2 THE FUR TRADE AND EARLY EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

ALVIN FINKEL

Charles the Second establish confirme and declare by these Presentes and that by the same name of Governor & Company of Adventurers of England Tradeing into Hudsons Bay they shall have perpetuall succession And that they and their successors by the name of Governor and Company of Adventurers of England Tradeing into Hudsons Bay bee and at all tymes hereafter shall bee persons able and capable in Law to have purchase receive possesse enjoy and retayne Landes Rentes priviledges libertyes Jurisdictions Franchyses and hereditamentes of what kinde nature and quality soever they bee to them and their Successors. . . .

Doe give grant and confirme unto the said Governor and Company and their successors the sole Trade and Commerce of all those Seas Streights Bayes Rivers Lakes Creekes and Soundes in whatsoever Latitude they shall bee that lie within the entrance of the Streights commonly called Hudsons Streights together with all the Landes and Terrirories upon the Countryes Coastes and confynes of the Seas Bayes Lakes Rivers Creekes and Soundes aforesaid that are not already actually possessed by or granted to any of our Subjectes or possessed by the Subjectes of any other Christian Prince or State . . . and all Mynes Royall as well discovered as not discovered of Gold Silver Gemms and pretious Stones to bee found or discovered within the Territoryes Lymites and Places aforesaid And that the said Land bee from henceforth reckoned and reputed as one of our Plantacions or Colonyes in America called Rupert’s Land.1

In such flowery language, King Charles II declared in 1670, with a stroke of the pen, that all the lands drain-ing into Hudson Bay — a vast expanse the extent of which he could hardly have imagined — belonged to his cousin Prince Rupert and the prince’s associates. He called these unknown lands Rupert’s Land in honour of his first cousin. In this manner, the British, who would have no direct contact with anyone who lived in what is now Alberta for almost another century, claimed the land and resources that ancient peoples had cultivated
for thirteen thousand years. It was just one example of the colonial mentality that resulted in Europeans seizing control of the Americas in the name of Christianity and civilization, though mostly to indulge an insatiable desire for the riches of what they called “the New World.” The Company of Adventurers — or, as it eventually became known, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) — was destined to become the first capitalist venture in the province of Alberta. Its rival, the North West Company (NWC), would emerge later, operating from 1779 to 1821.

Initial relations between Native peoples and the Europeans who came to the Americas from the sixteenth century onwards varied. Many of the peoples of the Americas faced enslavement by European conquerors, who wanted captive labour to exploit mines and cultivable lands. The Portuguese, who had pioneered the European slave trade in Africa in the sixteenth century, enslaved the Native peoples of today’s Brazil, slaughtering those who rose up in resistance. When Native deaths from exhaustion reduced the colonial labour force, the Portuguese simply replaced them with African slaves. The Spanish made slave labour in the mines and in the encomiendas (plantations) the key to their riches, with devastating consequences for the survival of the conquered Aboriginal populations. Writer Edouardo Galeano, describing the exhausting work of the Bolivian miners in Potosí, the largest silver mine in the world, notes that they were forced to live within the mine for months at a time while working exhausting hours with toxic substances, and that “eight million Indian corpses” were the product. “The bleeding of the New World became an act of charity, an argument for the faith.”

By the 1540s, the Spanish had wiped out the Arawak of the Caribbean. They went on to reduce the Native population of Mexico from about 27 million in 1519 to 1 million in 1600; in the same period, they decimated the Peruvian Natives, whose population dropped from 7 million to 1.75 million. Historian G.V. Scammell observes: “In short, in an unequalled record of genocide, the Spaniards had destroyed about 90 per cent of their new subjects in the course of a century. This they had in part accomplished, as a wide body of testimony confirms, by what a royal official described as ‘unheard of cruelties and tortures.’”

