with a monopolistic company but with the state, the church, and the school. These institutions would bring the Natives to the technological level of European civilization.

Not surprisingly, company officials countered that they treated the Natives justly and paid them fairly. They pointed out that company policy required its employees [servants in the contemporary term] to treat the aboriginal hunters equitably. The governor and his council as well as the imperial government, they said, closely supervised the behaviour of the company's servants in the interior and dismissed officers who were indolent or exploitive or took sexual advantages of aboriginal women. As Edward Ellice made clear, the company encouraged a sympathetic

31 *Report*, 393.

32 The only witness to bringing specific examples of price gouging was John McLaughlin [*ibid.*, 262-85]. All the others spoke only in generalities.

33 *Ibid.*, 443.

34 *Ibid.*, 444.

understanding of indigenous traditions, yet fostered the adoption of European customs when suitable. The most valuable servant was one "who, by proper means and humane attention, and attempts to civilise the Indian, established an influence with the Indians."³⁵ To prove his point, he cited the fortieth standing rule of the fur trade:

That the Indians be treated with kindness and indulgence, and mild and conciliatory means resorted to in order to encourage industry, repress vice, and inculcate morality; that the use of spirituous liquors be gradually discontinued in the very few districts in which it is yet indispensable; and that the Indians be liberally supplied with requisite necessities, particularly with articles of ammunition, whether they have the means of paying for it or not and that no gentleman in charge of a district or post be at liberty to alter or vary the standard or usual mode of trade with the Indians, except by special permission of council.³⁶

As the fortieth rule implied, the company's trade policy was based on a paternalistic system in which company executives assumed the Natives to be relatively immature in business, economic, and political acumen and thus required management and protection. Except in Canada and near the United States boundary — where there was competition — the company conducted the trade entirely on credit, exchanging fur for clothing, robes, blankets, traps, guns, and ammunition. In practice, this meant that the traders were perpetually in debt to the company, which, in itself, may not necessarily have been detrimental to the hunters and their families. While they may have accumulated significant, long-term debts, most appeared to have preferred the system. As Eleanor Blain has observed in the case of the Ojibwa, the company tried on several occasions to abandon the debt system because periodically it had to forgive unreasonably high debt loads. The Ojibwa, Blain notes, always rejected such overtures.³⁷

In somewhat legalistic terms, Governor George Simpson also explained that the company did not actually trade goods but "gave" them to the Natives and they repaid the company with fur.³⁸ Simpson's carefully drawn, legalistic distinction between trading and giving illustrated his paternalistic and often patronizing attitude. Since the giving of gifts had a long history among North America's aboriginal people and was an integral part of any commercial transaction,³⁹ the use of this concept showed that Simpson understood an ancient tradition, but it also demonstrated the power the company had over the hunters. By calling trade goods gifts, the company felt, for

35 Ibid., 342.

36 Ibid., 368. In a letter to the secretary of the board of governors, Simpson reiterated the company's paternalistic, yet self-centred policy. "Above all it is an object to secure the well-being and good-will of the natives, to encourage them to industry and to prevent the operation of those causes which in other countries have led to their degradation and the decrease of their numbers." This policy, Simpson believed, had won the company a respect which was necessary so a few men could govern and keep order in a large territory. The policy had also resulted in an increase in population in the northern regions of Rupert's Land and therefore more hunters, an increase in furs trapped and supplies bought. In sum, Simpson concluded, the relationship with the Natives went beyond trade: "We befriend and assist the native to the utmost of our ability; we come to their aid in every difficulty and emergency, we afford relief in times of sickness and want, we settle their quarrels and exercise a general guardianship over them." HBCA/PAM, A12/8, Simpson to Shepherd, 26 January 1857.

37 Eleanor M. Blain, "Dependency: Charles Bishop and the Northern Ojibwa," in Kerry Abel and Jean Friesen (eds.), *Aboriginal Resource Use in Canada: Historical and Legal Aspects* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1991), 101-2.

38 *Report*, 64, 81.

39 Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*, 196, argues that at various times the company attempted to abandon gift giving.

example, it need not differentiate among fur species and did not have to pay a premium for more highly valued furs. Simpson argued that "the Indian[s] would never understand our varying the prices of the fur according to the prices here [in London]," and that they would concentrate on the more valuable species and hunt them to extinction. Moreover, as former trader, John Rae, opined, "the Indian is so improvident that if he were paid in the spring he would waste everything before winter."⁴⁰ To what extent, one might ask, were Simpson and Rae's assumptions, that the aboriginal hunters could not appreciate the value of cash, any different than the Aborigines Protection Society's belief that they could not survive the onslaught of European culture?

Despite Simpson and Rae's paternalistic justifications for the credit system, some contemporary observers noted that Native hunters fully comprehended the concept of trading. Although they may not have adequately grasped the intricacies of the market and margins, they "understood the value of every skin they had, and they had in mind everything they wanted."⁴¹ They were "perfectly shrewd" in their dealings and knew their rights; they fathomed the concept of pricing and, if feasible, would go to the outpost which offered the best prices.⁴²

Modern historians confirm the contemporary evidence. Running through Arthur Ray's groundbreaking analysis of the fur trade in Rupert's Land is the theme that the Natives were active partners in the trade.⁴³ In a more specific way, Eleanor M. Blain suggests that the northern Ojibwa knew how to manipulate white traders into giving them better prices by shopping at various posts, coming back for more "essential" goods, and refusing to hunt for fur.⁴⁴ Similarly, John S. Milloy demonstrates compellingly that over generations the Plains Cree, as go-betweens, had developed complex trading relationships covering the Plains and had established a reputation as shrewd traders.⁴⁵

In the final analysis, however, by 1857, the impact of the fur trade on the lives of the aboriginal people of still unsettled Rupert's Land's may actually have been relatively slight. Governor Simpson testified that the company supplied only a small portion of the Natives' annual needs. He suggested that they did not require supplies for the summer and that even in winter their wants were limited. As hunters, they supplied most of their own food and made most of their own clothing out of fur and hides. Although he could provide no specific figures on the amount of goods traded to the Natives, he estimated that the company landed annually at York Factory, Moose, and East Main about £60,000 worth of British manufactures, such as blankets, fabrics, arms, ammunition, iron works, and axes. With about two-thirds of that amount designated as trade goods, Simpson estimated that the company distributed less than £1 per aboriginal person in Rupert's Land.⁴⁶ Even if his calculations were

40 *Report*, 35. See also the testimony by non-Hudson's Bay witnesses such as Sir J. Richardson, Colonel John Ffolliott Crofton, Sir George Back, Lieutenant-Colonel William Caldwell, and Richard King [*ibid.*, 150-69, 169-84, 184-90, 298-312, 312-20].

41 *Ibid.*, 37.

42 *Ibid.*, 282.

43 Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*.

