

A Skilled Game of Exchange

Ojibway Fur Trade Protocol

Bruce M. White

WHEN Indians and white traders exchanged furs and manufactured goods in the fur trade, each brought a set of expectations to the transaction. These expectations have usually been characterized as two fundamentally different motives for human exchange. According to this theory, traders wanted unlimited material gain or profit. Indians, including the Southwestern Ojibway in the 18th and 19th centuries, acted under the belief that members of society should share the products of their labor with relatives, friends, and strangers. Some theorists characterize these differences as a dichotomy between economic (or "rational") and noneconomic (or "irrational"). A basic problem of the trade, it is suggested, was to reconcile these seemingly different viewpoints.¹

This dichotomy between a desire for profit and a material concern for others, however, is simplistic. Traders were not always motivated exclusively by personal profit, especially in regard to their own Indian and white relations. It can also be argued that in obeying the injunction to share their catch, their game, and their harvest, the Ojibway were in a very real sense pursuing self-interest, yet in an Ojibway material and cultural context.²

Such a paradoxical statement is based in part on certain realities of Ojibway life. Despite their well-developed skills in hunting, fishing, agriculture, and the storage of food, the Ojibway had to cope with an uncertain food supply brought about by the vicissitudes of disease, climate, and luck. Also, the need for mobil-

¹ See, for example, E. E. Rich, "Trade Habits and Economic Motivation among the Indians of North America," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 26 (Feb., 1960): 44; Carolyn Gilman *et al.*, *Where Two Worlds Meet: The Great Lakes Fur Trade* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1982), 5, 51. For their advice and criticism, the author would like to thank Ann Regan, Curtis L. Roy, Louise Dechêne, Helen H. Tanner, John Carl Hancock, and John Fierst. Special thanks go to Mary Whelan for her help in revising the final manuscript. Research on this paper was made possible in part by a Phillips Fund Grant in American Indian Ethnohistory from the American Philosophical Society, 1983. Some of the ideas proposed in the paper were generated during a Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) Charles E. Flandrau sabbatical in 1980-81. An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the Algonquian Conference, Duluth, 1984.

² Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), 33, 36.

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ity imposed limitations on a family's accumulation of food and material goods.³

When Ojibway hunters were successful, they had two major alternatives. They or others in their family could dry and store the extra meat for their own future use. Or they could store that food in a nonmaterial way by giving it to others. In giving food Ojibway people made an investment in long-term goodwill and helped to assure their own future well-being.

The Ojibway process of sharing thus resulted ultimately in furthering self-interest. To paraphrase economist Adam Smith's classic statement about the self-interest of the capitalist and the good it does for society in general, we may say that the Ojibway hunter, intending only to pursue the good of others, was led by an invisible hand to promote his own good more effectively than when he really intended to promote it.⁴

There were many examples of what might be called self-interested gift giving in Ojibway life, not all of which correspond to the definition of investment known in a market economy. The hunter who gave a feast to honor the spirit of a bear that he had killed did so in part because he believed that he must show the proper appreciation to the bear spirits who had "pitied" him. In taking leaves from a medicinal plant, an Ojibway woman placed a bit of tobacco around the root of that plant as a proper return to its spirit. These examples, which whites might call superstitious or wasteful, were, for the Ojibway, rational expressions of self-interested investment in future well-being. Furthermore, they reflect the basic reciprocity with which the Ojibway approached their relations with others.⁵

Ojibway leaders were often described as being generous: they shared whatever goods they had. For their generosity they received the goodwill, loyalty, and sense of obligation of followers. All of these things helped the leaders retain their base of power. Ethnographer Johann G. Kohl's figurative evaluation, though perhaps an overstatement, is apt: "A man who lays up such capital in the hearts of his followers is thence much richer than if he had all the wares under lock and

³ On the uncertainty of the Ojibway food supply, see, for example, Edwin James, ed., *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (Reprint ed., New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1975), 68. On food storage techniques, see Peter Grant, "The Sauteux Indians about 1804," in Louis R. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest 2* (Reprint ed., New York: Antiquarian Press Ltd., 1960): 330. Some of the arguments here and below were also made by Daryll Forde and Mary Douglas in "Primitive Economics," in George Dalton, ed., *Tribal and Peasant Economies: Readings in Economic Anthropology* (New York: Natural History Press, 1967), 15, 24.

⁴ "By preferring the support of the domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. . . . By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it." Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* 1 (Hartford, Eng.: Cooke & Hale, 1818): 319.

⁵ See Bruce M. White, "'Give Us a Little Milk': The Social and Cultural Meanings of Gift Giving in the Lake Superior Fur Trade," *Minnesota History* 48 (Summer, 1982): 63.



key. In case of need, all his followers blindly obey his orders."⁶

It was in this Ojibway socioeconomic context that the Lake Superior fur trade operated, a fact which explained the large-scale gift giving of fur traders. Fur trade gift giving was a financial investment in the goodwill of the Ojibway—in economic terms an *intangible asset* comparable to a modern company's investment in advertising and salesmanship. When seen in this light fur trade methods resemble modern business practices; particularly in automobile marketing, in which a variety of dealerships compete in providing virtually identical products. An auto dealer in the Twin Cities, for example, sponsors weekly advertisements of his low prices and generous credit terms. These broadcasts feature music, offer free hot dogs, popcorn, and balloons to those who come to look at cars, and promote worthy charities and a crusade designed to convince people to fly the American flag more often.⁷

What do these gifts, this music, and these announcements have to do with the price of cars? Like the jovial, friendly tone in which the announcers present the ads, they are designed to create goodwill by convincing the potential customer that the dealership is operated by honorable, generous, and patriotic people. These gifts, then, like those given by fur traders, are not simply a way of lowering the price of cars in a competitive situation. Their role was explained by economist Thorstein Veblen: advertising employs tangible assets "with a view to creating a certain body of good-will. The precise magnitude . . . may not be foreseen, but, if sagaciously made, such investment rarely fails of the effect aimed at—unless a business rival . . . should outmanoeuvre and offset these endeavors."⁸

In giving gifts the trader was investing in an intangible asset defined in Ojibway terms—an asset that would in the long run help him obtain the ends he sought. Gifts and the meanings attached to them functioned as a means of differentiating among the al-

most identical goods provided by competing companies. If all went well the trader made a profit from the sales of his furs. With this, the trader supported his family and relations. He could also convert his profits into further influence and further goodwill in the Indian community. Thus, fur trade capital took many forms, both tangible and intangible.

