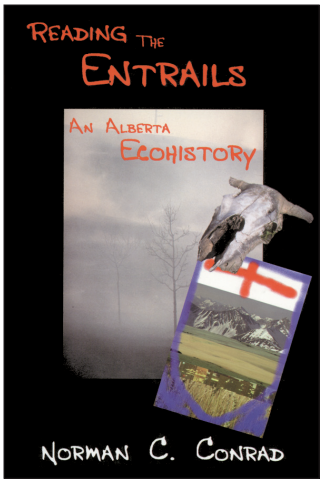

READING THE ENTRAILS: AN ALBERTA ECOHISTORY

by Norman C. Conrad

ISBN 978-1-55238-671-2

CHAPTER 4

BISON BOUNTY

Before contact, 60 million bison grazed North America. Alberta was primary range for four million, hauntingly close to its present cow population. The plains and parklands surged with boisterous bison. They wandered in swells, where a blanket of bison might swatch a hillock, then in blots swarm a valley, only to move on up a draw in an organic mass and cascade up over the top. Spilling out onto a grassy plateau, they might spread and placidly graze, until bison wisdom told them to move on. Not much later, a time came when the plains echoed hollow and melancholy—no bison, no wolf, no bear.

BISON

HBC men had little need for inland food sources while located on the bay and provisioned from London. Meanwhile aggressive Canadiens, NWC and westward-advancing U.S. free traders roused HBC with an inland challenge. Retreating beaver beckoned all of them ever deeper into the wilds, ever farther from supplies. To follow required inland food sources. Of their few food alternatives, one option's providence was overwhelming. This manna was pemmican.

Pemmican is a nutritious, high-energy food made of processed lean bison meat. Dried lean jerky was pulverized and blended with liquid marrow fat in a leather bag weighing, when full, approximately 40 kilos. Berries, other fruits or herbs were added according to custom, season or taste. A concentrated food that carried and stored easily, pemmican was the perfect mainstay for long overland trips and nasty inland winters.

Initially, pemmican demand determined the size of the organized hunt. Until the 1820s, trade required only small hunts and the Metis Red River hunt easily addressed that market. Later, Americans streamed up the Missouri River with bison trading on their minds, challenging HBC interests

on Alberta's high plains. To thwart American expansion, particularly on Blackfoot Confederacy lands, and to obtain a more westerly local supply, HBC repaired to the plains to take up the pemmican trade with the local Native people—the Blackfoot Confederacy, (Bloods, Blackfoot, Peigan) and Sarcee. But this market proved too modest for HBC ambitions. If new bison-based products could be found, they might replace the dwindling beaver fur trade, cement relationships with the plains people and secure the land.

During the 1860s, fashion-conscious consumers on America's eastern seaboard took a fancy to bison robes. Demand increased. New tanning technology also turned bison to highly desired leather for fashion, military and industrial applications. Fast-improving production technology—involving horses, guns, transportation and organization—more efficiently turned the bison to account. After the American civil war, breech-loading and repeating rifles travelled west to help kill in what was now becoming a gorge. Prices rose, costs fell.[1] Thousands of years of hunting—jumps, pounds, drives, stalks, camouflage and traps—seemed not to affect population numbers (just phenotypes) but the new tools of hunting and killing, rendering and production, transportation and marketing, changed all that.

Bison declined, then disappeared in the nimbus of White people's westward movement. In the U.S., extinction tracked railways west, opening bison lands to White people—to their markets and technology, consumptive appetites and productive means. Equipment and hunters paid passage down the line; the stiffening carnage of their orgy chugged back up the tracks. America's first transcontinental rail line, completed in 1869, cut the west and its bison into northern and southern herds. Following that, extinction zones billowed out north and south of the railway lines.[2] Farley Mowat speculated that:

> Between 1850 and 1885, more than 75 million buffalo hides had been handled by American dealers. Most were shipped east on the railroads, which had contributed heavily to the extinction both directly and indirectly.[3]

Rail chased the disappearing bison north to Montana by 1880, just in time to aid elimination in this last stronghold. Without railways Canada's death machine did not reach the same zany heights but the bison population suffered the same precipitous plunge.

