



READING THE ENTRAILS: AN ALBERTA ECOHISTORY

by Norman C. Conrad

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DISTANT RUMBLINGS

BIFURCATION



When the sea swamped and resubmerged Beringia about 15,500 years ago, the Old and New World disconnected, leaving each to their own biological, human and technological destinies. But that would not last. Over following millennia sailing and other technology progressed in the Old World enough to enable an adventurous few, beginning about 1,000 years ago, to sail over the “seams of Pangaea” to the New World.

Most famous was Christopher Columbus. Queen Isabella of Castille and King Ferdinand of Aragon entered a *capitulacion* with Columbus on April 17, 1492, authorizing and financing the Columbian venture. The hope in sailing west was to find the riches of the East and, once there, to claim this unknown vastness for God and King and capital. Columbus cast off on August 3, 1492, sighting the Americas on October 12. This foundland he claimed for Ferdinand, Isabella, God and himself. By Papal Bull proclaimed May 4, 1493, mere months after Columbus’ return, Pope Alexander VI of the Borgias divided those parts of Earth not yet possessed by Christian princes in two. Spain got the Americas (except undiscovered Brazil) and Portugal got the Far East (except the Philippines).

Spain and Portugal modified aspects of the Papal Bull in the Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494. Based on the flimsiest contact and the shallowest knowledge—shore landing and walkabouts—two continents, all of their life and peoples, were inserted into portfolios of one church, two countries, several kings and a number of commercial venturers.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

England’s King Henry VII declined on the Columbus prospectus, but he was not about to miss the next big opportunity to trade into the Orient. To borrow current commercial mantras, he was interested in “globalization”

and “international trade” and in doing “Pacific Rim business.” Others—English elites of the church, nobility and commerce alike—wanted to open the Oriental door. They selected John Cabot, a Venetian, to find the way to spices, gold, and other eastern riches.

Henry VII’s patent to Cabot captured the spirit of the age and the purpose of the endeavour in this language:

... to seeke out, discover, and finde whatsoever isles, countreys, regions or provinces of the heathen and infidels whatsoever they be, and in what part of the world soever they be, which before this time have bene unknowen to all Christians . . .

and to:

. . . subdue, occupy and possesse all such townes, cities, castles and isles of them found, which they can subdue, occupy and possesse, as our vassals, and lieutenants, getting unto us the rule, title, and jurisdiction of the same villages, townes, castles, and firme land so found.

For this, Cabot could govern whatever lands he found and maintain its trade as a monopoly subject to a 20% Crown tax.

On May 2, 1497 John Cabot sailed out of Bristol to the Americas, making land on June 24, perhaps Newfoundland or Labrador. With bargain secured and lands claimed, not really that intrepid an explorer, Cabot soon came about. Several weeks later he was celebrating in England. Cabot felt he had neared Japan and the riches of the Orient and like Columbus, he died believing that. Later voyages by others confirmed fears that this land-fall to the west was not the rich Orient but a forbidding barricade—the impenetrable and hostile Americas.

Henry Hudson thought he sailed into the westerly sea in 1610. Rapture flip-flopped to dismay as the bend of bay came clear. This was no passage to the Orient. The body of water was an enormous inland sea—the immense puddle remaining from the retreat of the Laurentide Ice Sheet. This giant bay took Hudson’s life, dying there after a mutinous crew cast him adrift, and his name. Later the Hudson’s Bay Company, the longest surviving example of the overseas trading company, took this bay’s name for its own.

Others continued sailing west, seeking the Northwest Passage and its avenue to fortune. Some of those who landed in these parts commented on the quality of fur-bearing animals, particularly the beaver. As fortune would favour or curse it, the beaver possessed uniquely structured inner hair. Hatters were mad about it as a base for the felt-like material required in the manufacture of trendy hats. With such desirable features demand soon outran



supply, driving the European beaver to commercial extinction. Then it was on to the New World. The beaver purge passed first over the Saint Lawrence Lowlands then progressed upstream to the Great Lakes. Reports (Radisson and Groseilliers) that Hudson Bay drainages teemed with the most luxuriant beaver stirred interest among armchair aristocratic adventurers lounging about the Stuart monarchy in England. Might a New World beaver business have potential?

