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# 1. Cultures of Exchange in a North Atlantic World

SUSAN SLEEPER-SMITH

The fur trade first emerged in a region where geography limited agricultural self-sufficiency and encouraged indigenous people to engage in a mutually negotiated exchange of furs for trade goods. The trade in peltry served a curiously modern function, evolving as part of a credit economy fueled by supply and demand. Indians exercised a precocious consumerism that was well adapted to the “flexible specialization” that characterized early modern production in Europe, where goods could be refined or invented to serve the needs of the consumer. Because the fur trade developed at a time when no one European market could process the quantity of furs that were harvested, furs had a multiplier effect on the economies of Europe’s port cities. For instance, many of the furs that were shipped to La Rochelle in France were reserved for immediate re-export to other ports, such as Amsterdam. The Dutch also reserved and reexported beaver pelts to Narva, where they were processed and then returned to Amsterdam and La Rochelle. Eventually, the pelts were transformed into beaver hats to meet the demands of the growing consumer revolution. The hats were then circulated as finished products to all of Europe, and they were simultaneously shipped to the Caribbean and the Americas. In Europe, well-worn beaver hats were repaired by the French and were then exchanged by both the Spanish and Portuguese for slaves in Africa.

Furs from North America’s interior landscape became enmeshed in a spider web of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century exchange processes. Indians continued to control the landscape where the richest peltry was harvested, and their demand for specific goods

determined what Europe produced for North American exchange. For two centuries, from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, indigenous demand for specific types of finished goods, especially cloth, influenced the goods that were being produced for shipment to North America.

This research explores the exchange processes that came to characterize the North Atlantic commerce in furs. While historians most frequently associate the Spanish domination of South America as the more financially lucrative colonial domain, it was the economically valuable commodities, which were extracted from the Gulf of St. Lawrence, that dominated early resource extraction: fish, whale oil, and furs. Despite the attention that Columbus brought to the Caribbean, by the end of the sixteenth century North Atlantic commercial activity exceeded, in volume and value, that of the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>1</sup>

Indians recognized that Europeans were anxious to acquire furs, resources that were initially harvested in limited quantity. Indians hunted and processed peltry, a skill that few Europeans would successfully acquire. Indians demanded specific types of trade goods and Europeans began manufacturing the types of goods that met those demands. Too frequently we have failed to appreciate the agency of the indigenous consumer. In the United States Indians have been stereotypically obscured by myths of decline and demise, agency has been masked by dependency, and national histories have denied Indian involvement in world histories, especially that of the Atlantic World. This problem is further complicated by confining the fur trade to the parameters of early national history in both the United States and Canada. In the United States the fur trade remains confined to the colonial period and stereotypical of indigenous demise. In Canada the fur trade plays an extended role, shaping “the interplay of economic forces, technology, and geography,” and influencing the outcome of Canadian political history.<sup>2</sup> However, Canadians also view industrial and commercial development as restrained by prolonged involvement in the fur

trade. The scholarly emphasis on the Hudson's Bay Company obscures the expansionary impact the earlier French colonial trade had on the North Atlantic economy.

In both the United States and Canada stereotypical figures dominate the social arena of the fur trade. Both north and south of the border, the fur trade has been mythologized as a masculine landscape, where only the most hardy men survived the rigors of the wilderness. European traders are primarily envisioned as a negative influence, men who transported trade goods, diseases, and alcohol to Indian Country. Indian cultures are concurrently stereotyped as relatively weak, having cultural values and belief systems that were quickly undermined by the intrusion of western goods and the people who conveyed them. Rarely do we see alternative scenarios that involved extended encounter and sustained interaction between Indians and Europeans. Even more rarely do we see this as an Indian-dominated landscape.

Indians are rarely considered as participants in Europe's market economy, other than being its victims. Depictions of European intrusion have mistakenly removed indigenous people from playing significant roles in the emerging Atlantic economy. While disease devastated many eastern coastal villages, there were other numerous villages that moved into trading ascendancy. It was indigenous demand that shaped what Europeans traded, as well as what they produced. Indians harvested highly desirable, universally transportable commodities that brought good returns in Europe. In North America the market for trade goods was much more tenuous because Indians often refused to trade. When goods were priced too high or were of inferior quality, Indians regularly played traders against each other to obtain a greater quantity of goods. Despite European claims to the contrary, Indians were not overwhelmed by the novelty of western goods. Baubles and beads quickly proved to be insufficient to exchange for furs, and for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Indians frequently ignored demands to collect specific types and quantities of furs. Europeans found

themselves controlled by the demands of their Indian customers and frustrated by the inefficient and limited production of the types of manufactured goods that Indians demanded. The natural resources of North America allowed Indians to compete in the emerging transnational Atlantic marketplace. Studied closely, the fur trade reveals how European rivalries, particularly those of the French, English, and Dutch, produced what today we refer to as a seller's market, which encouraged Indian consumers to get what they wanted by playing one country against the other.

