

Fort Chipewyan
and the Shaping of
Canadian History,
1788-1920s

“We like to be free in this country”

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I

Writing Fort Chipewyan History

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

– *Thomas King, The Truth about Stories*

In 1899, government commissioners travelling through northern Alberta to negotiate Treaty No. 8 and issue Métis scrip were perplexed by how un-Indian the Aboriginal people appeared.¹ While the physical setting at Lesser Slave Lake Settlement was “all sweet and primeval, and almost untouched by civilized man” (Mair 1908:54), the cultural setting was not: “The crowd of Indians ranged before the marquee had lost all semblance of wildness of the true type ... Instead of paint and feathers, the scalp-lock, the breech-clout, and the buffalo-robe, there presented itself a body of respectable-looking men, as well dressed and evidently quite as independent in their feelings as any like number of average pioneers in the East ... One felt disappointed, almost defrauded. It was not what was expected, what we believed we had a right to expect” (54-55). The commissioners could not even distinguish Indians from Métis, or Half-breeds, as they were commonly called. Charles Mair (1908:72) referred to the “primitive people” of the region as “Lakers,”² and the following year Dr. O.C. Edwards noted in his journal: “It seems absurd to classify the dark skinned people of the north under the separate heads of Indians and half breeds. I have not seen an Indian as he is popularly known or depicted since I left Calgary. These so-called Indians of the north are all half breeds

... If they choose 'treaty' then they are written down Indians, if they select 'scrip' then they are called half breeds" (Leonard and Whalen 1998:53).

If the commissioners were bewildered by the lack of congruence between the people they saw and their own understandings of Indian-ness and Métis-ness, it did not stop them from conducting the government's business as if the Aboriginal peoples *were* those familiar to them. Government policies that had developed in response to Aboriginal situations in the Plains and Prairies of western Canada were imposed virtually unchanged in the North, a region where the Aboriginal ways of life and issues of the day were quite different.

The actions of the treaty and scrip commissioners exemplify how the particularities of place, time, and culture were overridden by a master narrative, a dominant account or story, about the history of Canada as a nation and the place within it for Aboriginal peoples (McCormack 2005). In its broadest construction, that narrative spoke of a process of homogenizing culture change driven by an expansionary global capitalism. It presumed that indigenous peoples drawn into interaction with Europeans would come to resemble them. In the twentieth century, it came to be called "modernization" and involved "the privileging of scientific and technological explanations of the world" (McLeod 2002:37). Europeans and European-derived peoples during the nineteenth-century heyday of global colonization defined themselves as modern peoples, those "most advanced in technological, political, economic, and social development" (Black 1966:6; see also Blaut 1993:1-2). As J.A. Hobson wrote from Great Britain, "We represent the socially efficient nation, we have conquered and acquired dominion and territory in the past: we must go on, it is our destiny." Britons had a "mission of civilization" to the rest of the world (Hobson 1948[1902]:156-157; see also Merry 2000:7). Indigenous people who became civilized (or modern) were expected to abandon their own less rational and less efficient traditions. In Canada's Northwest, as in many other parts of the world, the so-called modern era began with the imposition of a form of internal colonization after Confederation, as the new nation-state of Canada began to expand into Rupert's Land and other Hudson's Bay Company territories.

In Canada, modernity translated into a derivative narrative about progress, a Canadian manifest destiny that held that Canada developed as a country and achieved its destiny to greatness through the agency of explorers, government agents, and homesteaders – all Europeans – who steadily pushed backward the frontiers of civilized lands into the western

and northern wilderness occupied by primitive people – “Indians” and, in the far northern reaches, “Eskimos” – who must either disappear or themselves become civilized, at which point they would no longer be Indians (or Eskimos). Métis, as Indian descendants who were already biologically and culturally transforming into non-Indians, played a marginal role in this story.

This Canadian narrative was more than ideological history (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:19). It prescribed a course of action vis-à-vis Aboriginal peoples and the land that was elaborated in an evolving set of federal and provincial policies, legislation, and regulations. When narratives have direct behavioural implications, and especially when they mandate action, it is useful to call them paradigms, in this instance, the paradigm of progress. The narrative is the textual aspect of a paradigm, and the pattern for behaviour is its operational aspect.

The concept of paradigm is approached somewhat differently in the social sciences than in the physical sciences, where it was developed to account for revolutions in scientific thought and related directly to experimental testing (Kuhn 1962). In the Kuhnian view, “science is characterized by the existence of a ruling dogma which exercises hegemonic control for lengthy periods” (Hassard 1993:79). Occasionally, there are “upheavals in which accepted wisdom is replaced by a new way of seeing” known as paradigm shifts (Kuhn 1962). In this approach, paradigms are incommensurate, having “separate sets of standards and metaphysical beliefs”: “rival paradigms cut up the world with different standards, different assumptions, different language” (Hassard 1993:78). In short, they involve different narratives and discourses, or ways of thinking and talking about a particular subject.

The social sciences do not fit neatly into the Kuhnian framework but are poly-paradigmatic, which means that more than one paradigm may be operating at any one time (see Barnes 1990; Hassard 1993). Because they are derived more from close observation than from experimentation, social science paradigms are always mediated by culturally influenced human perceptions, including the interests of “elite groups outside of the scholarly field itself” (Blaut 1993:37). And when social scientists interact with diverse human populations, they are likely to encounter competing narratives and paradigms held by the populations being studied (McCormack 1998a). In situations of power differentials, some paradigms will dominate, although that dominance may not be evident. The nature of hegemony is that the dominant interpretation has “come to be taken for granted as the natural, universal, and true shape of social being ... It consists of things

that go without saying: things that, being axiomatic, are not normally the subject of explication or argument” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:28-29; Gramsci 1971:12; Merry 2000:14).

John Hassard (1993:86-87) has argued that people can be “trained into” new paradigms, just as they can learn new languages and how to translate between them. Moreover, multiple paradigm research offers multiple lenses for its “analytical scrutiny” (88). We can take advantage of this diversity rather than striving to prove one right and another wrong. Part of the process of being trained into multiple paradigms is learning how to deconstruct them and understand their implications for political decisions and policy and program development. Such training also entails a stance of respect and appreciation for what the concepts mean to their respective holders.

