

French Canadians,
Furs, and Indigenous Women
in the Making of the
Pacific Northwest

JEAN BARMAN



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Introduction

THOSE OF US WHO THINK about the past have a double obligation. On the one hand, we need to respect the findings of our predecessors. On the other, we must not let ourselves be so persuaded as to fail to consider other possibilities. The Pacific Northwest is a case in point.

Bounded by California to the south, Alaska to the north, Pacific Ocean on the west, and Rocky Mountains on the east, the early Pacific Northwest has been mostly passed over in histories of the United States and Canada. Well into the nineteenth century, this far corner of North America, home to many and diverse indigenous peoples, little interested outsiders apart from their acquisition of animal pelts, for which external governance was a hindrance. The region was only in 1846 divided between the United States and Britain, from 1867 Canada, whereupon each country pinned its version of the past on the Pacific Northwest. Whichever the country in charge, the history of the half not theirs was lost from view; that of the half acquired being tacked on to a national narrative.

The time is long overdue to reconsider the Pacific Northwest on its own terms. *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* does so from three interwoven perspectives. French Canadians have been almost wholly absent, the economy that brought them there evoked from the perspective of the English speakers in charge, and indigenous women subsumed into larger discussions on indigenous peoples. Once we bore down beneath the surface of events, we become aware, in Jocelyn Létourneau's words intended to apply more generally,

of “the marginalization, sometimes deliberate and sometimes unintentional, partly successful and partly unsuccessful, of the French fact (as well as the Native fact and the Métis fact).”¹

My beginning point is a long generation of French Canadians who, I argue, together with the indigenous women in their lives and then their descendants have shaped the Pacific Northwest as we know it today. Mostly born between 1790 and 1830, 1,240 French Canadians whose names survive were attracted by the region’s first outsider economy, based in furs, up to 1858 when the last part of the Pacific Northwest acquired outside governance.

Not only did French Canadians head to the Pacific Northwest, they stayed. A quarter of the 1,240 soon recrossed the Rockies in the course of their employment, but of those with a choice to make, almost two-thirds remained for as long or short as their lives might be. Until the early 1840s they made up the largest group of outsiders. *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women* follows this founding generation and their descendants into the present day.

To understand how it was that French Canadians, indigenous women, and their descendants have mattered, we need to move beyond the usual narratives written from the perspectives of those in charge and focus instead on the men and women who made their feats possible. To put the matter another way, we need to peer beneath the surface of colonialism as the term is invoked to signify an outside country acquiring control over another geographical entity and its peoples for the purpose of economic exploitation and possibly settlement. Colonialism came late and gradually to the Pacific Northwest. Ships of several countries visited the coast early on, but it was only in 1793 that the first overland expedition arrived and only in 1846 that the large land mass acquired its permanent political status, opening the way to the imposition of external authority. The intervening time period, marked by the presence of the global phenomenon that was the fur trade, is most often evoked from the perspective of the Americans and British or, more recently, that of indigenous peoples about to be cast aside.² In retrospect we know the end of the story, but doing so does not give licence to read back in time.

While we cannot determine the “what ifs” of the past to know how the Pacific Northwest might have developed without French Canadians’ presence, it is short-sighted not to acknowledge the differences they made. By attending to the backstories of the past as well as to events on centre stage, we come to understand, more generally, how it is that ordinary people doing their jobs affect the course of events.

IN A LONG TRADITION

French Canadians shaped the Pacific Northwest not by rejecting who they were but rather by drawing on firmly established ways of life that were theirs by virtue of their births and upbringings. They were comfortable in their selves and acted accordingly.

French Canadians, as the term is used here, were at the same time not all alike. Joined together in the context of the Pacific Northwest fur economy were three groups sharing paternal ancestral origins in what is today Quebec, the French language, adherence to Catholicism, and first and possibly also last names premised on language and religion. Seven in ten of the 1,240 named French Canadians who arrived with the fur economy up to 1858 were Canadiens, characterized by French maternal as well as paternal descent.³ The other three in ten divided between indigenous men from the Montreal area, known in the fur trade as Iroquois; and others, possibly also wholly indigenous, but much more likely métis, which is the French-language term for individuals of French paternal and indigenous maternal descent.⁴ Working and living together, Canadiens, Iroquois, other indigenous men, and métis formed chains of acquaintance and webs of relationships based in, and strengthened by, their common attributes.