GRANTS, LAND AND MONOPOLY

King Charles II, Prince Rupert, the Duke of Cumberland, the Earl of Holderness and other elites in the umbra of Stuart power wished to make something of England's claims to the New World's north. The potential profit from furs, precious metals and Northwest Passages persuaded them to undertake a commercial sortie into Hudson Bay. Launched in 1668, their hired hands returned in 1669 laden with furs and experience. If suitable long-term business commitments could be arranged then a continued commercial venture into Hudson Bay might be feasible. That would involve the usual mix—a grant, a monopoly, a corporation and the participation of those closest to commercial and imperial power.

For close friends, relatives and supporters (and perhaps his personal account), on May 2, 1670 Charles II chartered a body corporate, "The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay" (HBC) providing it with a grant of power and land of unknown but certainly gigantic proportions. The grant was of the "sole Trade and Commerce" over vast tracts of land "that are not already actually possessed by the Subjectes of any othere Christian Prince or State." Most of the grant, lands draining into Hudson Bay, well over two million square kilometres of lands, were named "Rupert's Land" after the warrior Prince, Prince Rupert—friend, relative, HBC founder and generic supporter of Charles II. With this, the company represented the "true and Absolute Lordes and Proprietors of the same territory and Lymit . . . Saving always the faith Allegiance and Sovereaign Dominion due to" the monarchy.

The Crown summarily dealt to its cronies nearly half a continent, one known, occupied and used by first Americans for over 10,000 years. For what? The only direct rent payable was "two Elkes and two Black beavers whensoever and as often as Wee our heires and successors shall happen to enter into the said Countreyes Territoryes and Regions hereby granted." During the 200 years of HBC monopoly (1670 to 1870) no rent was paid because the Crown never visited the granted lands. Neither did the adventurous governors of HBC.



Straightaway the Hudson's Bay Company set to trade beaver with Native people. Aboriginal traders may have puzzled at the wondrous gullibility of Europeans. They travelled great distances under adverse conditions to exchange such useful things as iron axe heads, needles, cooking ware, guns and ammunition for the fur of the plentiful beaver. Laughter might have echoed around the bay on finding Europeans trade these for rodent hair to be pressed into strange shaped, decorative hats. Compared with the marvel and utility of Iron Age technology, furs of the plentiful beaver were as trinkets.

For its first 100 years the company sat on the bay, luring willing Native people down the rivers from lands farther and farther distant, loaded with a winter's work of furs to trade. Aboriginal ways seemed to continue as they hunted, trapped and traded—it's just that the technology had changed and they now laboured at it with higher technology, seeking the yield of international trade. Vassalage to the fur industry became the way of life, whether trapping and shooting with iron age tools for foreign markets, transporting the product down to the edge of the bay, or marketing and trading with these apparent friendly fools from Europe. Did they know the culture-shaping, potentially culture-destroying, consequences of technology and trade? Relationships with other creatures, the land, their gods, culture, economy and selves, all would change.

1730, RUMBLINGS CLOSE BY

Passed from trader to middleman to hunter, whispers from out of the south and down from the northeast told of White people, how they were coming to Alberta and of their power. Early products of their iron technology—pots, pans, trade goods made of nearly indestructible materials never before seen—obtained from Native middlemen traders, confirmed these tales, sparking the charm and intrigue. Mechanical manifestations arrived from the northeast, guns and goods. About the same time, 1730, biological émigrés, horses and smallpox, moved into Alberta from the south. It would take another 25 years for Europe's first emissary to reach Alberta and almost 150 years before White people, by direct hand and numbers, would have substantial physical impact on the land but the European envelope was now open. Escaping from it were their paradigms, powers, technology, appetites and biomes. Even before their arrival White credentials were presented: cold power, indestructible products, invisible creeping death and marvelous technology with the power of evil or beneficence.