44 Blain, "Dependency and the Northern Ojibwa," 93-105.

45 John S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy and War, 1790 to 1870* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988).

46 *Report*, 62-63, 81.

based on imprecise and high population figures, the logic of Simpson's argument is compelling.

Recent scholarship on this issue seems to suggest that Governor Simpson's assertion may have been simplistic. Most historians would agree that on a macro level, and over several centuries, the fur trade contributed to altered tribal boundaries, to shifted seasonal migrations, and to specialized economic activities. Arthur Ray, for example, argues that today's aboriginal welfare syndrome has deep roots in fur trade history.⁴⁷ Hunting for commercial purposes encouraged Natives to concentrate on killing only certain species or to become traders only; it definitely altered their seasonal movements. Moreover, by the mid-nineteenth century, when game was becoming increasingly scarce, the Hudson's Bay Company had appropriated considerable control over food supplies in Rupert's Land. It made survival possible for its servants and many of its hunters in marginal areas by imposing sophisticated logistics on the territories, replete with fixed depots and rigid transportation schedules over set routes.⁴⁸ The company's labour policies, wage schedules, and trade standards, while they ensured comfortable profits, returned marginal benefits to the Natives and made credit and frequent gratuities essential to the welfare of the hunters and their families. Without losing sight of human agency in this complex process, the fur trade had been instrumental in significant economic and demographic changes in the territories. Moreover, as Calvin Martin has so eloquently argued, fur traders, along with missionaries and disease, contributed to the erosion of indigenous religious beliefs and values and thus profoundly affected Native culture and society.⁴⁹

Case studies, focussing on limited regions and time periods, suggest that alterations in economic patterns and social institutions were subtle, multifarious, and geographical.⁵⁰ Using the Cree of eastern James Bay, for example, Toby Morantz argues for a continuous time line from pre-contact to at least the end of the nineteenth century in which few significant changes occurred in the economic and social life of her subjects. Her inland Natives, who did not specialize in hunting for the fur trade and retained their reliance on local food sources, did not materially change their subsistence lifestyle and social relationships. "In sum, given the state of historical knowledge now available for the James Bay region, one would have to favour characterizing Cree society as one of cultural and social continuity reaching back into pre-European times," Morantz writes, "The contact period and the early fur trade did not drastically or even dramatically alter their overall cultural and social configurations."⁵¹ Similarly, Shepard Krech challenges the idea that the fur trade had a great

47 Arthur Ray, "Periodic Shortages, Native Welfare, and the Hudson's Bay Company 1670-1930," in Shepard Krech (ed.), *The Subarctic Fur Trade: Native Social and Economic Adaptations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 1-20.

48 In 1849, for example, Sir George Simpson increased inventories of supplies and ordered that in addition to regular supplies, the London office ship enough goods so that the company would have on hand at its York and Norway House depots a one-year reserve on all essential items, two-thirds of a year on those that could be curtailed without serious inconvenience, and one-half on those that traders and Natives could do without in an emergency. In addition, Simpson insisted that the country have a two-year supply of ammunition and twine. See, HBCA/PAM, A12/4, Simpson to Barclay, 30 June 1849.

49 Martin, *Keepers of the Game*.

50 Shepard Krech (ed.), *Indians, Animals, and the Fur Trade: A Critique of Keepers of the Game* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981) offers a series of articles that question Calvin Martin's conclusions.

51 Toby Morantz, "Old Texts, Old Questions: Another Look at the Issue of Continuity and the Early Fur-Trade Period," *Canadian Historical Review* 73 (June 1992): 185. See also Morantz, "Economic and Social Accommodations of the James Bay Inlanders to the Fur Trade," in Krech, *The Subarctic Fur Trade*,

impact on the Kutchin who lived along the lower Mackenzie, Yukon, and Porcupine Rivers. Although the fur trade integrated them into a global fur market, they did not become subjugated to this intruding economic system, they did not lose their economic autonomy, nor did they depend on the Hudson's Bay Company for their survival. In fact, Krech argues that the European traders could not likely have maintained their northern posts without help from aboriginal hunters, fishers, labourers, and interpreters. Conversely, while the Kutchin desired European commodities because they were technologically superior to their own indigenous tools, they did not purchase food items. The fur trade, then, changed their material culture; it also instigated some hostilities with neighbouring tribes, turned some Natives into go-betweens, and killed many through imported diseases. But, Krech concludes, the Kutchin continued to hunt and fish as they did before the white trader had reached their grounds and they traded fur only as an extra activity. In fact, many of them did not participate in the trade at all.⁵² Obviously, the Cree, the Kutchin, and, as Eleanor Blain argues convincingly, the northern Ojibwa, were quite capable of living for years without acquiring European trade goods.⁵³

Contemporary observers, however, doubted whether the indigenous hunters could live indefinitely without European commodities. Both sides of the debate before the committee assumed that the Natives had become dependent upon white traders and could not survive without their products. Sir George Back, a member of two Franklin expeditions and one on his own in 1833 to 1835, thought the Natives could no longer live without the Hudson's Bay Company. Before the arrival of the company, "they were accustomed to rely upon their own exertions; they used the bow and arrow; they knew nothing of fire-arms, and consequently were self-dependent," Back claimed, "and being self-dependent, they maintained themselves at that time."⁵⁴ Once the Natives abandoned their traditional way of life, he insisted, they lost their ability to survive in the wilderness. Should the company leave the territories, they would die, he concluded. Sir J. Richardson, an equally inveterate traveller through the territories early in the century, agreed entirely and told the committee that the Natives could no longer live without ammunition. Lastly, Lieutenant-Colonel William Caldwell, Governor of Assiniboia until 1855, went further than Back and Richardson, arguing that the Natives had enjoyed the protection of the company's rule:

I think that the management of the Company, with the Indians, has been the means of keeping them longer than would have been the case if they had been

55-79; and Paul C. Thistle, *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1986). In Krech, *The Subarctic Fur Trade*, Carol M. Judd, "Sakie, Esquawenoe, and the Foundation of a Dual-Native Tradition at Moose Factory," 81-97, and Charles A. Bishop, "The First Century: Adaptive Changes Among Western James Bay Cree Between the Early Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," 21-53 argue that at certain times and upon various people the trade did have a significant impact.

52 Shepard Krech, "The Early Fur Trade in the Northwestern Subarctic: The Kutchin and the Trade in Beads," in Bruce G. Trigger, Toby Morantz, Louise Dechêne (eds.), *"Le Castor fait Tout": Selected Papers of the Fifth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1985* (Montréal: La Société historique du lac Saint-Louis, 1987). In an earlier article, "The Trade of the Slavey and Dogrib at Fort Simpson in the Early Nineteenth Century," in Krech, *The Subarctic Fur Trade*, 142, Krech had cautioned, "The effects of the trade surely varied from one individual to the next, from one band to another, and one ethnic group to the next." Yet, he maintained the thesis that the trade at Fort Simpson had not led to significant dependency.