BENEATH the unfamiliar terminology and cultural specifics of the fur trade lie fundamental principles of motivation and salesmanship that express themselves in a variety of ways in many cultural and historical contexts. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss summarized these principles when he described the power of tangible objects to communicate human thoughts and emotions: "Goods are not only economic commodities, but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order, such as power, influence, sympathy, status and emotion; and the skillful game of exchange . . . consists in a complex totality of conscious and unconscious manoeuvres in order to gain security and guard oneself against risks brought about by alliances and rivalries."⁹

In the fur trade among the Southwestern Ojibway these conscious and unconscious maneuvers took the form of a pattern of social exchange. The trader attempted to do business by adhering whenever possible to the cultural values and etiquette of his potential clients and customers. These values and etiquette dictated a kind of diplomatic protocol which structured the trader's year. As J. G. Kohl remarked, "[I]t may be conjectured that a trader can only be successful through caution and exercise of tact. I have been told, and have indeed remarked it, that association and difficult negotiations with the Indians have produced famous diplomatists among these traders."¹⁰

The chief triggering mechanism in this trade protocol was gift giving. Gifts could help establish a business tie in Ojibway terms—a trusting relationship resulting from a metaphorical kinship—through which trader and Indian overcame the potential hostility of strangers. Whenever gifts were given they invoked or reinforced these symbolic meanings. But it was not just the exchange that was important. The way in which gifts were given and the way their presentation was tied to the exchange of furs for merchandise made possible the smooth operation of trade.¹¹

The journal of one British fur trader offers a complete picture of this protocol from a European point of view. Alexander Henry, the younger, a trader with experience in the Lake Superior area, was sent by the North West Company to operate a post among the Red River Valley Ojibway. In August, 1800, Henry and his employees met the Ojibway at the mouth of the La Salle River [Manitoba], where he had agreed to take part in the first gift-giving ceremony of the fall.¹²

⁶ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Life among the Lake Superior Ojibway* (Reprint ed., St. Paul: MHS Press, 1985), 66.

⁷ Such advertising may be heard every Saturday morning on WCCO Radio in the Twin Cities.

⁸ Veblen, *The Place of Science in Modern Civilisation* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 367.

⁹ Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Revised ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 54.

¹⁰ Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 130.

¹¹ For a discussion of the Ojibway attitudes toward gift giving, see White, "Give Us a Little Milk," 60-71.

¹² Here and two paragraphs below, see Alexander Henry, *Journal*, 47-48 (Aug. 21, 1800). Citations refer to an 1824 transcript of the journal in the Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. An altered version, edited by Elliott M. Coues, was first published in 1897 as *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest* (Reprint ed., Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1965).



PAINTING thought to be Alexander Henry the younger

Henry resisted giving gifts until all the local Ojibway were brought together. When the group was assembled, two men gave Henry part of the meat of a red deer and “some wild fowls.” Henry then gave presents to each of four chiefs who had influence with the people of the community. These presents were especially designed to show off the status of the leaders: scarlet laced coats, laced hats, red feathers, white linen shirts, leggings, breech cloths, and flags. To top it off Henry gave each leader one fathom of tobacco (formed into a kind of rope) and a nine-gallon keg of rum.

To the rest of the group he gave three kegs of mixed liquor containing nine quarts of high wines—a concentrated form of alcohol—per keg, and a gift of four fathoms of tobacco. Then Henry attempted to put these gifts into a context so that the assembled Ojibway would understand his reasoning and what he hoped for in return: “I then offered them a long speech, encouraging them to behave well, and not to be afraid of the Sioux, but to follow me up the Turtle river which was the place I proposed to winter at. Beavers were plenty in those quarters, by which means they could procure all their necessaries with ease.”

Henry’s approach to this ceremony—gathering all the various bands together at once, rather than dealing with each separately as did other traders in the

region—may have been more rigid than most, reflecting his rigid and authoritarian personality. It may also be that Henry simply described the event in more detail than most traders, since it was his first year on the Red River. His own accounts became briefer in later years.¹³

It should be noted that Henry’s ceremony in 1800 began with the Ojibway giving presents, demonstrating that the trading relationship was not instigated purely by the trader. Whoever initiated it, the pattern was well established, including the customary gifts given by the Ojibway and the design of the coats and hats that their leaders received. Both parties knew what to expect. Similarly, John Tanner, a white captive who grew up among the Red River Ojibway around 1800, told of a ceremonial present that his adopted mother generally gave to a fur trader on his arrival in the fall: ten fine beaver skins. “In return for this accustomed present, she was in the habit of receiving every year a chief’s dress and ornaments, and a ten gallon keg of spirits.”¹⁴

Initial Ojibway gifts to the trader often consisted of food, which symbolized that the Ojibway were willing to establish a relationship of some kind. On a practical level it meant that they would work to supply the food—game, wild rice, and maple sugar—on which the trader depended for survival during the winter.¹⁵

Such symbolic assurances, however, did not guarantee any specific quantity of food. Henry, who had a large number of men to feed, made other arrangements for a regular food supply. Arriving at his wintering place, he wrote: “I settled with the little Crane to hunt for me. I promised that if he would behave well, and kill as many animals as I might require for the season, I would pay him Sixty Skins, and give a Clothing to him and his wife and furnish him with a Gun and ammunition, &c &c.”¹⁶

IN THE FALL, after the trader had exchanged gifts and arranged for his winter’s food supply, his next step

¹³ Harold Hickerson, ed., “Journal of Charles Jean Baptiste Chabaille, 1797-1798,” *Ethnohistory* 6 (Summer, 1959): 275 (Aug. 26, 1797), 276 (Aug. 27), 278-279 (Sept. 19-20); Henry, *Journal*, 267 (Oct. 27, 1801).

¹⁴ James, ed., *John Tanner*, 102.

¹⁵ One chief, Kesconeek (Broken Arm), made this explicit when he announced in a speech accompanying gifts of furs and food to trader John Long, north of Lake Superior in the 1760s: “[W]e shall use our best endeavours to hunt and bring you wherewithal to satisfy you in furs, skins, and animal food.” See [John] Long, *Voyages and Travels of an Indian Interpreter and Trader* (Reprint ed., Toronto: Coles Publishing Co., 1974), 55.