French Canadians arriving in the Pacific Northwest shared a settlement history wrapping around furs. For two centuries a French possession, their historic homeland of New France extended at its height in the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries down the Mississippi River and west across the Great Lakes and into the prairies. For generations, young men had secured jobs as voyageurs, paddling the canoes heading out to trade newcomer goods with indigenous peoples for pelts, and some continued to do so through their lifetimes, very often raising families with local indigenous women. Even before the American War of Independence beginning in 1776, New France was no more. It fell to the British in 1763, and much of France's one-time sphere of influence came under American control by early in the next century. Because French Canadians were set apart by language and other perceived attributes, their continued presence across much of North America was often overlooked, and at other times disparaged. To the extent that descendants subsequently took centre stage in English-speaking North America, it was as Métis, being persons of mixed indigenous and newcomer descent who came together in the prairie fur trade and twice confronted the new Canadian state.⁵

French Canadians attracted to the Pacific Northwest were old enough to have experienced a firmly established way of life, young enough to have

ambitions of their own. By virtue of heading where they did, they were distinct from many other French Canadians attracted by the fur trade, who entered settings already put in place. Those crossing the Rockies to participate in its sole outsider economy, based in both trapping animals and trading for furs, had in consequence a freer range of action.

THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST RECONSIDERED

Reconsidering the Pacific Northwest, comprising present-day British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and parts of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, we come to realize the 1,240 French Canadians changed its face in five important ways. They, first, facilitated the five overland expeditions to the Pacific Ocean between 1793 and 1812 that together opened the region's enormous land base to the United States and Britain rather than to Russia to the north or Spain to the south, both of which had earlier explored the coastline. The crossings' common focus was resource exploitation, as indicated by the instructions American president Thomas Jefferson gave the leaders of the best known of the five, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, to find "the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce."⁶

Second, French Canadians drove the ensuing fur economy. Regardless of where companies were based, be it the United States, the former New France, or Britain, French Canadians formed the bulk of employees. They did so by virtue of their numbers and also due to their persistence.

Third, French Canadians, collaboratively with indigenous women, initiated the earliest agricultural settlement in the Pacific Northwest that was not wholly indigenous. Its success is attested by the first American missionaries setting themselves down next door in Oregon's Willamette Valley precisely because French Canadians and their families were doing so well.

Fourth, when the time came to establish external governance, French Canadians' presence ensured the United States would not get it all, as it sought to do, but that the northern half would go to Britain, giving today's Canada its Pacific shoreline. Britain would almost certainly have acceded to American demands had it not been importuned by the company then in charge of the Pacific Northwest fur economy. The London-based Hudson's Bay Company was determined to remain so long as profits were to be had, which they were owing in good part to French Canadians' persistence. It is otherwise very possible, and indeed probable, the entire Pacific Northwest would be American.

Fifth, French Canadians, along with the indigenous women in their lives, eased relations with indigenous peoples both within and beyond the fur economy. French Canadians came out of a long history of comfort with indigenous peoples that passed on to their children. A consequence has been that their descendants, rather than opting for a third way as the Métis did, have enacted both of their formative inheritances in their some-time roles as intermediaries between peoples.

APPROACH

Once we attend to the backstories of the past as opposed to limiting ourselves to the headlines, we uncover in the Pacific Northwest lives having major influence on the course of events. Be they Canadiens, Iroquois, otherwise indigenous, or métis, French Canadians were resourceful and determined without feeling entitled, as most Americans and British did. French Canadians did not need to aggrandize themselves, to be “heroic” if you will. Their satisfaction in the everyday made it all the easier for men in charge to claim the credit for what were French Canadians’ accomplishments. As for indigenous women, many of them had long and eventful lives, causing them also to be identified in the records of the past. Men and their families who enter this text as individuals are profiled in an appendix.

