

# european contact and the fur trade

Canadians’ perception of European contact and the fur trade is based on Eurocentric ideas. Due to the widespread acceptance of the European perspective, institutions like Museums have not fully interpreted and represented these historical events. As a result, the impact of settlers/colonizers have been historically diminished and consequently, the history of Canada has not been accurately depicted. In order to fully comprehend historical events, it is vital to understand and know the perspective of all peoples involved. Therefore, it is necessary to re-evaluate these events by focusing on the Indigenous peoples’ perspectives and how they were impacted. To truly accomplish this goal, an ethnohistorical approach is utilized. Ethnohistory is a historical approach that “incorporate Indigenous voices into the historical narrative, using oral history, artwork, material cultural, archeological evidence, and etymology as source material.” Through this methodology, European contact and the fur trade can be understood to a greater extent. Overall, by re-examining these events, we aim to present a more accurate and inclusive history.



Trapping

Trapping was integral to First Nations cultures across Canada providing a source of food, clothing, shelter, and tools. Traditional methods of capture included wood or rock deadfalls, pits, nests, or wooden enclosures. However, the development of the fur trade dramatically altered the traditional methods and usage and became an end in itself. Pictured above is Bud McArthur and his father Stephen McArthur trapping together.



Alex Janvier, *Morning Star*, 1993

For Alex Janvier, one of Canada’s most respected Indigenous artists, the circle is a metaphor for the cycle of life. “It represents the continuum of night and day, of life and death, of new life.”

To understand the initial impact of Europeans’ arrival in North America, it is necessary to understand the norms and complexities of Indigenous society before contact. The Indigenous population was comprised of varied nations with unique traditions, customs and languages. Predominantly self-sufficient and egalitarian societies, the “Land, like the air and water, was for the benefit of everyone, and so was communally owned.” Stewards of their environment, the majority of the population hunted and collected necessary resources. Though trade was important, it was not essential to their survival and prosperity. Despite the unique nature of Indigenous societies, Europeans did not understand the complexities of Indigenous society and thus deemed them as lesser.

Europeans, in contrast, greatly valued wealth and it was integral/vital to the prosperity of their economy and society. With Columbus’ success in the Americas, the kingdom of Spain acquired vast quantities of gold. Fearing an imbalance of power, the kingdoms of France and England also sent explorers to the “new world” in search of gold and other valuable resources at the end of the fifteenth century. Instead of gold, Europeans initially found an abundance of cod. Europeans subsequently created and focused on temporary cod fisheries as they did not seek to control or settle the land during this initial period. In terms of the Europeans early interactions with the Indigenous population, they primarily interacted with the Mi’kmaq and Beothuk. Both groups inhabited what is now Newfoundland and Labrador. While the Beothuk limited their contact with Europeans by moving inland, the Mi’kmaq people regularly traded furs for manufactured goods such as guns, clothing, copper and kettles. These early interactions and trade based relationships would eventually form the basis of the fur trade.

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Though Europeans were primarily interested in Canada’s abundance of cod, once the value and popularity of furs in Europe became evident, trade with Indigenous groups was prioritized. Ill equipped and lacking experience, European traders were dependant on the Indigenous peoples’ ability to act as hunters, guides, middlemen, transporters and fur processors. With Indigenous peoples in control, Europeans sought to build relationships based on peace and friendship.

To adapt to this flourishing trade, Indigenous communities altered economic and cultural components of their society. Primarily acting as traders, guides and middlemen, Indigenous economies became trade based. As a result, the importance of success in the fur trade became vital to the stability of a community. With the decline of local wildlife populations and the strongest men and women away trading, Indigenous communities were dependant on the success of the fur trade. This fragile balance caused Indigenous societies to become dependent on trade goods. In addition to altering the Indigenous way of life, interactions between Europeans and Indigenous resulted in the creation of a new cultural group. The Métis people are “of mixed European and Indigenous descent across Canada, and a specific community of people.” This blending of cultures created the Métis nation and thus changed the landscape of Canada forevermore.