This book explores the fur trade as a competitive process that brought Europeans from the coastal regions to the interior of the continent. Each nation established interior trading sites that attempted to nationalize and monopolize the exchange process with Indians. Europeans attempted to establish an advantage over their rivals by moving the fur trade ports from coastal regions to the inland riverways. Each hoped to interrupt the fur supply at its source, and each nation created a series of trading sites in the coastal interior. France drew Indians to the more convenient market space of Montreal, while the Dutch created a fortified market at Fort Orange, now present-day Albany. This research focuses on:

1. how fur trade exchange evolved as part of an expanding trans-Atlantic economy;
2. why the fur trade evolved into a regionalized economic system;
3. how Indians influenced the exchange process;
4. how gender proved an integrative tool that blended the disparate economic systems and provided for indigenous control of the exchange process in the Great Lakes region until the nineteenth century.

### **Islands and River Ports in the Early Exchange Process**

Three cross-oceanic routes dominated the North Atlantic exchange process from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The midoceanic route connected Europe to the Caribbean; the South Atlantic

passage linked it to West Africa and Brazil; and the North Atlantic water route connected it to Newfoundland, Hudson Bay, and the Great Lakes. This last route emerged as initially the most significant because it was the cod fishery and the fur trade of the North Atlantic that produced the greatest sixteenth-century monetary rewards. Over centuries, the cod fishery would retain its initial importance.<sup>3</sup>

It was the ocean's island ports that became the more important geographical features of this emerging Atlantic world. Exchange occurred at these ports: ships from different nations came into port for supplies and there, trade goods could be secured or exchanged while the shipping news circulated. Frequent wars subjected the merchant fleets to seizure and confiscation because no one European country was sufficiently powerful and able to defend all of its ships from piracy. Small coastal islands became important havens for navigating vast oceanic expanses and for the exchange of goods and supplies, which was often illegal. Islands became so important in this early trans-Atlantic world that Madeira, the Azores, and the Cape Verdes possessed "an importance out of all relation to their size and resources." The second geographically important feature of the trade that emerged was the protected bays and coastal riverways of the North American continent, which extended the reach of the ocean into existing networks of indigenous exchange.<sup>4</sup>

Certain resources, such as gold, magnified national rivalries and helped create the borders of empires while other natural resources, particularly fish, found national rivals working the same waterways, adjacent to each other. This trade was dominated by France, England, Spain, and Portugal. These waters were probably first exploited by the Devon fisherman of England's West Country, long before John Cabot's arrival in the fifteenth century. The widespread dissemination of information about Cabot's voyages, which focused on the rich marine resources of the northeastern Atlantic, encouraged the French, Spanish, and Portuguese to invade these North Atlantic fishing grounds. England's prior claims proved

unenforceable.<sup>5</sup> During the 1540s as many as three hundred ships ventured west annually to fish. In 1580 the English pamphleteer Robert Hitchcock estimated that there were five hundred French vessels a year engaged in the trade. This estimate, supported by French archival sources, suggests that the total harvest may have been of the same magnitude as the industry in cod in the early twentieth century. However, from earliest times fisherman returned with furs because this enhanced the personal profitability of these voyages. They traded furs for small European articles such as cloth or ironware. Until the first half of the sixteenth century, furs were an adjunct to fishing.<sup>6</sup>

After 1565 national rivalries dramatically changed the nature of fishing.<sup>7</sup> When Elizabeth I's privateering seadogs attacked Spanish and Portuguese fishing vessels in 1585, Philip of Spain pressured the Basque and Portuguese fishing fleet into joining the Armada in 1588. The defeat of the Spanish Armada signaled the end of Portuguese and Spanish fishermen in the North Atlantic, and England became one of two remaining fishing fleets.<sup>8</sup>