¹⁶ Henry, *Journal*, 109-110 (Sept. 12, 1801). Traders also depended on their wives. Although details are scarce, it seems that having an Indian wife helped ensure a steadier supply of food from her relations.

was to give trade goods on credit to his Ojibway clients. In cases where a trader lived in an Indian community throughout the winter—the most common method of trading with the Ojibway—the Indians received most items on credit, rather than in direct one-for-one exchanges. They then paid off their debts throughout the winter or spring.



J. O. LEWIS'S picture of Ojibway leader Weesh-Cub, wearing a jacket probably obtained in a gift exchange

The Ojibway took reciprocal material relationships seriously. Giving credit, especially when preceded by some sort of gift-giving ceremony, helped foster good feeling between trader and Indian: the trader demon-

¹⁷ Beaulieu, "The Fur Trade," in Gerald R. Vizenor, ed., *Escorts to White Earth, 100 Year Reservation, 1868-1968* (Minneapolis: The Four Winds, 1968), 89. Bazile Hudon dit Beaulieu, Paul's father, was probably the Beaulieu employed by North West Company trader François Malhiot at Lac du Flambeau in the winter of 1804-05; see Beaulieu family genealogy in Clement H. Beaulieu and Family Papers, MHS; Malhiot, *Journal*, 6 (Aug. 4, 1804), and North West Company rosters, Lac du Flambeau, 70, both in McGill University Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Montreal.

¹⁸ Henry, *Journal*, 111 (Sept. 15, 1800). In 1797 Chaboillez, Henry's predecessor on the Red River, gave differing amounts and a wider selection of gifts, including tools, with his credits. For example, to two Ojibway hunters who also received credits, Chaboillez supplied "a small Equip[men]t according to Custom," consisting of a measure of powder, a measure of shot, a measure of balls, a half fathom of tobacco, a large knife, a small knife, four gunflints, one gunworm, two Indian awls, two needles, two skeins of thread, and a little vermilion; entry of Sept. 17, 1797, in Hickerson, ed., "Chaboillez," 278.

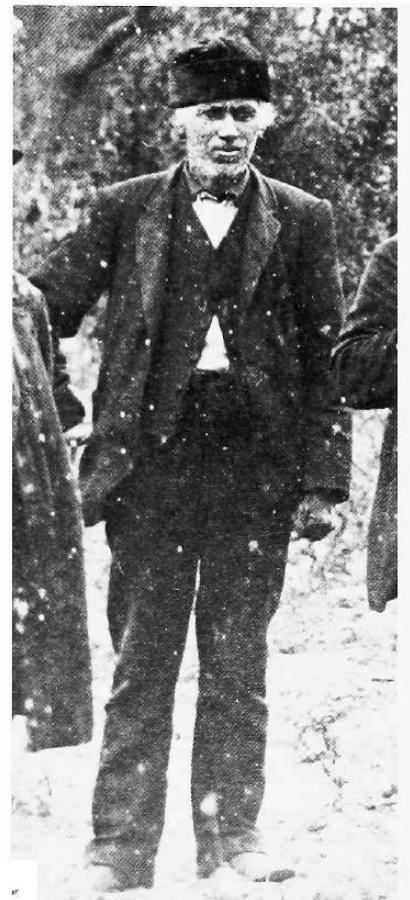
strated trust in his clients, and this, in turn, would elicit a trustworthy response. Despite the lack of European-style sanctions—courts and police designed to protect private property—the trader could expect to receive a return for credit given, though, as will be seen, this might not necessarily involve complete repayment from the trader's point of view.

Traders seldom detailed what they gave on credit. Paul H. Beaulieu, a second-generation Ojibway trader, wrote in a reminiscence of the 1820s and 1830s that fall credits generally consisted of cloth, blankets, traps, ammunition, and guns—all items a family would need to get through the winter and hunt for food and furs.¹⁷

From trader to trader the amount of credits varied. Some based theirs on the skills of particular hunters and trappers; others, with less knowledge of individual abilities, gave out uniform credits. In 1800 Henry advanced the Ojibway their "necessaries" to the amount of 20 prime beaver skins to each man. In addition he followed the usual practice of traders at the time, giving a few inexpensive items as gifts: "an assortment of small articles gratis such as one Scalper, two Folders, four Flints" to the men and "two awls, three needles, one [skein] of net Thread, one fine steel, a little vermilion, and half a [fathom] of Tobacco" to the women.¹⁸

Henry, like other traders, gave more liquor after giving credit and before the people left for their wintering places. This present was designed, as Henry put it, "to encourage them to hunt and pay their debts." When the Ojibway did pay off their debts, whether during the winter or spring, the traders would reward them with more alcohol. They might then give further credit

PAUL H. BEAULIEU, about 1886



and gifts. No matter how many times the cycle took place an orderly process was preserved, in which the exchange of furs for goods was layered between gifts designed to cement the goodwill of trader and Indian. In the spring traders often ended their stay in the Ojibway communities with ceremonies similar to those of the fall, including giving gifts of alcohol and clothing and making speeches.¹⁹

The normal pattern of gifts and credits was not the extent of exchanges between trader and Indian during the year. There were important ceremonies in Ojibway social and religious life when the trader customarily gave gifts. One example was the custom of “covering the body” of a dead person. When an Ojibway died his spirit was said to go on a long journey to the west. To prepare him for this journey, explained historian William Warren, “his body is placed in a grave, generally in a sitting posture, facing west. With the body are buried all the articles needed in life for a journey. If a man, his gun, blanket, kettle, fire steel, flint and moccasins; if a woman, her moccasins, axe, portage collar [tumpline], blanket and kettle.”²⁰

As a person of material wealth in the community and someone who may even have been related by mar-



riage to the dead person, the trader was expected to show respect by “covering” the body with the essential trade goods. In addition, etiquette dictated that he give some liquor to the relatives for a wake. In September, 1801, Alexander Henry mentioned such an occasion: “Bras Court’s daughter died aged nine years. Great lamentation and must have a keg of liquor to wash away the grief from their hearts, and a fathom of Cloth to cover the body, and a 1/4 lb. of vermilion to paint the same.”²¹