Though Indigenous peoples did benefit from trade with Europeans, it soon became apparent that Europeans brought more than tradable goods. Unlike Europe, the population of North America had never been exposed to smallpox, chicken pox or cowpox. This lack of exposure and immunity resulted in the death of approximately seventy percent of the Indigenous population while Europeans were minimally impacted.

Direct contact was not even necessary to transmit these deadly diseases: “Furs and the goods they were traded for would pass from hand to hand, carrying microscopic stowaways into the continent ahead of white traders, so that European diseases, most notably smallpox, decimated groups of Indigenous Peoples long before they had direct contact with newcomers.” Left weakened and vulnerable, survivors did not have the physical ability to hunt or collect food and as a result many also died from starvation. This drastic decrease in population further increased the fragility of Indigenous society.

Despite the impact of death, disease and starvation, Indigenous peoples continued to prosper throughout the fur trade. To maintain their position of importance in the fur trade, the Indigenous had created and maintained a competitive market by trading with the French and English. However, with the fall of New France and the redevelopment of the fur trade by the British, the Indigenous communities who had adapted during the fur trade were negatively impacted. Once Britain had gained full control, they began to regulate trade and with the French no longer a threat, Indigenous alliances were seen as unnecessary. As the British prospered with their new found power, the reduced markets negatively impacted the Indigenous groups who had adapted to, and were involved, in the fur trade. Indigenous peoples had become dependent on guns and other trade goods. This led to a decline in traditional hunting skills and self-sufficiency. Exploiting the Indigenous’ vulnerability, Britain’s approach of peace and friendship shifted to land acquirement and the control. This shift at the end of the fur trade was the beginning of European’s suppression and control of the Indigenous peoples of what is now known as Canada.



Beaver Pelts

The HBC blankets and fur pelts are important symbols of the fur trade. Though Europeans were primarily interested in Canada's abundance of cod, once furs became an important commodity in Europe, trade with Indigenous groups was prioritized. Ill equipped and lacking experience, European traders were dependant on the Indigenous peoples' ability to act as hunters, guides, middlemen, transporters and fur processors. As a result, the fur trade became Canada's main commercial enterprise from the 17th to 19th centuries. This competitive trade led to the creation of The Hudson's Bay Company. It became the main fur trading company in Canada and greatly impacted the colonization and development of Canada.



HBC Blanket

The blankets are named after the Point System, invented by French weavers in the middle of the 18th century. It was a means of indicating the finished overall size of the blanket while it was folded up. The points are represented on the Hudson's Bay Blanket as a series of short black lines woven into the blanket above the bottom set of stripes. A four-inch line represents on point and two-inch line represents half a point.



Beaded Knife Sheath

For thousands of years beading has been an important component of Indigenous culture. Utilizing materials like shell, bone, pottery, copper, pearl, teeth, fossil stems, stone and eventually glass, Indigenous peoples created beads to embellish clothing and everyday objects. Commonly inspired by nature and religion, beads were used to create designs resembling animals, geometric shapes and abstract floral patterns. An important aspect of Indigenous culture, beadwork varied across the continent. This beaded knife sheath is a prime example of Indigenous artistry. Donated by Leslie Padwickin 2011, family members say it was given to their great-great Uncle Olser. It is constructed out of animal hide and is decorated with beads, braid, fringe and metal tassels.



Bison

Throughout history the bison were a crucial aspect of Indigenous life and were used as their main food source. Despite the importance of the bison to the Indigenous way of life, Europeans commercialized bison products and nearly hunted them to extinction using powerful rifles. Specifically, the bison hide was used to supply the tanning industry in Europe and bison tongues were used to satiate the European palate. Once the most plentiful large mammal on the continent, by the end of the nineteenth century the number of wild bison had dropped to the low hundreds. The loss of this vital source of food would have dire consequences for the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

Image: Norval Morriseau, *Androgyny*, 1983

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☎ 306-634-7644  
✉ [director@eagm.ca](mailto:director@eagm.ca)  
🌐 [www.estevanartgallery.org](http://www.estevanartgallery.org)  
📍 located on Treaty 4 & Treaty 2 Territoty  
118 - 4th Street Estevan, SK

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