

# York Factory as a Native Community: Public History Research, Commemoration and the Challenge to Interpretation

Robert Coutts

**ABSTRACT.** The interpretation of aboriginal history at fur-trade sites has posed a challenge to heritage agencies in Canada. Research by the Canadian Parks Service into the long association of Native groups (primarily the Cree) with the Hudson's Bay Company post at York Factory focusses on economic subsistence and daily life, kinship patterns, and the development of a permanent and seasonal Native labour force. Such themes as conflict, adaptation, and marginalization are critical to an understanding of the role of aboriginal people in the fur trade, and can help heritage agencies move beyond the idealized and simplified interpretations of the past that we still see at many historic fur-trade sites.

**SOMMAIRE.** L'interprétation de l'histoire autochtone dans les endroits où il y avait traite de fourrure représente un défi pour les organismes canadiens qui s'occupent du patrimoine. Les recherches effectuées par le Service des parcs canadiens dans la longue association entre les groupes autochtones — surtout les Cris — et le comptoir de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson à York Factory se concentrent sur la subsistance économique et la vie de tous les jours, les liens de parenté et le développement d'une main d'œuvre autochtone permanente et saisonnière. Pour comprendre le rôle des Autochtones dans la traite de la fourrure, il faut aborder les thèmes du conflit, de l'adaptation et de la marginalisation. Cela peut aider les organismes responsables du patrimoine à aller au delà des interprétations idéalisées et simplifiées du passé que l'on peut encore voir sur le site de nombreux comptoirs historiques.

In recent decades the interpretation of the role of aboriginal people in the fur trade has presented a challenge to both scholars and public heritage agencies. In the early 1970s the historiography of the North American fur trade underwent a significant shift in focus. Since that time scholarship has moved well beyond the "trade and empire" approach that characterized most early texts, as we witness the proliferation of historical and ethno-historical studies that increasingly concentrate upon the Native peoples who represented the most integral part of the fur-extraction economy.<sup>1</sup> This shift in scholarly emphasis has been reflected in attempts by public heritage agencies in Canada to redirect interpretation at historic fur-trade sites, even if the results of these initiatives have often been uneven. York Factory, a fur-trade post and distribution centre operated by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) for almost three centuries, and now a national historic site, is representative of this changing direction.<sup>2</sup> Ethnohistorical research sponsored by the Canadian Parks Service on the history of this important settlement is attempting to shed light upon the lives of the Native people who traded and worked at York over its long history.

The interpretation of fur-trade sites like York Factory, and the role of Indian traders and labourers, has challenged the way public heritage agencies attempt to communicate Native history to the public. For many North Americans, exposure to the history of the fur trade, and the role of Native peoples, has not come through scholarly texts or through the more accessible "popular" histories, but from visits to the many fur-trade posts that have been commemorated, restored and interpreted throughout the continent. For example, visitation at just three of the better-known sites — Old Fort William, Lower Fort Garry and Fort Vancouver — totalled almost half a million people in 1990. With increasing emphasis in North America

upon heritage conservation and "heritage tourism" (also largely a phenomenon of the 1970s), the nature and scope of the research carried out by agencies such as the Canadian Parks Service has undergone a marked change. For public historians, or those historians working for government or other publicly funded agencies, Native themes have played an increasingly critical role in informing the types of research that have been conducted at commemorated fur-trade sites. While historic resource inventories, material culture studies and structural histories, or the analysis of the "built environment," remain an integral component of public history research, there is a growing trend toward the sponsorship of ethnohistorical studies that have an important multidisciplinary focus. Perspectives from ethnology and archaeology, from historical linguistics, from physical and cultural geography, as well as from oral traditions, have begun to be incorporated by public historians into the analysis of the evolution of Native communities at fur-trade settlements.

Unlike a large proportion of the historical studies of the role of aboriginal peoples in the fur trade, which often adopt a broad-brush approach in a wide regional setting, public history or ethnohistory research can focus upon specific communities and how cultural, political and economic structures, as well as a community's self-defined integrative mechanisms, changed over time. These considerations are largely the result of heritage programming. Interpretative programs, like local histories, respond to site-specific needs and have helped to establish the context and direction for government-sponsored research. Within this mandate, it is the public historian who makes the necessary links between community history, defined both temporally and geographically, and a wider body of knowledge and understanding.

Researching and interpreting the history of aboriginal peoples at specific fur-trade posts — posts that were established by European commercial concerns and continued under their management — remains problematic. The study of Native groups who traded, worked and lived at, or in the vicinity of, a post like York Factory can be limiting in terms of the wider applicability of the research findings, as each post was in many ways a unique community of individuals.<sup>3</sup> Site-specific research can restrict the types of general conclusions that may emerge regarding the lives of Indian peoples in the "historic" period. Alternatively, by ignoring the internal dynamics of the many intercultural communities that characterized fur-trade life in the West, research and commemoration are often limited to the search for what some heritage planners call "pure" (or pre-contact) Native sites that risk categorizing aboriginal societies according to the ethnocentric concept of "pre-history," in effect making them part of the "natural" environment. At York Factory, ethnohistorians are able to study one such intercultural settlement where Indians and Europeans, who had come together for economic reasons (the exploitation of resources), over time created a unique and multilayered community in the fur trade.

Like other fur-trade posts in the West, however, York was not a society



based upon economic partnership. An imperialist ethic governed the establishment and continued existence of the factory as the HBC pursued its policy of commercial hegemony in the region. This particular point is central to the way the fur trade, as an historical phenomenon, can be interpreted to the public. At trade sites like York Factory heritage agencies have the opportunity to focus upon the critical themes that have defined the relationship between Natives and newcomers, or such topics as colonialism, conflict, acculturation and economic marginalization.

### Researching York Factory

The study of York Factory as a Native community can focus upon economic and social life in the fur trade as it evolved at one site over a considerable period of time. Established by the HBC in 1684 at the mouth of the Hayes River on the west coast of Hudson Bay, York Factory operated continuously until 1957 as, variously, a trading post, supply depot, manufacturing centre and district headquarters for the fur trade of the Northwest. Native peoples, primarily the Swampy Cree of the Hudson Bay lowlands, were closely associated with the post for almost three centuries.