The three sections and twelve chapters of *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women in the Making of the Pacific Northwest* reconsider the region from the perspective of the 1,240 named French Canadians who arrived with the fur economy through 1858. The chapters combine quantification and qualification, for, as Allan Greer points out in respect to French Canadian participation in the 1837 Quebec Rebellion: “Statistics from arrest records, censuses, and other quantifiable sources can be helpful as long as statistical abstractions do not cause us to lose sight of the human complexity of the situation. There is always the danger, in this sort of approach, of ignoring or slighting that which is not measurable.”⁷ The numbers are important, but so are the stories.

The critical starting points are the biographies of French Canadians and others in the Pacific Northwest fur economy constructed by Bruce McIntyre Watson out of his two decades of meticulous primary and secondary research, and generously shared while still in manuscript form.⁸ As well as summarizing men’s work and personal lives in the Pacific Northwest, the biographies, published as *Lives Lived West of the Divide: A Biographical*

Dictionary of Fur Traders Working West of the Rockies, 1793-1858, include name variants, approximate birthdates, and possible birthplaces based on contemporary records. The most frequent versions of men's names are used here, with interested readers able to retrieve variants from the alphabetized biographies in *Lives Lived*. It has proven to be virtually impossible, given the frequency of single surnames and lack of information on parentage, systematically to track men backwards in time to their familial origins, a task left to descendants and others having a better sense of context and place. Women's names are given as they appeared, most often in Catholic church records, and tribal linkages specified and spelled as they were used at the time as opposed to present-day renamings. Totals in charts and elsewhere are rounded off to the nearest five or ten to reflect the original data's imprecision. Distances correspond to present-day usage, thereby kilometres north of the boundary between Canada and the United States, miles to the south.

On this base is laid a superstructure drawing on post journals, conscious that their content was tailored to be read by superiors; contemporary accounts having their own biases; church and governmental records; early newspapers; censuses; the secondary literature; and, very importantly, descendants' stories. Most sources consulted were in English because, quite simply, most sources referencing the Pacific Northwest are in English. The problematic nature of some of the data means that inferences drawn in the text are sometimes based on probabilities as opposed to certainties. For all of these reasons, *French Canadians, Furs, and Indigenous Women's* content is sourced as fully as is practical and, where a choice exists and the two are consistent, published sources are preferred to manuscript originals by virtue of being more accessible. The hope is the book will be a beginning rather than an end point, encouraging others to pick up on, and contest, threads introduced here.

Structure and agency jostle up against each other in all of our lives, and so it did for these men and women and then their children and descendants. They were real people leading real lives, if in past time, and, where feasible, they want to be acknowledged and respected as such. To this end, family stories are used both in and of themselves and to make larger points. The goal is for readers not only to *savoir* French Canadians and their families but also to *connaître* them – not only to know about them but also to become acquainted. The stories that have survived are sometimes complex because lives were complicated and because webs of relationships and chains of acquaintance mattered. So be it.

In reconsidering the Pacific Northwest, my goal is both specific, in relationship to French Canadians and indigenous women, and general, in respect to the roles played in past times by everyday human beings like most of us. Small numbers of people can effect big changes, not necessarily consciously, but by being in the right place at the right time, behaving decently, and doing their jobs. Just as with all of us, actions have consequences, both deliberate and unintended. By acting as they did, French Canadians, together with the indigenous women in their lives and then their descendants, have in some fundamental ways made the Pacific Northwest we know today.

PART I
*French Canadians and the
Fur Economy*

PART I FOCUSES ON French Canadians' engagement with the fur trade from the time of New France through its expansion into the Pacific Northwest. Chapter 1, "To Be French Canadian," reminds us that the 1,240 named French Canadians who arrived in the Pacific Northwest with the fur economy through 1858 were in a long tradition of travel across great distances. Following France's military defeat by Britain in 1759, French Canadians were cast on their own resources. Employment in the fur and related economies continued to exercise appeal. Except in areas once under French oversight, French Canadians were rarely in charge but were, rather, the backbone on which all else depended.

Chapter 2, "Facilitating the Overland Crossings," demonstrates that, whereas outsiders' five expeditions to the Pacific Ocean between 1793 and 1812 are commemorated as British and American feats, French Canadians account for their success. Up to then the Pacific Northwest was unknown apart from the coastline, and it was French Canadians who, by their actions, made possible the earliest written accounts, albeit their authors taking the credit.

