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Nineteenth Century Fur Trade Costume

Pamela BLACKSTOCK

Mention the fur trade and we think of Canada's perhaps best known folklore figure; the *voyageur*, dressed in his Assumption sash and tuque. But there were many other characters involved in the fur trade, representing different cultures and contributing different types of costume to fur trade society.¹ Current research sees the fur trade as an intermingling of European and Indian cultures, for example seen in Minnesota in the "Where Two Worlds Meet" exhibit in 1984.² This essay is based on a lecture given to the Costume Society of America during that exhibit, and on the premise that clothing associated with the fur trade reflects that interchange of cultures.

The paper presents a survey of the clothing in the 19th century as used for trade, and as worn by the different cultural groups who lived and worked at the posts. In this initial stage of research, published literature was reviewed for references to clothing. Here I am indebted to the amount of work already published on social and material culture aspects of the trade; by my colleagues with the Canadian Parks Service; two important social historians, Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown; The Minnesota Historical Society; and especially the Archives of the Hudson's Bay Company now in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba in Winnipeg. The Hudson's Bay Company was careful to ensure that its employees kept detailed records, and today researchers have a rich resource of post journals recording daily

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1. See for example, articles by Marius Barbeau, Dorothy Burnham, and E.-Z. Mas sicotte on the *ceinture flechée*. There are no publications to date on the clothing worn by all participants in the fur trade, though aspects of the *voyageur's* unique costume have been thoroughly dealt with by earlier costume historians.
 2. Carolyn Gilman, *Where Two Worlds Meet: The Great Lakes Fur Trade*. St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1982.

events, business and private correspondence, records of orders and inventories of goods, and pictorial documents. A not surprising concern for dressing appropriately for our northern climate filled the thoughts and written records of many fur traders, and these records contain references to garments.

A short history of the fur trade will be helpful for perspective. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, when the French controlled Canada, exploration westward established a small network of somewhat temporary trading posts mostly through the Great lakes area and beyond to the south and west, and established the future trading pattern with the Indians. Montreal became the centre of the fur trade. The French continued to contribute man power, as well as their language and customs to the trade throughout its existence.

After some successful trading ventures into Hudson's Bay, the British crown created by royal charter in 1670, the English company which became known as the Hudson's Bay Company, also called the HBC or simply "The Company". This charter not only granted the company rights to sole trade and commerce, but also absolute proprietorship of all lands "upon the seas lying within the confines of Hudson's Strait". This was interpreted as that vast region of watershed draining into Hudson's Bay which forms most of Canada, and which became known as Rupert's Land after the first company governor, Prince Rupert.

Rivalry between the French and English ended in 1763 when Canada was lost to England. The American Revolution in 1776 closed the border to southern trading, although Montreal continued to supply manpower and trade goods to American fur companies. However, the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly was challenged throughout the 18th century by independent traders. Now led primarily by Highland Scots but retaining French traditions and *voyageurs*, one group of these traders eventually coalesced in 1783 into a loose partnership called the North West Company, based in Montreal. The fierce competition resulted in both companies exploring further westward and establishing new inland posts. The North West Company explorers even ventured across the Rockies to the Pacific and established posts on the Columbia River. It is this period from the 1780s to 1820 that is generally considered the most exciting and dynamic period of the fur trade.

The Nor'Westers travelled back and forth from Montreal via inland waterways in large freight canoes, through to the Great Lakes and west across the Prairie rivers. Their inland headquarters was at

Fort William, where every summer the wintering brigades arrived from the west, bringing furs, to meet the eastern brigades, delivering trade goods.

The Hudson's Bay Company gradually moved inland from its original few posts around the Bay, using the York boat, a larger, heavier craft than the canoe. York Factory became the depot of its main transportation route to the Red River area and Upper and Lower Forts Garry. In the race to get furs to the London fur markets, the shorter route back to Europe via Hudson's Bay eventually defeated the North West Company, and in 1821 the two companies merged under a re-organized Hudson's Bay Company. This finally gave the HBC a virtual monopoly in Rupert's Land until 1859. The years following the amalgamation witnessed a period of stabilization of trade but also one of profound social change. The eventual pressure of settlement, and the decline in the beaver market as a result of the introduction of the cheaper silk top hat in the 1840s, resulted in the decline of the fur trade in Southern Canada. In 1870, the Company turned over Rupert's Land to the newly formed government of Canada.³

An 1832 map shows 101 posts across Canada, many of which became modern Canadian cities. While in the 18th century they might be considered inhospitable isolated posts inhabited only by a few men, they in fact became small settlements as traders married Indian women and brought up families. "By the early 1800s, it was estimated that between twelve and fifteen hundred women and children were being fed and clothed at Company expense; the wintering population at Fort Vermilion in 1810—36 men, 27 women and 67 children—gives a representative distribution of a post's population".⁴ We will now look at the people who lived at these posts, and the clothing they wore.

The men of both the North West Company and the HBC were divided quite strictly into officer and labouring classes. Officers of the North West Company were primarily of Highland Scots origin and had the reputation as being dashing and ruthless, while the English Hudson's Bay Company men were considered to be more staid. Both groups were generally of educated bourgeois origins. The 1821 amalgamation incorporated both groups into a new structure of "commissioned officers", made up of Chief Factors and Chief Traders, but more

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3. For the best short survey of fur trade history see Glyndwr Williams, "The Hudson's Bay Company and the Fur Trade: 1670-1870," *The Beaver*, (Autumn 1983).
 4. Sylvia Van Kirk. "Many Tender Ties": *Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870*. Winnipeg, Watson & Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980, p. 93.

than half of the new officers were former Nor'Westers. The Chief Factors formed the senior management of the Company in Canada. Each held two shares, earning them at that time approximately £400 a year. Many of them saw their service with the company from a colonialist point of view. That is as a temporary burden to be endured while furthering their career and earning enough money to allow them to retire comfortably as gentry in England or Scotland. Gradually however, more of these men retired in Canada, where their wealth gave them respected positions.