With such a lengthy period of Native-white contact in the fur trade it is not surprising that York Factory presents the researcher with an abundant documentary record, although it is one that is written almost exclusively from a Euro-Canadian perspective. This record provides a unique opportunity to study the development of a micro-economy and community. And while York came to be known before 1870 as "the most respectable place in the Territory" largely because, as Michael Payne has suggested, its society and European work force resembled, perhaps more than other posts of the period, the society of pre-industrial Britain, life at the factory also reflected the development of an intercultural community with both European and Native roots.<sup>4</sup> Over almost three centuries of Native-white contact at York the Cree played an increasingly critical role in the day-to-day operation of the post, eventually moving "inside the palisades" as provisioners, traders and labourers. Despite their changing status, however, Native people at the factory continued to be subordinate and exploited throughout the historic period. For a number of reasons, therefore, York Factory is an important historic site, not simply for its institutional or administrative role in the fur trade, but for the opportunity it affords the public historian to shift his gaze away from the Company's business office and trading store to the day-to-day life of the nearby encampment.

In doing so the public historian is confronted with many of the same difficulties that face historians and ethnohistorians who work in the academy. Public history, like all historical writing, is a process of selection which for a variety of reasons elevates certain parts of the story and submerges others. Heritage agencies frequently select images for presentation which they feel will clearly resonate with the public, often simplifying a particular version of events to the point where it becomes unintelligible and devoid of any real significance. If York Factory represents a remarkable

opportunity to focus ethnohistorical research upon such themes as conflict, adaptation and marginalization, it presents an even greater challenge for interpretation, both in the way the material is approached and made sense of, and how it is presented to the general public.

### **York Factory: A Brief History**

As one of the oldest HBC posts in North America, York Factory was the site of some of the earliest encounters between aboriginal people and European traders. The post is situated near the mouth of the Hayes River on a flat, marshy peninsula on the western shore of Hudson Bay. Twelve years after the founding of the HBC in 1670, traders from England, France and New England established a series of short-lived posts in the area of the Hayes and Nelson rivers in hopes of attracting Native traders from the interior. In 1684 John Abraham of the HBC relocated his Company's post to the north bank of the Hayes, calling the new establishment York Fort. (It was renamed York Factory in the eighteenth century.) The post attracted the trade of the Cree, Ojibwa, Assiniboine and more distant Gros Ventre (and occasionally a few other groups) who each year made the long journey to the Bay from the interior. Over the next three decades there was intense competition between rival Euro-North American traders for trade supremacy in the region. As expanding mercantile concerns in Europe sought new areas for resource exploitation, it soon became apparent that whoever controlled the mouth of the Hayes and Nelson waterways controlled the fur resources of the western interior. York changed hands a number of times in this period. Between 1697 and 1713 it was under French control and was renamed "Fort Bourbon," but was ceded back to England in 1713 with the Treaty of Utrecht.

York's location at the confluence of two major inland waterways, the Hayes and Nelson rivers, provided the factory with a large and abundant hinterland. By 1730 it had become the HBC's most important post on the Bay, far surpassing the volume of trade at such centres as Severn, Fort Albany, Moose Factory and Fort Prince of Wales at the mouth of the Churchill River.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of the Company's bayside network consolidated the economic intermediary role of the Cree and Assiniboine who bartered European manufactured goods such as guns, knives, kettles and tobacco at marked-up prices to Native groups living farther inland. Competition from the interior, first from the French, and after 1763 from rival Anglo-owned concerns operating out of Montréal, significantly reduced the volume and quality of furs traded at York Factory. In response, the HBC established a number of interior posts, beginning in 1774 with Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan River. Later competition with the North West Company accelerated the construction of a network of inland forts, which reached the prime fur-trapping areas of the Athabasca and Mackenzie regions by the time the two companies amalgamated 1821.

With the establishment of inland posts, York Factory assumed a new role as a storage, manufacturing and distribution centre in the HBC's Northern



Department, the Company's administrative designation for its fur-trading districts west of the Albany region and east of the Rocky Mountains. The site soon became the centre of a vast, tightly scheduled system of supply that began with the arrival of the annual ships from England. Large warehouses, including the still extant depot building, were constructed to house the many tons of furs, supplies and trade goods awaiting shipment to either England or the interior. As well, York was the centre of considerable artisanal activity, manufacturing a variety of articles for use in the local and inland trade. With this expanded role came new administrative and record-keeping functions, as Company clerks and accountants processed the large volume of paperwork that accompanied the daily transactions of a large entrepôt.

By the 1850s York Factory had reached its peak, with over fifty buildings located at the site and a permanent work force of some fifty-one labourers, tradespeople, clerks and officers. Two decades later, however, the post was in decline. Changes to the HBC's transport network saw an ever-increasing volume of goods shipped to the posts of the Northwest via American railways, steamboats and Red River carts along a southern supply line that headquartered at Fort Garry in Red River. By 1872, York Factory was supplying only those posts located below Norway House, including Oxford House, Nelson House, Severn, Trout Lake, Split Lake and Churchill. Later in the same decade, the factory's accounting functions and transport responsibilities were removed to Upper Fort Garry. In 1911 York was made the headquarters of the newly created Nelson River District, but lost this role to Churchill with the completion of the Hudson Bay Railway in 1929.<sup>6</sup> York soon declined to the status of a regional trading post, and the small Native communities at nearby Ten Shilling and French creeks were eventually abandoned in favour of settlement at the mission property or the Company's 118-acre reserve at the post itself. When the factory was finally closed by the HBC in 1957, the Swampy Cree inhabitants of the area left for more distant communities at York Landing, Split Lake and Shamattawa.

Throughout this transformation from trading post to entrepôt, distribution point and district headquarters, York Factory was an important part of the lives of the Swampy Cree and mixed-blood peoples of northern Manitoba. At the factory many assumed roles as traders, provisioners, wage labourers and consumers, while helping to forge a post society that possessed unique cultural characteristics as well as its own social and economic patterns and structures.

