Chapter Three

THE NORTHWEST FUR TRADE

Figure 3-1 This hand-coloured woodcut of a late nineteenth-century illustration by Frederic Remington shows negotiations at a Hudson’s Bay Company trading post. The Hudson’s Bay Company was run by the British.

Figure 3-2 Radisson & Groseilliers Established the Fur Trade in the Great North West, 1662, by Archibald Bruce Stapleton, 1917–1950. French fur traders travelled west along the Great Lakes and beyond.
To explore this Essential Question, you will

- focus on the expansion of the European fur trade in the Northwest by exploring the establishment of Rupert’s Land, the creation of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the British–French competition for resources and land, early French presence in the Northwest, European contact and interaction with First Nations, and the origin of the Métis Nation
- develop an understanding of the origin and impact of European colonial expansion on the First Nations of the Northwest

**GETTING STARTED**

History is full of unintended consequences. In 1611, Henry Hudson sought a passage to Asia through the Arctic. He failed in his quest, but his journey brought Hudson Bay to the notice of Europeans. Hudson’s journey set the stage for a fierce competition that would last more than one hundred years and that would involve Britain, France, and First Nations and Métis peoples across the Northwest. As rival fur traders tried to outdo one another and increase their profits, they explored and mapped the continent.

Study the two paintings on page 76. They represent the drama that unfolded across the Northwest from about 1670 until the early years of the nineteenth century.

- How would you compare the style of negotiations shown in each painting? Consider who is taking part in the negotiations and the location.
- What action or actions are taking place? What do these actions tell you about differences between British and French styles of trading?
- How do the paintings’ details contribute to your understanding of each work? For example, compare clothing styles and body language, as well as objects in the foreground and background.
- Is either painting a primary source? Could you use these works as historical evidence? If you can, what issues might you need to consider?

**Key Terms**

- Baymen
- voyageurs
- home guard
- custom of the country
- acculturation
- Métis
- Country-born
- pemmican
- Nor’Westers

**Enduring Understandings**

- Canada’s history and identity have been shaped by its vast and diverse land, its northern location, and its abundant natural resources.
- The relationship between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples moved from autonomous coexistence to colonialism to the present stage of renegotiation and renewal.
- Nouvelle-France, Acadie, Québec, and francophone communities across Canada have played a role in shaping Canadian history and identity.
The Rise of the Hudson’s Bay Company

The Mighty Beaver

As you learned in Chapter 2, in the early seventeenth century, the French had established a colony—Nouvelle-France—along the shores of the St. Lawrence River. At the same time, the British had started colonizing Atlantic Canada. The Northwest—the vast area to the north and west of Lake Superior—was largely unknown to Europeans. But after 1670, the French began to travel west more frequently. The fur trade had begun to exhaust the supply of furs around the eastern Great Lakes. To supply and profit from the continued demand for furs, the French began building more fur-trade forts farther west along the St. Lawrence River and around the Great Lakes.

It was not long before the British saw how much money was being made in the fur trade. Both British and French were soon sending shiploads of beaver pelts back to Europe. The competition between Britain and France—already active in Europe and the colonies—became fierce. Both countries wanted to control North America and its resources.

The French were the first to push inland and actively seek relationships with First Nations in the Northwest. Based on what you read in Chapter 2 about the early history of the fur trade, what consequences do you think French expansion into the Northwest had on First Nations?
The Hudson’s Bay Company’s Beginnings

In 1654, Médard Chouart Des Groseilliers and his brother-in-law Pierre Esprit Radisson made a trip from Québec to the interior. The two coureurs de bois built a trading post on Chequamegon Bay on Lake Superior. It was the first European post at the site. First Nations people in the area told them of the vast fur-trading regions to the north and west, around Hudson Bay, or Hudson’s Bay, as it was sometimes called at the time.

In 1659, Radisson and Groseilliers returned to Montréal. Along with thousands of furs, they had a plan to set up a trading post on Hudson Bay, which would reduce the cost of transporting furs from the Northwest to Europe. They hoped the French king would sponsor their scheme. However, Radisson and Groseilliers did not receive the warm welcome they expected. Because they had been trading without licences, their furs were confiscated, Groseilliers was put in jail, and they were both fined for breaking the law.

Radisson and Groseilliers Look to England for Help

Having received no support from the powers of Nouvelle-France, Radisson and Groseilliers decided to try their idea with British authorities. In 1665, the coureurs de bois presented their plan to the court of King Charles II.

King Charles II agreed to support their quest for furs. The king’s cousin, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, helped organize finances for the journey. After three years of preparation in England, Radisson and Groseilliers were ready. The British had acquired two ships, the Nonsuch and the Eaglet, for the journey. Both ships set sail from England in June 1668. The Eaglet, carrying Radisson, was forced to turn back off the coast of Ireland. The Nonsuch continued on its way, reaching the southern shore of James Bay. There Groseilliers and his men named the Rupert River after their main sponsor, Prince Rupert. After a successful trading expedition over the winter of 1668–1669, the Nonsuch returned to England.

Pleased with the expedition’s success, the king granted a charter to Prince Rupert and his partners on May 2, 1670. In the charter, the “Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson’s Bay,” better known as the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), were given a monopoly over the fur trade in all the land whose rivers drained into Hudson Bay. The monopoly also gave the company wide legal and trading powers over the area, as well as complete administrative and judicial control.

Imagine you are a member of the French Royal Court at the time of the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company and that you have the task of writing a letter to the King of France describing the founding of the HBC. How might you characterize the role played by Radisson and Groseilliers?
**RUPERT’S LAND**

In its charter, the HBC was granted a monopoly over lands in the Hudson Bay drainage area. In modern geographical terms, Rupert’s Land included northern Quebec and Ontario, all of Manitoba, most of Saskatchewan and southern Alberta, a portion of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, and parts of Minnesota and North Dakota in the United States.

What problems can you foresee as consequences of this land grant?

**THE COMPANY OF ADVENTURERS GETS STARTED**

In the seventeenth century, British businesses were in the process of expanding around the world. The British East India Company had been chartered in 1600 to gather the riches of India. Prince Rupert and his Company of Adventurers saw North America as another potential source of wealth.