WRITING in the 1850s, Warren recalled a time at Lac Courte Oreilles [Wisconsin] in the 1780s when alcoholic beverages were only given during the initial fall trading ceremony. “It was the custom of the traders in

those days to take with them to different wintering posts small quantities of ‘eau de vie,’ which, when their hunters had all assembled around them, they made a present of to the principal chiefs, for their people to have a grand frolic. To the inland bands, this great indulgence came around but once a year.”²²

Judging from the accounts of Henry and other traders, liquor use became more frequent by the early 1800s. Yet the point of using alcohol was not to make the Ojibway drunk and steal their furs, though some traders may have occasionally attempted to do just that. Liquor was something that the Ojibway, like people of many cultures, times, and places, had a liking for. When given in ceremonial exchanges, liquor came to be called by a term meaning mother’s milk—representing the sense of loyalty or obligation that the trader or diplomat wanted to arouse in the Ojibway.²³ When seen in this light, the increasing use of the beverage in the early 1800s may in part have been a function of the fierce competition between the North West and XY companies. It is not surprising that liquor would have been given out more frequently at a time when trade loyalties were at a premium.

But alcohol was not *always* milk—the symbolic representation of the relationship between the Ojibway and their traders. Alcoholic beverages had been incorporated into Ojibway social life (as shown by its use at funerals), and it was supplementing tobacco and food as a mediating device among people and between people and spiritual beings. When someone was ill, his family might make a feast of food and liquor as a way of obtaining spiritual aid in curing disease. In such

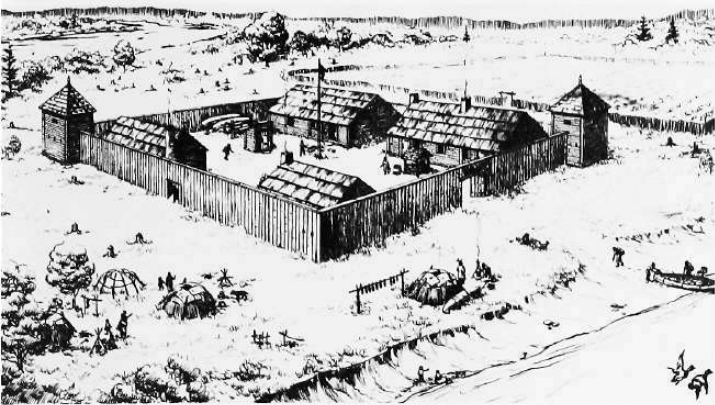
¹⁹ Henry, *Journal*, 52 (Aug. 23, 1800), 112 (Sept. 16, 1800); see also 255 (May 12, 1801), 276-277 (May 4, 1802). For other similar accounts of spring presents, see John McKay’s *Rainy Lake journal*, B. 105/a/2, folio 25 (May 14, 1795), *Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) Archives*, Winnipeg, Manitoba; John Sayer’s journal, published erroneously under the title “The Diary of Thomas Connor,” in Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest* (St. Paul: MHS, 1965), 277. For the identification of Sayer as the author of this diary, see Douglas A. Birk and Bruce M. White, “Who Wrote the ‘Diary of Thomas Connor’?: A Fur Trade Mystery,” *Minnesota History* 46 (Spring, 1979): 170-188.

²⁰ Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (Reprint ed., St. Paul: MHS Press, 1984), 72. A similar description was given by McKay in 1797; see B. 105/a/4, folio 23 (May 6), *HBC Archives*.

²¹ Henry, *Journal*, 264 (Sept. 6, 1801); see also 266 (Oct. 13, 1801). Giving goods and liquor at someone’s death was all the more important if the trader was considered partly responsible for the death; see, for example, Louis-P. Cormier, ed., *Jean Baptiste Perrault marchand voyageur parti de Montréal le 28e de mai 1783* (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1978), 68-69, 70-72, 75.

²² Warren, *History of the Ojibway*, 301.

²³ See White, “‘Give Us a Little Milk,’” 67, for a discussion of the social and cultural meanings of alcohol.



NORTH WEST COMPANY post, Fort Court Oreilles

cases the trader was asked to provide the alcohol. About a request of this kind, John Sayer, a North West Company partner wintering on the Snake River of eastern Minnesota, remarked: “[P]olicy induced me to Consent.”²⁴

The importance of liquor in Ojibway social life was also evident when Indians brought traders food. For this food Ojibway people usually received alcohol. Paul Beaulieu wrote that in the 1820s and 1830s a five-gallon keg of high wines “would buy more wild Rice in an Indian Camp than \$200 worth of any kind of Goods

²⁴ Peter Jones, *History of the Ojibway Indians* (London: A. W. Bennett, 1861), 96. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders*, 268. For examples of an Ojibway ceremony without liquor, see the description of a feast given to help cure an ill person, in Alexander Henry (the elder), *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories* (Reprint ed., New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), 149.

²⁵ Beaulieu, “Fur Trade,” 80.

²⁶ McKay, Journal, B. 105/a/1, folio 7 (Oct. 9, 1793), B. 105/a/2, folio 26 (May 25, 1795), B. 105/a/3, folio 39 (n.d.); George Nelson, Journal, 1804-05, p. 35 (Sept. 15, 1803), Metropolitan Toronto Central Library. See also François Malhiot accounts, “Liste des effets donnés pour des vivres,” Aug. 3, 1804—May 18, 1805, in McGill University Libraries, Rare Books and Special Collections. A translation of these accounts was published as “A Wisconsin Fur-Trader’s Journal, 1804-05,” *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 19 (Madison: The Society, 1910): 216-224.

²⁷ Nelson, Journal, 25 (Mar. 17, 1804); author’s translation from Michel Curot, Journal, 1803-04, p. 36 (Mar. 1, 1804), in Masson Collection, Public Archives of Canada. An incomplete version of the Curot diary was published in “A Wisconsin Fur-Trader’s Journal, 1803-04,” *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 20 (Madison: The Society, 1911): 396-471. For a description of one omission found in this published version, see Bruce M. White, comp., *The Fur Trade in Minnesota, An Introductory Guide to Manuscript Sources* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1977), 29.