This approach is particularly useful for addressing issues of Aboriginal history as a component of Canadian history. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples have very different historical narratives (McCormack 2005). Most Euro-Canadian narratives have revolved around a concept of conquest and rule of “superior” peoples over “inferior” ones.³ These narratives are easy to find in the mainstream historical literature, because they are how Canadian historians have commonly explained the growth of Canada as a nation. Aboriginal narratives have emerged in Aboriginal oral traditions; in accounts by Aboriginal scholars such as Harold Cardinal (*Indian Chiefs of Alberta* 1970), Neal McLeod (2002), and Taiaiake Alfred (2005); and in testimony to various commissions, most recently the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (e.g., *Royal Commission* 1996:4-18). Aboriginal accounts are particularly concerned with a people’s relationship to their traditional lands, their willingness to coexist with European newcomers, their consequent suffering, and their resistance to Euro-Canadian impositions and injustices. These accounts can be summarized briefly as a belief in equality of people within their homelands, to which they remain strongly linked, and their expectation of persistent autonomy, both individually and as nations. The narratives mandate respect for individual and community choices but opposition to imposed policies and especially any attempt to interfere with Aboriginal access to and control over their homeland and its resources. It should not be surprising that Aboriginal people rarely behaved as Europeans expected them to do. Aboriginal narratives have been marginalized and even dismissed until recently because of the intellectual and political hegemony exercised by Euro-Canadians. But they endured, and today they flourish.

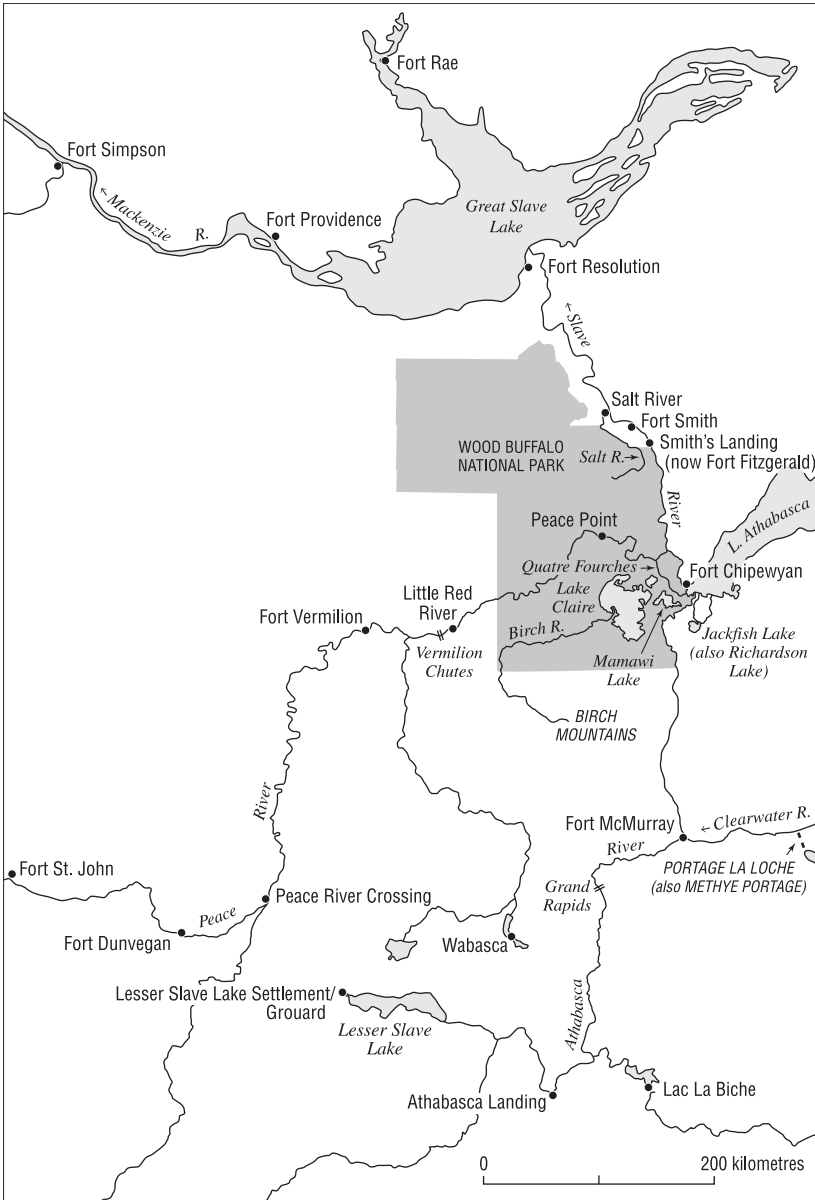
A century after the signing of Treaty No. 8, neither Indians nor Métis have disappeared. Although they live very different lives than they did in

1899, they have not become modern in the meaning above, despite regulatory structures imposed by federal and provincial governments that forced restricted forms of cultural and economic change on Aboriginal people. What is particularly unsettling is that the master narrative about Canadian history, Aboriginal people, and their place within Canadian history still prevails in mainstream discourse about the region and its peoples, little changed in its essentials from the narrative of 1899.

The intent of this book is to decentre these dual narratives of modernity and progress, to challenge the hegemony of the paradigm of progress, and to present interpretive alternatives through the lens of the history of Fort Chipewyan, the most famous and best studied of the Treaty No. 8 communities. Fort Chipewyan is over two hundred years old. It was founded by Roderick McKenzie in 1788 at the west end of Lake Athabasca (see Map 1.1) to support the Athabasca fur trade as well as the explorations of his famous cousin, Alexander Mackenzie. Its original occupants were a conglomerate of Europeans, including Scots, Orcadians, English, French Canadians, Métis, and other mixed-ancestry workers, more colourfully known as “voyageurs.” They traded and engaged in other exchanges with Algonquian people, who spoke one or more variants of the Cree language, and with Athapaskan or Dene people, who were the ancestors of groups now known as Beaver and Chipewyan.

The lifeways and peoples of this community have reshaped themselves many times since 1788. The Fort Chipewyan region became integrated into the emerging world-system through the European-operated fur trade.⁴ As part of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s North-Western Territory, it was acquired along with Rupert’s Land in 1870 by the new Dominion of Canada. Its global integration then came to be mediated by agents and policies of the nation-state and an emerging industrial economy.