The HBC appointed a governor and committee to organize fur auctions, order trade goods, hire men, and make shipping arrangements. By 1685, trading forts were operating at Rupert River, Moose Factory, Albany Factory, and Port Nelson. Each fort or post was commanded by a chief factor (head trader) and his council of officers. However, the London-based governor and committee set the basic policies for Rupert’s Land. They based their decisions on annual reports, post journals, and account books supplied by the officers stationed on Hudson Bay.

Although the HBC was headquartered in London, the real *adventurers* of the company were its employees, the *Baymen*. Most of the early HBC employees were indentured servants. Indentured servants were labourers who agreed to work for the company for a period of time, usually seven to nine years. In exchange, they received food, drink, clothing, lodging, and their transportation to the fur-rich area of Hudson Bay. Many Baymen were from the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland. The HBC considered men from Orkney to be well suited for life on Hudson Bay. Orkney Islanders were familiar with a harsh climate, had excellent boat-handling skills, and were hard workers.
Henry Kelsey, often called the Boy Kelsey, was born in England around 1667. Historians know little about his youth, except that he was an orphan who spent his childhood on the streets of London. In his early teens, he was apprenticed to the Hudson’s Bay Company as a cabin boy on ships that carried supplies to Hudson Bay. He then spent the next forty years working for the HBC.

In 1684, Kelsey stopped his Atlantic crossings and remained at York Factory. There he worked alongside experienced Baymen such as Groseilliers and Radisson. He liked and respected First Nations ways of life and learned to speak Ininew (Cree). Some reports say he learned Nakota (Assiniboine) as well.

HBC officials noticed Kelsey’s adventurous spirit and First Nations connections. In 1688, the HBC sent Kelsey and a First Nations guide to explore and make trading contacts with Dene communities north of the Churchill River. In 1690, the HBC decided to send Kelsey south to expand contacts with the Ininew. The HBC also hoped Kelsey could convince the A’aninin (Gros Ventres) and southern Nakota communities to travel north to the HBC forts.

Although Kelsey’s exact route is unknown, he left York Factory in June 1690 and, with the help of his First Nations guides, travelled down the Hayes and Saskatchewan Rivers. Records suggest that he wintered near what is now The Pas, Manitoba. He then followed the Red Deer River south and finally struck out on foot across the prairies. He may have gone as far as the Touchwood Hills in southern Saskatchewan. He lived among various First Nations of the region for two years before returning to York Factory in 1692.

To his death in 1724, Kelsey claimed that he had never been given due credit for his explorations. This claim was likely true because there was no concrete record of his journeys until a 1749 parliamentary report in England. It was not until 1926 that his journal was discovered in Ireland. The Kelsey Papers, a single, paperbound volume dated 1693, is still surrounded by mystery. Some historians do not believe it was really written by Kelsey. The journal, which opens with some curious, rhyming free verse, tells of his various travels, including some of the first recorded European sightings of musk-ox, grizzly bear, and the great herds of North American bison.

Figure 3-6 Kelsey Sees the Buffalo, by C. W. Jefferys, 1927. Henry Kelsey is believed to be the first European to have met First Nations people of the Great Plains in 1690.

**Explorations**

1. Take a historical perspective to consider why Kelsey might have joined the HBC. What would the company have offered him?

2. Historical records suggest that Kelsey helped other HBC employees learn First Nations languages. A copy of his unpublished Ininew language dictionary is in the British Library. What does this evidence tell us about Kelsey’s view of First Nations and their role in the fur trade?

3. Locate a copy of the *The Kelsey Papers* to research Kelsey’s descriptions of First Nations and their ways of life. What conclusions can you draw about Kelsey from these descriptions?
**ON THE SHORES OF HUDSON BAY**

As detailed in the HBC charter, the purposes of the company were to be “for the Discovery of a new Passage into the South Sea, and for the finding some Trade for Furs, Minerals, and other considerable Commodities.” In exchange for these duties, the charter granted the Adventurers

the sole Trade and Commerce of all those Seas, Streights, Bays, Rivers, Lakes, Creeks, and Sounds . . . that lie within the entrance of the Streights commonly called Hudson’s Streights, together with all the Lands, Countries and Territories, upon the Coasts and Confines of the Seas, Streights, Bays, Lakes, Rivers, Creeks and Sounds . . . which are not now actually possessed by any of our Subjects, or by the Subjects of any other Christian Prince or State.

The territory of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s monopoly was enormous, at least in theory. In reality, the HBC controlled only a small area near Hudson Bay. The British fur-trade system depended on First Nations people bringing furs to the forts along the Bay. As long as the fur supply was steady, the company saw little need to expand inland. In contrast, French fur traders were more willing to travel to their First Nations trading partners, bringing the furs back to French posts themselves.

For many years, the HBC confined its trading to the posts along the Bay. The Company’s mission to seek the Northwest Passage, if not forgotten along the way, was definitely secondary to the highly profitable fur trade.

Before long, a protocol developed with the HBC’s First Nations trading partners, especially the Ininimowin (Swampy Cree), whose territory was near many HBC posts. Annual trading sessions began with the passing of a ceremonial pipe, which the Ininimowin left at the fort to indicate they would return the following year. A ritual exchange of gifts took place, and then the traders began their negotiations. The Ininimowin were astute traders: guns were forged to their specifications, wares were made lighter for transport, and tobacco was prepared and packaged as instructed.

First Nations peoples across the continent had long had their own network of trading relationships. The new relationship with the Europeans initially fit into traditional trading patterns. Both Europeans and First Nations people profited during the early years of the trade. First Nations people received new trade goods, such as metal tools, and Europeans received furs and knowledge and technology to help them live and travel in North America’s unfamiliar environment.

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**RECALL... REFLECT... RESPOND**

1. Take the historical perspective of an HBC employee. Why would you take part in First Nations’ styles of trading ceremonies?