Between the overland crossings and Americans' arrival in numbers starting in the early 1840s, French Canadians enticed by the fur economy made up the largest number of newcomers to the Pacific Northwest whose names survive. The huge region lying west of the Rocky Mountains, north of California, and south of Russian America belonged to no country because none cared enough to lay a claim. It was no one's colonial possession. American and British companies attracted by the profits to be had from furs had virtually a free hand so long as indigenous peoples were willing to trade pelts for newcomer goods and French Canadians were willing to labour on the companies' behalf. Chapter 3, "Driving the Fur Economy," describes French Canadians' roles, while Chapter 4, "Deciding Whether to Go or to Stay," explores that key decision.

I

To Be French Canadian

FRENCH CANADIANS FLIT across the North American past. They are there, but, in the words of the familiar saying, there's no there there. To be French Canadian was all too often to be an absent, oftentimes nameless, presence.

The historical reality was quite different. To be French Canadian in the early Pacific Northwest, or, for that matter, elsewhere across North America, was to belong to a long tradition of travel and hard work. By the time French Canadians reached the Pacific coast on the first overland expedition of 1793, their predecessors had been criss-crossing much of North America for a century and more. Differences in outlook and language caused the British and Americans who left most of the written records largely to ignore French Canadians, so much so that their presence has mostly slipped from view.

FRENCH CANADIANS IN THE MAKING

The attributes French Canadians took with them to the early Pacific Northwest harked back in time to the vast empire France assembled in North America between the mid-sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. In comparison to New France, with its command of two of the continent's major river systems – the St. Lawrence and the Mississippi – Britain's thirteen Atlantic colonies were paltry in size. Only Spain, with its centre

in Mexico, gave competition. By the time New France fell to the British in 1763, what it meant to be French Canadian was firmly in place.¹

Just as each empire around the world produces distinctive ways of being, so did New France, or “Canada” as it was also known after an indigenous word. Originating with a handful of persons primarily from Normandy and nearby provinces in northwest France, settlement in the heartland of New France, strung out along the St. Lawrence River, increased principally through a high birth rate that doubled the non-indigenous population in each successive generation.² As Serge Courville and Normand Séguin remind us, “the river occupied the dominant position and defined the axis along which the population was constituted historically and along which trade was carried out.”³ Just 240 settlers in 1640 became a population of 2,500 a quarter of a century later, and 15,000 by the end of the seventeenth century. Following a tradition brought over from Normandy, most were *habitants*, meaning that in exchange for modest annual dues they leased a long, narrow strip of land, known as a long lot, from the local seigneur, a prominent individual, or other entity such as the Catholic church, which had received a large grant from the French king in exchange for services. Land grants or seigneuries were concentrated between the administrative centre and ocean port of Quebec City, founded in 1608 upriver from the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the trade centre of Montreal, established in 1642 some 250 kilometres or 150 miles farther along the St. Lawrence River. Halfway between them lay the small village of Trois-Rivières, whose origins went back to 1634.⁴

France sought to make as much money as possible from its New World colonial possession, and it was furs that, along with agriculture, filled the coffers. Demand in Europe was seemingly insatiable, especially for beaver pelts, whose matted underfur was indispensable to making the felt hats everyone with any claim to respectability wore as a matter of course.⁵ As well as granting land concessions to a select few, French authorities issued trading licences for those who wished to venture farther afield. In this age when religion truly mattered, Catholic missionaries were recruited to convert indigenous peoples, with whom alliances were formed to encourage them to supply newcomers with pelts in exchange for trade goods.

Among the least conciliated of New France’s indigenous peoples were the Iroquois, excellent trappers who resented the invasion of their large territory and repeatedly came into conflict with outsiders. According to Jacques Lacoursière, “control of the fur trade was the source of the conflict, with the Iroquois wanting to be the only middlemen operating

between the French and the fur suppliers.”⁶ Increasingly caught up in war, and numerically reduced by new diseases, particularly smallpox, the Iroquois participated in broader negotiations that the French held with indigenous peoples. By a treaty signed in 1701, the Iroquois and others agreed to stay neutral in future military conflicts. While the Iroquois overall encompassed five widely spread out nations, a pro-French group settled upriver on the St. Lawrence not far from the fur-trading centre of Montreal.