²⁸ Priscilla K. Buffalohead, in “Farmers, Warriors, Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women,” *Minnesota History* 48 (Summer, 1983): 240, argued that women controlled the distribution of game in Ojibway society. For a rare example of unwillingness to share food, see James, ed., *Tanner*, 66.

and wild Rice was the Chippewa trader main stay after reaching his trading post and without which subsistence was not assured to them.”²⁵

It was not just that traders found it convenient to exchange liquor for food. Traders might have preferred to give liquor for furs. Alcohol was what the Ojibway demanded. Soon after opening the Hudson’s Bay Company trading post on the Rainy River in 1793, John McKay reported: “I am obliged to buy Every ounce of Country Provisions that we Eat as we cannot Procure any ourselves, which will be very hard on the Brandy.” Between 1794 and 1796 he purchased moose meat, fish, and wild rice to the value of 400 made beaver (or prime beaver skins), 88 percent of this (350 made beaver) with brandy; the rest with ammunition and a little cloth. Similarly, in 1804-05 at Lac du Flambeau, North West Company trader François Malhiot directly purchased food to the value of 288 prime beaver skins. Of this 60 percent (172.5 skins) was bought with liquor alone. Another 30 percent (85 skins) was bought with a combination of liquor and tobacco. George Nelson, an XY Company trader in 1803-04, wrote: “We don’t pay provisions here with anything else than with rum sometimes tobacco, but seldom tho[ugh], & ammunition. The Indians are so accustomed to it that they are quite surprised when any other payment is given them.”²⁶

If the trader had no alcohol he had difficulty getting any provisions. In mid-March, 1804, Nelson wrote that one of his employees had gone to stay with the man’s father-in-law “as we have nothing here to eat. I gave him a little ammunition & a few silver works to trade provisions—for we have now nothing else to trade. We subsist upon Indian Charity.” Two weeks earlier on the St. Croix River, another XY trader was having similar problems. Michel Curot had also run out of liquor. Even one of his men, a veteran named Smith, who had family ties with the Ojibway, could not get any food. “The Indians told Smith that when they have killed a deer, they will give him some, if he goes to get it at their lodges, that they will not carry it to this place because he doesn’t have any rum to give them, that it was only that which engaged them to bring it to the fort.”²⁷

It could be argued that the Ojibway were accustomed to alcohol as a payment for their food simply because the traders were accustomed to giving it. But the trade of rum for food was consistent with the Ojibway attitude toward food as something to be shared. A hunter might in a certain sense own the animals that he himself killed, but he was obliged to give that game to the female members of his household, who fed the family and shared the food with relations and with strangers who might be in need. A mercenary attitude toward food was rare.²⁸

Alcohol was seen as a quintessential kind of food,

and the Ojibway shared it with those around them in drinking parties. John Tanner's attitude when he gave such a party may have been typical. He opened the head of a keg of spirits and announced to everyone: "I am not . . . one of those chiefs who draw liquor out of a small hole in a cask, let all those who are thirsty come and drink."²⁹

When traders wished to refrain from providing alcohol to the Ojibway, they met with resistance. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trader at Rainy Lake in the late 1820s, John D. Cameron, told the Ojibway that there might come a time when the company would no longer bring them any liquor. His clients replied very much as many groups of white people of many eras might have replied: "Then you will not make many packs for Indians will not hunt when they are deprived of the greatest and indeed the only delightful enjoyment they have on Earth." In these attitudes traders saw a significant means of influencing Ojibway behavior, especially in competitive times. It was for these reasons that liquor was said to be indispensable in the trade.³⁰

Ojibway perception of alcohol as being in some sense like food and unlike other trade goods is evidence for the phenomenon that economic anthropologists have come to call "spheres of exchange"—that is, categories of exchange involving different goods and services and cultural values. Usually such transactions are separated into those with symbolic value and those without. Two such spheres are evident in Ojibway dealings with fur traders. In one category were furs and the basic items of merchandise, the bulk of which were exchanged primarily through credit. In the other sphere was alcohol, tobacco, food, and prestigious articles of clothing. Rarely given on credit, these items of symbolic value were primarily given away as gifts. There was occasional crossover between these two categories, such as the rare exchanges of furs for liquor, and traders occasionally blurred the categories by giving ammunition or tools as gifts.³¹

Fundamentally, however, food, tobacco, and alcohol were always gifts, even in what might appear to be one-for-one exchanges. The wording in many traders' diaries suggests that, from the Ojibway point of view, giving food for liquor was an exchange of gifts, rather like modern American Christmas presents. Malhiot typically described such a transaction as follows: "L'Outarde arrived here with two loads of meat which he gave me as a present. I gave him 6 pots of rum." Malhiot's wording in such cases was different from the way he described direct transactions involving furs. Generally for trading he used the French verb *traiter*, probably to describe an interaction in which the Indian did not simply present the item to the trader, but preceded his presentation with some sort of discussion of

what trade goods he wanted and possibly what rate of exchange he thought was fair.³²

This is not to say that everyone shared the attitude of the Ojibway toward food-alcohol transactions. Although traders probably expected a return of one kind or another from all their material dealings, some saw gifts as something given *sans dessein*—for nothing. In 1797-98 Charles Chaboillez made clear the conflicting attitudes of Indian and trader. He mentioned the arrival of two men at the post. One of them "made a Present of Twenty Pieces Dried Meat & 8 Sturgeons." In return Chaboillez "paid Him Twenty Eight Pints Rum & gave them each Two Pints sans Dessein."³³

Thus, for Chaboillez, the "present" from the Ojibway was one for which he felt obligated to "pay" something in return, at the same time that he gave what he himself considered to be a "gift." Yet his gift of rum was no doubt qualitatively the same as the rum that he considered to be a payment. The payment was what Chaboillez thought to be a just return for the meat and fish. The gift was something he gave over and above that. For the Ojibway the two were probably indistinguishable unless Chaboillez made a point of the difference in his words or actions. At the same time the gift and payment were indistinguishable when viewed from the trader's bottom line: he had to pay for them one way or the other. Such were the nuances of trader-Indian interaction.

COMPETITION in the fur trade had other effects besides an increase in gift giving. Having sought to establish relations with a number of Ojibway, having given them gifts and credit, the company or trader did everything possible to ensure that the opposing company did not interfere with these relations.

