

Contents

List of Illustrations, Maps, and Tables	vii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xv
Note on Sources	xix
Abbreviations	xxi
1. Introduction	
<i>Sons of the Farm, the Trade, and the Wilderness</i>	I
2. Leaving Home	
<i>Family and Livelihood in French Canada and Beyond</i>	18
3. Rites of Passage and Ritual Moments	
<i>Voyageur Cosmology</i>	52
4. It Is the Paddle That Brings Us	
<i>Voyageurs Working in Canoes</i>	86
5. The Theater of Hegemony	
<i>Masters, Clerks, and Servants</i>	134
6. Rendezvous	
<i>Parties, Tricks, and Friendships</i>	165
7. En D�rouine	
<i>Life at Interior Fur Trade Posts</i>	201
8. Tender Ties, Fluid Monogamy, and Trading Sex	
<i>Voyageurs and Aboriginal Women</i>	247

9. Disengagement

Going Home and Going Free 287

10. Conclusion

Carrying the World 302

Notes 309

Bibliography 371

Index 399

Illustrations, Maps, and Tables

Illustrations

1. Canoe cup viii
2. Engagement for Joseph Defont 37
3. *Ex voto of the Three Castaways* 56
4. “Chanson du Nord” 92
5. Canot du maître 105
6. Canot du nord 109
7. Portaging 125
8. *The Four Stages of Cruelty* 188
9. Fort William N.W. 202

Maps

1. The voyageurs in North America xxii
2. Routes of the pork eaters 96
3. Routes of the northmen 98

Tables

1. Numbers of Voyageurs Working in the Trade 5
2. Annual Wages of Voyageurs 41
3. Crews Traveling Inland from Fort William 107
4. Composition of Posts in the Northwest Interior 208
5. Housing Arrangements at Fort Vermilion, 1809 211
6. Women at Fur Trade Posts 273
7. Voyageurs’ Wives at Fur Trade Posts 274
8. Alexander Henry the Younger’s 1805 Census of the Northwest 275

Preface

The voyageur's canoe cup shown in figure 1 represents a fascinating nexus of values held by French Canadian voyageurs who worked in the fur trade as paddlers and laborers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Voyageurs carried cups, secured with string to their belts or sashes, to easily quench their thirst during their arduous trips along rivers, streams, portages, and lakes. Carved out of wood into the shape of a turtle shell with the name "Pierre Anthoine" engraved on the bottom, this particular cup shows how voyageurs' identities blended influences of their French Canadian homes in the St. Lawrence valley with Aboriginal worlds they encountered in the continental interior. The turtle shell is a common symbol of the earth among Algonquian-speakers and Iroquoian-speakers. Many origin stories speak of one or more people falling from the sky onto the back of a turtle in a primordial sea, and various animals diving to the bottom of the sea for soil to place on the turtle's back to create land. A naked man, serving as the cup handle, appears to be holding up the land or earth. This symbol is reminiscent of the famous Greek tale of Atlas, Titan leader and ancestor of the Trojans, condemned by Zeus to hold up the heavens. Although trapped in pressing servitude, Atlas is a symbol of male strength and recognized as the god of daring thoughts. The naked figure may also represent the idea that voyageurs had to lug the world around with them while they worked as porters in the fur trade. What looks like a wild boar is engraved above the name on the bottom of the cup. Boars were indigenous to the forests and grasslands of Europe and the Mediterranean countries and were the ancestors of domesticated pigs. In medieval and early modern Europe, wild boars were hunted both for their meat, considered a delicacy, and to mitigate the

