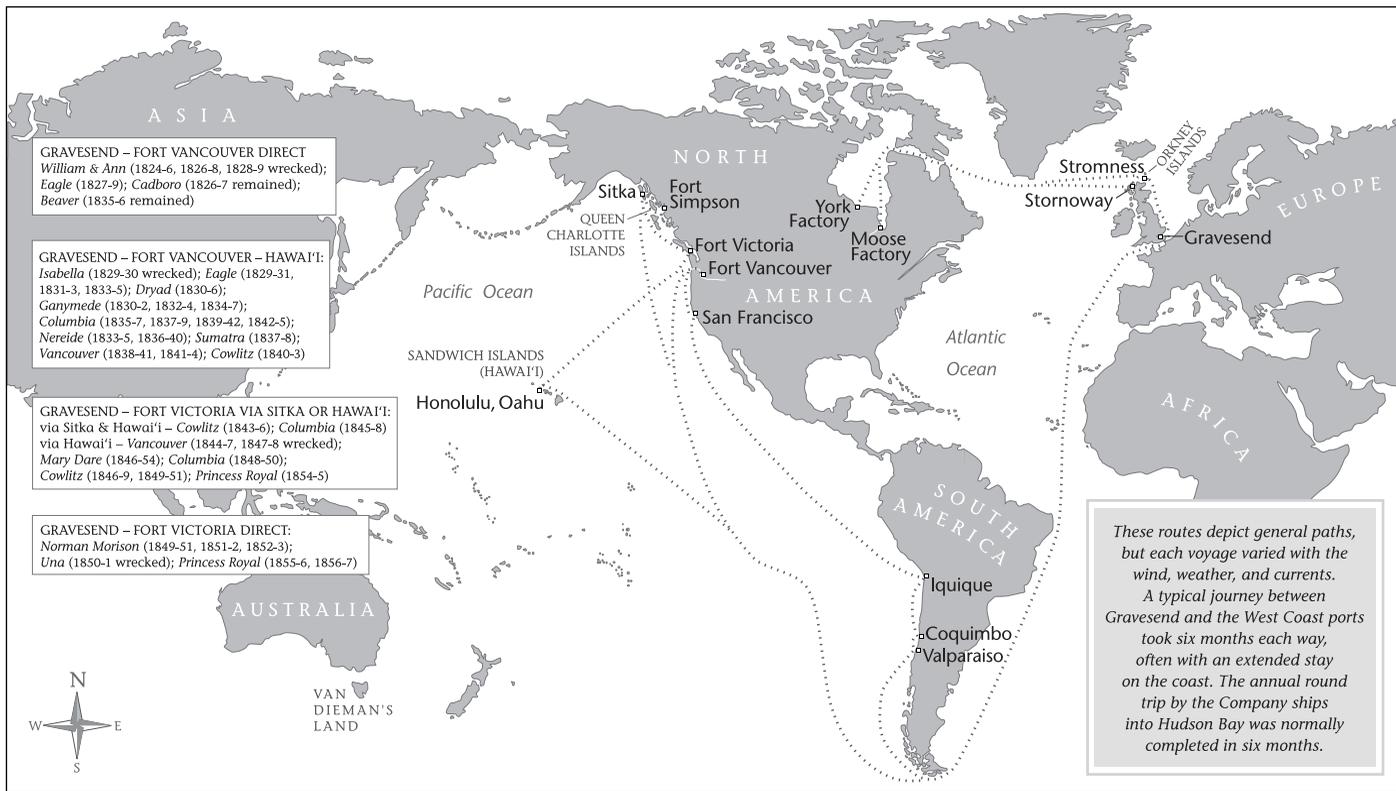


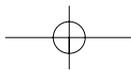
Introduction

The Hudson's Bay Company, founded in 1670, had its headquarters in London, England, but most of its operations in North America. The London governor, deputy governor, and Committee members made decisions about the pursuit of the trade, but they rarely visited the North American continent where the trade occurred. Most of the officers and men at the posts and the ships were recruited in Britain, and for the first 150 years of the Company's history went out in ships to Hudson Bay and from there inland to various fur-trading activities operating under its own hierarchical system. The vast territory west of the present Ontario-Manitoba border formed the Northern Department, with communications radiating from its headquarters at York Factory out to the various district headquarters and from there to the posts and outposts. The Company secretary provided the communication link between these two distinct and distant parts of the Company. The HBC built a successful trade, initially based on the popularity of a hat made from felt using the soft underfur of the beaver. The union with the North West Company in 1821 changed not only the extent of its trade but also the traditional routes and the focus on fur because the Company inherited posts on the Pacific Ocean. The western coast of North America – the Columbia Department – required a new approach around Cape Horn that changed the length of the return voyage from months to years. It offered new products, such as salmon and wood, and eventually new markets along the route from Chile and California in the south to the posts of the Russian American Company in the north (Alaska) and into the Pacific Ocean in the Sandwich Islands (Hawai'i).