Most frequently colonial historians focus on the process of mainland colony formation and fail to recognize that the multiple islands, protected bays, coastal waterways, and Europe's claims to the offshore islands affected the colonization process. Colonies also became intertwined with indigenous trade networks in complicated ways. The exchange process that took place at Tadoussac, in the protected confines of St. Lawrence Bay, existed long before European arrival. Following the influx of these Europeans as many as twenty thousand Native inhabitants may have seasonally relocated at Tadoussac. The island closest to Tadoussac was Newfoundland, and it was this island that emerged as an important piece of real estate in the oceanic landscape. Once France dominated the trans-Atlantic market for fish, its fleet became almost twice as large as that of the English.<sup>9</sup> The internationally shared waters of the early cod industry were gradually transformed by the size of the French merchant fleet and by French land claims to Newfoundland. France

exerted increased control over Newfoundland's interior shoreline, and this allowed the French to dominate Great Banks fishing. It was the French who fished Newfoundland's southern waters and had access to both Tadoussac and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The natural resource base of Tadoussac was the watershed of the Saguenay River, where hunting was the primary occupation. The Saguenay provided Indians access to the forested areas of the Canadian Shield, where expansive hunting grounds facilitated access to beaver, moose, and deer—items that were important sources of food and clothing. The prime-quality furs came from arctic regions, and it was the preponderance of beaver that transformed the fur trade into a highly valued commodity. Beaver was extinct through much of Europe. Indians used the beaver skin as clothing, piecing together five to eight beaver pelts with moose sinew—with constant wear the long guard hairs dropped out and the pelts became greased, pliable, and the fur became downy.<sup>10</sup>

The Newfoundland coast, especially Acadia, was crucial to the early fur trade, although English officials dismissed Acadia as of limited consequence. In 1680 "An Account of His Majesties Plantations in America" described Acadia as sparsely settled, a place that lacked either "government ecclesiastical or civil" and where a few people "live by catching fish." The English Commissioner of Custom, also dismissed Newfoundland and reasoned that "Newfoundland is not to be taken or accompted a plantation."<sup>11</sup> However, it was Acadia's location that gave the French access to St. Lawrence Bay and its adjacent riverway and provided the pathway to the interior of the continent.

All the coastal lands and islands from Cape Canso to the Bay of Islands were controlled by the French.<sup>12</sup> Although populations were sparse, the French government encouraged the loyalty of the Acadian colonists by developing mercantile policies that favored the Acadians. A royal declaration in 1683 allowed the Company of Acadia to bring its beaver pelts to France without taking them to Quebec and freed them from paying the  $\frac{1}{4}$  duty.<sup>13</sup> By the last years of

the century, a decree of July 20, 1694, upheld the Acadian's special rights to beaver and gave them the right to bring in two thousand pounds of beaver if they paid the 1664 duties.<sup>14</sup> The Acadians were allowed to retain any surplus above two thousand pounds, which could then be reexported. By 1700 they were given the right to transport six thousand pounds of beaver, burdened only by paying the equivalent of the 1664 duties. The Acadians retained the right to export the rest.<sup>15</sup>

The sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Atlantic world was defined by imperial ventures that rested on the control of islands and port cities rather than on land-based empires. An oceanic rivalry among the Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, and Dutch evolved in the sixteenth century and was marked by repeated attacks on islands as political rivals sought greater access to the ports and islands that controlled trade.

The sixteenth century was a period of intermittent warfare for the port cities and islands of the Atlantic world. Virginia sent ships to attack Acadia in 1680. Sir William Phipps forced Port Royal to surrender, carried off the French governor, made the inhabitants swear fealty to William and Mary, and then sailed off leaving a French sergeant in charge. Meanwhile, the English sailed up the St. Lawrence, took Quebec from the French and transported their colonials to England. Subsequently, the French successfully attacked the Scots on Cape Breton while the Spanish overwhelmed Providence Island in the Caribbean.