In his famous western expedition during the late 1850s, John Palliser commented on diminishing herds. The orgy climaxed in the late '60s. By the early '70s, hunters ranged farther afield to find prey. The next decade was the mop-up operation, spent reducing to nothingness the fragmented

remnants of this profound life force. Impetus demanded that the last few be killed.[4] Relentlessly, they were. With nearly no bison remaining in Alberta in March 1879, Canadians negotiated with Montana to hunt their remaining few. Those were soon snuffed out.

By debacle's end, two small populations and a few scattered individuals remained from 60 million. One, the wood bison of northern Alberta's boreal forests, was so remote and inaccessible it was either overlooked or too difficult to hunt by even the most rapacious of hunters. The other, a collection of plains bison, hunkered down in Yellowstone Park's sometimes safe haven. A few remaining stragglers were captured for enclosure.

On the bison grounds Metis and Native people often did the hunting and killing, the rendering and scraping, the transporting of robes to the trading post and then down the river or rail to market, activities that were contrary to the culture and tradition of Native people. John Foster argues that the Metis were not of this tradition, claiming that:

> In their behaviour the Metis heralded the future settler society not the past. The Metis of the 1870s in Alberta were the precursors of the consumerist, single-commodity, boom and bust economy of the 20th century West, especially in Alberta.[5]

Nearly everything about the business—the scale, purpose, tools and ethic—was White, and was duplicated with agonizing conformity in other European colonies and outposts around the world.

Those involved in the bison campaign in Alberta from 1830 to 1880, lived well for a time. Several months of deadly serious killing, the fall hunt and the spring hunt, took care of material needs, while snoozing, schmoozing and boozing occupied much of the rest. Traders and top-duck hunters worried about markets, free trade, prices, production costs, costs of labour but not the bison. For a few scintillating decades the hunt brought an aura of wealth and prosperity as the bison business flared brilliantly; then that too died.

BISON PEOPLE

Before Europeans, the bison, not trade, was essential to plains peoples. Plains Native people were one member in the large community of bison-dependant life. When the bison tribe moved on, the human tribe broke camp to do the same. It was their way of life and survival. They rejoiced over the bison in song and spirit. They needed little because the bison and the land cared for them. When they wanted things from others or had a

surplus, they traded, but irregularly, on a discretionary basis and among near equals. Then came a fundamental discontinuity. People from far away arrived with new beliefs and tools, new ways of doing things and new ways to compel others to do their will. Compliance promised much; resistance held defeat, perhaps death. Trade expanded rapidly. Steel pots cannot harm a Stone Age man? Cloth and beads cannot kill a wild land? Little seemed to change, but everything did.

The bison changed. Before, the bison was a fellow creature, so bountiful and useful that it forged a way of life. The bison was the keystone species; humans a dependant. Waste was limited because takings were generally small and purposes right. Direct appetite limited the hunt. One could only eat so much pemmican and layer on so many robes.

With large-scale trade the bison became something else. It became a potential—a "resource"—a thing that became better as it reduced from living mammal to pemmican, leather and robes. Hunters had only to exchange such humble things as pieces of dead bison to obtain marvellous European goods. Like the philosopher's stone, trade's elixir transmuted the base to the precious. The bison metamorphosed into knives and pots and tobacco and liquor. Fastforwarded, this is more than metamorphosis. In the commercial sacrament, it becomes a transubstantiation—bison turned to whatever money could buy.

Native people changed. Before, they were hunters. The bison was hunted for what it could provide—meat, robes, tongue or hump. Appetite for bison slaked, the hunter rested; so did the bison. After contact, the Plains people harvested the bison as a trade product, something to be traded into something else—non-bison things. No longer did the hunter/harvester ask the bison to satisfy his bison needs. He asked it to satisfy his every appetite, his globalized needs. With trade's transubstantiation, enough dead bison could provide nearly anything in the world the hunter wanted. Never having enough White goods, suddenly there were never enough dead bison. All the world's bison could not satisfy this appetite. And they didn't.