2. What elements of the HBC’s charter do you predict had a significant role in shaping the years that followed? Why?
Between 1688 and 1763, Britain and France were frequently at war as they competed for territory and power in Europe and elsewhere around the world. Both countries wanted North America’s abundant natural resources for themselves, and they frequently tried to drive their rivals from the continent. Business interests in North America and the empire-building goals of European countries were intertwined. European fur traders pursued the goals of their monarchs back in Europe, especially if those goals led to competitive advantage over their business rivals.

**THE FRENCH-BRITISH RIVALRY: PART ONE**

In the early 1600s, the French dominated the North American fur trade. The St. Lawrence River gave them Atlantic access to the heart of the continent. The city of Montréal prospered as the main depot from which furs were shipped to Europe.

Between 1640 and 1670, two events directly motivated French expansion into the Northwest. The first event was the Haudensoune (Iroquois) Wars. Having lost their valuable fur-trade allies, the Wendat (Huron) and Algonquin First Nations, the French were forced to seek trading partners farther west.

The second event that prompted the French to expand west was the creation of the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1670. The HBC’s impact was felt as early as 1671, when French fur traders noticed a drop in the number of furs reaching Montréal. The French responded with diplomatic negotiations with First Nations to win back their trade. Diplomacy toward First Nations was matched with an aggressive military policy to try to eliminate the HBC’s hold on Hudson Bay.

The French and British competed with each other to win over more First Nations trading partners than their rivals. What methods do you think they used? What effect do you think this competition had on First Nations?

In 1681, French authorities began giving licences to *coureurs de bois*, a recognition of the valuable role these traders played in extending Nouvelle-France’s fur trade. These licenced traders were known as *voyageurs*.

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**Figure 3-8**  *Dickering with the Factor, by Franklin Schoonover, 1912.* The HBC stocked its posts along Hudson Bay with supplies and waited for First Nations people to bring their furs. What impression of the HBC’s approach to the fur trade does the painting give you? Given when this painting was created, how accurate do you think this representation is?
In the thirty years that followed the creation of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the French tried to destroy the HBC’s forts along the Hudson Bay. The first HBC headquarters on the Bay was established at Port Nelson in 1682. The construction of the fort brought a quick response from France: it sent a naval force to capture and destroy the fort in 1684. The HBC then relocated and rebuilt the fort on the Hayes River, calling it York Factory.

After war broke out in Europe in 1688, the British and French regularly sent expeditions to raid and capture each other’s fur-trading posts. Both Moose Factory and Rupert House fell to the French, who were eager to capture York Factory as well. They gave that task to Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville, a career soldier and sailor who had already taken part in many expeditions against the British. The French appointed him commander-in-chief of Hudson Bay.

In the spring of 1697, the King of France sent a large fleet to Hudson Bay, but the ships became trapped in the ice. Under the command of d’Iberville, the forty-four-gun Pélican broke free and made its way to the mouth of the Hayes River. In the foggy conditions, the British could not tell how many French ships they faced. They assumed the Pélican was accompanied by French warships.

The French ship was soon surrounded by a British frigate, the Hampshire, and two armed freighters, the Dering and the Hudson’s Bay. The British fired the first shot and the Pélican was hit broadside. The subsequent battle raged for close to four hours. In the end, one British ship was sunk, one had surrendered, and the other had retreated. The Pélican was tattered, but victorious.

Despite being outnumbered, d’Iberville’s French force captured York Factory. France had temporarily won the battle for the Bay. For the next sixteen years, the HBC puzzled over how to win back its monopoly.

Then, in 1713, the British and French signed the Treaty of Utrecht to end the War of Spanish Succession. As part of the agreement, the French gave up all claims to Hudson Bay and the region returned to British fur traders. The French focused their plans for fur-trade expansion on territories in the Northwest.

In 1699, Pierre d’Iberville was presented with the cross of the order of Saint-Louis, which France used to reward exceptional officers. He was the first person of Canadian birth to receive it. Thereafter, he recommended immediate colonization of Louisiana. Who would think that d’Iberville was an exceptional officer? Who might disagree? Why?
In 1730, the government of Nouvelle-France funded an expedition by Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Vérendrye to explore the West in search of a route to the Pacific Ocean. The French were determined to find a route through the continent and set up trade with Asia, as well as to extend the fur trade into the interior of the continent. La Vérendrye was the Canadian-born son of the governor of Trois-Rivières. He had served in the French army abroad and, upon returning to Canada, had become a fur trader and farmer. La Vérendrye was given the fur trade monopoly for the areas he explored.

La Vérendrye left Montréal on June 8, 1731, with a group that included three of his sons. In the years that followed, he built a series of fur-trading posts that became an important base of French operations in the West.

In 1738, La Vérendrye established two forts in present-day Manitoba: one at Fort Rouge (Winnipeg) and the other at Fort La Reine (Portage la Prairie). From Fort La Reine, La Vérendrye and his group made their way to Lake Manitoba, Lake Winnipegosis, Lake Winnipeg, and the Saskatchewan River. He then oversaw the construction of Fort Dauphin, Fort Bourbon (Grand Rapids), and Fort Paskoya (The Pas). The La Vérendryes explored the Saskatchewan River and two of the sons reached the Rockies. They also explored North and South Dakota, setting the stage for Nouvelle-France’s territorial growth in the decades that followed.

According to the Voices feature, what were La Vérendrye’s motives for western exploration? What might have been some of the unintended consequences of his explorations?

Voices

The colony will receive a new benefit independently of the discovery of the Western Sea through the quantity of furs that will be produced which now ... go to the English. I am only seeking to carry the name and arms of His Majesty into a vast stretch of countries hitherto unknown, to enlarge the colony and increase its commerce.

— Pierre La Vérendrye
La Vérendrye’s western expansion established a pattern for Montréal’s inland trade and, as the French moved inland, they became strong competition for the British. The French had a different trading style. Instead of waiting at their posts for First Nations people to bring furs to them, the French sought out First Nations in their own territory. For First Nations, the French traders eliminated the considerable work of hauling their furs to Hudson Bay.

To the dismay of Hudson’s Bay Company officials, the voyageurs diverted many furs on their way to the Bay by intercepting First Nations traders on their journey north. HBC shareholders in London were furious at the drop in profits and demanded that the HBC do something. The HBC realized it could no longer wait for furs. It needed to move inland.