Fort Chipewyan is still famous as a fur trade community, and some people still trap, yet the local economy has not been dominated by the fur trade for nearly half a century. In many ways, it resembles other rural northern Alberta towns. While Fort Chipewyan is often thought of as an isolated Native community, in fact it has always been a plural society, based on the co-residence and interaction of people of many ethnic and cultural affiliations, whose economy has increasingly been integrated into a global capitalist economy. These facts are paramount in understanding the local history and the community’s place within a larger Canadian history. They also help us view Canadian history from a northern locale, where the story of the evolving Canadian state takes a decidedly different form.



MAP 1.1 The Fort Chipewyan region

The Fort Chipewyan described in this book no longer exists. It is a place of the past, and so too are all the Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian people who once lived there or in the surrounding smaller communities, or who played some role in the course of local events. That means that all the histories of it are stories about its past that have been constructed by individuals based on their own personal and intellectual histories and the narrative traditions within which they operate. They convey multiple and partial truths, yet, as Thomas King (2003a, 2003b) has reminded us, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” The stories of this book are based on information drawn from two primary and typically divergent storylines: those told and inscribed by Europeans and Euro-Canadians, mostly representatives of external agencies and the Canadian nation-state, and those told and inscribed by resident Aboriginal people. I have brought together these two storylines, but not in a seamless narrative. Instead, I tell a new story that draws upon my own history of involvement with Fort Chipewyan and other research endeavours over four decades and that strives to maintain the distinctiveness of its diverse sources and voices. The in-text citations themselves are a subtext that conveys part of the story. This book has a precise intellectual genealogy as a result.

My life became intertwined with Fort Chipewyan in 1968, when I first went there as a young anthropology student to do a service project. Although I no longer remember the stereotypes I must have brought with me, I was eager to learn about the realities of the land and the people. The town, and much of its surrounding bush, is a place I came to know well. I have travelled to the community by air, canoe, river barge, and winter road. I have gone “up the lake” and along local waterways, visiting sites where people lived, worked, and were buried. I lived for many months in a log cabin without power or water, and at other times I stayed with local families. Much of my research was conducted as visits with friends and acquaintances over endless cups of tea and coffee, although I also did formal interviews. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents alike generously invited me into their homes and shared stories from their own lives. I began as a young stranger with no relations and ended as a peripheral member with (fictive) kin and long-term friends and acquaintances, both community Elders and others closer to my own age. David Smith (1995:124) has pointed out that for Chipewyans, a story is a gift: “a life-enhancing present and a gesture of respect and love.” I came to understand that through their stories, I was being taught aspects of local culture and history, conferring a moral responsibility to use the stories well.⁵

This way of learning conforms to Aboriginal approaches to the production and transmission of knowledge. Scott Rushforth (1992), Jean-Guy Goulet (1982, 1994, 1998), Henry Sharp (2001), and, for Fort Chipewyan itself, Ronald and Suzanne Scollon (1979) have written convincingly of how, for the Dene (Athapaskan-speakers), true knowledge is based on personal experience. The next best way of learning is by observing others “who know how to do things” and “by hearing mythical, historical, or personal narratives” from people whose claim to knowledge is authoritative (Rushforth 1992:488). Similarly, Richard Preston (2002[1975]:76) explains that for Crees, “Judgments of credibility are based on whether the person has seen the event himself, or whether he gets the information from someone known to him who has seen the event. Less credibility would be attached to information given by strangers or to reports of events that reach one at third or fourth hand.” I was privileged to hear many stories from people born early in the twentieth century who lived what is considered a traditional life on the land, as well as from younger people and from non-Aboriginal people who held often-pivotal positions in government departments affecting Fort Chipewyan.

The term “oral tradition” refers to knowledge transmitted through oral narratives, comprising “personal stories generated from the experiences of the teller as well as accounts that have been passed on from generation to generation” (Morrow and Schneider 1995:6n1).⁶ While the term is frequently used with reference solely to Aboriginal narratives, the scope of oral traditions is much broader, comprising all accounts told by individuals with first-hand knowledge or knowledge derived from the stories of others. To study the histories of a plural society and of diverse Aboriginal peoples encapsulated within a dominant nation-state, it is crucial to seek out the recollections of a wide range of people, including those in positions of power, to “examine the dialogic space” between them (Harkin 2004:xxvi). Each person will construct his or her own personal story and tell about particular episodes based on his or her own positioning (Cruikshank 1990). Not only are the oral traditions not homogeneous, they are also often contradictory and conflicting. The emphasis on discourse in this book is one way to respect the integrity of the different stories, not to reconcile the differences among them but to reveal them and thereby to decentre the dominant discourses.

During my years in Fort Chipewyan, I conducted formal and informal interviews that relied upon oral traditions of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Some of the formal interviews elicited life histories. I have also been fortunate in being able to use interviews conducted by

others, most notably interviews conducted in 1974 by the Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research (TARR) program of the Indian Association of Alberta, by Jim Parker for the Oral History Component of the Alberta Oil Sands Environmental Research Program, and in 1988 by Patrick Moore about Native dance in northern Alberta (see Appendix). These collections of interviews, some of which were conducted with the same Elders but about different topics, are an impressive body of recorded oral documents.⁷

Set against the oral traditions is another stream of evidence, the extensive body of written documents concerning Fort Chipewyan and the surrounding region. In these documents we can hear the voices of the Euro-Canadians living in Fort Chipewyan and elsewhere who shaped the regulatory structures that governed many aspects of community life. The vast majority of these documents are letters, memoranda, reports, and diaries. While there is a tendency to associate written documents solely with Euro-Canadians, many contain testimony by Aboriginal people. Sometimes these take the form of accounts by government officials or missionaries, but many are authored directly by Aboriginal people themselves, typically in the form of letters and petitions about their situations, and more rarely as personal memoirs or life history narratives.⁸ Like the oral traditions, the written documents vary widely in content. Goulet (1998:251) has pointed out that “experientialist ethnographers emphasize ... their connectedness in the field to particular individuals, in specific places, at a given point in time, for it is in interaction with other individuals that one gains knowledge of particular forms and processes of social life.” To Johannes Fabian (1991:87, 104), this “quality of active participation in communicative interchanges” is the trademark of fieldwork, and it is what produces “ethnographic objectivity” and new ethnographic knowledge. To this I would add that immersion in detailed archival accounts is also deeply personal, a form of communication with distant people no longer available for personal meetings. Both allow us to move beyond our estrangement from these people of the past to reveal the fundamental humanity of all the “Others” we encounter in the community or in the archives.