Under normal circumstances the Ojibway could be expected to honor established ties with traders. But these ties could be broken if one adhered to the logic of the relationship: metaphorical kinship established through the giving of gifts. To win over a group of Ojibway already tied to his opponent, the trader had somehow to call into question the validity of the opponent's gifts. He had to show that the gifts were misleading, empty, incapable of symbolizing a genuine relationship of mutual loyalty and obligation. The Indian would thus be freed of the contract implied in the gifts.

One way of competing effectively was to convince the Ojibway that the opposition trader could not meet

²⁹ James, ed., *Tanner*, 102.

³⁰ Cameron, "Rainy Lake Report," B. 105/e/6, p. 9 (1825-26), HBC Archives.

³¹ Paul Bohannon and George Dalton, eds., *Markets in Africa* ([Evanston]: Northwestern University Press, 1962), 3.

³² Malhiot, *Journal*, 30 (Mar. 16, 1805), 8 (Aug. 9, 1804).

³³ Hickerson, ed., "Chaboillez," 278 (Sept. 14, 1797).



RIVAL companies soliciting trade "a hundred years ago," from Harper's Monthly, June, 1879

their expectation that they be kept supplied with goods. According to Beaulieu: "[A]s a general thing the Indian will not throw off on the Trader that outfits him. There are of course a few exceptions to this rule. But if a Trader refuses an Indian for the least trifle after he has outfitted him, the indian thinks he is free from any obligation and trades where he pleases."³⁴

Traders for the upstart XY Company therefore tried to convince the Ojibway their firm was going to be around for some time to come and would provide a continuing source of trade goods and gifts. The Ojibway also had to be convinced that the North West Company was taking them for granted—not treating them well enough in gift giving and trade. On the other hand, the North West Company had to convince the Ojibway that a relationship with the XY would not be rewarding in the long run. Michel Curot, who oversaw XY trading efforts on the St. Croix River in 1803-04, recorded one of the arguments by which North West partner John Sayer hoped to persuade the Ojibway (who had taken credit from Curot) to have nothing further to do with the XY. Sayer told them that Curot and his people were simply pitiful, that they "did not

have anything for them, that he [Sayer] would leave someone with them during the summer who would give them rum & trade goods, that if all they had was me to depend on for their needs they also would be pitiful, that I would leave them early in the spring & would leave no one with them."³⁵

Speaking against these arguments Curot pointed out that the Ojibway were worse off, materially speaking, when the North West Company had been their sole source of supply. He then reminded them of the gift and trade relationship he had established with them. "Pay your credit and you will not lack for merchandise and rum."

The unwillingness or inability of the trader to provide liquor was another important reason that might allow the Indian to break off the relationship. Just as a trader had a hard time getting provisions when he ran out of alcohol he found the same to be true about the repayment of credits. If the trader used up his supply of rum or high wines early on and was unable to reward the Ojibway with these beverages that they expected after they repaid their debts, then some Ojibway refrained from making the repayment. They reasoned that if the trader would not give them the liquor they expected it meant that he had no regard or respect for them.³⁶

Another means by which the trader could affect the attitude of the Ojibway toward him was by showing them generosity when they were hungry. John McKay suggested this in the instructions he gave to one of his employees on the Rainy River in 1794: "if strangers come your way scruple not to cut them a pipe of Tobacco and give 'em something to eat, . . . notwithstanding they may have brought you nothing it will perhaps have a good effect in time to come. If you stand at trifles with your Indians it will give 'em a bad opinion of you and turn their affections to other objects."³⁷

In 1826 John Cameron described the positive impact of his practice of feeding the Ojibway who came to his Rainy Lake trading post: "When Indians make more pounded sturgeon & oil than they want, they trade the surplus with us. . . . When an Indian comes to the Fort, he never brings anything to eat. By having pounded sturgeon & oil—no time is lost in cooking—Nothing pleases an Indian more than in giving him something to eat immediately on his arrival. It is the Grand Etiquette of Politeness amongst themselves."³⁸

Because the Ojibway felt this way about hospitality, traders who were not generous could incur the wrath of their clients. Curot wrote of one man who was unhappy with the competitor, Sayer, "who gave him almost nothing to eat and who does not want to give him rum which he promised to allow him to take out of the fort. He prevented his men from putting their kettles on

³⁴ Beaulieu, "Fur Trade," 90.

³⁵ Here and below, see Curot, *Journal*, 16 (Nov. 6, 1803).

³⁶ Malhiot, *Journal*, 33 (April 26, 1805), describes violence committed against the trading post of his competitor Simon Chaurette, who had promised to supply some liquor but had run out.

³⁷ McKay, *Journal*, B. 105/a/2, folio 7 (Nov. 1, 1794).

³⁸ Cameron, "Report," B. 105/e/6, folio 4.

the fire, thinking that this Indian would leave sooner, not seeing any preparations for cooking wild rice or meat. The Indian left late and stole a powderhorn full of powder."³⁹

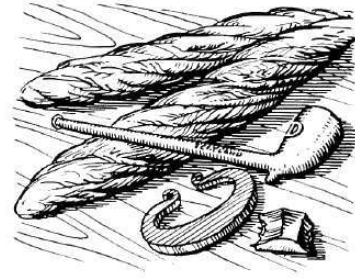
People who had been treated in this manner by one trader were susceptible to the kindness of another. Malhiot told how he won the trade of a group of Ojibway from outside his trading area, previously indebted to neither competing company. The hunters had a pack of furs but were out of food. In addition to giving them merchandise and a barrel of rum mixed half and half with water, Malhiot also presented them with two sacks of corn. One of his men used this gift of corn in his successful effort to win the trade of their furs from his competitor: "Don't trade with him. He knew you were starving, but he didn't deign to bring you a single grain of corn. He's a pig. He makes a god of his stomach. He would just as soon see the Indians starve before he would give them a glass of water."⁴⁰

If competition made the trader more generous with gifts, it also made him go further out of his way to write off debts. In a way the trader functioned as an insurer for his Ojibway clients, making up for the vicissitudes of weather and accident. Malhiot, for one, extended further credit to a group of Ojibway who met with a canoe accident and lost all their goods shortly after receiving their credits in the fall.⁴¹

FUR TRADERS used a variety of means to monitor their opponents and enforce their agreements with the Ojibway. A trader might build his trading post in a strategic spot, close to that of the opposition where he could keep track of his own clients and waylay those of the competitor. At his post on the Pembina River in 1801, Alexander Henry had built a "watch house" opposite the XY trading post where he stationed two of his men to keep an eye on the competitor's movements.⁴²