53 Blaine, "Dependency and the Northern Ojibwa."

54 *Report*, 188.

without the aid and assistance of the Company. If there had been free trade, if the trade had been thrown open, I think that there would not have been the number of Indians which they at present have in the territory.⁵⁵

Simpson's testimony also raised the question as to what extent his paternalism translated into fair prices and justice for the indigenous hunters. Under the credit system, the standard of exchange was the beaver skin; in other words, prices, set down in written scales, were expressed in terms of beaver skins; one blanket, for example, being equivalent to four beaver skins. The markup for company employees anywhere in the territories ranged from one-third to one half, depending upon rank. For white customers it approached 50 percent, but for the Natives it varied from 200 to 300 percent depending on location, local conditions, and transportation costs.⁵⁶ John Rae thought the company's prices reasonable and recalled that company servants could sell Hudson's Bay Company merchandise privately in the United States and still make a profit. He also explained that even though the tariff in the Mackenzie district was marked up relatively high to pay for transportation cost, it was still less than half of Russian prices. But even Rae could not escape the paternalism inherent in the fur trade by suggesting that the Natives had sufficient to clothe themselves, and, in fact, admitted that one time he had not lowered prices because they were so well dressed. Moreover, Rae, like many of the other witnesses, skirted the just price issue by concentrating on fair treatment instead. Hudson's Bay Company traders were respectable men who treated the Natives kindly and with humanity, said one witness; they "are men of simple primitive habits, leading the most hardy lives; generally speaking, contented, doing their duty faithfully to their employers, and in many instances taking sincere interest in the welfare of the Indians around them, and doing all they can to benefit them, but the Indian is a very difficult subject."⁵⁷ Of course, as John Rae admitted, company officers had considerable self-interest for treating their customers fairly. "It is their object both to clothe the Indians well and to give them plenty of ammunition, because the better they are fed, and the better they are clothed, the better they will hunt."⁵⁸ In sum, Rae thought that the aboriginal people had benefited from the commercial relationship because they received supplies from England, including "the luxury of tobacco."⁵⁹

If the Hudson's Bay Company, with the support of friendly witnesses, could argue with some conviction that it treated its aboriginal partners with a measure of fairness, it had greater difficulty persuading the commissioners that starvation was not becoming a common occurrence in Rupert's Land. The most alarmist evidence of widespread hunger came from the Aborigines Protection Society. Citing Alexander Simpson, a disgruntled chief trader formerly posted in Hawaii,⁶⁰ the society claimed that Rupert's Land contained vast areas in which the means of subsistence was scanty. From Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg, for example, Simpson wrote that Natives found it difficult to survive in the winter. To the north of Canada game was more abundant, but subsistence was hard and famine frequent. Fish was scarce, according to Simpson, and, during the winter, inhabitants of the region had to survive entirely

55 Ibid., 311.

56 Ibid. 34, 393.

57 Ibid., 25-26.

58 Ibid., 29.

59 Ibid., 187.

60 Galbraith, *Hudson's Bay Company*, 319.

on rabbit, considered a wretched food. When that supply failed, the people were in real trouble. In fact, he had heard of parents who killed and ate their children. Gradually, he warned, famine was extending over the entire territory, except the Prairies. He and the Aborigines Protection Society doubted that the Hudson's Bay Company could avert imminent disaster because they thought the cause of hunger was the decline in animals rather than the company's abuses.⁶¹ Nevertheless, some witnesses accused the company of being niggardly with supplies.⁶²

Company officials dismissed the allegations of widespread starvation. They asserted that game was still plentiful in certain regions and that elsewhere the Natives could supplement their diets with agriculture or in extreme cases by relief supplies. Governor Simpson emphatically denied suggestions of extensive hunger among the Naskapi in Labrador specifically and dismissed the claims of cannibalism of children as totally exaggerated. He similarly discounted the stories of A.G.B. Ballatyne, a strong opponent of the company, that starving people north of the Arctic Circle were eating beaver skins. Ballatyne had never been north of the circle, Simpson snorted, and years ago, while he served as his secretary, "his judgment was [not] very sound upon many points."⁶³ When questioned further, Simpson denied any specific recollections of cannibalism but admitted there might have been some cases in the Athabasca district in the recent past.

Contemporary witnesses defended Simpson's contention that food supplies in Rupert's Land were still sufficient. Bishop David Anderson believed that the Prairies still supported an abundance of buffalo, fish, and fowl most of the year. He did note, however, that food shortages occurred because the Plains Natives did not store any food. "They are improvident as regards the rest of the year," he observed.⁶⁴ He also reminded the committee that wherever Natives adopted farming methods their food supplies were plentiful and their populations increased, but where they refused, they suffered hunger and declining numbers. John McLaughlin believed that the isolated cases of starvation were a consequence of the monopoly. In fact, he believed hunger would be worse if it was not for smuggling and illicit trading among the Natives. It provided supplemental income for many.⁶⁵

Current historiography seems to support Simpson's assertion that starvation was relatively rare and limited to isolated regions. Although she does not provide a quantitative answer to the question, Mary Black-Rogers argues that historians must

61 *Report*, 443.

62 George Gladman, a long-time company employee, charged that shortages of supplies, usually caused by local managers, were not uncommon and that the Natives frequently suffered hunger. "The treatment of the Indians, whether humane or otherwise, depends entirely on the officers in charge of posts," Gladman noted, "his liberality governed by his outfit" [*ibid.*, 393].

63 *Ibid.*, 85. Privately, Simpson explained to the board of governors that he believed the company had managed the Natives well, that the period since 1821 was characterized by the absence of crime, the gradual development and knowledge of trade, and an increase in the aboriginal population. More specifically, he argued that the Natives and environment had benefited from the fur trade. Through careful preservation of the resource, the company had been able to increase the fur trade, a fact of great benefit to the indigenous hunters as they were better able to purchase clothing, ammunition, and other necessities. In those rare cases of scarcity, the company could supply relief to all Indians at times of scarcity. But that happened only as a "result of the proverbial improvidence of the Indian race" or illness. HBCA/PAM, A12/8, Simpson to Shepherd, 26 January 1857.

64 *Ibid.*, 242.

65 *Ibid.*, 264.

place their analysis of fur trade terminology in a cultural context. She identifies three levels for the word “starving”: a literal usage implying an actual shortage of food and going without eating; a technical function suggesting that the search for scarce food did not allow time for fur hunting; and a manipulative meaning where starving included “metaphorical, deliberately ambiguous, or untruthful statements.”⁶⁶ More specifically, Irene M. Spry suggests that, despite occasional shortages and incidents of begging, food resources were relatively plentiful until the end of the 1860s.⁶⁷ Inferentially, however, both arguments imply that food shortages, even if sporadic, were a reality and were probably becoming increasingly frequent by the late 1850s. Quite possibly, then, the supply of game was diminishing in some parts of the territories; and that fact alone would place the aboriginal nations in a weak position when the agricultural frontier approached Rupert’s Land.