damage they cause to crops and forests. In Greek, Roman, and Celtic traditions, a boar represented power, ferocity, and strength. One of the twelve labors of Hercules was hunting a wild boar. The boar was a common charge in both English and French heraldry. Although pigs were brought to North America by the earliest colonists, wild boars did not become widespread there until the late nineteenth century. It is likely that the carved boar on the canoe cup represented a heraldic charge brought to the St. Lawrence valley by a French settler. Even if the cup's carver did not belong to the family with the crest, he may have borrowed the image to convey his prowess in hunting. The centrality of the boar on the cup reflects the importance of food to voyageurs, whose occupation demanded intense physical labor. The carver of this cup seemingly felt free to draw widely on symbolic vocabularies from European and Aboriginal traditions, even if he was unaware of the full extent of their connections and meanings. The message embedded in the unique design of this canoe cup suggests that although Pierre-Anthoine felt the burden of his indentured servitude while serving in the trade, he was proud of his occupation, which required strength and bravery. This book explores the complex and varied values, like those reflected in the canoe cup, that developed among French Canadian voyageurs, who formed a mainstay of labor in the fur trade, a major European-based economy in early North America.

My interest in voyageurs began with a desire to contribute to the history of plebeian peoples who did not leave a documentary record yet who had a significant impact on the social and cultural landscape of early North America. French Canadian voyageurs traveled vast distances over the continent and left a significant legacy. French was one of the main languages among Europeans and European Americans in the Montreal fur trade until the mid-nineteenth century, and its presence today is reflected in placenames across the continent. Many voyageurs formed kinship ties with Aboriginal people and settled in the Northwest to raise their families. A large portion of métis people had French ancestry. Dozens of Francophone communities exist in northwestern North America today, and a large part of these descended from fur trade families. Today voyageurs are highly visible as colorful cari-

captures in popular culture and history, but they have rarely been the subject of serious study. The fragmented nature of sources on voyageurs and their subjugation in commercial and political arenas has confined them to the peripheries of most historical narratives. This book places French Canadian voyageurs squarely in the center of historical narrative as serious people with compelling stories and lasting consequences. The book devotes considerable attention to Aboriginal and mixed-blood, or *métis*, peoples, but only in the context of their relationship to French Canadian voyageurs.

Several key terms used extensively throughout the book—*voyageurs*, *freemen*, *bourgeois*, *métis*, *pays d'en haut*, and *Aboriginal*—require some clarification. In its most general sense, the term *voyageur* has referred to travelers, to contracted servants (*engagés*), or to small-scale independent fur traders, who worked alone or in small groups, with some financial backing from merchants. I use the criteria of labor status to distinguish these categories. Thus in this book the term *voyageur* refers to *engagés*, servants, and workers. Independent traders, including those who traded illegally without licenses, are designated as *coureurs de bois*. *Freemen* refers to former voyageurs who chose to go on living in the *pays d'en haut* independently, relying on a variety of means to survive, including trading, trapping, hunting, fishing, and engaging in short labor contracts with fur trading companies. After the end of the Seven Years' War (also known as the French and Indian War) in 1763, the fur trade operating out of Montreal was reorganized under the direction of Scottish, English, American, and a few French Canadian managers. These men, who included company partners, those in charge of districts, and the occasional senior clerk, called themselves *bourgeois*. One bourgeois, Alexander Ross, suggested that the term originated with the voyageurs themselves and was a holdover from the New France fur trade. Partnerships of bourgeois hired voyageurs mainly from parishes around Montreal and Trois-Rivières. Along with French Canadians, Iroquoian men from Kahnawake were hired to work as voyageurs in the trade, but their numbers never reached beyond 10 percent of the total servants. Their experiences working in the trade were distinct from those of French Canadian men, and I have not explored them in this book. This book refers to *métis* as people who are descended from

both Aboriginal and European ancestors, and to Métis as a specific ethnic identity that emerged around the Great Lakes in the seventeenth century. It was often not easy to distinguish between French Canadian and métis voyageurs (the sons of European traders and Aboriginal women). By the early nineteenth century, métis voyageurs came to occupy a significant place in the fur trade labor pool. Their unique heritage and cultural development, especially where Métis was recognized as a distinct ethnicity, merit close and dedicated study, which is beyond the scope of this project.