As British colonies were established in what is now the United States, the African slave trade came to provide most of the labour required by plantation owners in the South, though some Natives were enslaved as well. In New England, Kentucky, and Tennessee, among other areas of settlement where the British newcomers did not practise labour-intensive agriculture, Natives were viewed as nuisances rather than a potential labour force. They were chased from their traditional lands, which caused many bloody wars as they attempted to assert their sovereignty and either disperse the newcomers or compel them to respect Native control. Throughout this period of conquest, for all Native peoples in contact with the Europeans, European diseases to which they had no immunities proved devastating. But it is important to note that disease as such does not explain the longer-term decimation of the original peoples. Comparative studies of the impact of disease on Native groups demonstrate that when a Native group remained able to control its food supply and to negotiate its relations with the Europeans, a short-term demographic upset was turned around in several generations.
European exploitation and robbery of resources, not European germs, were responsible for genocides and near-genocides of Native peoples in the Americas.9

Initially, the experiences of the Natives with Europeans in much of what became Canada were somewhat more positive than those of Natives in the rest of the Americas. There were no early discoveries of gold and silver in Canada, and the climate was not suited to plantation crops or, in most areas, to extensive single-family farming, given the European technology of the period. The main riches of interest to the French, the first Europeans to establish permanent settlements in Canada, came from ocean fishing, which they did themselves without conflict with Native fishers, and the fur trade. The HBC was similarly interested only in furs and not in settlement.

The fur traders had neither option of ignoring or enslaving Native peoples. The Europeans in the small fur-trade posts and settlements lacked the labour power and the geographic knowledge required to trap and prepare furs for the lucrative European markets. For the same reason that the Spanish enslaved Natives — the need of their labour power — the French and the British involved in the fur trade formed partnerships with First Peoples in lands rich in furs. The Natives quickly learned to bargain shrewdly for the European goods that they wanted in trade for their furs. Samuel de Champlain, the fur trader responsible for the establishment of Quebec in 1608, complained three years later that the Natives “waited until several ships had arrived in order to get our wares more cheaply. Thus those people are mistaken who think that by coming first they can do better business; for the Indians are now too sharp and crafty.”10

Generally, the fur trade in a region followed a predictable pattern. First, while furs remained abundant, mutual respect characterized relations between European fur buyers, on the one hand, and Native trappers and Natives who served as trade intermediaries between trapper and buyer, on the other. The Native peoples drove as hard a bargain as they could for the products of their labour, incorporating the goods that they received in trade from the Europeans into their traditional material and spiritual lives.11 While some Natives succumbed to the blandishments of the Roman Catholic missionaries and became Christians, most remained skeptical of a religion that contradicted their own and offered no guidance for trapping animals or gathering plants.12 Eventually, though, supplies of furs diminished, sometimes along with game, which had
been sufficient for the Natives but could not supply the needs of both Natives and Europeans in an area. As their resources dwindled, Natives could no longer negotiate the terms of trade with Europeans; thus, some of them became dependent on fur buyers and on government officials for credit and for goods. A return to old ways of living was possible for some groups when fur supplies or distant markets collapsed: Natives in northern Canada, for example, seemed to simply return to the status quo ante for several generations after the fur trade in their region declined. But usually European agricultural settlements were established in the wake of a shattered fur trade, and pressure was put on Native peoples to settle on small reserves while white settlers took over their former lands.

With respect to the Prairie region, historical geographer Arthur Ray notes:

In spite of the fact that necessity for cooperation prevented any deliberate attempts to destroy the Indians and their cultures by hostile reactions, their traditional ways were transformed nonetheless. The fur trade favoured economic specialization. . . . Ultimately the resource bases upon which these specialized economies developed were destroyed due to over-exploitation. Significantly for Western Canada, this occurred before extensive European settlement began. Therefore, out of economic necessity, the Indians agreed to settle on reserves with the promise that the government would look after their welfare and help them make yet another adjustment to changing economic conditions.¹³

Such a sad result would not have been predictable when Alberta Natives first began to trade with Europeans since their initial involvement was indirect. As various areas in eastern Canada became overtrapped, Native intermediaries searched for furs in areas further west and north. By the early eighteenth century, furs that Alberta-based Natives traded with intermediaries had become part of the international fur-trading industry. But Alberta Natives had yet to encounter any Europeans; according to archaeologist Trevor Peck, the European goods that Plains peoples acquired before their direct contact with Europeans, including guns, were simply made use of alongside their traditional goods in ways that had minimal impact on their existing cultural practices.¹⁴ Sometime between 1725 and 1750, the Blackfoot acquired horses from First Nations in the United States who traded with the Spanish.¹⁵ Horses became incorporated into the buffalo hunt and the social and religious practices of the Blackfoot.¹⁶ The Cree, who were allies of the Blackfoot in pre-fur trade days, also acquired horses.