If the extent of the company’s responsibility for the decline of animal populations in the North-West remains an open question, its role in the relatively peaceful character of the territories went unchallenged. All witnesses agreed that the company and its employees had minimized animosity among the inhabitants of Rupert’s Land and kept crime to insignificant levels. Under the company’s protection, some noted, it was possible to travel anywhere in the region safely and securely.⁶⁸ This was true in part because company officials, they agreed, were respected and they supervised their employees closely.⁶⁹ To be sure, their task was eased by two important conditions. In the first place, they admitted, the sparseness of the white population was crucial. Hudson’s Bay personnel comprised a small minority scattered across a vast territory. On the one hand, they did not crowd the indigenous people out of traditional hunting grounds; on the other hand, their survival and their ability to maintain a profitable trade rested entirely on their ability to create a friendly, symbiotic alliance with the overwhelmingly larger Native population. As Governor Simpson put it, “They look to us for their supplies, and we study their comfort and convenience as much as possible; we assist each other.”⁷⁰ At the same time, this amicable relationship rested on the peaceful character of the northern tribes.⁷¹ Pointing to the incessant warfare among indigenous peoples and newcomers in the United States, most witnesses concurred that the congenial nature of the northern, woodland Natives was a prime factor in the peaceful relationship.

If the company officials took credit for the tranquillity in the northern woodlands, they could not do so for the Plains. A few of the witnesses admitted that the Blackfoot were a particularly fierce and warlike tribe and did on occasion cause trouble.⁷² This testimony presented almost as an aside, like so much of the evidence about the Native peoples, *greatly oversimplified a complex reality. In fact, since the beginning of the* decade, intricate cultural and economic pressures, largely caused by the fur and

66 Mary Black-Rogers, “‘Starving’ and Survival in the Subarctic Fur Trade: A Case for Contextual Semantics,” in Trigger, Morantz and Dechêne, *Le Castor Fait Tout*, 618-49.

67 Irene M. Spry, “Aboriginal Resource Use in the Nineteenth Century in the Great Plains of Modern Canada,” in Abel and Friesen, *Aboriginal Resource Use in Canada*, 81-84.

68 *Report*, 22.

69 *Ibid.*, 59.

70 *Ibid.*, 92. The governor neglected to mention that without the provisions of pemmican and meat which the Natives supplied, the Hudson’s Bay could not operate as efficiently in the North-West as it did.

71 *Ibid.*, 284.

72 *Ibid.*, 22-23, 117, 284.

buffalo hide trade, were shifting traditional hunting ground boundaries. The decline of all animal populations, but especially the buffalo, impelled a slow but relentless westward movement of all the indigenous Plains hunters, including the Métis. While the Cree were pushing into Blackfoot territory, the latter were squeezing tribes to their west and north and fighting back the invaders from the east. Violent clashes over control of the resource became increasingly common and, in fact, in the spring of 1857 a marauding band of young Cree stole a large number of Blackfoot horses from an encampment on the South Saskatchewan River. In the resultant chase the Blackfoot killed seventeen of the Cree.⁷³

Most committee members and witnesses, however, were interested primarily in the incidence of natural resources in Rupert's Land and the extent of arable land; they paid only scant attention to the history of the Native peoples. They were ready to accept the evidence that conditions in Rupert's Land were comparatively stable and somewhat satisfactory. Moreover, any concerns the committee may have had were with the future of the Native peoples rather than their past. And, with the supply of game diminishing, the outlook was bleak. "What is to become of the natives when their lands can no longer furnish the means of subsistence?" the Aborigines Protection Society asked.⁷⁴ Others worried that the company's sudden withdrawal, whether voluntary or forced, would spell disaster for all inhabitants of the territories.⁷⁵ In either case, everyone recognized that the inevitable settlement of the arable sections of the North-West would likely bring considerable hardship to the Natives and significant changes to their society. The problem, all agreed, was how to prepare the aboriginal people for these far-reaching transformations. But, because all the witnesses and committee members were white and no Natives were asked or expected to testify, the answer inevitably was one-sided and simplistic: the civilization of the Natives.

Equally clear was that no one expected the Hudson's Bay Company to play a significant role in this civilization process. To be sure, some critics charged the company for having failed its obligations to educate and Christianize the Natives. Rev. Griffith Owen Corbett, a Church of England clergyman at St. Andrew's, the largest parish in Red River, from 1852 to 1855, observed that the Hudson's Bay Company had actively opposed the establishment of aboriginal settlements and missionary activities. He told the commissioners that he had tried to establish a mission at Portage la Prairie but the bishop had informed him that the company objected because it wanted to restrict settlement to the Red River region, thinking it too difficult to govern people outside that community.⁷⁶ Corbett did admit, however, that the Hudson's Bay Company had recently withdrawn its objections. Nevertheless, he believed that company policies still practically prohibited the establishment of missions even if Natives

73 Milloy, *The Plains Cree*, 103-10; Robert A. Church, "Blackfeet and Fur Traders: Storm on the Northwestern Plains," *Journal of the West* 36 (April 1997): 79-84.

74 *Report*, 443.

75 Alexander Isbister argued that the denser populations of both white and Native people in the United States was a crucial factor in that country's more violent history. Beginning with relatively sparse populations, government could carefully control the rate of settlement and avoid wars between Indians and whites [*ibid.*, 122].

76 Lieutenant-Colonel William Caldwell, commander of a pensioner corps in Red River, confirmed that he had discouraged the establishment of a mission at Portage la Prairie because it would be outside his jurisdiction [*ibid.*, 309]. See also the testimony of Alexander Isbister and the letter of an aboriginal chief, called Peguis [*ibid.*, 120-37, 353-6, and 445].

desired them, citing an aborted mission at Fort Alexander, near Lake Winnipeg, where the company ordered a missionary to confine himself to the fort and “not to civilise and evangelise the heathen; not to form a locality or permanent dwelling for the Indians.” When asked, Corbett charged that the company opposed settlement because “if missionaries and missionary settlements increase, chief factors and fur trading posts must decrease.”⁷⁷

Meanwhile, Sir George Simpson vigorously denied the charge that the Hudson’s Bay Company had thwarted “the settlement of Amerindians as agricultural labourers or as a Christian community.”⁷⁸ The Natives could occupy any piece of land [except that which had been purchased by Lord Selkirk] without payment to the company, he added gratuitously; moreover, the company had encouraged agricultural pursuits at its Rainy Lake, Cumberland, Swan River, and Norway House posts as well as at various missions by supplying the Natives with tools and seed potatoes and grain. “We are exceedingly anxious that ... [the Natives] should give their attention to agriculture,”⁷⁹ he asserted, quickly appending that the conspicuous lack of success was due not to company policy but to the aboriginal people’s distinct distaste for field labour. As for the criticism that the company discouraged the task of instructing the Natives in European ways, Simpson argued that “as a Company [we are not] charged with the education or civilization” of the Natives.⁸⁰ Yet, the company had voluntarily assisted the Church Missionary Society because “we are anxious to improve the condition of the Indians.”⁸¹ It had built schools at York Factory, Norway House, and other posts; it had provided free passage to missionaries, their goods, and their school supplies; and, it had paid salaries for some schoolmasters and missionaries. The evident lack of success was due not to company recalcitrance but to the isolation of the posts, the sparse populations, and the reluctance of parents to leave their children at the schools.