**The First Inland Forts**

In 1743, the HBC built its first inland post at Henley House, 200 kilometres inland from the coast on the Albany River. In the 1750s, Henley House was attacked twice by the French, who saw the fort as an encroachment on their territory. James Isham, the chief factor at York Factory, chose Anthony Henday, a net maker and onetime smuggler, to make a journey inland to invite First Nations to trade at British posts. Escorted by Ininew (Cree) and Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) guides, Henday’s journey between 1754 and 1755 took him across the prairies to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. However, Henday was unable to convince members of the Niitsitapi Confederacy to travel to Hudson Bay. They did not want to make the long trip north and did not want to cross Ininew territory, which could lead to conflict.

**Recall… Reflect… Respond**

1. Take a historical perspective to explain why you think the HBC hired Anthony Henday, a convicted smuggler.
2. In what ways did European rivalries, especially between Britain and France, have consequences for the fur trade?
In 1733, Joseph Robson joined the Hudson’s Bay Company as a stonemason for a three-year tenure. His task was to build Prince of Wales Fort (present-day Churchill, Manitoba). In 1744, he returned to Hudson Bay for another three-year term. This time he was “Surveyor and Supervisor for the Buildings” at York Factory and later Prince of Wales Fort.

Robson explored as much as 80 kilometres up the Nelson River and published many topographical maps. Robson also created charts that recorded the river’s course and its surroundings, made tables of winds and tides, recorded the costs of building Prince of Wales Fort, and sketched detailed plans of the two forts.

His maps, records, statistics, and sketches, as well as his impressions of the HBC’s policies and business, were published in 1752 in a book called An Account of Six Years Residence in Hudson’s-Bay. His work included several sharp criticisms of the HBC. In particular, he told stories about the oppressive behaviour of some of the company’s factors and he condemned their refusal to explore the western interior. He is famous for his comment that the HBC slept while the French captured the continent:

The Company have for eighty years slept at the edge of a frozen sea; they have shewn no curiosity to penetrate farther themselves, and have exerted all their art and power to crush that spirit in others.

Robson’s book is a valuable source of primary evidence for historians. It was the earliest book of its type to record first-hand knowledge of what working for the HBC was like.

1. Based on Figure 3-13, what do you think was the primary concern of the British in constructing the fort?

2. Why do you think Robson’s critique of the HBC has attracted so much attention from historians? Read portions of Robson’s book, which is available online.

Go to the Shaping Canada web site and follow the links to find a copy. What information did he find most significant? How is this information significant today?
**First Nations’ Roles in the Western Fur Trade**

The fur trade in North America began with the earliest contacts between First Nations people and Europeans. Within a few years of their arrival on the continent, French and British fur traders competed with one another to form trading relationships with First Nations. First Nations traders used British–French rivalries to their advantage. They frequently demanded, and received, better terms and goods in exchange for a partnership.

From the beginning, First Nations people eagerly sought European goods and paid for them in furs. The unit of currency in the fur trade was one “made-beaver,” a prime beaver pelt that had been worn until most of the beaver’s long outer hair had been worn off.

**What role did First Nations play in the Hudson’s Bay Company fur trade?**

Like the Wendat (Huron), who had been the primary French middlemen in Nouvelle-France, the Ininimowin (Swampy Cree) and Nakota (Assiniboine) took this role for the Hudson’s Bay Company until the 1720s. Using their pre-existing trading alliances, the Ininimowin and Nakota controlled trade in the areas surrounding the HBC posts for many decades.

The HBC middlemen travelled upstream, especially along the Saskatchewan River, trading for furs with other First Nations. They then transported these furs to the trading posts on Hudson Bay. Many middlemen and their families began to settle near the HBC forts and became what were known as the **home guard**. Some First Nations people worked for the traders, hunting, paddling supply canoes, and making snowshoes.

After 1774, however, as the number of trading posts across the West grew, the role of middlemen declined because more First Nations traded directly with inland HBC posts. In later years, the home guard First Nations participated in the fur trade by supplying the European fur traders with food and other supplies.

**C&C** How do you think the cultures of the home guard changed as the people began living in permanent or semi-permanent villages near the HBC forts? How do you think their cultures remained the same?
The Custom of the Country

Even though the Treaty of Utrecht gave the Hudson’s Bay Company sole trading rights in Rupert’s Land, the voyageurs continued to travel from the Northwest to Montréal every spring with their furs to trade. These men were sometimes called free traders. Many free traders returned to the Northwest as soon as their business in Montréal was complete. They were more at home among First Nations communities than in the villages of Nouvelle-France.

Many French traders took First Nations women as wives in a formal process known as the custom of the country. First Nations had a tradition of building alliances with other communities through marriages, so the practice was easily accepted. The fur traders and their masters in Montréal also encouraged these relationships. French officials believed the marriages would strengthen friendships and trade with First Nations. They hoped that marriage to French men would encourage First Nations women and their children to adopt French language, religion, and culture in a process known as acculturation. To the surprise and dismay of French authorities, the process of acculturation worked both ways: many of their French traders began adopting First Nations ways of life. In time, a new culture and people arose from these unions: the Métis. Métis children were raised with elements of both French and First Nations cultures and were immersed in the fur-trade culture and economy.

Take a historical perspective to consider the response of French officials to the acculturation of French men to First Nations ways of life. What does their surprise tell you about their worldview?

In contrast, the HBC’s London-based directors were concerned about the costs of supporting fur traders’ families at their posts. Therefore, the company strictly forbade its employees from marrying First Nations women. However, this rule was regularly violated by HBC employees. By the 1740s, when HBC employee James Isham reported that the HBC traders’ offspring around the posts had become “pretty Numerious,” the HBC acknowledged the limits of its control and eased off its rule. HBC employee families began to settle around HBC forts and became a significant part of the home guard. The children of the Baymen and First Nations women were known as Country-born. Country-born families developed a culture that was distinct from that of the French Métis along the Montréal trade routes.