Such personal experiences can and should be powerful, life changing. They impose a moral burden to make sense of the stories, including – and especially – their diversity, and to follow the research leads that they provide. Over time, Fort Chipewyan has become my personal centre for knowing something about Others of all sorts, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. For years I have travelled through this history, struggling to hear what these diverse voices were telling me about representation and interpretation, about the confusions of understanding that dominate

popular discourses about Aboriginal peoples and nation building in Canada, and about Fort Chipewyan history in particular. The story of Fort Chipewyan has been an evolving one, shaping and reshaping itself in my head and in my writing.

My first research question about Fort Chipewyan was posed in an honours thesis written the winter following my first summer in the community (McCormack 1969). I asked: what shaped contemporary Fort Chipewyan? I refined this question in my doctoral dissertation (McCormack 1984b), which sought to explain why Aboriginal people who had formerly lived in bush communities abandoned them after World War II and relocated permanently to Fort Chipewyan. In the following years, I drew on the dissertation as I worked with community members to develop a major exhibit at the Provincial Museum of Alberta, where I was the curator of ethnology, and an associated conference to commemorate the bicentennial of Fort Chipewyan in 1988 (McCormack 1988; McCormack and Ironside 1990, 1993).⁹

This endeavour drew me into the often overlooked but highly productive realm of material culture. As I worked at the museum, and especially in the context of a research project with Blackfoot Nations, a new question emerged: how can we explain why modern Indians (First Nations) should still be seen as “real Indians” – a problematic term at best – when they opt for aluminum boats over birchbark canoes, or pickup trucks instead of horses, and adopt a host of other modern technologies in their patterns of daily life? What does it mean to be a modern Aboriginal person? This question had never occurred to me in the past, tutored as I was by northern people who had no doubt of either their Aboriginal identities or their modernity. In the museum realm, and later as a professor at the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, I learned to appreciate the power of racialized stereotypes about Aboriginal people and the difficulties most non-Aboriginal – and even some Aboriginal – people have in seeing past them. These explorations also led back to how the history of Fort Chipewyan relates to larger regional and national questions and a still largely unformed northern history.

As a history, this book is itself a historical document in that it speaks to my engagement with these issues from my own personal and theoretical contexts. It is intended to move my interpretive project forward by showing how people who lived in a linked set of communities with one way of life at the time of Confederation transformed into a single community with a different way of life in the late twentieth century.

I focus explicitly on how Fort Chipewyan modernized in the years after Treaty No. 8 was signed. But I reject the earlier definition of what being modern means. This book argues that Aboriginal – and all – people can and do become modern without relinquishing the beliefs and practices that are important to them. Becoming modern does not mean that people's cultures will be, somehow, less authentic. As Betty Duggan (1997:31) has written, "An authentic culture is not one that remains unchanged ... but one that retains the ability to determine the appropriateness of its adaptations."¹⁰ The emerging conflict between the people of Fort Chipewyan and the expanding state of Canada from the late 1800s onward concerned who would set the rules for the process of modernization and how self-determination by Fort Chipewyan people – especially Aboriginal people – was undermined.

Five premises underlie the analysis of this book.

First, Fort Chipewyan is and has always been a complex plural society, never a homogeneous community. Its residents have been a variety of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who collectively constitute the Other, or a series of diverse Others, all part of the same social formation. Each party brings to the telling of Fort Chipewyan history different narratives, with different understandings of what happened and why.

Second, Fort Chipewyan did not automatically become part of Canada after 1870, except in a strictly formal sense. The process of state building that ensued was simultaneously a process of colonialism that played out within the national arena of nation building and the international arena of expanding global capitalism. Therefore, the history of Fort Chipewyan is also Canadian and Alberta history, though seen from the periphery – the northern edge – rather than the centres of power.¹¹

Third, Aboriginal peoples never relinquished their own narratives or attempts to control their own circumstances and destinies. When the state imposed increasingly restrictive legislation and regulatory structures, both encouraging and forcing Aboriginal peoples to abandon their own ways of belief and thought, local people always tried to mitigate such initiatives and, when necessary, opposed them. In short, Aboriginal people had agency.

Fourth, none of this analysis is intuitive or obvious. To most Canadians, the master narrative of modernity and progress explains how Aboriginal people became part of Canada and the world-system. The power of these narratives is such that it is difficult for most people to comprehend that there are other ways to approach and comprehend the issue. They became

“common sense,” part of the popular culture of Euro-Canadians. From this perspective, the non-Aboriginal people who were the agents of the colonial process were at the same time victims of their own narratives.

Fifth, a consideration of Fort Chipewyan history that uses these perspectives can point the way to a New Northern history analogous to the New Western History of the United States. Both are framed by a broader comparative colonialism, by an emphasis on multiple perspectives, by the realization that national histories are the outcome of complex interactions among diverse peoples within and beyond regional boundaries, and by attempts to deconstruct the historical ideas about those regions and peoples who live there and the roles of these ideas in nation-building mythology (e.g., Limerick 2001; Perry 2005; Clifton 1989; Szasz 2001[1994]).

In discussing the people of Fort Chipewyan, I utilize historically rooted and often ambiguous terminologies. The history of northern usages is complex and little studied. Preferred formal terms today in Canada are “First Nations” instead of “Indian,” and “Métis” for “Half-breed” (e.g., Communications Branch 1998; Sitarski 1992).¹² However, these terms misrepresent former ethnic and cultural situations. The terminology followed here respects documented historical usages, especially in the use of the term “Indian.” Culturally specific terms are used when applicable: “Cree,” “Chipewyan,” “Half-breed,” and “Métis.” The term “Indian” is used as a historical referent for Crees and Chipewyans together. “Métis” signifies both Half-breeds and Métis, and “Aboriginal” and “Native” are terms for the totality of Aboriginal peoples in the region. Similarly, specific European/Euro-Canadian ethnic terms (Scots, Orcadian, French Canadian or Canadien) are used where appropriate. “European,” “Euro-Canadian,” and “White” all indicate non-Aboriginal persons of European ancestry.¹³ The term “Euro-Canadian” normally is reserved for non-Aboriginal persons present after Confederation. One historical problem is how Aboriginal people learned to consider themselves to be “Indian” in addition to being “Cree” or “Chipewyan,” which are themselves problematic terms. This book will address some of the issues involved in this developing ethnic awareness.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The development of the book proceeds in the following way. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the position of Fort Chipewyan as a social formation situated at the intersection of the global economy and Aboriginal domestic

economies. Chapter 2 outlines the founding peoples of the plural society of Fort Chipewyan, both those living in the settlement and those in the surrounding region, Aboriginal and European alike. Chapter 3 considers the historical shift from domestic and capitalist modes of production to a new fur trade mode of production that defined the internal dynamic of the new plural society. The fur trade mode of production proved to be remarkably elastic and resilient. Even today, it persists in Fort Chipewyan and many other northern communities.