From the late 1820s to the 1850s, Hudson's Bay Company vessels sailed yearly from London, England, to the Company's Pacific headquarters at Fort



Hudson's Bay Company routes around Cape Horn.



Vancouver, which today is the city of Vancouver, Washington, on the north shore of the Columbia just opposite Portland, Oregon, on the south shore. After the establishment of Fort Victoria – the present-day Victoria, capital of British Columbia – on Vancouver Island in 1849, the new colony became their destination. The Company ships made this long journey around the southern tip of South America in order to supply their business interests from California to Alaska with men and goods and to bring back the results of their trade. Usually, the round trip took almost two years and men who went out on these ships were often away for longer, staying to transport agricultural products and conduct trade along the coast and as far away as Oahu (Hawai'i) and Valparaiso, Chile. Others stayed for longer periods as workers in the posts, on the Company farms, and, after the international border was agreed upon in 1846, in the mines and farms of the new British colony on Vancouver Island. While they were away, their relatives – wives, parents, sisters, and brothers – as well as sweethearts and friends wrote letters to them. Most of the letters took the same long journey around the Horn and sometimes arrived after the men had left for home or, as occasionally happened, after they had met with tragic accidents. As west coast trade and settlement grew, men also left the Company's employment for better prospects. As a result, a large number of letters remained undelivered.

Postal arrangements developed and expanded during the period under consideration. Ships' letters were the main method, where the next ship – usually the Company's own – carried the mail. However, by the end of the period, mail was sometimes shipped to Panama and crossed the isthmus to be picked up by ships on the Pacific coast. Occasionally the express brigade, following the fur trade routes across the continent, carried mail between the regular sailings. Initially, separate envelopes were not used; the paper on which the letter was written was left blank on one side and folded to form a cover where the address could be written. Then the folded sheet was carefully sealed with sealing wax, round wafers of various colours, or colourfully decorated gummed seals. Occasionally additional sheets or small items, such as a lock of hair, were inserted in the enclosure. Mail was costly and families used various methods to cut costs, including limiting the number of sheets and filling them completely with writing, even cross-writing messages on the page. The page was filled with writing, then turned at right angles and filled in the other direction. This can increase the challenge of reading the letters, but with practice most are remarkably easy to decipher.

The Hudson's Bay Company kept very detailed and informative records of all its activities. Since the Company had scruples about private property – an extension of its very careful handling of its own property – it was most respectful of its employees' letters. Since the Company was not in the habit

of throwing away any written material, when a letter failed to reach a man in the Columbia district, it was preserved – often unopened – and returned to the Company's London secretary. Although we have evidence that some letters were returned to the families, many were not, perhaps because return addresses were insufficient. Therefore, the secretary of the Company – William Smith during much of the period when the ships went regularly to the west coast – marked each letter and filed it meticulously. About 250 letters collected during several decades were never claimed. Of those located – and there may be others not yet traced – only about forty, sent to men in regions other than the west coast, were excluded from this volume.

These undelivered personal letters became part of the archival collection of the Company in London, England. In 1974 the large and varied collection of documents of the fur trade was moved to the Provincial Archives of Manitoba in Winnipeg. For more than a decade, Judith Hudson Beattie and Helen M. Buss have been reading the undelivered letters, transcribing them, organizing them, discussing them, as well as studying related materials. Judith Hudson Beattie, Keeper of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, has a broad knowledge of the Company, its history, and its men, and has researched the biographical backgrounds of the men to whom the letters were addressed. This information appears in the notes of this book alongside information about the ships and posts where many of the men served. Helen M. Buss, whose research has been in memoirs, letters, and diaries, has collaborated with Judith Hudson Beattie to write narratives that introduce the letters and their writers as well as the men for whom they were intended. Together, we have grouped the letters in terms of the different positions of the men who were to receive these letters – the sailors whose lives were lived primarily on ships and in seaports, the French-speaking *voyageurs* hired in villages along the St. Lawrence River, the largely English and Scottish Company men who served at the posts and occasionally retired there, and the emigrant workers who hoped to be part of a new colony. Although the men and their correspondents share many concerns, we have divided their letters into these categories in order to provide introductions that take into account their historical, linguistic, and social differences, as well as their varied relationships to the Company and its activities.