Fur’s central role in the economy encouraged Iroquois, along with others, to trap and otherwise be employed. Montreal merchants imported goods on consignment from France. These goods were then supplied to holders of trading licences on credit or for a share of their eventual profits. The latter were responsible for hiring men and provisioning canoes for the increasingly long trip west from Montreal through the *pays d’en haut*, or upper country, to acquire pelts. The general reliance on water meant that men proficient with the region’s birchbark canoes were in high demand. Adapted from indigenous originals using readily accessible natural materials, the canoes were strong enough to transport heavy loads, yet light enough to be carried around obstructions. It was possible to travel by water with relative ease up the St. Lawrence River, west across the Great Lakes, and south on the Mississippi River.

Some men worked in the fur trade briefly, others travelled back and forth seasonally, and still others stayed in the *pays d’en haut* a lifetime, possibly becoming free traders known as *coureurs de bois*. Louise Dechène counted up to 160 men departing annually from Montreal alone at the beginning of the eighteenth century, rising to 300 by the 1730s, with many of them members of the same extended families.⁷ By mid-century, some merchants had permission to trade as far west as the foothills of the Rocky Mountains via the Saskatchewan River. Much as would later occur in the Pacific Northwest, the longer men were away from home, the more likely they were to partner with indigenous women, their métis or mixed-descent offspring sometimes following their fathers into the fur economy. It was not a matter of conquest; rather, as Michael Witgen concludes, “Native people in the western interior of North America easily adapted the practice of hunting and processing furs for exchange into their existing political economies.”⁸

With the passage of time, as set forth by Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal, isolated pockets of settlement premised on mutual adaptation grew up across the *pays d’en haut* and beyond.⁹ The small enclaves of La Baye or Green Bay and Prairie du Chien originated in today’s Wisconsin, the

military post of Michilimackinac – later shortened to Mackinac – in Michigan, the military post and then government centre of New Orleans in Louisiana, and so on. However distant these outposts might be from each other, they were threaded together, in Tanis Thorne's words, "like beads on a necklace, by a vast transportation and communication network along navigable waterways."¹⁰ Residents sometimes known as creoles, having paternal origins in New France and possible maternal indigenous descent, fashioned ways of living that, as later in the Pacific Northwest, combined the familiar with adaptation to circumstances. As to how "a few hundred such men held the west in fee for France," each little "outpost of French culture," while distinctive, was linked to its remote counterparts by, in the view of W.J. Eccles and Peter Moogk, "a common institutional heritage, language, and religious faith."¹¹

Be they of paternal and maternal French descent; métis combining French paternal with indigenous or partly indigenous maternal descent; Iroquois or other indigenous persons with their familial origins in New France; or, in a few instances, creoles with their immediate origins in the fur enclaves along the Mississippi River, French Canadians shared critical attributes. They had paternal origins in New France, spoke French, were nominal if not also practising Catholics, and favoured French Catholic first names if not also surnames. They were accustomed to hard work and were at ease with indigenous peoples.¹²

The economy of New France was not the only one in North America sustained by the trade in furs. Newcomers in many areas trapped or traded with indigenous people for pelts, both for their own use and for sale. Soon to become a principal player, the London-based Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was incorporated in 1670. A royal charter gave this private venture an exclusive trading monopoly across Rupert's Land, the British name for the vast watershed, or drainage basin, of the northern inland sea known as Hudson Bay. Along the shores of Hudson Bay, the HBC established several large posts, including the long-lived York Factory, to which indigenous peoples were expected to bring pelts, in contrast to the French practice of going where the furs were to be had. France initially contested the HBC monopoly, but in 1713, in the aftermath of numerous European wars, formally ceded to Britain – hence to the HBC – its claim to Rupert's Land, extending west to the Rocky Mountains and south into the northern prairies of the future United States. The HBC initially had virtually nothing to do with New France or with French Canadians, employing Englishmen and Scots recruited in part from the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland, where ships stopped on the way to North America.