By the mid-1700s, both the French fur traders, headquartered in Montreal, and the English, based in York Factory on Hudson Bay, were attempting to establish relations with Natives in the West so as to reduce the role of the intermediaries in the trade and thus increase their potential profits. The first European known to have set foot in Alberta was Anthony Henday, a labourer with the HBC at York Factory. Accompanied by Cree guides, he came west in the hope of establishing relations with the Blackfoot and to encourage them to bring furs to York Factory or other HBC forts. The Natives were largely indifferent to his efforts since having more European goods hardly seemed worth the risk of lengthy treacherous voyages, a view generally shared by all Alberta Native communities.¹⁷
But after the British defeated the French in the Seven Years War (1756–63) and the French ceded control of Canada to the British, Anglo-American fur traders who settled in Montreal, in alliance with Anglo-American traders on the frontier, began establishing fur-trading posts throughout the West, including what is today Alberta. The allies formed the North West Company (NWC) in 1779, uniting the efforts of most of the free traders who defied the HBC’s monopoly. Native groups for whom a visit to a fur-trading post was only days away down river were generally happy to become part of the trade. While the Blackfoot continued for some time to reject any role as trappers, they proved quite willing to prepare and sell pemmican — dried buffalo meat seasoned with berries — to the traders who lacked their own sources of food. The ability of Native peoples in the interior to trade with the Montreal-based firms forced the HBC, which was enraged that Britain would not enforce the monopoly granted to the company in 1670 over the western trade, to also establish western posts. The result was not only a series of competing posts, often close together, across the West, but also frequent violence between HBC and NWC traders.

FUR-TRADING COMPANIES AND THEIR WORKFORCES

The first fur-trading post in Alberta was Pond’s Fort, established by Peter Pond in 1778 on Lake Athabasca. Fort Chipewyan followed in 1788. Soon there were also posts in today’s Edmonton region. Two posts, Fort Augustus, built by the NWC, and Edmonton House (also known as Fort Edmonton), the HBC response, were constructed in 1795 near what is today Fort Saskatchewan.

Fort Edmonton was moved to the site of today’s Rossdale Flats, just south of downtown Edmonton, in 1801, then briefly to Smoky Lake in 1810. Returned to Rossdale Flats in 1812, the fort was moved to the higher ground of the site of today’s legislature in the 1830s because of the constant threat of floods on the Flats. In total, about sixty forts were built in Alberta between 1778 and Confederation in 1867, though some only lasted a few years.

The presence of fur-trading posts in their region gave an incentive to large numbers of Alberta Native communities to participate in the fur trade. By the 1790s, even the Blackfoot, once so reluctant to trade with the Europeans, brought wolf and fox skins to trading posts on the northern fringe of their hunting territories. Before the HBC and NWC merged in 1821, Natives took advantage of the companies’ competition to get the best prices possible for their products. Even after the merger, Natives traded with American free traders when they could not get better prices from the Canadian monopoly fur-trading company. The change from a subsistence to a trading economy impacted all of the First Nations, though throughout the years of the fur trade, they were social actors, not victims like Natives elsewhere in the Americas who had become slaves or landless and confined to small reserves. The Alberta First Nations retained many of their core beliefs. Even when smallpox, diphtheria, and other diseases killed thousands at a time, they continued to have faith in the medicine of their traditional healers.

Social work professor and Blackfoot scholar Betty Bastien, a member of the Piikani First Nation, writes that the Blackfoot, during the fur-trade period, adopted some of the Europeans’ materialistic values. “The relationship with the bison,” she writes, “shifted from a ceremonial and subsistence relationship to one of commercial use.” American demand for buffalo robes fuelled large buffalo kills in the Canadian West early in the nineteenth century. But a bigger threat to maintaining buffalo herds arose in the 1860s when industrialists discovered that buffalo hides provided excellent belts for power-transmission systems. While Native peoples participated in the slaughter of the buffalo, by the 1860s their refusal would have made little difference since white American buffalo hunters were also engaged in the lucrative hunt for buffalo hides.

Initially, the Native peoples who took part in the trade participated mainly as independent providers of furs or pemmican, or as middlemen. The NWC and HBC employed mainly whites to operate their trading posts, to build boats, and to ship furs to Montreal and York Factory, respectively. The NWC used primarily French-Canadian voyageurs, following in the footsteps of the French companies that had been forced out of the fur trade after France was routed from Canada. In 1802, the company employed about fifteen hundred French-Canadians, mainly as seasonal contract workers. In response, the HBC, beginning in the 1770s, hired a large group of experienced boatmen from the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland.