Because the men generally remain silent within this correspondence, we include contexts for their lives in these introductions. The biographical background that introduces each man's entry is largely from Company records and is supplemented by the biographical information in the notes. Since the letter writers speak for themselves, we offer only contextual information in most cases and additional biographical information only when it is available. Our narratives are aimed at helping a wide variety of readers to enter the

letters with the essential information they need to read them as representations of individuals. Although we expect a wide variety of researchers – from genealogists through social historians and cultural theorists – to find these letters useful, we do not expect our narratives to provide all of the contexts that such scholars may require. Rather, we hope they will serve as a basis for understanding the human subjects who wrote and received the letters as well as provide some directions for the further research of the reader. Our first aim is to put ordinary people, who have not been central to either the history or the literature of the period, in the primary position of attention.

Even though we wish to highlight the lives of working people, there are a number of prominent Company officials whose decisions profoundly affected the lives of ordinary folk. Three names in particular recur in these pages. George Simpson, governor in North America, had enormous powers in terms of both the careers of men and the operation of posts. Chief Factor John McLoughlin of Fort Vancouver, where west coast trade centred, had most of the day-to-day power over men's lives – except for men on ships, who were under captains' orders – and was the local court of last resort in all disputes. Later in the period, James Douglas became an important authority in the lives of seamen, immigrant workers, and men at various posts. In his roles first as McLoughlin's second-in-command, then as chief factor and governor of Fort Victoria and the new colony of Vancouver Island, his decisions enter the stories of these workers, sailors, and emigrants.

These voices from a past world are vividly present through the vehicle of their personal letters, which we reproduce with only very minimal additions, such as essential punctuation and a few helpful translations of phonetic spellings and words no longer in current use. The letters from the families of *voyageurs* appear both in their original French and in full English translations. Within each of the book's divisions, we have ordered the entries and letters chronologically, with only a few exceptions where a strict chronology would separate related stories, in order to give readers a sense of the changing world of the early nineteenth century.

This collection of letters offers us an unusual look into a broad spectrum of lives in this period and is unique in terms of the variety of human subjects that speak directly to us out of the past. The letters are from multiple correspondents to multiple addressees and thus represent a variety of perspectives in terms of age, place of residence, class, and gender. Yet because the common situation of all of the letters is that they are being sent to men who are far away from home – working to make a living for themselves and their loved ones – common themes prevail: concerns about safety (both physical and spiritual), worries about money, and about the ability of love and loyalty to survive over time and distance. The letter writers range from clever young

women of the country gentry class – who write in prose reminiscent of a Jane Austen novel full of romance, parties, and money – to barely literate, poor parents too old to work their farms, who are desperate for a son's return. There is, as well, the wife who gets a portion of her husband's pay quarterly from the Company but only sees her husband for three months in three years – just long enough to conceive a child that he will not see for years. In contrast, there is the brother who makes sly jokes about the quality of women in faraway places. There are the deserted women who have been left behind, with memories and little else. While the bulk of the letters are from people in Lower Canada (Quebec), England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland – including a substantial number from the western islands and Orkney and a few from the Shetlands, a few letters are from men themselves at posts in the Company's service.

Readers in Britain may find that their towns, their districts, or their family names are mentioned in some letters, while readers in Canada and the United States will discover that some of the men settled in North America or left “country wives” – that is, Aboriginal (First Nation and Métis) women – they may have married according to the “custom of the country,” in which marriages were blessed by Aboriginal ceremonies or by declared cohabitation. These wives and their children became founders of their communities, ancestors of extended families. The history of the Company and its men has always been closely related to Canada's history as a colony and as a nation. In the United States there is a growing awareness of the many interconnections between the Company's activities and western expansion. One of those historical moments, the settlement of the Oregon Territory, coincides with these letters. But beyond these appeals, there is the power of the letters themselves. When we first began to read them we found ourselves intensely and personally involved in their vivid re-creation of peoples' lives, peoples' selves. Over the years of our research and writing, the ability of these letters to bring their writers to life for us, to make us feel and imagine their situations and those of the men they wrote to, has never faded. They are powerful evocations of the lives of actual people in a period now distant but made close to us by these personal letters that reach out across time.