Competing traders were often surprisingly polite to each other, though the politeness may simply have been a ruse to get close to the opponent and obtain information. On Christmas Day in 1794, for example, McKay of the HBC noted of his North West Company competitor: "Mr. Boyer invited me & men to a dance." In April, 1798, Chaboillez mentioned that a group of competing traders "came over with Six Men to pay us a visit[.] made a Pott of Punch between us & gave the Men each a Dram & 1/2 Foot Tob[acco]." On New Year's Day in 1824, a later HBC trader on the Rainy River, John McLaughlin, gave a dance to which he invited the American Fur Company trader and the women of his post—but not any of their husbands.⁴³

Traders also gathered information from their kinship network and those of their men. XY trader Curot learned that one Ojibway family did not want to give their furs to the North West trader because the man was



out of rum. Curot said he had heard it from the wife of his man Savoyard who had in turn heard it from the wife of the North West trader's clerk.⁴⁴

With information obtained through such an alliance network, the trader was also better able to monitor the location of Ojibway in their camps throughout the woods. The trader would then periodically send his men to visit Indian families. The practice of making such visits, known as going *en dérrouine*, kept the Ojibway supplied with goods during the winter and allowed the trader's men to bring back any furs or meat that had been produced. In many cases, when the Ojibway were ready to pay back their debts or supply food, they sent word to the post for the trader to send his men. Malhiot recorded one case in which a man indebted to him informed him that he had killed a bear. Unfortunately Malhiot had no one to send so the man decided to tell the trader's competitor to come for the meat. However, he promised to save the skin for Malhiot.⁴⁵

At other times going *en dérrouine* served largely competitive purposes. Paul Beaulieu wrote that "The utmost vigilance is exercised by both Clerk and men also Indian spies watching the movements of the opposition trader and when a march to an indian camp can be stolen from either party, it is considered as a feat of good generalship." Malhiot, for example, sent two of his men to stay all night outside his opponent's fort, to wait for a particular group of Ojibway and "follow

³⁹ Curot, Journal, 38 (Mar. 3, 1804).

⁴⁰ Malhiot, Journal, 25 (Dec. 23, 1804).

⁴¹ Malhiot, Journal, 18 (Sept. 29, 1804).

⁴² Henry, Journal, 266 (Oct. 22, 1801). For another example see the elaborate dance of traders McKay and Charles Boyer, in McKay, Journal, B. 105/a/2, folio 5 (Oct. 21-23, 1794).

⁴³ McKay, Journal, B. 105/a/2, folio 13; McLaughlin, Journal, B. 105/a/9, p. 38; Hickerson, ed., "Chaboillez," part 2, *Ethnohistory* 6 (Fall, 1959): 386 (April 28, 1798).

⁴⁴ Curot, Journal, 51 (May 18, 1804).

⁴⁵ The origins of the word "dérrouine" are unknown; see John Francis McDermott, *A Glossary of Mississippi Valley French, 1673-1850*, Washington University Studies, New Series, Language and Literature, no. 12 (St. Louis: The University, 1941), 66; Malhiot, Journal, 30 (Mar. 16, 1805); Henry, Journal, 270 (Jan. 1, 1802); Curot, Journal, 12 (Oct. 18, 1803).

them when they leave in order to get what they owe me."⁴⁶

In another case Malhiot was foiled in a concerted effort to win over the trade of an Ojibway named Old Sorcerer who was already indebted to the XY trader Simon Charette.

"Sunday [March] 3 [1805]. Old Sorcerer arrived this morning. I made him drunk. He was going to Chorette's [*sic*] but one of my men, having encountered him, made him consent to enter here. . . .

"Monday the 4th. I sent off George Yarns and Beaulieu this night after getting Old Sorcerer to consent not to go alert Chorette. . . .

"Friday 8th. George Yarns arrived this night. Chorette went to the lodges a half day before him and had the time to get the greatest part of the skins. For five days he knew the people were there!"⁴⁷

When he was trying to enforce his own agreements and win the furs of another concern, the trader was most unscrupulous. Alexander Henry described how he obtained the furs of a group of Ojibway in April, 1804: "I went out to the upper part of the Tongue River to meet a band of Indians returning from hunting Beaver. I fought several battles with the Women to get their Furs from them. It was the most disagreeable Derouine I ever made however I got all they had, about a pack of good Furs, but I was vexed very much at having been under the necessity of fighting with the women. It is true it was all my neighbours Debts. . . . I returned home with the Furs that I had so well purchased."⁴⁸

One of XY trader George Nelson's men was especially good at going *en dérrouine*: "He was bold & brave & had an excellent memmory [*sic*] & was able to travel almost any distance in the woods without a guide or anything like it. When he could not persuade the indians to give their furs he would take them & often rumage [*sic*] in their bags; for it seldom happens we'll find an indian willing to give all his furs or his debt. . . . But we are often obliged to say (& do) give me your skins if you don't I'll take them & perhaps beat

you in the bargain. Our trade is often pillage; but of our own; for I hardly believe there be one indian in the Country but who owes more or less either the NW or HB companys."⁴⁹

Nelson suggests that traders' pillaging of Indian furs was a frequent occurrence. Such events, however, were usually the result of extreme circumstances—such as the competition between large companies—in which traders had so overextended themselves in gift giving and credit that their Indian customers were unable to provide them with what they considered an adequate return on their investments. These circumstances, when sustained for years on end, might force mergers between firms, as happened between the North West and XY companies in 1804 and between North West and HBC in 1821. Mergers brought retrenchments in gift giving and credit. But the protocol as described here continued to be an important part of the trade.⁵⁰

THE EFFECTS of competition were not all unfavorable from the Indian point of view. For one thing it is probable, though the evidence is uncertain, that traders competed with each other in the rates of exchange they established when extending credit in the fall. Much of the evidence for this form of what we might call price competition relates to those occasions when Ojibway who had already paid off their credit were trading surplus furs. Charles Chaboillez, for example, reported in 1798 that two Ojibway "came to Trade the remainder of their Skins but would not Trade them unless, they should have the Goods at the same Price as the South Traders sold them, in lieu of living [*letting*] the furs go out of my Shop I was obliged to give them the Blks [*blankets*] 2 1/2 pts Three Skins ea." Chaboillez defended himself against the wrath of his superiors, asking not to be blamed for his actions: "I am convinced that the goods are sold at a lower rate than they are Invoiced, but in the mean time its very hard to see Peltries taken out of ones Shop to Trade at a Neighbour—They Traded Sixty four skins—which was remaining of their Bundles."⁵¹