Yet, in the second half of the twentieth century, the fur trade ceased to dominate local and regional economies. Much of this book examines why and how the local economy began to shift to a social formation embedded in the Canadian industrial state. While Canadians have tended to take this change for granted and naturalize the process as part of the evolution of the nation, it was not inevitable.

Chapters 4 to 6 set the stage for understanding the roots of this change. Chapter 4 provides the international and national contexts for the late-nineteenth-century events impinging on the Fort Chipewyan region, outlining changes in the world-system and global capitalism, the consequent creation of the Canadian nation-state, and its expansion into the Northwest and the far Athabasca District, newly acquired from the Hudson's Bay Company. It was in this period that the Athabasca District became a trading hinterland oriented to the new city of Edmonton. Chapter 5 focuses on the local impacts of these developments, in two directions. First, renewed competition in the northern fur trade followed the termination of the company's monopoly. Second, toward the end of the nineteenth century, Canada began to take its first tentative steps in the long process of expanding its control into the North, which opened the door for Treaty No. 8 in 1899 and 1900 and a twentieth-century process of internal colonialism. Chapter 6 discusses the roles played by Roman Catholic and Anglican missionaries, present in Fort Chipewyan since the mid-nineteenth century, who provided support for these endeavours in addition to their primary role of converting people to Christianity.

Chapter 7 discusses the cultural baselines or ways of life for people who lived at Fort Chipewyan and in settlements in the bush at the time of treaty. Fort Chipewyan was then a small centre for industrial activities and market exchanges, populated by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who were engaged in a broad range of activities, only some of which related directly to the fur trade. Northern Aboriginal life was not the same as Aboriginal life in the south, although the differences were little appreciated by government policy makers in Ottawa.

Chapter 8 follows with a detailed examination of Treaty No. 8 and the related issuance of Half-breed scrip, events that occurred in 1899 and 1900. Treaty No. 8 was one of the so-called numbered treaties, legal devices used by the Canadian government to acquire land from the people it called Indians. Scrip was a parallel device to satisfy Half-breed or Métis claims. Together, they constituted a set of paradigms for dealing with Aboriginal peoples of the Northwest south of the Arctic. The treaty was the legal device that produced rigid identities of Indian and Métis. It created the Chipewyan Band and the Cree Band of Fort Chipewyan, now the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and the Mikisew Cree First Nation, respectively. These are legally established bands, and their members have a formal legal identity as Indians under the British North America Act (the Constitution Act, 1867), the Indian Act and its amendments, and the Constitution Act, 1982. Those people who chose not to enter into treaty and instead applied for scrip were identified as Half-breeds, a more ambiguous identity legally. Treaty and scrip together had impacts on a host of community factors that are still important one hundred years later. To treaty signatories and their descendants, the treaty is a living document, one with ongoing relevance and redefinition, though for much of the twentieth century it was more ignored than honoured.

Once Aboriginal people had either entered into a treaty relationship with the federal government or become ordinary citizens in the eyes of the Canadian government by applying for scrip to settle their Aboriginal claims, the way was open for federal and provincial governments to build legal structures of occupation in the Fort Chipewyan region and other Treaty No. 8 areas. Chapter 9 uses the rich documentary record to trace the beginnings of government regulatory regimes in the region, both federal and, after 1905, provincial. However, until the end of World War I, neither government had much regulatory *power*, and life continued much as it had before for local residents.

This situation changed, not for the better, following World War I. Chapter 10 points to the chasm between an era of on-the-ground Aboriginal sovereignty and autonomy and a new era of internal colonialism by the Canadian nation-state that was marked by the war, a series of horrifying epidemics, and a singular watershed event, the invasion of the Fort Chipewyan region by White homesteaders turned trappers, along with some Métis trappers and their families from the Lac La Biche area. The pattern for peaceful appropriation of power by outside agencies had been created, and its consequences would be marked by the violation of promises made

by the Crown under Treaty No. 8, the creation and expansion of Wood Buffalo Park in 1922 and 1926, and a continually evolving regulatory regime devised by the federal and provincial governments from the 1920s through the 1970s that steadily eroded Aboriginal political and economic control and contributed to the people's marginalization and poverty in their own homeland.

The concluding chapter summarizes the threads of this story and points to how it will be taken up in a second volume that will analyze the next fifty years of this history of local underdevelopment – the time when underdevelopment really began.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Historical photographs depicting aspects of Fort Chipewyan and its residents are numerous in Canadian archives. They date from the late nineteenth century and increase in number in the early twentieth century. Surveyors with the Geological Survey of Canada and the Dominion Lands Survey were responsible for most of the early photos, thanks to their mandate to explore and document. But there were other travellers with cameras, almost all of whom took pictures of the imposing Hudson's Bay Company establishment. Next in popularity were pictures of the town as seen from the lake and of the Roman Catholic mission. Archives also contain photos of other buildings, residents of town and bush, and some activities. A selection of photographs is included in Chapters 4-10. In keeping with the theme of this book, pictures have been included of some of the people and places to which Fort Chipewyan was linked historically.

Building a Plural Society at Fort Chipewyan: A Cultural Rababou

*On parle le rababou.*¹

– Ronald Scollon and Suzanne Scollon, *Linguistic Convergence: An Ethnography of Speaking at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta*

This book is not a traditional ethnography or ethnohistory of the Cree, Chipewyan, or Métis people of Fort Chipewyan, although aspects of their cultures and ways of life are essential considerations. None of these Aboriginal peoples existed in isolation from the others, and even to speak of “the Cree,” for example, is problematic. Such artificial analytical boundaries imply an idealized homogeneity that misrepresents real-life complexity, cultural and otherwise.