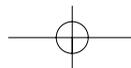
One of the strongest reminders of past lives are the letters of women. Women's lives have not always been part of traditional historical narratives because of our society's reliance on what Robert B. Shoemaker calls “written discourse” as the “dominant discourse” (1998, 4). This has meant that women's activities have been behind the scenes of these traditional narratives and therefore not generally the subject of commentary. In contrast, in these letters we see women engaged in multiple activities of work and influence. Company records reveal just how hard the men in their service worked; these



Origins of men on the ships, men at the posts, and emigrant labourers.



Origins of the *voyageurs* and some Hudson's Bay Company posts.



letters confirm that the families left behind often had equally hard, if different, forms of service. In fact, being in domestic service was the common way for a woman to earn a living in this period. Historian Bridgit Hill finds that it is “from the letters, journals, diaries and memoirs of their employers” (1996, 4) that we learn of the lives of servants. In this text we hear some of these servants speak for themselves in their own written discourse: their letters.

Both the men and the women who write these letters also help us address the absence of the lives of working-class and lower-middle-class people in historical and literary accounts of the period. They reveal just how difficult were the conditions of many working families, how quickly financial situations could change, how poor health speedily became tragic death in the days before modern medicine, employee benefits, and social welfare plans. The place of servants, like the place of women in the social structure, was part of the growing great change in English society in the first half of the nineteenth century. When we read their accounts of work-related difficulties, we can more easily understand why, especially in the later part of the period covered, a number of our correspondents mention emigration as a possible cure for their situation.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Our main aim has been to let the general reader enjoy the flow of the letters, uninterrupted by such academic apparatus as footnotes, while supplying full references for those who wish to pursue further research. Each entry is numbered, and each letter within each entry includes the date on which it was written at or near the beginning. As transcripts, the letters are reproductions as faithful as possible to the originals; as noted above, we have added only necessary closing punctuation to separate sentences and, occasionally, an explanatory or missing word. A word may be missing, for instance, where the seals that held the letter closed, on being opened, have torn the paper. All our insertions are shown in square brackets. Where handwritten originals include one or more lines underscoring words for emphasis, we follow the modern typesetting convention of showing such words in italics. Indentation in the originals is erratic. We have regularized the placement of the date, inside address, and salutation and placed return addresses, where they are given, on a single line, rather than as a series of increasingly indented parts. All letters that begin with the symbol  are among the undelivered correspondence. A few letters reproduced in the book are not in this collection and are therefore not marked with the symbol. These appear on pages 46, 68, 83, 144, 247, 292, 295, and 297.

All source citations for the letters, as well as for some related subjects, are in the notes at the end of the book. Source citations for letters are at the end of the notes for each entry listed in their order of appearance; wherever possible, letters, extracts, and quotations are identified by the date on which they were written. Hudson's Bay Company Archives material at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba is signified by the acronyms HBCA, PAM; all other citations are indicated with the author's last name and the date of publication in parentheses. Full bibliographical information is available in the references. When "the Company" is cited, it always refers to the Hudson's Bay Company. On a number of occasions, since events in one man's life often connect with another, we refer readers to other men's stories with a cross-reference to his entry number. The reader will also find the stories indexed by the men's names at the end of the text.

On the first mention of a post or fort we give the present-day name of that location (e.g., Fort Vancouver is Vancouver, Washington), and this information is also available in Appendix B.

As money is often a central topic in the letters, we offer this rough guide to purchasing power, gleaned from the letters themselves. A loaf of bread could be purchased for fivepence and a gallon of flour for ninepence. A young apprentice boy was given sixpence for a week's pocket money, while his family paid £10 per annum for the rent of a modest home in London and £15 for the funeral expenses of the boy's mother. A seaman earned between £24 and £30 a year, and a second mate's salary rose to £50. While £8 would buy you a small boat "to go on the river to sell beer," you would need £800 to buy "a pleasantly situated cottage" with some land in the country. During the period when American ships began to recruit British seamen with higher wages, the English pound was worth approximately five American dollars. The letter writers transcribed sums of British currency in various ways in their texts, but it is safe to say that the standard order of pounds (£), shillings (s), and pence (d) is always intended.

Finally, we found when confronted with the phonetic spelling of some letters that by reading them aloud and thus pronouncing the words as they were written, we not only understood more of the meaning but could also hear something of the accent of the time and place.