Despite the isolation and hardship of their lives, most officers managed to maintain their status of living. Most forts had separate officers' dwellings, many officers had personal man-servants, and their tables in the officers' messes were laid with silver and crystal. Generous food rations were provided by the Company. Most portraits show these men as well-dressed business men, typical of their day, and their families were kept according to their station.⁵ An order placed by Francis Heron from Fort Nisqually up the Pacific coast in 1834 for example, included 2 superfine blue cloth coats, black cassimere trousers, and a black silk vest for himself, plus assorted fabrics and ribbons. He specified that the English tailor should make him a cloak of the slate coloured camlet lined with red bath coating, and of the bottle green Petersham cloth; a frock coat, trousers and vest for himself, and a fashionable suit for each of his two boys consisting of a jacket with two rows of ball buttons, trousers and vest. The tailor was to estimate the boys' sizes from their ages.⁶

In meetings with the Indians, the officers made particular efforts to dress in the role of the European chief. As seen in Figure 1 showing speeches prior to the annual trading ceremony, in which the officers are dressed in correct business attire for 1820. This sort of costume served to sharply distinguish the officers from their men.

George, later Sir George Simpson, the Governor of North American operations for the HBC from 1820 to 1860, was perhaps the outstanding representative of this group. He was a dashing figure, but not in the romantic sense of the buckskinned swashbuckling trader. Rather, as the senior official of an English company, he was said to more closely resemble more a London banker. He was described as

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5. From "Letters of Letitia Hargrave" by Margaret Arnett McLeod, ed. Book review by R.O. MacFarlane, *The Beaver*, (March 1948), pp. 40-41.
 6. From a letter to James Hargrave, York Factory, in *The Hargrave Correspondence 1821-1843*, by G.P. de T. Glazebrook, ed. Book review in *The Beaver*, (Sept. 1938), p. 54.



Figure 1: "The Red Lake Chief Making a Speech to the Governor of the Red River Settlement (Robert Pelly) at Fort Douglas in 1825". Litho by W. Day after Peter Rindisbacher. National Archives of Canada. Neg. C-1939

“dressed everyday in a suit of black or dark blue, white shirt, collars to his ears, frock coat, velvet stocks and straps to the bottom of his trousers. When he went out of doors, he wore a black beaver hat worth forty shillings. When travelling in a canoe or boat, he was lifted in and out of the craft by the crew; he still wore his beaver hat, but it was protected by an oiled silk cover, and over his black frock he wore a long cloak made of Royal Stuart tartan lined with scarlet or dark blue bath coating. . . .”⁷

While visits by the governor (and he did visit most posts) were treated with great pomp and circumstance, there is evidence to suggest that day-to-day life at a post warranted less fashionable clothing. The few candid photographs that exist from the mid 19th century show the Chief Traders, at least, wearing more casual clothing, similar to that of their men. When an English lady travelling to Red River in 1840 arrived unexpectedly at Oxford House, she surprised Chief Trader Richard Grant in clothing that she described as “certainly exactly not *comme il faut*”. She felt an apology was almost unnecessary in these “wilds of north America”, but Mr. Grant thought otherwise, and would only join the group after having shaved and changed his dress.⁸

Lower ranks of what were still called “gentlemen” included the masters of small posts, clerks, apprentices to these two categories, and other mid-level employees such as surgeons or masters of the sloops attached to the posts on Hudson Bay. They again were usually of Scots-English heritage, and often gained their position through kinship ties within the company. Pay levels varied, with the lower ranges of pay overlapping the upper ranges of pay for ordinary employees. But these men were distinguished by privileges such as the right to dine with the “commissioned gentlemen”, and the fact that new officers were drawn from these ranks. Many senior officers started their careers as junior clerks.

This group seems to have been more willing than the officers to assume more practical clothing for the climate: “over this dispensary of needfuls and luxuries (the trade shop) presides an accountant and two clerks, none of them gotten up in the elaborate costumes of the counter-waiter of civilization, but rather affecting buckskin

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7. Sylvia Van Kirk, “Life in the Western Canadian Fur Trade 1770-1870,” *Canada’s Visual History*, Series 1, vol 34. Ottawa, National Museum of Man/National Film Board, n.d., p. 4.
 8. Isobel Finlayson. “York Boat Journal”, *The Beaver*, (Dec. 1951), p. 34.

coats, corduroy trousers, and the loudest styles of flannel shirts".⁹ Another account recorded: "it appeared the approved uniform for clerks on the boat journey was a greyish blue cloth "Illinois" capote with silver plated buttons, a broad scarlet worsted sash, the regulation head gear being a fine navy blue cloth cap with leather peak".¹⁰

The labouring classes were called ordinary "servants" of the Company, and were also salaried employees hired on 3 to 5 year contracts, but, except for the occasional tradesmen, few ever rose through the ranks to become officers. James Sutherland wrote home to his brother that to come out to Rupert's Land as a labourer meant that there was "more than the chance of being a slave all your life, . . . however much I may be able to befriend you, it would be impossible to raise you either to rank or respectability from so Menial a situation".¹¹

The North West Company traditionally recruited all its labour from French Canadians around Montreal, while the Hudson's Bay Company found after the mid 18th century that men from the Orkney Islands north of Scotland were more reliable workers and better suited to the rigours of life around Hudson's Bay than the English urban workers they had previously hired. The Orkneymen were originally hired for general labour, but by the early 19th century were more often hired as tradesmen, such as coopers, blacksmiths, carpenters, masons and tailors. Between 1830 and 1858 The Company paid European servants £16 to £17 per year on first contracts as labourers, and from 1858-1875 £24 which included special allowances for luxuries. Skilled boatmen earned a few pounds more, and tradesmen got up to £40 year but generally under £30 on their first contract.¹²

Other nationalities were also hired, such as Norwegians, Danes, Irish, and Scots (from the mainland and the Lewis and Shetland Islands), and on the Pacific Coast, Hawaiians, but the mix of traits and languages met with limited success. Sir George Simpson finally wrote to London that he had decided that an equal mix of French Canadians and Orkneymen would be most successful. French Canadian and mixed-blood employees formed the majority. Indians were hired on

9. H. M. Robinson, *The Great Fur Land* (1879), p. 77.

10. *The Company of Adventurers* (1867), p. 116.