After an absence of 9,000 years, the horse returned to America, becoming a powerful, socially formative technology. Horsepower altered many things in the human camp—areas that could be exploited increased six fold;



social groups enlarged; wealth in horses promoted class differentiation; patterns of trade and theft changed; conflict over land and resources increased and with it, warfare.¹ Horses carried hunters to rich hunting grounds; they fleetly followed meandering herds of bison or quickly dispatched warriors to fight distant others. When herding bison to pounds or jumps and in the hunt itself, the hunter-horse unit enjoyed the never-before combined advantages of speed, security and endurance.

Guns came out of Hudson Bay by way of HBC inland traders. At the point of kill, the gun gave efficient, effective and remote service.² Guns and horses worked synergistically to multiply the powers of the hunter or warrior by a stupendous order. A large beast ridden by man, doing his bidding; the sorcery in man's hand-held stick, harder than stone, that killed distant life with thunder and smoke at the will of its holder: these combined powers—guns and horses all under a rider-man's dominion—conjured a nightmarish spectre for earlier people. How could foot bound man, woman, child or animal, defeat this ferocious apparatus?

Mysterious epidemics followed White people in the air wherever they went. Through scourges over thousands of years, Europeans developed wide immunity to these pathogens, but Americans had not. When passed to the New World, waves of disease spread through the original peoples. With immune systems unprepared, infection hit tribe-wide, ruthlessly eating individual and communal lives from within. Usually the introduction was unwitting, but not always.³ In 1730, a plague crept up the Missouri River into Alberta. Carried by traders, this smallpox epidemic devastated nearly half those exposed to it. Raging through the Crow'snest Pass area of southern Alberta, it annihilated one clan, erasing them from being. But the envelope also held other subtler agents of construction and destruction. Some things promised advantage to Native people, some posed threat. For the land there was no good, only successions of disaster.

AND MOSES SENT THEM TO SPY OUT THE LAND OF CANAAN⁴

Alberta's first White man slipped from the envelope a quarter of a century after these first manifestations. On September 11, 1754 near a now-place called Chauvin, Anthony Henday passed westward over a future survey line onto lands that would one day be designated Alberta. Some say he was the first white person to see it. Forces in England brought Henday to Alberta. HBC's monopoly and grant were under assault at home. Some demanded that HBC fulfil its mercantilist mandate: find the northwest trade route to the Orient; consolidate land claims; export British civilization, institutions



and religion; expand the empire through exploration, conquest and exploitation; and defeat the westward-expanding French, posing competitive and imperial threats. To silence critics at home and protect its grant and monopoly, the HBC in the early 1750s cautiously authorized more western exploration. Some commercial intelligence might also help business. HBC wished to know more about the extent of other fur traders' incursions onto HBC lands; attitudes of western Native people to trade and commerce; conditions and productivity of lands and wildlife; and they wished to survey other profitable opportunities including possible overland trade routes to the Pacific and the Orient. Henday, a HBC York Factory employee and former smuggler, volunteered to undertake this reconnaissance as a paying and guided guest of a party of Assiniboines.

History talks of Henday befriending the Native people. Here "befriending" means to smile at them, assess what they have to take or trade, calculate their worth alive or dead, and smoke pipes. Native Albertans made similar calculations concerning risks and rewards in dealing with White people, but their position was one of fundamental weakness. White ambitions were unknown to them.

The honouring of Henday contains coded meanings to many recent Albertans. He marks the advent of purpose for Alberta—all before was mere nature, perhaps just a preparatory mechanical unfolding. All after was development and improvement, the beginning of civilization and the end of savagery. Henday foreshadowed civilization, enlightenment, technology, development and progress—in short, the goodness claimed in justification for the newcomers. He was the sign that these things would bless a barren land, the land and people of *terra nullius*. Some see it differently. This, they say, was the lead ripple in a sequence of waves of itinerant exploiters coming to take from the land whatever the market's appetite demanded, to export it, to enrich themselves and then move on, leaving behind a hollowing land.