Though the “servants” of the company accepted the right of their masters to rule, they expected their bosses to demonstrate both compassion and common sense. When they felt that instead their supervisors had been cruel and stupid, they occasionally revolted, often as individuals but sometimes collectively. Some forms of protest involved working slowly or inefficiently, deliberately mistranslating what their master was trying
to convey to a Native or vice versa, or, if there seemed few alternatives, deserting their master, though that violated the terms of their contract. In turn, masters often responded with intimidation and threats, and the withholding of alcohol and feasts. Occasionally, despite the tight job market, a company would fire a worker. The NWC, for example, faced with a strike in Rainy Lake in 1794, managed to persuade a number of the workers to return to work. The company then promptly fired the strike leaders.22

The Orkneymen of the HBC collectively demanded higher wages in 1805, and the company, following accepted capitalist principles of the period, fired the instigators and replaced them with another group of workers.23 They turned to Natives, mostly mixed-bloods, whom they paid the existing wage but hired on purely seasonal contracts.24 The lack of Native worker solidarity with the Orkney workers was unsurprising since the Orkneymen, like other Europeans in the region, made no effort to treat Natives as equals or to insist that the company hire them on the same terms as whites.

While the fur trade may have been a partnership of Europeans and Natives, there was never any doubt in the minds of the whites in charge of the HBC about who should rule the roost. The company, as reorganized in 1821, had a clear social class structure, which, in turn, was based on race and gender. At the apex of the company was the governor appointed by the leading shareholders in Britain. Then came the chief factors, who supervised trade districts, and beneath them, the chief traders, who ran the main trading posts. These individuals were incorporated into the company as partners and received, between them, 40 percent of company profits, with the non-working investors receiving the remaining profits. From 1821 to 1833, chief factors earned average profits of 800 pounds a year while the chief traders earned 400 pounds. Clerks, who earned salaries of about 100 pounds a year, were next in the hierarchy, followed by assistant clerks earning half that amount. No First Nations person was ever appointed to a position of clerk or higher. Only a few mixed-bloods with influential fathers broke the racial barrier. In 1821, none of the 25 chief factors of the company were individuals known to have Native blood, while only two chief traders of 28 and 16 clerks of 140 were mixed-blood.25

**NATIVE-EUROPEAN INTERACTION AND THE ORIGINS OF THE MÉTIS**

From the earliest days of interaction between European fur traders and Native peoples, some of the former lived among the latter and, to a degree, adopted their ways. Many European men chose to live with or marry Native women. For Native women, the decision to live with a European man was fraught with dangers, including abandonment. But to some, it offered the opportunity to live a somewhat easier, sedentary life with more material goods. Though the HBC, during its first century, attempted to prevent its servants from having intercourse with Native women and having mixed-race families, the NWC recognized early on that such marriages cemented the bonds between the company and particular Native communities. By the time Alberta Natives were drawn into the fur trade, marriages of European-origin traders and Native women were the rule rather than the exception. Until the churches had established themselves firmly in western Canada, such marriages followed Native customary practices.
Racist sentiment pervaded European-Native relations, including those within the HBC. While marriages in the early period of the trade in western Canada were between European men and First Nations women, a prejudice eventually developed against women who had only “Indian” blood. Mixed-race (Métis) women became the valued marriage partners because they had some white blood, and, according to historian Sylvia Van Kirk, “with the emergence of the mixed-blood wife, the trend was the formation of lasting and devoted marital relationships.”26 Although traders viewed life at the remote trading posts as too rough to appeal to white women, that view changed as communities such as Manitoba’s Red River Settlement developed.
agriculture and expanded their populations and institutions. Once the traders and settlers believed that the West had become “settled” enough to bring white women there, they decided that mixed-race women were not good enough for them. In short, a hardening of racial lines occurred as the fur trade became more established, and those lines became even more rigid as the fur trade gave way to agricultural and urban settlements.27

Whether First Nations or Métis, Native women played an essential, unpaid, and largely unmentioned role in ensuring the profitability of the fur-trade companies. Arthur Ray summarizes some of those contributions: “They produced and repaired essential footwear (mocassins and snowshoes), chopped wood, collected canoe-birch supplies, made canoe sails, provided tanned hides and pack cords, re-dressed furs for shipment to London, grew vegetables, snared hare, and caught and preserved fish.”28