11. Ernest W. Marwick. "Chief Factor James Sutherland and his Orkney correspondence," *The Beaver*, (Winter 1966), p. 44.

12. Philip Goldring. "Lewis and the Hudson's Bay Company in the Nineteenth Century" *Scottish Studies* 24, (1980), p. 32.

seasonal contracts, and provided hunting, trapping and interpreting services in return for provisions.

The greatest need for labour was for boat crews, and although the Orkneymen could handle the York boats, French Canadians were the undisputed masters of canoe travel. Called voyageurs, (meaning "travellers") from the time of the French period, they were used in great numbers by the North West Company and had already by the end of the 18th century become somewhat of a folk legend.

Voyageurs were renowned for their strength, endurance, love of song, small stature, and their colourful part Indian and part European costume that was much commented on. This description is typical of many: "They wear a capot or surcoat, made of a blanket, a striped cotton shirt, cloth trousers or leathern leggings, moccasins of deerskin, and a belt of variegated worsted, from which are suspended the knife, tobacco-pouch and other implements"¹³ A clay pipe and tuque or feather and ribbon-trimmed top hat, completed the costume (Figure 2).

The North West Company furnished its voyageurs with shirt, trousers and blanket, accounting for some of the uniformity, but the rest of the clothing was their own. Since most of the voyageurs were recruited from agricultural parishes around Montreal, their costume is in fact linked quite closely with the traditional costume worn by the Quebec habitant, or farmer: homespun capote or jacket, tuque, finger-braided sash, and *bottes sauvages*, adopted from Indian moccasins.¹⁴ In the 19th century, as the Métis and Iroquois gradually replaced French Canadians as voyageurs, they kept much the same costume, though the styles evolved over time, following contemporary manufacture. An 1858 photograph by H.L. Hime of a portage in 1858, and as late as 1870 in paintings by Frances Hopkins, the voyageurs are shown wearing basically the same costume as described in the late 18th century.

The voyageurs were considered by contemporary Englishmen as a wild, half-civilized lot who loved gaudy finery and spent all their salary on clothing or ornament for themselves and their wives.¹⁵ In contrast, the Orkney labourers of Hudson's Bay, in some cases, saved up to three-quarters of their salary over the entire contract period.

13. From Washington Irving's *Astoria* (Works, VIII, London 1886). In Elizabeth Loosely, "Early Canadian Costume," *Canadian Historical Review* (1942), p. 355.

14. Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross. "A la Canadienne: Some Aspects of 19th Century Habitant Dress," *Dress*, (1980), pp. 71-82.

15. From Washington Irving, in Loosely, p. 355.

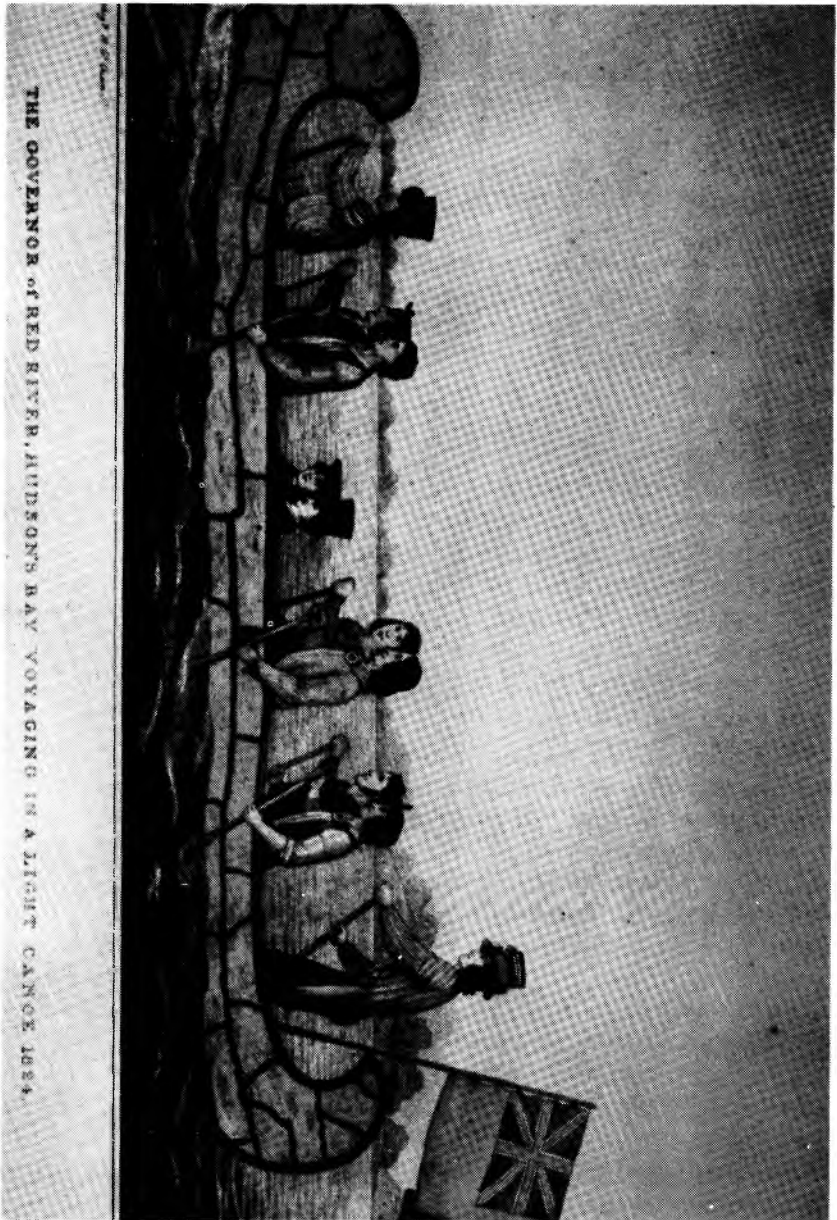


Figure 2: "The Governor of Red River, (Robert Pelly) Hudson's Bay, voyaging in a light canoe, 1824".

