The world is round and each society has been given the right to exist in this world within its territory. This is how the Creator had arranged it. Therefore, the traditional territory of the Blackfoot Nation was given to our people by our Creator. We respected and protected this traditional territory with our minds and our hearts and we depended on it for what it encompasses for our survival. Everything that we ever needed for our way of life and survival existed in our traditional territory, such as herbs for medicine, roots, rivers, game animals, berries, vegetables, the buffalo.1

Elder Adam Delaney’s description of the Blackfoot people’s views of their lives in the millennia before the arrival of Europeans is largely echoed by the other First Nations people of Alberta, though in each natural region the resources allegedly bestowed by the Creator differed. Any history of Alberta that accurately reflects historical time should devote 98 percent of its space to Native peoples, who, according to the most conservative estimates, have lived within what is now called Alberta for at least thirteen thousand years. The post-contact period (the period in which both Natives and newcomers have lived in Alberta) is less than three hundred years old, a blip in historical time.

The Native view of their traditional past emphasizes the role of the Creator and the importance to Native people of following the Creator’s teachings. Like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, Native religions are monotheistic. The great religions of the Old World, however, have creation stories in which God gave dominion to humans over all other animals as well as plants. In contrast, according to Aboriginal religions, the Creator gave spirits to all animals and plants, and humans, while they needed to consume other living things, were instructed to do so in ways that respected them as God’s creations. If they failed to do so, the Creator would punish them by depriving them of game and plants. In their view, the Creator expected them to take only what they needed and to demonstrate respect for non-humans via elaborate rituals.2

Humans were also expected to respect one another,
particularly within their primary affinity group, which was also their work group. Cree communities in the parklands region gathered regularly in circles to collectively pray, talk, heal, and reconcile, and to make supreme efforts to treat one another as equal children of the Creator. The Dene or Athabascan in the North, the Cree in the north-central region, and Blackfoot peoples in the centre and south of the province had similar beliefs and ceremonies. Although it is important to emphasize that each Native culture had its own language, its own story of how the Earth was created, and its own social structures, for all of these cultural groups, land was the property of the Creator, not of individuals, and everyone had to work together to use, share, and conserve the land and resources that the Creator had bestowed upon the group.3

On the surface, then, it might seem that Native peoples in Alberta experienced no historical development during the thirteen thousand years before they began contact through the fur trade with strangers from Europe. Some people, particularly during the period of colonial conquest of the Americas, used the word *primitive* to describe pre-contact Native societies in Alberta and the rest of Canada and the Americas. (The term *pre-contact* generally refers to the period before an Aboriginal society developed regular contact with Europeans.) They suggested that Natives hunted and gathered using never-changing, almost intuitive, techniques. In this view, Native societies in 1700 AD were no different than they had been in 9000 BC. To some, this meant that they were uncivilized and needed to be swept away by the Europeans, who were supposedly more advanced in areas such as technology and religion. Others argued for leaving them alone and treating the Americas much like a game preserve for early humans. While the latter, minority point of view would have benefited the Natives more over the long term, it was, like the former view, based on a completely incorrect dichotomy of allegedly “civilized” societies — European cultures — and “savage” societies — virtually all other cultures. In fact, Native societies changed dramatically over time as they constantly tried to find ways to better shape the resources that the Creator had given them to ensure that their material and spiritual needs were met.