While Europeans engaged in a continuing contest to control the coastal ports, their success often depended on the specialized knowledge of foreign pilots. Voyages of discovery and the subsequent division of the Americas into imperial domains was guided by a merchant fleet of well-traveled foreigners who attested to the complex of nationalities involved in creating this emerging Atlantic world. An Italian, John Cabot, explored for England while Verazzano, another Italian, sailed for France, and the Englishman Henry Hudson became a Dutch explorer. Specialized knowledge

about uncharted areas in the Americas privileged the pilots and the crews that crossed the Atlantic. It was impossible to navigate these lands without the knowledge of “foreigners” or to travel from one point to another in North America without the assistance of one’s rivals. Simultaneously, nation-based prejudices incited continuing attacks against port cities where “foreign” populations were annihilated or shipped back to Europe. Europeans labeled these Atlantic islands and ports as the legitimate colonies of nation states, but it remained unclear who would exercise legitimate authority over that landscape until the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

### **Furs and Politicized Processes of Exchange**

By the mid-sixteenth century ships were being sent to transport trade goods and retrieve furs, independent of fish. While fish and furs remained staples of North Atlantic commerce, furs became the more contested and desired products. Furs were highly transportable, required no capital investment in either people or land, and possessed a global receptivity both as a raw material and a finished good.

In Europe the introduction of North American peltry created an elaborate and specialized market and increased the interconnectedness of European port cities. In the seventeenth century supplies of beaver began to arrive regularly in Breton and Norman fishing ports, and by 1612 beaver was incorporated into the manufacture of Parisian hats.<sup>17</sup>

France dominated much of the initial fur trade because Jean Colbert, France’s finance minister under Louis XIV, favored the importation of furs. His revenue policies allowed the French to impose import duties on incoming peltry and export duties on the finished product, beaver hats. Mercantilism linked colony and mother country in terms of raw materials, finished products, and recirculated goods. In France the finest peltry became available at reasonable prices, and the expansive supply of raw materials led to the expansion of hat manufacturing. Increased hat production

helped stimulate a revolution in the production of consumer goods, and French hatters became known for producing the best hats in Europe. New sites of production emerged in France's port cities and transformed those spaces into sites of trans-Atlantic commerce. Hats manufactured in La Rochelle circulated throughout Europe; when worn out, they were returned to France for reworking, then recast for export to the Americas and for the Luso-African slave trade.

Colbert's policies created a surplus of furs and led to the reexportation of furs outside France. Furs were often sent to specific countries: white fur went to England where white hats were in demand, while the underside fur of the beaver skins was used in Holland and the backs were sent to Russia. Muscovie beaver that arrived in April and May went directly to Amsterdam or Rotterdam or on commission to Russia. A great flotilla took the furs to Russia.<sup>18</sup> The Dutch quickly monopolized the transporting of beaver pelts to Archangel and Narva, and returned with beaver pelts and beaver wool for distribution to the felters and furriers of western Europe. Amsterdam became the center of a new European trade system, while France remained the primary supply source.<sup>19</sup>

Beaver came in two varieties: coat and parchment. Coat was the more desirable fur, acquired after the pelt had been scraped, greased, and worn as coats by Indians—wear removed the stiff outer guard hairs of the pelt, exposing the softer, velvety undercoat. The *Castor sec*, or parchment beaver, that arrived in the autumn in France was usually sold in the following spring: a portion to the hatmakers of France, a portion to Russia, and a portion, the heavy skins with flat hair, to Germany for the manufacture of sleeves and furs. Felt acquired a variety of uses, even serving as material for armor.<sup>20</sup> Parchment beaver was not worn but was cured by being left in the sun to dry, and then it was traded.<sup>21</sup>

### **The North American Fur Trade**

Sometime between 1600 and 1640, the Dutch, English, Swedes, and French initially struggled to control access to North American

peltry. France and England eventually dominated the exchange process by moving the trade to internal river sites. This simultaneously transferred European rivalries to North America. These rivalries were complicated by a colonizing process in which monarchs depended on their wealthy titled favorites to finance these expansionary adventures.<sup>22</sup> New France, like most of the initial colonies, was organized as a commercial venture and granted as a monopoly to the Sieur de Monts, a powerful Huguenot. Quebec was founded in 1608, and an alliance with the Huron, during the summer of 1609, led Champlain to found Montreal. It was the Huron who became France's major ally and who served as the initial middlemen in the exchange process. They collected furs from the *pays d'en haut* and delivered them to the French. It was the Huron who helped shift the trade from Tadoussac to the newly founded Montreal site.<sup>23</sup> Quebec, Montreal, and Lachine were founded at the narrows of the St. Lawrence River, where the furs were stored, loaded on ships, and transported to France, avoiding the vulnerable Tadoussac location.