Litho by W. Day after Peter Rindisbacher.

National Archives of Canada. Neg. C-1994

Since all salaried employees (excluding therefore voyageurs) were supplied with basic provisions ensuring a certain degree of comfort, the money they did spend in the post shops went to clothing, and such luxuries as alcohol and imported foodstuffs. Their taste in clothing might differ, but all were restricted by the availability of goods. The order lists suggest that some items were brought in specifically for employees rather than for Indian trade.

Supplies were brought to Canada once a year, forming the Outfit for that year. Trade goods, provisions and personal orders had to be requested in the spring for delivery in the next year's Outfit the following summer.

Until the turn of the 19th century, some of the posts around the Bay kept tailors on staff, but the rapid development of the clothing industry in Britain soon made it cheaper to purchase certain ready-made garments there. Many of these goods were manufactured in England by firms under contract with the Company. Canadian Parks Service researchers have traced many of these suppliers, who were either manufacturing firms or clothing wholesalers.¹⁶ Among the numerous firms were some large British manufacturers, and suppliers of such goods as footwear, hats, umbrellas and oiled-silk hat covers, worsted sashes and gartering, and hosiery. Also listed are suppliers of haberdashery and slops, but unfortunately the individual garments are not always specified. Slops was the term for cheap ready-made clothing and probably included goods which appear on the inventories such as cotton and flannel shirts, jackets, coats, vests and trousers. "The largest single order of export goods for Outfit 1845 was made with Favell & Bousfields for slops, and this order equalled almost 22% of the entire 1845 shipment to the Columbia Department".¹⁷

On the other hand the North West Company had always procured a large part of its goods in Eastern Canada and New England. After the 1821 union of the two companies, Simpson implemented a policy of accepting "country-made" goods in an attempt to cut down on the cost of importing supplies. Outside purchasing in Canada proved more cost effective than supporting manufacturing at the posts, or in many cases, than importing goods. The HBC continued through the century to acquire its stock from both Canadian and English sources. Montreal provided many types of garments, and the

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16. Lester Ross, Lynne Sussman and André Laflèche. "Hudson's Bay Company Suppliers". 3 vols. *Manuscript Report No. 381*, Ottawa, Parks Canada, 1979.
 17. Lester Ross, *Fort Vancouver 1829-1860*. Washington, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1976.

origins of Montreal's garment industry have in fact been attributed to the fur trade. The Grey Nuns Convent in Montreal, for example, supplied in 1799 melton capots, sleeves, blankets, leggings, robes and cotton shirts. Several other firms provided hats, coats and jackets, and shoemaking firms just outside the city supplied numerous styles of footwear.¹⁸

From the natives around the posts the HBC purchased in particular leather goods and moccasins. The Indian wives continued to tan and sew moccasins and skin garments, and learned to work with cloth. Since quantities of fabric and sewing supplies were brought in, we can assume considerable sewing was done at the posts. Letitia Hargrave commented in the 1840s that she had little else to do but make clothing for herself and her family since the servants did all the rest of the work.¹⁹

The inventories for the various posts are most revealing, but also pose many questions. We can trace the growth and sophistication of a post by the quantities and types of goods in stock. For example, in the first year recorded at Fort Langley, 1828, the clothing is minimal, with only 1 capote listed, and a few cloth and corduroy jackets. By 1858 the stock included 295 capots and 7 different named styles of men's coats.²⁰ Preliminary comparisons of terminology suggest these styles followed contemporary fashionable dress.

"Scotch bonnets with or without peaks" commonly appear on the inventories. The strong Scottish influence in the Company is also shown through the presence of such items as Highland cloaks, Scotch gartering, tartan shawls, and tartan fabrics of various clans. Kilts however were never mentioned. Guernsey frocks, (pull-over sweaters popular with fishermen in the north of England and Scotland) are mentioned a number of inventories through the early and mid century, probably reflecting the Orkney influence, but I have not as yet been able to find other references to their possible popularity. Further comparisons of inventories from different posts might point out local and cultural taste in garments, but this line of research needs to be explored more fully.

One rather remarkable example of cross-cultural influence is the

18. Marius Barbeau, "Country-made Trade Goods," *The Beaver*, (Sept. 1944), pp. 16-19.

19. A.A.W. Ramsay, "Letters from Letitia Hargrave", *The Beaver*, (June 1940), p. 18-19; (Sept. 1940), pp. 37-39.

20. Mary K. Cullen, "Appendices to the History of Fort Langley 1827-96," *Canadian Historic Sites No. 20*. Ottawa, Parks Canada, 1973.

Glengarry cap, popular Scottish civilian wear after 1800. The McCord Museum holds two examples of a "Canadian version" of these, made by Great lakes Iroquois early in the 19th century, after the Glengarry pattern, and using European trade cloth and beads, but in an Indian manner.²¹

In the caption of the illustration "Colonists on the Red River in North America" (Figure 3), Peter Rindisbacher identifies a Scottish settler on the right by his Balmoral bonnet, and the French Canadian beside him by his capote and feathered top hat. But in other illustrations we see identified members of other cultural groups wearing these same garments. For example, Henry J. Warre painted "An Old Cree Guide" (Figure 4) in 1845 wearing both the blue capote and a version of the Balmoral. As a result it is hard to interpret from illustrations what category of labourer or which cultural group might be represented, since the same costumes appear time after time. With various cultural groups working side by side and having access to the same goods, it would understandably not take long for garments to be exchanged and introduced into one another's wardrobe.