Literally translated as “the country up there,” or “upper country,” the term *pays d'en haut* referred to areas “upriver” where French speakers from the St. Lawrence valley trapped and traded furs. In the early years of New France, the term referred to the area north of the St. Lawrence River, in present-day Quebec, and west of Montreal, in present-day Ontario. By the late seventeenth century, the term came to be widely used for the fur-trading territory mainly around the Great Lakes. After the mid-eighteenth century, the boundaries of the *pays d'en haut* moved farther west and north, following the reaches of the fur trade to the prairies around the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Assiniboine rivers; to the northern parkland along the Saskatchewan River; and even to the subarctic around Lake Athabasca. In this book the term is used to designate any area where voyageurs were sent to trade and carry goods.

Because there is no universal term to refer to indigenous peoples living in North America, the book employs *Aboriginal*, *Aboriginal peoples*, and *Indians* in hopes of appealing to the broadest audience and to minimize confusion. The American terms *American Indians* and *Native Americans* are cumbersome and confusing to many non-Americans, especially when they refer to indigenous peoples living outside the current borders of the United States. Likewise, the Canadian term *Native peoples* may confuse Americans who refer to those born in the United States as Natives. The popular term *First Nations* implies a European sense of nations that is not easily translated to Aboriginal identities. I am uncomfortable with *First peoples* because it seems imprecise, and with *Amerindians* because its usage is not widespread among English speakers. The term *Aboriginal* is clear, precise, and wide-

spread, and despite its colonial baggage, the term *Indian* works well in this book because of its common usage in the historic sources and its long history in North America.

Abbreviations of names have been silently expanded, such as “Frs” to “François” and “Antne” to “Antoine.”

I. Introduction

Sons of the Farm, the Trade, and the Wilderness

And as it may be interesting to the reader to know something of the character of these super-annuated sons of the wilderness, we shall sketch them.¹

Stereotypes

In his 1855 book, *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, trader Alexander Ross used these words to introduce a section describing French Canadian voyageurs and, in so doing, helped initiate a long history of stereotyping. Voyageurs are idealized and romanticized in North American history and popular culture. In the northern United States, they figure alongside rugged mountain men and rough-hewn farmers as hardy men who conquered the wilderness and settled the frontier. In Canada voyageurs occupy a central place in the mythology of nation building; by being friends of Aboriginal peoples and learning the skills necessary to thrive in the wilderness, they opened the way for later settlers. In both countries pictures of voyageurs adorn the labels on beer bottles, the sides of U-Haul vans, and advertisements for canoe vendors, summer camps, and wilderness tourism. Winter festivals in Manitoba and Minnesota commemorate them. Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota is “named for the . . . French-Canadian canoe-men who traveled these waters in their birch-bark canoes from the Great Lakes to the interior of the western United States and Canada.”² A major Canadian bus company goes by the name of Voyageur Corporation.³

The image of the voyageur evokes ruggedness, *joie de vivre*, and the ability to transport goods quickly and efficiently. The popular Canadian writer

Peter C. Newman describes voyageurs as “a remarkable ragbag of magnificent river rats” and “cockleshell heroes on seas of sweet water,” who held together a fur trade empire with their raw muscle. Surpassing even his own usual rhetorical excesses, Newman declares, in a series of vivid and inconsistent tropes,

Unsung, unlettered and uncouth, the early fur-trade voyageurs gave substance to the unformed notion of Canada as a transcontinental state. . . . Their eighteen-hour paddling days were more wretched than many men then or now could survive. They were . . . galley slaves, and their only reward was defiant pride in their own courage and endurance. Because they could boast of their exploits to no one but themselves, the voyageurs, like a wild and worn-out professional hockey team perpetually on the road, had to concoct their own sustaining myths. No voyageur ever reported meeting a small bear, a tame moose or a wolf that wasn't snarling with blood-lust.⁴