Despite the differing opinions on the amount of effort the Hudson’s Bay Company had put into the education and evangelization of the aboriginal nations, the members of the Select Committee could sense the elements of a consensus in the testimony placed before them. All parties agreed that if the Hudson’s Bay Company were forced to withdraw from the territories quickly or if the region were opened to free trade completely, the Native people would not be able to cope with the resultant settlement process. A rapid, unchecked flow of white colonists, they believed, would be devastating and likely lead to bloody confrontations. “If you take a very large extent of territory, and by doing so take away the employment which the Hudson’s Bay at present give to tribes of Indians, and leave them in want,” John Ross, a Canadian representative warned, not without some self-interest, “they may perhaps find means of helping themselves, and they may come down upon the border settlements.”⁸² Instead, many

77 Ibid., 139. The attitude of the company to missionaries was ambivalent. While it supported a number of missionaries of various faiths with free transportation and board and room, it exerted a measure of control over their expansion and actively opposed competition among the faiths. See, for only one example, Gerald M. Hutchinson, Introduction and Notes, *The Rundle Journals, 1840-1848* (Calgary: Alberta Records Publication Board, Historical Society of Alberta, 1977), xiv-xvi.

78 Ibid., 63.

79 Ibid., 58.

80 Ibid., 105.

81 Ibid., 64.

82 Ibid., 285.

of the witnesses agreed that the company and the aboriginal hunters should withdraw gradually and in stages from the fertile southern plains and river valleys to the northern forests. John McLaughlin, who expressed perhaps the most advanced of the apartheid schemes, suggested that settlement would extend no further than the northern limits of arable land. "There is a certain portion of the country which, of course, is so inhospitable that it would be impossible to colonize or cultivate it," McLaughlin declared. The far northern reaches of the territories should remain as a fur trade preserve he thought, but he too accepted the notion that once the Natives were prepared they should gradually move back into the newly settled areas and be integrated into the new society. In time, he believed, "the Indians ... might be all drawn down to the more habitable portions as they are such a race that they might amalgamate with others."⁸³ Judiciously handled and carefully controlled, the gradual settlement of the North-West, most witnesses echoed McLaughlin, could occur without the bloodshed witnessed in the United States. "Any settlement from Canada must come up naturally, and very gradually indeed."⁸⁴

Meanwhile, the opinion surfaced, that church and state should devise policies to prepare the remaining Natives for the encroaching white society. As Bishop David Anderson put it, there should be programs "which might at once be sound and salutary, and in accordance with the spirit of the present age; such as may tend to the good of all committed to ... [the company's] care, whether Europeans or Indian; their temporal advantages in the present world, and their higher interests as immortal beings, to be trained for another and an unending state."⁸⁵ Although his experience in Red River caused him to believe that the "brown man can resist the encroachments of the white man," Anderson hoped "that the Indian may be raised in the interval before ... civilization sweeps westward, as it must."⁸⁶ By "raised" he meant not merely Christianizing but also integrating the aboriginal peoples into the advancing western European, mid-nineteenth-century lifestyle. With rhetorical hyperbole, Anderson painted a Utopian vision. "The perfection of work is a European and an Indian together," he suggested, but added with some feelings of superiority "that there should be the European head, and the Indian as the mouthpiece."⁸⁷ In other words, despite all their humanitarian compassion, the advocates of settlement believed that there was no room in the proposed agrarian society for what they perceived to be an inferior savage way of life. The Native inhabitants of Rupert's Land had to accommodate themselves to the new order.

Bishop Anderson's opinion reflected current belief among many expansionists, missionaries, and humanitarians that the indigenous inhabitants of the region should be educated into accepting the newcomer's culture because the agrarian settlement of the Plains was inevitable and desirable. Not only was the civilization of the Natives appropriate but as witnesses were eager to demonstrate, it was possible. Some noted that limited progress in training Natives to be farmers had been achieved already in Red River, at The Pas, and at some posts like Norway House and Moose Factory. The Aborigines Protection Society forwarded a letter from a Peguis, a Saulteaux chief, as proof of the "Indian capacity" to adapt to the agrarian way of life. The society's

83 Ibid., 275.

84 Ibid., 285.

85 Ibid., 239.

86 Ibid., 245.

87 Ibid., 235.

secretary observed that the Red River settlement was a "remarkable example of the improvement of which the Indian race is capable."⁸⁸ In addition to becoming farmers, one Native had become a harness maker and another a tinsmith. Moreover, the secretary noted with obvious pride, the fact that in a settlement with considerable poverty there was not a locked door was clear proof that the moral standards of the Natives could also be improved.

When pressed, those witnesses before the committee who had lived or travelled in the North-West were not as sanguine in their hopes for farm training. John Rae, for example, very much approved "of settling and attempting to civilise" the aboriginal people but observed that agricultural settlements "would be beneficial" only as a supplement to the winter's hunt. The Natives will "never become great farmers" because of their fondness for hunting and their opposition to "civilised life," he thought.⁸⁹ At best, then, cultivation would be an additional income to the fur trade, only complementing it "because the time when ... [the Natives] would be employed in the settlements is not the time when they hunt."⁹⁰ Rae, therefore, did not expect the Natives to become full-time farmers.