The offspring of marriages of European men and Native women sometimes found a home in the First Nations societies of their mothers, and a few integrated themselves, with many difficulties, into the European societies of their fathers. Many, however, viewed themselves as a distinct people because they had ties as individuals to two very different social groups. The French-speaking Métis — who had served as boatmen, guides, and interpreters for the French as they ventured west of Quebec and served similar roles for the North West Company — developed their own clothes, Red River carts for the buffalo hunt, and their own language, a mix of Cree and French, which they called michif. While they contracted their labour to the fur-trading companies, the limited careers that the companies offered them encouraged them to remain freelancers, copying the Plains Natives in filling many of their subsistence needs with the buffalo. The Métis began to see themselves as a “nation” when the first leaders of the Red River Settlement, a settlement associated with the HBC’s efforts to provision their posts more cheaply, attempted to interfere with their access to buffalo.29 Though their resistance to the settlers was encouraged by the NWC rivals of the HBC, the Métis acted in their own rather than company interests as they challenged the rights of the settlers to limit Métis livelihoods. In 1816, a standoff at Seven Oaks, an area now part of the City of Winnipeg, resulted in the Métis forcing the dispersal of the first settlement in the area. Though outnumbered three to one, the Métis lost only one of their warriors while the HBC forces lost twenty-one.30

The sense of Métis nationhood strengthened in the 1840s when the HBC tried to enforce its monopoly over furs and pemmican, and to control supplies and prices for both by penalizing Métis and First Nations people who traded with free traders. A showdown came in 1849, when the HBC — which ran everything in the Red River Colony, including the courts — jailed and charged four Métis with illegal trading. As three hundred armed Métis gathered outside the company court, Guillaume Sayer, the first of the four to be tried, pleaded guilty but argued that he had traded with a relative and believed that he was exercising his customary rights. The jury recommended clemency and the judge, concerned about potential violence, imposed no sentence. The other three prisoners were released without a trial. The Métis interpreted these events as a vindication of their right to trade with whom they
pleased, and the HBC subsequently made few efforts to prove them wrong.31

English-speaking mixed-bloods often intermarried with the Métis, but also often formed communities separate from the Métis as well as from their English fathers and First Nations mothers. Bungi, the mix of English, Gaelic, and Cree spoken by this group of mixed-bloods, marked them off from other groups. These communities often felt caught in the middle of European-Métis clashes since English-speaking mixed-bloods seemed pulled between identification with other English-speaking people versus other mixed-bloods.32

Native (First Nations and Métis) people formed an important part of the working class in the fur trade. We have already noted the significant unpaid contributions of Native wives to the functioning of trading posts and the trade more broadly. Native men — apart from being free-enterprising providers of furs and pemmican, for which they received a negotiated rate per pound rather than a wage — also did many of the “grunt” jobs within the fur-trading companies. Foreshadowing the future of capitalism in Alberta from that time to the present day, only a small group of workers, almost exclusively white, had any job security. Clerks and surgeons, and a small group of tradespeople had contracts of three to five years, which were often renewed; this provided guaranteed wages for set periods. But boatmen, guides, interpreters, and canoe builders, who over time were increasingly mainly Native, had only seasonal contracts and could be barred from future contracts if they proved militant.

That did not always prevent militancy, however. In the 1850s, Native transport workers, led by Métis, organized a number of mutinies in an effort to force the HBC to provide better working conditions. While wages were at issue, more important demands were that the company provide sturdier, easier-to-navigate boats, along with smaller loads and better food on the boats. The boatmen were tired of dealing with dangerous currents in worn-out, overloaded boats. The company, unwilling to yield to such demands but aware that it could not easily replace its Native workforce, gradually switched to steam-powered boats to reduce the number of transport workers required.33

**THE SETTLEMENT ERA**

The Natives’ successes as both entrepreneurs and workers contributed to a growing sense in the Hudson’s Bay Company by the early 1860s that fur trading in western Canada had become unprofitable. Demand for the company’s product had fallen, and many areas previously rich in furs had been tapped out. Showing little concern for the fate of its Native “partners,” this capitalist enterprise sold out in 1863 to new London financial owners, who focused not on the fur trade but on the company’s alleged control of western Canada’s land base. Based on the original charter and Britain’s colonial view that Aboriginals had no legal control over land except for partial control over lands that Britain reserved for their use, the HBC became a land speculation machine first and a fur-trading operation a distant second.34