Even in more erudite venues, voyageurs were both idolized and simplified. Grace Lee Nute's *Voyageur* (1931) opens with the elegy, “His canoe has long since vanished from the northern waters; his red cap is seen no more, a bright spot against the blue of Lake Superior; his sprightly French conversation, punctuated with inimitable gesture, his exaggerated courtesy, his incurable romanticism, his songs, and his superstitions are gone.”⁵ Harold Adams Innis, the grandfather of fur trade and Canadian economic history, remarked in *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930) that the work of the voyageurs opened the path to Canadian confederation.⁶ Like comic-book heroes, voyageurs have a highly visible reputation, building the Canadian nation with their Herculean strength, while singing, laughing, leaping over waterfalls, and paddling faster than speeding arrows.

These representations of voyageurs as merry workhorses have a long history that begins with the writings of their superiors.⁷ In 1815 North West Company clerk Daniel Harmon described the voyageurs he had gotten to know over fifteen years as:

fickle & changeable as the wind, and of a gay and lively disposition. . . . they make Gods of their bellies, yet when necessity obliges them . . . they will endure all the fatigue and misery of hard labour & cold weather &c. for several Days following without much complaining. . . . They are People of not much veracity. . . . Therefore there is little dependence to be placed on what they say and they are much given to pilfering and will even steal when favourable opportunities offer. . . . by flattering their vanities (of which they have not a little) they may be made to go through fire and water.⁸

Who were these brave and untrustworthy men? Why have they received so little attention as ordinary men working in difficult conditions and yet so much attention as colorful caricatures? This book looks past the stereotypes of voyageurs to their lives, world-views, values, and unique situation as fur trade workers navigating the vast distances—physical, social, and cultural—between their homelands and those of the Aboriginal peoples who surrounded them in the continental interior. Fur traders and voyageurs called their new home “Indian Country” or the *pays d’en haut*, meaning the country that lay beyond the St. Lawrence valley.

Silences

Despite their highly visible profile in popular culture and history, voyageurs have received little scholarly attention. The fur trade has been subject to intensive inquiry since Harold Adams Innis’s monumental study *The Fur Trade in Canada*, but the sole monograph devoted to voyageurs was published by Grace Lee Nute in 1931. Fur trade scholars have been exemplary in illuminating the everyday lives of ordinary people in the past by paying close attention to Aboriginal peoples, both men and women.⁹ Yet most major works have focused on elites. Even though the labor system of the fur trade was built largely on indentured servitude, scholars have lumped together French Canadian voyageur servants with their mostly British and American masters, and voyageurs are usually described in only a single paragraph in textbooks of Canadian history.¹⁰ Other groups of European and European Amer-

ican laborers in the fur trade have recently come to the attention of scholars, especially working people in the New France fur trade, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the American Fur Company.¹¹ Those who have turned their attention to voyageurs have been constrained by the limited information that could be gleaned from their labor contracts, such as their parishes of origin, their numbers, and their economic contributions to New France and Lower Canada. Heather Devine's recent *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family 1660–1900* (2004) situates the importance of voyageurs' occupation within family and ethnic contexts. Yet, the world of voyageurs has remained shrouded in mystery.¹²

The voyageurs were the “proletarians” of the Montreal fur trade from the 1680s until the 1870s. As indentured servants, voyageurs transported—primarily by canoe—vast quantities of furs and goods between Montreal and posts in the far western and northern reaches of North America and traded with many different Aboriginal people, primarily in Aboriginal lodges and hunting camps. At their peak in the decade before 1821, up to three thousand French Canadian servants worked in the trade at any given moment. It is impossible to measure their precise numbers because their contracts signed in Montreal have not all survived, nor were contracts made in the pays d'en haut collected in a systematic manner. Based on signed contracts, Gratién Allaire calculated a steady climb in the number of engagements issued to workers in the fur trade between 1701 and 1745, peaking at 380 in 1738.¹³ This number represents between one-third and one-fifth of all men working in the trade, because their engagements lasted three to five years. Table 1 lists some estimates of numbers of voyageurs working in the trade after the 1763 conquest.