Tribal structures changed. Whether through emulation or stipulation, the new bison-business people came to reflect the White trader's structures. HBC business practices brought imperial inclinations of hierarchy to the plains. Through presents and ritualized preliminaries, trading often became elite-building and power-enhancing events. Trading chiefs elevated, the rest reduced. "Chief to chief" dealings are efficient, the one binds the many and it protects the interests of elites, whether European or Native American, from the clamour of the commoners. And if Native elites ever became too strident or principled, with modest White manipulations one

chief might be deflated and another inflated, in effect the manufacture of leaders. Flat tribal structures struggled with pyramidal HBC structures and lost.

Not just tribal leadership changed. With new trade-oriented cottage industries, tribal members had new things to do. Lower-downs in stratifying Native society became the working poor—scraping hides, rendering meat, making pemmican and preparing all manner of things for trade. Polygyny (long permitted in some Native people traditions) became a tool for acquisition. Prominent traders and hunters took on many wives to perform manufacturing functions. Dickason reports what must have been wrenching cultural effects on women of this new world of businessmen:

> Where Plains Indian women had usually married in their late teens, girls as young as 12 now did so; on the other hand, rarely could a man afford to buy a wife before he was in his mid-30s. As polygyny developed, so did a hierarchy among wives, with the senior wife usually directing the others.[6]

Along with their wives, great chiefs had many horses; hundreds, sometimes even thousands.[7] Status enhancing symbols of wealth and power, horses were used not only for transportation and hunting, but as a kind of currency and medium for wealth and property accumulation. Powerful chiefs on spirited horses draped themselves in magnificent costume and elegant attire. Again Dickason observes:

> Affluence was manifested in the size of tipis, which by the 1830s could be large enough to accommodate as many 100 persons.[8]

Conspicuous consumption became part of the new, improved Native society.[9]

Around the 1840s a fundamental shift occurred in the values of Alberta's Native people.[10] Before then, status depended not on material accumulations but social, cultural and spiritual distinction. With long exposure to White priorities and institutions, European attitudes invaded Native people's traditions. A materialistic consumer mentality blended into the potent potion that would cozen Native Americans of their culture and lands.

Trade splits production from consumption. Metis and aboriginals became producers. Eastern middle classes were consumers. In this disassociative state, both producer and consumer were glorified as goodness and progress. Few paid attention to likely future consequences. All relished the present

bounty; it appeared that new technology, products, markets and trade worked a cultural miracle for Native people. In contemporary terms, employment increased, incomes rose, population increased, production multiplied, per capita consumption shot up and all was well. Nicer yet, cultural ways did not appear to change except everyone had more horses in their corral, lots more beadwork, and full liquor cabinets.

Then the bison died. And so did the bison people. By 1879 the bison was gone and the people of the Blackfoot Confederacy were starving in squalor. Haughty power and independence dissolved into piteous begging for any refuse or spoilage having food value. Out of this deliquescing present, a vicious and dismal future hardened. The bargain made, trade executed, benefits enjoyed, only now were the costs levied. Faust-like, those Native people who survived could claim, "Now I die eternally."

POST-CARNAGE BLUES

After the bloody tide, scavengers swept the plains and forests to finish the job and exploit the remains. While the killing fever raged there was no time to dispose of rotting mounds of bison. Often the killers took only the hides, or tongues, or a choice cut of meat, leaving most to rot. Sportsmen took nothing except the ephemeral best, life. So the plains were leprously strewn with skeletal material, whitening skulls and ribs sloughed in decomposing flesh, a hollowing mortuary.

Scavengers did their best to dispose of the carnage, but the swift fox, coyotes, wolves, vultures, eagles and their array of small helpers, could not keep pace. White people also took to the plains, to turn whatever they could into a dollar. Bone pickers scoured the echoing plain for skulls and skeletal remains to sell as fertilizers to eastern farmers. And some turned their attention to species that had survived the slaughter.