The shift to these inland trading sites incited warfare among indigenous people. Indian rivalries were ignited when the French attempted to shift the focus of the trade to the shelter of an interior landscape. The establishment of Lachine and Montreal threatened to lessen both the quantity and quality of furs being shipped to the Dutch at Fort Albany. By 1626 the Dutch had provided their Iroquois allies with firearms, and in 1649 the Iroquois launched a devastating attack on the Huron that destroyed most of their villages and claimed hundreds of lives, consigning the survivors to torture and death, or adoption for the more fortunate. The Iroquois effectively dispersed the Huron, intending to become the middlemen of the trade. The Iroquois coveted the intermediary role of the Huron, but that role was quickly filled by the Odawa, who expanded the territorial limits of the old Huron trading circle westward and drew increased numbers of western Great Lakes communities into the exchange process.<sup>24</sup>

Eventually this series of Iroquois attacks subjected parts of the Great Lakes region to intermittent warfare, with hostilities that lasted almost sixty years. The Fur Trade or Beaver Wars brought almost six decades of demographic chaos to the northern regions of the western Great Lakes and ended when the Great Peace was signed at Montreal in 1701.<sup>25</sup>

Between 1654 and 1656, flotillas of Odawa canoes began transporting furs to Montreal, along the Ottawa River route. The Odawa incorporated the *pays d'en haut* communities that stretched north from Lake Superior to Hudson Bay. The annual canoe flotillas were graphically described by one contemporary observer, De Chesneau:

The Outawa Indians, who are divided into several tribes, and are nearest to us, are those of the greatest use to us, because through them we obtain Beaver; and although they, for the most part, do not hunt, and have but a small portion of peltry in their country, they go in search of it to the most distant places, and exchange for it our Merchandise which they procure at Montreal. . . . They get their peltries, in the North, from the people of the interior . . . and in the south. . . . Some of these tribes occasionally come down to Montreal, but usually they do not do so in very great numbers, because they are far too distant, are not expert at managing canoes, and because the other Indians intimidate them, in order to be the carriers of their Merchandise and to profit thereby.<sup>26</sup>

Iroquois raiding parties intermittently blocked the Ottawa River, the favored Odawa trading route between Michilimackinac and Montreal.<sup>27</sup> The journey to Montreal proved especially hazardous because numerous river portages left the Odawa open to repeated attack. The Odawa canoe brigades made it apparent that Indians were willing to engage in the trade, but they were reluctant to continue the trade when risk levels dramatically increased, and Indians simply refused to journey to Montreal.

In 1656–57, the Iroquois launched a major offensive against the

western Indians of the Great Lakes. This extension of the Fur Trade Wars westward brought unusually high fatality levels to northern Great Lakes villages. In arming the Iroquois, the Dutch introduced firepower into hand-to-hand combat. Repeated attacks led thousands of Algonquian-speaking Indians to seek refuge on the western shore of Lake Michigan and to band together in a vast refugee triangle that stretched along the lake shoreline south to the Illinois and Mississippi rivers.<sup>28</sup> One of the largest communities formed around present-day Green Bay, where Father Gabriel Dreuillettes claimed that the village contained as many as “twenty-four thousand souls.”<sup>29</sup> Another large village was formed at Kaskaskia and consisted of Ilini-allied villages.

Ironically, it was the Iroquois’ relentless pursuit of and attack on Algonquian-speaking nations that led the French to venture west to trade with Indians. Indians refused to journey to Montreal and consequently the city lost access to its most valuable export, furs. In essence it was French fur traders and not Indians who ultimately assumed the risk of traveling the hazardous Ottawa River route to and from the western Great Lakes. The French ventured west when Médard Chouart, Sieur des Groseilliers, officially visited the Ottawa in 1654. He returned two years later surrounded by a flotilla of thirty canoes, overflowing with furs. Groseilliers’s western travels dramatically increased his wealth but also made him more aware of other lucrative sites where furs could be obtained; he learned about prime coat or arctic beaver from the Indians who wintered at Green Bay. He came to believe that the richest harvests were waiting to be retrieved from the land surrounding the North Sea, or what the English would rename Hudson Bay.

Despite Groseilliers’s triumphant return to Montreal, he was denied official permission to return to the western Great Lakes. He then set a precedent that would be followed quickly by other equally adventuresome young Frenchmen. He simply disregarded the governor’s injunction and left for the west. On his second trip, he was accompanied by his more audacious brother-in-law, Pierre

Radisson.<sup>30</sup> Although Groseilliers and Radisson intended to establish a trading post oriented toward Hudson Bay, they failed to pursue this more northerly direction because their canoes were already overflowing with furs. They returned to Montreal accompanied by an even larger flotilla of canoes than that of Groseilliers's earlier voyage. Word of their success spread through the Montreal community; unfortunately, their return was met with official disapproval. They were fined for leaving Montreal illegally and paid a heavy duty on their fur returns.