The estimates listed in this chart are problematic for a number of reasons and are probably on the low side. Aside from Heriot, the commentators do not specify whether they are referring only to French Canadian servants from the St. Lawrence valley, or whether they are also including Iroquois from Kahnawake (the Sault St. Louis Christian reserve just outside Montreal), métis born in the pays d'en haut, or Aboriginal people indentured at the interior posts.¹⁴ The reported estimates probably only refer to one com-

Table I. Numbers of Voyageurs Working in the Trade

Year	Number	Commentary	Source
1784	500 voyageurs	“In 1784 the NWC employed 500 men in the service, whom they divided into two equal sets. The first set of 250 men transported goods from Montreal to the administrative center at western tip of Lake Superior in canoes capable of carrying about four tonnes, requiring eight to ten men to operate. The other set of 250 men transported goods from Lake Superior to the posts in the interior country, some as far as 3,000 miles distant.”	Letter of Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher to General Haldimand, October 4, 1784, in Wallace, <i>Documents</i> 73–74.
1790s	1,150 voyageurs	“The number of people usually employed in the north-west trade, and in the pay of the company, amounts, exclusive of savages, to 1,270 or 1,280 men, 30 of whom are clerks, 71 interpreters and under clerks, 1,120 are canoe-men, and 35 are guides.”	Heriot, <i>Travels through the Canadas</i> , 107.
1801	1,120 voyageurs	In his brief 1801 history of the fur trade, Alexander Mackenzie asserted that usually the NWC employed in one year 50 clerks, 71 interpreters and clerks, 1,120 canoe-men, and 35 guides. Of these, 5 clerks, 18 guides, and 350 canoe-men worked on the Great Lakes run.	Mackenzie, “General,” 33.
1802	1,500 voyageurs	Simon McTavish reported approximately 1,500 French Canadian servants working for the NWC.	London, PRO, Board of Trade Papers, Lt. Governor Milnes to Hobart, Oct. 30, 1802, List of Depts in the NWC supplied by McTavish, Frobisher & Co.
1816	2,000 voyageurs	“The number of voyageurs in the service of the North-West Company cannot be less than 2,000.”	T. Douglas, <i>Sketch of the British Fur Trade</i> , 39.

pany working out of Montreal (the largest was the NWC). The estimates do not specify whether they refer to the number of contracts signed in one year, or whether they take into consideration the numbers of voyageurs in the middle of their contracts. They omit informal contracts made at interior trading posts (to the best of my knowledge bourgeois did not keep a clear record of these cases). The Montreal companies did not have the same tradition of meticulous recordkeeping as did the HBC. Many partnerships with limited life spans did not preserve their records, even though large collections of voyageur contracts can be found in the archival collections of Canadian notaries.¹⁵ My estimate of three thousand voyageurs working in the trade at one time is a conservative approximation based on reported numbers and speculations about unreported numbers.

Voyageurs were primarily nonliterate and left few records. It is difficult to uncover their lives and voices. Only one document authored by a voyageur is presently known. John Mongle, a voyageur from the parish of Maskinongé, wrote to his wife in 1830 to tell her that he missed her. The quality of the letter's penmanship and the absence of any other writing by Mongle suggest that he had the help of a clerk. Sixteen letters written by voyageurs' families and friends to them help to portray the strains of families pulled apart when voyageurs entered the service. Voyageurs' voices sometimes also speak in court cases in which they were plaintiffs, defendants, or witnesses; and through their engagements (labor contracts), which outlined the terms of their service. One biography of a voyageur, Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, written by L'abbé Georges Dugas and published seventy years after Charbonneau retired from the service, also provides insight into voyageurs' world-views.