From early experience in dealing with the Canadian winter wilderness, the Europeans learned to adopt both Indian customs and garments such as moccasins and snowshoes. James Isham described winter dress at York Factory in the mid-18th century as layers of flannel, duffle and deer leather, with a long beaver coat and beaver cape overall. He commented that European clothes of cloth could only be worn in the summer months.²² Robert Ballantyne echoed this description almost a century later:

"After donning a pair of deer-skin trousers, he proceeded to put on three pair of blanket socks, and over these a pair of moose-skin moccasins.

Then a pair of blue cloth leggings were hauled over his trousers, partly to keep the snow from sticking to them, and partly for warmth. After this he put on a leather capote edged with fur. This coat was very warm, being lined with flannel, and overlapped very much in front. It was fastened with a scarlet worsted belt

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21. See also Charles Hanson Jr., "The Beaded Glengarry," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*, 13, 1 (Spring 1977).
 22. From James Isham, written in mid 18th century, in Glyndwr Williams, "The Hudson's Bay Company and The Fur Trade: 1670-1870," *The Beaver*, (Autumn 1983), pp. 18-19.

round the waist, and with a loop at the throat. A pair of thick mittens made of deer-skin hung round his shoulders by a worsted cord; and his neck was wrapped in a huge shawl. . . . A fur cap with ear-pieces completed his costume".²³

A boy growing up at a post remembered that his Indian mother dressed him like the other boys and men, in leather shirt and trousers and moosehide moccasins that she made. In cold weather he added a Company capote, buckskin mittens and a fur cap.²⁴ It should be pointed out that although the descriptions and illustrations make it clear that skin garments were worn, it may have been more often from necessity than choice. One does not see in Canada the buckskin-clad equivalent of the American mountain man, probably due to the easy access to European goods and their higher status. Also, the desire for promotion may have kept many lower ranked gentlemen respectfully dressed in the English taste.

The garment universally worn in the fur trade was the capote, described as a hooded frock coat. It is first identified with the Quebec habitant, and was most often there made of grey, and very occasionally blue, handwoven wool. In the fur trade, blue especially, and grey capotes, of common cloth, stroud, melton or blanketing, appear in great quantities on the shop inventories right to the end of the 19th century. These often outnumber the blanket capotes. Illinois capotes apparently had silver buttons, but the reason for that name is as yet unclear, as is the popularity of blue capotes. The first known illustration of a blanket capote dates from around 1780, worn by a Quebec farmer.²⁵ These were apparently favoured by the Indians and were sometimes called Indian capotes on the HBC inventories. Almost all early 19th century illustrations show the white blanket capote, with a single black or navy bar and sometimes "points", like the blanket standard to the trades. Although coloured blankets were available, they do not appear to have been made into capotes until very late in the 19th century. In most cases the capote was hooded, but the actual cut varied. Since the HBC seems to have procured these garments from a number of makers, there was no set pattern. The back was usually fitted like a frock coat while the front hung straight without

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23. Robert M. Ballantyne, who was stationed at York Factory in 1843-44, used his observations in his later semi-fictional accounts of the fur trade. This quote from *Hudson Bay*. (London, Nelson, 1888) pp. 178-179.
24. D. Geneva Lent, "Boyhood and Oxford House," *The Beaver*, (Spring 1962), pp. 47-51.
25. Beaudoin-Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

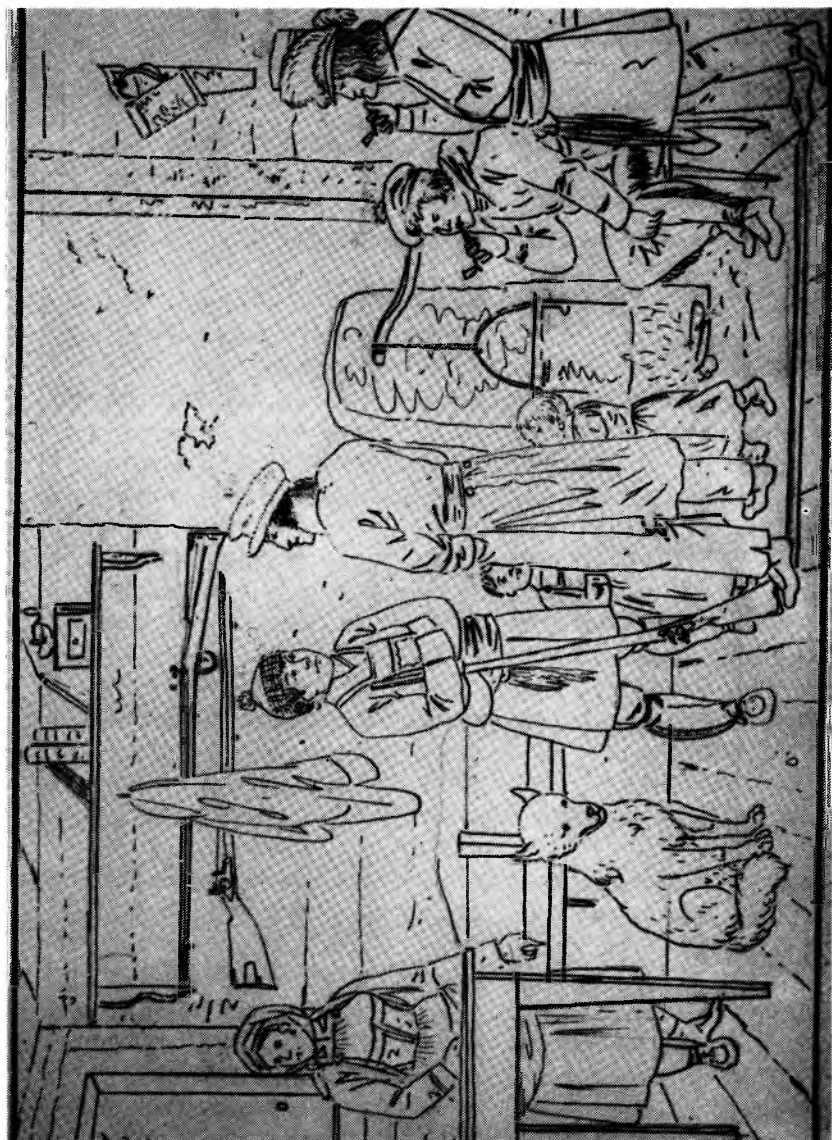


Figure 3 and 4: "Colonists on the Red River in North America", c. 1822, by Peter Rindisbacher.