Instead, the ethnographic focus is the plural society centred on Fort Chipewyan, “at the intersection of local interactions and relationships and the larger processes of state and empire making” (Roseberry 1988:163, emphasis omitted). To Mary Louise Pratt (1992:4, see also 6-7), such a locale is a “contact zone,” a social space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often [but not necessarily] in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.” She prefers this concept to that of the “frontier,” which in Canada is a term that privileges Canadian nation-building narratives. The emphasis in this book is historical as well as ethnographic. It is presented as ethnohistory and simultaneously as a study of the developing modern world order (see Comaroff and Comaroff

1992:x). The trading post provided a place in which all the people of the region could interact and jointly create a kind of intersubjectivity. This term refers to a shared, mutual space, analogous to Richard White's "middle ground," produced through a process of dialogue and communication and characterized by a set of meanings that properly belong to none of the interacting cultures (Fabian 1991:92; McCormack and Sciorra 1998; Salisbury 1976:42; White 1997:93; Bredin 1993:304-305). This shared space was represented in a new fur trade mode of production. The social and physical community developed as a complex entity with multiple ancestries and meanings, encompassing numerous subcommunities.

Physically, the social community was originally dispersed spatially, revolving around the trading post at Fort Chipewyan, which grew into a small town after 1870. Most members resided in small settlements in "the bush," the common term for the subarctic lands surrounding residential locales.²

The spatial patterns reflected the social community and the local ways of life. Although a primary cultural division at Fort Chipewyan could be drawn between European and Aboriginal peoples, from the beginning its ethnic and cultural profile was a conglomerate of people with diverse affiliations who occupied the region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The next chapter introduces the concept of mode of production, a useful theoretical tool for understanding both the interplay that followed and the creation of intersubjectivity, which was realized in the development of a new fur trade mode of production. An outgrowth of the meeting of peoples with domestic and capitalist modes of production, it involved a complex mixed economy comprising domestic production, commercial production, and wage labour. While its features were unique to the particular circumstances of the northern fur trade, as a mode of production it was comparable to that of other indigenous economies penetrated by capitalism and integrated into the world-system.³

The establishment of Fort Chipewyan was a northern instance of the vast transformations set in motion by the arrival of Europeans in the Americas and their encounters with the Aboriginal occupants. In the North, these meetings occurred within the context of a developing fur trade tailored to join European merchants with the Aboriginal people who would become producers, consumers, traders, and workers in a new economy and social world.

Fort Chipewyan began as a fur trade "factory," a fur production and service centre for Europeans trading in the Athabasca country, known after 1821 as the Athabasca District in the Hudson's Bay Company trading system.⁴ Centred on the western end of Lake Athabasca, this region was

distinguished by a rich concentration of subarctic fur and food resources, especially in the Peace-Athabasca Delta, an area of possibly unparalleled resource concentration. In addition to the entire range of subarctic furbearers, small game, carnivores, upland birds and migratory waterfowl, and fish, at least four ungulates were available locally: bison,⁵ moose, woodland caribou, and barren ground caribou (see Table 2.1).

European trade with peoples of the region began in the late seventeenth or, more likely, early eighteenth century, conducted by Aboriginal traders – commonly called “middlemen” – and by Athabasca residents who were willing to pack their furs all the way to Fort Churchill or York Factory on Hudson Bay, a long and hazardous journey (A. Mackenzie 1970:73).⁶ Direct trade locally between Aboriginal people and European agents began in 1778, with the arrival of Peter Pond and his entourage via the Methye Portage, which linked the Mackenzie and the Saskatchewan drainage basins. In 1788, Fort Chipewyan was founded for the North West Company by Roderick McKenzie, who had been recruited by his famous cousin, Alexander Mackenzie (Mackenzie 1970:73, 129; McKenzie 1889:27-28; McCormack 1984a:162; Parker 1987:6-11; Keith 2001).

From 1788 to 1870, the fur trade was virtually the sole point of articulation between the Aboriginal people of the Athabasca country and a larger social, political, and economic landscape: the developing world-system of global capitalism and its manifestations within particular core countries, especially Great Britain. During that time, global capitalism continued to evolve, and both the Canadian fur trade and the social formation of the Athabasca District moved through periods of conflict, change, and consolidation. The Montreal-based North West Company amalgamated in 1821 with the London-based Hudson's Bay Company after a period of agonizing struggle, much of it in the Athabasca District. The Hudson's Bay Company then enjoyed a monopoly on trade until 1870, when it sold its Canadian territories to Great Britain for transfer to the new Dominion of Canada. After Treaty No. 8 was signed in 1899, processes of state building became determinative in the history of the region.

The founding populations of Fort Chipewyan were established along with the post and continued to evolve over the next century (McCormack 1988:7-11). Each population segment had a distinctive history, culture, and one or more languages that it contributed to the plural society of Fort Chipewyan.⁷

Those people known collectively to Europeans as “Indians” experienced major changes in their local population dynamics because of their own strategies for participating in the fur trade, complicated by recurrent disease