One of the most useful surviving sources are the writings of the literate members of the fur trade, primarily the clerks and the bourgeois, who left post journals, letters, memoirs, and published accounts of their working experiences (see the Note on Sources for a full description). Some long passages quote voyageurs; other passages extensively describe their attitudes, customs, and rituals. In addition, northern explorers passing through the

fur trade social world produced a wealth of surprisingly detailed and nuanced reflections on voyageurs.

Yet viewing voyageurs through the eyes of these others generates a host of methodological problems. These texts contain layers of multiple meanings and multiple perspectives. We must “read beyond the words” in these written sources and take up the challenge to see beyond their biases.¹⁶ Without these records, historians would have few and narrow views of voyageurs.

I use the term *bourgeois* loosely to refer to all men who were not laborers, but the literate masters of the fur trade were not a cohesive, homogenous group by any means. They ranged from clerks to partners and shareholders, with different ethnic backgrounds, salaries, and status, but the men tended to form similar assumptions about social hierarchy, gender, race, and age. They all had a vested interest in making the trade profitable and in viewing voyageurs as subordinates. Bourgeois cast voyageurs as “other” in their efforts to construct themselves as serious, industrious, and successful men. The representations of voyageurs varied in different contexts. When describing their adventures in the wild and harsh Northwest, bourgeois portrayed voyageurs as part of the exotic landscape, as a source of additional tribulation and a test of their power and patience. Voyageurs added to the colorful and dangerous background of bourgeois adventures, as recounted, for example, in the elite setting of the Beaver Club in Montreal, open to bourgeois who had spent at least one winter west of Lake Superior.¹⁷ However, in commercial contexts, where the bourgeois reported on their success in the fur trade, they wrote about voyageurs’ great strength, ability, and suitability to fur trade work, emphasizing their obedience and loyalty. Bourgeois Alexander Mackenzie remarked in his general history of the fur trade (1801), “[Voyageurs] always show the greatest respect to their employers, who are [comparatively but few in number, and beyond the aid of any legal power to enforce due obedience. In short, a degree of subordination can only be maintained by the good opinion these men entertain of their employers which has been uniformly the case, since the trade has been formed and conducted on a regular system.]”¹⁸ In this commercial context, Mackenzie portrayed the workers as loyal and hardworking in order to bolster

the sense of success in trade and the authority and might of the bourgeois. One strategy to penetrate the biases in the bourgeois writings is to understand that the varying contexts in which bourgeois described voyageurs determined how they represented them.

A second strategy in overcoming the bias in the written record is to read widely in the writings of the bourgeois to discern broad patterns. “Repeating evidence” or incidents and behaviors that emerge frequently in a broad array of bourgeois writings reflect both widespread patterns and practices that were thought to be remarkable. At the interior posts the bourgeois repeatedly remarked on every animal that was killed by their servants, which reveals concerns about securing food but also that voyageurs spent much of their time hunting. Determining the variety of incidents and behaviors reflects the edges of “permissibility” in voyageur culture or the widest range of acceptable behaviors, rather than reflecting a “norm.” Thus, when the bourgeois wrote of voyageurs bullying or playing cruel tricks on one another, these were probably not common occurrences but reflect fractures in relationships and acceptable means of expressing tensions. Voyageur behavior can also be determined from a few particularly observant bourgeois and clerks who wrote much about them. General behavior can be inferred from specific instances described in great detail.

A third strategy in overcoming the difficulty in fur trade sources is to “read against their grain,” or to read around the overt intentions of the bourgeois. Fur trade sources contain many voices and perspectives, but some are more difficult than others to hear. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of *heteroglossia* has aided scholars in hearing a multitude of intentions and perspectives within the writing of a single person.¹⁹ In *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, which uses inquisitorial records to discover information about the world-views of peasants, Carlo Ginzburg commented that “[w]hile reading the inquisitorial trials, [he] often felt as if [he] was looking over the judges’ shoulders, dogging their footsteps, hoping . . . that the alleged offenders would be talkative about their beliefs.”²⁰ The passage from Daniel Harmon quoted earlier in this chapter portrays voyageurs as thoughtless and childlike “others” who were guided by the base lusts of their bellies,