Some Europeans stayed with their First Nations wives only as long as their posting in the Northwest, while others formed lifelong bonds. Many voyageurs, in particular, retired to live with their wife, children, and their wife’s extended family.
FIRST NATIONS WOMEN’S ROLES IN THE FUR TRADE

For fur traders, First Nations wives provided companionship in a land with few European women. In addition, the unions were good for business. First Nations women were indispensable to European fur traders because of their knowledge of how to survive in the North American landscape. They accompanied explorers and fur traders on their long journeys and provided food, prepared furs for travel, and gathered supplies for canoe repairs. Sometimes whole families travelled with the fur brigades, and the women did much of the paddling. Many women also acted as guides.

In addition, women provided European traders with First Nations kinship connections. In traditional First Nations societies, relationships were key. Until relationships were established, business could not be done. By marrying into a First Nations community, a fur trader established a kinship relationship with everyone in that community and, by extension, to other communities as well. These kinship relationships opened the door to trading partnerships.

In the early days of the HBC fur trade, First Nations wives occasionally accompanied their husbands to Britain when the men retired from the fur trade. Most husbands returned to Britain alone, leaving their First Nations wives with their communities. Take a historical perspective to consider the benefits and drawbacks of each practice.

The women raised families, made moccasins, netted snowshoes, cleaned and tanned pelts, snared rabbits and small game, collected berries and other food from the land, tended gardens, fished, and, each spring, cleaned and scrubbed the posts in the annual spring cleaning. They dried fish and preserved other food, and helped make pemmican for the fur-trade brigades. Pemmican consists of dried bison meat mixed with fat and sometimes berries. It is light to transport and keeps well without spoiling. This food, long a staple in the diet of many First Nations, would eventually become the main food of all fur traders, European, Métis, and First Nations.

Most of the tasks done by women in the fur trade were traditional roles for women in First Nations communities. During the fur trade, however, many women’s roles evolved as they became translators and intermediaries between their communities and the clerks and traders of the fur companies.
Thanadelthur was a young Dene woman born in northern Manitoba sometime in the late 1690s. There are no written records of her life, but we have come to know her story through the testimony of men who worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company and the oral tradition of her people.

Thanadelthur lived at a time when the Dene and the Ininew (Cree) were fiercely competing in the fur trade and regularly raiding one another’s camps. In 1713, Thanadelthur was captured by the Ininew during one of these raids.

Escaping her captors, she arrived at York Factory in 1714. There she met the chief factor of the fort, James Knight, who was impressed by her forceful personality. Knight was concerned about the conflict between the Ininew and Dene and believed it was a distraction from the fur trade. He thought that if the Dene and Ininew could make peace, fur-trade profits for the HBC would increase. He hoped that Thanadelthur could help establish this peace.

In 1715, a peace mission was organized. Accompanied by Thanadelthur as the interpreter, plus 150 home guard Ininew people, Knight travelled more than 1000 kilometres north and west to meet with Dene leaders. Historical records contain testimony from HBC officials who said that Thanadelthur had a sharp tongue and was highly persuasive. She was said to have guided the two groups to an agreement through “her perpetual [sic] talking.” After almost a year, the party headed back to York Factory, accompanied by ten Dene people.

Thanadelthur fell ill and died on February 15, 1717. The young woman was pivotal in establishing a peace between the Dene and Ininew peoples. This peace helped build trade relations between the HBC and the Dene, leading to the construction of an HBC fort at present-day Churchill, Manitoba.

**Explorations**

1. Name two consequences of the peace facilitated by Thanadelthur.

2. After Thanadelthur’s death, James Knight wrote in his journal that “She was one of a very high Spirit and of the Firmest Resolution that ever I see in any Body in my Days and of great Courage.” Research other sources of information about Thanadelthur. Which are primary and which are secondary sources? Explain which information you find most reliable and why. What aspects of Thanadelthur’s story are missing?
Fur-Trade Problems in the West

As fur traders moved west, they carried diseases such as smallpox, influenza, measles, and scarlet fever. First Nations on the Atlantic coast and around the Great Lakes had been devastated by these diseases. Western First Nations, however, had had few direct contacts with Europeans until the fur trade expanded. With expansion, however, the diseases spread inland. From 1780 to 1784, a major smallpox epidemic spread throughout First Nations in the West. Entire communities were wiped out. Others were so weakened by the illnesses that they were unable to care for themselves.

As it had near the eastern Great Lakes, the uneven distribution of firearms among First Nations resulted in deadly conflicts between communities. For example, Ininew (Cree) and Nakota (Assiniboine) traders were among the first communities in the Northwest to receive firearms from the HBC. Using these guns, they pushed back other communities and expanded their territories to keep their position in the fur trade. In particular, Ininew home guard used guns to secure their position as middlemen between the HBC and Dene communities to the north. In 1717, soon after the peace agreement negotiated by Thanadelthur, the HBC built Fort Churchill, which was in Dene territory. Thereafter, the Dene had their own supply of firearms, and conflicts with the Ininew did not resume.

Over time, the fur trade depleted fur stocks in some regions and First Nations moved from their traditional territories. What problems do you think these movements caused?

**RECALL... REFLECT... RESPOND**

1. In which ways did the cultures of First Nations people of the Northwest adapt to change as the fur trade expanded west? In what ways did their cultures stay the same? How did European cultures change and stay the same?

2. How were these cultural changes historically significant?
As they established trade with one another, Europeans and First Nations people learned about worldviews and cultures that were often very different from their own. In many cases, people from each group were puzzled by the other’s motivations and actions. In almost all cases, people interpreted other people’s actions through the lens of their own worldview. Read each statement on this page, considering how each speaker’s worldview affected his or her viewpoint.

A Piikani (Peigan) chief told a story to explorer David Thompson in 1787 in which he described his people’s first close encounter with a horse. During a battle, a horse ridden by a rival was killed and the Piikani gathered to examine the animal up close:

Numbers of us went to see him, and we all admired him, he put us in mind of a Stag that had lost its horns; and we did not know what name to give him. But as he was slave to Man, like the dog, which carried our things, he was named the Big Dog.