FRANCE'S LEAVINGS

France's vast North American empire was very much of a time and a place, far less important to the mother country than to those who for several generations had made their lives there. Extended hostilities with their impetus in Europe culminated with Britain defeating France militarily in 1759, and to the victor went the spoils, or at least most of them. By the Treaty of Paris signed in 1763, French territory east of the Mississippi, including its core along the St. Lawrence River, went to Britain. By a sister agreement of the same year, France's far-flung claims west of the Mississippi River went to Spain, extending those the Spanish already possessed there. As summed up by Eccles: "In 1763 the vast, sprawling French empire in North America had ceased to exist. Nor did France have any desire to recover the lost territories." The former mother country's priorities lay elsewhere. To make this point, Eccles quotes the French foreign minister in 1777, at a time when the French-speaking population in North America totalled some 125,000: "France possesses colonies that suffice for its population and its economy. More would be a liability rather than a benefit."¹³

While France rather nonchalantly walked away to pursue its ambition elsewhere, its French-speaking Catholic subjects were left to fend for themselves. French Canadians living in the core of the former New France were least affected by change. A very small number, principally seigneurs and merchants, accepted an offer of repatriation to France, but the vast majority hunkered down. Without a mother country or another entity in North America similar to themselves in language, religion, and way of life, they turned inward to the ways and practices that had sustained them and, they hoped, would continue to do so. The creation of the United States in 1783, seven years after Britain's thirteen colonies lying east of the former New France declared their independence, resulted in an influx of pro-British Americans. As a consequence, in 1791, Britain divided its remaining possession into Lower and Upper Canada. The latter, which would become Ontario, was allotted to English speakers; the former, known as Quebec, to French speakers. A linguistic consequence was that some newcomers called themselves Canadians, the English variant of *Canadiens*. While the British inserted themselves at the top ranks, including of the fur trade based in Montreal, they never managed to overturn everyday life, which went on much as before, and it was these ways that a long generation of French Canadians took to the Pacific Northwest.

In sharp contrast, French speakers at the edges of France's empire soon found themselves in American territory. Another Treaty of Paris, which in

1783 ended the struggle for independence by Britain's thirteen Atlantic colonies, ceded to the new United States not only that contested area but the much larger territory, lying south of today's Canada and east of the Mississippi River, which Britain had acquired from France in the earlier Treaty of Paris. In 1803 the expanding United States acquired from France the vast Louisiana Territory, extending from the Mississippi River west to the Rocky Mountains, which the French had recently obtained from Spain in another land transfer originating in European events. An 1818 treaty with Britain set the United States' northern boundary east of the Rockies at the current 49° north latitude. The United States now controlled North America north to 49°, west to the Rocky Mountains, and south to the Spanish colonies of Florida and Texas. The consequences of these political manoeuvrings have been perceptively interrogated over the past quarter century by a remarkable group of scholars.¹⁴

New France's demise rearranged the fur trade. The North West Company (NWC), formed in Montreal in the early 1780s as a loose association of British merchants with French Canadian employees, consolidated its hold through its strategies of absorbing smaller companies and going where the furs were. The NWC was soon in direct competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, whose monopoly it was invading. By century's end the NWC controlled the trade out of Montreal, with a reach extending west through the Great Lakes and the prairies to the Rocky Mountains. In response, the HBC established Cumberland House and Île-à-la-Crosse in today's central Saskatchewan in 1774 and 1779, and the NWC built Fort Chipewyan in northern Alberta in 1788, Rocky Mountain House to the south in 1799, and so on. The rivalry continued to 1821 when the HBC took over the NWC.

The best known of the new enclaves was Red River at present-day Winnipeg. Its early Scots settlers, brought out by a contentious HBC-linked colonization project of the early nineteenth century, were soon outnumbered by former NWC and also HBC employees who were now freemen, meaning they lived on their own resources and traded independently. It was descendants of these freemen and indigenous women who, together with others of similarly independent life courses, became known as Métis. Disgusted not only with HBC efforts to sideline them but also with growing numbers of newcomers taking away their land, Métis would in 1869 and again in 1885 face off militarily against the Canadian government to protect their interests.