loins, passions, and vanities. Yet Harmon's colored view of the voyageurs sometimes contained a glint or glimmer of a voyageur voice. He notes that voyageurs worked hard in difficult circumstances, valued generosity, and cared about "faire L'Homme," or making the man. Harmon laments, as an Anglophone, that he often felt alienated and alone, but that even if he could have spoken French fluently, "what conversation would an illiterate ignorant Canadian be able to keep up. All of their chat [was] about Horses, Dogs, Canoes and Women, and strong Men who can fight a good battle."²¹ Harmon's dismissal of voyageurs in fact illuminated their interest in dogs, canoes, women, wrestling, and racing. Incidental descriptions of voyageurs' activities, rather than the bourgeois' moral preaching about them, can be very revealing. A bourgeois might have casually mentioned that his crew canoed for twenty-five songs or five pipes. His intention was to record the distance the crew traveled, but he also disclosed that distances were measured by voyageurs' work rituals.

A fourth strategy for reading beyond the words of the bourgeois is to unpack the meaning in voyageur rituals. Rituals were often described by bourgeois in tones of amusement or derision, but their "texts" offer valuable readings of the mental world of the voyageurs. Rituals produced and maintained community solidarity and thus were key to group solidarity.²² Celebrations in Montreal and at fur trade posts during the departures and arrivals of trading brigades were not simply quaint and sentimental customs. Their descriptions convey the importance of the voyageurs to their families and fellow workers, an acknowledgment of the danger during voyages, and markers of specific social worlds.

The sources are so fragmentary that it is rare to find much commentary about voyageurs at any one time and place. Because voyageurs were a mobile workforce, covering a vast area in the Northwest, and because northern fur trade posts were usually temporary and frequently moved, no large community of voyageurs could be found in any one area for an extended period of time. To capture the fluid and far-flung character of voyageurs' lives, I have drawn widely from the many temporary post journals, correspondence, and travel narratives of the constantly moving bourgeois as well the chronicles

of other travelers. I have hoped to glimpse their broad contours by casting my net as widely as possible and by illuminating the lives of some individuals that appear in detail in the documentary record.

Canoes, Horses, Dogs, Courage, Risk, Women, and Freedom

In 1855 former NWC clerk Alexander Ross wrote about a group of aged voyageurs who had worked most of their lives in the fur trade and whom he hired to take him from Norway House to the Red River colony. This group of “sons of the wilderness,” as Ross called them, was talkative, high-spirited, independent, and had long yarns to tell about their lives. The eldest voyageur, who acted as the leader of his crew, shared with Ross some reflections on his life, which Ross tried to recount in the voyageur’s own words. He bragged that he had been in Indian country for forty-two years. Although he was old, he could do anything requested of him: steer, row, or sail, proclaiming that he had been “brought up to voyage.” For twenty-four years he was a “light canoe-man” and hardly slept, easily paddling for fifty songs a day. He announced that no portage was too long for him, and the end of his canoe never touched the ground. He saved the lives of his bourgeois and was always the favorite, because he never paused at rapids or even waterfalls, claiming “No water, no weather, ever stopped the paddle or the song.” This aged voyageur also bragged about other accomplishments: he had had twelve wives, fifty horses, and six running dogs. He claimed:

“No Bourgeois had better-dressed wives than I; no Indian chief finer horses; no white man better-harnessed or swifter dogs. I beat all Indians at the race, and no white man ever passed me in the chase. I wanted for nothing; and I spent all my earnings in the enjoyment of pleasure. Five hundred pounds, twice told, have passed through my hands; although now I have not a spare shirt to my back, nor a penny to buy one. Yet, were I young again, I should glory in commencing the same career again. . . . There is no life so happy as a voyageur’s life; none so independent; no place where a man enjoys so much variety and freedom as in Indian country.”²³