Similarly, Rev. Griffith Corbett also expressed some reservations. Even though he thought that those who had turned to farming had improved their lives remarkably, converting an entire independent, hunting people into a sedentary agrarian society would be extremely difficult. Corbett noted that while some Indian tribes had been agriculturalists in the past, they had never grown sufficient vegetables to sustain themselves nor would they ever want to live on vegetables. By way of illustration, he noted that most Chippewas and many Natives at Red River inhabited fertile lands and had received training and assistance; nevertheless, the vast majority refused to adopt agrarian lifestyles, preferring to fish, hunt, and harvest wild rice. When asked, Corbett could not explain why some settlements were successful and others not but speculated that those Natives who were most independent of the Hudson's Bay, who had plenty of fish and rice and who did not need ammunition and clothing, were least likely to adopt farming. On the other hand, he predicted that the Swampy and Saskatchewan Cree were the most likely to accept "habits of civilised life" because they had long been dependent upon the company and needed their supplies. Thus, he reasoned, they would be more ready to accept "civilisation."⁹¹

The debate, whether or not the indigenous hunting society could adapt to an agricultural economy, was framed in the common nineteenth-century assumption that North Americans had a mandate to colonize the continent by cultivating the soil, or more specifically, that the Prairies were an expansive, non-productive wilderness that needed to be civilized through agriculture. As Frieda Knobloch has argued, agriculture, as its name implied, meant bringing culture to the wilderness.⁹² In Red River, for example, Alexander Ross, a prominent leader, felt a divine calling to toil in

88 Ibid., 444.

89 Ibid., 30, 42.

90 Ibid., 41.

91 The assumption that the Natives were unwilling to take up farming, held by many authorities even to the present, is challenged by Sarah Carter, "'We Must Farm to Enable us to Live': The Plains Cree and Agriculture to 1900," in R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (eds.), *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995).

92 Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5.

the fields as the vanguard of civilization in a vast wasteland and he criticized those Métis who preferred "indolence to industry, and their own roving habits to agricultural or other pursuits of civilized life."⁹³ In other words, farming was a superior economic endeavour to hunting because it was part of a civilizing process. More to the point, Rupert's Land's Native hunters had to become part of this civilizing strategy. All the participants in the Select Committee's hearings — none of whom were Native — agreed on this point; they only quarrelled about timing and procedures.

Turning the aboriginal citizens of the North-West into agriculturalists, all witnesses agreed, was only one aspect of the required civilizing process. The strategy also required a general education, which in turn was closely connected with evangelization. In other words, the Select Committee, its speakers and listeners, enamoured by the perceived glory of mid-nineteenth-century British culture, sought to spread its mentality to the farthest reaches of the empire.⁹⁴ Swept by the euphoria of the economic and social progress that the industrial revolution apparently had brought, Victorian Britons wanted to propagate their successful achievements across the globe. The free-trade doctrine that accompanied industrialization was not simply about the unfettered exchange of commodities, it also included the unhampered transmission of ideas, the message that Britain's industrial, technological, and Christian culture was the pinnacle of human civilization.⁹⁵ From this supposedly lofty perspective, the notion that the vast North American interior should be preserved to sustain an aboriginal way of life and yield only furs instead of agricultural crops, minerals and precious metals seemed absurd. Humans were destined to dominate the wilderness, to civilize it, to remove its natural cover and inhabitants, and to prepare its soil for profitable, cultivated crops. The Natives, according to this view, were savages: like the wilderness, they needed to be civilized; they had to be separated from unredeemed nature and inducted into the marvels of the industrializing, urbanizing civilization.⁹⁶

Working from this model, the criticism directed against the Hudson's Bay Company was more than a tirade against an outdated monopolistic enterprise; it considered the company to be a representative of an outdated culture, an obsolete way of life. Various critics charged that the Hudson's Bay Company had not only failed to inculcate modern European ideals into North America's aboriginal societies but had actively opposed settlement and evangelization.⁹⁷ The latter charge was contradicted by church officials who noted that the company provided adequate subsidies to missionary efforts.⁹⁸ In fact, Bishop David Anderson believed that the company's "disposition latterly has been to do much more for the Indians in carrying out civilization"; but he was quick to point out, "of course the direct object of the

93 Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State...* (1856; Minneapolis, 1957), 194; see also 78-80, 84-85, 98-99, 193-6, 203-23.

94 Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870* (New Haven, 1957).

95 John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): 1-15. This seminal article has launched a furious debate among historians. A dated, but useful, introduction to the discussion is Roger Louis, *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976). An excellent overview of Britain's cultural expansionism is Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century 1815-1914*, 31-36. As its title implies, Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* argues that disease, plants, and animals acted as shock troops preparing the way of Europe's invasion of North America and other New World continents.

96 Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*; Turner, *Beyond Geography*.

97 See testimony of Alexander Isbister and John McLaughlin, *Report*, 127 and 264.

98 *Report*, 157-58, 231, and 237.

Company would not be to colonise or to settle."⁹⁹ By the dictates of its corporate mandate, its activities would not be conducive to settlement, nor to "the civilisation and improvement of the inhabitants."¹⁰⁰

Bishop Anderson's position, set between the extremes taken by the supporters and detractors of the Hudson's Bay Company, exemplified the well-intentioned, yet patronizing position of many Victorian contemporaries. He suggested that without the company the Natives would not have advanced much "beyond that state of nature which may have existed for a very lengthened period."¹⁰¹ By using the phrase, "state of nature," Anderson alluded to more than the sinful condition of the aboriginal tribes. He also implied that they were an integral part of the wilderness, which was still untamed and uncivilized. Both the landscape and its indigenous inhabitants needed to be redeemed, that is, to be civilized. Speaking from his European-centred platform, the bishop firmly believed in the objective of turning the territory into a rural English countryside and he wanted the aboriginal inhabitants to be a part of this British society. "My own desire and endeavour would be to raise and rescue them as a people, and to prepare them to be able to stem the current when civilisation, as it gradually must, spreads westward from Canada over this mighty territory."¹⁰² Although he reluctantly admitted that the saying "the brown population dies out as the white population advances" was likely true, he optimistically hoped that "the experiment [of Anglican missions] may yet save the Indian."¹⁰³ Bishop Anderson, therefore, was concerned not only with the souls of the Natives, but also their society, culture, and life.

Ever the optimist, Bishop Anderson observed with some satisfaction that the church had already experienced some success in this endeavour, particularly in Red River. There, he claimed, many Natives "have been induced [by missionaries] to adopt settled and industrious habits" and some of their settlements were like English parishes with little farms and all the comforts of life. Obviously, Anderson added with regret, in more northern, isolated regions, the harsh climate, low temperatures, and poor soil were less likely to yield satisfactory results. Moreover, seasonal migrations would also make missionary work more difficult. Nevertheless, he concluded, wherever Native people had settled in communities and converted to Christianity, the results had been dramatic. "Wherever they are Christianised and settled," he observed, the population had increased. Even as hunters, Christian aboriginal people "socially, as regards their position in life ... are much improved"; their moral and social character had advanced from their "primitive state."¹⁰⁴ They had become like Victorian families, conducting family worship twice daily and attending church regularly.¹⁰⁵ Noting with considerable pride that two of the missionaries under his jurisdiction were Natives and that another was a Métis, Bishop Anderson, therefore,

99 Ibid., 240.

100 Ibid., 237.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid., 237-38.

103 Ibid., 246.

104 Ibid., 240.

105 Lieutenant-Colonel William Caldwell supported Anderson's view. He was very pleased with the progress of the aboriginal mission in Red River. He complimented the Natives on their mode of Sunday worship observances, adding that "they were as devotional in appearance as any congregation I ever was in" [ibid., 309].

believed that civilizing the Native through missionary activity had already met with considerable success.