In 1634, Father Paul Le Jeune, a Jesuit priest at Québec, reported the views of a local First Nations leader on the European desire for beaver pelts:

The Beaver does everything perfectly well, it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; in short, it makes everything … . The English have no sense; they give us twenty knives like this for one Beaver skin.

Explorer Samuel Hearne kept many journals of his travels and encounters with First Nations and Inuit peoples. In 1771, he wrote about how a group of Kitilermiut (Copper Inuit) people, who had never seen a European before, responded to his appearance:

They flocked about me, and expressed as much desire to examine me from top to toe, as a European naturalist would a non-descript animal … . The whiteness of my skin … was, in their opinion, no ornament, as they said it resembled meat which had been sodden in water till all the blood was extracted.

At one camp, he reported the community’s custom of allowing women in labour to give birth alone in a tent at some distance from the rest of the community:

These people never attempt to assist each other on these occasions. They entertain that nature is abundantly sufficient to perform everything required … . When I informed them of the assistance which European women derive from the skill and attention of our midwives, they treated us with the utmost contempt; ironically observing, “that the many hump-backs, bandy-legs, and other deformities, so frequent among the English, were undoubtedly owing to the great skill of the persons who assisted in bringing them into the world.”

**Explorations**

1. **What does each statement tell you about the speaker’s worldview? How did his worldview impact how he perceived the situation described?**

2. **In each case, the quotations show a First Nations perspective, but told through the words of a European. What are the problems with this type of evidence?**
The competition between Britain and France broke out into war in 1755, when the Seven Years’ War began. The war, which started in Europe, quickly spilled into North America. In 1759, the French surrendered to the British at Québec and Nouvelle-France was defeated soon afterward. The London committee of the Hudson’s Bay Company believed the fall of Nouvelle-France would mean the end of French competition for the fur trade. The committee members expected that the golden age of their fur-trade monopoly would begin.

This expectation, however, did not come to pass. Entrepreneurial English and Scottish traders, as well as Yankee traders from the Thirteen Colonies, rushed to Montréal to take over the profitable French trade routes. Many voyageurs continued their role in the fur trade, but now they sold their furs to English, Scottish, or Yankee traders. The Montréal-based traders ignored the HBC charter and its rules, and the fur trade continued to flourish in the city. Even though Nouvelle-France had fallen, the fur trade and its rivalries continued.

After the fall of Nouvelle-France and the passing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the northwestern fur trade became, in many ways, a free-for-all. The competition between the Montréal-based trade and the Hudson Bay–based trade continued, but now the Montréal-based trade also competed with itself. The new English, Scottish, and Yankee traders formed several small companies that fought to dominate the Montréal trade.

**C&C** How did life change for French fur traders after the fall of Nouvelle-France? In what ways do you think it remained the same?
After the 1680s, the Hudson’s Bay Company was firmly established along Hudson Bay. Fur was transported by First Nations people from the western interior to the forts via the river systems that fed into the Bay. Birch-bark canoes were an efficient form of transportation: they were light enough for portages (places where canoes and cargo needed to be carried overland to the next water body), they could carry several times their weight in freight, they were easily repaired, and they moved easily through rough water.

The HBC had three main river routes to the interior: the Upper, Middle, and Lower Track Routes. It was on the Upper and Middle Track Routes—a maze of lakes and rivers—that the Ininew (Cree) of the Saskatchewan River travelled to trade furs with inland First Nations and then transport the furs back to the Bay. The Ininew’s skills of trapping, preparing furs, paddling, and building canoes were essential to the HBC’s success.

It was difficult to build birch-bark canoes at York Factory and Prince of Wales Fort because there were few birch trees in the surrounding area. The Baymen began experimenting with other forms of river transportation.

In 1749, William Sinclair, the chief factor at York Factory, oversaw construction of the first York boat. Sinclair was the Country-born son of a Scottish father and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/Saulteaux) mother. Based on an old Orkney design, the York boat was larger, carried a greater load, and had a longer lifespan than a canoe. In addition, the York boat proved more stable in the sometimes rough waters of Manitoba’s larger lakes. The one notable disadvantage of the York boat came when portaging was necessary. Because the York boats were too heavy to carry, traders had to cut a path through the brush, lay poplar trees as rollers on the ground, and drag the boat overland.

After the fall of Nouvelle-France, the York boats were filled with French voyageurs, who joined the First Nations, Métis, and Country-born boatmen already working for the HBC. The heavy York boats could not be used on the Upper and Middle Track Routes, so the main route became the Lower Track Route. This route bypassed the Saskatchewan River, and the Ininew people whose economy had come to depend upon the fur trade.

**Figure 3-20** The Upper, Middle, and Lower Track Routes

The Upper and Middle Track Routes had too many portages to use the York Boat, so HBC traders began to prefer the Lower Track Route.

**Figure 3-21** The York boat’s heavy wood construction gave it an advantage in travelling through rocks or ice, making it sturdier than canoes against tears and punctures.

1. Create a web that shows the causes of the decline in the Saskatchewan River Ininew’s position in the fur trade.

2. Explain your analysis of the interrelated causes.
Competition Heats Up

The French approach to the fur trade was highly successful. In 1773, York Factory received 8000 beaver, down from 30 000 the decade before. The drop in furs reaching the Bay prompted the HBC to take action. In 1774, HBC employee Samuel Hearne built the first inland HBC post at Cumberland House near Pine Island Lake on the Saskatchewan River. Cumberland House was about forty days’ travelling time from York Factory. From the same point, the French traders had a five-month journey back to Montréal. The HBC hoped the post would give the company a competitive advantage.

The North West Company Is Formed

By the 1770s, the Montréal-based fur trade extended as far north and west as Lake Athabasca—separated from Montréal by 4800 kilometres. The route between Lake Athabasca and Montréal was one of the busiest and most profitable of the fur trade. As trade pushed farther into the interior, transportation expenses mounted. Before long, the major Montréal operators were pooling their efforts to save costs. In 1779, several of these operators formed the North West Company (NWC). The NWC was led by several businessmen, including Simon McTavish. By 1787, McTavish controlled eleven of the company’s twenty shares. Among the other shareholders were Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser, and Peter Pond, all fur traders and three of Canada’s best-known explorers.