TABLE 2.1 Major faunal resources

| | | |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Large game | Moose | <i>Alces alces</i> |
| | Woodland caribou | <i>Rangifer tarandus caribou</i> |
| | Barren ground caribou | <i>Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus</i> |
| | Bison | <i>Bison bison</i> |
| Small game | Snowshoe hare | <i>Lepus americanus</i> |
| | Red squirrel | <i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i> |
| | Beaver | <i>Castor canadensis</i> |
| | Muskrat | <i>Ondatra zibethicus</i> |
| | Porcupine | <i>Erethizon dorsatum</i> |
| Carnivores | Grey wolf | <i>Canis lupus</i> |
| | Coyote | <i>Canis latrans</i> |
| | Red fox | <i>Vulpes vulpes</i> |
| | Black bear | <i>Ursus americanus</i> |
| | Pine marten | <i>Martes americana</i> |
| | Fisher | <i>Martes pennanti</i> |
| | Ermine | <i>Mustela erminea</i> |
| | Least weasel | <i>Mustela nivalis</i> |
| | Mink | <i>Neovison vison</i> |
| | Wolverine | <i>Gulo gulo</i> |
| | Skunk | <i>Mephitis mephitis</i> |
| | Otter | <i>Lontra canadensis</i> |
| | Lynx | <i>Felis lynx</i> |
| Upland birds | Spruce grouse | <i>Falcapennis canadensis</i> |
| | Ruffed grouse | <i>Bonasa umbellus</i> |
| | Sharp-tailed grouse | <i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i> |
| | Willow ptarmigan | <i>Lagopus lagopus</i> |
| | Rock ptarmigan | <i>Lagopus mutus rupestris</i> |
| Migratory waterfowl | Canada goose | <i>Branta canadensis</i> |
| | Greater white-fronted goose (grey wavy) | <i>Anser albifrons</i> |
| | Lesser snow goose (white wavy) | <i>Chen caerulescens caerulescens</i> |
| | Trumpeter swan | <i>Cygnus buccinator</i> |
| | Sandhill crane | <i>Grus canadensis</i> |
| | Whooping crane | <i>Grus americana</i> |
| | Ducks, multiple species | |
| | | |
| Fish | Lake whitefish | <i>Coregonus clupeaformis</i> |
| | Lake trout | <i>Salvelinus namaycush</i> |
| | Northern pike (jackfish) | <i>Esox lucius</i> |
| | Goldeye | <i>Hiodon alosoides</i> |
| | Walleye (pickerel) | <i>Sander vitreus</i> |

Source: McCormack 1975a discusses the plant and animal species and ecosystems of the boreal forest and adjacent barren grounds or tundra. Current Latin designations for these animals were provided or confirmed by staff of the Royal Alberta Museum: Dr. Bruce McGillivray (Executive Director), Mark Steinhilber (Head of Life Sciences and Curator of Ichthyology and Herpetology), Dr. Jocelyn Hudon (Curator of Ornithology), and Bill Weimann (Assistant Curator of Mammology). And they were drawn in part from McGillivray and Hastings 1988.

epidemics resulting from the European presence.⁸ The original Beaver occupants retreated or were driven westward out of the region by incoming Crees and Chipewyans by the early nineteenth century (A. Mackenzie 1970:238; Ridington 1981:357; Wright 1975; McCormack 1984a:165; see also Smith 1987).

Chipewyans were newcomers to the Fort Chipewyan region, at least as permanent residents.⁹ They established themselves there in response to the fur trade, moving southwest from their former ranges in the transitional treeline bordering the barren grounds (Thompson 1962:72-73; Mackenzie 1970:125; Simpson 1938:355-356; Gillespie 1975; McCormack 1984a:164-167). Their occupancy was initially tentative, but an 1824-25 report about Fort Chipewyan distinguished between Chipewyans who were “more settled” and those who were “migratory” (Hudson’s Bay Company Archives [HBCA], B.39/e/8:28). This distinction might have been between Chipewyans and “Carribou Eaters,” who made “frequent visits” but lived elsewhere, especially at the east end of Lake Athabasca (HBCA, B.39/e/6:5). Many Chipewyans maintained family connections with Caribou Eater Chipewyans and with Chipewyans farther south in the boreal forest, connected by travel routes of lakes, rivers, and overland trails. Some segments of the local Chipewyan population were highly mobile, living for a time in the Fort Chipewyan region and at other times in the Fond du Lac–Black Lake region at the east end of Lake Athabasca. Until the mid-twentieth century, Chipewyans dominated the Aboriginal population of the Fort Chipewyan region (e.g., HBCA B.39/e/6:3; Provincial Archives of Alberta [PAA], Acc. 70.387, A.245/1; McCormack n.d.; Canada 1966).

The people who became known as Crees might have had a toehold in the region for a long time, though whether they were resident that far north prior to the advent of the fur trade is disputed because of limited and ambiguous archaeological and documentary evidence (Mackenzie 1970:132; Thompson 1962:72-73; Smith 1981b, 1987; Wright 1975).¹⁰ They probably reflect the coalescence at Fort Chipewyan of people from different Cree-speaking populations. Crees have a long history of residency in north-central Saskatchewan, and their territories might have extended at least to the Lac La Biche and Clearwater River area of northeastern Alberta (e.g., Russell 1991; Pollock 1978:134). They had an early presence – though not necessarily pre-fur trade – on the lower Athabasca River, where a post was maintained for their trade long after Fort Chipewyan had been established. They made trading and raiding trips to Lake Athabasca and beyond during the “proto-contact” period, a lengthy period during which European influences reached the region, but before Europeans actually arrived on

the scene. Cree oral traditions, first recorded by Alexander Mackenzie (1970:238), spoke of a peace they had made with Beaver Indians at “Peace Point” on the Peace River.¹¹ In the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century, some Crees who had settled in the Lesser Slave Lake region moved farther north to the Little Red River vicinity of the Peace River. They intermarried with and contributed some members to the Fort Chipewyan Cree population (Little Red River Cree Nation members, pers. commun. 1997; McCormack n.d.; Library and Archives Canada [LAC], RG 10, Annuity Paylists).

Peter Pond named Lake Athabasca on his maps “Lake Araubaska,” suggesting that original or incoming Algonquian speakers may have spoken the *r* dialect (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library). Cuthbert Grant referred to “Arabasca” in his 1786 journal (Duckworth 1990:11 and passim), and in 1874 Father Lacombe (x, xv) wrote that the “Cris d’Athabaskaw” spoke the *r* dialect. Yet in his 1801 publication, Alexander Mackenzie (1970) used “Athabasca,”¹² the *θ* dialect, which to Father Lacombe was the dialect spoken by almost all the other Wood Crees. The *γ* dialect persisted in the Fort Chipewyan region, and it was also spoken by the Crees who moved onto the Prairies. While linguists today call this dialect Plains Cree, it is spoken throughout northern Alberta (Rhodes and Todd 1981; Smith 1987:439-440; Lacombe 1874:xv).