Anderson's optimistic assessment received support from Peguis, the Saulteaux chief who in 1817 had signed a treaty with Lord Selkirk supposedly releasing title to a large parcel of land straddling the Red River. Subsequently, Peguis assisted the early colonist and even settled some of his people at Netley Creek on the river. Eventually, however, he came to realize that the treaty favoured the newcomers and not the indigenous people and he claimed that the four Native signatories to the treaty did not have the authority to extinguish aboriginal title to the land.¹⁰⁶ Peguis' evidence, obtained indirectly through a letter attached to the Aborigines Protection Society's written submission, was the only statement from an aboriginal inhabitant of the North-West.

Unwittingly, the sole voice for several First Nations, Peguis condemned the fur traders for robbing him and his fellow Natives and keeping them poor; but he praised the settlers and missionaries for teaching them agricultural techniques and the values of Christianity. On the one hand, the colonists had taught them how to cultivate the soil and raise cattle; on the other hand, the missionaries had shown them how to pray, to be industrious, honest, sober, and truthful; they had explicated the truth and peace of Christ. Many of his fellows, he explained, wanted to practice this religious ideal. While his commendation of farmers and missionaries may have been obsequious and fawning, it may also have been driven by a pragmatic trait and a dawning understanding of the implications of European settlement. He and his fellow Natives were not against further settlement, Peguis insisted, but before more white settlers would be permitted to take lands, a fair and mutually advantageous treaty must be negotiated. The indigenous inhabitants of the territories expected to be paid for the alienated lands. Moreover, they asked that the imperial government appoint a fair-minded person as their advocate in the bargaining. Since the Select Committee had not bothered to invite any Natives to express their opinions and feelings, Peguis' letter was but a footnote, a passing reminder that the aboriginal people understood the value of the land which they inhabited.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, it indicated a willingness to adapt to changing conditions and adopt an agricultural economy.

Canadian expansionists, who had their eyes on the enormous northwestern plains and contiguous forest, assured the committee that they understood that the Natives would have to be compensated for the loss of their property. William Henry Draper, chief justice of the Common Pleas of Upper Canada and official Canadian delegate, assured the committee that the aboriginal people would have to be recompensed. "I do not think they can be plundered with impunity."¹⁰⁸ Although Draper appealed to the British tradition of treating North America's aboriginal nations as diplomatic equals, he did not mention that more recently his province had departed on a different course. While the Select Committee was sitting, the colonial legislature passed the Gradual Civilization Act with the express purpose of Christianizing and civilizing the Natives by taking them from their communal reserves and placing them on smaller individual, freehold plots near white communities. Here they supposedly

106 W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 55, 72; Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of the Founding Peoples from Earliest Time* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 213, 239.

107 *Report*, 446.

108 *Ibid.*, 225.

could observe at firsthand industrious, civilized life. For the first time, however, legislation allowed the government to erase any legal distinctions between Native and non-Native peoples, to appropriate reserve lands, to intervene in tribal affairs, and to actively promote the integration of Natives into white society. In short, the 1857 Canadian legislation, based on the belief that aboriginal leaders were strengthening rather than eroding indigenous culture, legalized a new policy of forced civilization and assimilation.¹⁰⁹ Although the act did not in any way anticipate the future annexation of Rupert's Land, it did indicate the civilizing and assimilating intentions of government policy.

The expansionists also believed that violence could be prevented by a gradualist approach. John McLaughlin, for example, believed that Canada could avoid the violence experienced in the United States with proper planning. Suggesting that northern Natives were not as warlike and easily insulted as those in the United States, McLaughlin believed that proper legislation and the establishment of law and order could mitigate disputes and prevent violence.¹¹⁰ Similarly, supposing that the fur trade had kept the Natives in helpless dependency upon the company for many goods, like guns, ammunition, and blankets, Justice Draper argued that the Hudson's Bay Company could not be ejected suddenly nor replaced easily. Returning to the segregationist argument, he proposed that settlement be limited to the southern, arable territories and the fur trade be preserved in the northern regions. Separation, he believed, would prevent the violence seen in the United States; it would ensure peaceful relations with the Indians.¹¹¹ Bishop Anderson, who believed that the greatest obstacle to the assimilation of the Native was alcohol, also advocated secluding the Natives in the northern territories while permitting free trade and settlement in the south. The aboriginal peoples were threatened, he opined simplistically, not because "a more energetic, a more civilized, and in fact, a more intellectual man would come in competition with him," but because the Native, as a less civilized being, was more subject to the temptation of alcohol. In other words, until liquor could be eliminated entirely from the North-West and until the indigenous tribes could be elevated to the bishop's British standards, he hoped the government would limit settlement to the southern portion of the territories and allow the Natives to live a protected existence in the northern forests.¹¹²

Company officials took a realistic attitude, which did not differ much from that of the bishop. Having lived among the Natives in the North-West for decades, their perspective was perhaps less sanguine. It would not be the fur trade that would destroy aboriginal culture Edward Ellice suggested, but the "the march of civilisation."¹¹³ Thus, he and Governor Simpson recommended the preservation of the indigenous way of life as long as possible. Simpson, an investor in modern transportation technologies and conscious of the rapid advance of the railway across the North American continent, understood that the settlement of the southern plains and Saskatchewan

109 John S. Milloy, "The Early Indian Acts: Developmental Strategy and Constitutional Change," in Ian A.L. Getty and Antoine S. Lussier (eds.), *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), 58-9; John L. Tobias, "Protection, Civilization, Assimilation: An Outline History of Canada's Indian Policy," in *ibid.*, 42.

110 *Report*, 285.

111 *Ibid.*, 216, 227-28.

112 *Ibid.*, 252-54.

113 *Ibid.*, 342.

River valley was inevitable. Based on past experience, he argued, the result would be intemperance and disease for the First Nations and "little or no progress in education or civilisation." In other words, like Bishop Anderson, he had no confidence in the Natives' ability to adapt to new circumstances. But, for him personally, the issue was simply a business proposition. Limited by its mandate to conduct a profitable fur trade, the Hudson's Bay Company was able to administer a sparsely peopled fur empire but was not equipped to govern a large, heavily populated colony. A private company, he was quick to point out, did not have the financial resources nor bureaucratic experience to direct a colonizing effort. Thus, he had no objections to Canada annexing the southern, apparently arable, portion of Rupert's Land and providing for its settlement and administration, granted the Hudson's Bay Company received compensation for the loss of trade and territory. "I think there would be no objection to it, provided the Company were satisfied," he stated tersely but reminded the committee that the shareholders "consider themselves lords of the soil, proprietors of the country, in their own special territory."¹¹⁴ In the end, the company was interested only in sufficient compensation for the land and business it would be asked to surrender and the retention of a trading monopoly in the remaining regions.