National Archives of Canada. Neg. C-1937

"Old Cree Guide", 1845-46,

by Henry J. Warre, watercolour and pencil
National Archives of Canada. Neg. C-26345



seams. Some were trimmed at the shoulders with red stroud or fringe, and some had rosettes at the back hips. Some post inventories record capotes with capes. Examples from the Glenbow Museum of late 19th century styles appear to be cut more like the skin garments of the Plains Indians, without shaping to the front or back, and with a fringe at the shoulders to help shed rain. They were all apparently unlined, and fastened with toggles or buttons, or simply a sash, but were considered light and warm for active winter wear. The inventories list both cloth and blanketing capotes in ells, varying from 1 ell to 4-1/2 ells. Since the ell was a unit of measurement 45" long, we assume this indicated the amount of material required to make up the required size and length, normally between thigh and knee length. By far the most popular sizes were 3-1/2 and 4 ells.

The sash invariably seen with the capote, and especially favoured by the voyageurs, was known as the *ceinture flechée*. It was also worn around the waist without the capote to help support the back and abdomen when carrying heavy packs. The distinctive arrow design, created by the finger-braiding technique, is the best known, and the most famous ones originated in the village of Assumption near Montreal. Other variations exist however. By the late 19th century the Hudson's Bay Company learned to imitate this style by machine weaving, and had these sashes produced in England. Indian versions were often beaded.²⁶ However, there also exist on the inventories great quantities of scarlet worsted sashes, in 2, 4 and 6 inch widths, which usually outnumber the multi-coloured sashes. Despite the vast quantities listed of both blue capotes and scarlet sashes, we know of no extant examples.

I have briefly mentioned some trade items of clothing purchased by the Indians. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the costume of the various tribes in contact with the companies. But as economic historians have commented, the trading system itself and types of goods carried were very much influenced by Indian desires. For example, the first trading foray to the Yukon in 1847 found that all the Indians except one group preferred their own clothing, and the ones who were interested in European goods had specific tastes. The trader wrote, "These people, but *these* only, seem very fond of our capotes. It would be well to send a respectable supply of 3-1/2

26. Marius Barbeau. "Assumption Sash". Bulletin 93, *Anthropological Series no. 24*. Ottawa, National Museum of Canada, 1972.

and 4 ell capots, but few or none of a smaller size. White is the colour always demanded".²⁷

At least one trader complained that the Plains Indians retained skin garments longer and bought little in the way of textiles,²⁸ whereas Indians such as the Cree, who lived almost dependent on The Bayside posts, had adapted European clothing quickly.

Generally however, the Indians were quick to convert to European textiles, since, as David Thompson commented, they were more comfortable when wet, dried faster, and kept their shape better. He found at an earlier period that every Indian he met, even on the Prairies, was glad to exchange his leather dress for one of woollen manufacture of England.²⁹

Indians also saw foreign garments as signs of status, and the traders soon learned to make presents of special garments to the chief as part of the trading ceremony. These become known as Chief's coats and consisted typically in the 18th century of "a coarse cloth coat, either red or blue, lined with baize with regimental cuffs and collar. The waistcoat and breeches are of baize; the suit ornamented with broad and narrow orris lace of different colours; a white checked shirt, a pair of yarn stockings tied below the knee with worsted garters; a pair of English shoes. The hat is laced and ornamented with feathers of different colours. A worsted sash tied round the crown, an end hanging out on each side down to the shoulders. A silk handkerchief is tucked by a corner into the loops behind; with these decorations it is put on the captain's head and completes his dress. The lieutenant is also presented with an inferior suit."³⁰ Another trader commented, "we kept (in supply) a few so-called chiefs dresses. These were cast-off red-coat suits of the soldiers, supplemented by a tall stove-pipe hat with a bunch of still taller feathers attached. It was a common thing for an Indian to give a good buffalo runner (horse) for such a dress, in which he strutted around until he ran short of trading stuff. Then he sold the pants, next the waistcoat, then the coat, till at length

27. From the letters of Alexander Murray in Clifford Wilson, "Founding Fort Yukon," *The Beaver*, (June 1947), pp. 38-42.

28. H.J. Moberly, "Reminiscences of a Hudson's Bay Company's Factor (Sixty Years of Adventure and Service in Various Sections of the Far North West)," *The Beaver*, (Jan. 1922), p. 32.

29. From *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812*. Quoted in Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973, p. 236.

30. From Andrew Graham's *Observations on Hudson's Bay, 1767-91*. HBC Record Society Vol. XXVII, p. 317.



Figure 5: "Kamloops, B.C. Chief (St-Paul, wife and daughters), 1865",
Photograph by Birch.
National Archives of Canada. Neg. C-88905

he was stalking about in the hat and feathers, a pair of moccasins and a breechcloth. . . Last of all the hat and feathers went, and the full suit was back in store ready for another performance".³¹

By the end of our period, Sir George Simpson commented that the Indians were no longer satisfied with "useful articles of clothing", but wanted instead, "fine white shirts, superfine frock coats and straw bonnets for their women".³² (Figure 5)

Sylvia Van Kirk has in the past few years done masterful research on the role of the Indian wife and the coming of white women to the fur trade, and I would recommend her book *Many Tender Ties* to anyone interested in this topic. With white women banned from the trade by the HBC from the earliest days, it became common for traders of both companies to take Indian wives. This custom arose partly from loneliness, partly from the necessary help a woman could provide, but also, and most importantly, for the advantage it gave in ensuring good relationships with the wife's tribe. Van Kirk has attributed the peaceful relations between Indians and Europeans in Canada to the growth of family ties between the two groups.