The view that Native societies in the Americas were less advanced technologically than European societies was based largely on the superiority of European weapons and on the “logic” of conquerors that those whom they are conquering are inferiors. That view was reinforced in the Americas by the conquerors’ destruction of many Native societies and the burying of the Natives’ achievements. Archaeology and the oral histories that have been passed on from generation to generation of Aboriginal survivors have challenged the “cowboys and Indians” caricatures of the European–Aboriginal conflicts. We now know that the knowledge of various Native groups was immense and that terms such as *Stone Age* and *primitive*, once used to denigrate these societies, cover up the complexities and ever-changing character of the cultures of the Americas. The pre-contact Native peoples had long histories of interacting with a changing environment, and though the names of individual inventors and developers are largely unknown, the collective knowledge of these peoples that developed over time was impressive. Some of it may never be recovered because colonial germs and violence resulted in millions of deaths over a short period of time.
The Inca Empire centred in Peru, for example, synthesized the architectural, mathematical, astronomical, agricultural, and religious knowledge of the various Andean peoples whom the Inca conquered. Among the achievements of these peoples, who used stone and not metals, was the construction of earthquake-proof buildings and flood-proof roads. Their understanding of how stones could be chiseled to fit together so as not to be dismantled by natural forces was one application of their sophisticated mathematical and geological knowledge. In contrast, the Spanish conquerors and their successors deprecate the people they conquered and never bothered to learn anything from them about survival in the Andes region; instead, they applied their “developed” European technologies to build lovely edifices that were frequently ruined by earthquakes and ambitious roadway projects that stood covered in water and mud when flooding occurred. The sophisticated irrigation systems that the Andean peoples had developed in the desert conditions of their region remained unmatched for at least the first three hundred years of Spanish occupation.

On the surface, the achievements of the peoples of pre-contact Alberta may seem modest compared to those of cultures such as the Inca, Maya, and Aztec, who built huge temples and thousands of miles of roads and irrigation canals. But this is only true if one measures societies in terms of what one can see on the surface. Prairie Native cultures also had complex technologies that resulted from the collective labour of their peoples. As archaeologist Jack Brink, who led the team that reconstructed Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in southwestern Alberta, concluded:

Brink argues that the Europeans first in contact with the prairie Natives, wanting to minimize the achievements of the First Peoples, assumed that it must be easy to herd buffalo over cliffs and then crudely cut up their bodies to get food and clothing. In fact, it took years of invention and experimenting to determine where and by what means buffalo, which were wary animals, could be herded to cliffs from which a fall would kill them, with the least risk to humans in the process.

Equal ingenuity was needed in knowing what to do once the buffalo had jumped. Natives could only cut up and process the meat of a small number of buffalo, and not just any buffalo would do. They needed buffalo that had sufficient fat at that time of year to ensure a nutritious food supply for the people who had conducted the kill. To determine which animals were worth taking from a herd, they searched for hair over the eyes and on the horn, and for stripes on the spine. In addition to using buffalo meat for food, the people learned over time which parts of buffalo could

Alone in that basin that day, I knew that I stood among the remains of a huge construction project involving the collection and careful placement of thousands of individual rocks. Each one was selected for certain size and weight and placed in a spot deemed just right by a team of people who must have discussed and debated how the map was to be made. What started off as simple clusters of stone had morphed into a mental blueprint of complex, group-based decision-making on a scale and for a purpose that had mostly eluded consideration by archaeologists, anthropologists, animal ecologists, and pretty much everyone else.
be used to make such items as clothing, toboggans, cutlery, and powder flasks.

Such knowledge, along with prairie, parklands, and northern peoples’ more general hunting expertise — as well as their understanding of horticulture, natural medicines, and social relations — did not develop overnight. Archaeological evidence shows that small groups of hunters lived on the prairies of Alberta at least thirteen thousand years ago when the glaciers of a long ice age were beginning to retreat. It is likely that they crossed an ice-free corridor from British Columbia through a section of the Rocky Mountains. By that time, they had developed projectiles with large fluted points suited to killing big game as well as smaller animals, but the mammoths and mastodons that they hunted soon disappeared, perhaps because of overhunting.6

The First Peoples of Alberta adapted by turning their attention to the bison of southern Alberta, developing bone and antler tools and experimenting with and perfecting their projectiles. Sturdier projectiles were needed since there was limited access to stone for resharpening and for changing broken segments. Archaeologist Trevor Peck explains the importance of the development of “Folsom points,” some 12,800 to 12,200 years ago:

The regularity and exquisite form of Folsom points suggests that knowledge transmission within tight kin-groups or working with designated craft specialists was an intricate part of an individual’s upbringing. Practices of stone conservation, the use of biface cores, multifunction stone tools, and Folsom point preforms as tools were all elegant adaptive responses to a highly mobile lifeway focused on hunting bison in stone-poor areas.7

Over time, there were more inventions and more adaptations. For example, archaeological remains suggest that sometime between 7200 and 6500 BC, Native peoples began fine-tuning darts to fit the spear thrower. The melting of glaciers brought greater population movements within Alberta and between that territory and other parts of North America. For example, an unearthed burial complex dating back to the period from 4900 to 4400 BP (2950 to 2450 BC) included copper and evidence of the use of stone boiling, which suggest the migration of peoples from elsewhere, probably the Great Lakes region, where stone boiling to extract
bone grease had become common by the third millennium BC. The bone grease was used to preserve meat, reducing dependence on fresh meat and allowing communities to grow. Subsequently, there was a migration of Indigenous peoples from today’s American Midwest, as evidenced by discoveries of iron and copper projectile points as well as a style of pottery that was clearly introduced rather than developed locally.8

New technologies and techniques, whether brought by newcomers or developed locally, helped to make hunting more successful. The successive adoptions of the atlatl (spear thrower), the bow and arrow, and finally the buffalo pound were particularly important in enabling the growth of more and larger communities, first in southern Alberta and later in the northern reaches of the province. The buffalo pound was an enclosure that Native peoples built with logs and hides, generally at the bottom of a hill, to trap buffalo. Even though the animals were strong enough to crash through the wall that suddenly appeared before them, their instincts told them to stop in their tracks when confronted by a barrier. Thus trapped, they were speared by hunters who aimed through holes in the walls of the enclosure. The success of this method encouraged the bolder concept of the buffalo jump, in which Natives steered the buffalo along a path that ended not with a barrier but with a high cliff from which the stampeding buffalo fell to their death. Beginning in the first millennium BC, encampments of more than a hundred people were established at repeatedly used buffalo jump sites.9

Over time, the various Native peoples developed beliefs sacred to themselves about their origins and about the values that the Creator expected them to embody. They also developed a variety of rituals to appease the Creator and the spirits that the Creator had given to all living things. The Sun Dance, though its features varied among different peoples, was especially critical to prairie Aboriginals. It brought together related communities, allowed for the renewing of relationships, and offered young men the opportunity to demonstrate their bravery through a ceremony involving self-inflicted pain.10 Among the Blackfoot peoples, it was a multi-day event. An all-male warrior society chose the site, but the event was presided over by a holy woman. The highly ritualized Sun Dance was actually a series of religious ceremonies involving feasting, dancing, and singing. Each person carried a Sun Dance bundle in a rawhide bag filled with objects bestowed upon them at birth or for special achievements. Every item in the bag was made sacred by carrying it on vision fasts — fasts meant to induce a connection with the relevant spirits — and by learning special songs associated with that item. Individuals’ performances at a Sun Dance had to conform both with the special gifts bestowed upon them in their medicine bundle and with the rituals of the First Nation overall. Unsurprisingly, given the importance of the buffalo to the Plains peoples, the rituals of sacrifice and thanks to the buffalo spirits occupied as much time during the Sun Dance as the ceremonies devoted to the Sun Spirit.11

Labour was organized along lines that reflected the Aboriginal communities’ need to carefully balance the spirit world’s demands on the collective and on individuals. Everyone played a role in providing the community’s essential material goods, especially its food supply, but not everyone made the same contribution or received the same share of the total product. By
In the 1500s, the further south one might have travelled in Alberta, the more inequality one might have found, though compared to European societies of the time, all of the First Nations of Alberta were relatively egalitarian. The rigid divisions between European nobles and peasants, merchants and day labourers, and owners and slaves that had developed in Europe had some echoes among the Aztec, Maya, and Inca, but they were not replicated anywhere in Alberta.