Some traders stated that the strategy of competing by means of the prices they offered for furs did not always work. On February 6, 1794, John McKay on the Rainy River mentioned the arrival of four Ojibway bringing 20 beaver with them to trade. McKay, however, was sure that the men had over a hundred more beaver at their tents and tried his best to get these in trade also. McKay did not want the men to trade the furs with Charles Boyer, his North West Company competitor. "I even offered some goods under value and to send men for the furs but they would not saying They wanted to give a little to every trader."⁵²

Social reasons may well have led these Ojibway to turn down McKay's economically advantageous offer.

⁴⁶ Beaulieu, "Fur Trade," 90; Malhiot, Journal, 30 (Mar. 20, 1805).

⁴⁷ Malhiot, Journal, 29.

⁴⁸ Henry, Journal, 331 (April 1, 2, 1804).

⁴⁹ Nelson, Journal, 7 (Aug. 25, 1803).

⁵⁰ Such retrenchments are described in the author's chapter "Balancing the Books," in "Give Us a Little Milk": Economics and Ceremony in the Ojibway Fur Trade," (M.A. thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 1985), 69-109.

⁵¹ Hickerson, ed., "Chaboillez," 290 (Feb. 12, 1798).

⁵² McKay, Journal, B. 105/a/1, folio 14 (Feb. 6, 1794).

Perhaps one of the people was indebted to Boyer or even related to him or one of his men. But other motives were also possible. In the long run, it was important for the Ojibway to encourage competition; having a material relationship with both traders might ensure the long-term supply of the trade goods these people valued. Receiving gifts from two traders instead of only one might be more profitable in the long run than accepting McKay's offer of low prices for goods.

Also, as anthropologist Mary Whelan has noted in her study of the Dakota fur trade, unpaid debts might be a way of ensuring a continuing relationship: "In situations where economic (and other) behavior is organized around reciprocity, 'debt' is actually required to keep the system functioning." Complete repayment terminates a reciprocal relationship. The Ojibway might have considered it unfriendly if some of their gifts were immediately repaid. On the other hand, traders who had not been completely repaid might be more likely to return to the same community the next year than if they were owed nothing.⁵³

In another sense, however, gift giving was, itself, price competition. McKay's own reactions to the refusal of his offers of better prices suggests this. "I sent 6 quarts of spirits to be distributed amongst the Indians at their tents and some tobacco. I sent likewise a few articles to trade." The next day he reported that "the goods I sent had the desired effect." His men were able to obtain 43 beaver, twice as many as the people had originally offered to trade, but apparently not all that they possessed.⁵⁴

Although scholars often use rates of exchange to determine the cost of merchandise for native customers, this scheme does not take into account the goods that were given as gifts. In economic terms, the more gifts an Ojibway person was given, the lower would be the average cost to him of those goods. Yet the Ojibway themselves did not seem to apply such strict quantitative considerations to their relations with traders. John McLaughlin, at Rainy Lake in 1823, reported that the Ojibway of his post "think if they give you all they hunt no matter how little we are bound in return to give them all their wants." Given this belief among people who had been in contact with traders for at least 30 years, it is clear that, from the Ojibway point of view, prices were less significant than a kind of generalized material and social reciprocity.⁵⁵

The fact that gift giving effectively adjusted the prices paid by the Ojibway for the goods they received is only one facet of the economic meaning of gifts in the trade. It is difficult, if not impossible, to divorce gifts from their specific socioeconomic context among the Ojibway. Gifts when given in the right way made possible the trader's relationship in the community, a relationship that could then be used for the purposes of the

fur trade. Giving gifts in the proper way meant an adherence to Ojibway etiquette and trade protocol. As such it meant that the trader's relationship was not exclusively confined to dealings with the best hunters and trappers and their families.

Ojibway leaders, whether or not they themselves actually hunted or trapped, could still have an effect on the fur trader's success. Hence they would be given gifts. Cameron wrote in 1825 that he had given a large keg of rum, tobacco, ammunition, a knife, and some flints to a noted local leader: "Last night the Premier arrived. He brought nothing, however as he is considered by all the Indians as the first Chief of the Land, I gave him a favourable reception. Altho' I would not advance him goods last autumn, yet it is Good Policy to be on friendly terms with him. He has not the power of doing much good, but if evil inclined, cannot be at a loss to find followers to do a great deal of harm."⁵⁶

Cameron's statement, from a Hudson's Bay Company trader who was under continuing orders from company executive George Simpson to economize by cutting down on gift giving, is clear evidence that gifts were far from simply being a means for carrying on price competition. Instead it demonstrates that for fur traders the quality or price of their products was never sufficient to carry on trade. As in many modern commercial operations, persuading people to do business with you, especially at times when there was competition, meant a thorough knowledge of your clients' cultural beliefs. It meant a continuing investment in their goodwill.⁵⁷

But obtaining Ojibway goodwill did not automatically mean that the trader could attain the ends he sought. Investment in human proclivities, possibilities, and beliefs is chancy whatever the cultural context. If the trader did not establish the necessary social tie before giving credit, or sustain that social tie by adhering to trade protocol, he might end up losing his investment. On the other hand, if the trader gave away too many gifts in establishing or bolstering that social tie, he might undermine his position with his own creditors in the East. Avoiding either extreme was a necessary part of balancing every fur trader's books.

⁵³ Whelan, "The Archaeological Analysis of a 19th Century Dakota Indian Economy," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1987), 57.

⁵⁴ McKay, Journal, B. 105/a/1, folio 14 (Feb. 9, 1794).

⁵⁵ McLaughlin, Journal, B. 105/a/8, p. 14 (Nov. 2, 1822).

⁵⁶ Cameron, "Report," B. 105/a/10, folio 18 (May 25, 1825).

⁵⁷ On Simpson's directives and their effect on the traders at Rainy Lake, see White, "Balancing the Books," 82-94.

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