Prior to the move inland by the HBC in 1774, a small band of coastal Cree who inhabited the area around York Factory specialized in supplying the post with a variety of "country" goods and services. The small furs, provisions, country technology and services of the hunters, guides, packers and couriers, of what came to be known as the "Home-Guard" Cree were indispensable to the profitability of the fur trade at York. From a description left by Andrew Graham, who served at York for varying lengths of time between 1753 and 1772, the seasonal round of existence of the Home-Guard, both at and away from the post, was perhaps the most enduring

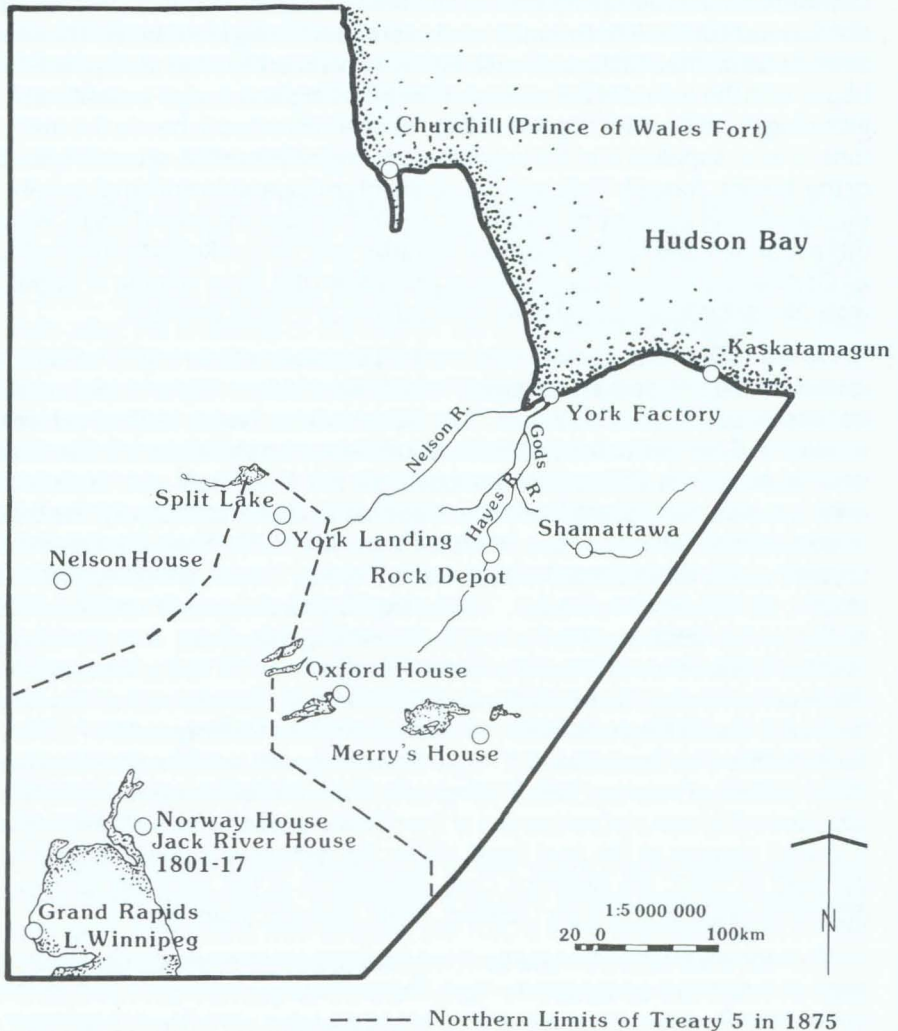


Figure 1. Fur-trade posts and communities in northern Manitoba.

feature of their relationship with the factory.<sup>7</sup> The approximately 200 men, women and children who at that time were associated with York Factory pursued a variety of activities — the caribou and goose hunts and the winter trapping and summer voyaging — which were largely dictated by the seasons of the year.<sup>8</sup> By the nineteenth century, and more particularly the second half of that century, the role of the Home-Guard at York had changed. Traditionally hunters and provision suppliers (at least for part of the year, while at other times engaging in subsistence activities outside of the fur trade<sup>9</sup>), a number of Cree families assumed new roles at the post,



primarily as wage labourers fulfilling many of the daily tasks that had once been assigned exclusively to European servants. As either part-time or permanent servants, they were engaged in a wide variety of activities such as voyaging on the York boats, loading and unloading goods and furs at ship time, cutting wood, packing fur, repairing and constructing inland boats and post buildings, whaling and rendering blubber, fashioning fish nets, assisting the post tradesmen, and transporting goods between the various storage facilities at the site.

At the same time that York was evolving as a community of Native labourers and their families, the development of associated institutions, such as the establishment of a Christian church and school was taking place. (While a missionary had first visited York as early as 1820, the first permanent mission at the site was not established until the 1850s. A church and school serviced the local population at York until the post closed in 1957.) When the HBC began to restrict its recruitment of Europeans as permanent servants for work at posts such as York Factory, it relied more heavily upon the labour services of the Cree. As part-time labourers, however, the York Factory Cree occupied the lowest levels of the labour hierarchy at the post in accordance with the racial division of labour that characterized much of fur-trade mercantilism throughout the Northwest. Nearby seasonal communities at French Creek and Kaskatamagan, as well as the development of a more permanent settlement at the post itself in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were indicative of York's changing composition from a Company town of largely European permanent servants and officers to a Native community of provisioners, and permanent and seasonal labourers.

While general ethnohistorical research on the role of subarctic Homeguard populations remains useful,<sup>10</sup> the study of a specific population and how it changed over time can yield a great deal of information on such topics as patterns of kinship and economic subsistence. Ascertaining the size and demographic composition of the population associated with York Factory, as well as determining who in fact constituted the local "Home-Guard," is central to this research. Also important is the question of whether the term "Home-Guard" identified a discrete subgroup whose membership remained largely continuous and unchanging or referred instead to a population where affiliation fluctuated according to the specific needs and priorities of the local people. Social organization, including patterns of marriage and kinship and the evolution of an indigenous mixed-blood population (of largely Swampy Cree/Scots-Orkney ancestry), as well as the nature of family structures, economic and political relations, the multi-layered relationships between local people and Euro-Canadian traders, the impact of missionaries and government officials, the effect of changing HBC policy and the rise of nativistic movements, are all crucial aspects in the study of fur-trade communities. The fairly rapid decline of York Factory after 1875 as the HBC's major entrepôt in Rupert's Land, and the extension into the area of Canadian sovereignty, with its police, treaties and government bureaucracy are also key parts of the story.<sup>11</sup> Declining fur trade and related



Figure 2. Cree labourers, hunters and family members, along with other post servants, at York Factory, 1880. The Anglican Bishop John Horden is standing at centre. To his left is Chief Factor Joseph Fortescue and Mrs. Fortescue. Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

activities in the region, as well as York's relegation to the periphery of the political economy of the Canadian nation-state, form useful points of reference in tracing the disruptive shifts that occurred in the social and economic fabric of the region in the twentieth century.