ON THE WESTERN FRONT (1754-1821)

Scarcely a trickle of White people followed Henday west over the following decades. Comfortable where they were, HBC persevered in their 100-year-old credo—sit close to the bay, trade with Native people and invite no trouble. The beaver was now gone from the Hudson Bay Lowlands; extirpation ballooned out north and west. Lengthening trading and supply routes snaked up major rivers, the only effective means for inland transportation. Pressure mounted to send HBC traders where the business was, up these rivers, west and north. More White people came, some from HBC, some from elsewhere.



Delegations of deadly disease canoed up the river with traders. This companion to White trade regularly halved the numbers of Native people (1730 and 1780 were two major 18th century epidemics). As populations reached pre-plague highs, new, devastating contagions visited, leaving families parentless, or childless—stealing the heart, the soul, the mind or the future of the clan. Bearspaw oral traditions claim they fled west to escape smallpox. Ultimately they had no place to hide.

Where smallpox left off, another spirit in the envelope, alcohol, took up. Booze possessed marvellous effects for its vendor. First, it was addictive. Without cultural resistance to it (or perhaps physiological adaptation), some Native people craved it, exchanging things of great value for it. Second, it compromised the judgment of those under its influence. The intoxicated made disadvantageous deals. A third less immediate but more pervasive effect was the way it strengthened the dealer's relative position at future bargaining tables. It broke down social and family structures, respect and judgment disintegrated, connection with the past and commitment to the future evaporated with this "marvelous" trade good. Desperate people take desperate positions, easily abandoned, to the negotiating table. The level playing field fictionalized in trade theory became distinctly tipsy with drugs. The trade table wobbled unconscionably in the drug dealer's favour.⁵

Who took advantage of alcohol? Nearly everyone trading for White people. English said the French first traded liquor. In 1755 Henday records this as the French advantage. English and French agree that American free-traders were the worst. Native people say, "White people brought it." Benefits went to the newcomers and Native people suffered the burdens. Liquor brewed-in with rapid technological change, starvation, epidemics and threat by an external enemy, to concoct a blend of wicked social devastation. Some White people claimed the resulting collapse of culture as evidence that Native people could not care for themselves.

For the moment, the land fared better than the people. Fortunately, trade focused only on those few species European markets demanded. But greater competition in the fur industry lured increasing numbers of traders and trappers west. Distance made supplying westward-ranging traders out of Montreal or London too costly, so local supply strategies became necessary. Demand for bison and pemmican increased.

Metis and Native people, primarily the independent Blackfoot Confederacy, took up provisioning the fur trade. Seeing an opportunity to increase business, HBC promoted a small trade in bison robes. That appetite would grow. One trade (fur) created the demand for another (meat) that pioneered yet a third (robes). Western diversification started on the backs of



the bison. Other American traders probed farther west and north, seeking new fur lands. Spanish from the south and Russians from the north claimed rights along the west coast. These Eurasian imperial competitors roused proto-Canadians from their slumber, hastening their westward expansion, driving them to grab lands and trade before others did. Increasingly, Montreal traders collaborated among themselves, trying to survive the cutthroat fur trade. During the winter of 1783-4, these Canadiens formalized a partnership called the North West Company (NWC). Scots and French, founders of the NWC, needed to settle on common strategies to compete with HBC and the freebooting American traders coming up the Missouri River.

Initially unresponsive, HBC finally fought back as business, profit and patience ebbed. By 1792 both NWC and HBC had trading posts in Alberta. HBC and NWC's war lasted more than 35 years, from before 1784 to 1821. From the near-stasis of monopoly to the dynamic change of competition, suddenly Alberta was a land of opportunity for White people. Open for business, traders paddled in. During this trade war White populations mounted from tens to hundreds, fur-bearing wildlife plunged⁶ and numbers of Native people oscillated between disease-lows and prosperity highs.

Now pelt-producers enjoyed choices. Instead of the unbudging single HBC traders of earlier days, a slough of solicitous pedlar-traders scrambled to give them top dollar for their furs. Aboriginal populations and living conditions fluxed spasmodically on their economic, cultural and demographic roller coaster. Fortunately for Native people (if this sorry tale can be called fortunate) furs had value and for that White people needed them on the land.