The company had twenty-three partners, but more than 2000 guides, interpreters, and voyageurs. McTavish and other Scots shareholders married French Canadian women and French Canadians played key roles in the company. French Canadians helped build and manage NWC trading posts, and were the majority of employees with face-to-face contact with First Nations people in the Northwest. The company’s blend of Scottish and French cultures kept it distinct from the more conservative, cautious HBC. The NWC became known for its bold and aggressive approach to business.
THE PATTERN OF EXPANSION

The NWC refused to recognize the monopoly claimed by the HBC in Rupert’s Land, and the HBC had no way to enforce it. The Nor’Westers—as the NWC traders came to be known—continued the French pattern of travelling to First Nations to trade with them, and the HBC was forced to adopt similar methods. Both companies expanded their operations farther and farther west to keep ahead of the other.

Expansion in the West followed a distinct pattern: the NWC would build an inland trading post and the HBC would follow, building its fort next door. In some cases, forts were just metres apart.

EXPLORING THE WEST

The drive to establish forts drove both the HBC and NWC to fund more exploration.

One of the Nor’Westers to take charge of the Montréal fur-trade routes was Peter Pond. In 1783, he mapped the Methye Portage, a 19 kilometre portage in present-day northern Saskatchewan. The portage had been used by First Nations in the region for hundreds of years as part of their regular transportation routes. The portage brought Pond to the Clearwater and Athabasca Rivers and then on to Lake Athabasca, the source of some of the best beaver pelts in the trade. In 1788, the NWC established Fort Chipewyan on the lake’s western tip (in what is now northern Alberta).

Pond also learned to make pemmican. In time, pemmican became the main food source of fur traders, and both the HBC and NWC would set up posts just to trade in pemmican. Many plains First Nations and Métis communities played a key role in the pemmican trade.

Pond was convinced that a route to the Pacific could be found from waters flowing into Lake Athabasca. However, the British government refused to fund his further exploration. Alexander Mackenzie, a NWC clerk who had followed Pond to the interior in 1785, was convinced Pond was correct. In 1789, Mackenzie left Fort Chipewyan along the Slave River and ended up at the Beaufort Sea. Disappointed with that route, he then tried the Peace River. Following this river and eventually a land route described to him by First Nations people he met along the way, Mackenzie reached the Pacific on July 22, 1793.

Although Mackenzie had reached the Pacific, the path he had taken was not practical as a major fur-trade route. The NWC began to explore for a route farther south. In 1808, Simon Fraser descended the river that would one day take his name and reached the ocean. However, the Fraser River had wild rapids and steep cliffs. Travel down the Fraser River was gruelling and dangerous, even for travellers without heavy bundles of furs or other goods.
In 1811, it was David Thompson who finally found a more practical fur-trade route to the Pacific. Thompson first came to North America with the HBC, working at Prince of Wales Fort. Eventually, he learned the craft of surveying and found he was a talented mapmaker. He was so talented, in fact, that the NWC hired him away from the HBC in 1797, at four times his HBC salary.

Thompson became the chief surveyor for the NWC and spent seven years mapping the West. In the course of his work, he travelled more than 80,000 kilometres, usually accompanied by his Métis wife, Charlotte Small, and their children.

Like earlier explorers before them, Pond, Mackenzie, Fraser, and Thompson were accompanied by First Nations guides, whose contributions have often been overlooked by history. For example, although many explorers and traders took their First Nations and Métis wives with them, most company records either ignored them or dismissed the women as “women of the country.” David Thompson was a notable exception: he insisted that his wife be referred to by name in all his reports. Without First Nations labour, translation skills, and knowledge of the land, none of the explorers would have survived their journeys or found the routes they sought.

The expeditions were also made possible by voyageurs. Speaking a combination of French and First Nations languages, the voyageur was at home on the rivers of the Northwest. He paddled most waking hours of the day and, like the First Nations people who accompanied such ventures, was indispensable in the exploration of the West.

From today’s perspective, what was most historically significant about the maps of the West that explorers such as Pond and Thompson created?
1. Was the HBC company employee making an ethical judgment in his complaint to the governor of British North America? How can you tell?

2. Regulations and restrictions against using alcohol as a trade good indicate that traders were aware of its destructive effects, yet they continued the practice.
Figure 3-27 The Beaver Club was formed in Montréal in 1785. Its membership included partners in the North West Company who had spent at least one winter in the Northwest. The motto of the club, engraved on the back of this medal above an image of six men in a canoe, is Fortitude in Distress. What does this medal tell you about European attitudes toward the fur trade and life in the Northwest?

**The North West Company’s Competitive Advantage**

The North West Company dominated the fur trade until it merged with the HBC in 1821. In the early years of the nineteenth century, the NWC had almost four-fifths of the trade. In 1804, the NWC had 108 posts in the Northwest, compared to the HBC’s 57 posts. The NWC had several competitive advantages. First, the NWC was owned and operated by men who were themselves active in the business. Many of the partners travelled into the interior and traded there. These partners understood the challenges of the Northwest and had personal relationships with their First Nations trading partners. Their first-hand knowledge made them effective managers of their large labour force and extensive transportation network. The NWC also had the benefit of its skilled and experienced voyageurs.

In contrast, the HBC’s directors and investors were primarily English noblemen and financiers who governed the company from faraway London. Their interest in the business was overwhelmingly financial and their actual knowledge of the trade was secondhand, at best. Only some HBC employees learned First Nations languages and adopted the customs of the people. Few had much knowledge of the lands and people from which their furs came.

**The Métis Nation**

While the partners and clerks of the North West Company were mainly Scots, the lower ranks of the company were filled with voyageurs and Métis people. Many voyageurs married First Nations women of the Northwest. Supported by the NWC, these unions grew in number and gradually a distinct culture emerged. Métis children were raised to understand and appreciate both First Nations and French cultures, and Métis families increasingly lived and worked near one another. As had happened with the Country-born home guard living around HBC forts, distinct Métis communities began to emerge, especially near the Red River.