### Ethnohistorical Sources

One of the major factors associated with ethnohistorical research on subarctic aboriginal peoples is the paucity of written records from non-European sources, at least for the pre-twentieth century. Consequently, written sources that recount life at York Factory are almost exclusively those of non-Native observers. To say that this record is extensive is an understatement. With tens of thousands of pages of archival records pertaining to its history, York was one of the most extensively documented fur-trade posts in Western Canada. Moreover, these records are largely continuous and cover the history of the factory from the late seventeenth century to its closing in the 1950s. By far the greatest repository of this written documentation is the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) in Winnipeg. While the York Factory fur-trade records dominate the written source material for the region, there is as well considerable information in the HBCA relating to Native peoples from a number of other posts in the York-Norway House-Severn triangle. These include records from posts at Flamborough House, Rock Depot, Shamattawa, Oxford House, Jack River House, Norway House, Merry's House and Fort Severn, among others. The York Factory materials in the HBCA include almost 200 post journals that, except for



thirty-eight years, run continuously from 1714 to 1939. Kept on a daily basis, these journals describe life at the post, and although they remain an essential source of information on Native people and the fur trade, their use is restricted by the writing skills and interests of the journal keepers, the proliferation of other types of documents, and perhaps most importantly the subjective biases of their Euro-Canadian writers.<sup>12</sup> A smaller number of what the Company called "District Reports" generally offer a more expansive commentary on Native trade at the post, although they cover, with notable gaps, only the nineteenth century. Apart from illustrating the Company's perspective on trade relationships, these reports also provide information on population, disease, welfare and the general state of trade in the region. The vast number of correspondence files that relate to York Factory, including both official and post correspondence, provide a wealth of information on HBC policy and Native responses, as well as observations on the movements of individuals and bands as they travelled within the region.<sup>13</sup>

As a document group, the York Factory financial records — roughly 2,000 account books covering the period from 1688 to the 1930s — provide an enormous amount of data on the economic life of the region. As fur-trade researchers began to realize in the 1970s, the HBC's detailed and assiduously kept financial records can offer significant insights into fur-trade life that are often less impressionistic than other types of records such as daily journals. While the eighteenth- and twentieth-century accounts are summarized, the nineteenth-century business records at York are extensive in keeping with the factory's enlarged role during that period as an administrative entrepôt. All sorts of documents, from provision books to Indian debt ledgers and work accounts, to expenditures for sick and destitute Natives and indent books (a listing of trade goods and European provisions required for a specific region), contain information and commentary on such topics as material culture, seasonal movements, trade practices, the provision of country produce, furs and labour services, kinship patterns, social organization and the ecological carrying capacity of the area.<sup>14</sup>

While York Factory's importance to the fur trade was in decline by the latter part of the nineteenth century, new types of records created at the post during that period contain useful data for ethnohistorical research. In 1910-11 administrative changes, such as the establishment of the "Fur Trade Department" and the founding of the Nelson River District with York as its headquarters, brought about such changes to record keeping as the creation of weekly district reports, information on Native welfare in the records of the Northern Stores Department, and a registry of Native births, marriages and deaths for the years 1925-32. As well, there are more detailed personnel records at this time that contain such data as place and date of birth for each employee at the factory, years of service, postings, position, marital status, number of children and salary. "Post Manuals" were also distributed at this time to individual managers, providing advice on such topics as "Treatment of Customers," "Trapping with Natives," "Relief" and "Prices to be Charged to Native Labourers."<sup>15</sup>

Aside from the journals, district reports, correspondence files and accounts, there are a variety of miscellaneous documents in the HBCA that contain considerable information on Native people at York. These include medical journals, survey notes, a few post censuses, and family related documents such as wills. There are also the published observations and correspondence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century residents like Andrew Graham, James Isham, Robert Ballantyne, and James and Letitia Hargrave.<sup>16</sup>

Critical, as well, to an understanding of some aspects of Native life at York, at least in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are the church and government records that pertain to the area. The records of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, deposited in the United Church Archives in Winnipeg, along with those of the Anglican Church held in the Keewatin Diocesan Office in Kenora and the Anglican Church Archives in Toronto, contain the journals, correspondence and private papers of the missionaries who visited or were stationed at York since the Reverend John West first travelled to the post in 1820. Government records are also extensive and useful for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The published and unpublished records of the Geological Survey of Canada — primarily the writings of James Tyrrell and Robert Bell who wrote extensively on the geology, flora, fauna and human occupation of the region — are significant. The records of the Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs, and the North West Mounted Police, located in the National Archives of Canada, are important sources of data on a great many aspects of aboriginal life at the post in the later period.

Visual materials are also significant sources for ethnohistorical detail. A selection of early Indian maps of the Hayes-Nelson region, along with the maps and notes left behind by HBC servants and surveyors like Phillip Turnor, Anthony Henday and David Thompson, provide two-dimensional observations on the geography, toponymy and trade logistics of the region.<sup>17</sup> Historical images of life at the post such as the paintings of James Isham, Edward Chappell and Peter Rindisbacher, the drawings of George Finley, or the photographs of Robert Bell, Joseph Tyrrell and A.V. Thomas are important visual documents of Native life in the region. This visual record provides evidence on many aspects of changing material culture and resource exploitation over three centuries, but exhibits many of the same subjective biases as does the written record and therefore must be used with caution.