Several subspecies of wolves lived for thousands of years alongside the bison, feeding on the young, old, sick, wounded and dead. They kept the bison herds free of disease and alert. Wolf numbers climbed during the bison slaughter. At the bison's end, White hunters heard the market say, "Now I want wolf." At this bidding, a new brand of exploiter rose up to ply his trade. This next succession in the development of the west was the wolfer.

Bullets were too expensive, hunting too difficult for these entrepreneurs. Poison—strychnine and arsenic—constituted the new production technology. The method was to leave dead bison or whatever they could kill, liberally seasoned with chemical death. Wolfers retired to their dens, to let time and poison hunt for them. Days later they would trail the prairies to find out what they had killed. Wolves died, poisoned, but so was nearly everything

else—coyotes, swift fox, badgers, weasel, ferrets, eagles, hawks, and starving people. The plains wolf, dependent on the bison but able to survive its extinction, itself then collapsed to extinction. Alongside went the plains grizzly.

Some claim today that bison populations are increasing. The inference is that the species is not extinct, having survived the debacle. In a genotypic sense that is true; but it ignores other types of extinctions, ones that may be as momentous, although not, perhaps, so clear.

The plains bison was the single most important animate species in the galaxy of North American grassland ecosystems. The multiple dynamics and the complex of relationships and interactions between bison and other species framed the biology of the Great Plains. The grama grass, blue grass and wheat grasses that co-evolved in accommodation with the bison, were no longer grazed. These grasses missed the mouth, rip, step and roll of the bison. That relationship, that synergy, was lost. The wolf, coyote and swift fox, the creatures who trailed the herds, the doctors and undertakers of the herd, languished. Birds that depended on the bison to stir up insects in their foraging, amphibians that needed bison wallow and rain for reproduction—all withered in sympathy, some to extinction. That biology also involved humans in dependant ways, and those people are today extinct. There are no more bison people, only specters and romantic yearnings. Nothing was the same after; nor could it ever be.

For the bison there was another kind of extinction, that of bison culture, the herd knowledge, the experience passed on from generation to generation of migrations, ways of the rut, winter refuge and spring's first green grasses. "Bisonness" went extinct, the culture of the bison died with the last free ranging, unrestrained wild beasts. The open grasslands, sloughs, coulees and wallows, will never again know the civilization of bison.

Passing through park bison enclosures I have seen these relict lords of the plains, levelling a distant and vacant gaze through the fence off to the line of horizon. Driving by bison ranches and game farms, one sees these humbled beasts, now bent to the service of modern man. No more roving the plains searching for the most succulent greens. Now they wait for a bale of hay produced from alien grasses on lands cultured to a new regimen, provided by someone who is waiting to butcher them. They do not worry about the wolf or grizzly bear; they know no enemies except their keeper. No bison these animals! They are cows in bison robes, a phenotypic disguise. To those who say the plains bison is not extinct, yes, its genes continue, but bisonness is as extinct to nature as the prodigious flight of passenger pigeons or the seaward bounding of the great auk.

BUFFALO CHIPS, BLOOD AND BLAME

Who exterminated the bison? The triggermen are well-known. Some sought mere amusement. Wealthy tourists, sportsmen they say, arranged gala safaris to the west to display their civilization by each killing many bison. The poor emulated the elite to the extent they could afford bullets and transportation. Hewitt in *The Conservation of Wild Life* in Canada records this footnote:

> In October 1884 a Canadian Pacific tri-weekly train from Calgary to Winnipeg was boarded at way stations by passengers laden with rifles, saddles and other equipment till it was crowded to capacity. Inquiry elicited the information that *seven* buffalo had been reported in the Cypress Hills. This was undoubtedly the last remnant of the vast herds which once roved the prairies of Western Canada, and, inspired by a desire to slaughter, at least 50, and probably 100, hunters immediately started for the town of Maple Creek . . . .[11]

But amusement and bloodthirst do not create the all-consuming rapaciousness and focused discipline necessary to eliminate these millions in a few decades. Powerful forces aimed the triggermen. Who or what were the "directing minds and wills" for this debacle?[12]

Turning the millions of bison on HBC lands to account required large-scale trade and sale into international markets. Demand to do so was stimulated, enabled in part by technological innovations. Earlier, the chic men and women of Europe helped the trapper load his traps in the watery wilds of America when they demanded to wear pressed beaver felt hats. Eastern American counterparts, wearing their bison coats and using bison robes, helped load gun charges on the bison hunting grounds. Blood of the millions spattered them as much as the triggermen.