By 1820 competition had run its course. Together, HBC, NWC (including now XY Company), Astor's American Fur Trade Co., the independents, Spain and Russia, imperialists and capitalists, had grabbed nearly all the remaining unexploited lands in the northwest. Ill effects of competition reverberated throughout the land; populations of some fur-bearing mammals teetered close to extinction. The industry suffered a classic dose of excess capacity in the face of a plummeting resource. Dividends dropped, expenses increased; the costs of competition became clear. Amalgamation was proposed to re-monopolize the fur trade on Rupert's Land—HBC with NWC under the HBC banner. In 1821 Britain's Parliament blessed this arrangement by extending the HBC monopoly for a further 21 years and expanding the grant to include lands farther northwest.

Before European trade touched the lands, Native people were self-sufficient. At first, with White trade, furs came easy. Prosperity increased, but now the people of the land depended upon trade and related technology to



maintain a hybridizing lifestyle. Despite human hubris, animals underwrote it all. Dependency was a powerful tool in bending Native people to European purposes. A highly placed HBC memo of May 22, 1822 describes the strategy:

However repugnant it may be to our feelings, I am convinced they [Native people] must be ruled with a rod of Iron to bring and keep them in a proper state of subordination, and the most certain way to effect this is by letting them feel their dependence upon us . . . In the woods and northern barren grounds this measure ought to be pursued rigidly next year if they do not improve, and no credit, not so much as a load of ammunition, given them until they exhibit an inclination to renew their habits of industry. In the plains however this system will not do, as they can live independent of us, and by withholding ammunition, tobacco and spirits, the Staple articles of Trade, for one year, they will recover the use of their Bows and spears, and lose sight of their smoking and drinking habits; it will therefore be necessary to bring those Tribes round by mild and cautious measure which may soon be effected.⁷

These gentler measures—practised with drugs, cultural nihilism, starvation, and the creation and management of dependency—seem more civilized than the direct and brutal American and Spanish strategies of guns and blood, but were they?

PLANTING THE SEED

Pioneering horticulturalists planted large gardens in Edmonton as early as 1793. As the fur industry's demand for local food sources grew, so did cultivated acres. By the early 19th century Alberta had small-scale commercial agriculture. To the north, Peter Pond (1770) confirmed earlier tales (1716, Swan or Wa-Pa-Su) of black pitch oozing out of the ground in the Athabasca region. These surface expressions of the "tar sands" hinted at gigantic subterranean riches, portending a fossil fuel industry to come. It would be another century (1880) before agriculture took firm root in Alberta and 150 years before the petroleum industry gushed to life. Until then there were other resources to capture, exploit and export.

Ships now bridged Pangaea's seams. Transportation technology joined distant continents and introduced their insulated life forms to others. Eurasian creatures took the ocean cruise to the Americas—the European envelope ripped open. Apart from White people, the vessel held a range of



organisms. Some, cultivars and domesticated animals, were intended for release. Uninvited others straggled along over time—species such as the house mouse and English sparrows. Recreational animals like cats, dogs and some birds came. All manner of Eurasian plants, the so-called noxious weeds, jumped onboard in Europe and once at their New World destination, jumped out. An opportunistic community of pathogens and diseases, virtually unknown in the unsuspecting Americas, slid down the envelope's sides. Once disembarked, these exotic contents still required European-style industry, community and context to live. The mouse needed a house, the sparrow eaves, the dandelion a disturbed field. With only a few exceptions, their invasion depended on more extensive White occupation. For the diseases, they preferred Native Americans.

European technology emerged from out of the envelope to empower the hunter. If Clovis technology was enough to dispatch the giant short-faced bear, what did smoothbore gun-toting, horse-mounted hunters do for the security of the bison? The power of the individual multiplied by orders of magnitude while the prospects for the prey diminished by the same factor. Ultimately, the Americas had little or no immunity to the diseases, drugs, markets or the technology of White people and their ways. 