No single document better captures the changing times for French Canadians in or out of the fur trade than the Durham Report of 1839,

commissioned by the British government to investigate grievances following an unsuccessful French Canadian uprising in Quebec two years earlier and to chart a way forward. French Canadians were depicted in the report as a relic of the past, “the remains of an ancient colonization,” with no role to play in the present day. For all that they were “an amiable, a virtuous, and contented people, and not to be despised or ill-used, because they seek to enjoy what they have, without emulating the spirit of accumulation,” they did not measure up. “There can hardly be conceived a nationality more destitute of all that can invigorate and elevate a people, than that which is exhibited by the descendants of the French in Lower Canada, owing to their retaining their peculiar language and manners. They are a people with no history, and no literature.”¹⁵ This perspective, dismissing French Canadians as irrelevant to the order of things, would be both proven wrong and then, over time, seemingly confirmed in the Pacific Northwest.

FROM THE GENERAL TO THE SPECIFIC

To understand what it meant to be French Canadian is to move from the general to the specific. While it is essential to make larger points, individual lives give them their meaning. They show how the path from New France to the Pacific Northwest, even when winding through the far reaches of France’s one-time North American empire, was consistent in the value attached to hard work and determination.

While the lives of most of the 1,240 identifiable French Canadians attracted to the Pacific Northwest fur economy through 1858 survive only in snatches, a small minority can be followed across the generations. François Duchoquette from Prairie du Chien was among forty-some men trekking overland in 1810-12 to the new American fur post of Astoria, founded by New York entrepreneur John Jacob Astor at the mouth of the Columbia River on its south side in today’s Oregon. No matter how young men were when they left home to make their way in the world, they carried with them their parents’ genes, just as would Duchoquette’s son, granddaughter, and so on in the Pacific Northwest into the present day.

By the time New Yorker James Lockwood arrived in Prairie du Chien in 1816 to make his life there, and, by the way, to record the family history of young Duchoquette, then “in the employ of Mr. Astor,” Duchoquette’s paternal inheritance had slipped from view.¹⁶ This was not unexpected, given that his father had long since been replaced in his mother’s life by a

second partner who had died and then by a third “Canadian of French extraction” from among the many such men sustaining the fur trade.

It was, in any case, François Duchoquette’s mother who mattered most in his upbringing. Recognized today as the first non-indigenous medical doctor to practise in Wisconsin, Mary Ann Labuche was born sometime before 1774 in “one of the French villages below,” possibly Cahokia across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Described by Lockwood as “of mixed African and white blood,” she likely had, given her surname and the fact that slaves were brought to Cahokia as early as the 1720s, a Canadian or creole father and a slave mother, from whom she acquired her medical, herbal, and midwifery skills. Settling in Prairie du Chien in the last years of the eighteenth century with the third man in her life, by whom she had the final five of her thirteen children, Mary Ann Labuche became, according to Lockwood, “a person of consequence among them, being midwife, and the only person pretending to a knowledge of the healing art.” Until a surgeon arrived some time later to serve US troops at the military post established there in 1816, Aunt Mary Ann, as she was known, “was sent for by the sick, and attended them as regularly as a physician, and charged them fees therefore, giving them, as she expressed it, ‘advice and yarb drink.’” She continued to be in demand even after the surgeon’s arrival, “whether they employed her because they had more faith in her skill, or because they could pay her with more ease, as she took her pay in the produce of the country, but was not very modest in her charges.” Later on, she “frequently went after the army physician had attended a patient a long time, who perhaps for want of nursing could not be cured,” and “would take the patient home with her, and by the force of good nursing and ‘yarb drink’ restore him to health.” Mary Ann Labuche’s status is indicated by incoming Americans allocating a farm lot in 1820, by virtue of “continual occupation for twenty-five years,” to the French Canadian man in her life, “Charles Menard, for Marianne Labuche Menard his wife.”¹⁷

As was usual at this time of sparse communication across distance, François Duchoquette’s mother lost contact with her son by the time of her death in 1833, unlike the “many of her descendants residing at Prairie du Chien, who are generally as industrious and orderly inhabitants as any other.” The story told in Wisconsin was that young Duchoquette “died in 1810 on John Jacob Astor’s expedition.” In fact, on his arrival at Fort Astoria in early 1812, he was employed, prestigiously for a French Canadian, as a blacksmith and canoe steersman.¹⁸ When the post was taken over by the NWC as a sidebar to the War of 1812 between the United States and

Britain, Duchoquette was among twenty men manning two express canoes that in the spring of 1814 headed east with departing employees.¹⁹ At some point he returned to the Pacific Northwest, and in about 1819, before again disappearing from the historical record, he fathered a namesake son by Mary Marguerite Lapetite, “the little one,” an Okanogan chief’s sister.