The particular nature of the archival record for York Factory — that non-Natives or outsiders wrote about the daily lives of Native people — makes the oral tradition, or the transmission of the unwritten history of both literate and non-literate peoples, an indispensable part of any reconstruction of the past at York Factory. Over the years, anthropologists and folklorists have collected various oral accounts from the Swampy Cree of the York region.<sup>18</sup> Narratives of Native life in northern Manitoba written by Native people themselves date from a later period, or the decades following World War I.<sup>19</sup>



More recently, traditional Swampy Cree legends have been collected by the late Cree artist Jackson Beardy, and by Carl Ray and James Stevens.<sup>20</sup>

As part of the current ethnohistorical research being carried out on York Factory by Canadian Parks Service staff, an oral-history program was begun in 1989 to help in the reconstruction of daily life at the post, especially for the years after 1920. In the eight interviews carried out to date with both male and female Cree elders and former residents who now live in Churchill, York Landing, Split Lake and Norway House, subjects from a wide variety of areas were covered, including biographical data, relations with the HBC, travel and seasonal harvesting of game, work at the factory, family relations, and history, social life, education and religious activities.<sup>21</sup> If such subjects as religious beliefs and traditional cosmology are not extensively covered in the interviews, each does help to reconstruct family relationships and the daily lives of Native people at York at a time that saw profound changes in the region due to the economic marginalization of the peoples of the Canadian subarctic. It should be noted that the oral-history program was developed as part of the post-1920 historical record. It makes no pretense at revealing the deeper cultural traditions and values of the region's Native inhabitants.

Ultimately, material gathered from the York Factory oral-history program will be integrated with the project's archival findings leading to the production of a more balanced and vital portrayal of the history of Native society and economy in the York Factory region.<sup>22</sup> Project researchers hope to eventually publish portions of the York interviews for possible distribution to secondary students throughout the Manitoba school system.

### Writing Ethnohistory

As stated earlier, the problems confronting the public historian who carries out ethnohistorical research are much the same as those facing his academic counterparts. In the case of the York project the problems are not restricted merely to defining the spatial and cultural parameters of the study, or managing the large archival record, but relate to the larger debate surrounding the issues of biased sources, subjectivity and cultural ethnocentrism, which may consciously or unconsciously inform the way non-Native scholars write about Native peoples.

In exploring these issues it is perhaps useful to attempt a definition of the term ethnohistory as it has evolved over recent decades. Bruce Trigger describes ethnohistory as the use of documentary evidence and oral traditions to study changes in non-literate societies from about the time of earliest European contact.<sup>23</sup> Like Trigger, Kenneth Wylie argues that ethnohistory is not so much a subject as it is a methodology that borrows concepts from a number of other social sciences while employing the synchronic approach of the anthropologist and the diachronic focus of the historian.<sup>24</sup> A variety of data sources — oral traditions, written records, material culture, art and language — help the ethnohistorian to reconstruct an historical culture, or at least to provide a plausible representation of one. Adaptation

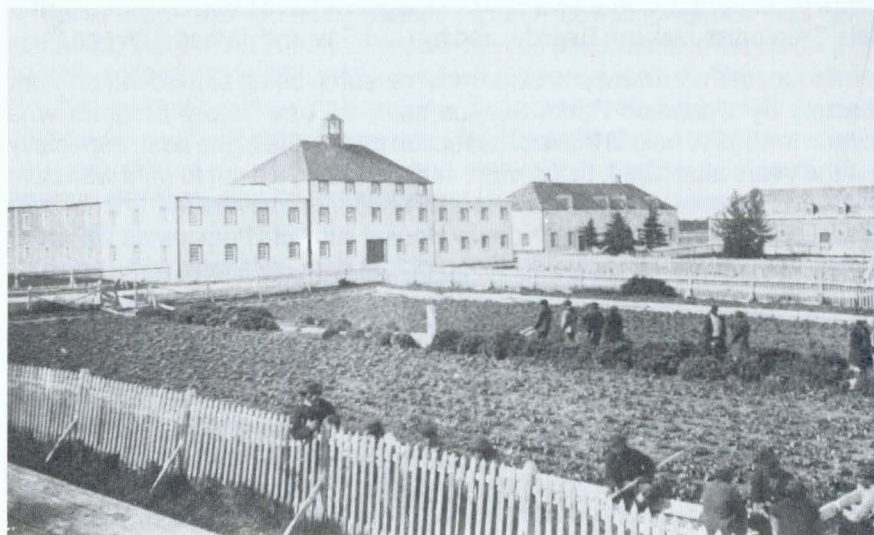


Figure 3. York Factory servants working at the post garden, 1878. Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Canada.

and change over time are key elements in this reconstruction. The “ethnographic present” quickly becomes history and like all writing on the past requires, if not resolution, at least the contextualization of both content and methodological and theoretical biases.<sup>25</sup> For many who call themselves ethnohistorians, writing the history of non-literate peoples, relying mainly upon written materials produced by an alien culture, is different from writing the history of a literate people who have abundantly documented their own activities. The biases inherent in the written record, it is argued, may be acknowledged in a general way by the ethnohistorian, but the particular form of these biases must be explored in detail; for instance, how the attitudes of HBC journal writers were backlit by the economics of Company policy and the deep-rooted expectations of the ahistorical “Other.” As Shepard Krech argues in a recent article, ethnohistory can in theory apply to the history of any “ethos” — whether “primitive” or not — and risks the ghettoization of the culturally distant “Other” if it does not broaden its focus and methodology to the study of not only groups and cultures, but processes as well.<sup>26</sup>

Like all historical writing, the ethnohistory of the fur trade must attempt to move beyond linear, progressivist perceptions of history to episodic approaches that see aboriginal involvement in the trade as pluralistic and diverse. Demythologizing our traditional views of the fur trade and the role of Native people in it would spur this process and help to bring about what James Clifford calls the “breakup of monological authority.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it would allow ethnohistorians to link the historical experiences of Native



people with such current issues as treaty land entitlements, aboriginal justice, political rights, racism and poverty.<sup>28</sup>

### Interpreting Historic Sites

For heritage agencies the forging of such links are a vital part of the way historic sites, including fur-trade sites, can be made relevant to the modern experience. The public historian, therefore, has the opportunity to participate directly in community policy making, bringing new approaches to traditional data sources while helping to establish alternative directions for public interpretation. It is an opportunity that few in the academic community will have. With public interpretation focussing on such topics as "life at the post" (as the realities of daily existence can link the visitor's own experience with those in the past), the public historian can engage in revisionist history at its most accessible level. At fur-trade sites such as York Factory, publicly sponsored inquiry into the documentary, oral and material culture record (a process that makes public history fundamentally interdisciplinary) can provide a multivocal and multidimensional interpretation that both educates visitors and challenges their preconceptions and stereotypes.