The newly arrived Europeans – virtually all men¹³ – were similarly diverse. The North West Company was dominated by Highland Scots from Montreal. Some were emigrants to North America escaping social and economic pressures in Scotland, others were Loyalists from the United States, and still others had received seigneuries in Quebec for their military service. The North West Company’s labour force was Scottish, French Canadian, and mixed-ancestry people who might already have been developing the identities that eventually became “French-Métis.”¹⁴ The Hudson’s Bay Company recruited heavily in the Orkney Islands. Although the Orkney Islands had become part of Scotland by that time, Orcadians had a distinctive Norse history and did not consider themselves to be Scots in identity or culture (McCormack 1987, 1992a, 1996b). After 1810, the Hudson’s Bay Company also recruited from Stornoway on the Island of Lewis and elsewhere (McCormack 1992a, 1992b; Goldring 1979, 1980a, 1980b, 1982; Clouston 1936, 1937a, 1937b; Wonders 1993; J. Nicks 1980). These men even spoke different languages: Orcadians spoke Norn and, after being colonized by Great Britain, adopted a Scots English, while Highland Scots spoke Gaelic. In Canada, Orcadians and Highland Scots often assimilated to a common Scottish identity (Brown 1988; McCormack

1996b, 2003a), which obscures their distinctive origins and contributions to the fur trade. It is intriguing to contemplate the possibility that the first language that a man from Stornoway (Lewis) and a man from Stromness (Orkney) may have had in common was Chipewyan, Cree, or French, not English.¹⁵

In the mid-nineteenth century, fur traders were joined by new groups of Europeans: Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries. Anglican missionaries were mostly Englishmen recruited by the Church Missionary Society. If they were married, they brought English wives with them to their mission posts. Roman Catholic missionaries were priests of the order Oblats de Marie Immaculée from France or Belgium and a parallel European Oblate order of lay brothers, joined later by French Canadian men from Quebec. They recruited a Quebec-based order of nuns to assist them, French Canadian members of the Sisters of Charity, more commonly known as the Grey Nuns (Soeurs Grises).

Historically, the term “Half-breed” often referred to people of mixed Aboriginal-British ancestry, and “Métis” to people of mixed Aboriginal-French ancestry.¹⁶ In 1868, however, Bishop Taché (1870:97-98) called all mixed-ancestry people “Half-breeds,” distinguishing between French or Canadian Half-breeds and English Half-breeds solely on the basis of their language.¹⁷ Similarly, in 1899 and 1900, “Half-breed” was the term used for all mixed-ancestry people by officials associated with the Treaty No. 8 and Half-breed Scrip Commissions (Canada 1966; Mair 1908; Leonard and Whalen 1998). This usage was affirmed by Lacombe in his *Memoirs* (1901). In 1906, Elihu Stewart (1913:36) claimed that “no offence is taken in applying the term ‘half breed’ to one who by nationality deserves the name, while he will bitterly resent the epithet ‘breed.’”

Such populations had been developing since the seventeenth century in the Great Lakes area (Peterson 1985; see also Mackenzie 1970:93). Some of their descendants might have ended up at Fort Chipewyan in the service of the North West Company and, later, the Hudson’s Bay Company. But many of these mixed-ancestry people were born at Fort Chipewyan itself, where mixed marriages began with the fur trade. Most local Half-breeds had Chipewyan mothers or grandmothers. While some family connections and communications existed between the mixed-ancestry people of Fort Chipewyan and better-known Métis centres such as Red River, that does not mean that Red River Métis culture or identity was exported to Fort Chipewyan (Slobodin 1966, 1981; Payment 1998; Bird 1991:xxiii, 5, 7).¹⁸

Instead, the Half-breed population of Fort Chipewyan, as elsewhere in Alberta and the Northwest Territories (Foster 1994; Nicks and Morgan

1985; Nicks 1987; Hanks 2000), is characterized by an independent genesis and lineage. The Fort Chipewyan Half-breeds began to evolve distinctive non-Indian identities even before Red River was founded. While many mixed-ancestry individuals were assimilated into Chipewyan bands and today bear a Chipewyan identity, others founded families who are now considered to be Métis. Two common French-Métis surnames in Fort Chipewyan today, with very old fur trade roots, are Tourangeau and Lepine (see Duckworth 1990).¹⁹ The name Mercredi is found in both Métis and Chipewyan family lines but is a modification of the original “Macardi or McCarthy”; men with this surname were identified as “Irish [half] breeds” in the 1901 census of Canada (LAC). Other local surnames derive from Highland Scottish and Orcadian ancestors, such as Fraser, Mackay, Flett, Loutit, and Wylie.

At the same time, it is important not to overemphasize the historical distinction between Indians and Half-breeds at Fort Chipewyan.²⁰ There is no evidence that the people themselves drew such firm boundaries. Such an emphasis reflects a European racial consciousness, fostered by political situations at Red River and in the Saskatchewan basin, where in the nineteenth century Métis became politically and militarily powerful. The ethnic distinctions imposed in northern Alberta by government policies at the time of Treaty No. 8 were consequences of these developments elsewhere (McCormack 1998b). In fact, while much is known about northern European-Indian intermarriage (e.g., Slobodin 1966, 1981; Smith 1982; McCormack 1989, n.d.), little is known of the development of a Métis consciousness or distinctive identity at Fort Chipewyan or elsewhere in the Mackenzie drainage.

We also know little about the Aboriginal evolution or adoption of a distinctive concept of Indian-ness, in addition to individual Beaver, Chipewyan, and Cree identities. At least two processes were under way, probably quite early. At some point, Chipewyans and Crees began to move beyond an internal focus on their own societies, a consciousness of themselves as “the proto-type of humanity” (Turner 1991:296) expressed by George Back’s quotation in 1820 of a Chipewyan statement, “we are people and there are none others” (Houston 1994:63), to a broader focus on their place in relation to other peoples with contrasting cultural ways, many of whom were not formerly known to them.²¹ In short, they began to accept the European concept of distinct groups of Indians, each bearing a culture, and they also created terms in their own languages for Europeans they perceived as distinct, especially English and French (see Goulet 1998:101-103).²² At the same time, the underlying meaning of ethnic distinctiveness

also began to shift, in that “the inventory of distinct traits” defining each group was being “produced to a significant extent through interaction with other sectors of the society” (Jackson 1989:128) – the collective space of the evolving plural society at Fort Chipewyan. These processes intensified in the twentieth century as local Aboriginal people came to define themselves within the framework of the encompassing Canadian society. For now, it is enough to know that by the end of the nineteenth century, all of these terms were firmly in use and contributed to the intersubjectivity of the fur trade world and its distinctive mode of production. No matter what people called themselves in their immediate families and communities, they recognized the common meanings of terms such as “Chipewyan,” “Cree,” “Indian,” “White,” and “Half-breed.” They were part of the lexicon of the fur trade and of that new space of common interaction.

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