These marriages were called *à la façon du pays*, ("in the custom of the country"), and were based on Indian custom whereby the trader obtained the permission of the bride's parents and paid a bride price before taking her back to the post. The marriage could later be dissolved, but in many cases such marriages proved to be monogamous and long lasting. In the North West Company at the turn of the 19th century, when a woman was taken as wife in this way the other women of the fort performed a ritual of scouring her of grease and paint, and she exchanged her native garments for those of the "Canadian fashion", which consisted of a skirt, short gown, petticoat and leggings, supplied by the company.³³ There may be a connection again between this costume and that of the female habitant, although this is also the basic working woman's costume of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.³⁴ The Hudson Bay Company servants also attempted to "civilize" their wives and daughters. Van Kirk found in the Books of Servants' Private Commissions from 1790-1810 that "the officers at

31. Moberly, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

32. From Sir George Simpson, ca. 1857, in Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

33. From Daniel Harmon's journal, 1811, in Sylvia Van Kirk, "Women in Between: Indian Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada", *Canadian Historical Association Meeting papers*, (Fredericton, 1977).

34. Jacqueline Beaudoin-Ross, " 'A la Canadienne Once More': Some Insights into Quebec Rural Female Dress", *Dress*, 7, (1981), pp. 69-81.

Albany seem to have been particularly anxious to have the females in their families adopt English fashions. Large quantities of cloth (mainly calico and chintz), ribbons and lace were ordered, along with the items essential to dressmaking", as well as issues of ladies' magazines, jewellery, and even undergarments. Although European shoes and boots were also brought in, the moccasin long remained the usual form of footwear, however Europeanized the rest of the costume.³⁵ Early 19th century illustrations such as Figure 6 show a mix of Indian and European styles, often some years behind the current fashion, while photographs around the 1850s and 1860s show quite up-to-date European clothing. In addition to their moccasins and leggings Indian women seem to have always retained the blanket worn over their head. Descriptions such as this are typical: "Squatting down on the floor. . . sat about a dozen Indian women, dressed in printed calico gowns, the chief peculiarity of which was the immense size of the balloon-shaped sleeves, and the extreme skantiness both in length and width, of the skirts. Coloured handkerchiefs covered their heads, and ornamented moccasins decorated their feet, besides which, each one wore a blanket in the form of a shawl, which they put off before standing up to dance".³⁶

By the end of the 18th century, mixed-blood daughters of traders gradually replaced Indians as wives. They had the advantages of being better able to fit into a civilized lifestyle, while still being able to help in traditional tasks. In addition, the position of their fathers as senior officers could be advantageous to young incoming traders. The network of kinship ties that grew up, with European branches in Canada and Britain, as well as Indian links, became complex and resulted in a very closely knit society. It was not until the arrival of white women, about 1830, that this society began to stratify and eventually break down. The presence of white women, who considered themselves superior, underlined the cultural short-comings of the mixed-blood wives, particularly in settled areas like the Red River colony, where their native skills were no longer required.³⁷