Unfortunately, historic sites, especially those that involve some aspect of Native history, frequently achieve the opposite. Monological interpretation can subtly or overtly re-create for visitors their own comfortable images of the past: the Native as noble (or neo-noble) savage, the primitive and menacing wild man, the friend and partner of the white trader and settler, or simply the Indian as part of the background, in effect an "offstage Greek chorus."<sup>29</sup> So as not to offend visitors, interpretation at historic sites is routinely static and "safe." Little thought is given to challenging visitors' preconceptions, or attempting to revise outdated, flawed or even racist interpretations. Instead, heritage agencies have the tendency to take a much less controversial path, offering, as Jennifer Brown has pointed out, "a rather sanitized and idealized version of the past."<sup>30</sup> In Canada, the invention of a fur-trade tradition and the images of the colourful voyageur and the heroic trader/explorer that have become a part of our popular mythology are typically reflected in the types of interpretive programming that prevail at commemorated fur-trade sites. In some cases the fault lies with research that is inadequate, naive, or poorly done, while in others the presentation of heritage programming is too often left to individuals with little appreciation for the complexities of historical traditions.

If the national historic site at York Factory is not the best example of this style of historical interpretation, largely because the site is fairly remote and comparatively low-key in its interpretation, many other restored or reconstructed fur-trade posts continue to reflect stereotypic images of the fur trade and Native people in their visitor programming. Fort William at Thunder Bay, Lower Fort Garry near Winnipeg, and Fort Michilimackinac in northern Michigan are three historic sites where meticulous research has gone into the restoration and furnishing of post buildings. Less attention, however, has been given at these sites to the form and content of the

animation presented to visitors, which at times is wooden, inaccurate, or exaggerated beyond recognition. One needs only to witness the "arrival of the Métis fur brigades," as re-enacted by staff at Fort Michilimackinac, to see almost every stereotype of the voyageur (a hard-drinking, womanizing brawler who loves to sing) come to life.

Idealized and simplified versions of the past embodied in sanitized visual displays, lifeless and homogenized restorations, and the pseudo-events of historical animation, are partly a response to the perception of the site visitor as "tourist" for whom entertainment takes precedence over understanding and diversion over education. The tourist (usually white and middle-class) within this paradigm remains not only physically separated from the events and processes depicted, but is intellectually and emotionally removed as well, in effect becoming a non-participant (or in the lexicon of modern bureaucracy a non-"stakeholder") who is unable to experience any shared sense of the past. In the realm of heritage tourism, visitation rates become crucial. Competition from tourist and entertainment facilities for dwindling leisure dollars (making heritage itself, as Jean Friesen has commented, an entertainment "commodity") has occurred as governments increasingly attempt to measure the worth of historic sites by economic yardsticks, pressing heritage to "pay its own way."<sup>31</sup> For government "regional integration" — in part the economic spinoffs created within a local community by the creation of an historic site — at times seems as important as the site's historical significance.

The commoditization of culture, including Native culture, is a by-product of this heritage/tourism entente. Where anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz define culture as an integrated system of meanings by which the nature of reality is established and maintained,<sup>32</sup> economists and planners, as Davydd Greenwood suggests, view culture as a "come-on," a "natural resource" or a "service."<sup>33</sup> Cultures, especially "traditional" cultures, provide tourists with the "local colour" that is often the product of mass media. At fur-trade sites costumed animators "play Indian" (a phenomenon that may be traced to centuries-old European expectations for the "savage Indianness" of Native North Americans) in order to provide the visitor with a service — a "glimpse into the past," a costumed drama, or simply entertainment.<sup>34</sup> However, as Greenwood argues, the commoditization of culture (or "culture by the pound"), which assumes that tourists have a proprietary relationship with genuine or ingenuine cultural manifestations, is a violation of cultural rights and can rob a people of the very meanings by which they organize their lives.<sup>35</sup>

This difficulty in seeing aboriginal people beyond their traditional historical experience, as having a past but no present (or future), has made it difficult for heritage agencies to commemorate and interpret adequately the evolving relationship between Natives and newcomers. If many of the standard general texts of Canadian historiography refuse to integrate Native history into our national histories and continue to restrict their coverage of aboriginal themes to the obligatory early chapter — just after landforms,





Figure 4. Alex Chapman and family at York Factory, early 1930s. Abel Chapman (the young boy standing at the extreme left) was recently interviewed as part of the York Factory oral history. Photo courtesy of John Ingram.

flora and fauna — heritage commemoration can still talk about a “Native period,” presumably one that has now ended.<sup>36</sup>

But if heritage agencies have in recent years begun to commit increased resources to commemorating and interpreting Native history, they have at the same time shifted their gaze northward beyond the prairie and subarctic peoples who participated, and continue to participate, in a fur-trapping economy. There are a number of reasons for this geographic change in focus, including political considerations, sovereignty issues, inadequate commemorative coverage of traditional Inuit and Dene cultures, and a feeling in heritage circles that “we have done the fur trade.” There is as well, I believe, an attraction to the North as “wilderness” and the perception of the Arctic and its indigenous peoples as virtually “untouched” by contact with whites: a kind of acculturation frontier where Native people, according to popular belief, have lived until very recently in much the same fashion as their ancestors. Like the early twentieth-century travellers Ernest Thompson Seton and the musical ethnographer Christian Leden, who embarked on his pilgrimage to the Arctic in 1913 because he wanted to see the “real” North

before it disappeared (and was disappointed to find the Keewatin Inuit "too civilized" because of their contacts with Euro-Canadians),<sup>37</sup> heritage agencies strive to protect and commemorate the traditional sites of Inuit culture before they are lost. While prehistoric Arctic settlements, as well as thousand-year old religious and ceremonial sites, are critical to establishing the link between modern Native societies and their pasts, so too are the "contact" sites that have had such profound impacts upon the evolution of Native cultures and histories.

At York Factory, for instance, commemoration has traditionally centred on the Euro-Canadian side of the equation, leaving little room for exploring the daily lives and economies of aboriginal peoples, especially for the years after 1870. The reasons for this are at best vague but might relate to the view that the far North has more exotic appeal for heritage agencies than does northern Manitoba. According to this viewpoint traditional culture (however that is defined) has been lost there, as today the northern part of the province represents for some little more than a hinterland for resource exploitation or a marginal region of poverty and social problems. Moreover, fur-trade sites like York Factory usually have a thematically identified period of "historical significance," which generally refers to the years when a large number of whites lived at the post. Later themes associated with the region, such as the process of dispossession of the York Factory Cree, are accorded less significance and have less priority for research and interpretation. But it is precisely the recognition and interpretation of this process which is crucial in relating the past to the present in helping us to understand the historical context for the issues that are of concern to modern indigenous peoples.