Radisson and Groseilliers fueled a westward demographic movement of single young men. The financial success of their western journey created a large pool of men who eagerly risked their lives on the high-stakes outcome associated with furs. Radisson and Groseilliers became emblematic of the *coureurs de bois*, or runners of the woods, the illegal traders whose success brought numerous young Frenchmen into the western Great Lakes. Most followed the Groseilliers-Radisson pathway west, and as their predecessors, they took up residence in Native villages, living among Indians for two to three years. The *coureurs de bois* relied on Indians for protection and access to furs.<sup>31</sup> Many married Indian women, in part because marriage "after the manner of the country" provided access to peltry. Increasingly, New France also discovered that many illegal traders remained permanently in the west and never returned to Montreal.<sup>32</sup>

In the 1660s there was a rush of traders into the west from Montreal.<sup>33</sup> Ironically, the western Great Lakes offered opportunities for family formation that were hindered by the small population of women in the St. Lawrence region. In 1665 when the westward journeys began, French Canadian men outnumbered French women by nearly two to one. Fifteen years later there were still 55.5 men to every 44.5 women. Only at century's end did the skewed ratios become balanced.<sup>34</sup> French officials often criticized these men because they preferred to live as Indians. However, there were pressing economic reasons why these young men went west.<sup>35</sup> Those

who engaged in the fur trade could earn as much in two years as a *habitant* or resident of Montreal might earn in fifteen years.<sup>36</sup> Large numbers of single young men dramatically changed the nature of the exchange process. Within twenty years, the intendant claimed that five to eight hundred men were trading in the “woods,” as illegal traders or *coureurs de bois*.<sup>37</sup> They left on their own and were not always financed by Montreal merchants. Often, they were just as likely to journey to the English at Albany to sell their furs as they were to return to Montreal.<sup>38</sup> By 1676 attempts to restore the Native trade routes to Montreal had failed, and Frenchmen who lived and traded among Indians dominated the exchange process.

Radisson and Groseilliers had inadvertently changed the nature of the fur trade by shifting the exchange process from Montreal to the western Great Lakes.<sup>39</sup> They successfully demonstrated that sizeable profits could be made through the fur trade by heading west. However, the role that Radisson and Groseilliers played in the New France trade has been overlooked because their names are more commonly associated with the English fur trade. The voyages of Radisson and Groseilliers became part of a tangled story that led the English to lay claim to Hudson Bay and created the rivalry that ultimately led to the Seven Years' War.

The unusual story of Radisson and Groseilliers began when the two adventurers journeyed to Versailles to secure funds to establish an outpost at the North Sea; they also hoped to recover the fines imposed on them by the New France intendant. Radisson and Groseilliers quickly discovered that the minister of finance, Colbert, was committed to Robert La Salle's plan to expand the trade of the western Great Lakes in a southerly direction, from the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. Unfortunately, neither Radisson nor Groseilliers possessed practical knowledge of the North Sea region; they relied on indigenous knowledge rather than practical experience. La Salle's exploration of the Mississippi was financially backed by Colbert's son, and this placed La Salle in a stronger position at the French court. Although Radisson and Groseilliers proposed

what would be ultimately a more profitable route, it was La Salle's Mississippi route that triumphed and led France to perilously extend the fragile boundaries of its North American empire. La Salle believed that furs transported southward to the Louisiana delta would reduce French dependence on Montreal, which was closed for bad weather during a major part of the year.<sup>40</sup> Following the failed Groseilliers-Radisson visit to Versailles, La Salle died at the delta of the Mississippi, and his demise eliminated the Mississippi as a viable alternative to Montreal.