35. Van Kirk, "Many Tender Ties", p. 99.

36. From *Hudson Bay*, 1848, in R.M. Ballantyne. "Christmas on Hudson Bay," *The Beaver* (Winter 1958), p. 8.

37. Van Kirk, "Many Tender Ties".

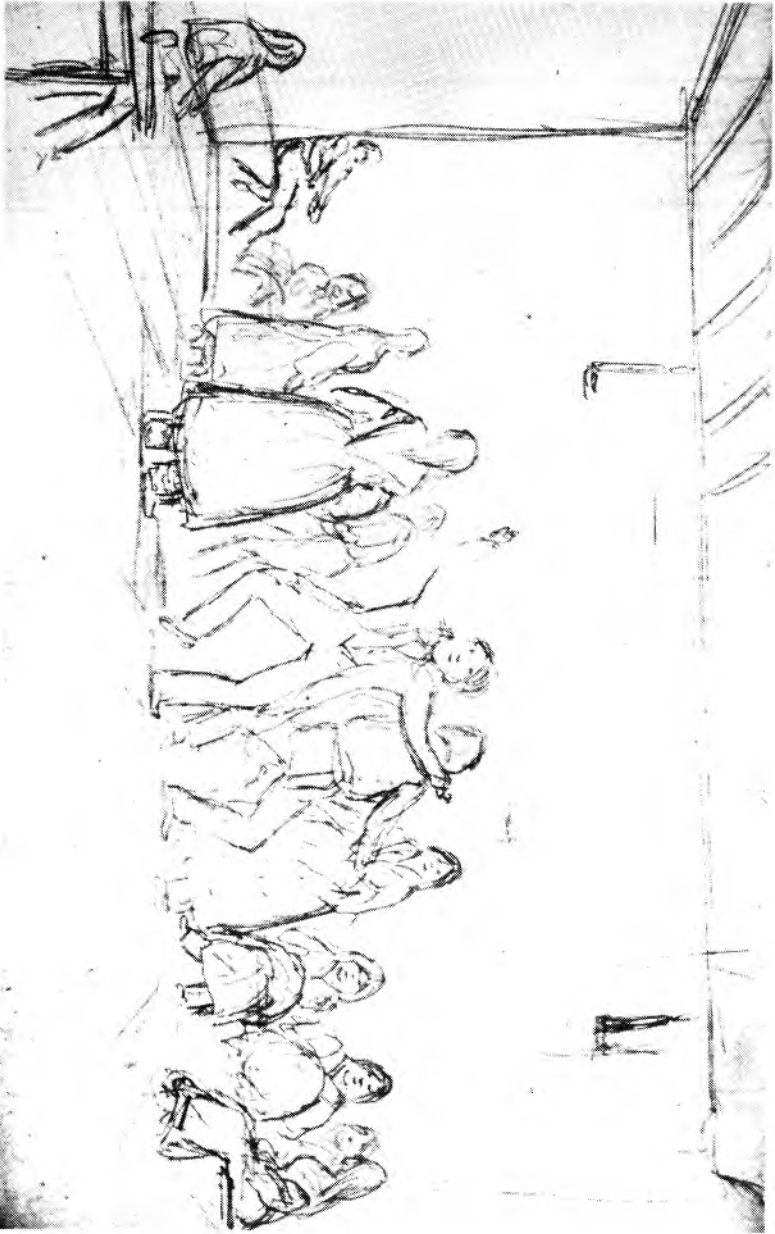


Figure 6: "Ball in Oregon Territory", 1845 (Fort Victoria)
Sketch by Henry J. Warre.
National Archives of Canada. Neg. C-34094

Sometimes when a trader left the fur trade to retire to Britain, he left his family in the care of another trader. But many of the English and Scottish men of the Hudson's Bay Company proved devoted fathers, and took great interest in the welfare of their children, ensuring them a good education, a good marriage within the trade for their daughters and secure positions for their sons, often within the fur trade. The children were named after their father, brought up in his religion, and dressed in European styles. They were often sent to England or eastern Canada for schooling or permanently when the father retired. As a result these people, while remembering their Indian heritage, chose to identify themselves as Englishmen, and assimilated into English Canadian culture to the degree that they never constituted a distinct cultural group. Their clothing was that of any other Scots-English middle class Canadian.³⁸ (Figure 7)

On the other hand, French speaking descendants, chiefly of the NorWesters, tended to congregate in the Red River area where, because of the social structure, they evolved into a distinct cultural group called the Métis. Possibly because of indifference on the part of their French Canadian voyageur fathers, but certainly due to the stronger influence of their Indian mothers, this group remained much closer to its Indian heritage than did the English mixed-bloods. The Métis eventually diverged into two sub-groups: those who took up the semi-nomadic life of the Indian, following the buffalo hunt each year and working as voyageurs and labourers for the Hudson's Bay Company; and those who settled as farmers and business men and dressed in a somewhat more bourgeois style.³⁹

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38. For further information on children of the fur trade see L.G. Thomas, "Fur Traders in Retirement", *The Beaver*, (Winter 1979); Jennifer Brown, "Ultimate Respectability: Fur Trade Children in the 'Civilized World,'" *The Beaver*, (Winter 1977 and Spring 1978); Jennifer Brown, "A Colony of Very Useful Hands", *The Beaver*, (Spring 1977).
39. Robert Gosman, "The Riel and Lagimodiere Families in Métis Society 1840-1860," *Manuscript Report No. 171*. (Ottawa, Parks Canada, 1977).



Figure 7: "Mary Anne McDonald, daughter of Chief Factor Archibald McDonald," c. 1850

Photograph.

National Archives of Canada. Neg. PA-123895

From their voyageur fathers and Indian mothers the Métis generally inherited a love of finery and garments which formed a unique costume. Visitors to the Red River often commented upon it: "Men and women both wear moccasins worked with gaudy beads. The men's trousers are generally of corduroy or Canada blue, and their coats are of the Canadian pattern, with large brass buttons, and a hood hanging between the shoulders. A jaunty cap surmounts the head, often of blue cloth, but sometimes of an otter or badger skin, and, whether with the coat or without it, a gay sash is always worn around the waist, the bright tassels hanging down the left hip. Into this are thrust the buffalo-knife behind, and the fire-bag at the right side".⁴⁰ The women "are fond of show, and invariably attire themselves in gaudy prints, and shawls, chiefly of the tartan kind - all, as a matter of course, of foreign manufacture; but, like Indian women, they are very tenacious of the habits and customs of their native country. The blanket as an overall, is considered indispensable".⁴¹ Rudolph Friederich Kurz noted in 1851 that while their brightly coloured costume was semi-European, semi-Indian in decorative style, their clothes were of European rather than Western cut.⁴² (Figure 8).

The Métis were also responsible for the development of a rich tradition of embroidery, combining both European and Indian elements. Coats, moccasins, fire bags, tobacco pouches and saddles were decorated with unique designs incorporating tendrils, heart-shaped buds, and flowers. This decorative style first appeared on painted leather coats of European cut in the early 19th century, then was adapted to quill work and finally bead and silk work.

This very general survey of the fur trade is intended to serve as an introduction to the topic and to point out some of the resources available on a subject where costume research is only just beginning. There are many questions yet to be answered. Western Canadian society, in particular, developed from a blend of cultural influences, and its Scots-English-French-Indian heritage resulted in clothing styles quite different from those of the American West. The very existence of a large mixed-blood population attests to the intermingling of cultures, and the Métis costume is perhaps the best example of this. Today

40. Marble Nanton, "To Red River and Beyond", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, (Aug. 1860), p. 588.

41. From Ross' *The Red River Settlement*, 1837, in Alexander Ross. "Settlers at Red River", *The Beaver*, (Sept. 1952), pp. 32-35.

42. T.J. Brassler, "Metis Artisans," *The Beaver*, (Autumn 1975), p. 57.



Figure 8: "A Halfcast and his two wives", c. 1820-25,
by Peter Rindisbacher
National Archives of Canada C-46498

those characteristically Canadian garments have come down to us in the form of the Hudson's Bay blanket coat, and the child's Red River costume of blue capote and red sash. From a costume point of view, perhaps the Métis should be the folk hero of the fur trade.

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