To address these questions heritage agencies must listen to the contemporary views of aboriginal people concerning their own past, opening a dialogue which empowers them to define the commemorative frameworks and hermeneutic models that reflect their own experiences. To some extent this process has already begun. Increased emphasis upon consultative processes, upon ethnohistorical and community-based research (such as the work currently being carried out by the Canadian Parks Service in the Yukon and Northwest Territories), and the move toward potential cost-sharing partnerships for historic site development, are opening up new directions for the commemoration of Native history in Canada. Whether these initiatives constitute a genuine sharing of power, however, remains to be seen, for in this regard government has a long way to go.

By admitting parallel histories at York Factory we might better understand the issues of conflict, economic marginalization, continuity and change as they affected the Cree of northern Manitoba. Through the focussing of our research on one particular fur-trade site (within a broader comparative context) we might succeed in establishing a link between the remembered past and the modern experience. This link, it is hoped, can help to move the interpretation of the historical community at York beyond the cardboard stereotypes that too often characterize public interpretation



at historic fur-trade sites. York Factory represents an opportunity to present a different paradigm, one that views the fur trade in a new and more critical light and one that might aid in the process of making Native history truly a part of our national history.

### NOTES

1. This change in focus was perhaps most readily apparent in the publication of such texts as Arthur Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Arthur Ray and Donald Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1977); Abraham Rotstein, "Trade and Politics: An Institutional Approach," *The Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1972); and Carol Judd and Arthur Ray, eds., *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).
2. York Factory was designated a national historic site in 1936 by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. The site's original designation was based upon its crucial role in the economic and military struggle between France and England for control of the Hudson Bay fur trade in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.
3. For a discussion on this point see Michael Payne, "Fort Churchill, 1821-1900: An Outpost Community in the Fur Trade," *Manitoba History* 20 (Autumn 1990): 2-15.
4. Michael Payne, *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory: Everyday life in Hudson's Bay Company Service, York Factory, 1788 to 1870* (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites, Canadian Parks Service, 1989), 158.
5. The volume of trade at York peaked at approximately 42,000 Made Beaver (MB) in 1730, compared with just 8,000 MB at Fort Churchill, 11,000 MB at Albany, 4,000 MB at Moose Factory and 3,000 MB at Eastmain that same year. See Ray and Freeman, *Give Us Good Measure*, 34.
6. G. Adams, M. Burnip and R. Coutts, "The York Factory Ethnohistory Project: Phase I Progress Report," *Research Bulletin* no. 284 (Ottawa: Canadian Parks Service, 1991), 11.
7. Andrew Graham, *Andrew Graham's Observations on Hudson Bay, 1767-1791*, ed. Glyndwr Williams (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1969) 192. Graham writes:

At the Forts there are natives which we style home-guards or home-Indians, and by the trading natives Winepeg, or Muchiskewuck Athinuwick, which last word signifies Indians, who are employed as hunters to supply the Forts with provisions, which is not inconsiderable, and are paid for such according to their dexterity and shooting. They also carry packets, and haul trading goods from forts to forts. They are trusted goods to the value of twenty or thirty beaver in October, when the fall goose season is over, when they go a little distance inland and traps martens etc. Towards May they pitch in again to the forts to kill geese etc.; in the interim they pay their debts, and what furs may remain they trade for brandy, and gets merry. The number of them at one of the capital forts are from 150 to 200 men, women and children, the last of whom are at present too many for providers... Besides the above natives supplying us with fish, flesh and fowl of many kinds, we get provisions from the Nekawuck or Lake Indians, who are every now and then, summer and winter, coming in to trade a few furs.

8. Ibid.
9. The extent to which Native people engaged in activities outside of the fur trade is a topic only recently addressed by fur-trade scholars. Complaints throughout the archival record by HBC officers that Indians were "lazy" or "improvident" in terms of trapping or voyaging to the post are being reinterpreted to demonstrate that Native people often followed different priorities that remained outside of their participation in the trade. See Jennifer

- S.H. Brown, "The Blind Men and the Elephant: Fur Trade History Revisited," in Patricia A. McCormack and R. Geoffrey Ironside, eds., *Proceedings of the Fort Chipewyan and Fort Vermilion Bicentennial Conference* (Edmonton: Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, University of Alberta, 1990), 15-19.
10. See, for instance, J.E. Foster, "The Home Guard Cree and the Hudson's Bay Company: The First Hundred Years," in D.A. Muise, ed., *Approaches to Native History in Canada*, Mercury Series, History Division Paper no. 25, (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1977).
  11. Treaty 5, which included a large portion of the territory north of Lake Winnipeg, was signed in 1875. After years of pressure from bands living north of the Treaty 5 boundary, including the York Factory Indians, adhesions were signed at various settlements between 1908 and 1910. At York Factory the treaty was signed by Chief Charles Wastasekoot in 1910. Ironically, the York Factory Indians, with the longest record of contact with whites, were the last band in the province to sign a treaty. See Frank Tough, "Economic Aspects of Aboriginal Title in Northern Manitoba: Treaty 5 Adhesions and Métis Scrip," *Manitoba History* 15 (Spring 1988): 3-16.
  12. Adams, Burnip and Coutts, "The York Factory Ethnohistory Project," 14.
  13. Ibid.
  14. Ibid.
  15. Ibid., 13.
  16. Graham, *Observations on Hudson's Bay, 1767-91*; James Isham, *Observations on Hudson's Bay, 1743*, ed. E.E. Rich (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1949); James Hargrave, *The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843*, ed. G.P. Glazebrook (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1938); Letitia Hargrave, *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave*, ed. Margaret Arnett MacLeod (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1947); and Robert Ballantyne, *Hudson Bay: Or, Everyday Life in the Wilds of North America During Six Years Residence in the Territories of the Hon. Hudson's Bay Company* (London: Thomas Nelson Ltd., 1902).
  17. A recent publication by Richard Ruggles entitled *A Country So Interesting, The Hudson's Bay Company and Two Centuries of Mapping, 1670-1870* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) discusses the HBC's use of maps drawn by Native informants. One such map of the York hinterland beyond Split Lake drawn in 1806 by Chachaypaywayti, is reproduced on page 146 of that book. The HBCA contains a total of some thirty-two maps which depict the York Factory region between 1750 and 1850, drawn for the most part by Company servants and surveyors.
  18. See for example Robert Bell, "The History of the Che-che-puy-ew-tis: A Legend of the Northern Crees," *Journal of American Folklore* 10, no. 36 (1897); S.C. Simms, "Myths of the Bungees or Swampy Indians of Lake Winnipeg," *ibid.*, 19, no. 72 (1906); J.R. Cresswell, "Folk-Tales of the Swampy Cree of Northern Manitoba," *ibid.*, 35 (1922); and David Turner and Paul Wertman, *Shamattawa: The Structure of Social Relations in a Northern Algonkian Band* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1977), Canadian Ethnology Series, no. 36. Using oral accounts, some archival sources and anthropological data, Turner and Wertman identify the processes by which the Cree hunter-gatherer society of early twentieth-century Shamattawa established proprietary hunting and trapping rights for individual band members and family production units.
  19. See Maxwell Paupanekis, "The Trapper," in *People and Pelts: Selected Papers of the Second North American Fur Trade Conference* (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1973), 137-43, and Tom Boulanger, *An Indian Remembers: My Life as a Trapper in Northern Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1971).
  20. Jackson Beardy, "Cree Legends from Northern Manitoba" (unpublished manuscript, Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, 1971); and Carl Ray and James Stevens, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971).