Markets reflected the ambitions of dominant institutions and elites—HBC, Canada and England will do for the minute and in a shallow way. Here lies much of the "directing mind and will" in this disaster (and many others like it ongoing at that time on Earth). Once this apparatus and driver, a machine in ways—the human cogs, physical levers, the production methods and available technology—was running at full throttle, even the market, its engine, could not stop it. When demand slowed in 1875 the killing did not. Foster describes the dynamics of the time:

> The casual observer might have predicted a decline in robe production with the fall in prices. In this view Native hunters, Indian and Metis, would simply cease to hunt to produce robes in surplus amounts and return to a strategy of an earlier generation of hunting for subsistence. Such was not the case. The Metis particularly had never been subsistence producers. Rather than diminishing the production of robes the fall in prices increased production. More robes were necessary to attempt to sustain the flow of material goods from the east.[13]

This overshoot and collapse quite likely was anticipated, perhaps even intended. Some understanding of business assists us. *Beyond the Limits* explains a similar but more recent context:

> Ecologist Paul Ehrlich once expressed surprise to a Japanese journalist that the Japanese whaling industry would exterminate the very source of its wealth. The journalist replied, "You are thinking of the whaling industry as an organization that is interested in maintaining whales; actually it is better viewed as a huge quantity of [financial] capital attempting to earn the highest possible return. If it can exterminate whales in 10 years and make a 15% profit, but it could only make 10% with a sustainable harvest, then it will exterminate them in 10 years. After that the money will be moved to exterminating some other resource.[14]

These principles, wielded in rougher fashion, applied to hunters and bison. Extinction has costs but it also has its rewards.

Long-term objectives might be achieved by eliminating the bison. For those who coveted Native and bison lands, Natives and bison were problems. Obstacles to cow and plough, they both had to go. One needed no excuse to shoot bison. It was good business and it might help to solve the resident people problem at the same time.[15]

That Canada intended to eliminate the bison and carried it into action is sharply underscored by a last-minute hesitation. On March 22, 1877 the Northwest Territories Council, a federally appointed body, passed an ordinance to protect the bison. Parliament and the council well knew the consequences of failing to protect the bison. Mr. Schultz told this to proceedings of the House of Commons on March 26, 1877:

> It was a fact that the very existence of the plain tribes of Indians depended upon this valuable animal . . . . The same

> authority (Father Lacombe) . . . estimated that, at the present rate of destruction, in eight years the buffalo would be extinct . . . .[16]

Less than 16 months later, by resolution of August 2, 1878, the Northwest Territories Council repealed protection for the bison. This during the death throes of the Canadian herd. Canada, it must be noted, killed every one of its plains bison. Only American members of the subspecies survived. For Canada, empire and nation created the plan, owned the lands, had police power in place to enforce laws, set the laws and then repealed them while having clear knowledge of consequences. They proceeded notwithstanding.

The few concerned for the bison and Native people were powerless to stop the killing. Annihilation continued until there were no more. Some say extermination was unfortunate but necessary. It had to be done for development of the empire. It had to be done to civilize the northwest. It also had to be done for White people, the farmers, the trains and the nation. It had to be done to purge the plains of pests. Economic theory had it that the world was a better place for all this because the fashionable had their bevy of bison robes to pelt backs and beds. It had to be done because the market demanded it. Billfolds had to be filled and a new land of opportunity had to be seized. To do otherwise would be to stand in the way of progress, really the embracing sin.