Consequently, Radisson and Groseilliers decided to venture into the North Sea, but they did so without financial backing. Fortunately, the Atlantic world was a multicultural landscape where practical geographical knowledge was available from a variety of sources. Thus, Groseilliers and Radisson turned to a New Salem, Massachusetts, pilot who was familiar with the route to the North Sea. He willingly transported Radisson and Groseilliers across the Atlantic, but their successful crossing was marred by being shipwrecked off Sable Island. There, the two Frenchmen were offered a ride to Boston by a group of English commissioners who had been sent to negotiate the transfer of New Amsterdam to England. Ironically, the English commission ship was then captured by the Dutch and its boat, crew, and passengers were landed on the coast of Spain. In 1666 the English commissioners, along with Groseilliers and Radisson and the crew, finally reached England. Word of their adventures spread quickly through the merchant classes, where they won the support of Sir George Carteret and King Charles, who commissioned the Frenchmen to sail under the sponsorship of English investors. In 1668 Radisson and Groseilliers departed England, but severe storms forced Radisson's ship to return to England. It was Groseilliers who successfully established a trading outpost on the North Sea, guided by the colonial sea captain from Salem, Massachusetts. Groseilliers returned with one of the largest cargoes of prime quality arctic furs ever transported across the Atlantic. The English not only renamed the North Sea but they established the Hudson's Bay Company as

a corporate entity, headed by Prince Rupert, the cousin of Prince Charles, and by Sir George Carteret.<sup>41</sup>

The English had a substantial presence in the North Atlantic because of the fishing trade, but at this time they possessed only limited imperial commitments beyond Ireland.<sup>42</sup> Following Groseilliers's return from his trans-Atlantic voyage, the English claimed the lands and riverways that drained into Hudson Bay. English land claims in North America dramatically expanded by over 1.5 million square miles when the HBC laid claim to one of the largest landed empires in the world. Carteret viewed Hudson Bay as integral to a well-rounded empire, one "in which northern lands would counterbalance tropical territories, and the control of trade routes would be all-important."<sup>43</sup>

The Hudson's Bay Company changed the nature of the western fur trade because the bay location eliminated the costs associated with transporting trade goods from Montreal to the interior of the country and carrying furs from the interior to Montreal. At Hudson Bay Indians initially brought their furs directly to the company posts and bargained directly with British traders. The rivers were efficient highways, flowing into the tidewater at Hudson Bay. The English established forts along the coastline and, later, established trading posts along the rivers that emptied into Hudson Bay. Large ships, coming directly from Britain, moored adjacent to the posts in the bay. The HBC was immediately competitive with the French because "goods could be obtained on a large scale, with access by sea, at more favorable exchange rates."<sup>44</sup> Because Hudson's Bay Company had direct access to the best furs, prime quality or winter coat beaver, English peltry then brought Europe's highest prices. From their initial arrival in Hudson Bay to their lengthy tenure in the region, the English company reaped handsome profits from the fur trade.

In the 1670s the French had been reluctant to push into Hudson Bay because the market was already glutted with less valuable parchment beaver. Even more problematic was the threat that manpower

would be reduced in the Montreal region if new fur-trade locations were established. If the trade was pushed northward into Hudson Bay, the pool of illegal traders would continue to expand, drawing men away from agricultural activity in the St. Lawrence River valley. Thus, the administrators of New France remained firmly committed to a fur trade with a trading cycle that spanned eighteen to twenty-four months, although it often stretched to thirty-six months. They transported trade goods upriver along the Ottawa to the Great Lakes and the following year returned downriver, with peltry destined for Montreal.

By the end of the seventeenth century, three distinct fur trading regions had evolved in North America. The most northern region was Hudson Bay and it had direct trans-Atlantic access to London. The British Crown awarded the entire watershed to the Hudson's Bay Company. This area was defined by the Canadian Shield, a terrain that formed the hilly north-south border initially shaped by the great continental ice sheets. Hudson Bay was drained by a large number of rivers that flowed directly into it, their direction being determined by the shield. The regional network that evolved at Hudson Bay was organized around the transportation of trade goods directly from London. Furs were initially exchanged at the British forts that rimmed Hudson Bay, the exchange process essentially controlled by a corporate entity, the Hudson's Bay Company, rather than by individual fur traders. The British had eliminated the middlemen from the exchange process, and profits accrued primarily to the company, rather than fur traders.

The second region was defined by the Atlantic–Gulf Coastal Plain and extended west to the rolling hills of the Piedmont, a hilly transitional zone that leads to the Appalachian Mountains. The Appalachian Mountains separated the Atlantic region from the Great Lakes. From Maine to southern New York and the regions around Delaware, there was harvestable beaver peltry; farther south the fur trade was focused on deerskin.

The third region, the Great Lakes, extends more than one