Among the Dene peoples of northern Alberta, a class system did not develop in the pre-contact period. The Dene lived in small communities, usually of about twenty or thirty people, and harvested local resources including fish, small game, caribou, trees, and berries. They co-operated in the tasks necessary to maintain their communities, which relocated on a seasonal basis according to food sources. While these communities were largely self-sufficient and minimally involved in trade with other communities, they were generous to other Athabascan-speaking communities who came to them for help because nature had temporarily failed to provide their needs. In turn, they expected that when they were in trouble, aid would be reciprocated.

Intermarriage occurred among the communities within a region, and women and men took on different social roles. While men hunted the caribou, which often meant working at a distance from their homes, the women, who had the primary child care responsibility, stayed close to home, hunted smaller game, and harvested berries and other edible plants. Men manufactured boats and hunting tools, while women produced all the household goods and clothing. Though women played important social roles in Dene society, it appears that men sometimes exchanged or shared wives without their consent. When famine struck, it was female babies and only rarely male ones who might be subjected to infanticide. Still, as historian Kerry Abel notes, missionary and fur trader reports of women’s subordination to men as beasts of burden reflected European prejudices about the proper division of labour between the sexes rather than real exploitation. The European view that women were the “weaker sex” was not shared by the Dene, who regarded women as naturally stronger than men. In the sexual division of labour, women hauled to camp the carcasses of animals hunted by the men, butchered the meat, and transported all of the camp members’ possessions when camp was moved. “The available evidence suggests that the Dene considered men’s and women’s work to be different,” writes Abel, “but not of relatively higher or lower value.”

The Cree of the parklands were similarly egalitarian despite the fact that the somewhat milder environment in which they lived allowed them to form communities of fifty to a hundred people. The women constructed tipis from caribou or moose hides, which the family set up and dismantled as they followed the seasonal paths of moose, caribou, beaver, and bear. Sturdy birchbark canoes made by the men provided the major means of transport. Cree communities, like those of the Dene, shared their wealth with sister communities who had suffered a bad year. The bonds among social groups were strengthened each summer when large numbers of communities gathered in a central location to renew ties of friendship that might also be called upon to gather forces against perceived enemies.

While the Sioux and the Blackfoot of southern Alberta were once egalitarian as well, their societies
became somewhat less equal as they became buffalo-hunting peoples. The intricacies of planning a buffalo hunt and the need for prompt selection of buffalo, quick storage of meat, and longer-term preparation of the many products that could be made from buffalo led to at least some specialization of labour and some rewards for those seen to have higher status within the buffalo society. Chiefs of the hunt and of warfare, along with shamans (the religious leaders or diviners), were at the apex of the social hierarchy. Their superior position within the society was reflected in their dwellings, which were larger than those of other families, and in their having more than one wife. Among the Blackfoot, however, the chief positions were not hereditary; furthermore, the chief’s credibility depended upon his ability to ensure that all members of the tribe were taken care of.14

The Plains people learned to be flexible in order to ensure their survival. As Plains scholar Frances Kaye observes, they “countered climate variability with geographic mobility.” She adds, “Indigenous people did not follow the buffalo herds — rather they anticipated buffalo movement and stationed themselves where experience told them the bison would be moving. Or, if their forecast was wrong, they moved towards alternate or supplementary food sources such as deer, elk, berries, or prairie turnip.”15

Just as work and the products of labour were largely shared within the pre-contact societies of Alberta, looking after those who fell on misfortune was viewed as the responsibility of the whole community. Fur trader and explorer David Thompson, writing about the Cree, noted:

FIG 1-3 A drawing, ca. 1854, of a buffalo pound. Buffalo were herded between funnel-shaped barricades into a circular enclosure, often located at the bottom of a hill. Thus trapped, the buffalo were spearred or shot by hunters stationed on the outer side of the enclosure’s walls. At the centre of the enclosure stood a ritual flag. Glenbow Archives, NA-3225-4.
These acts that pass between man and man for generous charity and kind compassion in civilized society are no more than what is every day practiced by these Savages as acts of common duty; is any one unsuccessful in the chase, has he lost his little all by some accident, he is sure to be relieved by the others to the utmost of their power.16

Although Thompson used the common racist epithet “Savages” to describe Aboriginal people, he had a great deal of respect for their society, as did many of the fur traders. He was hardly alone in raising doubts about the idea of European societies representing a higher form of civilization. American photographer Walter McClintock, living among the Blackfeet in Montana, who shared an ancestral culture with the Blackfoot of southern Alberta, wrote: “Their unselfish and patriotic lives, devoted to the welfare of their tribe, rise before me in strange and painful contrast with the rich and powerful of my race.”17

Sharing with those who had suffered misfortune applied not only within a community but across all social groups within a First Nation. Among the Dene, for example, while each community had its designated hunting grounds, there was an understanding that any group that had been unable in a given year to meet its needs from within its customary hunting areas could hunt in another tribe’s territory. It had to request the right to hunt outside its traditional territory, but such requests were ritual and were always granted as long as the solicited tribe was not also short of food.18

Some European commentators presented northern peoples as callous regarding old people and the sick, since the survival of a community sometimes required them to leave an old or sick person behind as they changed camp with the seasons in search of food. But oral tradition, backed by evidence from European observers, stresses that abandonment occurred only after heroic efforts to preserve the life of someone who could not contribute to the common good. “When the explorer Ross met the Netsilik people a century and a half ago,” writes Keith J. Crowe, “he saw Iliktat, an old man who was being pulled on a sleigh by his family across a difficult land. Early in this century Chief Robuscan of Abitibi carried his very heavy crippled wife on his back in their travels for almost twenty years.”19

Sharing was also the norm for the Cree and the Blackfoot. While each Cree community had some territories under its control, each region also contained common hunting, trapping, and gathering areas, as well as “medicinal lands that we shared [sacred lands], peace territorial lands that we designated for the shelter and safety of all people.”20 The Blackfoot societies also practised reciprocity in the annual Sun Dance. Though a chief might have more material goods than others within the group, “a man aspiring to become a leader sought to outshine his competitors by his feasts and presents given to others, even at the cost of self-impoverishment. . . . Care of the poor was one of the recognized responsibilities of the band chief. Should he fail in this duty, his leadership position was severely jeopardized.”21

During the First Nations period in Alberta, the organization of work and the distribution of the products of work were based on sophisticated and ever-evolving social relations that were undergirded by Native
Millennia of Native Work

spirituality. Natives carved out communities in which each individual contributed to the collective’s well-being and which could in turn count on related groups for support in hard times. This achievement is evidenced in the fact that these communities proved able right to the end of the pre-contact period to govern themselves without developing formal state-level institutions of governance. Ironically, the governments and settlers who looked down on the Natives interpreted the lack of formal state institutions and formal churches as revealing “primitivism” among Canada’s First Peoples. We now recognize how ethnocentric their views were. But many of the earliest Europeans in contact with Native peoples came to respect them and to recognize the complexities of their societies and their organization of work. Our next chapter, which deals with both the fur-trading period and the early settlement of Alberta, demonstrates that the European fur traders found much to admire in First Nations societies and that the fur trade represented a partnership, though not always an equal one, of Natives and Europeans. In contrast, the settlement period, though superficially a negotiated partnership, was for the most part simply an example of European imperialism that resulted in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples and the attempted erasure of their cultures, which had evolved over millennia.
It was customary for Plains Native women to carry a baby in a cradle board, or **papoose**, on their shoulders or back, which allowed women to perform their many chores inside and outside the home while also attending to their babies. Provincial Archives of Alberta, P149.