21. The topics selected for the oral interviews were developed with the help of Flora Beardy, a Cree woman born at York Factory and who has worked for the Canadian Parks Service in Churchill, Manitoba for a number of years. Ms. Beardy carried out the interviews in Cree and translated and transcribed each into English.
22. According to Vansina the linking of oral traditions with the written record is crucial in reconstructing the past. The relationship of the two, he writes, "is not one of the diva and her understudy in the opera: when the star cannot sing the understudy appears: when writing fails, tradition comes on stage... Wherever oral traditions are extant they remain an indispensable source for reconstruction. They correct other perspectives just as much as other perspectives correct it." See Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey, 1985), 199.
23. Bruce Trigger, "Ethnohistory: Problems and Prospects," *Ethnohistory* 29, no. 1 (1982): 2.
24. Kenneth C. Wylie, "The Uses and Misuses of Ethnohistory," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1973): 708-09.
25. Jennifer S.H. Brown, "Northern Algonquians from Lake Superior and Hudson Bay to Manitoba in the Historical Period," in R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson, eds., *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 232.
26. Shepard Krech III, "The State of Ethnohistory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20 (1991): 345-75.
27. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 54.
28. Such links, for example, exist between the Native experience in the fur trade and modern racism. While Paul Thistle, in his book *Indian-European Trade Relations in the Lower Saskatchewan River Region to 1840* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1986), argues that the "core culture" of the Western Woods Cree remained unaffected by their participation in the fur trade, others like Frank Tough have challenged this interpretation. Tough suggests that the racial division of labour created by the fur trade is one of the antecedents of contemporary racism. See Frank Tough, "The Northern Fur Trade: A Review of Conceptual and Methodological Problems," *The Musk Ox* 36 (1988): 66-79.
29. Peter Newman, *Company of Adventurers* (Toronto: Viking Press, 1985), 243.
30. See comments by Jennifer Brown in Michael Payne, "Summary Report, Fur Trade and Native History Workshop," sponsored by Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, Edmonton, March 1990, in the Rupert's Land Research Centre, *Newsletter* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 10.
31. Jean Friesen, "Heritage Futures," in *Prairie Forum* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 196. See also Friesen's description of the link between heritage and tourism on pages 196-198 wherein she claims that "Heritage and tourism are travelling a yellow brick road together... [leading] not to a greater understanding of each community's past but to the Golden Arches of theme park history, where pseudo-events replace real emotion and where the community's critical evaluation of itself is replaced by costume drama against a backdrop of historical façades" (p. 197).
32. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in M. Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Publishers, 1966).
33. Davydd Greenwood, "Culture by the Pound: An Anthropological Perspective on Tourism as Cultural Commoditization," in Valene Smith, ed., *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).
34. Perhaps the most bizarre example of "playing Indian" might be the weeklong festival held each year in the Westerwald area of central Germany where hundreds of bank clerks, office workers and professionals, dressed in "authentic" Native costume (usually Plains Cree), get together to exchange lore and perform "traditional" aboriginal ceremonies and dances. Much of this current German fascination with "der wilde Westen" probably

originated with the books of Karl May, a turn-of-the-century German confidence man who spent years in prison writing adventure stories about brave Indian warriors and rough-and-ready frontiersmen. Although May never travelled to North America, his books have sold 65 million copies to date, making him one of the best-selling authors in history. Notable among his many fans were Bertolt Brecht, Albert Einstein and Adolf Hitler. See Kevin Scanlon, "Der Wilde Westen," *Equinox* 53 (September/October 1990): 57-67. For a more theoretical discussion of the phenomenon of "playing Indian" see Rayna Green, "The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe," *Folklore* 99 (1988): 30-55. Green traces the roots of "playing Indian" to Europe in the early post-contact period when captured Indians brought to the royal courts of Europe were expected to "remain 'Indian,' acting out various aspects of their 'savage' lives for royal and groundling audiences alike." (p. 33) Green concludes that in the modern age "Indians are in effect loved to death through playing Indian, while despised when they want to act out their real traditional roles on the American landscape. For Indians to be Indian, or rather to be Indian in their some 200 distinct tribal roles, to be Indian in the historical future, non-Indians must give up the role. And they must quit asking Indians to play that role." (p. 50)

35. Greenwood, "Culture by the Pound," 179.
36. Parks Canada, "Policy Guidelines for Parks Canada's Involvement in Pre-contact Native History," unpublished report, Policy and Planning Division, National Historic Sites Division, Ottawa, September 1985, p. 1.
37. Christian Leden, *Across the Keewatin Icefields: Three Years Among the Canadian Eskimos, 1913-1916*, ed. Shirlee A. Smith (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1991).