As far as the aboriginal people were concerned, Simpson privately argued that if the British government's objective was "the preservation of the Indian race," then he believed "that it can only be attained by preserving them from the contaminating influence of bad example and the use of ardent spirits, and by allowing them to retain their primitive habits, following the occupations for which alone they appear to be suited by nature — that of hunters."¹¹⁵ Personally, he believed that assimilation was a dubious prospect. Whenever they had integrated among settlers, the Natives had "cast aside their simple habits of life," he suggested, "and follow[ed] the, by no means beneficial example of whites and half-castes." To save the aboriginal way of life, Simpson recommended that the imperial government limit settlement to the southern portion of Rupert's Land and set aside a northern fur reserve, where the company could continue a profitable business and meanwhile maintain what it considered to be the traditional way of life of the original inhabitants of the territories. This did not mean, said Simpson, that the Natives were "to be left in a state of ignorance and barbarism." Indeed, it was the European's "duty to instruct and civilize them." Simpson's approach, as condescending in its supposed superiority as the other witnesses, was not, however, as thorough-going as that of the expansionists. "Without attempting to force upon them white man's habits and feelings," company employees, with the help of missionaries must prepare the Natives for the impending change by "a gradual development of their mental faculties, naturally almost dormant." But, the intent of this education would not be to alter their basic lifestyles, but to cope with the new technological culture. Still, this corporate manager, personally involved in the exploitation of the territories' resources, be they fur or minerals, understood the virtual inevitability of the settlement and development process and he was but proposing a temporary reprieve for an old way of life.

In the end, the Select Committee accepted the obvious compromise. It decided that it was in the imperial interest that, when it was ready, Canada should be permitted to annex all the lands it needed for colonization. At that time, the imperial government should make equitable arrangements with the Hudson's Bay Company and

114 Ibid., 87. See also HBCA/PAM, A7/2, Shepherd to Labouchere, 18 July 1857.

115 HBCA/PAM, A12/8, Simpson to Shepherd, 26 January 1857.

Canada for the surrender of the designated lands. Meanwhile, the committee recommended that in the interim it was important to maintain law and order in the region, to curb the liquor trade, and to stop "the indiscriminate destruction of the more valuable fur-bearing animals"; therefore, the company should retain its exclusive trading rights. This, according to the committee, was best "to the prosperity and contentment of our North American fellow-subjects; and especially in the mode which is best calculated to add strength to the great colony of Canada."¹¹⁶ The committee also believed that action in the North-West must be quick and decisive to demonstrate to the United States that Great Britain had a determined interest in the region. "The rapid extension of settlement which had been going on in so remarkable a manner to the south of the American boundary line, renders it a matter of great importance to establish within our own territory a counterpoise favourable to British interests, and modelled upon British institutions."¹¹⁷ To the committee, then, the settlement of the southern portion of the North-West was imperative and the Native peoples had to be fitted into the mould.

The Select Committee's recommendation and the Hudson's Bay Company's ready acquiescence demonstrated how closely all the participants in the process had followed the same score. While every witness and member had played their distinctive and at times discordant parts, they had all rendered the same theme. Rupert's Land was a vast, isolated and untamed wilderness. Modern scientific knowledge, consummated in current farming and transportation technologies, would enable European newcomers to turn the still hostile wasteland into a productive landscape. The great expanse, which so far had only spawned fur, could generate much more valuable cash crops. The unorganized territories must be subdivided, fenced, and hedged in; they must nourish millions of people. Trees must be planted and bogs drained, minerals mined, and soils cultivated.

Viewed from this perspective, the original human inhabitants of the northern expanse were but components of an uncivilized nature. They, like the wilderness, needed to be redeemed, that is civilized. That assumption was predicated on the notion that the First Nations, living in Rupert's Land, were a homogenous people with a simple, undiversified culture. The testimony before the Select Committee overlooked the complexity of the many different nations that lived on the prairies and in the woodlands. It did not recognize that the Native peoples were more than savage hunters, but that their movements also accorded with the ripening of fruits and the availability of tubers, and, that in some cases, tribes engaged in agriculture.¹¹⁸ Since the aboriginal nations had no written history, the witnesses disregarded the rich diplomatic and cultural relations between the various tribes; since they did not share the capitalist ideology, the testimony ignored the trade and commerce among the indigenous peoples that pre-dated the arrival of the white fur traders. Most importantly, the participants in the committee's hearings did not recognize that the Natives were active participants in the history of Rupert's Land. Thus they resorted to a paternalism, which despite its arguably good and humanitarian intentions, sought to manage and control the future of the original citizens. In short, the committee failed to accept them as equals, as people whose participation in the development of the North-West was important.

¹¹⁶ *Report*, xi.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹¹⁸ Carter, "Plains Cree and Agriculture," 447.

Despite its obvious flaws, the committee's report is an important document because it mirrored the Victorian attitude to aboriginal people and because it was an omen of what was in store for Rupert's Land's first citizens. The directors of the Hudson's Bay Company, like many of their critics, may not have fully appreciated the rich cultural heritage of Rupert's Land's Native people, but they, and particularly their North American governor, understood the expansionist ideology. As shrewd, literate businesspeople, they were active participants in their emerging technological society. Closely connected to government circles, they were fully cognizant of the new realities and of imperial ambitions. As they explained to the colonial secretary,

We are convinced, notwithstanding the hostile agitation of parties in Canada against our Company, that our prosperity is not opposed to that of Canada, neither is the advancement of Canadian interests incompatible with ours, but, on the contrary, that in all matters of essential importance our joint interests are mutual and identical. It requires but a small degree of knowledge of the existing state of British North America, and more particularly of the policy which guides the adjoining Government of the United States to perceive that the honor and reputation of Great Britain and the interests of her subjects can be best preserved by the cordial union of all those in that locality who are bound to it by the ties of birth and affection.¹¹⁹

This appeal to an imperialist duty, that equated a commercial mandate with an implied ecological as well as territorial mission, did not preclude a strong dedication to trade and profit. Although the Hudson's Bay Company was ready to accept the recommendations of the Select Committee, it expected to be compensated for the loss of its territories. Provided Canada paid appropriate compensation, the company was prepared to withdraw from the arable portions of their enormous holdings and leave the civilization of that portion of the wilderness to settlers and the state. Meanwhile government, school, and church could attend to the refinement of the aboriginal nations. Thus the company and the Canadian government of the day accepted the report of the Select Committee as a prelude, an articulation of a theme that would dominate the impending settlement of western Canada.

119 HBCA/PAM, A8/8, Shepherd to Labouchere, 16 March 1857.