The HBC view of western Canada was shared by the Fathers of Confederation, mainly capitalists in Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic colonies who viewed the Canada that they created as a potential commercial giant. They wanted it to follow the US model in which the original states in the east captured lands further
west from Natives and Mexicans alike and turned them into successful commercial farming areas that became the market for the goods produced by eastern manufacturers. In this model, traditional Native societies based on hunting, trapping, and fishing stood in the way of social progress.35

In 1869, the HBC ceded political control over the lands that it had been granted by Britain one year short of two centuries earlier. The Government of Canada paid the company 300,000 pounds (about 1.5 million dollars) for its land, the same price that the HBC owners had paid to buy the company in 1863. But more

FIG 2-5 Buffalo bones awaiting shipment at Medicine Hat, 1885. Bones were gathered then loaded onto railroad cars and shipped to factories in the east. There, the bones were ground and used in refining sugar or for fertilizer. Provincial Archives of Alberta, B10102.
FIG 2-6 The 1870 execution of Thomas Scott by the provisional government of Louis Riel in the Red River colony, as depicted in a painting done in 1879. Known for his hostility to the Métis, Scott was charged with plotting against Riel’s government. Glenbow Archives, NA-20-8.
importantly, the government, as part of the bargain, gave the HBC control over 5 percent of Rupert’s Land, which, after the building of the CPR, would yield the HBC a profit of almost 200 million dollars. The Government of Canada — maintaining the fiction that the Government of Britain, not the people who had lived in western Canada for thirteen thousand years, was the owner — did not at the time offer the First Peoples one penny for their lands.

The Canadian government also ignored the concerns of the Métis and English-speaking mixed-bloods that they receive assurances of title to lands that they farmed: at that time, they had no title since the HBC, although a quasi-government, had followed rather informal rules regarding farms and hunting territories. This resulted in a Métis-led armed resistance in 1869–70 against efforts by Canada to establish its sovereignty in Red River. Though the federal government negotiated with representatives of the provisional government at Red River, led by Louis Riel, and agreed on paper to many of their demands, it subsequently sent a twelve-hundred–man military expedition to take control of the new province of Manitoba until a provincial government was elected. The leader was Colonel Garnet Wolseley, who had already achieved some colonial notoriety for putting down an uprising in India and who would subsequently play similar roles against opponents of British imperialism in southern Africa and Egypt. Murders and beatings of rebellion supporters persuaded many Métis to flee Red River and to establish new settlements in areas of today’s Saskatchewan and Alberta. Riel and other leaders of the provisional government fled the colony.

Efforts to oblige the federal government to furnish the land promised to the Métis in Manitoba in 1870 and to recognize Métis title to lands that they had settled further west, in present-day Alberta and Saskatchewan, came to naught. Euro-Canadian farmers received titles to Red River lands that the Métis regarded as their own, and Métis leaders worried that the same fate would befall them in their new settlements to the west. Unable to persuade the federal government to communicate with them, they brought Louis Riel out of his American

![Fig 2-7 Militia camp near Batoche, in present-day Saskatchewan, during the North-West Resistance of 1885. Provincial Archives of Alberta, A5569.](image-url)
exile and deputized him to pressure Ottawa on their behalf. Since this changed nothing, they began a second armed resistance in 1885, this time in the Northwest. (Until they became provinces in 1905, the area that is today Alberta and Saskatchewan was divided into districts that were administered as parts of the Northwest Territories.) The federal government crushed this resistance, which had been joined by a small number of the First Nations communities in northern Saskatchewan and Alberta. The government also hanged Riel and eight of the First Nations rebel leaders, six Cree and two Assiniboine, and jailed other participants, some of whom died during their imprisonment or just after their release.38
Shortly after the first of the two Métis-led armed resistances, the federal government began to respond to demands from the Plains First Nations for the negotiation of treaties prior to any further European settlement within their lands. Seven treaties were negotiated from 1871 to 1877, covering all of the territory of the southern regions of the eventual Prairie provinces, the areas that the Canadian authorities regarded as having agricultural potential.

The two sides had different agendas in the negotiations. For the federal government, the important objective was to ensure that the Native peoples’ defence of their traditional territories did not stand in the way of plans to create a European commercial agricultural economy and society in what they called western Canada. To ensure the success of such plans, the Natives themselves would have to be assimilated to European culture, and traditional Native societies would disappear. The Natives had a contrasting goal: to preserve their communities and as much as possible of their traditional economic pursuits and culture, while adding agriculture to the economic mix to compensate for the loss of food resources that the thinning of the buffalo population had occasioned.