Mary Ann Labuche’s Pacific Northwest grandson, whether or not he heard stories about her, inherited his grandmother’s talents. It may have been his father’s initiative or perhaps the influence of his stepfather Joachim Lafleur, who a few years after arriving from Yamaska in 1828 in HBC employ partnered with Mary Marguerite Lapetite. The highly unusual consequence, according to a contemporary, was that young Duchoquette “could read and write and was a pretty good bookkeeper.”²⁰ Possibly thanks to his stepfather’s encouragement, he joined the HBC at age sixteen.

It was virtually unheard of for a French speaker, much less a métis son, to rise in the HBC hierarchy, but Mary Ann’s grandson managed the feat. Two decades after he started with the company in 1836 as a native apprentice, the usual first job for young men of part-indigenous descent, François Duchoquette succeeded his stepfather in charge of Fort Okanogan, where pelts brought south from the vast interior were transferred from pack horses to boats on their way to the coastal post of Fort Vancouver, where they were shipped to Britain by water. His Okanogan maternal descent caused him to be fluent in the local language and may have enhanced his suitability, even though he still had to deal with the prejudices of the day, which the HBC exemplified. An English Canadian travelling through the area shortly before the post’s closure in 1862 described Duchoquette, not long before his death, as “Franswa, a half breed French and Indian,” and as “a short, stout French half breed.”²¹

Mary Ann Labuche’s line of descent lived on in the Pacific Northwest in the person of a great-granddaughter, whose tenacity echoed Mary Ann’s own in faraway Prairie du Chien. Marguerite was born in about 1850 to Duchoquette and a local woman named Maria, who was, like his mother, Okanogan, to use the Canadian spelling for the Okanogan people. Marguerite, in the pattern of Mary Ann Labuche, raised a dozen or so children by three different men, mostly through her own resources. Her first partner, Alexander McDougall, whom she wed in 1875, was the son of an ambitious part-indigenous Scot from Red River, who had settled in British Columbia’s Okanogan Valley, and of an Okanogan woman, just as Marguerite’s mother and paternal grandmother had been.²² Sometime thereafter the couple claimed their Okanogan inheritances to settle on the

large Colville reservation, recently established in northern Washington. Likely following McDougall's death, Marguerite appears to have had short-term relationships with two possibly white men, to use the language of the time, prior to marrying elderly Okanogan chief Aeneas shortly before his death in about 1913.

As it was for her great-grandmother in Prairie du Chien, Marguerite Duchoquette's first priority was her family. Both her offspring and sons-in-law reciprocated by taking up allotments nearby as soon as federal legislation breaking up reservations made it possible to do so. By the time of her death in 1944 at the age of ninety-five, Mary Ann Labuche's great-granddaughter Marguerite had seen the birth of at least twenty grandchildren whose families were spread across northern Washington, on and off reservations. The line of descent from New France across the far reaches of France's North American empire to the Pacific Northwest is alive and well.

TO SUM UP

The story of the Pacific Northwest Duchoquettes and their Cahokia and Prairie du Chien progenitor Mary Ann Labuche neatly encapsulates the linkages between the fur economy west of the Rockies and what occurred elsewhere and earlier in time. That family, originating with François Duchoquette's trek overland to Astoria, was the product of a century and more of movement originating in New France, just as were the families of the other 1,239 named men attracted to the Pacific Northwest through 1858 by the fur economy. While we know far less about the backgrounds of most men than we do about this remarkable woman and her son, grandson, and great-granddaughter, they also had parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents whose genes they carried. To be French Canadian in the Pacific Northwest is to share in the history of New France.