The Métis culture was born of the French fur trade. Métis people bridged cultural gaps, creating better trading relationships. They played a special and vital role in the fur trade due to not only their skills as voyageurs, hunters, and interpreters, but also their knowledge of the land.

**RECALL…REFLECT…RESPOND**

1. The fall of Nouvelle-France to the British had consequences for many people in the Northwest. What groups of people were affected and how?

2. In what ways did Métis and Country-born cultures show change and continuity over time?
The first corporate seal with the coat of arms for the Hudson’s Bay Company was made in 1671, the year after it was granted its royal charter. Historical records indicate that the company used the corporate seal from the very beginning. Having and using a corporate seal was, and still is, an important part of the HBC’s identity.

Although the coat of arms has changed over the years, elements of it have remained consistent:

- a silver shield with a red cross (the cross of St. George, patron saint of England)
- four brown beavers
- a crest showing a fox sitting on a red cap
- two elk supporting the shield and crest (in 1961, the elk were changed to two moose)

Between 1880 and 1913, the fur-trade company began to diversify its business:

- 1881: the first HBC mail-order catalogue
- 1907: the company established a wholesale department to sell liquor, tobacco, coffee, tea, confectionaries, and blankets
- 1913: modern department stores were opened in Calgary and Edmonton

With these changes came the need for a logo that would represent the company’s identity in advertising. By 1965, the company had become more of a department store than a fur trader. That year the HBC introduced “The Bay” banner logo. In 2005, in an attempt to modernize the company’s image, a new logo was created. The new logo simply depicted the letters “HBC” in white below stripes of the company’s four emblematic colours—green, red, yellow, blue.

During the fall of 2009, in light of the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, another HBC logo was introduced. This logo was to appear on all official Olympic apparel, athlete uniforms, and advertising initiatives for the games. The newest logo uses a modernized version of the company’s original crest and full name.

Figure 3-28  Many people see the 2009 logo as a shift back to the historical roots of the HBC.

1756

1958

1965

2005

2009

1. Describe how the changes in the HBC’s coats of arms and logos show both continuity and change.

2. What does the last logo tell you about the historical period in which it was developed?
Chapter 3
Questions and Activities

1. The Essential Question of this chapter asks, How did First Peoples and Europeans interact in the Northwest and what were the results?

If this question appeared on a test or quiz, how would you answer it? Use your book to outline the main ideas and details for a short essay that answers the Essential Question.

2. Historians may use many types of primary evidence to reconstruct the past. Evidence can include photographs, art, film, oral histories, music, maps, land surveys, and even cookbooks or records of what people ate during a particular time period. Conduct research to find out what Europeans and First Nations people ate during the early fur-trade era (until 1763) in Canada’s Northwest. Answer the questions that follow in your research:
   a) Was there a written recipe for the food, or was the recipe passed down orally?
   b) Report on differences in the vocabulary of the cookbooks/recipes over time. How have terms for measurement and ingredients changed?
   c) What do the ingredient lists tell you about the types of foods available and the lifestyle of the time?
   d) In general, what appeared to have been most important: taste, nutrition, portability, convenience, or availability of ingredients? Rank these in order of importance to the people who ate the food.
   e) Were there differences in the diet of First Nations people and Europeans during this period? If so, what were they?
   f) Describe any evidence of acculturation that you found in your research.

3. Create an account of an Ininew (Cree) trader from the Saskatchewan River area who has travelled to York Factory to trade furs for Europeans goods. You can choose to present an oral account of your story from the perspective of the Ininew trader or you can write the story as though you are an HBC trader who is interested in recording information about the lives and cultures of First Nations people.

Consider the questions that follow in creating your account:
   • Where did you begin your journey?
   • What methods of transportation did you use in your trek?
   • How did the landscape change as you travelled north? How did the changing landscape affect your journey?
   • What were the difficulties of your journey? What did you enjoy?
   • Whom did you travel with?
   • Who met you at the fort?
   • What were your impressions of the Hudson’s Bay Company fort?
   • What trade goods did you receive for your furs?

4. The historical significance of the fur trade is remembered through a variety of public monuments in Manitoba. Research these monuments and write a travel guide description of the monuments you most recommend.

Figure 3-29 The Lower Fort Garry National Historical Site is the oldest stone trading post in North America.
5. The word *bannock* has Scottish origins. It is a biscuit-like bread that became part of First Nations food traditions. First Nations borrowed the European method of making biscuits or scones and began making their own form of bread that was popular with voyageurs, hunters, trappers, and traders because it was filling and easy to pack on expeditions. Today bannock continues to be popular in First Nations and other communities.

The Kikiwak Inn on the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Manitoba offers a variety of bannock in its dining room, including bannock pops, garlic bannock, and garlic cheese bannock.

a) How did bannock become a staple of First Nations diets in the Northwest? How is bannock an example of continuity and change?

b) How are the different varieties of bannock offered at the restaurant of the Kikiwak Inn an example of acculturation?

c) Which of the ingredients in the bannock recipe below would have been acquired by First Nations by trade with the Europeans? Which would not have?

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**Traditional Bannock Recipe**

4 cups flour
5 tsp baking powder
1 Tbsp sweetener (e.g., sugar or syrup)
1/2 tsp salt
1/2 cup lard
2 cups water

Mix flour, baking powder, sweetener, and salt together. Slowly mix in the lard until the mixture looks like coarse oatmeal. Make a hole in the centre of the dry ingredients and gradually pour in the water. Mix all ingredients together. Knead for a few minutes, but not too long as it makes the bannock tough. Pat out the dough with your hands until it is about 2 cm thick. Press the dough into an oiled pan. Bake.

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**Steps to Your Challenge**

Which events or ideas from this chapter could be the topic for your History Minute? Meet with your Challenge partners to discuss all of your ideas and decide which topic you will do. Collaborate on a written statement explaining why this topic was significant in shaping Canada’s history. How will each of your Minutes show a different historical perspective? Re-read the instructions for your challenge on page 17. Decide how you will complete your storyboard and which tasks you will divide up among group members and which tasks you will need to work together to complete.