During treaty negotiations, the spokespersons for Native people emphasized their willingness to share land and resources with the newcomers in return for federal help in making a partial move from a hunting and fishing society to one that included agriculture as well. They wanted their traditional hunting and fishing rights protected. In the case of what became Treaty Six in 1876, the First Nations of central Alberta and Saskatchewan also asked for and received guarantees for a free “medicine chest”: European doctors and medicines to supplement Native doctors and traditional treatments, government aid during famines, and free agricultural implements. Speaking at Fort Carlton, Saskatchewan, Chiefs Mistawasis and Ahtahkakoop emphasized that the Natives and Europeans must agree at one and the same time to share resources and not to interfere with each other’s lifestyles. Chief Sweetgrass at Fort Pitt focused on similar themes.

Though historians often suggest that there was a failure of the two sides to communicate during the negotiations, Euro-Canadian eyewitnesses, including journalists who covered the discussions, claimed that the government commissioners responded to the Native side by suggesting that the government was also interested in sharing resources, not in dispossessing Aboriginal peoples. While the government viewed the whole purpose of treaties as the surrender of most Native lands, the negotiators were careful to avoid talk of land surrenders and emphasized instead that the government did not need all the land for white settlers and that there would be plenty of land left over for Natives to carry on their traditional economy. Referring to Treaty Six negotiations, historian Sheldon Krasowski observes that the negotiators failed to raise the issue of land surrenders: “the eyewitness accounts also revealed that the treaty commissioners neglected to mention the surrender clause during the discussions, which was also the case at Treaties Three, Four and Five.”

Some historians, noting the discrepancies between what the Aboriginal negotiators reported regarding the contents of discussions and what the commissioners wrote down, give the latter the benefit of the doubt, claiming that a wide cultural gulf made it impossible for the two sides to understand one another. Krasowski,
From the Aboriginal point of view, the notion of ownership and surrender of lands held little meaning since the Creator was the only owner of lands; communities simply contracted with the Creator to make use in a given area of what the Creator had granted them, in return for which they would behave in a way that demonstrated their respect for the Creator’s gifts. In a practical sense, they wished to avoid copying their fellow First Nations to the south in the United States in going to war with a ruthless enemy who would despoil them of their lands. While they were not keen on hordes of white agricultural settlers becoming established on their traditional territories, they hoped that at worst, the treaties would give them some state protection from these settlers, and at best, they would provide for a kind of co-management of the lands and resources of the region. Important leaders of the Cree, such as Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) lobbied the Department of Indian Affairs for large reserves in which the Native peoples would not be surrounded by European settlers. But Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney persisted with plans to have small reserves scattered throughout the western provinces to prevent Natives having a geographical homeland and a base for resisting assimilation and marginalization.

The Natives’ disappointment began almost immediately after signing the treaties. The government never made a serious effort to live up to the letter of the treaties, much less the spirit of the negotiations. It ignored its pledge in Treaty Six to fill the nutritional gap during lean times when famine struck in the winter of 1883–84; it cut back on rations for Native peoples as a government cost-cutting measure, saving its money instead to generously subsidize the private owners who

however, suggests, based on both the reports of the Natives involved in negotiations and the European eyewitness reports, that “during the treaty making period, Euro-Canadians understood the expectations of Indigenous peoples in the treaty relationship.” In plain English, the commissioners deliberately misled their Native counterparts and produced treaties that they understood very well did not replicate the agreements that they had reached with the First Nations in the actual negotiations.
were building the CPR; and it looked aside as Indian agents, farm instructors, and civilians mistreated Native peoples in ways that violated treaty understandings.\textsuperscript{44} The attitude to Native starvation was similar to the British attitude that had permitted a million Irish people to die during the Great Famine of 1845 to 1852.\textsuperscript{45} Though in both cases, the precarious circumstances of the people who were dying had largely been created by imperialist dispossession of their land base, the imperial power argued that the people’s inherent laziness was the cause. The agent-general of Indian Affairs made clear that this inverted view of reality was at the base of the government’s relief policy: “So long as they can rely, or believe they can rely, on any source whatever for their food they make no effort to support themselves. We have to guard against this, and the only way to guard against it is by being rigid, even stingy in the distribution of food, and require absolute proof of starvation before distributing it.”\textsuperscript{46} So, contrary to treaty provisions, there was no general distribution of food during famines in Treaty Six territories, and rations were distributed only for labourers on Indian Agency farms. But the farms provided fewer jobs than were needed to meet the demand of starving Aboriginal peoples, and farm labourers were paid with rations that were too small to feed large families.\textsuperscript{47}

From the government’s point of view, regardless of what lies their representatives might have told to get them, they had the signatures of Native leaders guaranteeing that Native peoples would not interfere with Canadian and European immigrants to the West who settled on traditional Native hunting and gathering lands. The government also established the North West Mounted Police in 1873, nominally to protect Aboriginal people from ruthless whites, but in practice to enforce a new status quo to restrict Native peoples’ mobility and to prevent them making demands on the new settlers in their midst.\textsuperscript{48}

Aboriginals’ mobility was further restricted by the provisions of the \textit{Indian Act} of 1876 and various subsequent amendments, as well as by administrative practices. In 1885, for example, the act banned the potlatch, the key ritual of the Pacific Coastal peoples. The next year, the government of John A. Macdonald implemented a passbook system, which required Prairie Natives to receive written permission to travel off reserve. While the pass system was never legislated, it remained in place until the 1940s, though its enforcement was not always rigorous. It was used to discourage Sun Dances and other Native practices involving First Nations gatherings that united people from many reserves.\textsuperscript{49} In another colonial gesture, Euro-Canadian laws regarding polygamy and divorce were used to call Native marriages into question and to restrict the rights of Native women.\textsuperscript{50}

Perhaps the most damaging interference in Native family lives was the forced attendance of children from reserves at schools well away from the reserves. With roots in earlier efforts by governments in the colonies of what became Canada to impose European languages and cultural values on Native children, the residential school system enforced mandatory attendance of reserve children in the Prairie provinces from the 1870s to 1948. The schools were run by mainstream churches, and staff members punished children who spoke their own language and taught them not only that traditional Native religions were sinful but that they must embrace Christianity if they wanted to go to heaven when
they died. Most died quite young. In the early years, the underfunded schools made the children perform hard physical labour, fed them poorly, and did little to provide proper sanitation. The medical superintendent for the Department of Indian Affairs, which was responsible for the schools, reported that for the years between 1894 and 1908, 30 to 60 percent of all children who had been placed in a residential school died within five years of first attending. While the department suppressed the report, Native parents had become aware of the high mortality rate associated with their children being kidnapped by the faraway schools and

FIG 2.10  Cree students, suitably clad in European-style clothing, pictured with their Methodist Church teacher at Hobbema, Alberta, ca. 1890s. Glenbow Archives, NA-682-5.
frequently resisted having their children taken away from them. But Indian agents often used the pass system as a way of forcing recalcitrant parents to send their children to residential schools. They would deny uncooperative parents a pass allowing them to hunt off reserve, without which the family might starve.51

The state’s desire to assimilate Native children to Christian values was not accompanied by a belief that Natives should have the same economic rights as other western Canadians, any more than it was by a willingness to grant them human rights. White settlers who moved to the Canadian West, cleared ten acres of land, and built a home within three years received 160 acres of land and therefore the ability to farm commercially. But Native families on reserves received only ten acres of land. Whereas the government was convinced that white “pioneers” could become part of the commercial economy that would make western Canada the linchpin of economic development for the entire country, Natives were regarded as people who could never do more than become subsistence farmers. So not only were they given smaller plots of land, but the government also resisted making good on promises, laid out in the treaties, of material aid intended to help Native peoples become successful farmers, arguing that Natives were not serious about farming. The Natives responded by assuring the government that they were serious but could not get started without seed or farm implements.52

In short, Native peoples, in the government’s view, were to become the equivalent of peasant farmers in Europe who had only enough land to grow what their families needed to subsist. This also meant that Natives, short of income and wanting to supplement it, would be conveniently available to help white farmers who needed help getting their farms operational or harvesting crops.

The unequal treatment of Natives and whites with respect to farming was the most salient characteristic of the division of labour in early western Canada. But as other industries became established in the region and as successful farmers began hiring temporary labour, it became clear that exploitation and class divisions, as well as resistance by oppressed workers and minorities, would mark work life for many years to come in the area that in 1905 became the Province of Alberta.
FIG 3-1  Chinese workers building the CPR main line, 1884.
Library and Archives Canada, c-6686 b.